Latina/o College Students' Experiences at a Predominately White Research University

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Latina/o College Students’ Experiences at a Predominately White Research University

A Dissertation Presented

by

MARIA ALICIA REMALY

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

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

May 2019

Education
Latina/o College Students’ Experiences at a Predominately White Research University

A Dissertation Presented

by

MARIA ALICIA REMALY

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Associate Dean of Academic Affairs
College of Education
DEDICATION

A mi Tata Henry Argomedo quien me enseño que uno siempre puede estar “como tigre.”

A mi padrastro Hector Salineros quien me apoyo en todas mis decisiones y momentos difícil sin juzgar.
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ABSTRACT
LATINA/O COLLEGE STUDENTS’ EXPERIENCES AT A PREDOMINATELY WHITE RESEARCH UNIVERSITY
MAY 2019
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Latina/o students’ access to higher education has increased over time; however, the graduation rates for this group (52%) remain lower than those for white students (63%) (Excelencia in Education, 2015; Fry, 2004; National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2014)). This low graduation rate presents a problem for the financial and social progress of the Latina/o population due to the key role that a bachelor’s degree plays in the labor force. The purpose of this exploratory, qualitative study was to better understand the college experiences of Latina/o students in a predominantly white institution (PWI) in the state of Massachusetts. This study focused in key areas that are known to be important for retention and completion: campus climate, faculty interactions, family relationships, academic performance, campus resources, and financial needs. This study explored the role that colleges have in Latina/o students’ success in obtaining a four-year degree and the role that students have in their own success. In addition, this study explored differences within the Latina/o population by gender and transfer status.

The results of this study provide college administrators, faculty, and staff (particularly those from institutions with a Latina/o population similar to the institution
studied in this research) with knowledge about Latina/o students’ college experiences that informs practices to improve their educational success. Overall, the main factors that help Latina/o students progress toward their bachelor’s degrees are interactions with people who serve as retention agents; the variety of academic support services, co-curricular activities and organizations available on campus; interactions with families; and students’ self-advocacy and motivation. The main factors hindering Latina/o students educational progress are financial needs, lack of representation of Latinas/os on campus, inadequate academic support, having difficulty learning about university resources, and unhelpful faculty, academic advisors, and peer mentors. It is my hope that the results of this study will be used by college administrators, staff, and faculty to better serve Latina/o students as they obtain their four-year degrees.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

Latina/o students’ access to higher education has increased over time; however, the graduation rates for this group (52%) remain lower than those for white students (63%) (Excelencia in Education, 2015; Fry, 2004; National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2014)). This low graduation rate presents a problem for the financial and social progress of the Latina/o population due to the key role that having a bachelor’s degree plays in the labor force. In the current economy, having a bachelor’s degree is essential to access into middle-rank job positions in the United States (Fry, 2002). Therefore, having a four-year degree is needed to get access higher level jobs and leadership positions. Latinas/os comprised 17% of the United States population in 2012 and are expected to increase to 31% by 2060 (Excelencia in Education, 2015). They are a fast-growing, young population; therefore, increasing the number of bachelor's degrees among Latinas/os living in the U.S. is critical for the well-being of the Latina/o population and the economy of the country (Fry, 2002; Excelencia in Education, 2008; Excelencia in Education, 2015).

The lower graduation rate of Latina/o students compared to white students (NCES, 2014) is particularly worrisome because Latina/o students also graduate from high school in a smaller percentage than white students (Stark & Noel, 2015). Therefore, even though Latina/o students who graduate from high school have similar college

---

1 This study will explore differences between Latina and Latino students; therefore, I chose to use the term Latina/o to make a clear distinction between referring to the Latina/o population (women and men) to Latina and Latino college student separately.
enrollment rates (44%) than the entire population of high school graduates (47%) (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2011a), as a group they have lower college enrollment and graduation rates. In other words, the educational system loses a larger percentage of Latina/o students than white students in both high school and college. Administrators, faculty, and staff in four-year colleges need to better understand the college experiences of Latina/o students in order to improve the educational outcomes of these students. This knowledge can inform university practices that aim to better serve Latina/o students by providing effective services and resources (Jones, Castellanos, Cole, 2002). My study focuses on learning about Latina/o college students’ experiences and how these experiences help or hinder these students’ progress toward a four-year degree.

**Latinas/os Educational Pathways**

There are several educational factors that may jeopardize Latinas/os’ chances of graduating from college. The educational experiences of Latinas/os are characterized by attending secondary schools with low resources (Davis-Kean, Mendoza, & Susperreguy, 2012), being overrepresented in community colleges, and being part-time college students (Fry, 2002).

In 2017, approximately 34% of people 25 years and older had a four-year degree while Latinas/os had a lower rate, approximately 17% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). This gap can be explained, in part, due to the leak in the educational pipeline of Latina/o students. In the case of high school students, 87% of white students, and only 75% of Latina/o students, graduate on time (Medina, McFarland, Stark, & Cui, 2016). Fifty-two percent of Latino college students who started their higher education at a four-year
college in 2006 graduated within 6 years, whereas 63% of white students graduated within the same time frame (NCES, 2014).

Latinas/os, besides having a lower degree completion rate than their white peers, as a group receive less financial aid than other racial/ethnic groups (KewalRamani, Gilbertson, Fox, & Provasnik, 2007) and take more time to finish their degrees (Swail, Cabrera, & Lee, 2004). Of those Latinas/os who obtained their bachelor’s degrees, only 23% obtained it in 4 years, compared to 44% of white students (Swail et al., 2004).

An additional factor to take into consideration when describing the educational pathways of Latinas/os is that more than half of Latina/o college students access higher education through community colleges (American Association of Community Colleges, 2009; Furbeck, 2011; Perez & Ceja, 2009; Suarez, 2003). Sixty percent of Latina/o undergraduate students enter higher education through a community college, compared with only 42% of white undergraduate students (Fry, 2004). This pattern is problematic because Latinas/os are underrepresented among those who transfer to a four-year college (Excelencia in Education, 2015; Hagedorn Chi, Cepeda, & McLain, 2007). In fact, only 13% of Latina/o community college students obtain a bachelor’s degree in comparison to 23% of white students (Fry, 2004).

It seems that higher education institutions are not equally successful at providing services and support to their entire student body (Fry, 2004). The lower graduation rates of Latina/o students in comparison to white students cannot be totally explained by students’ academic preparation because Latina/o students have lower graduation rates than their white peers who have a similar level of college preparation (Fry, 2004).
Therefore, if four-year college administrators want to improve the graduation rates of Latina/o students, they need to find better ways to serve these students.

**Current Context**

Retention and persistence issues have been key aspects of the higher education agenda for decades (Berger, Blanco, & Lyon, 2012; Pascarella, Smart, & Ethington, 1986; Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000; Suarez, 2003; Tinto, 1975, 1997). Although substantial research on these topics exists, studies that solely focus on the experiences of Latina/o college students in four-year colleges are relatively recent (Nora, Barlow, & Crisp, 2005) and fewer in number.

Studies about Latina/o students in four-year colleges have found that having unmet financial needs (e.g. Hernandez, 2000; Joo, Durband, & Grable, 2009) and lacking role models negatively affects Latinas/os’ college experiences (e.g. Boardes-Edgar, Arredondo, Kurpius, & Rund, 2011; Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996). On the other hand, having approachable and caring faculty and staff (e.g. Anaya & Cole, 2001), a welcoming college environment (Arana, Castañeda-Sound, Blanchard, & Aguilar, 2011) and family support (Hernandez, 2002; Sánchez, Reyes, & Singh, 2005), positively affect the college experiences of these students.

The current literature about Latina/o college students has several limitations. Even though the experiences of Latinas/os vary depending on demographic variables, such as country of origin and socioeconomic status (Arbona & Novy, 1991), the current literature, in general, does not make distinctions within the Latina/o population. Studying Latinas/os as a homogenous group “mask[s] the different experiences and problems faced
by the individual subgroups” (Arbona & Novy, 1991, p. 335). Therefore, we know little about differences within the Latina/o population.

Almost none of the studies about Latina/o students at four-year colleges have been carried out in the Northeast U.S. Consequently, we know little about the experiences of Latina/o college students in that geographical region. This lack of knowledge is troublesome because, as mentioned above, the Latina/o population is heterogeneous and their college experience may vary depending on the geographic location of their college. For example, the experiences of Latinas/os in higher education institutions located in Massachusetts may vary from those of students from institutions located in California and the Southwest U.S. region which are the areas that have most often been studied. Forty-one percent of the Latinas/os in Massachusetts are from families whose country of origin is Puerto Rico (Granberry & Torres, 2010). In contrast, more than 65% of the Latina/o population in California and the Southwest U.S. region are from families whose country of origin is México (American FactFinder, 2010).

Another consequence of not making distinctions within the Latina/o population is that we know little about gender differences among Latina/o college students. It is important to learn separately about the college experiences of Latina and Latino students because there are gender differences in graduation rates. The six-year graduation rate of female students from the 2010 cohort was 63% and for male students was 57% (NCES, 2017). In the case of Latina/o students the difference between female and male students is slightly larger, Latina students had a 6-year graduation rate of 58% and Latino students of 50% (NCES, 2017).
Similarly, there is scarce information about the experiences of Latina/o students in four-year institutions who transferred from a community college. It is important to explore the college experiences of Latina/o students as a separate group because these students’ experiences in a four-year college are different from the experiences of white students regarding academic performance and college satisfaction (Berger & Malaney, 2001). In order to expand the knowledge about Latina/o within group differences, in this study, I explore differences between Latina and Latino students, as well as differences between Latina/o transfer students and non-transfer students.

This study expands the literature about Latina/o college students’ experiences as they relate to obtaining a four-year degree. It is my intent that this new knowledge will inform college administrators on how to provide better services for their Latina/o students.

**Purpose of the study**

The purpose of this exploratory, qualitative study is to better understand the college experiences of Latina/o students in a predominantly white institution (PWI) in the state of Massachusetts, in key areas known to be important for retention and completion: campus climate, faculty interactions, family relationships, academic performance, and financial needs. This study explores the role that colleges have in Latina/o students’ success in obtaining a four-year degree and the role that students have in their own success. In addition, this study explores differences within the Latina/o population by gender and transfer status.
Research questions

This study addresses the following general and specific questions based on previous research on Latina/o college students:

- What are the personal and institutional factors that Latina/o college students in a PWI in Massachusetts perceive as influencing their educational progress toward a bachelor’s degree?
  o What are the institutional and personal factors helping Latina/o students’ progress toward a bachelor’s degree? How and why are these factors helping them?
  o What are the institutional and personal factors hindering Latina/o students’ progress toward a bachelor’s degree? How and why are these factors hindering their progress?
  o How do these factors differ between Latina and Latino students?
  o How do these factors differ between transfer and non-transfer Latina/o students?

Significance of the Study

As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, even though access to four-year colleges has increased for the Latina/o population, there is still a graduation gap between white and Latina/o students. Latina/o college students are graduating at lower rates than their white peers. This qualitative study contributes to current scholarship by describing Latina/o college students’ experiences that help or hinder students’ progress toward a four-year degree in a PWI in the state of Massachusetts.
Because most of the current research on Latina/o college students does not account for differences within this population, this study contributes to the current knowledge about Latina/o college students in four major ways. First, this research focuses on a geographical area where little research has been done about Latina/o college students. In this way, this research expands the knowledge about Latinas/os in Massachusetts. Second, there is not much known about the differences between Latina and Latino college students. This study contributes to expand this knowledge by comparing gender differences within the Latina/o population. Third, there is little research done about Latina/o transfer students and most of these studies have been carried out in Florida and California. This study expands the current knowledge about Latina/o transfer students by studying differences between transfer students and non-transfer students. Fourth, by using a theoretical lens that accounts for both structural and individual aspects that affect Latina/o students’ college experiences, I studied college retention and persistence issues which, in general, have been studied separately.

The results of this study provide college administrators, faculty, and staff (particularly those from institutions with a Latina/o population similar to the institution studied in this research) with knowledge about Latina/o students’ college experiences that informs practices to improve their educational success. The results of this study also provide information about Latina/o college students’ strengths and challenges. This study describes the challenges that Latina/o students face regarding financial needs, their relationships with different groups of people inside the institution, and the lack of representation of Latinas/os on campus. At the same time, it provides knowledge about what it is helping these students to succeed. It is my hope that college administrators,
staff, and faculty will use the results of this study to better serve Latina/o students as they obtain their four-year degrees.

An increase of bachelor’s degrees in the Latina/o population will have several benefits for this population. Individuals with four-year degrees earn on average ($1,189 weekly earnings) 65% more than individuals with high school diplomas ($718 weekly earnings) (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). In addition, bachelor’s degree holders have lower poverty and incarceration rates than those who do not have a bachelor’s degree. Also, children whose parents hold a bachelor’s degree are better prepared for school work than children whose parents do not have a bachelor’s degree (Baum & Payea, 2005).

Closing the graduation gap will not only help the Latina/o population to increase their chances of having higher salaries and leadership positions in the country but will also benefit the economy of the country. People with bachelor’s degrees pay higher taxes and rely less on social programs than those without a bachelor’s degree (Baum & Payea, 2005). In this way reducing the graduation gap addresses an educational inequality issue as well as the well-being of the nation.

**Method Overview**

I used a qualitative research approach to explore the deep meaning that Latina/o students give to their college experiences. I carried out six focus groups in a large research university located in Massachusetts (that I will call NRU). Each focus group had between 4 and 7 participants. The focus groups were separated by gender and transfer status. In addition, I chose six focus groups participants to interview individually.

I recruited participants by sending an email invitation to the entire Latina/o student population at NRU. Then, I sent out an email to those students who expressed
their desire to participate in my study, explaining to them the details of the focus groups. Because in this study I stress the importance of recognizing that the Latina/o population is heterogenous, after the focus group I sent the participants an email with an online survey asking them about demographic information in order to gain a better understanding of the participants.

I recorded the focus groups and then had them transcribed verbatim by professionals. I coded the transcripts and then analyzed the data to find commonalities and differences among the different groups. I triangulated the data with institutional data, such as year-to-year retention rates and NRU survey results. The coding and analyzing process was guided by my conceptual framework, but as I expected, information I had not considered in my conceptual framework emerged. I address this issue in the discussion section where I propose a revised conceptual framework for future research.

**Definitions**

There are several terms used in this research that need to be defined at this point. The following terms are commonly used in the higher education literature but may have slightly different meaning depending on the context in which they are used.

**Educational Success:** For this study, educational success means graduating from a four-year institution with a four-year degree.

**Latinas/os:** I decided to use the term Latinos because I agree with González and Gándara (2005) in that this term makes a distinction between people of Hispanic ancestry and those who have a Hispanic ancestry but live in the United States. In other words, I believe that Latinas/os represent those Spanish speakers from Latin America who are living in the United States. If these people were living in their country of origin, they would be
represented by their nationality instead of being labeled as Latinas/os. As expressed by González and Gándara (2005), “people of Hispanic ancestry become Latinos when they come into contact with the United States, thereby assuming the role of the ‘other’” (p. 394). In addition, as pointed out by Calderón (1992) in his historical analysis of the terms Hispanic and Latino, the term Latino was used by “community leaders” as a way to bring together Spanish speakers from Latin America “in response to common structural conditions in the areas of education, politics, and economics” (Calderón, 1992, p. 40). These concepts of “other” and unity have drawn me to choose the term Latino, instead of Hispanic for this research.

**Transfer students:** In this study the term transfer student is used to refer to students who transferred from a community college to a four-year college. In Chapter 2, I explicitly mention when the concept of transfer students alternately refers to both students who transfer from another four-year institution and students who transfer from community colleges. If no caveat is made, the reader should assume that transfer students are those students who transferred from a community college into a four-year college. However, within the participants there were few who had transferred from another four-year institution. I decided to keep these participants because their experiences are relevant and different from non-transfer students.

**Agency:** Agency is defined as “the individual’s freedom to act and shape society” (Giddens & Sutton, 2014, p. 52).

**Structure:** Structure refers to “society’s influence on the individual” to explain societal inequalities (Giddens & Sutton, 2014 p. 52).
Persistence: I used persistence as defined by Berger et al. (2012). Persistence is “the desire and action of a student to stay within the system of higher education from beginning year through degree completion” (Berger et al., 2012, p. 6). This definition of persistence highlights the role that the student has in her/his own educational success.

Retention: Retention refers “to the ability of an institution to retain a student from admission to the university through graduation” (Berger et al., 2012, p. 6). This definition, in contrast with persistence, focuses on the institution and its role in students’ success.

Community Cultural Wealth: I use Yosso’s (2005) definition of community cultural wealth in my study. Yosso defines community cultural wealth as:

- cultural knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed by socially marginalized groups that often go unrecognized and unacknowledged. Various forms of capital nurtured through cultural wealth include aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial and resistant capital. These forms of capital draw on the knowledges Students of Color bring with them from their homes and communities into the classroom (p. 69).

Predominantly White Institution (PWI): A PWI is a college or university in which the student body is comprised of 50% or more white students.

Assumptions and Delimitations

I base my study on several assumptions. First, I assume that both the institution and the students themselves play a critical role in the educational success of Latina/o students. Second, I assume that students will be willing to share with me and their peers
their college experiences. Finally, I assume that college administrators and staff are interested on reducing the graduation gap between their white and Latina/o students.

I reduce the scope to this study to Latina/o students attending a PWI located in Massachusetts; therefore, students attending a PWI in other states may have different experiences than my participants. Another delimitation is that I used a binary definition of gender in this study (focus group for Latina and Latino students), therefore, I did not explore in this study the experiences of Latina/o students who self-identify as transgender or gender non-conforming.

**Overview of the Study**

Even though Latina/o students’ access to higher education has increased overtime, their graduation rates are lower than their white peers (NCES, 2014). In this study, I provide information about institutional and individual factors that influence the Latina/o college experiences that can inform future practices and policies in higher education institution to better serve their students. In Chapter 2, I present the theoretical lenses that I use to frame my study, as well as an analysis of empirical studies about Latina/o college students. In Chapter 3, I describe my conceptual framework, the selected higher education institution, and my research design. In Chapter 4, I describe in detail the main themes that emerged from the analysis of the data. Finally, in Chapter 5, I discuss the results using conceptual framework, present revision to my conceptual framework and present recommendations for practice and future about the experiences of Latina/o college students.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, I present the theoretical lenses that guided my research and the empirical evidence that supported the use of theory to better understand the experiences of Latina/o college students. First, I briefly present the four major conceptual lenses that guide my research and then describe them in more detail. The chapter continues with an analysis of empirical studies about factors that affect Latina/o students’ progress toward their four-year degree. I finish this chapter with a section about transfer students. Due to the limited number of empirical studies about Latina/o transfer students, I included empirical studies about transfer students broadly and transfer students of color.

Conceptual Lenses

This study is framed by sociological theories about agency and structure, higher education theories of retention and persistence, campus racial climate elements, and Latina critical theory. In this study, I explore Latina/o students’ perceptions about the role that they and their institution have in helping or hindering their educational success. In order to better understand the college experiences of Latina/o college students, it is necessary to focus on structural and agency issues that positively or negatively affect these students’ chances of obtaining a four-year degree. This is important because, as mentioned in the previous chapter, Latina/o students have a lower graduation rate than their white peers (Excelencia in Education, 2015; Fry, 2004). Therefore, a dual approach that considers the role of the institution and the student provides a better understanding of why Latina/o students are not graduating at the same rate as their white peers.
The concepts of agency and structure, retention and persistence theories, elements of racial campus climate, and Latina critical theory provide different lenses to explore Latina/o students’ college experiences. Theories about agency and structure help to understand how Latina/o students use their agency (ability to make choices, Giddens, 1984) to successfully navigate an educational system that presents numerous structural barriers for them. Retention and persistence theories focus on factors that can affect graduation. Therefore, in the case of retention, the focus is primarily on the institution (structure) and persistence focuses primarily on the students’ actions to successfully graduate from college (agency). There is growing recognition in higher education literature that students are not the only ones responsible for their educational success and that higher education institutions also have a responsibility to accommodate their increasingly diverse student body by implementing strategies to address their students’ needs (Berger et al., 2012). Lastly, campus racial climate and Latina critical theory provide a framework to explore "the way in which race and racism explicitly and implicitly impact on the educational structures, processes, and discourses that affect people of color generally and Latinas/os specifically" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 38). I will base my study in the spirit of Latina critical scholars who advocate addressing the interlock between race/ethnicity, class, and gender and its effect on the experiences of Latina/o college students (Bernal, 2002; Martinez-Alemán, 2003). Based on this interlock, I carried out focus groups separated by gender and transfer status in order to explore the intersectionality between gender, SES, and ethnicity.
Interplay Between Agency and Structure

The concepts of structure and agency have been widely used by sociologists to analyze societal issues (Giddens & Sutton, 2014). There are two opposite paradigms of what influences humans’ actions and thoughts, namely materialism (structure) and idealism (agency). The materialist paradigm focuses on how societal structures and ideologies restrain or enable human actions and thoughts, while the idealist paradigm stresses the role of human actions in changing those structures. Sociologists emphasize either agency -- “the individual’s freedom to act and shape society” (Giddens & Sutton, 2014, p. 52) or structure -- “society’s influence on the individual” (Giddens & Sutton, 2014, p. 52) to explain societal inequalities. However, there is a consensus that both structure and agency influence each other (Archer, 2010). Therefore, “the individual is not entirely free and autonomous, nor is he or she entirely determined by structures” (Leibowitz, van Schalkwyk, Ruiters, Farmer, & Adendorff, 2012). I use the interplay between structure and agency to frame this study because I wanted to explore both structural aspects that affect Latina/o students’ college experiences, and these students’ own role in their success in a predominately white institution (PWI).

Because educational structures contribute to educational inequalities (Varelas, Settlage, Mensah, 2015), I argue that the interplay of agency and structure helps to better understand inequities in higher education institutions. Educational structures (such as educational resources, physical spaces, social climate, curricula) influence either enable or constrain the learning experiences of students (Varelas et al., 2015). For example, faculty and college staff can empower or disenfranchise groups of students.
This study in particular is framed by Giddens' theory of structuration. A key part of the theory of structuration is the concept of "duality of structure" (Giddens, 1984, p. 25). For Giddens, structure and agency are not two independent entities, but a duality where "structure is not 'external' to individuals" (Giddens, 1984, p. 25). Giddens claims that “individuals play an active role in shaping social life” (Seidman, 2008, p. 139). For Giddens, the distinction between agent and social structure in human actions is only useful for analytical reasons because in reality it is not possible to separate both (Giddens, 1984). Giddens would explain the success of Latina/o students by emphasizing that these students “do not simply conform to social norms and conventions,” (Seidman, 2008, p. 139) such as stereotypes of Latinas/os portrayed in TV shows or statistics about the low graduation rates of Latina/o students. Instead, these students who are “knowledgeable, reflexive, and skillful agents,” act and are guided by their “practical knowledge of their world” and their “ability to reflect upon conditions of their actions” (Seidman, 2008, p. 139). In other words, Latina/o students reflect on their life experiences and learn how to use educational structures for their own benefit. However, Giddens also recognizes that agency is limited if individuals cannot "exercise some sort of power" (Giddens, 1984, p. 14). In the case of Latina/o students, they may have the abilities and intentions needed to succeed in college, but their agency (or role as agents) may be limited by constraints in their environment. For example, Latina/o students may feel powerless in a PWI, which in turn can affect their capability to succeed in college. Therefore, in this study, I explored the perceptions that Latina/o students have about their own actions to succeed in college and how their four-year college is hindering and/or enabling the educational success of these students.
Retention and Persistence Theories

Retention and persistence have been theoretically and empirically studied for more than 30 years. Tinto’s interactionist theory has been one of the most used theories to study student retention. Tinto’s (1975) theory focuses on three elements related to student retention: characteristics of individuals, characteristics of higher education institutions, and student interaction within the college environment.

Within characteristics of individuals, the elements related to retention include: (1) family background, (2) individual characteristics, (3) past educational experiences, for example, high school characteristics that affect students’ aspirations and expectations, and (4) goal commitment. For example, students from higher socio-economic status (SES) are more likely than students from lower SES to remain in college, or students with higher levels of commitment to obtain a degree are more likely to remain in college than their peers with lower levels of commitment. The second element of Tinto’s theory, characteristics of higher education institution, includes institution type, size, quality, and student composition. The third element of Tinto’s theory, student interactions within the college environment, analyzes the degree of concordance between the student and his/her academic and social environment.

This third element includes two highly studied concepts, namely academic and social integration (e.g. Braxton, Milem & Sullivan, 2000; Deil-Amen, 201; Pascarella et al., 1986; Severiens & Schmidt, 2009). While social integration occurs through peer relationships and contact with faculty and administrators, academic integration can be measured by academic performance and intellectual development, with academic performance being one of the most important elements in predicting student persistence.
in college (Tinto, 1975). From an agency and structure lens, Tinto's (1975) model focuses on the student’s agency to integrate into college life. According to Tinto, the students have to find a place inside of the institution that, in turn, will help them integrate both academically and socially into their college.

Even though Tinto’s (1975, 1997) interactionist theory has been highly used in empirical retention studies and has been critical to the understanding of retention, researchers (such as Berger, 2000; Rendón et al., 2000, Tierney, 1992) have criticized it. Tinto, in his early work (1975), does not take into consideration the experiences of nontraditional and underrepresented students to develop his theory. As a consequence, the college experiences of those students regarding retention are not accurately represented in Tinto's early work. Currently, college students are more diverse than in the 1970’s, when retention started to be a national issue in the United States. Tinto (1997) acknowledged, in part, this change by claiming that in the case of commuter students, who have several obligations outside the college, academic and social integration must occur inside the classroom. Currently, Tinto (2010) advocates a "move beyond our theories of student retention to a model of institutional action" that will provide higher education institutions with "policies, programs, and practices to enhance student retention and completion" (p. 53). Tinto moved from a focus on the student's role to integrate into college life, toward structural changes that colleges can implement to increase students’ retention and degree completion. One consequence of this change is that researchers not only have to analyze how colleges affect different populations of students, but also how different colleges may affect those groups of students in different ways (Berger et al.,
This study responds to these calls by exploring Latina/o students’ college experiences in a PWI in the Northeast.

**Critiques of Tinto's Interactionist Theory**

Emergent theories about retention and persistence focus not only on the role that students have in their college success (agency) but also on societal structures that affect their college experiences (Berger, 2000; Rendón, 2011; Tinto, 2010; Tierney, 1992). These scholars claim that there is a need to reassess Tinto’s theory to better understand the experiences of students from diverse backgrounds who have been historically underrepresented in four-year colleges. Berger (2000) claims that colleges “often fail to recognize valuable skills, abilities, attitudes, perceptions, and knowledge possessed by students from traditionally underrepresented groups in higher education” (p. 120). In this same line of thought, Tierney (1992) claims that “the ‘problem’ must be defined not as a group’s lack of ‘acculturation’ but as an institution’s inability to operate in a multicultural world” (p. 615). In the case of Latina/o students in PWIs, administrators do not provide structures that recognize: (1) the contribution that these students bring to the institution, and (2) these students’ cultural knowledge and skills that help them succeed in college. The challenge is to create a college culture where diverse cultures are recognized and valued.

Tierney (1992) critiques Tinto’s use of the concept of rite of passage because this anthropological concept was created to analyze the transition of an individual within his or her own culture, and not to understand how a person makes the transition from one culture into a different one. Higher education institutions have their own culture that in the case of PWIs is the mainstream culture in the United States. Therefore, nontraditional
students who come from a different background will need to make the transition from their own culture toward the one held by their institution. For example, a Latina/o student who grew up in a Latina/o community must transition from a Latina/o dominated culture into the culture of a PWI. This study explored how Latina/o students experienced that transition.

Another critic of Tinto’s model is Rendón (2011). Rendón argues that retention theories should not only focus on the individual, but also on the societal structures that affect student retention. Rendón advocates for "a movement away from deficit-oriented and assimilationist models” (p. 187). Rendón challenges the conception that nontraditional students are responsible for fitting into their colleges; instead, she stresses the role of educational institutions in students’ success. Moreover, Rendón et al. (2000) explain that faculty and staff have to proactively reach out to nontraditional students because that will help these students engage in services and programs that colleges have put in place to accommodate a diverse student body.

Rendón (2011) argues that minority students, under an interactionist model, are asked to leave behind their culture in order to fit into the culture of their predominately white college; however, this type of model does not account for the fact that minority students can become bicultural. In this way, these students do not need to leave behind their culture to succeed (Rendón, 2011). Even more, they can draw from their community cultural background to find strategies to succeed in college (Yosso, 2005.)

Even though involvement in college life is important, it may be a challenge for nontraditional students (Rendón, 1993). Nontraditional students are more likely than traditional students to have doubts about their ability to succeed in colleges and may need
help from key figures to navigate college life (Rendón, 1993). For Rendón, student validation from faculty and/or staff members may be needed by nontraditional students in order to get involved in college life. Therefore, faculty and staff members need to reach out to students to validate students’ potential because nontraditional students experience involvement “when someone takes an active role in assisting them” (Rendón, 1993, p. 16). It is validation and not involvement that transforms nontraditional students into "powerful learners" (Rendón, 2011, p. 241). Under an agency and structure lens, Rendón’s (1993) validation theory focuses primarily on structure. Rendón argues that institutional agents have to validate students’ contributions both inside and outside of the classroom to help these students succeed in college.

Scholars such as Rendón, Tierney and Berger understand that students from racial/ethnic minority groups bring valuable experiences to college and that higher education institutions have to recognize these type of experiences as useful sources of knowledge and abilities. Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, and Allen (1998), working through a similar lens as Rendón, Tierney, and Berger, developed a framework to study a specific structure of these institutions, the campus racial climate. Campus racial climate is particularly important because there is a connection between students being able to successfully navigate their college racial campus climate and their grades (Fuertes & Sedlacek, 1995), as well as a positive relationship between grades and sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2008).

**Campus Racial Climate**

Historically, Latina/o students have perceived educational institutions as unfriendly environments that do not welcome them (González, 2007; Hernandez &
Morales, 1999; Jones et al., 2002; Medina & Luna, 2000; Reyes & Rios, 2005; Turner, 1994). This perception can be explained, in part, because these institutions reflect the larger society where “a monolithic system of majority values and beliefs tend to devalue racial, cultural, and linguistic differences” (Medina & Luna, 2000, p. 49). Therefore, it is not surprising that the campus racial climate can affect Latina/o students’ academic performance in college (Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009).

Campus racial climate is "the overall racial environment of [a] college campus" (Solórzano, Ceja, Yosso, 2000) and has been studied since the early 90’s (Hurtado, 1992). During the last 30 years the racial campus climate in higher education institutions has improved (Chang, 2000); however, Latina/o students still face discrimination (Hurtado et al., 1996; Jones et al., 2002; Salas, Aragon, Alandejani, & Timpson, 2014) and often do not experience a sense of belonging to their campuses (Jones et al., 2002; Salas et al., 2014; Turner, 1994). These challenges are faced even by Latina/o students who are among the most academically prepared for college work (Hurtado, 1994).

Hurtado (1994) developed a framework of four dimensions to better understand the campus racial climate that was later enhanced by Hurtado et al., (1998). These dimensions include the historical, structural, psychological, and behavioral dimensions of the college environment (Hurtado et al., 1998). In a later revision of the campus climate dimensions, Hurtado, Alvarez, Guillermo-Wann, Cuellar, and Arellano (2012) grouped the dimensions into institutional-level and individual-level dimensions. The institutional dimensions are the historical dimension, the organizational dimension, and the compositional dimensions. These dimensions focus on administrators’ efforts (or lack of) to acknowledge the historical context and the policies and practices of inclusion or
exclusion on their campuses, as well as the structural diversity of the campus. These dimensions focus on the structural aspects of higher education institutions. The individual-level dimensions are the psychological and behavioral dimensions. Like most studies that have as their unit of analysis Latina/o college students, I focus on the individual-level dimensions.

**Psychological and Behavioral Dimensions**

The psychological dimension focuses on students’ perceptions of: (1) their relationships and attitudes toward students from different racial/ethnic backgrounds, (2) how much the administration’s values diversity, and (3) "discrimination or racial conflict." (Hurtado et al., 1998, p. 289). The behavioral dimension focuses on the type of interactions among different racial/ethnic groups.

The perceptions that students have of the campus racial climate vary by the type of institution and can foster or hinder academic performance (Yosso et al., 2009). Latina/o students who perceive their campus racial climate as a negative one doubt their own academic abilities (Yosso, et al., 2009) and are more likely to experience racial tension than their peers who attend institutions with a higher concentration of Latina/o students (Hurtado, 1994). Students in Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI) reported that the “bicultural campus” environment helped them make cultural connections with peers, in turn, those connections helped them persist (Arana et al., 2011, p. 246). Students in HSIs found that “a welcoming, one-on-one, diverse, and engaging university climate” are key elements in positively affecting persistence (Arana et al., 2011, p. 245).

Even though Latina/o students are better prepared than their white peers to develop relationships with people from backgrounds different from their own, they
experience racial tension more often than their white peers (Ancis, Sedlack, & Mohr, 2000). This is a concerning finding because students of color who perceive higher levels of racial tension on campus report having lower levels of academic and social adjustment (Hurtado et al., 1996). On the other hand, students who report having a positive perception of their university express "having greater feeling of belonging" (Bordes & Arredondo, 2005, p. 127).

Yosso et al. (2009) found that Latina/o students face interpersonal and institutional microaggressions on campus. Microaggressions are defined as "subtle, innocuous, preconscious, or unconscious degradations, and putdowns ... [They] may seem harmless, but the cumulative burden of a lifetime of microaggressions can theoretically contribute to ... flattened confidence" (Pierce, 1995, p. 281). Interpersonal microaggressions are verbal and non-verbal "racial affronts" coming from faculty and other members of the college community toward Latina/o students (Yosso et al., 2009). Hurtado (1994) found that Latinas/os who are among the best academically prepared have the impression that the majority of their white peers believe that students of color are accepted through special admission. Regarding faculty behavior, Turner (1994) found that students of color describe faculty as inaccessible, having low expectations for them, and lacking concern for them. In addition, Jones et al. (2002) found that Latina/o students report faculty as having the expectation that students of color will be “experts in their culture” (p. 31). Even Latina/o students who are among the best academically prepared report that faculty members make derogatory comments about students of color and provide more support to white students than to students of color (Hurtado, 1994). These types of discriminations against students of color may affect Latina/o students’
persistence because Latina/o students who experience discrimination have a low level of sense of belonging (Hurtado, 1994), feel isolated (Jones et al., 2002; Turner, 1994) and have a feeling of tokenism on campus (Jones et al., 2002).

Besides the interpersonal microaggressions, Latina/o students also face institutional microaggressions. Institutional microaggressions, in the case of PWIs, are represented by the lack of a critical mass of Latinas/os on campus (Padilla, Treviño, Gonzalez, Treviño, 1997; Yosso et al., 2009). Yosso and colleagues (2009) argue that a lack of a critical mass of Latinas/os on campus may result in a passive aggression against Latina/o students who may feel “disregarded and insignificant” (p. 673). Latina/o students interpret the lack of Latinas/os on campus as a lack of interest by the college administration to recruit them as both students and faculty members (Jones et al., 2002). The lack of a critical mass of Latinas/os on campus limits the availability of role models for Latina/o students who are critical for their success (Suarez, 2003).

Microagressions may have several consequences for Latina/o students’ college performance. Yosso et al., (2009) found that "covert microaggressions cast doubt on students’ academic merits and capabilities, demean their ethnic identity, and dismiss their cultural knowledge" which can affect Latina/o students’ educational persistence (p. 667). These students may also suffer “cultural starvation” due to the limited support for “cultural nourishment,” defined as “individuals and material elements that replenish the students’ cultural sense of selves” (González, 2002, p. 193). This limited support for cultural nourishment can negatively affect Latina/o students because it transmits the message that the knowledge, resources and culture of minority groups are not needed or valued on campus (Yosso et al., 2009).
In addition, microaggressions cause stress in students. The victims of microaggressions have to first recognize the microaggression and then question if their negative perception about it is correct (Yosso et al., 2009). Then, they have to make the difficult decision of responding or not responding to the microaggression. On one hand, they worry that if they do react to the microaggression they might be labeled as too sensitive and be further marginalized. On the other hand, if they do not react against the microaggression, they may regret their decision because it may be interpreted as acceptance of the microaggression.

Latina/o students in PWIs use different mechanisms to overcome microaggressions and cultural starvation. Latina/o students recognize and utilize the knowledge and skills they gained in their communities to create and foster a space of resistance (academic and social "counterspaces") to successfully overcome the obstacles they face during college (Yosso, 2006). In these “counterspaces,” Latina/o students find mutual support that helps them to persist in their educational goal of graduating (Yosso, 2006).

Latina/o students create small communities within a larger community in order to succeed in college (Hernandez, 2000; Padilla et al., 1997). Students connect with peers with whom they share a common background through a diverse range of activities, such as Chicana/Latina studies (González, 2002), ethnic activities (Padilla et al., 1997), and participation in cultural centers (Jones et al., 2002). Through these activities Latina/o students meet other Latina/o students who are succeeding in college. These successful Latina/o students serve as a source of motivation (Hernandez, 2000, p. 580) and help younger students with the transition from high school to college (Padilla, et al., 1997).
Cultural centers have been used for Latina/o students as places to create a small community that can help them succeed in college (Jones et al., 2002; Turner, 1994). Cultural centers can serve as “safe havens” (Jones et al, 2002, p. 21) for Latina/o students and have been described by them as “a home away from home, a place to visit, deal with personal, and academic problems” (Turner, 1994, p. 362). However, Latina/o students also find that these centers are used “as a scapegoat for all efforts that relate to ethnic minority students, thus minimizing campus wide responsibility on issues of diversity” (Jones et al., 2002, p. 28). These students report that staff outside the cultural centers redirect students to the cultural center instead of addressing the students’ concerns (Jones et al., 2002). Overall, Latina/o students describe cultural centers as a welcoming and nurturing place that can help them persist in their educational goals by providing them with opportunities to enhance or develop their academic and social connections (Jones et al., 2002). These connections as argued by Tinto (1975) play an important role in students’ retention.

In summary, Latina/o students, by creating a small community, realize that they are not helpless because they can use their own agency to create an environment where they can find support and motivation. In my study, I explored both structural and agency elements related to campus racial campus by asking students about their perceptions of the campus racial climate in their institution and their perceptions about the role of the administration regarding the quality of the campus racial climate.

**Latina Critical Theory**

Latina critical theory provides an epistemology to analyze the educational system in the United States taking into consideration the effect of race and racism in student
outcomes. Latina critical theory provides a framework to analyze how racism may affect the college experiences of Latina/o students (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 38). These scholars advocate for a persistence model that not only acknowledges the role of students in their educational success, but also the role that colleges have in providing students opportunities to use their already existing knowledge and skills to transform that knowledge and skills into competences needed to succeed in four-year colleges. Therefore, these scholars focus on both agency (Latina/o students’ actions) and structure (institutional efforts or lack of efforts to retain Latina/o students). As mentioned before, in my study, I explored both areas.

There is a need for research in the field of higher education that describes Latina/o students as knowledgeable, skilled individuals, and which acknowledges that college culture values some types of knowledge and cultures while devaluing others (Bernal, 2002). Bernal (2002) argues that "for too long, the histories, experiences, cultures, and language of students of color have been devalued, misinterpreted, or omitted within formal educational settings" (p. 115). My study provides information about the knowledge and skills Latina/o students use to succeed in their college education and the connections between those skills and knowledge and their family and cultural background. I chose Yosso’s (2005) concept of community cultural wealth to explore these connections because this concept stresses that the knowledge developed and transmitted in the Latina/o communities can be a strength and asset to Latina/o students.

Yosso’s (2005) community cultural wealth concept challenges Bourdieu’s definitions of cultural and social capitals because his theory assumes that “some
communities are culturally wealthy while others are culturally poor” (Yosso, 2005, p. 76). Yosso defines community cultural wealth as:

cultural knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed by socially marginalized groups that often go unrecognized and unacknowledged. Various forms of capital nurtured through cultural wealth include aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial and resistant capital. These forms of capital draw on the knowledges Students of Color bring with them from their homes and communities into the classroom (p. 69).

Aspirational capital “refers to the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers (Yosso, 2005, p. 77). Navigational capital “refers to skills of maneuvering through social institutions” (Yosso, 2005, p. 80) and resistant capital “refers those knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality” (Yosso, 2005, p.80).

Every student comes to college with cultural and social capital, but not any capital can be easily transformed into positive educational outcomes. Some students have the type (qualitative) of capital that educational institutions and its staff value the most; in consequence they are rewarded. Not all types of knowledge and skills translate into the same kind of educational benefits. Therefore, staff and faculty need to think about their roles in promoting an inclusive environment where different types of knowledge and skills are valued (Rios-Aguilar, Kiyama, Gravitt, & Moll, 2011).

By highlighting the strengths of the Latina/o community and the role of educational institutions in the success of Latina/o students, research based on Latina critical theory not only gives voice to those students who historically have been marginalized in research about higher education, but also shifts the analysis from individual/cultural factors to institutional ones that may affect Latina/o students’
educational outcomes. Scholars who frame their work under Latina critical theory intend to "debunk myths," such as Latinas/os not valuing education (Valencia & Black, 2002).

An example of community cultural wealth is that Latina/o parents give support to their children through verbal encouragement, advice, and cautionary tales (Auerbach, 2006). These findings are in contrast to the majoritarian story that states that Latina/o parents do not care about their children’s education because they do not attend school functions. Auerbach’s (2006) study is a clear example for the need of research that uses a Latina critical theory approach to expose research based on a deficit approach. Auerbach (2006), by acknowledging that majoritarian stories may distort the reality of communities of color, argues that there is another possible explanation for the low school participation of Latina/o parents besides a lack of interest in their children’s education. For example, some parents may encounter language barriers and schedule problems due to work and family commitments.

Why is Latina critical theory needed? Because it helps to "identify, analyze, and transform those structures and cultural aspects of education that maintain subordinate and dominant racial positions in and out of the classroom" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p.25). Many faculty, administrators and staff "draw on majoritarian stories to explain educational inequality through a cultural deficit model and thereby pass on beliefs that students of color are culturally deprived" (Kretovics & Nussel, as cited in Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p.31). There is a need for new narratives to explain the equity problem of the educational system in the United States beside the deficit approach that is behind so much educational theory.
In summary, my study explored the experiences of undergraduate Latina/o students in order to learn from their own voices what is helping them to persist in a PWI. I focused on both students’ agency, as well as structural barriers and support. Retention and persistence theories contributed to my study by providing specific areas to explore during the focus groups, such as institutional efforts to retain Latina/o students (structure) and what Latina/o students do to succeed in college (agency). Latina critical theory provided concepts, such as community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), to explore areas related to cultural background and its effects in Latina/o students’ academic outcomes. Latina critical theory also provided a lens to study the experiences of Latina/o students that includes the acknowledgement of structural barriers that Latina/o students face at their colleges. In this respect, campus racial climate provides a specific lens through which to explore the college experiences of Latina/o students.

In the next section, I analyze the major areas that affect the likelihood of Latina/o students obtaining a four-year degree. The studies presented in the next section include studies about: retention, persistence, and degree completion.

**Latina/o Students Experiences in Four-Year Colleges**

Studies about the experiences of Latina/o students in four-year colleges are relatively recent, concentrated in the past ten years (e.g. Gloria, Castellanos, Lopez, & Rosales, 2005; Gross, 2011; Longerbeam, Sedlacek, & Alatorre, 2004; Mahaffy & Pantoja, 2013; Oseguera, Locks, & Vega, 2009; Torres, Reiser, LePeau, Davis, & Ruder, 2006). In this section, I focus on four elements that play a role on Latina/o students obtaining a four-year degree: a) Financial aid, b) interaction with faculty and staff, c) family relationships, and d) academic performance. I chose these four elements and
excluded pre-college experience because college administrators can influence these four elements, but only have indirect influence over pre-college experiences. Then, I finish with a section about Latina/o transfer students. There are only a few articles that focus on Latina/o transfer students’ experiences after transferring to a four-year college; therefore, I included studies about transfer students in general.

While I analyze studies that focus on the experiences of Latina/o students in four-year colleges. I also included studies about students of color in areas where studies about Latina/o students were limited. I included both quantitative and qualitative studies because both contribute to understand what is helping or hindering the degree completion of Latina/o students. Quantitative studies are more likely to use national samples than single-institution data. It is important to note that in studies that use national data, Mexican students comprise the majority within the group of Latina/o students. The results of this study enhance knowledge of the college experience of Latina/o students from other backgrounds, particularly, those students from Puerto Rico and Dominican Republic. The majority of quantitative studies that are not based on national datasets were carried out in the Southwest and on the West Coast of the United States. Another caveat about the results of the quantitative studies presented in the next section is that they are mostly correlational and not causal. Therefore, the results are suggested effects instead of causal effects.

The qualitative studies were carried out in different geographic areas of the United States; however, the Northeast is not represented, with the exception of Pennsylvania and Maryland. My study enhances the knowledge about the college experience of Latina/o students in the Northeast, particularly in Massachusetts. Finally,
both quantitative and qualitative studies rarely make a distinction between Latina and Latino students and only a couple of studies focus on Latina/o transfer students. The results of this study contribute to knowledge about gender and transfer status differences among Latina/o college students by using focus groups divided by gender and transfer status.

**College Expenses and Financial Aid**

The amount of financial resources available to college students during their college years affects their chances of obtaining their degrees (Arana et al., 2011; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Cabrera, Stampen, & Hansen, 1990; Longerbeam et al., 2004; Titus, 2006). Students from a higher socioeconomic status (SES) are more likely than their peers from a lower SES to finish college (Titus, 2006). This trend is particularly worrisome for the Latinas/os students because they are overrepresented in the low socioeconomic population (DeNavas-Walt & Proctor, 2014; Sciarra, 2007). According to the National Longitudinal Survey of Freshman, in 1999 there was a big difference between Latina/o and white students regarding their families’ income. Forty-two percent of Latina/o students and 65% of white students came from families who earn more than 75,000 dollars annually (Fisher, 2007). As a consequence of these trends, financial resources and financial aid has been one of the aspects studied regarding Latinas/os degree completion.

Students with financial constraints report that their financial concerns affected their academic performance (Joo et al., 2009). The limited amount of financial resources to cover college expenses generates stress in Latina/o students who have to find ways to
produce the resources to cover what is missing (Hernandez, 2000; Joo et al., 2009) and who may reduce their course load due to work for pay responsibilities (Joo et al., 2009).

Unsurprisingly, Latina/o students report that if they were to leave college it would for to financial reasons (Longerbeam et al., 2004), or that financial needs add an extra stress to their college experience (Hernandez, 2000; Salas et al., 2014). Longerbeam et al. (2004), in their quantitative study, found that Latina/o students were more likely to report financial concerns than their peers. Latina/o students were more likely to expect to need to work during college than their peers and to need to work to support personal and family needs instead of working for career networking as their peers did. Latina/o students were also more likely to work longer hours in comparison to their peers (Longerbeam et al., 2004).

Working during college affects Latina/o students in different ways. Arana et al. (2011) found that non-persistent Latina/o students reported that the long hours they needed to work negatively affected their college performance. These students explained that their work reduced the time that they could dedicate to academic demands. Similarly, Sy (2006) found that for Latina students "working longer hours was related to lower academic performance” (p. 383). However, Arbona and Nora (2007) did not find that the number of working hours, or students making financial contribution to their families, were part of the unique predictors of college attainment for Latina/o students. Instead, they found that being enrolled part-time was the major predictor (Arbona & Nora, 2007). Sy’s (2006) study provides some insight about these different findings. Sy found that students’ "perception of how much their school and work responsibility conflicted with each other" negatively affected students’ academic achievement and school and work
stress (p.374). Therefore, it may not be working per se that negatively affects students’ performance but how the type of work interferes with their academic job.

One of the structural factors that has helped Latina/o students with unmet needs remain in college is financial aid (Mahaffy & Pantoja, 2013). However, there are students who report still having unmet needs even though they are recipients of some type of financial aid (Hurtado, Laird, & Perorazio, 2003). These students are still at risk of not graduating because having unmet needs negatively affects degree completion (Titus, 2006).

It is interesting to note that studies carried out during the 80’s showed that financial aid is an effective way to help students from a low SES to be as likely to persist as their peers from a higher SES (Cabrera, Nora, Castañeda, 1992). On the other hand, Gross (2011) found that federal grants and targeted loans have a modest effect in reducing departure from the educational system.

The positive effect of financial aid on degree completion may be limited for Latina/o students because, even though they comprise a large percentage of the low SES students (Gross, 2011; Titus, 2006), the average amount of aid that they receive, as a group, is less than the amount received by other racial groups (KewalRamani et al., 2007). This difference in the amount of aid received may be explained, in part, by Latina/o students being reluctant to take loans (Cunningham & Santiago, 2008).

In summary, these studies show that the lack of financial resources affects the likelihood of Latina/o students obtaining a bachelor’s degree. This study contributes to this area of knowledge by exploring structural factors that may affect degree completion, such as type of work and number of hours worked during college. In addition, I explored
how these students use their agency regarding their financial needs and their perceptions about the financial aid received.

However, not only unmet financial needs affect the likelihood of Latina/o students obtaining their degrees. Gross (2011) stresses that "financial aid is a necessary but insufficient condition for success" (p. 317). Financial aid helps improve the persistence of Latina/o students, but not to the extent that it eliminates the difference in retention rates between Latina/o students and their white peers (Gross, 2011; Hu & St. John, 2001). Therefore, it seems that unmet financial needs is only one of the many aspects affecting Latinas/os’ degree completion. As a consequence, there are other college experiences that need attention, such as interactions with the college community and academic performance.

Interaction with Faculty and Other Staff Members

Another factor that affects college degree completion is students’ interactions with faculty (Hernandez, 2000; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991), advisors, and other staff members (Museus & Neville, 2012; Torres & Hernandez, 2010). Research about Latina/o students’ interactions with faculty focuses on the frequency of those interactions (e.g. Fisher, 2007; Kim, 2010), the quality of the interactions (e.g. Anaya & Cole, 2001; Kim & Sax, 2007), and the types of support that faculty and staff provide to students (e.g. Hernandez, 2000; Arana et al., 2011). Faculty members who develop relationships that focus on the well-being of their Latina/o students positively affect the retention of these students (Hernandez, 2000) by providing them with academic support (Anaya & Cole, 2001; Mahaffy & Pantoja, 2013), motivation (Arana et al., 2011; Torres & Hernandez,
2010; Kim & Sax, 2007), and institutional information (Torres & Hernandez, 2010) to develop social and academic connections (Arana et al., 2011).

Positive interactions with faculty and staff regarding academic issues positively affect Latina/o students’ academic performance (Anaya & Cole, 2001) and their self-reported learning gain during college (Lundberg & Schreiner, 2004). In particular, faculty who are enthusiastic about their teaching, available to their students, and who provide support and encouragement, positively affect Latina/o students’ academic motivation (Arana et al., 2011; Hurtado et al., 1996) as well as their grades and their perception of educational satisfaction (Cole, 2008). Student interactions with faculty who are “approachable, helpful, understanding, or encouraging” have a positive relation with students’ grades (Anaya & Cole, 2001, p. 7) and learning (Lundberg, 2010). Lundberg and Schreiner (2004) found a relation between Latina/o students’ self-reported learning gain and the following student behaviors and motivations: working harder due to instructor’s feedback, meeting faculty expectations, and asking faculty for advice to improve writing (p. 558). Lundberg and Schreiner (2004) concluded that “faculty interaction was a better predictor of learning for students of color than white students” (p. 564). Similarly, Kim and Sax (2007) found that Latina/o students had a greatest increase in their academic standards "due to the expectations of a faculty member" than their peers (p. 8). In contrast, the lack of supportive faculty has been reported by Latina/o students as a reason for leaving their college (Arana et al., 2011).

Another approach to the study of Latina/o students’ interaction with faculty focuses on the frequency of those interactions. The results of these studies vary depending on the statistical analysis used by the researchers and the type of institution
where the studies were carried out. Some researchers have found a positive relationship between the amount of interaction with faculty and Latina/o students’ college satisfaction (Fisher, 2007) and grades (Fisher, 2007; Kim, 2010). Fisher (2007) found that Latina/o students have higher levels of “formal academic ties to professors” than white students (p. 138). However, three of the five items used to measure “ties to professors” are student-faculty interactions limited to students asking faculty questions. Only one item on the scale was about having general talks with faculty.

Interestingly, as noted by Wells, Lunch and Seifert (2011) the statistical models used to analyze data can affect studies’ results about the college experiences of Latina/o students. For example, the statistical models used to analyze survey data can affect the results about the connections between student-faculty interactions and grades. Anaya and Cole (2001) found that seven variables related to interaction with faculty about academic affairs have a positive relation with students’ grades. However, when controlling for more variables, such as student residency and time spent on schoolwork only two variables were related to students’ grades. The variable “talking with a professor” was positively related to students’ grades and “visited [faculty] informally after class” had a negative relationship with students’ grades (p. 7). On the other hand, when using the same survey data as Anaya and Cole (2001), Cole (2008) did not find relationships between type of interaction with faculty and students’ grades. This difference can be explained because Cole (2008) used a different statistical analysis. Cole grouped the interaction variables into three scales instead of doing a regression as did Anaya and Cole. Lundberg (2010), also using the same instrument as the previous authors, did not
find a relationship between the frequency of interactions with faculty out of the classroom and learning for students of color.

Another variable to consider when analyzing Latina/o students’ interactions with faculty is the type of institution where the studies were carried out. Einarson and Clarkberg (2010) found that in a private institution, Latina/o students’ interactions with faculty at social events were positively associated with three outcomes: intellectual gain, self-development, and overall college satisfaction. However, working with faculty on research was negatively associated to self-development, while intellectual discussion was positively related to intellectual gain but negatively related to overall college satisfaction. Interestingly, formal or academic interactions with faculty had a "smaller contribution" in the three outcomes for Latina/o students than for their peers. On the contrary, social interactions had a "stronger contribution" in the outcomes for Latina/o students than their peers (Einarson & Clarkberg, 2010). In the case of students who attend Hispanic Serving Institutions, having involvement with faculty out of the classroom was positively related to self-efficacy and students’ grades (DeFreitas & Bravo, 2012).

In conclusion, quantitative studies (using survey data) have detected the types of interactions that students have with faculty, but these studies cannot describe the quality of these interactions or how and why these interactions relate to educational outcomes. It seems that the quality of each of these types of interactions is a piece of the puzzle needed to better understand how these interactions affect students. The present study explores the quantity and quality of interactions between Latina/o students and faculty members, as well as students’ perceptions of these interactions and how these interactions relate to their educational progress toward their degree.
Another group of studies focuses on the role of faculty, advisors and staff as role models/mentors. In contrast with the studies mentioned in the previous section, these studies are grounded in a critical approach instead on a more traditional approach (e.g. Astin and Tinto's work). Mentoring has been found to be critical for the success of Latina/o students (Bordes-Edgar et al., 2011; Gloria et al., 2005; Hurtado et al., 1996). Mentors or role models can serve as “cultural translators” for students, helping them to better understand "college customs and rituals" and to connect them with college resources (Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora, 2011, p. 236). In their longitudinal quantitative study, Torres and Hernandez (2010) found that Latina/o students "with an advisor/mentor consistently have higher levels of institutional commitment, satisfaction with faculty, academic integration, cultural affinity, and encouragement" (p. 141). These students also reported a higher likelihood of staying enrolled in their college. Similarly, Bordes-Edgar et al. (2011) in their longitudinal quantitative study found that Latina/o students who were still enrolled or had graduated after 4.5 years reported having more mentoring than those students who had dropped out. In addition, Bordes and Arredondo (2005) found that Latina/o students who have a mentor compared to Latina/o students without a mentor "have a more positive perception of the university environment" (p. 126). Mentors can also support the academic growth of Latina/o college students (Santos & Reigadas, 2002). Students who participate in a mentoring program increased their college self-efficacy (DeFreitas & Bravo, 2012; Santos & Reigadas, 2002) and "had better defined academic goals" (Santos & Reigadas, 2002, p. 46).

The role that faculty and staff have in helping students navigate the college culture has been also studied. Faculty members can be a source of support if they help
students navigate the challenges of college life by providing or connecting students to opportunities where they can socially engage with activities that are relevant for them (Arana et al., 2011). In particular, Latina/o faculty and staff have the advantage of providing successful mentoring to Latina/o students because they themselves have successfully navigated the educational system and can share their own experiences (Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000; Hernandez, 2000). Santos and Reigadas (2002) argue that having a Latina/o mentor who shares the mentee's values and background has a greater perceived positive impact for mentees. However, as pointed out by Verdugo (1995) and more recently by Gloria et al., (2005), Latina/o students have limited access to this type of mentoring due to the low numbers of faculty and staff who are Latinas/os. In 2015, Latina/o students comprised 16% of the college student population, but only 4% of faculty and 9% of college staff (NCES, 2016).

A large number of Latina/o students, approximately 40%, are the first in their families to go to college (Lundberg & Schreiner, 2004; Saez, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf, & Yeung, 2007; Santiago, 2007). Therefore, higher education administrators should have in place institutional structures that help these students enhance their knowledge about college life. Museus and Neville (2012) found common characteristics among staff who provide that type of help for minority students. One of these characteristics is that they share some type of common background such as cultural heritage. In addition, these staff members not only provide academic support, but a holistic support that includes cultural, social, and psychological issues. These staff members are perceived by Latina/o students as caring individuals who proactively reach out to them and connect them with institutional resources (Museus & Neville, 2012; Schreiner, Noel, Anderson, & Cantwell
In addition, mentors play a role in supporting Latina/o students’ career and personal development by connecting these students to campus resources (Santos & Reigadas, 2002). Salas et al. (2014) argue that mentors "could influence self-regulatory and self-reflective capacities in Latino students," particularly those who are first-generation students (p. 241).

Another area that has been studied is the type of faculty-student interaction inside the classroom and how different pedagogies affect these interactions. Lundberg (2010) argues that "faculty must create a learning environment and interpersonal interactions that validate students of color and encourage their sharing of ideas" (p. 65). Classroom activities that provide a safe space to "integrate, synthesize, and express ideas from multiple perspective" foster learning for students of color (Lundberg, 2010, p. 66). Rendón (1993) argues that it is critical for minority students’ college success to participate in college life. However, many of these students may need "external agents" that validate these students’ academic and personal contributions before they get involved in their campus life (Rendón, 1993, p. 8). Faculty who foster "academic validation" were described by minority students as: (1) being "personable and approachable to students;" (2) treating "students equally;" (3) "concern for teaching students;" (4) providing classroom activities that allow "students to experience themselves as capable learners" and help those who need more help; and (5) "provid[ing] meaningful feedback to students" (Rendón, 1993, p. 12).

Staff and faculty members can be proactive “external agents” by reaching out to students instead of waiting for these students to approach them. This type of outreach is particularly relevant for Latina/o students who may rely on their peers to obtain academic
information instead of faculty or advisors (Hurtado et al., 1996; Mahaffy, & Pantoja, 2013; Torres et al., 2006). According to Torres et al. (2006), Latina/o students do not seek academic information from their advisors because these students do not recognize advisors "as authority figures," or do not feel comfortable looking for help from them (p. 67). Instead, the students in Torres’ et al. study preferred to ask to staff with whom they had "built a personal relationship" for information (p. 67).

Latina/o students use their agency by asking their peers about information; however, this approach may not be the best one to receive accurate information. Indeed, students reported that they have had to contact their advisors after acting upon wrong information provided by peers (Torres et al., 2006). Therefore, promoting the concept of being a proactive external agent may be a structural effort from the college administration to increase the graduation rate of Latina/o students. Faculty and staff members who proactively reach out to Latina/o students can provide them with accurate information and help these students to realize that they belong on campus and/or are able to succeed in their academic work (Rendón, 1993). As argued by Rendón (1993) "faculty and staff can transform even the most vulnerable students into powerful learners who are excited about learning and attending college" (p. 18).

In conclusion, faculty and staff members can be a source of academic and social support for Latina/o students, as well as a source of academic and social validation that helps them engage in college life. Latina/o students’ interactions with faculty are associated with educational outcomes, such as grades, self-reported learning and self-development gains, as well as persistence. However, there are conflicting findings about which types of interactions are the ones that have a greater positive impact for Latina/o
students, or why some types of interactions are negatively associated with some outcomes. The students more likely to leave college are those who lack validation both in and out of the classroom (Rendón, 1993). Therefore, this study seeks to better understand Latina/o students’ interactions with faculty and staff, as well as how those interactions affect their academic performance, by asking participants about their perceptions and actions regarding their interactions or lack thereof with faculty and staff.

**The Role of the Family**

Faculty and staff are not the only ones that can affect the college experiences of Latina/o students. Family has been mentioned by students as both a source of motivation (Arana et al., 2011; Hernandez, 2000) and a source of obligation (Arana et al., 2011; Hernandez, 2002) that can affect their chances of obtaining a four-year degree.

Family serves as a source of support, encouragement, and motivation for Latina/o students (Hernandez, 2002; Sánchez et al., 2005). Parents offer direct encouragement to their children to go to college through sharing with them their stories of struggle due to poverty and limited formal education (Sánchez et al., 2005). These students recognize the sacrifices that their parents have made in order to provide opportunities for them; in turn they do not want to disappoint them by leaving college (Hernandez, 2002; Sánchez et al., 2005). Latina/o students see education as way of not facing the same struggle their parents did (Sánchez et al., 2005). In addition, Latina/o students are motivated to finish their degree because they want to financially give back to their parents (Hernandez, 2002; Sy & Romero, 2008).

Beside parents, older siblings and the community serve as a source of support for Latina/o students. Older siblings who have attended college serve Latina/o students as
role models who provide information about college life (Sánchez et al., 2005). In the case of first-generation Latina/o students, their community serves as a source of motivation because these students have a sense of responsibility and desire to give back to their communities (Yosso et al., 2009; Zalaquett, 2006). The Latina/o students’ community also serves as a source of cultural wealth that can help them to navigate college life. Therefore, Latina/o students’ families and community are an important area of these students’ life that can affect their college experience. Students who report having family support are less likely to report the intention of leaving college (Gloria et al., 2005); however, family can also negatively affect students’ persistence.

Studies about Latina/o students’ interactions with their families have focused on two major types of interactions: relaxing/socializing and responsibilities/obligations. These studies have the commonality of addressing societal structures that affect the educational outcomes of Latina/o students, such as the need to help their families due to financial hardships. Arana et al. (2011) found that family obligations, such as having to financially support children or other relatives, as well as family crisis, were reported by students who did not persist as negatively affecting their college experience. Hernandez (2002) found that Latina/o students mentioned that family obligations impacted their education due to the time they needed to spend completing chores and responsibilities at home. Sy (2006) found that Latina/o students who spend more time translating for their parents presented higher levels of stress in college. Tseng (2004) found that Latina/o students from immigrant families who spend more than 15 hours helping their parents with household responsibilities had lower grades than their peers who spend less time in those activities.
On the other hand, family interaction can have positive effects on Latina/o students’ college life. Students who maintained a relationship with their family and were less homesick reported lower levels of stress and pressure than their peers who had difficulty being separated from their family (Hurtado et al., 1996). Sy (2006) found that Latina/o students who spend more time socializing/relaxing with their family reported lower levels of school-related stress and higher academic achievement than their peers who spent less time with their families. These findings show family as a source of strength instead of a challenge.

Family obligation is an area that may have gender differences for Latino and Latina students. Latina college students face the challenge of taking care of younger siblings and providing financial help to their parents while in college (Hurst, 2009; Sy & Romero, 2008). Latina students from immigrant families also report that their parents do not always understand the demands of college work (Sy, & Romero, 2008). On the other hand, Latino students have to struggle between being college students and providing financial support and protection to their families (Cervantes, 2010). Latino students, in contrast with Latina students who receive support from their mothers, report a weak or nonexistent relationship with their fathers (Cammarota, 2004).

Differences among Latina/o students can go beyond gender and can vary by SES as well. Students from a lower social economic status may have more family obligations that take time away from their college work (Sy & Romero, 2008). In addition, Latina/o students who are the first one in their family to go to college may receive a different type of help from their families than those students who have parents with bachelor’s degrees.
There are several limitations within the current literature about family interactions. Most of the studies about the role that family has on Latinas/os’ education focus on pre-college experiences (Sy & Romero, 2008). In addition, the majority of the participants in these studies are from Mexican-American families (e.g. Gloria et al., 2005; Sanchez et al., 2005; Sy, 2006); therefore, little is known about how family interactions affect the completion of a four-year degree for Latina/o students from other backgrounds. This study contributes to this knowledge by including participants who are studying in Massachusetts whose family origin is most likely to be from Puerto Rico and Dominican Republic instead of México. In addition, I carried out focus groups for Latinas and Latinos separately to learn more about gender differences regarding factors that help or hinder their educational success.

**Academic Performance**

Another aspect that has been studied that influences Latina/o students’ graduation rates is academic performance. Bordes-Edgar et al. (2011) found that Latina/o students who have persisted or graduated within five years had stronger GPAs than those students who had dropped out within that same time frame. Similarly, Hy (2000) found that low grades were negatively associated with persistence for minority students.

Academic performance is one of the main areas of concerns of Latina/o students while transitioning to college (Chiang, Hunter, & Yeh, 2004; Hernandez, 2002; Hurtado et al., 1996; Longerbeam et al., 2004). In fact, Latina/o college students are more likely than their white peers to report that if they were to leave college, it would be due to “lack of academic ability” ( Longerbeam, et al., 2004, p. 544). Latina/o students, even those who took honor classes in high school, report concerns about their academic preparation
for college work (Hernandez, 2002). Latina/o students whose dominant language is not English, reported that it was more difficult for them to express their thoughts than their white peers (Mahaffy & Pantoja, 2013). These same students reported running out of time during exams and having difficulties completing their assignments (Mahaffy & Pantoja, 2013). In addition, Latina/o students reported the need to improve their study skills (Chiang et al., 2004) and time management skills (Hurtado, et al., 1996) in order to succeed as college students.

In summary, studies about Latino college students have found structural aspects that hinder the educational progress of Latina/o students such as unmet financial needs and lack of role models. These studies have also found enabling structures that support the educational success of Latina/o students. These structural factors include financial aid and approachable and caring faculty and staff. From an agency point of view, these studies show that Latina/o students reach out for help to people from a similar background, use their parents’ experiences as a source of motivation to graduate, and created spaces on campus where they feel safe. These studies also found that there are structural aspects that negatively affect the educational success of Latina/o students that are not directly related to the college. Some of these structural issues include students working to help their families or being underprepared for academic college work. The present study intends to enhance the understanding of the experiences of Latina/o students in a PWI in Massachusetts by exploring their perceptions and actions regarding financial aid, interaction with faculty, family interactions, the racial campus climate, and their academic performance. As mentioned in the previous chapter, I carried out six focus groups, three with Latina students and three with Latino students. One of the six focus
groups was comprised only of Latina transfer students and another one only of Latino transfer students to be able to explore both gender and transfer status differences.

**Latina/o Community College Transfer Students**

Community colleges have a critical role in our society as they provide opportunities for social mobility, especially for groups that have been historically underrepresented in higher education, as in the case of Latina/o students. Indeed, a large percentage of Latinas/os’ access to higher education is through community colleges (AACC, 2009; Furbeck, 2011; Pérez & Ceja, 2009; Suarez, 2003; Wolf-Wendel, Twombly, Morphew & Sopcich, 2004). As shown in the previous sections, numerous studies have explored Latinas/os’ college experiences. However, almost none have focused on Latina/o transfer students (Suarez, 2003) despite the differences found between white transfer students and transfer students of color (Berger & Malaney, 2003; Ishitani, 2008; Keely & House, 1993; Laanan, 1999). As a result, I have decided to include Latina/o community college transfer students as a distinctive group to be studied in my research. In this section, due to the limited number of studies about Latina/o transfer students, I first present the major findings about transfer students and the main differences between white transfer students and transfer students of color. I finish this section by presenting the scarce existing literature about Latina/o transfer students.

**Transfer Students’ Academic Performance**

The majority of the quantitative studies about transfer students explore transfer students’ grades and make comparisons between transfer students and native students regarding their GPAs and degree completion or retention rates. Hill (1965) and Díaz (1992) carried out meta-analyses of transfer students’ studies. Both found that transfer
students suffer a decrease in their grades after transferring, but the majority of them recovered their grades after their first semester. Hill (1695) called this decrease in grades “transfer shock” (p. 201). Díaz (1992) found that 79% of the studies reported that transfer students had a decrease in their grades after transferring, but she also found that 67% of those studies found that transfer students partially or completely recovered from that dip in their grades within the first year after transferring. Carlan and Byxbe (2000) found that even though transfer students’ GPAs decrease during the first semester, these students graduated with GPAs similar to the grades of students who started as freshmen.

Even though numerous studies have found that transfer students experience transfer shock (Cutright, 2011; Carlan & Byxbe, 2000; Keeley & House, 1993), some studies present caveats. Cejda, Kaylor, & Rewey (1998), in their study carried out in a liberal arts college, did not find statistically significant differences between community college transfer students’ GPAs and their GPA post-transfer. When Cejda et al. (1998) controlled for disciplines, they found that students majoring in mathematics and sciences had a statistically significant decrease in their grades, but students majoring in fine arts and humanities, as well as those in the social sciences, had an increase in their GPA which was not statistically significant. Keeley and House (1993) found that business students had the largest transfer shock, engineering students had the smallest, and that transfer students recovered their grades after four semesters.

Because the findings about the academic performance of transfer students vary from a decrease in their GPAs to an increase in their GPAs (Laanan, 2001), researchers need to make distinctions between transfer students from different backgrounds (King, 1999; Pérez & Ceja, 2009). However, there are limited studies that focus on subgroups of
transfer students. This study contributes expanding the knowledge about the experiences of a subgroup of transfer students, Latino/a transfer students, and how those experiences affect their educational success.

Another area where scholars have found different results is in studies that compare the academic progress of transfer students with students who entered an institution from freshman year (non-transfer students). Dougherty (1992), in his literature review about transfer students, concludes that students who enter a community college expressing their goal as obtaining a bachelor’s degree “are 11% to 19% less likely to do so than comparable students entering four-year colleges” (p. 204). Depending on the dataset and control variable used by researchers, the findings about degree completion and retention vary from transfer students having higher attrition rates (Porter, 1999) and lower degree completion rates (Berkner, He, & Cataldi, 2002; Porter, 1999), to not finding a statistically significant difference between these two groups of students regarding retention rates (McCormick, & Carroll, 1997) and graduation rates (Lee, Mackie-Lewis, & Marks, 1993; Melguizo, Kienzl, Alfonso, 2011). Melguizo and Dowd’s (2009) study is a good example of how controlling for different variables results in different findings. They found that transfer students have lower degree completion than non-transfer students, but when they controlled for SES and institutional selectivity that difference was very small. Even more, when they made corrections for self-selection bias and transfer policies by states the difference was not significant.

Transfer Students’ College Experiences

A limited number of studies focus on the college experiences of transfer students (Melguizo et al., 2011). The few studies about college experiences have found that
community college transfer students have a lower level of institutional engagement (Ishitani, 2010) and college satisfaction (Berger, & Malaney, 2003; Lee et al., 1993) than non-transfer students.

Student-faculty interactions may also affect the college experiences of transfer students. Volkwien, King, & Terenzini (1986) found that community college students’ intellectual growth was positively associated with class enjoyment and participation. These authors concluded that for community college transfers “what happens in the classroom is what counts” (p. 425). Interestingly, they also found that the frequency of faculty-student interactions is not enough to have a positive association with intellectual growth; but the quality of those interactions did have an association. In addition, finding faculty unapproachable is negatively associated with transfer students’ academic adjustment (Laanan, 2007).

Both academic and social adjustment can affect the experiences of transfer students. When transfer students perceive a negative campus environment where faculty have a stigma about them, their academic adjustment is negatively affected (Laanan, 2011). On the other hand, social adjustment is positively affected by student-faculty interactions and by having a high level of satisfaction with the college environment (Laanan, 2011). Lee et al. (1993) found that even though transfer students and native students do not differ in their persistence, transfer students are less satisfied both socially and academically with their college experience. Each one of the studies presented in this section use a quantitative approach; therefore, they do not explain the "why" behind these results. Qualitative studies, as my study, provide a better understanding of these findings by exploring the "why" behind the findings from quantitative studies.
The small number of qualitative studies about transfer students focuses on the transition from the community college to the four-year institution. These studies have found that transfer students face several challenges when transitioning from the community college culture to a different culture in their new four-year college. These challenges include: new administrative procedures (Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012), new student-faculty interactions (Townsend & Wilson, 2006), new academic demands, and making new social connections (David & Dickman, 1998; Townsend & Wilson, 2006).

One of the challenges that transfer students face is having to learn about administrative procedures in their new institutions. Tobolowsky and Cox (2012) interviewed faculty and staff in a four-year college and found that their participants thought that transfer students bring with them to their new institutions assumptions and expectations that worked in their community college but may not work in their new institutions. For example, financial aid is automatically applied to the students account in their community college; however, they need to accept the financial aid in their four-year college before it goes into their account. Another difference was students’ expectations of being contacted by the administration to help them out with administrative procedures, as they were used to in their community college. However, in their new institutions, staff did not reach out to students until some kind of infraction was in place.

Transfer students have to adapt to a new environment where faculty interact with students in a different way than in their community colleges (Townsend & Wilson, 2006). Townsend and Wilson (2006) found that transfer students have less time to interact with their faculty and that faculty-student relationships were perceived by transfer students as less personal than those they had with faculty in their community...
colleges. In contrast, Davies and Dickman (1998) found that transfer students find their faculty in the four-year college approachable and more knowledgeable than in their community college.

Besides adapting to a new type of interaction with their faculty, community college transfer students have to face different academic demands in their new institution such as fewer small assignments and more academically demanding courses (Davies & Dickman, 1998; Townsend & Wilson, 2006). However, at the same time, some of them find the courses in the four-year college intellectually stimulating (Davies & Dickman, 1998).

Another academic challenge linked to social challenges is that some transfer students are not able to make study groups, which have helped them during their community college years (Townsend & Wilson, 2006). Making friends may be difficult for transfer students who describe four-year college as having a competitive environment and where students lack respect for each other and their faculty (Davies & Dickman, 1998).

As mentioned above, transfer students have difficulties making social connections with other students (Davies & Dickman, 1998; Townsend & Wilson, 2006). It is hard to make connections with students who already have developed and established friendships. Transfer students report feelings of social isolation (Townsend & Wilson, 2006), being overwhelmed, and feeling dehumanized due to the large size of their four-year institutions (Davies & Dickman, 1998). However, being involved in clubs or other academic activities helps transfer students adjust socially to their new college (Laanan, 2007; Townsend & Wilson, 2006) and obtain their bachelor’s degree (Wang, 2009).
The difference on findings about the academic performance and college experiences of transfer students can be in part explained due to the diversity among these students. Several scholars have made the call to study subgroups of transfer students (e.g. Berger & Malaney, 2003; Wawrzynski & Sedlacek, 2003). The next section explores the difference between white transfer students and transfer students of color.

**Transfer Students of Color**

According to Laanan (2011), since the 2000’s researchers have been focusing on the experiences of transfer students of color. Learning about the differences among transfer students from diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds is needed because students of color have different stressors than white students (Smedley, Myers, & Harrell, 1993). Berger and Malaney (2003) studied transfer students in a PWI. They found that white transfer students have better grades and higher levels of satisfaction in their college than transfer students from racial/ethnic minority groups. These scholars suggest studying different subgroups of transfer students, particularly those transferring from community college, because these institutions serve a large number of minority students (Berger & Malaney, 2003).

Laanan (1999) found that white transfer students have a higher level of interactions with faculty and class participation, and fewer problems socially adjusting to their four-year colleges than transfer students of color. On the other hand, transfer students of color were more likely than white transfer students to report being academically underestimated by their professor, being stigmatized for being transfer students, and feeling overwhelmed and alienated.
Regarding differences in retention rates and academic performance between white transfer students and transfer students of color, Ishitani (2008) found that transfer students of color have a lower attrition rate after transferring than their white peers; however, in their third semester, they were 68% more likely to leave their college than their white peers (Ishitani, 2008). It is important to note that Ishitani’s study included both transfer students from community colleges and other four-year colleges. Regarding academic performance, Keely and House (1993) found that minority transfer students suffer a larger transfer shock than white students.

**Latina/o Transfer Students**

Most studies about Latina/o transfer students focus on the transfer process itself and not on the experiences of these students after transferring (e.g. Ornelas & Solórzano, 2004; Rendón & Valadez, 1993). An exception is the studies of Suarez (2003), Wolf-Wendel et al. (2004), and Melguizo (2009), this last one being the only quantitative study. Melguizo found that even though Latina/o degree completion rates decreased from 80% in the 80’s to 60% in the 90’s, the degree completion rate for Latina/o transfer students did not change, staying around 50%. She also found that in the 1980s, Latina/o transfer students’ degree completion was 27% lower than non-transfer junior students. However, in the 1990s there was no statistically difference between Latina/o transfer students and non-transfer Junior students regarding degree completion rates.

Suárez (2003) found that role models are important for the educational success of Latina/o transfer students. Suárez’s (2003) qualitative study used interviews to explore what help Latina/o transfer students have a successful transfer experience. She interviewed ten students, six professors and two counselors. Suárez (2003) found that
role models were important for Latina/o transfer students’ educational success. Latina/o transfer students reported that “it was important for them to be able to identify with someone on the campus … who had shared similar experiences, either academic or personal, and had succeeded” (Suarez, 2003, p. 113). This study confirms the findings presented previously about the importance of higher education institutions having a diverse staff and faculty body to provide positive environments for Latina/o students.

Wolf-Wendel et al. (2004) studied a transfer agreement between two community colleges, one located in Florida and the other in California, with a selective women’s college in Massachusetts. Even though their study does not focus solely on Latina transfer students, I decided to include it on this section because several of the participants were Latina students. These scholars found that “women community college students who are brave, have the necessary academic background, and who do make the leap find success at Smith College” (p. 226). These students reported a cultural shock when arriving at Smith College due to the lack of diversity, but found enough support in other transfer students with who they shared a background. They also reported that even though the first year was challenging, getting to know their new institution helped reduce their stress.

In summary, the knowledge about Latina/o transfer students is very limited. The present study enhances the knowledge about Latina/o transfer students because I was able to focus on the unique experiences of these students by having two focus groups of transfer students which allowed me to compare their experiences to their non-transfer peers.
The literature overall reveals a number of structural and agentic factors that may affect Latina/o students’ success. For example, structural aspects such as unmet financial needs and lack of role models for Latina/o students on campus negatively affects the college experiences of Latina/o students. On the other hand, enabling structures that support the educational success of Latina/o students are financial aid and approachable and caring faculty and staff. Examples of agentic factors are Latina/o students reaching out for help to people from a similar background, using their parents’ experiences as a source of motivation to graduate, and creating counterspaces on campus where they feel safe. To further explore the factors that affect the college experience of Latina/o students mentioned in this literature review, I employed a qualitative approach for my data collection and analysis that allowed me to listen to the voices of Latina/o students in a PWI in Massachusetts regarding what are the factors that they perceive as influencing their college experiences.
CHAPTER 3

METHOD

Introduction

This study explores the meaning that Latina/o students give to their college experiences, as these experiences relate to successfully navigating the path to obtaining a bachelor’s degree. I used focus groups and individual follow-up interviews to explore Latina/o students’ perceptions regarding both the role of their college and their own role in their educational success.

On one hand the purpose of this study is to increase the knowledge about what PWIs are doing to better serve their Latina/o students and what these students are bringing with them to college that helps them obtain their four-year degree. On the other hand, the purpose of this study is also to learn about what students perceive as hindering their academic progress at both the institutional and the personal level. This study also explores differences by gender and transfer status, I carried out separate focus groups for these groups (Latina, Latina transfer, Latino, Latino transfer). Because the purpose of this study is to learn the deep meaning that Latina/o college students give to their college experiences, I employ a qualitative approach for my data collection and analysis.

Qualitative methods help the researcher understand the complex private experiences of participants. Brizuela, Steward, Carillo, and Berger (2000) state that “[q]ualitative researchers seek to interpret what particular people in particular situations at particular times do” (p. xiv). This claim aligns with my interest in exploring Latina/o students’ college experiences in a particular institution (a PWI in Massachusetts) through their own voices. In accordance with one of the guiding principles of qualitative research,
I wanted to learn about the participants’ internal lives, their successes, and their failures to accomplish their pursuits in a world that too often presents discord with a persons’ hopes and ideals (Taylor & Bodgan, 1992). I chose to use a qualitative approach because it allowed me to better understand the experiences of Latina/o students, whose voices have been historically silenced, by learning from and listening to these students’ voices. Particularly, I focused on experiences that are helping or hindering students’ progress toward their four-year degree.

My study has several characteristics that make the choice of qualitative methods particularly appropriate and useful. I used a natural setting (Creswell, 2009), as well as a descriptive, emerging, and interpretative approach (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). My natural setting is the participants’ college. I use a descriptive approach by using focus groups and follow-up interviews to explore what the participants “think about” their colleges experiences (Krueger, 2015) and to be able to “describe and interpret” my participants’ experiences instead of “measure or predict” behaviors (Rossman & Rallis, 2012, p. 9).

My study is “emergent rather than tightly prefigured” (Rossman & Rallis, 2012, p. 8). Instead of limiting my focus groups to explore areas we already know affect the educational success of Latina/o students, my research design allows students to bring out the topics that they think are affecting their path to graduation. In this respect, I provided time at the beginning of the focus groups for the participants to reflect on their college experiences and write down what they think has helped and hindered their educational progress. In this way, I had access to what is important for the participants before asking them about the topics highlighted by the existing literature about Latinas/os’ colleges’ experiences. Finally, my study is interpretative, which means that the “qualitative
researcher assumes that understanding (analyzing and interpreting) and representing (interpreting and writing about) what has been learned are filtered through her own personal bibliography that is situated in a specific sociopolitical, historical moment” (Rossman & Rallis, 2012, p. 9).

In my case, the theories, concepts and studies mentioned in the literature review, as well as my own personal experiences as a Latina graduate student, guided my data collection, analysis, and interpretation. As Reichardt and Rallis (1994) argue, I strongly believe that doing research is a "value-ladenness" endeavor (p. 88); therefore, the researcher cannot leave behind her own values and the unique way she experiences the world. In consequence, I acknowledge that I used my own experiences as a Latina student to develop my conceptual framework. In turn, my conceptual framework and the previous knowledge existing about Latina/o college students helped me to develop my focus group protocol. In addition, my training as a therapist helped me feel comfortable in my role as the focus group facilitator and in asking clarifying questions during the focus groups.

**Conceptual Framework**

This study expands the knowledge on what is positively and negatively affecting Latina/o college students’ degree completion. Particularly, I aim to better understand the role of both four-year colleges and Latina/o students themselves play in their educational experiences. As figure 1 shows, my study is guided by the interplay of structure and agency, which I link to higher education theories and studies about persistence and retention, as well as concepts from Latina critical theory.
I based my study on sociological theories of agency and structure in order to learn about the experiences of Latina/o students from these two lenses (four-year colleges and students). In particular, I used Giddens (1984) Theory of Structuration that posits that the individual can transform structures, but at the time, these same structures enable or restrain humans’ actions.

I link Gidden's (1984) theory to current literature in higher education, particularly literature on retention and persistence theories, to learn about institutional efforts (or lack of efforts) to retain Latina/o students to graduation and the actions (or lack of action) that Latina/o students take to persist to graduation. For example, the initial work of Tinto stresses the role of individuals (agency) integrating academically and socially into their colleges. Tinto (2010), in his later work, includes a structural lens by arguing that the
institutions have a role in the educational success of their students. In the case of Rendón’s (1993) Validation theory, the focus is on structural issues which includes faculty and staff. Rendón argues that for minority students to successfully navigate college, they have to first be validated by college agents. Rendón (1993) stresses the role of faculty and staff who can use their own agency to proactively reach out to Latina/o students to help them to overcome structural inequalities.

Latina critical theory informs this study by providing a broader lens that takes into consideration the context of higher education within American society. In particular, my conceptual framework is informed by the psychological and behavioral dimensions of Hurtado and colleagues’ (2012) racial campus climate theory. I included the racial climate theory because higher education institutions are considered unwelcoming places by some Latinas/o students (Jones et al., 2002). This unwelcoming description of four-year colleges may be rooted in the fact that these colleges reflect the "monolithic" American culture, where the white upper-middle class is considered the norm (Medina & Luna, 2000, p. 49). Another concept of Latina critical theory that informs my conceptual framework is cultural wealth (Yosso, 2006) which focuses on both agency and structure. Latina critical theory recognizes the existence of educational structures that can hinder or enable Latina/o students’ success, but at the same time, these theories recognize that Latina/o students have a role in their own success. These theories have an asset-based framing rather than a deficit-based highlighting that Latina/o students bring to college resources and skills developed in their community that are essential for college graduation; however, as these theories show, these resources are often ignored or undervalued by colleges.
The third aspect of Latina critical theory that informs my study is the concept of interlock between social identities (Bernal, 2002; Martinez-Alemán, 2003). I acknowledge that the experiences of Latina and Latino students may be different by carrying out focus groups by gender. I also took into consideration the interlock between ethnicity and transfer status by carrying out separate focus group for transfer students and non-transfer students.

Empirical studies about the Latina/o students’ college experiences also inform this study (e.g. Arbona & Nora, 2007; Gloria et al., 2005; Hernandez, 2000; Longerbeam et al., 2004). Previous research has shown that financial resources (e.g. Hernandez, 2000; Joo, Durband, & Grable, 2009), interaction with faculty and other staff members (e.g. Anaya & Cole, 2001; Gloria et al., 2005), family relationships (Sanchez et al., 2005), and academic performance (Bordes-Edgar et al., 2011) can positively or negatively affect the college experiences of Latina/o students. Therefore, besides asking about questions regarding campus climate, I included each of these aspects in my focus group protocol.

I chose to carry out a qualitative study to answer my research questions because, as advocated by Latina critical theory, I wanted to give voice to a group that has been historically underrepresented in four-year colleges. The current literature provides knowledge about areas that affect students’ educational success, but we know less about how these areas affect students in a PWI in Massachusetts. Even more, I see Latina/o students as knowledgeable individuals who can help enhance the understanding of their college experiences in a PWI. It is my hope that the knowledge gathered in the focus groups can guide policies and programs in PWIs to better serve Latina/o students.
In summary, my research questions are guided by the interplay of structure and agency, asking students about their role and their institution’s role in their educational success. The focus groups’ questions, the analysis of the data, and the discussion of my results were guided by my research questions, past empirical literature, and theories, presented in Chapter Two.

**Site Selection**

**Latinas/os in Massachusetts**

A large percentage of the studies about Latina/o college students have been carried out in California and the Southwest region of the United States (Arizona, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas). In those states, the Latina/o population comprises more than 30% of the population of each state with the exception of the state of Oklahoma (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). In contrast, Latinas/os comprise only 12% of the population of Massachusetts (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). Another difference is that in California and the Southwest region, México is the country of origin for more than 65% of the Latina/o population. In contrast, only 5% of Latinas/os in Massachusetts have México as a country of origin (Hispanic Trends, 2014). In Massachusetts, Puerto Ricans comprise the largest group of Latinas/os (41%), followed by Dominicans (19%) (Granberry & Torres, 2010). I argue that the experience of Latinas/os living in the U.S. may vary depending on their geographic location and the dominant group of Latinos that is there; therefore, the experiences of Latina/o students in California and the Southwest U.S. region may be different from the experiences of Latina/o college students in Massachusetts.
The Latina/o population in Massachusetts has increased 30% since 2000 (Granberry & Torres, 2010). Latinas/os are a younger population than the total population of Massachusetts: Latinas/os’ median age is 26 years old, and the median age of the population of Massachusetts is 38 years old (Granberry & Torres, 2010). The educational attainment of Latinas/os in Massachusetts is worrisome because 35% of this population has less than a high school diploma, compared to 8% of whites (Granberry & Torres, 2010). At the same time, Latinas/os have the lowest rate of bachelor’s degree attainment (16%), while the white population has a 40% attainment rate (Granberry & Torres, 2010). Interestingly, the percentage of Latinas/os who hold at least a bachelor’s degree differs by country of origin, with Latinas/os from Cuba and México having the largest percentage (39% and 33% respectively) (Granberry & Torres, 2010).

The educational attainment of Latinas/os affects their representation in the labor force. Even though Latina/o labor force participation is the same as white (69% of people 16 years or older who are not in school and are either employed or officially unemployed) (Grandberry & Torres, 2010, p. 12), they are underrepresented in "Professional or Managerial Occupations" (p. 14). Latinas/os only comprised 21% percent of the population of "Professional or Managerial Occupations," while whites comprised 42% (p. 14). On the other hand, Latinas/os are overrepresented in jobs related to "farming, construction, production, and transportation," comprising 27% of this population, while white comprise 16% of the population working in these types of jobs (p. 14).

The income of Latina/o families is not only affected by Latinas/os holding "low-paying and low-skills professions" (Shea & Jones, 2006, p. 12), but also by the fact that
Latinas/os earn "less on average than other ethno-racial groups" across different types of jobs (Grandberry & Torres, 2010, p. 19). The current representation of Latinas/os on the job market, which is affected by their educational level, has deep implications for the wellbeing of the Latina/o population. For example, "the median income for Latino families in Massachusetts ($34,918) was roughly half that of families in the overall population ($68,701) in 2004” (Shea & Jones, 2006, p. 12). This income disparity has not changed recently accordingly to the 2014 American Community Survey (Institute for Asian American Studies, 2014). Consequently, Latina/o families have higher poverty rates (28%) than the overall Massachusetts population (8%) (Institute for Asian American Studies, 2014). Therefore, it is imperative to know more about the college experiences of Latina/o students in Massachusetts in order to learn about what is affecting students’ success, both positively and negatively. With this goal in mind, I chose a PWI research institution located close to two cities with large percentages of Latinas/os. In addition, this university has increased the graduation rates of Latina/o students in the last decade. Therefore, the experiences of Latina/o students in this university may help enhance the knowledge about what a PWI can do to increase graduation rates for their Latina/o students.

**Northeast Research University (NRU)**

I chose a large, public research type I university, that I will call NRU. NRU is located close to two cities with large Latina/o populations. In 2010, Latinas/os comprised 48% and 39% of the population of these two cities (U. S. Census Bureau, 2010). The information about NRU provided in this section was gathered through NRU institutional websites and by contacting particular university offices. NRU has an undergraduate
student body comprised approximately of 22,000 students. In the fall of 2018, NRU had 1,625 (8.0%) undergraduate students enrolled who identified themselves as Latinas/os.

In NRU, the first-year retention of Latina/o students increased from 80% for the Fall 2010 cohort to 85% for the Fall 2017 cohort. Even though this rate is higher than the national one-year retention rate for four-year public colleges (70%) (National Student Clearinghouse, 2016), this retention rate is lower than that for white students at NRU. White students had a first-year retention of 89% for the Fall 2010 cohort and 92% for the Fall 2017 cohort. Even though the difference between first-year retention seems large, this difference may seem larger than it is due to the big difference between the size of these two populations. Of the 360 Latinas/os that comprised the Fall 2017 cohort, 306 returned for a second-year and of the 2,871 white students from the same cohort, 2,638 returned for a second year. For NRU’s 2010 cohort, the six-year graduation rates for Latina/o students was 64% and, for white students, 78%. NRU increased their 6-year graduation rate for the Fall 2012 cohort to 78% for Latina/o students and 81% for white students. NRU’s graduation rates are better than the national six-year graduation for public four-year colleges: 52% for Latina/o students and 63% for white students (NCES, 2014).

In the case of transfer students, the four-year graduation rate for NRU’s 2010 cohort was 71% for racial/ethnic minority students and 74% for non-minority students. The four-year graduation rate increased for the Fall 2014 cohort only for non-minority students to 80%. On the other hand, the four-year graduation rate for racial/ethnic minority students reduced one percentage point for the Fall 2014 cohort (70%).
Student survey data from NRU shows that Latina/o students rate their overall experience at NRU and NRU’s campus climate slightly lower than their white peers (difference is less than five percentage points in both questions). They are also slightly less likely to recommend NRU to a friend than their white peers (difference is less than five percentage points). Regarding contact with faculty, Latina/o students are more likely than their white peers to talk “very often” with faculty about career plans and to talk with faculty outside of class about course related issues (difference is approximately 10 percentage points for both questions). However, Latina/o students are less likely to work with faculty on a research project (25%) than their white peers (33%).

Transfer students at NRU rate academic advising lower than their non-transfer peers in areas such as: being available when needed, informing students of important deadlines, sharing knowledge about academic support services, and providing useful information about courses (difference is approximately 10 percentage points).

While the survey data from NRU are useful in understanding some of what I aim to address, I will use a qualitative design to understand more deeply what these results suggest. I will explore both faculty connections and campus climate during the focus groups to better understand these results and be able to suggest recommendations to better serve Latina/o students in a PWI.

**Research Design**

Students attending higher education institutions are a heterogeneous group who have diverse college experiences. Researchers use different methods to learn about how students’ experiences relate to educational persistence. One of these methods is interviewing, which gives unique access to interviewees’ perspectives about their world. I
collected my data by carrying out focus groups, which is one type of group interview that focuses on the group interaction (Morgan, 1988), and individual follow-up interviews with Latinas/os students at NRU. I carried out three focus groups with Latina students (one of them was comprised of only transfer students and the other two of non-transfer students) and three with Latino students (two focus groups with non-transfer students and one with only transfer students). Each focus group lasted approximately 90 minutes. As shown in Table 1, the focus groups were comprised of between five and seven students. I am following Krueger’s (2015) recommendation to use small groups when the goal is to gain a deep insight into the participants’ experiences when the subject is one with which students have ample experience. After I carried out the focus groups, I selected six participants (one from each focus group) for individual follow-up interviews in order to deeper in particular issues.

Table 1: Number of participants in each focus group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus Group Composition</th>
<th>Number of Participants (Total 38)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Latina Non-Transfer</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latina Non-Transfer</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latina Transfer</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino Non-Transfer</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino Non-Transfer</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino Transfer</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

My conceptual framework provided me with “categories for data gathering and analysis” (Rossman & Rallis, 2012, p. 271). I selected five major categories that comprised my conceptual framework to cluster the focus group questions, namely: campus climate, financial concerns, student-faculty and student-staff interactions, family interactions, and academic performance. Each of these sections were aligned under the
agency-structure framework and explored both the students and the institution’s role in educational success. I asked each group of students the same questions in the same order to be able to compare the groups because one of the purposes of this study was to explore differences by gender and transfer status.

**Focus Groups**

I chose to carry out focus groups because "one advantage of group interviewing is that the participants’ interactions among themselves replace their interaction with the interviewer, leading to a greater emphasis on participants’ point of view" (Morgan, 1988, p. 12) and because focus groups are especially helpful in "uncovering why participants think as they do" (Morgan, 1988, p. 25). Therefore, the focus groups not only helped me better understand what is helping or hindering Latinas/os educational success, but also why these factors are affecting them. In addition, I chose focus groups because what one participant shares may trigger a memory in another participant.

A critical aspect of interviewing participants is to help them express themselves but at the same time maintain boundaries. I had limited time to interview participants because they are busy college students; therefore, keeping the conversation focused on the research questions was important. I used a "standardized open-ended interview" approach for the focus groups (Patton, 2002, p. 343).

The "standardized open-ended interview" is an interview protocol that provides the interviewer/facilitator with the exact wording and order for the questions (Patton, 2002, p. 349). I chose this type of protocol for the focus groups because the goal of the focus groups was to explore specific college experiences (See Appendix A for focus group protocol). A focus group using a "standardized open-ended interview," however,
has some weaknesses. Due to the limited time for the focus group, the interviewer may need to move on to the next section even though participants may still have more to share. Another limitation is that some of the participants may feel silenced by the group if they have different experiences than the rest of the participants in the focus group. Even though I framed the focus group as a place where consensus was not a goal and where diverse experiences were likely to be shared, some students may not have felt comfortable sharing their experiences. To address the limitation of the focus groups, I decided to include a hand-out were participants could gather their thoughts about the topics that were going to be discussed during the focus groups (see appendix B) and individual follow-up interviews.

**Individual Follow-Up Interviews**

The main goal of the individual follow-up interviews was to address focus group method limitations. The results of this study show that these individual interviews were necessary because students spoke about at least one aspect that they did not feel comfortable sharing during the focus groups. I chose to use an "interview guide approach" for the follow-up interviews (Patton, 2002, p.343). Each interview was different because they had their unique goals (Patton, 2002, p. 343). The "interview guide approach" provides the interviewer with the flexibility to explore "topics or subject areas" predetermined (Patton, 2002, p. 343). In the "interview guide approach" there is no need to cover the interview’s themes in a specific order or have a pre-established wording for questions. The flow of the interview determines the order in which the topics emerge, and the wording of each question may be different for each participant. The advantage of using this type of interview was that it helped me to better use my limited time with the
students by focusing on critical topics. At the same time, it provides freedom for the interviewees to bring into the discussion what they think is important regarding the themes discussed during the interview. In this way, new themes emerged that I did not anticipate and were not part of my framework. For me, it was especially important to provide opportunities to the participants that allowed them to report new angles about their college experience.

I interviewed six students (one from each focus group). I chose students for the interviews after doing my preliminary analysis of the focus group data. I chose students who reported having an experience different from the rest of the participants or who could talk about areas had not been deeply covered in the focus groups (see table 2 for details). With all of these students I asked about topics that were not deeply discussed by the focus groups participants (financial aid, family relationships, and academic performance).

Table 2: Rationality for choosing interview participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus Group</th>
<th>Main reason to select participant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Latina Non-Transfer</td>
<td>This participant was one of the few who mentioned gender issues in the classroom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latina Non-Transfer</td>
<td>This participant was one of the few who spoke about financial reasons as something positive. She also reported having a positive relationship with faculty in big lectures.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latina Transfer</td>
<td>This participant was on of the very few commuter students in the focus groups.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino Non-Transfer</td>
<td>This participant talked about the need to infiltrate group studies of white students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino Non-Transfer</td>
<td>This participant was the only one who stressed the topic of his own agency to change the institution.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino Transfer</td>
<td>This participant is one of the few participants who moved to the U.S. recently. He also shared clear discriminatory and stereotypical experiences that he had with peers.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Participants

The participants were Latina and Latino students from NRU, both transfer and non-transfer students. Following recommendations made by the IRB, the initial invitation email was sent out by a university staff member on my behalf to the entire population of Latina/o students who had completed at least one semester at NRU. That initial email had a brief description of my study and information about how to contact me in case they were interested in participating (see Appendix C). In the email I sent out to students who were interested in participating in my study, I included more details about the study, the hours and days for the focus groups, a preferred method of contact, and consent form.

I sent a reminder to the participant a day before the focus group and an hour before the focus group to the participants’ preferred method of communication (this arrangement was shared with the students in advance). The participants were informed during the focus groups and in the consent form about the possibility of being selected for an individual follow-up interview. After the focus groups, I sent an online survey via Qualtrics to the participants asking them for demographic information. Thirty one of the 38 participants responded the survey. The response rate to this survey was 81.6% (n=31). In order to guard students’ confidentiality, I am only providing the demographic information as a group and not by individual (See table 3).
Table 3: Participants Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Latinas (n=14)</th>
<th>Latinos (n=17)</th>
<th>Transfer (n=9)</th>
<th>Total (n=31)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First-year</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Live in (while applying to NRU):</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Massachusetts</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out-of-State</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest level of education of either parent:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not complete high school</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate degree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate degree</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Were born in:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S.A.</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Another country</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Origen:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South America</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central America &amp; Caribbean</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>México</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis is the process of giving meaning to the data collected during the focus groups and interviews (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). Rossman and Rallis (2012) define this process as ongoing and iterative, where data is sorted into categories from which themes are recognized by the researcher. This process is not linear. From diverse categories themes emerge, and in turn, these themes may influence how we categorize our data and may lead to changes in those categories, resulting in new themes. Rossman and Rallis (2012) suggest the following steps to analyze the data: “fully knowing the data
(immersion), organizing these data into chunks (analysis), and bringing meaning to those chunks (interpretation)” (p. 262). In order to accomplish these three steps, I listened carefully to the audio of the focus groups, then I coded the transcripts and analyzed the codes to find themes that gave meaning to the codes.

I recorded the focus groups and interviews and had them transcribed verbatim by a professional team. I also wrote field notes about each focus group (e.g. the seating arrangements, and proportion of agreement/disagreement between the participants). I read the transcripts along with audio several times. This process provided me with an excellent opportunity to immerse myself in the data, listen to the voices of the participants, and check for the accuracy of the transcripts. After this process, I coded the transcripts using Dedoose. A code is defined as "a word or short phrase” that captures the meaning of a portion of the transcript (Saldaña, 2013, p. 3). I used an inductive analysis strategy guided by my conceptual framework using a combination of predetermined codes (guided by my conceptual framework) and emergent codes because I wanted to immerse myself in the "details and specific of the data to discover important patterns, themes, and interrelationships” (Patton, 2002, p. 41). After coding the transcripts, I analyzed them while looking for similarities or connections among them to generate general themes (See appendix D). In chapter four, I present the findings that are common to the four groups of participants (Latina transfer, Latina non-transfer, Latino transfer, Latino non-transfer), but I also mention when I found differences among these groups.

**Trustworthiness**

According to Rossman and Rallis (2012) a critical part of qualitative research is usefulness; if findings “are sufficiently believable,” others may “use those findings to
take action to improve social circumstances” (Rossman, & Rallis, 2012, p. 59).

Therefore, I incorporated into my research design several strategies that helped me to show that I carried out my study in a rigorous way.

**Believable Findings**

One part of having believable findings is providing a clear description of strategies that the researcher will use to check the accuracy of the findings. I used four strategies to check the accuracy of my findings. First, in chapter four, I provide a "thick description" of the data using direct quotations from the transcripts (Creswell, 2009, p. 191; Ponterotto, 2006, P. 547). In this way the reader will be able to compare my findings (themes) to the words of the participants. Second, I triangulated my results with institutional data from NRU, such as retention and graduation rates and NRU’s survey results. Third, I used "peer-debriefing" (Creswell, 2009, p. 192). I had regular meetings with a colleague who provided me with feedback during each step of my research. For example, we discussed my focus group protocol, my first round of coding, and the themes.

My fourth strategy was to consider the bias that I bring into my research. Doing sound qualitative research not only demands, from the researcher solid knowledge about qualitative methods, but also a keen sense of internal reflection. The qualitative researcher has to reflect on the role that her identities, assumptions, and roles have in her own research (Brizuela et al., 2000; Peshkin, 1988). According to Peshkin (1988) researchers not only have to be aware of their subjectivity but also explore it and understand how it can interfere with decisions they make during their research. Brizuela et al. (2000) claim that “ethics and validity emerge from researchers’ acts of inquiry”
while they reflect on “their roles and identities and the effects that those elements may have on the research process and relationships” (p. xvi). Therefore, researchers need to explore their assumptions, biases, perspectives, and opinions in an ongoing process (Rossman & Rallis, 2012).

I brought to my research my own experiences as a Latina student. Therefore, I intentionally put strategies in place to not let those experiences prevail over my participants’ voices. For example, I used analytical memos and peer debriefing to systematically reflect on how my experiences and who I am have influenced my research journey. I also used my conceptual framework to develop my focus group protocol so as not to rely only on my personal experiences. Even though I started my research having my own view of what it means to be a Latina student in a PWI, and having scholarly knowledge about the experiences of Latina/o college students, I put my participants’ voices at the front and center of my research. I truly believe that what they have to share is meaningful and worthy.

**Use of Findings: Transferability of Knowledge**

The aim of this study was to inform practices and policies not only for the institution where the study was carried out, but also in other institutions with similar characteristics. Therefore, it is expected that administrators and practitioners would want to know how and where the study was carried out in order to compare NRU demographics which those of their own institution. Therefore, I provide in this chapter detailed information about the racial composition of NRU’s student body, and NRU’s retention and graduation rates, and Latina/o students’ perceptions about NRU’s campus climate.
In addition, scholars who want to carry out a study similar to mine in order to compare results need to know the details of my study. Therefore, to allow transferability of knowledge I provided in this chapter a description of my research design and decision making.

**Limitations**

Even though this study has the goal of enhancing knowledge about the college experiences of Latina and Latino college students, it has its limitations. First, the results are not intended to be generalized to the entire population of Latina/o college students because I am studying only one institution. Another limitation is that human beings are complex and often what they think, do, and say is not congruent; therefore, this study only provides information about what the students said about their experiences during the focus groups and interviews, which may be different from what they think and do. In addition, the results describe what the students shared with me therefore, some relevant information may have been intentionally or unintentionally left out. Even though I provided a space for students to share what they think is helping or hindering their educational progress, the focus group protocol may restrict the discussion in some way.

Another limitation is that participants select themselves to participate in this study. It is possible that students that did not volunteer to participate in the focus groups have different experiences as a college student than the participants. In addition, the participants of this study are successfully progressing toward to their four-year degrees because they had successfully transferred into a four-year college or are at least in their second semester at NRU. The voices of those students who have left NRU before graduating may be different to the voices of my participants.
In conclusion, I chose to use a qualitative approach for my research because I am interested in learning about the college experiences of Latina and Latino students from their own voices. I chose to use focus groups and interviews because these two data collection techniques allowed me to hear the voices of these students; the techniques complement each other and therefore reduce each other’s limitations.
CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Introduction

During the focus groups participants were asked about the personal and institutional factors that are helping or hindering their educational progress toward a bachelor’s degree. In this chapter, I present the areas that Latina/o students mentioned as helping them to succeed as well as the areas that are hindering their progress (or the challenges that they are facing). Following the call from Latina critical scholars (e.g. Bernal, 2002; Martinez-Alemán, 2003), I address the interlock between social identities by mentioning differences by gender and transfer status when these differences emerged in the data. In chapter five, I bring all these differences together to provide a complete analysis of the differences that I found by gender and transfer status, as well as discussing relevant findings were there were not differences.

The results presented in this chapter were gathered primarily though the focus groups and were supplemented by the individual follow-up interviews. There was only one topic in the results that was covered primarily in the interviews instead of the focus groups: not fitting the mold of what it means to be a Latina/o on campus. I make explicit in the narrative of this chapter when the details were shared by the participants during the individual interviews, rather than the focus groups. In addition, I used a few quotes from the written responses on the focus group hand-out, and I make this explicit in the narrative. What students wrote in the hand-out matches what the students shared during the focus groups (see appendix E for details of data gathered on the hand-outs).
Main Themes

I want to acknowledge that the following themes are presented dichotomously as either helping or hindering the educational success of Latina/o students, but each theme actually has areas that both help and hinder the success of the students. These two sides of each theme are presented together to provide a fuller picture of the complex experiences of this heterogeneous group of students, as well as to demonstrate that the university has room for improvement even in the areas that are primarily helping Latina/o students. In addition, I want the participants’ voices to be the protagonist in this chapter; therefore, I only describe the participants’ experiences in this chapter, leaving chapter five for my interpretation and analysis of these results.

The areas that are mainly helping Latina/o students include: the university’s academic and non-academic resources (including human resources), Latinas/os’ relationships with their family members, and students’ attitudes and behaviors. The areas that are mainly presenting a challenge to Latina/o students include: not taking advantage of university resources, having to overcome transition issues from high school or a previous college to their current university, financial constraints, and the lack of representation of Latinas/os on campus.

Academic Resources

The University has multiple formal academic support services that help Latina/o students succeed in obtaining their four-year degree

Formal academic support services are one of the structural aspects that NRU has that helps Latina/o students succeed academically in college. The University Learning Center (ULC) is one of the key university resources. Supplementary Instruction (SI, study
sections guided by an upper-level student in a lecture setting) and Tutoring (one-on-one interactions with an upper-level student) are the two ULC resources that help Latina/o students the most. The writing center is another resource that is useful for students. Most Latina/o students described the ULC as a place where they come with questions about their courses’ content and where they learn from other students (e.g. peers asking questions that the participants have not thought about).

I think that what is most helpful are like really big SI sessions, because when you have a student that aced the class before and is teaching a big lecture, it is really helpful to have other people ask questions about things that it didn’t ever occur to you to ask. Having a classroom environment is more helpful for me. It is hard to motivate myself personally. (Latina student, non-transfer)

I feel like [SI] is the number one thing that [the university] has helped me with. (Latina student, non-transfer)

For me at least the SI sessions. Some of them are full instruction. They’ve saved me through Orgo. (Latino student, non-transfer)

You just walk in, and you can make an appointment and tell them what class it is for. Then, they will try to find you a tutor who has taken that class, TA’s for it, is currently a TA for it. They just sit with you one-on-one mostly, but they’ll have a couple of people at the table they’ll try to help. If you have people that are in your class that are there you help each other. You just bring there whatever, your study guide or your paper, or homework, and they’ll help you do it or review it. (Latina transfer student)

Tutoring helps Latina/o students study for exams and motivates them to study. As one student explained: “[I prefer] tutoring, just because it is more one-on-one individually and I get to ask more of my questions. It goes step by step what I don’t understand, what I do understand.” (Latina student, non-transfer.)

Regarding differences between groups, Latina students more often use the ULC and overall reported being more satisfied with the ULC services than their Latino peers. This difference in usage is larger in the case of tutoring, where Latina students use
tutoring the most. Also, Latina students mentioned the ULC in the beginning of the focus groups as one the aspects that has helped them the most; however, for Latino students, the ULC appeared later on and in some cases, I had to ask them directly about it. Regarding differences by transfer status, transfer students attend SI and tutoring sessions less often and were more critical about these resources than their non-transfer peers.

Even though ULC resources play a key role in the academic success of Latina/o students, some students prefer to study by themselves and/or get help directly from a faculty member. Some of the issues that affect the effectiveness of the ULC resources are that not all students are aware of these services and the services are not always helpful. For example, “it is almost like rolling a dice. You can also have a really bad instructor.”

(Latino transfer student)

The first SI session I went to, I actually went through and learned one of the things that was on the test the next day. It was great. The second one I went to was so generic in the topics covered, it just wasn’t beneficial. (Latino transfer student)

Beside the ULC, a variety of academic university resources help Latina/o students succeed. Some participants described the library as a place that is open 24 hours for studying, computer access, scanning and printing. As one Latina non-transfer student mentioned when explaining what was helping her succeed:

Educational resources offered at the library, like you can rent out a textbook instead of buying it and all the different websites, like the five colleges have certain educational films and stuff that you have free access to as a student. That is really helpful.

Finally, research opportunities also play a role in the success of Latina/o students. Research opportunities help Latina/o students stay academically motivated because they provide instances where students can make connections between what they are learning
in college and their future careers, as well as help them gain a deeper understanding of course materials: “[research] is a good experience, just for after school, because it is more of a professional environment” (Latina student, non-transfer)

I think that as a science major, one of the things that’s really helped me is the fact that it’s a big research campus. For the biology major, I want to do research, so having the opportunity to be able to work. It gives me the opportunity, like figure out what I want to do and what path I want to take. It helps me get more motivated to do what I want. (Latina student, non-transfer)

The diverse array of formal academic support resources (e.g. SI sessions, tutoring sessions, the writing center, library open resources) mentioned by the participants are in line with what Tinto (2010) advocates; the need for universities to have programs and practices that help retain students. On the other hand, students use their agency to make the decision to reach out for help and use the resources. In the next section, I describe another structural aspect that affects the success of Latina/o students: the quality of interactions between students and their faculty, academic advisors, TAs, and peer mentors.

**Personal Interactions with Faculty and Academic Support Providers**

*Latina/o students’ interactions with faculty members, academic advisors, TAs, and peer advisors can help or hinder students’ success depending on the quality of these interactions.*

Participants have access to faculty members, academic advisors, TAs, and peer advisors that help them to stay on-track academically. The participants reported having positive interactions with either their academic advisors or their peer advisors. Most Latina/o students described faculty as helpful and approachable. In the cases where faculty members were not helpful, Latina/o participants reached out to their TAs.
Latina/o students use their agency (ability to make decisions) to overcome a difficult or distant relation with a university human resource (faculty, academic advisors, TAs, peer mentors) by reaching out to some other university human resource. The willingness to reach out for help after encountering a challenging interaction with a faculty member or advisors may be a skill that students learned in their family or communities. These skills are similar to the navigation and resistant capitals mentioned by Yosso (2005) when describing community cultural wealth. These students have learned to navigate educational institutions even though they can encounter stressful events. On the structural side, the university provides students with different types of resources that can help students to stay academically on-track.

**Academic Advisors and Peer Mentors**

Peer advisors and academic advisors help Latina/o students stay on-track academically. However, the usefulness of these relationships varies depending on the students’ majors and the particular academic or peer advisor. Most Latina/o students have good experiences with their peer advisors. Even more, some students prefer their peer advisors instead of their academic advisors because they feel closer to them. These Latina/o students prefer their peer advisors because they share similar challenges.

I think that peer advisors are generally better than a person of an older age because they are like going through the same major stuff as you are. [The peer mentors] know which professors are not so good … they are just direct and straight to the point sometimes and they are just there for you (Latina student, non-transfer)

Peer advisors are particularly helpful when they are available and develop friendships with their mentees. Peer advisors are especially important for students in majors where is hard to get an appointment with an academic advisor. In this regard,
peer advisors not only provide academic advice but also emotional support to Latina/o students and connect them with other students and university resources. In the voices of a non-transfer Latina student: “[My peer mentor] helped me a lot when I was homesick … I am very close to her, and she helps me with a lot of stuff, and I think it is a great program that U has.”

Not all participants had positive experiences with their peer advisors. Some peer advisors were not knowledgeable or friendly. Regarding differences by groups, Latino students mentioned peer mentors less frequently than their Latina peers, and Latino transfer students were less aware of the existence of peer advisors.

While some students prefer to talk with their peer mentors, others prefer to talk with their academic advisor because they trust an adult more than a student: “I found that adults are more direct, and they are like, this is hard class and if you can’t handle it, don’t take it” (Latina student, non-transfer).

Academic advisors help Latina/o students stay on-track academically by providing them information about which classes to take, major’s requirements, administrative procedures and advice on how to graduate on time. All these types of information help students reduce their stress and, in some cases, the cost of their college education with the recommendation that students take certain classes in a community college.

Actually, what I'm making my schedule for next semester, I realized I have two classes that I have to go the actual office and fill out a form because it's not in my major. So they've helped me. They've oriented me and told me, ‘Okay. You have to do this if you're going to take this class. You have to go to the office and you have to fill out this form because it's not in your major. And you might want to take this back at a community college so you don't have to waste money here.’ They've really looked out for me. (Latino student, non-transfer)
[My advisor is] really nice, and she helps me with anything I need, like classes, or just to talk. (Latina student, non-transfer).

For a school that has so many thousands of students, they do a very good job advising every person to their best potential.” (Latino student, non-transfer)

On the other hand, negative aspects of academic advising include its impersonal nature, difficulty getting appointments, and the inability to have a unique advisor, particularly in large majors. The differences of experiences with advising depends on the majors and the quality of the academic advisor. On the negative side, academic advisors are described as impersonal and as lacking useful information for students. It is an issue for students to have to repeat themselves each time they visit their advisors because it is not always the same advisor. In these cases, when students do not develop good relationships with their advisors, Latina/o students figure out their classes on their own (agency) using the university website (structure):

[The advisors] don’t even know my name. (Latino student, non-transfer)

In such a big college, you are just a number … Maybe, I should have [sought] more help, maybe I should have gone more often, but it is like, I don’t want to hear the same things. I can just find that online, and I’ll be fine without that help. (Latina student, non-transfer)

One student shared how her advisor recommended she pursue a different major than the one she was interested in pursuing. The student stated that the academic advisor did not provide a rational or logical explanation for the recommendation. This student had to use her agency to reject the academic advisor’s recommendation and to transfer to the major of her preference. In her own words:

I had a meeting for [transferring] last week, and when I was like, ‘I want to do econ,’ they were like, ‘well, you have only taken two classes. Why not do poly sci?’ I was like, ‘I have never taken poly sci class. Where do you see it? She’s like, ‘I think you should consider it.’ I was like, ‘No, when can we do [the transfer]? She said, ‘well, maybe next year,” and I was like, ‘what is the earliest
we can get it done? She is like, ‘You can try contacting me during the summer,’ and I was like ‘you will be hearing from me as soon as grades are out’ … It was annoying that I had to be so pushy about it. (Latina student, non-transfer)

Regarding difference by groups, Latina students mentioned academic advisors more often than their Latino peers. Latino students reported fewer negative interactions with their academic advisors than Latina students did. Latina/o transfer students barely mentioned their academic advisors and their comments were almost all negative ones. In general, participants expressed that their experiences with academic advisors depended on their majors and how personable and knowledgeable the advisors were.

**Professors and TAs**

Most of the interactions that Latina/o students have with faculty and TAs are positive. In the cases where faculty members are not approachable or not clear during class, Latina/o students seek out help from their TAs. TAs help students to better understand the class material and to get organized for exams because they know what the professors usually ask in exams and sometimes explain the course material even better than the professors. As illustrated in the two following quotes: “[The TAs] took the class a year or two before so they understand the student perspective, where the professor could really focus on more and they really hit that home.” (Latino student, non-transfer)

They are pretty tough classes, but they had a lot of strong, experienced TAs. And that helped you understand the material better. Not just in lecture, where they kinda go little bit fast, but kinda go into depth on what the material is.” (Latino student, non-transfer)

Even though most of the TAs are helpful, some are not well trained and do not have a strong grasp of the courses’ materials:

This is kind of personal to my classes maybe the classes I've taken. Sometimes for basic level classes, they're taught by TAs, or graduate students. Those are not that good. I think it really does depend on the TA, 'cause some are truly fantastic. I
have one that I think is doing just as good as a super qualified professor, but then I have one that's really sucky. So, I don't know. I think it's good that they have graduate students that are getting the experience, and I think it's cool that they do that, but some just aren't so good. (Latina student, non-transfer)

Can you explain this? [The TAs] are like, repeat what they just said … can you explain it better? They are just like repeat what they just said. It is terrible. I usually don’t go to the TAs, I just go to the professor directly. (Latina student, non-transfer)

In the case of professors, most of the relationships that Latina/o students have with faculty are helpful. Most faculty are approachable and interested in the success of their students; therefore, Latina/o students can reach out to faculty if they have academic problems. In addition, faculty members help Latina/o students by encouraging them to create study groups, doing research with them, providing letters of recommendation, and being helpful during office hours. As illustrated in the following examples and quotes: (1) A non-transfer Latino student mentioned that he approached a faculty member in a class in which he was not doing so well and received help from the faculty member; and (2) A Latino transfer student shared that one of his professors was helping him find an internship. “They are just literally at their desks. And you just ask them anything, projects or their advice on anything” (Latino student, non-transfer).

Something that I do a lot that a lot of people don't do is go to teacher's office hours. That has helped so much with me. Teachers when you go see them they love it, and that had given me .. I finished a class like a B+ but he ended up giving me an A- just because I went to him all the time. They'll do that when you get close to them and you can go see them they know you want to do well. (Latina students, transfer)

In the case of non-transfer Latino students, their faculty interactions are better than they expected. These students explained that their high school teachers told them that university professors were not approachable. However, when the students reached
out to their professors, they realized that the professors were more approachable than they initially thought.

I was worried that I might fail the classes. And so I went and talked to the professors directly and I was terrified to do it because in high school I always kind of learned from my teachers, ‘Oh, the professors at college are “cutthroat” and rigid and won’t help you with anything. They will throw your papers out right in front of you.’ All the professors wanted to help. So that was a positive experience (Latino student, non-transfer)

However, not all students can overcome these preconceptions about college faculty. These students understand the importance of creating connections with faculty but feel too intimidated to approach them. These students, who may lack of confidence, experience, or agency to take proactive steps, need faculty and staff who proactively reach out to them, as Rendón and colleagues (2000) recommend. As mentioned before building relationships with faculty is a key way for students to obtain letters of recommendation and opportunities for research and internships.

It is intimidating going the first time, ‘cause it's someone upper higher than you, or you feel like they're better than you or whatever. I just didn't go. I don't know. That is something that I wish I would've changed, or I wish I should change, ‘cause you still need one of those references, so get to know a professor, definitely. (Latina student, non-transfer)

I think that now that I'm a Junior, I'm thinking about who I'm going to ask for recommendations for grad school or for jobs or whatever. I can't really think of that many. Just because I haven't really talked to many professors. I know probably like one or two, but when I was thinking about, like "who am I going to ask for recommendations for grad school?", it wasn't a very long list. I kinda find it hard to talk to my professors. (Latino student, non-transfer)

Even though in general interactions with faculty were described by the participants as positive, participants also mentioned having negative experiences with faculty members. For example, a Latina student reported that her professors during office hours told her that she was wasting their time by asking questions. Participants also
shared that some faculty members are not good at explaining the class material which makes the material hard to understand:

I find that a lot of times, a good scientist doesn't necessarily make a good teacher, especially if they understand the subject too well. It's almost hard for them to teach it, because they don't articulate those small connections that make sense in a bigger sense, like connecting the topics. It just comes naturally to them. I find that one of my best teachers is someone who used to have trouble with the subject themself. They write super fair tests and they're really great at explaining everything because they had trouble with it themselves. (Latina student, non-transfer)

I know that they have their degrees and stuff like that. But there's a difference between having a degree and teaching ... like having a degree and teaching and having a degree ON teaching. There’re people that know how to teach and how to maintain the calm in the class. But there's teachers that know a lot, I know they're intelligent, but they don't know how to say those thoughts to us. So, I'm not saying that they’re bad. They’re not, they’re intelligent people. They have their PhDs and stuff like that. That I don't and I wish I had. But most of the time it's just teaching myself. (Latino student, transfer)

Students made an interesting distinction between faculty in their major and in general education courses. Even though the majority of interactions with faculty were reported as positive, participants reported mostly negative interactions with professors in general education courses. Latina/o students, with few exceptions, described faculty in general education classes as not caring for their students and not being approachable. Even more, few participants mentioned that it was not worth trying to connect with faculty in general education lectures: “I don't see how [participating in class] is gonna benefit me, really. If [the professor] not even gonna remember me, or we're not gonna have any sort of relationship, ever.” (Latina, non-transfer)

On the other hand, a few students described having positive interactions with faculty in general education classes. Interestingly, these few students are all non-transfer
Latina students. These students described faculty as caring for their students. These students also stressed that they took the initiative to connect with those professors.

When [professors] find out that you're a freshman, they're really nice, and they understand that you actually don't really know anything about anything, so ... And they don't treat you like you're stupid, they just treat you like a freshman, 'cause you really don't know much about what's going on, and how to go about learning stuff. In most of my classes, when I've gone and talked to some of my professors, they're really nice and really helpful with most things. (Latina student, non-transfer).

My experience is a little bit on the opposite side because I'm a Freshman. I'm taking all those classes [general education courses]. My professors so far have been really attentive. They recognize me. They know me by name. I believe that is in part because I try to make myself known. I understand what they meant when they say that sometimes they just don't care, but if I personally just made it a goal to just make them see me in those classes and that's been really good. I can go to them for office hours or just after class like for five, ten minutes, just speak to them about what I didn't understand. (Latina student, non-transfer)

Regarding difference by groups, Latina participants talked more about their relationships with their TAs than Latino participants did. Transfer students did not mention their TAs frequently, but the couple of comments they did make were positive. Overall, non-transfer Latina students were more critical of their TAs than the rest of the focus group participants.

In summary, faculty, TAs, academic advisors and peer advisors are key resources for the academic success of Latina/o students. Students value the variety of people available to them for course material explanation and academic related issues. This variety is useful because some Latina/o students prefer to create connections with other students (peer advisors) instead of faculty or their professional academic advisors. Having different people to reach out to is also helpful when Latina/o students encounter faculty and/or academic advisors who are not particularly helpful or welcoming.
Non-Academic Support Services

*Latina/o students use non-academic University support services to help them to persist.*

Beside academic support services, non-academic resources also help students succeed. Non-academic resources that help Latina/o students succeed include: Mental health support, student-run organizations, sports, study abroad, Greek life, cultural centers/organizations, and administrative offices. These resources help students find life balance. Life balance is important for students because it helps them reduce their stress levels, which in turn helps them study better. As is the case for academic resources, non-academic programs and services are structural NRU aspects that help students succeed in college. At the same time, students make the choice to participate in these programs (agency). For clarity, in this section, I focus on the positive aspects of non-academic resources and in future sections (e.g. sense of belonging), I describe the short comings of some of these services.

A lot of studies show that stress is not great for your brain. Moderate stress is really great for higher cognitive function and retaining stuff … At certain point you are really not going to retain much more if you’re too stressed out, so you really need a balance. (Latina student, non-transfer)

I would say that the [University] offers a lot of different activities like intramural sports. So, I know that doesn’t mean like academics, but if you get to do activities outside of academics, you’re not always stressed about your papers, your projects, you can go out and do other things and just clear your mind. [The University] offers ton of different stuff for any different interests. I would say having that helps you with everything else (Latino student, non-transfer)

The university offers mental health services, such as massages, therapy dogs, and psychological therapy sessions without copay. These types of services were mentioned by
participants of all groups with the exception of Latino non-transfer students. These
services help students reduce their stress particularly during exams periods:

I also occasionally visit a therapist because sometimes I find that it's good to talk
to a trained professional about my struggles and stuff like that, social pressures,
all that junk. I don't know if anyone else is ... (me too). I find it helps a lot. And I
love the fact that you don't have to pay any co-pay at CCPH for their therapy I
find that really awesome. (Latino student, transfer)

Student-run organizations are a nice distraction where Latina/o students can spend
time with peers with whom they have similar interests. In these clubs, Latina/o students
learn about resources available on campus and how to access these resources. These clubs
also help participants create and foster social connections.

I also like making connections with other students. Last semester I didn’t really. It
was an adjustment because my other school was so much smaller and everything,
so I didn’t really put myself out there more, but I feel like doing things like clubs
or organizations really helps me make the difference better. (Latina student, student.)

I feel like the student groups [are] … a big thing. Yeah, we are more than just
bookworms … I feel like getting involved on campus has helped a lot. ... I feel
like join these organizations gave me a sense like I actually have a family, I was
part of something. (Latino student, non-transfer)

I like that there’s a lot of clubs and stuff like that. The first weeks of the semester
I was doing nothing. I was like, I don’t know what to do. So, then I joined a bunch
of clubs … I used to play ping-pong when I was a kid. And they have
tournaments of ping-pong here. That’s nice, just like a hobby. I just have to spend
like an hour doing that and then I can go home. So that’s helpful. It’s not a waste
of time because I’m enjoying the time (Latino transfer student.)

Study abroad experiences connect Latina/o students with their cultural roots and
relatives because they provide the opportunity to travel to Spanish speaking countries. As
one Latino student non-transfer shared: “I got to go to Costa Rica and see where my
family is from ... for me that was nice, I don’t know where else I would have gotten that
opportunity.”
Few students mentioned their membership in a fraternity or sorority as helpful. In the case of Latina students, being part of a sorority helped them stay motivated and do well academically because they had to comply with academic requirements and were among hard working peers. Being a sorority member provided them with access to academic resources (e.g. course notes, previous exams) and people with whom to study, socialize (e.g. having lunch), and network: “[The sorority has] academic requirements and it’s pretty rigorous so if I don’t have that GPA I can’t really do anything, like none of the fun stuff, so it’s like an incentive” (Latina student, transfer).

You make connections with your big sisters and your little sisters and it’s really cool … I’d say it’s nice to have that big huge group of people to be able to reach out to like if I want to eat and all my friends are busy or they’re in class, I can post in our group and any random sister will just go with me, and it’s fine. It’s nice. We got to know each other better. (Latina student, transfer)

In the case of a Latino non-transfer student who mentioned that belonging to a fraternity helped him, he stressed that his fraternity was multicultural which helped him make connections with other students of color:

For me I joined a fraternity. That really helped me a lot because it gave me a brotherhood, networking but what it allows me to do is really connect with other students like me because it’s a multicultural; Latino based one our demographic is automatically not white people. It’s mean for people like me, people like my bros from CV or Jamaica, whatever other ethnic groups. Right then I’m already connected to other students. I feel like the clubs and the groups, it really allows me to connect with the students more, it propels me to want to stay here. (Latino student, non-transfer)

Participants who belong to the university band or sport teams explained that these activities help them relax, make friends, and stay busy. As one Latina student non-transfer shared:

I’m part of the marching band … I can hang out with them and just have fun and relax … it is not an activity that’s full academic, in a sense, then I don’t have to worry about all those other things.
In addition to providing stress release and friendship, belonging to an athletic team help students with their academics because special tutoring is available for the members of the team.

University cultural centers and organizations are also resources that positively affect the success of Latina/o students. Being part of a cultural RSO (such as Latino Unidos), the Society of Hispanic Professional Engineers (SHPE) or the university cultural center helps Latina/o students create academic connections and networks. Participants receive help in the cultural center with their resume and their scholarship applications. However, Latino students mentioned that the university does not provide enough resources for these organizations. In further sections, I will describe in more detail the role of these organizations (academic connections and sense of belonging).

Finally, Latina/o transfer students described administrative offices as helping them to graduate on time by helping with the process of transferring credits. As one Latina transfer student shared:

[The] administration is willing to work with you so even the registrar and trying to get credits to transfer and professors to acknowledge that certain class you took might be the class that they want you take here. That has helped me graduate on time.

In summary, Latina/o students take advantage of non-academic resources to create social connections, to find places to relax and reduce academic stress, and to connect with people with whom they share common interests or backgrounds.
Student Use of Resources

Even though the university has many academic and non-academic resources that can help students succeed, not all students take advantage of these University resources.

The University is a place that has many resources to offer students; however, Latina/o students have to look out for them. A Latino transfer student referred to the need of students to use their own agency to take advantage of the university resources:

[NRU] is very big so there are times where you do have to go out of your way and look for things. Sometimes they won’t just come to you, you have to actively search for it because of the size of the campus.

When Latina/o students do not use the University resources, it is because they do not know about the resources, they do not have time to take advantage of the resources, or they had mixed experiences (positive and negative ones) while using the resources.

Among the resources that some students do not know about are the University Multicultural Center, the University Learning Center, the Society of Hispanic Professional Engineers, and the student-run club, Latinos Unidos.

Several transfer students, particular those who transferred in the spring semester, mentioned that they did not know about some university resources and recommended that the orientation should provide more information about the university resources. For example, a Latino transfer student shared that because of the location of his dorm (where many transfer students live), it is hard to know what is happening on campus: “You can have trouble getting news because I live in [this dorm] and [the activities] are all in [this other dorm], I don’t know what’s happening over there.” The decision of placing transfer students in a dorm that is not centrally located on campus is a structural decision by the
NRU administration that has significant negative effects on the college experiences of Latina/o transfer students.

Non-transfer students, particularly first-year students, also mentioned not knowing about some resources:

I think that I just don’t know a lot of the resources, since I haven’t been here that long. And it’s just hearing, and knowing what to do once people tell me like, ‘Oh, you should try this,’ I’ll do that in the future. (Latina student, non-transfer)

Students who do not know much about university services recognize that they play a role (agency) in whether or not they get information about these services. For example, some students mentioned that they are not good at asking for help, do not have contacts/a network that can help them to access relevant university services information, and that navigating the academic support services can be a little intimidating:

You gotta look for [the resources]. Because as she said, nothing will come to you … and even if they tell you about it, it is still intimidating. The first time I went to tutoring in the library I was like, ‘where am I going?’ I don’t know how to do this. And I just really needed help with comp sci, and I ended up making it. It was scary. (Latina student, non-transfer)

As Rendón and colleagues (2000) argue, these students would benefit from staff intentionally reaching out to communicate about the university resources and to connect Latina/o students to these services.

The lack of intentional practices that connect students with campus opportunities has negative effects on Latina/o students’ college experiences, particularly on their chances of participating in internships and research opportunities. Students have to be proactive in obtaining research opportunities: “It’s not gonna come to you, you have to look for it, but NRU has really good research, for anyone in any major that you’re looking for.” (Latina student, non-transfer). Interestingly, there are gender differences
among the students who have not taken advantage of research opportunities. For Latina students the problem is not knowing about these opportunities. For Latino students the problem is the lack of connections with faculty members: “I thought that [research opportunities] would be everywhere and it is really not.” (Latino student, non-transfer).

The following example shows that Latino students recognize the importance of having contacts to obtain access to research opportunities:

   Luckily through my friend’s sister I heard of a position that somebody wants an undergrad. So I’m like, okay, just give me the email and I can email him. I’m going to email him probably very soon as she gives me his email and hopefully it goes well because they have to interview you or something to see if you want to. (Latino student, non-transfer)

Even though students recognize their role in not knowing about the university resources (agency), they also acknowledge that the university could do a better job disseminating information about University resources and how to access those resources (structure). On the positive side, the university has an activity fair where students can learn about the different student-run organizations and a website with a directory of these organizations. On the negative side, the online directory can be a little confusing and it is not up-to-date.

Another reason that Latina/o students do not use resources is that they are not satisfied with the quality of the services. The University Learning Center and Career Services are two services that can better serve Latina/o students. For some students, the quality of SI and tutoring sessions varies because some student facilitators are not as competent as others, and SI sessions do not always cover the right course material. The helpfulness of career services also varies depending on the major, “I have never used
career services personally, because I know they don’t know about journalism.” (Latino student, non-transfer)

Latina/o students who are too busy with academic activities, sports, and work do not have time to take advantage of the university resources:

The only obstacle I have run into is having the time to actually do something outside academics. Because, obviously, I’m a student and then I work at one of the dining halls, so I have never, I mean, it is only my first year. So far, I haven’t found the time for anything else outside that. Easy to find, but actually doing it? It’s tricky. (Non-transfer Latino)

Participation in student-run organizations depends on the preconceptions that Latina/o students have about these clubs. Some Latina/o students think that belonging to a club will take too much of their time. Other Latina/o students think that if they miss one of the club meetings in the beginning of the semester it will be too late to join because everyone will already know each other. Participants who are part of clubs answered these students’ concerns by explaining that it totally fine to miss some meetings and that anyone can attend clubs’ events.

In summary, there is agreement among participants that the university provides an array of opportunities for students to get involved on campus. But, for some participants it is hard to take advantage of these opportunities. Some are agency issues, as in not actively looking for information or making the time to participate in activities. Others are structural issues as in having to work long hours because the university does not provide enough financial aid and a university information dissemination system that seems to work for some students but not for others.
The Role of Latina/o Students’ Families

*Family as a source of motivation that helps students persist in their college education, while also acting as a stressor, in part due to the pressure of being children of immigrants or first-generation college students.*

Family plays a critical role in the success of Latina/o students by being a source of motivation to do well academically. Interestingly, family was barely mentioned before I asked about it directly at the end of the focus groups. On one hand, family was described as the main source of motivation and support system; but on the other hand, family was mentioned as a source of emotional pressure. Students also described the families as not being able to help them financially or by providing knowledge about college life.

Latina/o students benefit from having frequent conversations with family, visiting family during the weekends, being encouraged by their family to do well academically, and by the financial support that their family can provide to them. However, some Latino students have limited contact with their family while on campus. This reduction of communication is not intentional but a consequence of being busy with college life: “I talk to my Mom every once in a while, but I feel like, when come to school I kind of disappear in terms of interactions with family in general” (Latino student, non-transfer)

Family members are an important support system for students, as illustrated in the following quote: “[My family is] my whole support system. I call my Mom every time I have an exam or when I am stressed out.” (Latina student, non-transfer)

[My dad is] very motivated, very determined person so he instills that in me … He wanted me to have the more degrees the better. He’s really into the academic aspect of it. (Latina student, transfer)
A lot of moral support. I ever need it, [my family is] just a call away. One time I just had to go home at four in the morning, it was an emergency and I just called up there and they were there already. They just want to see me succeed and be happy with whatever it is I end of doing” (Latino student, non-transfer)

I Facetime my parents on regular basis … Occasionally I will go home because I do not live too far from home. (Latino student, transfer)

Family connections are particularly critical for Latina/o students who feel homesick. Students who live close to campus visit their family during the weekends which helps them to reduce feeling homesick:

I go home a lot to see my family and kind of maintain my sanity because I do not really consider the [NRU] home, I do not really feel happy here. For me, I like being able to go home whenever I want. (Latino student, non-transfer)

This student described how NRU does not feel like home, a feeling that has been described in previous studies about the college experience of Latina/o students. Back at home, this student finds the strength necessary to persist in his education despite the challenges he faces on campus (not being home). This student is using his aspirational capital (Yosso, 2005) by holding onto hope in the face of educational structural challenges (i.e., lack of representation of Latinas/os on campus) (Yosso, 2005).

Family, particularly mothers, are a source of motivation for Latina/o students to get their four-year degrees. Parents push their children to do well academically as illustrated in the following quotes: “my mom obviously pushes me a lot” (Latino student, transfer); “[My parents] tell me every day ‘Your job is to study’” (Latina student, non-transfer); “My Dad is a huge advocate for education for going as far as you can in terms of education” (Latino student, non-transfer); “Being at school, [my parents] do not think that I am wasting my time here, they want me to keep succeeding and doing what I want to do” (Latino student, non-transfer).
[My Mom] has always been on top of me … checking my grades, because she was always very clear that college was the only option … She is always like, ‘You do not want to be a house cleaner like I am’” (Latina students, transfer)

This last quote illustrates how parents not only motivate their children by encouraging them to pursue higher education and engaging in conversation about academic performance, but also by sharing cautionary tales (an example of community cultural wealth) using their own life experiences. All these examples reinforce the perspectives of Latina critical scholars who debunk majoritarian stories that say that Latinas/os do not value higher education, and present valuable counter-stories as competing narratives.

In addition, participants expressed that they want to get their degrees not only for themselves but for their parents: “[My family is] why I’m here, the reason why I want to get this degree and make it the best” (Latina students, non-transfer); “Family, my Mom has definitely been a motivator” (Latina student, transfer); “At least while I am here away from my family, I always think of [my mother] because I always want to make her proud, you know? It is one of the things that keeps me going” (Latino student, non-transfer); I changed my degree to spend less time in school ... so I can start making more money so I can start helping my mom … I'm just trying to graduate so I can get a job and give back” (Latino student, transfer).

Latina/o students, particularly students who are the first in their family to go to college in the U.S., feel that they need to be an example for the rest of the family: “I’m gonna [graduate] for them and for myself. Just what you said, going off of [my siblings’] mistake and just learning from that and having that and trying to set a better example has been a lot of motivation” (Latina student, non-transfer).
In addition, Latina/o students want to do well in college to show that their parents’ sacrifices were worth it. These students describe their parents’ sacrifices as leaving their home country to provide better opportunities for their children and having to work hard, long hours. Because of their parents’ sacrifices they feel they need to do well in college so that they can do better than their parents. Some of the students expressed that parents have invested a lot in their children. Parents are described as role models of strength and perseverance. However, this motivation to do well for their parents can also be a source of extra stress:

I am the first one to study in the U.S. … Just know that there this pressure to just do better for us, for the family, ‘because we want better for you and we know that you want better than what you already had’, which is nice though … Sometimes it is just gets too much with the stress of school, your emotional things, and then you have that responsibility on top of you. I have to do better for them at least. (Latina student, non-transfer)

[My Dad] decided to go with my uncle to find a job here in the U.S. to build a better life for me and my brother and my family. There is not a lot of pressure on me because of it, but I feel like I owe it to him for doing all these things. To be better for myself and better for, I don’t know. Just to prove that he did it for something and it is not just a waste of whatever. (Latina student, non-transfer)

My Mom had been the main role model in my life … she came from, both of my parents did but she especially was more of the rural country, the poor and then she built her way up from that. With my parents I think there is definitely a pressure for me. I think it stems from them being immigrants coming, there are like, ‘This is the opportunity that you need to do the best that you can.’ (Latino student, non-transfer)

My Dad would never say this to me but it is like I have to make it worth for him to have moved here and worked 20 hours days and do everything that he does for me. (Latino student, non-transfer)

Financial support is another way that family helps students succeed in college.

The financial support varies from helping students get loans to paying for all college
expenses. Some students mentioned that their parents told them they shouldn’t work because their only work was to do well academically:

[My parents] want me to do well in school, so they just really push me to continue to do well. They are always like, ‘You even stop working. As long as you are doing well in school that is all that matters.’ (Latina student, transfer)

On the other hand, some students face financial constraints because their families are not able to help them financially. These students have little or no financial support from their parents. Furthermore, some of them work to help with family expenses. In consequence, some students must work long hours to support themselves and help their families which adds an extra stress in their lives: “I mean, I think a big pressure is like I do have loans and a scholarship and scholarships come with conditions and loans accrue interest” (Latina student, non-transfer); “I am still working a full-time position just split between two jobs just because I still help out at home.” (Latina student, transfer); “I do feel pressured because we didn't really get a whole lot of financial help. We got a couple federal loans and that's it.” (Latino students, non-transfer).

The academic consequences of financial constraints are having less time to study and changing a major or dropping a double major in order to graduate earlier (more details on this topic will be provided in a further section).

Some Latina/o students help their parents with errands principally because their parents do not speak English. Latina/o students also help their family with chores such as child care. Interestingly, child care and home chores were mentioned by both Latina (transfer and non-transfer) and Latino non-transfer students. Latino transfer students did share that they visited their parents and keep in contact with them, but did not share
having to help parents with errands or home chores. The following quotes illustrate how
Latina/o students help their families:

I have gotten so used to calling places as my mom. I know her social security
number, everything by heart, because she is like, ‘Just call and pretend you are
me.’ (Latina student, transfer)

My main responsibility at home is really just when I need to babysit my nephews.
(Latino student, non-transfer)

I have to help out whenever I go home. I also have to babysit for my nieces …
Sometimes I just want to stay here the weekends and maybe do nothing relax, not
think too much about school, but sometimes that just doesn’t happen. (Latina
student, non-transfer)

If I’m with my Dad he doesn’t really speak English the best so I help him out. I
work around at the house, pick up extra stuff. It was a lot more stuff last year with
my extended family, with my aunt, but it’s kind of died down a bit. I cook around
the house when my mom started working, help her out where I can. Sometimes I
have to drop my Dad off if my Mom’s at work. (Latino student, non-transfer)

These students mentioned that helping their family did not interfere with their academic
obligations, but that it would be nice to have time to relax. However, students reported
that working interfered with their ability to participate in clubs and other non-academic
campus activities.

Latina/o first-generation college students mentioned that their parents could not
help them with the college application process and that sometimes their parents do not
understand how college works, but that they show support in other ways:

My sister and I basically depend on each other for going through the whole
application process because [my parents] did not really understand. Most [the
applications] use big words to describe the most simple things, and my parents are
like, ‘I am sorry. We really cannot help you guys.’ We kind of just did it
ourselves, but every step of the way they have been super supportive, always
there” (Latina student, non-transfer)

[My parents] just always tell me, ‘Go to college, go to college, go to college,’
when they had no idea what being in college really mean or what goes on. (Latina
student, transfer)
In summary, family is described by participants in all groups as a source of motivation and emotional support that helps students succeed and stay in college. Participants want to show their parents that their sacrifices will not be in vain. Participants also want to be successful role models for the rest of their family and the Latina/o community. These motivations help students persist in their education despite the challenges they face in college. However, this motivation also comes with added stress for some participants due to family financial constraints and the pressure of wanting to make their parents proud. Regarding differences by gender, some Latino students (both transfer and non-transfer) tend to disappear while at college and have less family contact than Latina students. Both Latina and Latino students shared that they help parents with errands and home chores. However, Latino transfer students did not mention having to help their relatives with errands or home chores, though some of them did mention wanting to finish as soon as possible to help their family financially (as did participants for all groups).

**Transition to College Issues**

*Participants have to overcome several adjustment issues while transitioning from high school or their previous college to their current University.*

Latina/o students face several transition issues during their first months at the NRU. The type of challenges that Latina/o students face depend, among others, on their previous high school/college experiences and expectations about college. Some of the most common transition issues are adapting to a large institution, creating social connections, adapting to a predominately white institution, and becoming more independent.
When Latina/o students make the transition to college from a small school, they have a hard time adapting to large lectures and learning how to use university resources because they were used to small classes and having close relationships with faculty members.

I think that for me just being in a community college with before my class max class is 30, 40 people. Then coming here one of my classes has 150. Another has 100, which I wasn’t used to before. Then, I have TAs that I feel like I have more of a relationship with the TA than the professor. Even some of the professors have said, ‘don’t email me. Email your TA.’ That I always feel like, ‘but you are the professor.’ At the same time, though, I still feel like they are approachable. I don’t get the vibe that I can’t go to them, but it’s just I feel kind of weird not having that same relationship that I did when I was in [the community college]. (Latina student, transfer)

I guess this would go into something that has hindered my education here. Like the library is really intimidating, personally, because it is so big, and every floor has its own thing. I don’t know. It’s a little much for a freshman. I come from a really, really small school. My graduating class was like 70 kids. Just being in such a huge campus and not having all the resources just literally laid out in front of you sometimes is a little overwhelming. (Latina student, non-transfer)

Non-transfer Latina/o students also face the challenge of having less guidance in the university than they did in high school. In their current university, nobody is going to “chase after you” as teachers and other staff did in high school. These students feel overwhelmed because they do not have a person to guide them and teach them about university resources and policies. These students rely on themselves (agency) to find the right information and gain access to university resources:

In high school the experience a lot was the high school administration would just do it for you and try and find you and track you down to make sure you did everything you needed to do. And then in college there’s none of that and from high school experience we never really learned how to actually go out and do that. But I caught onto it fairly quickly … there are so many resources available that is easy to just look up a phone number and talk to somebody in some office. (Latino student, non-transfer)
Non-transfer Latina/o students had high school teachers who told them that university professors are not approachable. These warnings made students come to the university with a sense of intimidation regarding college faculty. Latina/o students overcame these feelings of intimidation and reached out to faculty. What they found was that many university faculty members are approachable despite what their high school teachers told them.

The type of challenges that Latina/o students face during the transition to college depends on the demographic characteristics of Latina/o students’ previous educational institution. Latina/o students who attended institutions (high school or previous college) with a diverse student body had to overcome the initial shock of attending a PWI where for the first time they feel like a minority: “It was just a big culture shock like, I’ve never seen so many white people in in one area before in my life” (Latino, non-transfer); “I don’t really consider NRU home, I don’t really feel happy here” (Latino student, non-transfer).

For students who came from a high school or previous college that had a diverse student body, it is easier to interact with other minority students than with white students. In a similar way, students who come from towns where the majority of the population was comprised of people of color are surprised when white peers on campus ask them question such as “where are you from?” and make other types of comments that make it clear that Latina/o students are the “other” on campus. These Latina/o students join clubs or organizations on campus that are composed of people from diverse backgrounds in order to create a sense of belonging on campus. These types of transition issues are based on the lack of representation of Latinas/os on campus. In a further theme in this chapter, I
will describe the academic and social effects that the lack of representation of Latinas/os on campus have on Latina/o students.

On the other hand, Latina/o students who come from PW high schools or colleges describe their current university as a diverse place and are excited about the diversity of the campus. For these students, it is easier to develop academic relationships with white peers than for participants who come from high schools and colleges with a large number of students of color.

Another transition issue that Latina/o students have to overcome is becoming more independent. For some Latina/o students it is difficult to have “to rely on [themselves] for everything,” to organize their time, and to be exposed to alcohol and drugs. For a few Latino students (transfer and non-transfer), the access to drugs and alcohol negatively affected their academic success, but they were able to change their behavior and are now doing well academically. During the transition to college, Latina/o students are presented with too many new responsibilities at once. One consequence of having these new responsibilities is the need to balance their academic and social life:

I think the biggest issue I had last semester was just the transition. You have to rely on yourself for everything, you’re completely on your own. Food is your responsibility, laundry, keeping all your [stuff] organized and clean, getting up in the morning, going to class, going to work. It’s completely on you and I had a difficult time with that transition because I lived with my parents and stuff. I was just all over the place, I didn’t have any of my stuff together. I was behind on everything and it was just really bad. But, I learned from that experience and applied it to this semester and its working as a charm. (Latino student, non-transfer)

Developing friendships is also a challenge that many Latina/o students have to overcome during their first semester in college, with the exception of students who came to campus with friends from high school or their neighborhood. In the case of transfer
students, it is harder for them than for their non-transfer peers to make friends because the rest of the students have already developed social connections. These students join clubs or university organizations to make the large institution feel more manageable.

I came in spring. So, I didn’t even have the freshman coming in with me. There was nobody an orientation, … but I’m really glad they made me come to the orientation because the few people I met there are the people I’m friend with now, the ones who are helping me get through all my classes. (Latino transfer)

Finding people to talk to, just making friends, period, is super difficult at the beginning. What I found was the best way, was just to join a new organization or just straight-up talk to people and just see where stuff goes. Otherwise, I used to spend a lot of time in my room. And got super sad. I’m like, I should probably go outside sometime, and I just start taking to people. (Latino transfer)

Another transition issue that participants have to adapt to is living in residence halls. For some Latino students, being exposed to drugs and alcohol hinders their academic success and social interactions. For example, a Latino transfer student mentioned that he can smell marijuana from someone else’s room in his own room and that this bothers him. In the case of alcohol, Latina/o students find it hard to have fun with their white peers because these peers drink more than Latina/o students prefer.

Staff in the residential halls, residential directors (RDs) and residential assistants (RAs), play a role in helping students during their transition period. Participants reported having positive and negative experiences with their RDs and RAs. On the positive side, RAs are an emotional support and are described as helpful, welcoming, approachable, and good sources of information on campus resources. On the negative side, RAs are described as not being approachable to first-year students. Living in a racially/ethnically diverse floor also helps Latina/o students during their transition. Otherwise it is hard for Latina/o students to make connections with people living on their floor. During an
individual interview, a Latino transfer student explained that his roommate always tried
to avoid talking with students of color. Another example from another student:

my floor is very diverse … and my friends are diverse. I feel like I didn’t make a
connection with any white girls, and if I were to be a floor above or below me, I’d
have a totally different situation where I wouldn’t feel as comfortable, and I
wouldn’t have had such a great time at [NRU]. Since my friends are diverse, and
they do understand me, I love it.” (Latina Non-Transfer).

The location of the residence halls also affects the transition period of these
students. Dorms that are far away from the center of campus and/or comprised of a
majority of transfer students do not help Latina/o students make social connections
(structure). Due to the distance from the residential rooms to the center of campus, it is
hard for Latina/o students to meet peers. In the case of Latina/o transfer students, it is
hard for them to gain knowledge about the campus because they were surrounded by
other transfer students who did not know much about the campus. This is a structural
issue that affects the social and academic integration of these students.

Finally, most transfer students had good experiences transferring credits from
their previous institution which helped them during their transition to their new
institution. However, some students had to retake general education courses and had to
deal with the bureaucracy involved in the process of transferring credits. The differences
in experiences vary by the students’ majors:

[The] administration is willing to work with you so even the registrar and trying
to get credits to transfer and professors to acknowledge that certain class you took
might be the class that they want you take here. That has helped me graduate on
time. (Latina students, transfer)

I got butchered. I was basically like a freshman coming in. My Computer Science
status, in term of credits, I was like a sophomore. I was fine. But they didn’t like a
lot of the classes I’d taken at my community college. They said, yeah, you did all
this, but you’re missing that … For like every single class. So, I’m like, I guess
I’ll start from scratch. (Latino student, transfer)
Transfer student orientation is an area that needs improvement because it does not provide enough information about the university resources. The experience that a Latina transfer student shared illustrates this point:

I definitely relate to what she was saying because I didn’t really hear about anything. Even in orientation I just felt like we were thrown, like ‘Here, go about your business.’ Even my first day I remember just even trying to navigate my schedule, like find the building and stuff.

In summary, Latina/o college students face several transition issues. Some of these issues are inherent characteristics of the process of transitioning into college life, such as becoming more independent, but others are related to the fact of being a racial/minority on campus. Latina/o students use their agency to overcome these challenges by joining clubs and making changes in their own behaviors to find a better life balance. On the other hand, as Tierney (1992) argues, NRU is challenged by the need to operate in a multicultural world and is not providing the necessary programs and practices to help Latina/o students during their transition to college.

**Financial Issues**

_Some participants have to overcome financial constraints that affect their college experiences._

Another challenge that participants have to face to succeed in college is financial constraints. Regarding this subject there are differences among participants, but these differences are not related to gender or transfer status. The differences depend on Latina/o students’ family financial situations. Some students have to help their parents pay for college, others work to cover additional college expenses such as housing and meal plans, others have loans, others do not need to think about money because their
parents are covering all their college expenses, and others have a job not only to pay for college expenses but also to help their parents financially. Most Latina/o students have to work during the summer to cover their college expenses. The following quotes illustrate some of the different types of experiences that Latina/o students have regarding financial issues:

I have a sister in college right now, too. I went to this school based off her choice, mainly. I just try to make my parents’ life easier. I’m not the perfect child, but if this was the one thing that could help them, then sure. (Latina Non-Transfer)

I’m still working almost a full-time position just split between two jobs just because I still help out at home … In some ways I still feel like a commuter, because I’m here, but it’s literally just to lay my head (she is too busy to engage in co-curricular or social activities on campus) (Latina student, transfer)

I have loans but my parents also help to pay for school. I’m not necessarily worried about paying back my loans but it’s definitely something to think about after I graduate. (Latino student, non-transfer)

I don’t have trouble back home financially, stuff like that. My parents have told me, I don’t have to worry about that, it’s okay, just finish with the best grade you can, and as fast as possible, and that’s it. (Latino student, transfer)

Some of the consequences of having financial constraints includes: (a) choose a NRU based on the cost instead of personal preference; (b) having to stay in NRU, even though it is not the best fit for the student; (c) stress due to loans, “[t]hey are always in the back of my mind;” or having a scholarship that has academic requirements; (d) having to work long hours (to pay for college and help family) which makes it difficult for students to have time to study and make social connections; (f) dropping a second major or changing a major to be able to graduate earlier to help family financially:

I received a little financial aid, but still I have loans. And my parents help me out to pay some part of it. My father is the one who helps me more. But he works in Colombia … So, actually it’s kind of hard for me, because actually I was doing a double major but I needed to do an extra year. So, I dropped it because I didn’t
want my father to keep, because he’s actually ending his career. He hasn’t ended it because of me. So, I feel kind of guilty. (Latino student, transfer)

It is interesting to note that the pressure that comes from having loans and scholarships motivated students to do better academically. Scholarships with academic requirements motivate students to do well to keep the scholarship and show they are the right candidate for it. In the case of loans, Latina/o students see them as a motivation to finish because they are making a large financial investment in their education: “I think that [having loans] pushes me to work a little bit harder on my academics, because I feel like that’ll lead me to a better job” (Latina student, non-transfer).

Even though Latina/o students’ financial resources to pay for college varies, they do agree that NRU should provide more financial aid to students, particularly to racial/ethnic minority students. But at the same time, they recognize that the university is addressing students’ financial issues with some initiatives. The University provides services that help students reduce college costs with free or reduced educational resources, such as ‘rent a book’, lending laptops, access to academic journals, and printing and scanning services. In the case of transfer students, there is a state-level policy that helps transfer students pay for their tuition (Mass Transfer) if they have a certain GPA. A few students received great financial package from the university; in those cases, students do not need loans which helps them reduce their stress level:

I’m the youngest of seven, so it was really difficult for me to just got to college, [NRU] offered me a really great financial package … Overall, the financial aid, it’s one of the main reasons that I’m doing good, because I don’t have to worry about taking loans or work. It doesn’t bring any stress to me, so that’s a really big help (Latina student, non-transfer)

In summary, having unmet needs affects Latina/o’s college experiences because they opt for dropping a double major or changing their majors in order to graduate earlier.
In addition, because students have unmet needs, they have to work long hours to be able to afford college which increases their stress level and limits the time they have to spend studying and socializing (including participating in student-run organizations).

**Lack of Representation of Latinas/os on Campus**

The lack of representation of Latinas/os on campus affects Latina/o students’ interactions with faculty and peers, and their perception of the value that the university gives to the Latina/o community.

The lack of representation of Latinas/os on campus affects the college experience of Latina/o students. Latina/o students who attended high schools with large numbers of students of color reported having more challenges with the lack of representation of Latinas/os on campus than their peers who attended predominantly white high schools. Regarding gender, Latino students reported having more issues related to being a minority student on campus than Latina students did.

For Latina/o students, the lack of representation of Latinas/os on campus signifies a lack of recognition of the Latina/o culture by university administrators. The lack of representation of Latinas/os on campus manifested as being the only (or one of the few) Latina/o in a class or on a residential floor, standing out while walking on campus, having difficulty connecting with other Latina/o students, and not seeing the Latina/o culture represented on campus. As the following quotes illustrate: “I feel like our culture doesn’t have a place here.” (Latina student, non-transfer)

I think [NRU] don’t expose our culture enough. You see a lot of Chinese New Year, or when it’s the Black Heritage Month. They have events for that, but you don’t really hear much about when it’s Hispanic Heritage Month or anything. (Latina student, non-transfer)
I think my weirdest experience was one day in this class we were reading a Hispanic book and just how the author started saying he calls himself white now. He doesn’t even connect with his Hispanic heritage, and that was cool, but I was surrounded by everyone who was not … they were all white. They were just looking at me like if I had all the answers, or if I related to him in some way. They were afraid to tell me what they felt like because they didn’t want to offend me. I was just like, ‘Can we just have a conversation? Can you not look at me like I have 18 heads?’ I can definitely related to that, especially coming from [my community college] you had people in purple for christ’s sake, any color of the rainbow they were there. (Latina transfer)

I’m the only Hispanic in my major. Of juniors, the only Hispanic. Without seeing somebody like you, in your major, indirectly, it’s kind of hard. (Latino student, transfer)

I feel like when I walk around campus I just kind of have, I hate to say target because I don’t feel like I’m being targeted, but I just feel like when people see me there’s just kind the acknowledgement like, ‘Oh you’re tan. You’re not the majority here.’ Just that kind of thing. I found in my experience, when I met people they kind of remember me more and they also remember my name. Especially teachers and things like that. Like, ‘Oh, it’s the one Latino kid. Can’t [mess] that up.’ (Latino student, non-transfer)

These Latina/o quotes show that the campus racial climate at NRU needs improvement.

As is mentioned in the literature about campus climate, Latina/o students are asked to represent or be experts on their culture (Jones et al., 2002), and feel “disregarded and insignificant” due to the lack of representation of their culture on campus (Yosso et al, 2009).

Latina/o students who expected a more racially/ethnically diverse campus have to adjust to the lack of representation of Latinas/os on campus. These students were surprised because they have saw University brochures representing a more diverse campus than is the reality. Latina/o students want to see the Latina/o culture represented on campus but do not expect that to happen any time soon. As some students explained (particularly those students who expected the university to be a predominately white campus): “In a way, you deal with it, just 'cause that's how it is. It's not that it should be
that way, but it just is.” (Latina student, non-transfer). Even Latina/o students who
eXpected to attend a PW campus would prefer to see more Latinas/os on campus: “It is
just nice seeing somebody who has the same background as you in the same position you
are. You have an instant connection just by having a person like that.” (Latino student,
transfer). This instant connection is not limited to fellow students because Latina/o
students also make connections with Latinas/os dining and cleaning/maintenance staff.
These Latina/o staff members are important for Latina/o students because they provide a
sense of being at home because, among other reasons, they can speak Spanish with them:

I'm tight with some of the older adults who work [in the dining] and English is not
the thing and they speak Spanish. I'm just like you know, when I see them like, oh
my God a family member. What's up? We speak Spanish. We're tight. Even
people who are at [this dining hall], some of them are like Asian, I still talk with
them. (Latina student, non-transfer)

The lack of representation of Latinas/os on campus affects Latina/o students’
interactions with their peers in both social and academic aspects. In addition, it is easier
for Latina/o students to develop academic connections than social connections with white
peers: “You mingle more in academics” (Latino student, non-transfer); therefore, I
present the findings about these two aspects in separate sections.

**Academic connections with white peers**

The lack of representation of Latina/o students affect Latina/o relationships with
their white peers in academic settings. These connections are important for Latina/o
students because peers can help them better understand class materials particularly when
TAs and faculty are not approachable or helpful. In addition, having study groups can
also help academically. Therefore, Latina/o students who have a hard time connecting
with their white peers are missing the help that peers can provide academically. The following quote illustrates the importance of having academic connections with peers:

> In my classes I try to sit towards the front and so what happened in [one of my classes] was like the people that I formed my study group with, it think they try to sit towards the front too, to pay attention more. During one of our labs, we ended up working together as partners for that and we just decided because we work so well together, we’ll start studying together at the library. We all had the same complains about the TA and we all thought similar things about how the class was going, like our expectations versus what was actually happening. We just kind of built off that. It’s been working for us. (Latina Non-transfer)

There are gender and transfer status differences regarding academic relationships with white peers. In general, Latina students do not have major difficulties creating study groups, except for Latina transfer students who report having a hard time creating academic connections because their peers already developed those connections. Latina non-transfer students are the only ones that mentioned gender issues with their white male peers. These students have a poor quality of academic interactions with white male peers because white male peers’ behaviors show that they think Latina students cannot do the academic work as well as they can.

> I've noticed that mainly in my econ classes, that if there's these really tall, deep voice, white guys … One time a guy had no idea what was going on, and I had the whole problem done and everything, and I was like, "I can help you! Here you go." He's like, "Yeah, yeah, sure," and turns to the guy who just came in halfway through class and was like, "Bro, do you got this?" I'm like, dude, I have this! (Latina student, non-transfer)

There have been instances where I've been in groups where men, whatever you want to call them, boys will dominate conversations … I don't feel comfortable talking, just because ... I don't know if it's just the atmosphere of the class that seems like I shouldn't really want to talk, but I won't because there's a lot of men in the class … And that seems somewhat common in the classes that I've had at NRU. (Latina student, non-transfer)

In the case of Latino students, they talk about having to find a way to join academic groups formed by white peers. Latina/o students who come from predominantly
white high schools are more successful at “infiltrating” white groups because they have practiced that skill in high school. However, even Latino students who know how to infiltrate white peers’ groups prefer to interact with racial/ethnic minority students: “I kind of have to infiltrate a little bit” (Latino student, non-transfer). During a personal interview, a Latino non-transfer student explained how he infiltrates white peers’ groups:

> Everyone looks around to the people that they know … I need to ask around people that I kind of know … ‘hey can I join you?’ They have to say yes, they are not going to say no, they don’t want to be rude … I have to assert myself.

Even though this student knows how to infiltrate white peers’ groups, when possible he prefers to interact in class with other students of color. Latino students who attended a PWI and came to the university with a group of friends from their high school have a totally different experience. In these cases, Latinos do not consider being Latino as a factor that affects their academic relationships with peers:

> I came here with a lot of friends from my high school so I already had the community, the friends that I needed to feel comfortable here. I came here with double digit amounts of friends … and I made friends in my floor when I came here and we stayed friends all throughout all four years so I kinda never felt alone, never felt different. I don't know.” (Latino student, non-transfer)

The differences are not only related to gender and transfer status, though. It is easier for Latina/o students with more outgoing personalities to develop academic connections because it is easier for them to talk with people they do not know. Students’ study preferences also present a difference for students regarding academic interactions with white peers. In addition, students’ skin tone also influences how Latina/o students interact academically with their peers. White Latina/o students acknowledge their white privilege by stating that it helps them create connections with white peers: “Because people will perceive you as white and then you will have white privilege” (Latino
These students shared that peers do not know that they are Latinas/os until they shared their cultural background which can sometimes cause discomfort for the students:

I've had people tell me I'm lying when I tell them I'm Latino … I have to explain every single time … Yeah people don't believe you or they can't comprehend it. So I explain it to people and then like, "Stop lying." I'm like, "Okay." So I just sort of don't mention it I guess. (Latina/o student, non-transfer)

The consequences of the lack of representation of Latinas/os not only affect Latina/o academic interactions with peers, it also affects Latina/o students’ classroom experiences. Students face microaggression in their classroom where they are expected to be “experts in their culture” (Jones et al., 2002). Latina/o students are singled out in class by faculty members who ask them to share their experiences to educate the rest of the classroom. These students feel that their answers are representing the entire Latina/o community instead of their own particular experiences or opinions. Latina/o students have an issue with this situation because it asks them to represent an entire community which is diverse but by their responses is portrayed as homogeneous. With this type of behavior, faculty members are contributing to a limited vision of the Latina/o community instead of helping to understand that the Latina/o community is a heterogeneous one: People with different opinions who share the same culture. The behavior of these faculty members is another example of the need for practices within NRU that will help the institution successfully operate in a multicultural world and improve its campus climate.

Latina/o students in highly white majors have a more difficult time in their academic environment:

When I'm not with the classes with the RAP, everyone else is just like a sea of white. Sometimes you're the only one in the room and sometimes they want you
to be the person to educate them. I, myself, feel so annoyed about that. (Latina student, non-transfer)

But, even Latina/o students in more progressive majors (described as having a better environment) would like to have people in their majors with whom they can relate on a cultural level. As described by scholars who study campus climate (e.g. Hernandez, 2000), most Latina/o participants would like to see more Latinos/as on campus because it is easier to connect with people with whom they share a common background.

To overcome the challenge of creating academic connections with peers, Latina/o students create academic connections with peers through non-white groups or organizations. In culturally diverse sorority/fraternities and residential academic programs for minority students, Latina/o students develop academic relationships that help them with study materials and study groups. The Society of Hispanic Professional Engineering (SHPE) is another organization that helps Latina/o students to succeed. Through SHPE Latina/o students have access to internships and Latina/o mentors. SHPE also helps students attend conferences and provide students with the opportunity to develop friendships and find volunteer and job opportunities. A Latina transfer student shared her experience volunteering in the community:

I think volunteering in the community, [we actually go to the schools and things like that and motivate kids to do science], has opened a lot of doors for me, because ... you can speak a lot about it when you have interviews from just to get to know more people around you. I think that was a huge part that helped me do the internship that I got.

During a personal interview, a Latino transfer student shared the diverse skills that he developed by being part of SHPE. SHPE helped him to meet people with a similar background to his: “they are coming from a similar family like mine, the culture … they have faced that experience.” SHPE helped him pay the expenses associated with going to
a conference that exposed him to companies that do not come to NRU career fairs. SHPE also provide him Latino mentors by connecting him with Latino graduate students: “if they can, I can.” This student and others during the focus groups mentioned that NRU is not providing enough financial support to organizations such SHPE and the University Multicultural Center. One non-transfer Latino student shared in the focus group hand-out: “everything that doesn’t directly benefit white people seems to be ignored.” Students expressed the need for NRU to support organizations that primarily support students of color.

Another program that helps Latina/o students academically is the Learning Scholars program that is geared toward students of color and helps connect these students with faculty of color (who were described as professors who care and understand). The Louis Stokes Alliance for Minority Students also helps Latina/o students by providing a class for minority students in research and study skills. This class helps students develop academic connections with peers and important academic skills. Finally, the University Multicultural Center is a welcoming place, where students can obtain help writing their resume and applying to scholarships.

Social Connections with white peers

As argued by Tinto (1975), social connections help students succeed in college. In the case of Latina/o students, social connections reduce stress and feelings of loneliness, which in turn makes them want to stay in the university despite the challenges they have to overcome. Unfortunately, some Latina/o students feel they do not have friends on campus. This is due to structural issues such as the lack of a critical mass of Latina/o
students on campus, students having to work long hours, and the challenges presented by living off campus.

With the exceptions of Latina/o students who came to the university with friends from high school, it is difficult for Latina/o students to connect with their white peers. Latina/o students from cities with a large number of people of color are the ones that have the most difficult time connecting with white peers due to the lack of a common backgrounds. Most Latina/o students prefer to have social connections with people with whom they share a similar background because these people understand the challenges that Latina/o students face in college:

There is an individual who actually lives on my floor in my dorm … he’s Mexican. And as far I know so far, him and I are the only Hispanic people in the building. Everyone else is either white or Asian and I think there’s a couple of Black kids. I don’t know, it’s kind of nice to have that connection cause there’s a better understanding of our backgrounds and our own experiences. He was also struggling a little bit last semester academically so there was that kind of connection too and it’s just kind of good to have that there. And just in general having peers who understand who you are and what you’re going through. It’s really nice (Latino Non-transfer)

Participants shared similar types of feeling in the focus group hand-out: “trouble relating to fellow students because of cultural differences or ignorance” (Latina student, non-transfer); and “need more diversity, want to be able to go to school where you can see more people that look like me” (Latino student, non-transfer).

It is particularly challenging for Latina/o students to create social connections with white students when the behaviors of white peers make it clear that Latina/o student are the “other” on campus (microaggressions). As one student explained: “If you don’t have an accent you are kind of way more accepted because already, just by being not white you kind of have an otherness to you” (Latina student, non-transfer). The types of
behaviors that make Latina/o students feel like they are the “other” on campus are charged with stereotypical and disrespectful comments, avoidance behavior, and asking questions in an insensitive manner. Participants provided many examples of their interactions with peers that made them feel like they are the “other” on campus. For example, a non-transfer Latino student shared that his first roommate did not feel comfortable talking with him and avoided him and other students of color as well. Participants shared that peers made several comments similar to the following: “You’re my first friend of color.” (Latina, non-transfer); “Having people like, ”Hey, can I touch your hair?” It feels like a dog, I'm like, ‘Ahh’” (Latino student, non-transfer).

In addition, Latina/o students have to be careful with humorous comments. They are very careful with stereotypical jokes because they can escalate very quickly. In the case of Colombian students, they are told jokes related to drugs. Latina/o students feel that their peers reduce them to these stereotypical characteristics. They want to tell peers that they are more than what they see portrayed on TV shows:

I’ll say that I’m, Colombian and then they’ll go straight to the like Cocaine jokes. If they don’t know I’m Colombian then they’ll go straight to like the crossing the border or they start making those kind of jokes. I can understand on one point, that’s what they see on TV and everything, but then when I like actually start talking about what it’s really like and the background, they’re like, is that real? I’m like yes, we’re not exactly what you see on TV. We have this whole different thing. It’s so much more cultured. You have to know about it to really appreciate it and they don’t take the time to like appreciate it and learn about it. It’s kind of upsetting. (Latina students, non-transfer)

Latina/o students also have to face the challenge of being exposed to insensitive comments made by their white peers. For example, a Black Latina student shared that her roommate was nice but made many insensitive comments regarding her racial appearance. The roommate’s comments focused on how the Latina participant’s
appearance did not fit the mold that the roommate had about the participants’ physical appearance. For example, the roommate said: “I’m more ghetto or gangster than you are” “My friends would not let you in their car.” (Latina student, non-transfer).

Other insensitive comments and behaviors that students experience included the following: “You are exotic,” “those are your parents?,” being called stereotypical names, people looking at them when they speak Spanish, and being spoken to with a couple of Spanish words in a condescending way. Beside insensitive comments, Latina/o students also have to face stereotypes such as peers assuming that they are good dancers, that they play a sport, and that they are not academically capable. Some participants mentioned that other students think that because they have an accent, they are not smart or that Latinas/os are accepted into the University because of their ethnicity and not because of their academic merits.

Another type of difficult interactions with peers includes Latina/o students being racially misplaced or asked what they are. These questions are used sometimes as a pick-up line or to start a conversation. Particularly, Latina/o students feel uncomfortable with these types of behaviors. As one explained: “I’m a person”. In the case of students who are white or black, they have to explain to their peers that they are in fact Latinas/os. These students’ cultural backgrounds are challenged by both white and some Latina/o peers.

Latina/o students’ reactions to negative interactions with peers include educating their peers and explaining to them that next time they should rephrase their questions or comments. Latina/o students explained that white students have these types of negative interactions with them because their peers lack education, “your parents didn’t teach you”
(Latina student, non-transfer). Latina/o students described their white peers as ignorant of all races, as not having experiences traveling abroad, and as not being used to spending time with people from different backgrounds. It seems that students are using their community cultural wealth (e.g. aspirational, navigational, and resistant capitals) to be able to deal with a racially-hostile environment.

One non-transfer Latino student used his transformative resistant capital to deal with the lack of representation of Latinas/os on campus. He decided to get involved in improving the experience of Latina/o students on campus by helping to create a residential area for Latino students, “I will make it my home.” (Latino student, non-transfer). It was his hope that in this way NRU would be more appealing to Latina/o students.

As mentioned before, social connections help Latina/o students persist in their educational path. Therefore, if Latina/o students have challenging social interactions with their white peers, with whom do these students create these social connections? Most Latina/o students have small groups of friends. Some students found these friends on their floor while others have not made new connections on campus but have kept their social connections from home. Latina/o students create social connections with people with whom they share a common background. For example, it is easier to create connections with students who understand the Latina/o students’ financial constraints. These peers understand that Latina/o students do not have money to go on vacations or that instead of going on vacations they have to work. In a further section, I describe how participants create a sense of community to overcome the challenges they face when creating connections with their white peers.
Interestingly, not all the effects of having challenging interactions with white peers are negative ones. Latina/o students use the lack of representation of Latinas/os on campus as a source of motivation because they want to defy stereotypes: “I just need to do my part and succeed so they see me as a person, not just as a Hispanic” (Latina student, non-transfer).

The political climate on campus also makes it difficult for Latina/o students to develop social connections. It is difficult for some Latina/o students to deal with people who have very strong political views. Some Latina/o students also mentioned that some students are insensitive to how current political issues can affect Latina/o students’ families.

As in the case of the academic setting, Spring semester transfer students reported having difficulties creating social connections with peers because students in higher level courses already had their groups of friends. Some transfer students suffer from depression due to the lack of contact with their peers. Transfer students overcome this situation by joining university organizations and intentionally talking to people to make friends. One student shared that he used to spend a lot of time in his room. He was so sad that he decided to do something about it.

Unfortunately, not all Latina/o students have found their social niche. Some students said that they still do not have friends and for others being in a PWI is still a challenge: “It is a very white school, I need to be able to go somewhere where I can see people that looks like me … I just don’t feel at home here” (Latino student, non-transfer). This student uses his connection to his family as a resource to be able to stay in the university.
Finally, Latina/o students party and relax in a different way than their white peers. Latina/o students like to hang out with peers, but drinking in excess is not as much a part of their parties as it is for their white peers. The following quote illustrates the sentiment of several Latino non-transfer students about feeling different from their white peers and their drinking habits:

I’ve tried to make friends with people from certain cliques and I feel like there’s just a wall. Like they acknowledge you as a person but they don’t really want to get to know you further. I don’t know if it’s because of my ethnicity, or our ethnicity. It just feels like we’re just being alienated from the groups because of who we are. If you look different, probable don’t have the same experiences. Though they might be talking about something that I might not understand. It’s subconsciously. Or at least, in my case, I don’t do all the stuff that they do. That’s just not my culture. I live in Boston right … I don’t have a big house with a lawn or a backyard to have parties at. A lot of them say they’ve been doing it since high school. Man, I was playing soccer in high school. I wasn’t partying or drinking in high school. That is not my culture.

In summary, the lack of representation of Latinas/os on campus affects the college experiences of Latina/o students. It is not easy for them to develop academic and social connections with their white peers due to the lack of a common background and white students’ behaviors that make it clear that Latina/o students are the other on campus. In the next theme, I present a variety of Latina/o students’ behaviors that help them overcome the challenges presented in this and previous themes.

**Latina/o Students’ Attitudes and Behaviors Help Them Succeed**

*Latina/o students come to college with an array of personal attitudes and behaviors that help them overcome the challenges they face in a PWI.*

Latina/o students are not empty vessels. On the contrary, they come to college with skills, knowledge, and attitudes that are useful for their success in college. Personal motivation, creating a sense of community on campus (e.g., participating in co-curricular
activities), and academic skills (such as organization skills) are among the several personal resources that Latina/o students bring to college. Some also use their community cultural wealth to succeed in college (e.g. aspirational and navigational capitals).

**Motivation**

Even though Latina/o students face diverse challenges in their university such as financial constraints, difficult interactions with white peers, and issues transitioning to college, they persist. Families, students’ desire to defy stereotypes, and the prospect of financial security are among the motivations for students getting their four-years degrees.

Family is one of the main motivations that Latina/o students have to obtain their four-year degree. They want to make their relatives proud and be an example for other members of their family. These students want their parents to know that the sacrifices they made by moving to the U.S. and having to work long, hard hours are paying off.

Yeah, my Dad is a huge advocate for going as far as you can in terms of education. I almost feel like doing my best is what I have to do and kind of like what you're saying, its not in any bad way. Like my Dad would never say this to me but its almost like I have to make it worth for him to have moved here and worked 20 hours days (Latino student, non-transfer)

I have an older brother, but he didn't do well just like in school academically. I learned from his mistakes and stuff. I do feel that pressure you have to take one for the family and progress on, to move forward. (Latina student, non-transfer)

In a few cases, family motivation comes from fear because parents threaten students with cutting them off financially if they do not do well academically: “You have to do well in school or we will stop funding you and kick you out.” (Latino student, non-transfer)

Another source of motivation is the desire to defy stereotypes about Latinas/os. Latina/o students want to show that Latina/o can be successful academically. For
example, they want to show that they can do well in PW majors, such as engineering, computer sciences, and business. During a personal interview, a Latino transfer student shared that he was happy that he was able to change the mind of a peer who thought Latinos were not good at math. He added “other Hispanic friends they also told me that, that they want to give a better image to the others, so they study harder.”

The university can be an intimidating place for some Latina/o students due to its size and the lack of a critical mass of Latinas/os on campus. Latina/o students engage in behaviors that help them create a home for Latina/o students on their campus away from home. For example, a couple of Latino students got involved in creating a residential floor on campus for Latina/o students and participated in an access program that targeted minority students. Through these activities, Latina/o students can change their surroundings to make them more welcoming for Latinos. These behaviors are good example of the interplay between structure and agency (structuration). These students are changing the structure and trying to make NRU a more diverse place.

I'm on the forefront of all these things. I get to talk with administrators all the time ... Just recently [I was part of the creation of] a residential community for Latino students. I'm doing my best ... When I came here I agree, a lot of things were like, you feel ... It was the first time I felt like a minority but instead of taking it. I said, I'll make it my home. I'm not going to see it as not my home. (Latino Non-transfer)

Another source of motivation for Latina/o students is the possibility of obtaining a well-paid job with their four-year degree. Latina/o students want a good paying job to help their families, avoid the financial hardship experienced by their parents, and give back to their communities. Therefore, Latina/o students take advantage (agency) of university resources that will help them obtain a well-paying job after graduating. University resources (structure) that connect students to future employment include:
university academic reputation, networking events, career services, as well as research and internship opportunities.

Research and internship opportunities motivate Latina/o students to stay in college because these activities help them visualize a path to employment. Internships and research opportunities expose Latina/o students to professional environments that can help them obtain a well-paying job after graduation. These opportunities also help student figure out what kind of job they want after graduating:

One of the things that’s really helping me is the fact that it’s a big research campus. For [my major], I want to do research, so having the opportunity to be able to work. It gives me the opportunity, like figure out what I want to do and what path I want to take. It helps me get more motivated to do what I want. (Latina Non-transfer)

Latina/o students take advantage of university career services because these services help students achieve their goal of having a well-paying job. Some of the aspects of career services that are most useful to Latina/o students include: career fairs, practice for interviews, and resume workshops:

[Career services] are extremely helpful. They helped me get the internship that I have now just by looking at my resume and telling me exactly what to do. They’re just really good. My old school did not have anything like that so this is really nice” (Latina transfer).

Even though career services are helpful, these services are not equally effective for all students. Some majors have more effective career services than others:

They should maybe divide [career services] by, not major cause that would be a lot but have different sections. One career services for 25,000 students doing a bunch of different things, it sounds too broad. Like you as a [student in your major] you probably feel like they couldn’t help you. I went there last year for help with my resume and I felt like they did help me but if I went to something else … like [internship in my major]. I’d have to go look somewhere else (Latino Non-transfer)
Sense of community

Latina/o students actively look for ways to make their large university feel smaller and ways to overcome the challenging relationships they can have with their white peers. They find ways to develop a sense of belonging on campus. Latina/o students develop a sense of community, despite the challenges they face due to the lack of representation of Latinas/os on campus, by connecting with peers with whom they share a common background and joining different types of student-run organizations: “[the clubs and groups] propels me to want stay here … I came to get the academic but stayed because I met the people.” (Latino student, non-transfer). In another example, one student mentioned feeling isolated until he joined Latino Unidos and a racially/ethically diverse fraternity: [after joining a Latina/o based club], I felt like I had people who were like me, who I could talk with” (Latino student, non-transfer).

As an example, Latino Unidos (a student-run organization) helps participants create a sense of community. By participating in Latinos Unidos, Latina/o students create connections with students who look like them and enjoy the same type of music and food as well as obtain access to information about university resources and find a place where they feel like at home. However, participants reported both positive and negatives experience with Latino Unidos, and a few did not know about its existence on campus.

On the negative side, Latina/o students who do not fit the mold of what means to be a Latina/o for members of Latinos Unidos have to fight to fit in in. These students are already fighting to fit in at a PWI so to have to fight to fit into the club makes the club less appealing. During the focus groups the participants did not feel comfortable sharing what they did not like about Latinos Unidos. However, in the individual interviews,
participants opened up about this topic. During the interviews three participants shared that they felt they did not fit the mold of what was expected of them as Latinas/os: “I didn’t feel that I fit in with the club.” Some students felt let down because they wanted to connect with other Latinas/os on campus but were received with comments like: “you do not act Puerto Rican enough” or “you don’t look like” (Latina student, transfer). Another student shared:

It makes me uncomfortable around other Latinos on this campus … not matter how much I try… I never like seen as Latina under their eyes because I didn’t grow up in a Latino community. I didn’t grow up celebrating Latino holidays or eating Latino food. (Latina student, Non-transfer)

In addition, there are cliques inside the club that can make the environment a little intimidating in the beginning. However, Latino Unidos members “warm up” to new members after they get to know them. Even though Latina/o students have different views of Latino Unidos, they agree that the club’s special events (e.g. food, dancing) are nice events, a place where people share music, food, and everyone looks similar. These events are important for students because they help them stay connected to their Latina/o roots by sharing Latina/o music and food.

Another place where Latina/o students find a sense of community is in the Dining facilities. Some participants shared that they bond with Spanish speaking university staff, particularly in food services. These students felt the connection through the common language. Even Latina/o students who do not speak fluent Spanish enjoy the opportunity to share a few Spanish words with the dining staff. “It is like they are family members,” “we’re tight,” “Latino people are my family.”
Finally, sororities and fraternities that are racially/ethnically diverse are also helpful in creating a sense of community. These organizations help Latina/o students connect with other students who help them with their academics and their networking.

**Academic Skills**

Latina/o students’ academic skills or lack of thereof also play a role in the academic success of these students. Being organized is one of the main skills that Latina/o students need to succeed in college, such as having a good schedule system and a balance between all of their activities and responsibilities. Good academic habits such as recording classes, going to every class, not partying before an exam, going to office hours, and developing relationships with faculty, sorority sisters, and classmates are also helpful to academic success. In addition, networking skills are useful as well as getting into the habit of attending university events, joining clubs, using career services, and connecting with alumni and faculty.

Finally, Latina/o students are aware of their weaknesses and recognize that they have areas of improvement. For example, they have to take care of themselves better by having a healthier diet and resting more. Other students need to be more intentional in creating social connections by getting involved on campus activities. Others need a better balance, not only to focus on academics but to find room for relaxation. And others need to improve their academic skills, such as time management (less procrastination), and take advantage of academic resources.

In summary, Latina/o students’ motivation to obtain their four-year degree helps them overcome the challenges they face in their PWI. Latina/o students also intentionally find ways to make the large campus feel more like home by joining clubs and other
organizations that help them find a sense of community on campus. Finally, Latina/o students take advantage of university resources that help them to succeed academically. These students do not dwell on the challenges they face; instead, they focus on their final goal of obtaining a four-year degree and use the university and personal resources that will help them to get there.

Overall, I want to highlight that the findings from the focus groups, focus group hand-outs, and interviews are similar to each other, with the exception of the topic of “not fitting the mold of what it means to be a Latina/o on campus;” this topic was elaborated on by the participants during the interviews. Also, the findings presented in this chapter are supported by NRU’s own campus climate survey findings and retention rates presented in chapter three. Latina/o students in NRU have higher retention rates than the national rate; but they rate the campus climate and their overall experience lower than their white peers (5 percentage points). They are more likely to interact with faculty than their white peers (10 percentage points), but are less likely to participate in research projects with faculty members (8 percentage points). In other words, the experience of Latina/o students in NRU may be better than their Latina/o peers in other institutions, but NRU can do more to better serve their Latina/o students by addressing structural issues that affect these students’ college experiences. In the next chapter, I interpret the findings presented in this chapter and provide recommendations for practice and future research.
CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study is to better understand what is helping and hindering Latina/o students’ path to graduation in a predominately white university in Massachusetts (that I called NRU). This study is guided by Gidden’s (1984) Theory of Structuration that provided a framework to explore students’ own role in their educational success and institutional aspects that enable or constrain students’ progress toward graduation. I found that both students’ actions (or lack thereof) and university elements positively and negatively affect Latina/o students’ educational success, defined as obtaining a four-year degree. The main findings of this study support previous knowledge about what affects the college experience of Latina/o students (campus climate, faculty interaction, family relationships, academic performance, campus resources, and financial needs) and expand this knowledge by providing a deeper understanding of why these elements are important for Latina/o students at NRU.

In this chapter I address my research question -what factors do Latina/o students in a PWI in Massachusetts perceive as helping and hindering their educational progress toward a bachelor’s degree? - by addressing each of my four specific research sub-questions. Then, I review my conceptual framework, present recommendations for practices and policies, and finish this chapter with recommendations for future research.

Main Findings

The main findings that I discuss in this chapter were drawn from the focus group discussions, focus group hand-outs, and individual follow-up interviews. Interestingly, all the topics in the hand-out were discussed during the focus groups, but a few of them I had
to ask directly about it at the end of the focus group (e.g. family interactions and finances). It is possible that participants may have not volunteered some information due to the setting of the focus group (sharing personal experiences in front of peers). Therefore, the topics that did not emerge from the participants should not be considerable as not having a role in the success of Latino students. The individual follow-up interviews helped to alleviate this issue. For example, participants during the individual follow-up interviews brought up a subject that was barely mentioned during the focus groups, the issue of not fitting the mold of what means to be a Latina/o on campus.

Because one of the purposes of this study was to expand the knowledge about the college experience of Latina/o students in Massachusetts, a geographic were few studies have been done about Latina/o student, it is important at this point to reiterate the context of NRU. NRU is located in a rural area close to two cities with a large population of Latina/o students. NRU has a retention rate of Latina/o students higher than the national rates and, during the last years, has engaged on a campaign to make their campus more inclusive and welcoming.

What is Helping Latina/o Students Progress to their Bachelor’s Degree

Sub-question #1: What are the personal and institutional factors that are helping students’ progress to the bachelor’s degree? How and why are these factors helping their progress?

There are many factors that students mentioned as helping them progress toward their four-year degree. Before starting the focus group discussions, participants had the chance to write down on a personal handout what they think is helping them to succeed at NRU. The top five elements that students mentioned in those handouts were a) having
supportive and high-quality faculty members; b) academic support (including the university learning center and office hours); c) assistance and guidance provided by administrative offices; d) university programs, clubs, and organizations for minority students; and e) the variety of opportunities (including diverse classes, clubs, and campus events).

The main factors discussed during the focus groups as helping NRU Latina/o students make progress toward their bachelor’s degrees were interactions with people who serve as retention agents; the variety of academic support services, co-curricular activities and organizations available at NRU; interactions with families; and students’ self-advocacy and motivation.

**Retention Agents**

Faculty members, TAs, academic advisors, and peer mentors help Latina/o students persist academically. As previous studies have also found (e.g., Anaya & Cole, 2001; Mahaffy & Pantoja, 2013), faculty members and TAs who are approachable help Latina/o students by providing academic support and showing interest in students’ success. However, in this study, faculty were not mentioned as a source of motivation (as in the case of the studies of Arana et al., 2011 & Hurtado, 1996), with the exception of Latina/o faculty who serve as role models and inspiration. As some students mentioned, seeing somebody that looks like you succeed helps to visualize yourself succeeding.

Even though Latina/o students may feel intimidated by college professors, they feel that they can reach out to faculty to ask for course material clarification and advice. This finding reinforces previous studies that have found that faculty members need to be intentional in reaching out to Latina/o students (Rendón et al., 2011) because for some
students it is particularly challenging to reach out to faculty. Faculty connections are particularly important for Latina/o students because faculty help Latina/o students get involved in research and internships, and they provide letters of recommendation for students. These three aspects are very important for Latina/o students because they connect students’ college studies with career plans which is one of the key motivational elements for students, particularly those who have economic constraints, for obtaining their four-year degree. In addition, TAs are particularly important when faculty do not provide the needed academic support.

Academic advisors help Latina/o students find their academic path to graduation by providing information about how to stay on-track academically. For many Latina/o students it is critical to graduate on-time due to financial constraints. Therefore, academic advisors play a crucial role in providing students with accurate information about major requirements, transferring credits from other institutions, and outlining a realistic timeline to graduation; however, there are not many studies (e.g. Torres et al., 2006) that focus on the role that academic advisors have in the success of Latina/o students.

As in the case of TAs, peer advisors are particularly helpful when students do not find their academic advisors helpful. Peer advisors provide relevant information to students about academic requirements and also provide emotional support to students. In this way, Latina/o students obtain information about college life and have somebody who they can reach out to for help, particularly, during the initial transition to college. This finding regarding the role of peers is exciting because current literature about the experience of Latina/o college students has found that Latina/o students rely on their peers to obtain academic information instead of faculty and advisors (Hurtado et al.,
1996, Mahaffy & Pantoja, 2013, & Torres et al., 2006). Therefore, peer advisors are a great resource for Latina/o students who otherwise will be relying on peers’ information which sometimes may not be accurate (Torres et al., 2006).

**University Services**

Another main factor that helps Latina/o students succeed academically is university academic and non-academic services. Even though the current literature about Latina/o college students’ experiences acknowledges that positive academic performance in college is one of the elements that positively affects retention and persistence (Border-Edgar et al., 2011), there is a scarce number of studies that focus on the role of academic services in the success of Latina/o college students. I found that, through academic services, Latina/o students find help to improve their academic performance in their courses. This study sheds light on why academic performance is particularly important for the retention and persistence of Latina/o students. Many Latina/o students need to graduate in the least time possible to help their families financially and support themselves; therefore, they need to have good grades to progress quickly to graduation. In supplemental instruction and tutoring sessions, students learn by being taught by upper-level peers and by the questions their peers ask. In this way students reinforce what they are learning in their classes and prepare for exams.

There is not much literature about the role of non-academic services in the success of Latina/o college students, with the exception of the role of culturally-based organizations and centers (e.g., Jones et al., 2002; Turner, 1994). I found that non-academic services, such as mental health support, student-run organizations, and sports
help Latina/o students find balance in their life. This balance helps students reduce stress which in turn helps students do better academically.

As previous research shows, I found that culturally-based university organizations provide opportunities to Latina/o students to create social connections that help them stay in college. Previous studies have stressed the importance of: (1) cultural centers that help students have “a home away from home, a place to visit, deal with personal, and academic problems” (Turner, 1994, p.362), and (2) counterspaces created by Latina/o college students where they bond with people with whom they share a common background and gain the support needed to persist in their college education (Yosso, 2006). Cultural centers and other types of cultural organizations on campus (e.g. SHPE, Latinos Unidos) provide an outlet for Latina/o students to find peers with whom they share a common background. In addition, I found that sororities and fraternities that have a culturally diverse membership provide an environment where Latina/o students find social connections that help them gain knowledge about the university and create social and academic connections with peers. Cultural centers and organizations help Latina/o students connect with faculty of color, internships, conferences, friendships, and academic support.

Finally, other university resources that help students persist in their education are residential floors that have a large number of minority students, RAs who are approachable, and welcoming and efficient administrative offices that offer different types of assistance to students (e.g. financial aid, transferring credits).
**Student Self-Advocacy and Motivation**

Not only university structural aspects help students persist in their path to their four-year degree; self-advocacy is also a key aspect that helps Latina/o students succeed academically. Latina/o students find strategies to succeed in college, such as actively looking out for help from different people (e.g., TAs, academic advisors, peer mentors, and faculty) and taking advantage of academic university resources. The findings regarding self-advocacy and motivation confirms Giddens’ theory that “individuals play an active role in shaping social life” (Seidman, 2008, p.139). Latina/o students are in fact “knowledgeable, reflexive, and skillful” (Seidman, 2008, p.139) individuals who use their ability to reflect about their college life conditions in order to develop strategies that help them succeed in a social environment where they have been exposed to overt and covert racially charged comments. For example, a Latino student who recognized the negative effects that the lack of representation of Latina/o has on Latina/o students helped to create a residential area for Latina/o students. In this way, this student is changing university structures so that the university becomes more appealing and a better place for Latina/o students.

Latina/o students use their agency (ability to make choices) to successfully navigate an environment where they have to overcome several challenges, such as the lack of Latina/o representation on campus. These students use their agency to challenge negative messages that they received in high school about college life and defy stereotypes that their white peers have about Latinas/os. For example, even though high school teachers have said to students that college professors are not approachable, Latina/o students do engage with faculty, even when these interactions can be
intimidating, because they know that making connections with faculty is an important step toward getting access to extra academic support, research opportunities, internships, and letters of recommendation. In addition, Latina/o students are their own advocates because when they need help and they do not receive it from the traditional sources (e.g. faculty, academic advisors), they find other ways to obtain help or information. For example, Latina/o students who find their academic advisors unhelpful look for information on the university website.

Further, Latina/o students have a strong motivation to succeed that helps them navigate an environment where they are an ethnic minority. They face a campus climate charged with interpersonal and institutional microaggression such as being singled out by peers and faculty, and challenging relationships with their white peers (including stereotyping and insensitive and insulting racial remarks). They also face institutional microaggressions such as the lack of representation of Latina/o on campus and the lack of resources for Latina/o-based organizations on campus. Even though this campus climate makes Latina/o students feel disregarded, they use their agency to limit the effect that these structural constraints have on their educational success. For example, Latina/o students instead of internalizing their white peers’ insults or insensitive comments focus their attention on how uneducated their peers are about other cultures and countries.

Latina/o students also use their lack of representation on campus in a positive way as a source of motivation to defy stereotypes. Instead of being upset by the lack of Latinas/os on campus, students focus on how to make the campus a better place for themselves. For example, Latina/o students who attended predominately white high schools have already learned how to infiltrate study groups comprised of white students
and use those skills to interact academically with their white peers. In the case of Latina/o students who have a hard time making connections with white peers with whom they do not share a similar ethnic or socioeconomic background, they participate in cultural organizations and create connections with college peers who belong to racial/ethnic minorities with whom they share some common interests (such as membership in a club). These connections help students reduce stress and want to stay in college. All these behaviors show that students use their agency to put in place mechanisms that help them succeed in college despite the challenges they face.

**Family Connections**

For students who consider the campus climate hostile, family connections help them to stay in college. For these students, visiting their family and neighborhood help them feel less homesick. As other scholars (e.g., Arana et al., 2011, Hernandez, 2000, Sanchez at al., 2005) have found, my study also shows that connection with family provides the motivation and emotional support that students need to succeed in college. Family is one of the main sources of motivation that students have to succeed in college. Family is a source of motivation because Latina/o students want to be role models for other relatives and show that their parents’ sacrifices were not done in vain. This is particularly important for students who are children of immigrants. Latina/o students use their community culture wealth, particularly navigational capital to hold onto hope in the face of structured inequality (Yosso, 2005, p.77). These students want to succeed not only for themselves but for their parents. As in the case of Auerbach (2006), I found that Latina/o students’ parents shared with their children verbal encouragement, advice, and “cautionary tales” about having a college degree to have a better life than them.
What is Hindering Latina/o Students Progress to their Bachelor’s Degree

Sub-question #2: What are the personal and institutional factors that are hindering students’ progress to the bachelor’s degree? How and why are these factors hindering their progress?

Several factors hinder the educational success of Latina/o students. These main factors are financial needs, lack of representation of Latinas/os on campus, inadequate academic support, having difficulties learning about university resources, and unhelpful faculty, academic advisors, and peer mentors. Latina/o students’ lack of organization and weak networking skills also negatively affect their educational success.

**Lack of Representation of Latinas/os on campus**

As previous studies (e.g., Padilla at al., 1997, Yosso et. al., 2009) show, I found that the lack of a critical mass of Latina/o students on campus affects Latina/o students because it is hard for them to establish academic and social connections with peers, which in turn, affects their overall experience in the university. In addition, the lack of recognition of the Latina/o culture on campus is a constant reminder that Latino/o students are the “other.” Being the only (or one of the few) Latinas/os in the classroom affects students because they are singled out by faculty and peers. In some instances, they are asked by faculty members to represent the entire Latina/o community by sharing their personal thoughts on a given topic. Being singled out in this way by faculty members bothers Latina/o students because the Latina/o community is a diverse one composed of people with different opinions who share a similar culture; therefore, it is not possible to speak out for an entire community without perpetuating the idea that Latina/os are a homogenous group. Unfortunately the university, instead of being intentional about
putting in place practices and programs that could help to reduce the effects that the lack of representation has on Latina/o college students, does not provide enough financial resources to culturally-based organizations which provide critical support to Latina/o students.

Beside experiencing institutional microaggressions (e.g., lack of a critical mass of Latina/o on campus), Latina/o students experience interpersonal microaggressions. Latina/o students’ interactions with white peers include stereotypes about Latinas/os and insensitive or ignorant comments toward Latina/o students. Current literature explains that interpersonal microaggressions create self-doubt and stress in Latina/s students (Yosso et al., 2009); however, in general, the participants in this study explain that these interactions are bothersome but do not affect their academic success. This finding has an important caveat. The population of these studies is comprised of students who are succeeding in their progress toward their four-year degrees because they have successful transferred from another higher education institution or are at least in their second semester at NRU.

Latina/o students, in this study, place the blame of the tense racial interactions on their white peers who are described as uneducated and not having knowledge about other cultures. Latina/o students, particularly those who are children of immigrants, are focused on obtaining their four-year degrees and will not be derailed by their white peers’ comments. Latina/o students use their navigational capital to maneuver the college campus climate successfully and reduce the negative consequences due to the challenges that they face. However, it is important to highlight that for a few students, the lack of representation of Latinas/os on campus and peers’ comments make them feel like they do
not belong on campus. These students find support in their families and their culture to stay on their paths to their four-year degrees.

Another structural factor that affects the college experience of Latina/o students is the university’s lack of a mechanism to connect Latina/o students with other students of color. This oversight is particularly worrisome because it is hard for Latina/o students to meet each other on campus. These connections are critical for Latina/o students because it is easier for them to connect with people with whom they share a cultural background. In addition, the university is ignoring a human resource that helps students deal with the lack of representation of Latinas/os on campus: Latina/o service/maintenance staff. For Latina/o students, it is uplifting to interact with people on campus who speak Spanish because they find an immediate connection with them. By ignoring the contribution of Spanish speaking staff, the university is devaluing the role of their staff have as retention agents. These findings reinforce Bernal’s (2002) argument that administrators devalue the contributions of people of color in educational settings and Tierney’s (1992) thoughts that higher education institutions are unable of operate in a multicultural world.

**Inadequate Academic Support**

Other factors that hinder Latina/o students’ academic success are having unhelpful faculty, academic advisors, and peer advisors. Academic advisors and peer advisors who are not knowledgeable, or who are unavailable or impersonal, limit the knowledge that students have about their academic requirements and paths to graduation. Faculty who are not welcoming during office hours or who are not good at explaining course material also affect Latina/o college students’ academic experiences. In these
cases, Latina/o students reach out to TAs or peers to better understand the course material.

Even though academic support services are helpful to Latina/o students, their positive effects are limited because some supplementary instruction sessions do not match the material covered in class, or the quality of the tutors vary which affects how helpful the sessions are. The same variation of quality happens with other university services. In addition, quality of services also depends on the majors; for example, some majors have very good career services while others do not.

**Dissemination of Information about College Resources**

Not only would improving academic and career services help Latina/o students, but the university also needs to create better mechanisms for publicizing these services. It is hard for Latina/o students to learn about the abundant resources and opportunities on campus; therefore, it is critical for the university to be able to effectively connect students to services and college life opportunities (e.g., social clubs, sports, events, cultural and academic organizations). This effort is particularly important for first-year students whose parents’ have been not exposed previously to college life and, therefore, cannot provide guidance about this topic. For example, the university needs to update their student-run organization website and provide more information about expectations for students’ participation in these clubs (e.g., clarify that students can participate as much or as little as they want and that they can attend some social clubs’ events even if they do not belong to the club).
Financial Needs

Limited financial aid is one of the factors that has consequences in several areas of Latina/o college life. As the current literature (e.g. Hernandez, 2000; Joo et al., 2009; Salas et al., 2014) has found, my study shows that Latina/o students who do not have enough financial aid have to work long hours which reduces the time these students can dedicate to studying and participating in co-curricular activities. Having limited free time also affects students’ social lives because they do not have much time to socialize or relax. In addition, students who do not have enough financial resources decide to change their major or drop one of their double majors in order to graduate earlier.

Latina/o Students’ Organization and Networking Skills

Beyond the university structural issues affecting Latina/o students, students’ own dispositions and actions also affect their education. As in previous studies (e.g. Chaing et al., 2004; Hurtado et al., 1996), I found that Latina/o students acknowledge that they need better organizational and time management skills. In addition, Latina/o students need to develop better networking skills. Sometimes it can be difficult for Latina/o students to establish relationships with faculty members which negatively affects their chances of participating in research, assistantship, and obtaining letter of recommendations. Students recognize that they need to get out of their comfort zones to network so that they can take advantage of college academic opportunities, which in turn, will help them in their future professional careers. In addition, some students need to learn to reach out when they need help and look for information about university resources.
Differences by Gender

Sub-question #3: What types of differences exist between Latina and Latino students?

There is very little knowledge in the current literature about differences in college experiences by gender among Latina/o college students. I found that there are several gender differences regarding what helps or hinders the academic success of Latina/o students. These differences exist in both social and academic aspects of college life. The following findings have an important caveat. The findings in this study can be shaped by gendered experiences of Latina and Latino students in college, but also by the setting of the study. In other words, the findings in this section are a representation of gender differences of Latina/o on campus, but specifically as reflected through only having Latinas or Latinos in the focus groups.

In the academic aspects, academic support services were mentioned in the focus groups by Latina students earlier, more often, and as being more helpful than for Latino students. On the other hand, the need to improve academic performance was only mentioned by Latino students.

Research opportunities is another area where gender differences exist. Latino students find it harder than Latina students to get research opportunities due to the lack of connections with faculty members. On the other hand, Latina students more often than Latino students mentioned that they were unaware of research opportunities. Regarding interactions with faculty and academic advisors, Latina students spent more time during the focus groups talking about them than Latino students did. But, Latina students more often had negative interactions with their academic advisers than Latino students did.
While Latina students spent more time during the focus groups talking about academic resources that are helping or hindering their progress, Latino students spent more time talking about social aspects. Latino students spent more time during the focus group than Latina students talking about the lack of representation of Latinas/os on campus. Latino students mentioned earlier in the focus groups and more often how the lack of representation affects them (e.g., how it is hard for them to be part of study groups).

Regarding their transition to college, Latino students have a hard time becoming more independent and balancing their academic and social lives. These challenges were mentioned less frequently by Latina students. Finally, Latina students communicate more frequently with their families than Latino students who, in general, describe that they tend to disappear from their family while they are in college.

**Differences by Transfer Status**

**Sub-question #4: What type of differences exist between Latina/o students who transfer from a community college and Latina/o students who enter the institution as freshmen?**

There is extremely limited knowledge about the college experiences of Latina/o transfer students. I found that there are few differences between Latina/o native and Latina/o transfer students regarding the topics addressed in this study. The differences are primarily at the structural level (e.g., a poor-quality orientation, living arrangement on campus for transfer). In general, Latina/o transfer students use academic resources less often and are more critical about them than non-transfer students. Latina/o transfer students, particularly those who are Spring transfers, know less about the university
resources on campus when compared to their peers. In addition, Latina/o transfer students mention their academic advisors less often and are more negative about interactions with advisors than their peers.

For Latina/o transfer students, particularly for Spring transfers, it is harder to develop connections with their peers than it is for non-transfer students. One aspect of the university that makes it even harder for transfer students to develop connections with peers and to learn about the university’s resources is that their residential dorms are located far from the center of the campus (where the social and academic activities happen). Transfer students live in these dorms with other transfer students who, like them, know little about university’s resources and opportunities; therefore, it is hard to get inside knowledge about the institution.

**Recommendations**

Latina/o students bring with them to college resources that help them persist academically, such as a strong motivation to obtain their four-year degree and self-advocacy skills. At the same time, PWIs also play a role in the retention of Latina/o students by having accessible faculty and staff, effective academic resources, and a variety of opportunities for students to get involved, such as student-run clubs, and cultural organizations/centers. These findings provide guidelines for institutional change to improve the experiences of Latina/o college students in PWI. However, I advocate that each institution first learns about their unique context, including who their Latina/o students are (e.g. what proportion are children of immigrants), their racial campus climate, and the major challenges their Latina/o students face (e.g., financial issues, connections with faculty, and relationship with peers) before considering a Latina/o
students’ retention plan for their institution. It is important to note that the finding of this study represent the experiences of Latina/o students in a PWI located in a rural area in the state of Massachusetts. Therefore, the findings should be considered as part of the context of the results. Future research about the college experiences in the state of Massachusetts (and the Northeast U.S region) is needed to further explore if the college experiences of Latina/o college differ by geographical region.

My main areas of recommendations are how to deal with the lack of representation of Latina/o students on campus; how to improve the connections that Latina/o students have with faculty and staff; how to increase the connections between the university and the families of Latina/o students; and how to improve the effectiveness of academic and social resources on campus.

How to Deal with the Lack of Representation of Latinas/os on Campus?

One of the major structural issues that Latina/o students have to overcome in a PWI is the lack of a critical mass of Latinas/os on campus. If administrators in PWIs want to improve the college experiences of Latina/o students, they have to first recognize that the lack of representation of Latinas/os on campus presents a challenge for these students. Then, they can establish programs that help students overcome those challenges. In other words, administrators need to be transparent about this issue and intentionally take actions to provide special programming that aims to reduce the consequences of the lack of representation of Latina/o on campus.

The first step toward dealing with the lack of representation of Latina/o students is to show that the administration embraces cultural diversity on campus. One way to show that diverse cultures are valued on campus is to recruit Latina/o students, faculty,
and staff. Having faculty and staff from diverse cultures will provide role models for Latina/o students which will help them to "identify with someone on the campus … who had shared similar experiences, either academic or personal, and had succeeded" (Suarez, 2003, p. 113). As stated by Hagedorn, Chi, Cepeda and McLain (2007), “as the number of Latina/o students and faculty on campus increase to a critical mass, academic success increases as well” (p.89). This type of diversity has a positive effect on Latina/o students because it sends a "message of inclusivity" (Oseguera, et al., 2009, p.37), meaning that the administration values what Latinas/os bring to the campus community. This change in the college personnel and the creation of programs that address the unique needs of Latina/o students show students that the institution has embraced diversity as a "central value of their educational enterprise" (Hurtado, et al., 1998, p.282).

One of the programs that can be put in place to help Latina/o students is a first-year seminar that targets Latina/o students. In a large PWI it is hard for Latina/o students to connect with each other. Students want to develop these connections because it is easier for them to relate to peers with whom they share a common background. However, Latina/o students have limited time to socialize due to the time that they spend with their academic work, their job for pay, and their families. Therefore, a first-year seminar for Latina/o students can address this issue as well as provide information about college life and successful academic behavior (e.g. use of academic resources, time management). It is important that the recruitment for this first-year seminar acknowledges that the university is actively involved in a recruitment process of Latina/o students, staff, and faculty, but that structural changes take time; therefore, the university is offering this class to help Latina/o students connect with each other. In this class students will be
encouraged to share how they are overcoming college life challenges and provide information about institutional, academic, and social resources.

The first-year seminar could also explore the topic of ethnic identity development. It can be particularly challenging to transition to a PWI for Latina/o students who attended highly segregated high schools (with a large percentage of minority students). For these students college may present the first time that they have to confront stereotypes about Latinos (Torres & Hernandez, 2007); therefore, the view that they have about themselves may be different from how their white peers see them. Latina/o students who attended highly segregated high schools have the extra challenge of recognizing and making meaning of racism, as well as learning how to react to racist encounters (Torres & Hernandez, 2007, p.558). While dealing with the traditional challenges of college, Latina/o students will have to resolve the conflict generated by being exposed to white peers’ stereotypes and prejudice about Latina/o students. On the other hand, Latina/o students who attended PW high schools can help their peers by sharing the skills they already developed, such as how to infiltrate study groups. The focus of the seminar should be on showing students how being multicultural is an asset that would help them succeed not only in college but in their life after college (e.g., the importance of having people skills in the current job market.)

As mentioned before, it is easier for Latina/o students to make connections with peers with whom they shared a common background. However, the lack of a mass of Latina/o on campus makes it hard for Latina/o students to connect with each other. Therefore, another effort that the institution can take is to provide an email-listing of Latina/o students. Latina/o students can voluntarily sign up to be part of this list. This list
would help cultural-based university centers and student run organizations share information about their activities. It is important that this effort be framed acknowledging the structural issue of the lack of representation of Latina/o on campus and as a practice that intend to reduce the consequences of this structural issue.

Culturally-based centers and student-run clubs are an important support for the success of Latina/o students. In these organizations, Latina/o students find a place where they can connect with their Latina/o roots, role models, and other minority students. It is essential that leaders in these organizations recognize that the Latina/o culture is a heterogenous one, so that they can create spaces that are welcoming to everyone who identifies as a Latina/o, and not only Latina/o students who fit a specific mold (e.g., welcoming people with different Spanish language skills). The university administrators should provide financial support for these campus organizations. This is another way in which the institution can show they value the assets that different cultures bring to campus. The administration should be intentional in not only providing money to these organizations but also in making sure that all students’ cultures are represented in campus events, food, and physical spaces.

**Connections with Faculty and Other Staff Members**

In the case of PWIs, outreach programs to diversify their student bodies take time to accomplish their goals. Meanwhile, faculty and staff in PWIs can become retention agents for Latina/o students by intentionally creating opportunities to connect with Latina/o students to guide them to successfully navigate college life. Therefore, PWI administrators need to put in place policies that show that the university values the work that faculty and staff do to connect with, guide, and mentor Latina/o students. These
policies can be different types of incentives, training, and programming that create instances where faculty and staff can connect with Latina/o students.

Students and academic affairs practitioners have a key role in the implementation of policies that aim to help faculty connect with students. These practitioners could organize cultural events and informal meals in which faculty are invited to mingle with Latina/o students (Nuñez, 2011). In addition, these informal gatherings should help students learn about academic opportunities such as internships and research opportunities. These connections with faculty are key for Latina/o students because they are highly motivated by the prospect of getting a job.

Practitioners could also provide training to staff and faculty about how to better serve their Latino/a students (e.g., connect students with academic and social campus resources). The training should include knowledge about how to help students enhance their self-efficacy (Torres et al., 2006) and how faculty and staff can recognize subtle instances of racism in and out of the classroom to help students to make meaning of these situations (Torres & Hernandez, 2010). For example, they need to learn about how stereotypes and insensitive comments affect Latino/a students, as well as the fact that they cannot expect a single student to be the representative of an entire culture/community. College leaders have to financially support these activities and trainings, and at the same time, they need to introduce changes to the reward structure to include these type of interactions (Hurtado et al., 1998). In summary, college leaders have to recognize the important role that these connections between faculty/staff members and Latina/o students have in the success of these students.
Interestingly, PWIs are neglecting to recognize staff who play a key role as retention agents: Latina/o staff in service units. Latina/o staff create connections with Latina/o students through their common cultural background and language. These staff members provide a sense of being at home for Latina/o students who, in general, do not feel represented on campus. Therefore, these staff members should be recognized for the important role they play in improving the college experience of Latina/o students in a PWI.

**Financial Aid**

Financial aid plays a critical role in the success of Latina/o college students. Having unmet financial needs affects Latina/o students’ academic success because they need to work long hours to be able to afford college. Therefore, financial aid staff should be equipped to reach out to Latina/o students and explain financial aid information to them in an effective and timely manner (Swail, Redd, and Perna, 2003). Financial aid staff should be knowledgeable about scholarships, loans, and other types of financial aid that target Latina/o students.

There should be an institutional effort to provide job opportunities for Latina/o students that connect them with the Latina/o community. These types of jobs have two main goals: to provide financial help to Latina/o students while they do something meaningful to them and, at the same time, to help the university recruit Latina/o students. The institution should also explore if there are academic practices that interfere with working students’ activities, such as having exams out of regular class hours (hours that students may have already allocated for a job).
Connection with Family

Many Latina/o students are the first in their families to attend college in the United States. Therefore, Latina/o students’ families do not necessarily understand college procedures and expectations (Torres, 2006; Zalaquett, 2006). Family members can better support these students if they are aware of college academic demands and expectations. The findings of this study (e.g., Latina/o students have a support system in their family) suggest that college administrators can support Latina/o students’ success by creating connections between family members and the institution.

Latina/o students would benefit from having formal structures that connect their families with their college. This connection would not only support students by helping their families to understand college expectations, but would also provide an inclusive environment where Latina/o culture is welcomed (Tierney, 2000). An orientation where college expectations and college demands are explained to family members would be particularly helpful to first-generation Latina/o students. To successfully engage these students and their families, these orientations should be culturally responsive, reflecting the cultural traditions, beliefs, and values of the Latina/o community (Koss-Chioino & Vargas, Hobbs, as cited in Hobbs, 2004, para. 2). Therefore, these orientations should be held in both English and Spanish because the use of the Spanish language shows respect for the Latina/o community, even for those who are fluent in both languages (Hobbs, 2004).

This orientation should be carried out as soon as students are accepted and should include information about financial aid, grants, scholarships, college services, academic advising and college life (Oseguera et al., 2009; Zalaquett, 2006). In addition, the
orientations should be offered at diverse times so families would have different options to choose from. Extra services that could be provided during the orientations are childcare and food for young children in the family (Atiles, & Bohon, 2005). These services have a double purpose: to provide supervision for these children, but also to engage these children early on in college culture.

**Effective University Academic and Social Resources**

Latina/o students rely on academic support services that help them better understand course material. The administration should support these services and provide continued assessment of them to make sure that they are being efficient. The most efficient academic support services for Latina/o students are supplementary instruction and tutoring, particularly those sections that are in good alignment with the course material. Office hours are also helpful for the academic success of Latina/o students. Therefore, faculty should be welcoming and helpful during those sections. Academic advisors also play an important role in the success of Latina/o students. For Latina/o students, it is more helpful to have an advising system where they have one advisor instead of visiting different people every time. This system is better for Latina/o students because they prefer to ask advice from people with whom they already have a relationship instead of needing to repeat their story every time they have an appointment.

All the recommendations mentioned until now are adequate for both native and transfer Latina/o students. There is one recommendation that is key for transfer students specifically: having a well-thought-out transfer student orientation. In this orientation, Latina/o transfer students should learn about the university academic services, financial aid processes and timelines, student-run clubs and organizations, and other university
resources. During the orientation, they should also be asked to meet faculty members from their departments. In this way, these students can learn about services and connect with faculty members before the academic year starts. Another recommendation that targets transfer students is to have a residential area for them that is strategically selected, so that they have access to non-transfer peers that can provide campus general information to them.

However, not even the best quality services are effective if students do not know about them or do not know how to engage with them. Therefore, it is critical that the university find ways to effectively disseminate information about these services (e.g., academic support services, student-run organizations, administrative processes). Administrators should support the efforts to implement an effective online system and practices to share information about resources available on campus. For example, information about all these resources should be shared in the first-year seminar and transfer orientation, and there should be an up-to-date and user-friendly online service for students to learn about student-run organizations and academic resources.

**Future Research**

This study contributes to the literature about the college experiences of Latina/o students by disaggregating that population to focus on a subgroup, the Latina/o students in a PWI institution in the Northeast. I advocate studying within group differences to have a better understanding of how to improve the support provided to all students. Today, higher education institutions have a more diverse student body than ever before; therefore, it is imperative to college administrators, staff, and faculty to learn how to
better serve students who have been historically underrepresented in colleges and universities.

**Conceptual Framework Revisions**

Even though my conceptual framework provided me with adequate lenses to explore and analyze the experiences of Latina/o college students in a PWI, some additions can be made to deeper explore areas that emerged during the focus groups (see figure 2).

**Figure 2: Conceptual Framework with Revisions**

**Contextual Aspects:**

- Racial Campus Climate
- Latina Critical Theory
- Community Cultural Wealth
- Additional lenses: *Psychological aspects of being an immigrant (Funds of Knowledge)*
- *Kuh’s theory of student engagement*
- *High School racial composition & expectations about the racial composition of the university student body*

**Empirical Studies, factors enabling or hindering educational success:**
- Financial Aid
- Interaction with faculty and staff
- Family Interactions
- Academic Performance

My conceptual framework included as a main guiding lens Giddens’ (1984) theory of Structuration. By using this theory, I learned about both institutional and students’ aspects that help or hinder Latina/o college students’ educational success. This
theory was particularly helpful in providing the framework necessary to understand that Latina/o students do not conform to their surroundings because they try to shape it to better serve them. In this way Latina/o students use their power to improve their college experience and succeed academically in environments that present several challenges.

Another area of my conceptual framework, Yosso’s (2005) community cultural wealth concept, related to this idea of students using their agency and different types of capitals (e.g., navigational, aspirational) to improve their college experiences because these concepts highlights the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that students developed in their family and communities that help them to shape their surrounding and success in college (e.g. tales about their parents sacrifices, motivation to defy stereotypes).

The retention and persistence empirical studies, including those about campus racial climate, provided critical areas to be explored during the focus groups and to later analyze the data. Finally, Latina Critical Theory (Bernal, 2002; Martinez-Alemán, 2003) provided me with a lens that guided the design of this research (because of these theories I decided to separate my focus group by gender and transfer status) by stressing the importance of the interlock between social identities and acknowledging educational structures can either enable or constrain the learning experiences of students (Varela et al., 2015).

Future research could use a similar conceptual framework as my study, but I recommend including few new aspects to it. One of the areas that it would benefit by adding more nuance into it, is Tinto’s (1975) concepts of social and academic integration. These aspects of Tinto’s theory could be supplemented by including Kuh’s concept of engagement: “how the institution deploys its resources and organizes the curriculum,
other learning opportunities, and support services to induce students to participate in activities that lead to the experiences and desired outcomes such as persistence, satisfaction, learning, and graduation” (Kuh, 2001 in Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges & Hayek, 2007, p.44).

In the case of Latina/o college students, these three concepts, social and academic integration as well as engagement, should be understood as needing to fulfill three main roles. First, engagement and integration activities should help student to find life balance, which in turn reduces stress. Second these activities should help students to create a smaller community within their PW large campus with people with whom students share some common interests or background. Third, these activities should help students to connect their studies with their future careers.

Another area that needs revision is the concept of campus racial climate. The psychological dimension can be expanded by adding students’ expectations about their college racial campus climate. Students’ expectations about the college racial climate are shaped by the students’ high schools’ racial/ethnic composition and the students’ previous knowledge about their college. In future studies, the effect of a dissonance between racial campus climate expectations and reality should be included. For example, students who expected that their college was going to be almost all comprised of White students did not expect the Latina/o culture represented on campus. In the case of students who expected a more diverse campus racial/ethnic composition had a more difficult adaptation process than their peers who expected a highly white campus. In addition, students who came from high schools that were predominately white have an
easier transition into their predominately white university than their peers who attended a more racially/ethnically diverse high school.

Finally, another area that should be added to my conceptual framework is theories that address the psychological effects of being a child of immigrant or a first-generation immigrant, such as studying motivation and self-determination through the lenses of being an immigrant. Current research suggests that immigrant college students “tend to resist stereotypes in part due to the primacy of their immigrant identities and their connectedness to the opportunity structure of mainstream society” (Owens & Lynch, 2012, p.303). More research about the interlock between ethnicity and immigrant generation is needed (Owens & Lynch, 2012). Another concept that can be added in this regard is “funds of knowledge” (Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992, p.313) which supplement Yosso’s (2005) concepts of community cultural wealth by stressing the role of immigrant communities in developing “strategic and cultural resources” (Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992, p.313) that student develop in their immigrants household or communities that helps them to succeed in college but are overlooked by the college administrators, staff, and faculty.

**Areas of Exploration for Future Research**

Because academic support services play a key role in the success of Latina/o college students, future research should focus on assessing the effectiveness of those services- particularly, the characteristics of effective academic support services. There is also a need for more studies that focus on the role of faculty and staff as “retention agents,” people who make “a significant impact on students’ decision to stay or leave college” (Schreiner et al., 2011, p.336) of Latina/o college students. These studies should
ask students to describe the persons who have been helping them succeed in college, including faculty, academic advisors, administrative personnel, student workers, and service staff.

In addition, future studies should focus on the role that sororities/fraternities, student-run organizations, and university cultural centers have in the success of Latina/o students. Another area that should be further explored is the experience of Latina/o students who are immigrants (or first-generation immigrants) and how their experiences are similar or different from Latina/o students who are first-generation college students but are not children of immigrants.

The findings of this study provide evidence that the experience of Latina/o college students are influenced by the intersectionality of their identities (gender and transfer status); therefore, future research should address this issue. For example, studies that further explore the experiences of Latina/o students by gender and transfer status are needed. In addition, the role of race in the college experiences of Latina/o students should be further explored because as the results of this study show, Latina/o students who are identified as white by their white peers, in general, have better academic and social relationships with their white peers.

The use of a conceptual framework that included structure and agency brought to light the need for studies that focus on the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that these students bring to college that help them succeed in college (e.g. self-determination, aspirational and navigational capitals, self-advocacy). Future studies that focus on these types of skills, knowledge and attitudes will enhance the knowledge of practitioners to
design programming that can help Latina/o students develop or enhance these types of skills, knowledge and attitudes.

From a methodological point of view, there is a need to develop surveys that are designed for Latina/o college students. Scholars should use the current knowledge available about Latina/o college students to develop these surveys. These surveys should be used as a data collection tool for quantitative studies with a large number of participants.

Studies that focus on Latina/o students who are successfully navigating the higher education system brings forward the voices of those generally excluded from studies about minority students: those who succeed. A large number of studies focus on those who are not succeeding and trying to understand the reason for their failure. As Harper (2012) observes in his study about successful Black students, the:

most surprising and most disappointing [finding in his study was] that nearly every student interviewed said it was the first time someone had sat him down to ask how he successfully navigated his way to and through higher education, what compelled him to be engaged in student organizations and college classrooms, and what he learned that could help improve achievement and engagement among Black male collegians (p.15).

In conclusion, the findings of this exploratory, qualitative study help to better understand the college experiences of Latina/o students in PWIs in the state of Massachusetts. Overall, the participants in this study perceive their educational experience at NRU as challenging but necessary to achieve their goals. They use their own competencies (knowledge, skills, and attitudes) and internal motivation to
successfully navigate college life. They use a variety of university resources and personnel to overcome difficulties. These students have to deal with the lack of representation of Latinas/os on campus and financial constraints. The university can play a critical role in helping these students succeed by recognizing and addressing the structural barriers that are challenging the academic progress of these students.
APPENDIX A

FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Introduction

Welcome and thanks everyone

Explain the purpose of the study: I am interested in learning about your experiences as an undergraduate here at NRU. What is helping you in your educational progress and what is making your success difficult.

Go over consent form (major aspects such as: confidentiality is expected, but I cannot guarantee it)

Go over focus group expectations (e.g. we can disagree with each other, each of us has unique experiences, you can leave in any moment and you can skip all the questions that you want. You can contact me later if you don’t want to share something here but you think is important for my study)

Brief introduction of everyone in the room

Warm up activity:

Introduction: I would like to start by asking you to focus on the entirety of your experience at NRU so far and how these experiences have positively and negatively affected your educational progress. What has been particularly helpful for your success at NRU? What challenges have you faced here at NRU?

Questions:

Ask them to share one of their answers and continue going around the table, until we have covered all the participants’ answers.

For each example provided by the participants I will ask:

To what extent (example) has affected your experience at NRU?

I will ask about the following aspects if they are not mentioned by the students.

1. To what extent college expenses have affected your experience as an undergraduate student?
   Do you work for pay? How many hours? On or off campus? Do you have financial aid?
   Do you have loans? [maybe this can be in the same paper sheet that the initial exercise.]
2. To what extent your interaction with faculty members or staff have affected/influenced your experience as an undergraduate student?
   - How would you describe your relationships with your professors? Do you attend office hours or email them? Please describe the interactions that you have had with your professors?
   - Have you used any of the academic services on campus? How would you describe those interactions?
   - Have you used any other university services, how would you describe those interactions?

3. To what extent your interaction with your peers have affected/influenced your experience as an undergraduate student?

4. To what extent your relationship with your family has affected/influenced your experience as an undergraduate student?
   - How would you describe the connections between your family and your studies? (What type of help do you receive? How do you have to help your family?)
   - How would you describe the connections between NRU and your family backgrounds?

5. How would you describe the social environment at NRU?
   - Do you feel connected to particular groups inside NRU?
   - How socially connected do you feel to NRU?

6. How would you describe the academic environment at NRU?
   - How would you describe your participation in your classes?
   - To what extent are your contributions in class valued by your peers and professors?
   - How challenging have been your academic work at NRU? (what has helped you, and what are the challenges)
   - To what extent do you feel valued as a student at NRU Amherst? (can you provide examples to help us to better understand your respond)
   - Have you had classes based on group work, or group assignments? How would you describe your academic group work at NRU?
   - How would you describe the racial climate at NRU? Is you culture represented on campus? If, yes, how is your culture represented on campus? How this representation or lack of representation affects/influence you.
Please think about your entirety educational experience as an undergraduate student at NRU and how these experiences have positively and negatively affected your educational progress toward your four-year degree. What has been particularly helpful for your success? What challenges have you faced?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Write down 3 to 5 aspects of NRU that have helped you to succeed.</th>
<th>Write down 3 to 5 things that you have done that are helping you to succeed.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Write down 3 to 5 aspects of NRU that have, in some way, hindered your educational success.</td>
<td>Write down 3 to 5 things that you could be doing better or you are not doing that would help you to succeed.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Have you taken educational loans to help you pay for education here at NRU?____________________
Do you have financial aid from NRU? _______________________________
Do you work? _____________ How many hours per week? _________________
APPENDIX C

EMAIL INVITATION AND CONSENT FORM

Subject - Participate in study - Latina/o colleges experiences

Dear [student name],

I am a Latina doctoral student in the School of Education, here at NRU. I write to you to invite you to participate in my study about Latina/o college students' experiences. This study is a requirement to complete my Ph. D. in education. Your participation will consist on attending to an hour-and-half focus group at the library. If you decide to participate in my study please send me an email to mremaly@acad.umass.edu or text me to 413-559-8468. Please include in your email or text the best time for you to participate in the focus group. I will write back to you with the details of the focus groups location and time.

I have attached a consent form that provides you with more information about my study, so you can take an informed decision about your participation in my research.

I highly appreciate your willingness to participate in my study and help me to learn more about the college experiences of Latina/o colleges students. As a token of my appreciation, you will receive 15 dollars for your participation in the focus group.

Thank you in advance and I wish you a successful semester,

María Alicia Remaly
Consent Form for Participation in a Research Study - University of Massachusetts Amherst

Researcher(s): María Alicia Remaly
Study Title: Latina/o College Experiences at a Predominately White Research Institution

This form is called a Consent Form. This consent form will provide you information about my study so you can make an informed decision about participating in this research.

I am inviting you to participate in my research study about the experiences of Latina/o college students. I am carrying out this study as a requirement for my Ph.D in Education. I am doctoral student, who identifies as Latina, at the University of Massachusetts Amherst in the College of Education. As the researcher, I am asking you to participate in my study to help me to better understand the college experiences of Latino/a students. You are being selected to participate in this study because you are in the registrar’s list of current students who identified as Latina/o. To participate in this study you have to identify as a Latina/o college student and be older than 18 years old.

The purpose of this research study is to learn about the college experiences of Latina/o college students as they relate to these students’ educational progress toward their four-year degree.

If you agree to take part in this study, your participation will consist of attending an hour-and-half focus group at the library on March or beginning of April. You may also be asked to participate in a follow-up interview that should last one-hour or less. If you decide to participate in my study please send me an email at mremaly@acad.umass.edu or text me (or call me) at 413-559-8468. I will write back to you with a couple of possible days and time for the focus group and the focus group’s exact location.

As mentioned above, you will be asked to participate in a focus group (group interview). The focus group will start by going over this consent form. Then, the topics that I will explore with you include discussing aspects that have helped you to succeed at UMass and factors that are hindering your educational progress. The focus group will be comprised of only Latina students or Latino students.

You may also be invited to participate in a follow-up individual interview that should last not more than an hour. Only one or two focus group participants will be selected to participate in the follow-up interviews. Participants for the follow-up interview will be selected to better understand the topic discussed during the focus group depending on their participation level and experiences shared during the focus groups. If you are selected, I will contact you within two weeks from the focus group to schedule the interview. Your participation in both the focus group and the follow-up interview are voluntary and you may skip any question you feel uncomfortable answering.

You may not directly benefit from this research; however, your participation in the focus group may help you to develop connections with other Latina or Latino students including myself.

I believe there are only minimal possible risks associated with this research study. I foresee the following possible inconvenient:
- The time it takes to participate in the study.
- It is possible that participants might feel some level of discomfort due to the topics discussed in the focus group.

However, the participants always have the right to not answer any or all the questions during the focus group.
- The participants may have some minor discomfort because they may know other participants and may do not want to share their experiences in front of a particular individuals. However, as mentioned above, the participants will be have the right to not answer questions and they can leave at any moment.
- Breach of confidentiality is possible due to the nature of the focus group (please see next paragraph).
The following procedures will be used to protect the confidentiality of your study records. With your permission, I will audio record the focus group for accurate quotations and data analysis; the audio file will be erased at the end of the study (in no more than three years). The audio file will be transcribed. As the audio file, the transcription documents will be kept in a secure account, password protected. You should understand that I will use direct quotes from the focus groups but I will not use your name in any part of my study. I also want you to be aware that I plan on using the findings of this study to write a paper that I will send to a conference and hopefully have it published in a scientific journal. I will protect both your identity and that of your university by giving you both pseudonyms. You can chose your own pseudonym during the focus group.

Please be advised that although I will take every precaution to maintain confidentiality of the data, the nature of focus groups prevent the researchers from guaranteeing confidentiality. The researchers would like to remind participants to respect the privacy of your fellow participants and not repeat what is said in the focus group to others.

I highly appreciate your willingness to give your time to this project. As a token of my appreciation, you will receive 15 dollars for your participation in the focus group. In the case that you are selected for the follow-up interview and you agree to it, I will provide refreshments and a light snack.

I will be happy to answer any question you have about this study. If you have further questions about this project or if you have a research-related problem, please feel free to contact me by email to mremaly@acad.umass.edu or calling me (or texting) 413-559-8468. You can also contact my professors who are supervising my study: Joe Berger at jberger@educ.umass.edu or Ryan Wells at rswells@educ.umass.edu or to my department Educational Policy, Research, & Administration (EPRA) at 413-5453610. If you have any questions concerning your rights as a research subject, you may contact the University of Massachusetts Amherst Human Research Protection Office (HRPO) at (413) 545-3428 or humansubjects@ora.umass.edu

I want to remind you that the participation in this research study is completely voluntary. If you agree to be in the study, but later change your mind, you may drop out at any time without negative consequences.

When signing this form I am agreeing to voluntarily enter this study. I have had a chance to read this consent form, and it was explained to me in a language which I use and understand. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have received satisfactory answers. I understand that I can withdraw at any time. A copy of this signed Informed Consent Form has been given to me.

Please check and indicate consent by checking the box below, signing and dating below:

Yes, I agree to have my comments during the focus group discussion audio-recorded and transcribed (Note: If you do not agree to be recorded, you may not participate in the focus group discussion).

Yes, I agree to be contacted for a follow-up interview and have this interview audiorecorded.

My preferred method of contact is: ______________________________

_______________________ ____________________ __________
Participant Signature: Print Name: Date:

By signing below I indicate that the participant has read and, to the best of my knowledge, understands the details contained in this document and has been given a copy.

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent Print Name: Date:
APPENDIX D

FIRST ROUND OF CODING

1. University Resources

1.1 Academic Resources:
   1.1.1 Library
   1.1.2 Academic Support
   1.1.3 Peer Mentor (maybe advisors and peer mentor analyze as one code)
   1.1.4 Advisors (maybe advisors and peer mentor analyze as one code)
   1.1.5 Teaching Assistants
   1.1.6. Faculty
   1.1.7 Positive Academic Reputation
   1.1.8 Research opportunities
   1.1.9 Academic Curriculum

1.2 Infrastructure:
   1.2.1 Buildings

1.3 Mental Care

1.4 Programming
   1.4.1 Orientation
   1.4.2 Study abroad
   1.4.3 Career Services
   1.4.4 Non-academic opportunities
   1.4.5 Internships/Volunteer (building your resume)

2. Comparison between previous institution and NRU

   2.1 Previous college vs NRU
   2.2 High school and NRU (More about this in Latino Roots. City of Origin)
     2.2.1 Different resources
     2.2.2 Transition

3. Finances

   3.1 University resources that reduce participants' financial burn or family?
   3.2 Financial stress (some of this is in family)

4. Agency

   4.1 What can I do better?
     4.1.1 Better self-care
     4.1.2 Better organization skills
     4.1.3 Motivation
     4.1.4 Better Academic/Professional engagement
     4.1.5. Take advantage of the diverse University resource

   4.2 Sources of motivation

   4.3 What I am doing well?
     4.3.1 Use of resources
     4.3.2 Organization skills
     4.3.3 Self-advocacy
     4.3.4 Academics
     4.3.5 Self-care
5. NRU areas for improvement
   5.1 Improve Recognition
   5.2 Political Environment
   5.3 Administration
   5.4 Better information about resources
   5.5 Lack of Representation
   5.6 Other

6. Interaction with peers
   6.1 Residential Life/Residence hall
      6.1.1 RA
      6.1.2 Dorms
   6.2 Social Interaction
      6.2.1 Social Interaction
      6.2.1 Sense of community
      6.2.2 Whiteness
   6.3 Academic Interaction
      6.3.1 Academic interaction with peers
      6.3.2 Academic Interaction with Latino groups

7.0 Academics:
8.0 Co-curricular Activities
9.0 Commuter
10.0 Family & Latino Roots
    10.1 Family
    10.2 Latino Roots/City of origen
11. Transfer students: (Should I put her social aspects related to being transfer, maybe move everything related to transfer here)
    11.1 Credits Transfer
## APPENDIX E

### FOCUS GROUP HAND-OUT CODING RESULTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Institutional Aspects Helping Students to Succeed</strong></th>
<th>Latina</th>
<th>Latino</th>
<th>Transfer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assistance and guidance: Administrative Office</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Academic Support: University Learning Center (SI, Tutoring), office hours</td>
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<tr>
<td>Faculty: Supportive and high-quality faculty</td>
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<tr>
<td>University programs, clubs and organizations for minority students</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variety of opportunities: Diverse courses, clubs, and events</td>
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<tr>
<td>Research opportunities and internships</td>
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<tr>
<td>Academic Advising</td>
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<tr>
<td>Career services</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Helpful Teaching Assistants (TAs)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Location: Being close to home</td>
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<tr>
<td>Peer: Friends and people to study with</td>
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<tr>
<td>Being part of Greek life</td>
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<tr>
<td>Flexible curriculum</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Financial Aid and university free academic resources</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Individual Aspects Helping Students to Succeed</strong></th>
<th>Latina</th>
<th>Latino</th>
<th>Transfer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Taking advantage of the following:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Taking advantage academic services</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>b. Research opportunities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>c. clubs or other co-curricular activities</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>d. Career services</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>e. University based Latina/o organization/centers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Develop a network of friends</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reaching out to faculty, TAs, and friends for academic help</td>
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<tr>
<td>Quality time spend on academics</td>
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<tr>
<td>Time management and organization skills</td>
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<tr>
<td>Being independent &amp; proactive</td>
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<tr>
<td>Taking interesting classes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Improved healthy habits</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Networking</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Family</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
### Institutional Aspects Hindering Students to Succeed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Latina</th>
<th>Latino</th>
<th>Transfer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Issue with the academic curriculum: signing to classes, general</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>education courses too difficult, academic overload, night exams,</td>
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<tr>
<td>and transferring credits issues</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of critical mass of Latina/o on campus</td>
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<tr>
<td>Academic advising</td>
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<tr>
<td>Faculty not available or not good quality of teaching</td>
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<tr>
<td>Administration not helpful</td>
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<tr>
<td>Large size of the campus</td>
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<tr>
<td>Not enough financial aid</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dorm issues</td>
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<tr>
<td>Not enough help for transfer students</td>
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<tr>
<td>Low quality of teaching assistants</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transition to college issues</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### Individual Aspects Hindering Students to Succeed

| Need to procrastinate less and more time spend studying             |        |        |          |
| Improve time management and organizations skills                    |        |        |          |
| Getting more involve in co-curricular activities                    |        |        |          |
| Improve healthy habits                                              |        |        |          |
| More networking                                                     |        |        |          |
| Visit home less often                                               |        |        |          |
| Reach out for the following services:                              |        |        |          |
| a. Career services                                                 |        |        |          |
| b. Academic services & office hours                                 |        |        |          |
| Get research experience and internships                             |        |        |          |
| Create more connections with students of color                      |        |        |          |
REFERENCE LIST


Melguizo, T. (2009). Are community colleges an alternative path for Hispanic students to attain a Bachelor's degree? Teachers College Record, 111(1), 90-123.


Museus, S. D., Neville, K. M. (2012). Delineating the ways that key institutional agents provide racial minority students with access to social capital in college. Journal of College Student Development, 53(3), 436-452.


