COMMUNITY CULTURAL WEALTH AND THE
INSPIRATIONAL NARRATIVES OF FIRST
GENERATION MEXICAN AMERICAN
ELITE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

by
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COMMUNITY CULTURAL WEALTH AND THE INSPIRATIONAL NARRATIVES OF FIRST GENERATION MEXICAN AMERICAN ELITE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Abstract

This narrative inquiry qualitative study analyzed eleven community cultural wealth (CCW) capitals (cultural strength and assets) to determine whether they were utilized by first generation Mexican American students to thrive in their trajectories from high school to elite universities. The 11 explored capitals—academic, adaptability, aspirational, ethnic-consciousness, familial, linguistic, navigational, pluri-consciousness, resistant, social, and spiritual capital (Perez Huber, 2009; Rendon et al., 2014; Yosso, 2005)—also form the theoretical and conceptual framework for this study. For the purposes of this study, first generation students are defined as persons whose parents did not earn a bachelor’s degree or higher. As trailblazers for their families and communities, first generation students must overcome a greater number of obstacles in order to transform into role models and inspirational figures of perseverance for future generations. Elite universities are identified as the top 25 nationally ranked institutions of higher education according to the 2021 U.S. News & World Report’s National University report. This study investigated the statistically lower undergraduate enrollment of first generation Mexican American students at elite universities. Analyzing the experiences of current and former first generation Mexican American undergraduates allowed the research field to better appreciate the factors, high school programs, mentoring, counseling services, cultural
capitals, and college experiences that positively influenced elite university persistence and degree completion for this resilient group of students.

The qualitative research study made use of semi-structured interviews in order to gain a deep understanding of the experiences of first generation Mexican American elite university students. Seven participants met eligibility criteria for participation in this study (adults who identified as first generation, attended a California high school, and later enrolled at an elite university); these were selected to participate through the use of purposeful and snowball sampling. The results of this study revealed that first generation Mexican American students generated and made use of 11 cultural capitals prior to and/or after enrolling at an elite university in order to maximize their actualizing potential and attain educational success. The utilization of community cultural wealth (CCW) allowed participants to not only persist, but also to thrive at some of the most academically challenging and least culturally diverse post-secondary environments in the country. Six themes emerged from this research study including family support, external support, breaking intergenerational cycles of poverty, elite university campus support programs, use of spirituality/region, and overcoming the imposter syndrome. In summary, research findings revealed that at the high school level and prior to commencing their undergraduate studies, first generation Mexican American students prepare for and select elite university through the utilization of 11 cultural capitals, family support, external support (mentorship and external nonprofits), and their desire to break intergenerational cycles of poverty. Additionally, once enrolled at elite universities, first generation Mexican American students successfully navigate their undergraduate studies as a result of the utilization of 11 cultural capitals, elite university campus support programs
(first year student residential programs and on campus Hispanic student organizations), use of spirituality (and/or religion), and successfully overcoming thoughts and feelings around imposter syndrome.
This dissertation was presented by

Rafael Iniguez

It was defended on
March 25, 2022
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Christina Luna, Chair
Educational Leadership

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Juan Carlos Gonzalez
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__________________________
Susan Tracz
Curriculum and Instruction

__________________________
Miguel Zavala
Curriculum and Instruction
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to begin by thanking my wonderful parents, Rafael Iniguez and Esperanza Diaz, for their love, courage, diligence, and indomitable perseverance. Both of you served as inspirational role models to me. Thank you, God, for blessing me with two amazing parents who were always there to provide for me and my siblings. I would also like to acknowledge my brother Saul, and sisters, Carina and Sandra, for always supporting me and encouraging me to pursue my educational goals.

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I am deeply grateful for various mentors who made a profound and positive impact in my life. Thank you to Mr. Martin Mares, who exposed me to a world of wonderful higher education possibilities through the Ivy League Project. As a result of his influence and my participation in his elite university preparation program, the Ivy League Project, I was able to attend and graduate from the University of Pennsylvania in 2006. I would also like to thank Mrs. Arlene Gray, my high school French teacher, who passed away in December of 2021; Mrs. Gray inspired me to apply to various universities, gave me her personal computer during high school, provided me with a part time job, and inspired me to have a life-long love of travel and learning new languages. Thank you to Mr. Richard Martinez who served as my U.S. History teacher in high school and whose rigorous coursework and high expectations overprepared me for academics at elite
universities. Thanks to your early mentorship and push for academic excellence, I was able to reach this point in my life.

To my loving daughters, Catalina Iniguez and Cambria Iniguez, thank you for being patient with me while completing this degree. The global pandemic made it possible for me to spend more quality time with you as soon as our classes went from in person to Zoom. Thank you both for choosing me to be your father. I hope I make you proud and I look forward to spending more quality time with you in the coming years.

I also want to express my sincere appreciation for my beautiful wife, Jennifer Iniguez. Thank you for taking on additional responsibilities while I attended school. Your love, caring personality, and support made it easier for me to accomplish this life goal. I feel strongly that earning the first doctorate within my immediate and extended family members is part of my life purpose; I will use this doctorate to teach, inspire, and motivate others to reach their fullest God given potential and gifts, and unconditionally, you made that possible for me.

Finally, I would like to thank my dissertation committee members. Thank you, Dr. Christiana Luna, for always being available to guide me and provide me with feedback. Thank you for taking the time to review, revise, and provide me with constructive feedback every step of the way. Thank you for being fun, expressing your authenticity, and sharing your vast expertise with me. Thank you to Dr. Susan Tracz, Dr. Juan C. Gonzalez, and Dr. Miguel Zavala for your support and feedback; I deeply value your contributions, time, and effort to make this study great. Your dedication to me will positively impact many talented first generation Mexican American students for years to come. Thank you again.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The United States is home to some of the best universities in the world and is heralded widely as the land of vast opportunities. Within this ideal, it is implied that everyone who resides in this country will have an equal and fair access to the possibility for the fulfillment of their post-secondary dreams and aspirations; this includes the many academically high achieving and first generation Mexican American high school students who aspire to enter top tier elite universities. Elite and Ivy League universities are well known for being highly selective, having access to vast resources, higher graduation rates, higher retention rates, a wide variety of campus resources, outstanding student support services, a large amount of individualized support, small student to professor ratios, and an academically rigorous education (College Factual, n.d.; Hout, 2012). Despite the lack of equitable ethnic and racial representation at these institutions (College Factual, n.d.), many high achieving first generation Mexican American students continue to strive to become the first in their families to graduate from a university and serve as trailblazers for their families, communities, and society at large (Hout, 2012). Many first generation students desire to financially provide support to their families through the economic benefits of an earned degree and upward mobility becomes infinitely more achievable through admission to elite colleges and universities that have superior graduation rates, student support services, and academic rigor (Lopez, 2013).

In addition, elite universities offer a variety of resources to students who are offered acceptance after going through a very selective and rigorous admissions process. The reputable U.S. News and World Report (n.d.) created a complex methodology to rank national universities, from best to worst, based on a
variety of factors. According to Morse and Brooks (2020), the criteria used by the *U.S. News and World Report* to rank universities is “the product of years of research” and includes the following measures: student to faculty ratio, average federal loan debt, application requirements, tuition policies, financial aid policies, student body demographics, campus life, post graduate earnings data, alumni reviews, academic mission statements, and 17 additional indicators of academic quality. Furthermore, Morse and Brooks (2020) concluded that 40% of the *U.S. News and World Report* top university ranking comes directly from student success measures which entail (1) earning of a bachelor’s degree within 6 years; (2) nine student centered ranking factors that include graduation and retention rates; (3) social mobility (those awarded a federal Pell Grant as financial aid meant to go to student of low income backgrounds in support of their education); (4) graduation rate performance; (5) undergraduate academic reputation; (6) faculty resources; (7) student selectivity; (8) financial resources; (9) average alumni giving rate; and (10) graduate indebtedness. According to the recent *U.S. News and World Report* (n.d.) of national university rankings, all eight Ivy League universities made the list of the best 25 universities in the country. Throughout this dissertation, the term elite universities will be used to refer to the top 25 universities in this report; those 25 universities are listed in Table 1. In addition, the term Ivy League was used to refer to a group of eight top tier universities that are typically ranked among the top 20 best universities in the country, which include Brown University, Columbia University, Cornell University, Dartmouth College, Harvard University, Princeton University, University of Pennsylvania, and Yale University (Best College Reviews, 2021). Table 2 explores the top five undergraduate racial/ethnic demographics at the top ranked eight universities in the country (U.S. News & World Report, n.d.; College Factual, n.d.). Based on
this data, which is based on 2021 year enrollment information, the top three racial/ethnic undergraduate groups at the top eight elite universities are White Americans, Asian Americans, and International students (College Factual, n.d.).

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>University</th>
<th>2021 Ranking</th>
<th>Ivy League</th>
<th>Hispanic %</th>
<th>White %</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Princeton</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>9.0%</td>
<td>37.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Columbia</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
<td>37.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Harvard</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>9.2%</td>
<td>40.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Mass. Institute of Tech.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>9.4%</td>
<td>30.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Yale</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>10.4%</td>
<td>41.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Stanford</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>11.2%</td>
<td>32.6%</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Univ. of Chicago</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
<td>37.8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Univ. of Pennsylvania</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
<td>40.7%</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Calif. Institute of Tech.</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
<td>30.2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Duke</td>
<td>9</td>
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<td>6.8%</td>
<td>43.4%</td>
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<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Northwestern</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>8.7%</td>
<td>43.0%</td>
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<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>John Hopkins</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Dartmouth</td>
<td>13</td>
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<td>49.1%</td>
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<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Brown</td>
<td>14</td>
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<td>9.9%</td>
<td>39.8%</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Vanderbilt</td>
<td>14</td>
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<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Wash. Univ. St. Louis</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>No</td>
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<td>43.1%</td>
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<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Cornell</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Rice</td>
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<td>11.7%</td>
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<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Notre Dame</td>
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<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>UCLA</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>19.7%</td>
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<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Emory</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
<td>43.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>UC Berkeley</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>14.1%</td>
<td>26.8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Georgetown</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
<td>47.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Univ. Mich. Ann Arbor</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
<td>52.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Carnegie Mellon</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
<td>23.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Average: 9.5% 39.6%

Table 2

Undergraduate Racial/Ethnic Demographics – Year 2022 Top Eight Nationally Ranked Universities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University</th>
<th>2022 Rank</th>
<th>White American</th>
<th>Asian American</th>
<th>International</th>
<th>Hispanic American</th>
<th>African American</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Princeton</td>
<td>First</td>
<td>40.2%</td>
<td>22.3%</td>
<td>12.4%</td>
<td>10.6%</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Columbia</td>
<td>Second</td>
<td>30.1%</td>
<td>12.3%</td>
<td>37.6%</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harvard</td>
<td>Second</td>
<td>37.7%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>12.3%</td>
<td>11.2%</td>
<td>8.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MIT</td>
<td>Second</td>
<td>28.8%</td>
<td>29.6%</td>
<td>10.5%</td>
<td>15.4%</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yale</td>
<td>Fifth</td>
<td>41.4%</td>
<td>15.1%</td>
<td>20.8%</td>
<td>10.4%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stanford</td>
<td>Sixth</td>
<td>32.6%</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
<td>25.4%</td>
<td>11.2%</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.Chicago</td>
<td>Sixth</td>
<td>37.2%</td>
<td>18.7%</td>
<td>15.2%</td>
<td>14.2%</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UPenn</td>
<td>Eighth</td>
<td>40.7%</td>
<td>16.2%</td>
<td>21.3%</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Background

Elite universities boast a broad variety of educational programs and services to students who have the privilege to be admitted and are among some of the first universities to be founded in the country. In contrast, the term Ivy League, which describes eight of those elite universities came about in 1954 when, according to Best College Reviews (2021), the NCAA athletic conference for Division I was formed:

Although the term Ivy League was not created until the 1950s, many of these schools were in existence as far back as 1636, when John Harvard
became the first benefactor of Harvard University. Yale was formed in 1702 by a benefactor by the name of Elihu Yale. In 1746, the New Jersey school of Princeton was founded and was originally simply named the College of New Jersey. The fourth-oldest university in America is the University of Pennsylvania. It was founded in 1740 by famous founding father Benjamin Franklin. Brown University, founded in 1746, is located in Providence, Rhode Island. The smallest Ivy League school, Dartmouth, was established in 1769 in Hanover, New Hampshire. It received a large endowment of several billion dollars. In 1754, Columbia University began thanks to King George II of England. It is located in New York City. And finally, Cornell University got its start in 1865 thanks to two benefactors named Ezra Cornell and Andrew Dickson White. This school is located in Ithaca, New York. (Best College Reviews, 2021)

Around the world and in the United States, Ivy League Universities are among the most prestigious, academically rigorous, and selective; yet remain some of the least culturally diverse academic institutions in the country (College Factual, n.d.). According to Forrest Cataldi et al. (2018), approximately 33% of all higher education students in the country are first generation undergraduates. In comparison, only 17% of undergraduates at the eight Ivy Leagues are first generation students (Statista, 2021). As shown in Table 1, the typical demographics of the top 25 universities are 40% European American versus 10% Hispanic American (U.S. News & World Report, n.d.). It is typically the case that the largest student demographic is European American, followed by Asian American or international students, and Hispanic and African American students having the smallest percentage of undergraduate enrollment (College Factual, n.d.). At the same time, over 75% of the faculty at these elite institutions identify as White/European American while less than 5% are of Hispanic backgrounds (College Factual, n.d.).

Despite inequitable racial/ethnic representation among undergraduates and faculty members, first generation Mexican American students still strive to become the first in their families to earn a university degree. Earning a 4-year
university degree plays a paramount and transformational role in the lifelong trajectories of first generation Mexican American college students and their families. First generation students’ decision to attend a university is heavily dependent on the advice of parents, mentors, counselors, educators, and other adults with knowledge and experience within the world of post-secondary education (Carnevale & Rose, 2015). The focus of this dissertation was on the cultural assets that are utilized by first generation Mexican American college students to thrive at some of the country’s most selective and prestigious universities, despite enormous personal and sociopolitical obstacles. As we will see through a review of the literature later on in this dissertation, the decision to attend a four year university has the potential to transform future outcomes of students and their families through long-term benefits of degree attainment, which include: higher lifetime earnings, superior work options, improved health, a longer life, investments, and lower unemployment rates (Perna, 2000). The short-term benefits of attending college include psychological benefits of a continued education, social benefits, exposure to cultural diversity, and increased social status (Perna, 2000). A study by Chan (2016) revealed that 87% of employers in this country still favor college graduates when making the decision to hire. In addition, “97 percent of good jobs created since 2010 have gone to college graduates” (Chan, 2016, p. 2). Also, on average, college graduates make $32,000 per year more than high school graduates (Edelson, 2020).

Even though labor market needs are drastically changing in the country, a university degree still holds a lot of value and power. For instance, through their research, Carnevale and Rose (2015) discovered that college graduates (those with a bachelor’s degree or higher) generate above 50% of the country’s yearly economic worth. A study by Hout (2012) found various positive social and
economic benefits that arise for individuals who earn a bachelor’s degree. Research shows that “Education makes life better. People who pursue more education and achieve it make more money, live healthier lives, divorce less often, and contribute more to the functioning and civility of their communities than less educated people do” (Hout, 2012, p. 394). Overall, the U.S. economy also benefits from increased competitiveness that results from additional college graduates (Hout, 2012).

Students who decide to attend an elite university, including Ivy League universities, are presented with two major benefits: they will experience a greater likelihood of earning a bachelor’s degree and will receive additional support and services (College Factual, n.d.). The benefits just stated result from the fact that elite universities make, on average, a higher financial investment per student than other universities; despite higher tuition rates, the additional investment is linked to a direct financial cost to the university itself (Hout, 2012). Also, elite universities have significantly higher graduation rates than public state universities. According to the *U.S. News and World Report* (n.d.) ranking of top universities, the top 10 universities in the United States are, from Number 1 to number 10: Princeton, Harvard, Columbia, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), Yale, Stanford, University of Chicago, University of Pennsylvania, California Institute of Technology (CIT), and Johns Hopkins University (U.S. News & World Report, 2021). Based on 2021 data, the average graduation rate for the above top 10 elite universities is 94.7%, with Harvard and Princeton topping the graduation rate listing at 98% each; the combined yearly average tuition rate exceeds $50,000 for each of these universities (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).
Statement of the Problem

Despite the increased growth in the country’s U.S. population, elite post-secondary institutions have seemingly failed to recruit first generation Mexican American students to a level that is equitable and proportionate to that of the diverse demographics of the country. As Table 1 shows, there is a significant difference between Hispanic enrollment and European American/white student enrollment at the top 25 universities in the country. It is important to note that the terms “Latlnx” and “Hispanic” are inclusive of various Latin American ethnicities including Cuban Americans, Puerto Rican Americans, and so forth, so the Mexican American undergraduate student enrollment is far smaller than Hispanic enrollment rates reported below. In 2019, there were over 58 million people of Hispanic backgrounds in the United States of which 62% (over 36 million) were Mexican/Mexican American, the second largest ethnic group with 8% of the Hispanic population were Puerto Ricans, next with 3% were Salvadorans, and 3% were Cubans (Noe-Bustamante, 2019). As noted, the vast majority of Latinx or Hispanic people in the United States self-identify as Mexican or Mexican American.

The European American/white undergraduate enrollment at some of these top universities is also heavily influenced by other factors that create more admissions challenges for students of color. For example, over the span of six undergraduate admission cycles at Harvard University, 43% of the white student undergraduate population were also legacies (students whose parents graduated from Harvard), athletes, children of faculty members or employees, or children of families that donated to the university (Todd, 2019). During that same 6-year admissions cycle that took place from 2014 to 2019, less than 16% of admitted students that fell in the abovementioned “preferential treatment” admissions
categories were of African American, Hispanic American, or Asian American backgrounds (Todd, 2019). Todd (2019) stated that, “Since Ivy League schools were overwhelmingly white for the bulk of their histories, giving special status to the descendants of previous attendees would seem to perpetuate an unjust history of discrimination” (para. 5). In addition, more than half of the undergraduates came from the top 10% income distribution while two thirds came from the top 20% family income distribution; the average family income for Harvard undergraduates was $168,000 per year (Todd, 2019).

Based on a similar analysis, the top three universities in California are Stanford University, the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA), and the University of California at Berkeley (UC Berkeley or Cal). The most recent graduation rate at Stanford University is 94.3%, at UC Berkeley it is 91.9%, and 91.4% at UCLA; graduation rates are based on earning a bachelor’s degree within a 6-year period (College Factual, n.d.). On average, the UC universities have higher graduation rates and students earn a bachelor’s degree at a faster rate than undergraduates in the California State University (CSU) system (College Factual, n.d.). In 2020, the average 6-year bachelor graduation rate for the CSU system was 62% (College Factual, n.d.).

High school students in California have some of the most impressive post-secondary options after graduation. Upon graduating from high school, students can attend one of the 115 California Community Colleges (CCC), one of 23 CSUs one of nine undergraduate University of California (UC) campuses, or one of 83 private colleges or universities (California Colleges, 2021). Additionally, Los Angeles County has a total population of 10 million of which 48.6% identify as Hispanic while 26.1% identify as white alone (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). Many of California’s elite universities are located in the Los Angeles area and as depicted
in Table 3, Hispanic undergraduate enrollment continues to be disproportionately low. Despite this plethora of college and university options, data still show lower access and equity for many first-generation Mexican American students.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elite University</th>
<th>Hispanic (%)</th>
<th>White (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Loyola Marymount</td>
<td>10.7%</td>
<td>43.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pepperdine University</td>
<td>13.5%</td>
<td>49.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occidental College</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
<td>48.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Univ of Southern California</td>
<td>15.6%</td>
<td>37.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calif. Institute of Technology</td>
<td>17.2%</td>
<td>27.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UCLA</td>
<td>22.6%</td>
<td>26.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* This table was created by the researcher with demographic data obtained from College Factual (n.d). *College selection simplified.* https://collegefactual.com

Mexican American students who attend an elite university are more likely to earn a bachelor’s degree through the use of various resources including institutional agents (high school and college teachers, administrators, community advocates, and counselors), parental, and community support (Wagner, 2015). In fact, “A recent Stanford University study noted that there is a deficit of high-achieving, low-income students applying to select universities because the counselors and parents are not aware of admission and funding opportunities” (Wagner, 2015, p. 19). Through appropriate student guidance, parent workshops on post-secondary options, and rigorous college eligibility programs for high achieving Hispanic students at the high school level, admission to elite universities is more likely to happen.

Meeting eligibility criteria to apply and then enroll in an elite university immediately after high school will have positive transformational effects on the lives of first generation Mexican American students, underrepresented (undocumented, migrant) Hispanic students, their families, and their communities.
Conversely, there are many cultural costs and risks associated with attending an elite university. Some of those cultural costs include leaving the family, community, mentors, and other support systems behind to fully embrace independence, possible isolation, and a new beginning away from home (Stephens, 2009). Additionally, the elimination or subtraction of Mexican American students’ own culture and language takes place early on in the PK12 public school system through the process of “subtractive schooling” (Valenzuela, 2005). More details on these topics will be presented in Chapter 2. However, even to this day, Mexican American students are among the smallest enrolled subgroups based on undergraduate enrollment at the Ivy Leagues and other countrywide elite universities (College Factual, n.d.).

On average, Hispanic undergraduate student enrollment across the eight Ivy League Universities was 9.6% in the fall of 2012; during the same semester, the average enrollment of undergraduate white students was 45.6% (Patton et al., 2015, p. 203). Almost a decade later, those enrollment percentages remain relatively unchanged (College Factual, n.d.). Out of the 9.6% Hispanic enrollment, as mentioned before, it is important to note that the percentage of enrolled Mexican American first-generation students at Ivy League institutions is even smaller as the term “Hispanic” is inclusive of other ethnic groups. A major focus of my research was to attempt to determine why the percentage of Hispanic students at elite universities across the country continues to remain low despite Hispanic Americans being the second largest ethnic/racial subgroup in the country and the largest in the state of California. At its core, this is a social justice education issue that I seek to investigate through the counter-narratives of first generation Mexican American students who are currently attending or recently graduated from an elite university. More research is needed in order to better
understand the various assets and contributions that first generation Mexican American students bring to Ivy League and elite universities and to identify strategies to increase Mexican American undergraduate enrollment at these universities.

**Purpose of the Study**

In this study, I analyzed the various cultural assets used by first generation Mexican American students to thrive at elite universities through their own experiences and stories; this is social justice education and transformative research as evidenced by the significant racial discrepancy of Mexican American undergraduate enrollment at many of these top tier universities. Identifying the experiences of high achieving Mexican American undergraduates and recent graduates allowed the research field to better understand factors, high school programs, mentoring, counseling services, the college application process, and college experiences that influence elite university degree completion for first generation Mexican American students. The results of my study better prepare high achieving high school students to meet admissions eligibility to elite universities, increase their awareness of potential challenges they may face, and increase consciousness of a variety of cultural capitals that can be used to overcome any educational barriers. In addition, my research can better inform admissions staff at elite universities regarding the educational experiences and needs of first generation Mexican American high achieving students.

**Introduction of the Research Questions**

The following two research questions guided all aspects of the present study and helped to better understand the personal experiences of high achieving and first generation Mexican American elite university students.
**RQ1:** How do first generation Mexican American students utilize community cultural wealth (CCW) capitals to prepare for and select elite universities?

**RQ2:** How do first generation Mexican American students use CCW capitals to navigate through their undergraduate studies at elite universities?

**Introduction to Theoretical and Conceptual Framework**

Yosso’s CCW model was used and included Rendon et al. (2014) and Perez Huber’s (2009) expansion to the original capitals. For this study, I used an asset based approach to my research and elaborated on the various CCW capitals that first generation and high achieving Mexican American students generated and relied on in their decision to apply to, enroll, and be successful at elite universities. However, because CCW is an asset-based branch of critical race theory (CRT), I presented a brief overview of the main tenets of CRT below and a more detailed investigation of CRT in Chapter 2. According to McCoy and Rodricks (2015), CRT emerged from Critical Legal Studies (CLS) in the 1970s immediately after the Civil Rights Movement era of the 1960s in direct response to oppressive social structures which included disproportionate incarceration rates by race.

CRT scholars initially critiqued ongoing societal racism in Black and White binary terms and focused on the slow pace and unrealized promise of civil rights legislation. They eventually advanced the framework to examine the multiple ways African Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders, Chicanas/os, and Latinas/os continue to experience, respond to, and resist racism and other forms of oppression. (Yosso et al., 2009, p. 662)

The main seven tenets of CRT include (1) permanence of racism, (2) experiential knowledge/counter storytelling, (3) interest convergence, (4) intersectionality, (5) whiteness as property, (6) critique of liberalism, and (7) commitment to social
justice (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015). Most importantly, in addition to other forms of power imbalances and oppression, “Critical race theory provides a way to understand and disrupt the system of structural racial inequality” (McCody & Rodricks, 2015, p. 3). Using CRT for higher education is critical since “Traditional U.S. schooling is based on dominant standards and practices and anything and anyone who deviates from these norms are subject to being viewed and treated as ‘other’” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Additionally, Yosso and Solorzano (2006) are known within the research community for their commitment to shifting the narrative from deficit to asset-based thinking when it comes to doing research with People of Color, including first generation Mexican American students. Both researchers relied on CCW and CRT to more accurately represent the various cultural assets and strengths that first generation students and their families use to overcome systemic barriers:

- CRT shifts the research lens away from a deficit view of Communities of Color as places full of cultural poverty disadvantages, and instead focuses on and learns from the array of 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. (Yosso, 2005, p. 69)

Yosso and Solorzano’s (2006) work also helped to raise consciousness on the inequitable educational pipeline that many Latina/o students experience in the U.S.; their research revealed that Latina/o students experienced low academic outcomes in their trajectory from elementary school to earning a doctoral degree. Yosso and Solorzano’s (2006) research revealed that out of 100 Latina/o students that start school together at the elementary level, only eight would eventually earn bachelor degrees, two would go on to earn a graduate or professional degree, and only one in 500 would eventually earn a doctoral degree; in sum, less than one
student out of the original sample of 100 Latina/o students would eventually earn a doctoral degree (Yosso & Solorzano, 2006). With this data in mind, the six original (CCW) cultural capitals have been used as an asset based theoretical framework to describe how People of Color use these capitals in combination or separately to survive and persevere in education (Park et al., 2019). As depicted in Figure 1, Yosso’s (2005) CCW model is being applied to this study due to its overarching goal to expand social and racial justice through an assets-based lens.

Figure 1

T. J. Yosso’s Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) Model

In 2014, 9 years after the initial publication of Yosso’s “Whose Culture has Capital? A Critical Race Theory Discussion of Community Cultural Wealth,” Rendon et al. (2014) expanded Yosso’s (2005) original six capitals (familial,
social, navigational, resistant, linguistic, and aspirational) to include five additional capitals including spiritual, ethnic consciousness, pluri-consciousness, adaptability, and academic. (Rendon et al., 2014). Perez Huber’s (2009) research also expanded on spiritual capital. A more detailed overview on each of Yosso’s (2005) six original capitals and Perez Huber (2009) and Rendon et al.’s (2014) five additional student capitals is provided in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3.

**Significance of the Study**

The present research study revealed great significance for many high achieving first generation Mexican American students who aspire to attend some of the world’s top universities, specifically, elite and Ivy League universities. The end goal of this study was to better understand how *la familia*, high school counselors, academic programs, college readiness programs, and mentorship programs might support first generation Mexican American students to achieve success at the post-secondary level. An additional goal of this research study was to better understand the challenges that first generation students faced as they transitioned from high school to an elite university. Another goal was to explore whether CCW capitals are generated and used by first generation students to academically and socially persevere at elite institutions. Data from this study can be used by high schools across the country, Ivy League universities, and other systems of higher education to better prepare and recruit first generation Mexican American students for admission, retention, and graduation. At its core, this study reviewed racial and ethnic disproportionality at elite universities with the aim of also raising critical consciousness of the need to increase the number of Mexican American undergraduate enrollees at these institutions.
Definition of Terms

Continuing Generation College Student - Students raised in a family where at least one parent had a bachelor’s degree or higher (Center for First Generation Student Success, n.d.).

Cultural Capital - For the purposes of this study, an assets-based definition of cultural capital, most recently influenced by Yosso and Solorzano (2006), will be used. Based on Yosso’s work, capital can be defined as the talents, strengths, and positive experiences that are learned by People of Color from their families, communities, and culture (Yosso, 2005).

Elite Universities - For the purposes of this dissertation, elite universities are those that have high tuition rates, are highly selective (acceptance rates of 15% or lower), are desired universities among upper class U.S. and international families, and are also considered primarily white institutions (PWI) based on their undergraduate, graduate, and faculty student racial/ethnic demographic. Elite universities also tend to have lower rates of first-generation students in general as well as Mexican American first generation students.

European American - The term European American will be used to refer to students who have been historically referred to as “white.” However, the term “white” will be left alone when it is used in the research or taken from direct quotes. The goal in doing this is to create equity with language used so that it is more similar to other terms like “Hispanic American” or “Latinx American.”

First Generation College Student - Students whose parents did not have a bachelor’s degree (Center for First Generation Student Success, n.d.).

Hispanic - The terms Hispanic and Mexican Americans will be used throughout this dissertation to refer to Americans from Mexican and Hispanic
backgrounds. The sample of participants from this study will include participants who identify as Hispanic and/or Mexican American.

**Ivy League** - Ivy League schools are considered to be among the most prestigious of all universities in the United States and are among the top 25 ranked universities in the U.S. (U.S. News & World Report, 2021). These schools are primarily located in the northeastern part of the country. There are eight total universities that officially are part of the Ivy League. These universities were the first eight to be identified as Ivy League: Brown, Harvard, Cornell, Princeton, Dartmouth, Yale, Columbia universities and the University of Pennsylvania. Each of these eight Ivy League institutions are also among the top 25 elite universities in the country (U.S. News & World Report, 2021).

**Positionality**

In exploring who I am as a researcher, I have discovered several important facts about my personality, essence, and purpose. On a personal level and ever since I was a child, I tend to think a lot and try to find deeper meaning and understanding in everything and everyone. Since a very young age, I would think deeply about the conversations that others around me would have, especially adults. A high consciousness level at a young age helps to validate my inquisitive and investigative nature. I am also very empathic and consider myself to have a high level of emotional intelligence. I enjoy thinking, but I also take pleasure in feeling and experiencing the world through other people’s perspectives. The world is made up of multiple realities and truth itself is subjective. Taking doctoral coursework has also increased my awareness on race and oppressive structures that continue to make things harder for People of Color. Because of coursework and class discussion, I have embraced a different lens when looking at economic, political, education, and social systems. In many respects, I have been trying to
dismantle oppression through educational opportunities available to first
generation college students by providing them with appropriate programs,
guidance, and resources at the PK12 level.

As a researcher, I tend to apply some of the core elements that I learned
while I was in the counseling program at California State University, Fresno,
which include the use of unconditional positive regard, empathy, respect, self-
disclosure, and immediacy. Since 2012, I have become more spiritual and find
meaning in connecting with others at a soul-to-soul level. My intention behind
earning a bachelor’s degree in psychology and a master’s degree in counseling
was to ultimately bring healing to others through presence and understanding of
other’s experiences and narratives. Since researchers can also have an effect on the
outcomes, I hope that my work will empower others through narratives and critical
qualitative research methods like “testimonios.” Through the use of
counternarratives, I will contribute towards the praxis that is necessary in order to
generate real and equitable solutions for students who need the most support, high
quality educational programs, and inspiration.

My understanding on how we conceptualize knowledge and ways of
knowing is in line with the main principles of qualitative research. Based on my
own upbringing and how I came to know and understand the world around us, I
agree that truth is primarily subjective and “in the eye of the beholder.” I am aware
of my subjectivities and fully embrace them as they are part of my essence as a
persuasions at a given point, one's subjectivity is like a garment that cannot be
removed. It is insistently present in both the research and non-research aspects of
our life.” Knowledge is also learned through awareness of our own subjectivities.
Someone’s truth can be deeply understood through interviews, observation,
narratives, stories, intuition, oral history, and can also be elicited through media including photography. Among collectivistic cultures, many stories are passed down verbally, in conversation, from one generation to the next.

As a researcher, I firmly believe that knowledge and reality can be socially constructed and that we create our own views about truth through our own experiences and interactions with others. Truth is constructed through our interplay with our own identities, our families, our unique consciousness levels, our cultures, the media, educational systems, our own research, and society; as interactive social beings, we have an effect and are affected by micro and macrosystems. I am a first-generation college graduate of color attempting to achieve the “American Dream;” my reality has been and continues to be constructed through collective experiences, language, self-efficacy beliefs, perseverance, motivation, and effort. Knowing about Yosso and Solorzano’s (2006) research on the Latina/o educational pipeline and that the odds are against me, more than ever, I want to be the first member of my family to earn a doctoral degree in order to shatter barriers and break glass ceilings for younger generations, younger versions of myself. I will continue to fight negative stereotypes that have been constructed by the dominant-structured mainstream media, society, and people in positions of power.

Questions and issues revolving around equity, access, and social justice education profoundly fascinate me. The main driving force behind my research is to give voice to the voiceless, power to the powerless, and validation to the lived experiences of marginalized groups in our society, specifically, students of Mexican American backgrounds. For example, I am very attracted to the idea of using qualitative research for empowerment and advocacy of first-generation high achieving students. I have always been a believer in the power of a positive
growth mindset and apply the benefits of mindfulness to my own life. I have high expectations for myself, and for others. In reviewing statistical data, I am not supposed to be in a doctoral program and neither was I supposed to be a first generation graduate of the University of Pennsylvania. I skipped many generational accomplishments or steps in one lifetime. I experienced living in poverty and then later experienced attending one of the most prestigious universities in the country with a very high tuition rate. I have experienced the world through various lenses and that experience is also knowledge that deserves to be validated and will certainly help other first-generation students.

I grew up and continue to work in one of the greatest communities in the state of California. Parlier, California, is home to one of the largest migrant camps in the state. Locally, Parlier has also been referred to as the “little Mexico” of California. When families from Mexico and Central America immigrate to the United States, many choose to settle in Parlier. Many people who live in Parlier have jobs in farm work, they work in packing houses, the dairy industry, and other agricultural-related jobs. In high school, I was finally old enough to understand that my family was benefiting from food stamps, unemployment benefits, and Section 8 government assisted low-income housing. It is unfortunate that those at the top, the 1% richest families, continue to benefit from those at the bottom of the system. Now I understand that, “Poverty is classism, especially when the resources exist to eliminate it, but those who control the resources continually choose not to do so” (Gorski, 2008, p. 146).

During my first year at the University of Pennsylvania, I shared a quad dorm room with three wealthy international roommates at Van Pelt College House. One of those roommates was Mexican, however, his upbringing and family socioeconomic background was drastically different from mine. One evening, he
came into to our dorm room and announced that he had just purchased a new pair of Gucci shoes worth over $400. I was shocked at the price he had paid for those shoes. As I reflected, this moment served to increase my awareness on class and socioeconomic status at elite universities. In that moment, I could not believe that someone would have extra money that justified paying that much for some new shoes. However, 2 years later, at the end of our sophomore year, this roommate dropped out of the University of Pennsylvania and returned to Mexico. This experience also served a reminder that effort and persistence is oftentimes superior to perceived ability. Wealth can give people an advantage but having the right growth mindset and determination can be just as powerful. The reliance and generation of various cultural capitals can serve as a psychological and emotional safety net for low income first generation Mexican American students.

As an educational leader, I am on a mission to improve the academic outcomes of at- promise students through being an advocate, providing high-quality programs that will lead to success at the post-secondary level, and eradicate achievement gaps by race, gender, disability, and other categories that deviate from the dominant group. During my 12th grade year in high school, I was approached by Mr. Martin Mares, founder of the Ivy League Project, to join his mentoring and networking non-profit organization. Each spring, Mr. Mares takes high achieving students on a tour of the Ivy Leagues and other east coast universities; the tour also includes stops at historical sites, museums, tourist attractions, and other top ranked universities like Georgetown and American University in Washington D.C. Mr. Mares has been one of my mentors since I was a high school student, and he continues to be a mentor of mine today. In addition to Mr. Mares, I had other high school educators who had high expectations for me; one teacher even gave me her personal computer when she required me to type a
paper in her class and then realized I did not have a computer. Thanks to a local workforce agency, I also held two part time jobs during my 12th grade year that helped me to support my family financially. Throughout my life, I have benefited from institutional and protective agents that believed in me and invested their time and attention into my academic success.

On April 3rd, 2002, I received a letter of admissions from the University of Pennsylvania welcoming me to form part of their 250th graduating class, the class of 2006. I was speechless, excited, and worried, all at the same time; I knew that the odds were completely against me and it felt like I did not belong or did not deserve this opportunity. However, I had achieved my ultimate short-term goals but was now faced with a tough decision. My parents were excited but wanted me to stay close to home. Letting go of fear was tough but at the age of 17, I decided to take advantage of this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and accept my offer of admission and a very generous financial aid package from the University of Pennsylvania.

Initially and as a first-generation Mexican American student, I was most afraid of the unknowns and completely disconnected from my family and the rural farmworker community of Parlier. What would college be like? Would I be successful? What if I end up dropping out? Was I mentally prepared for the academic rigor of an Ivy League University? Hispanic students have a lower probability of earning a bachelor’s degree and there are fewer first generation students at the Ivy Leagues compared to other higher education systems like the University of California (College Factual, n.d.). Additionally, “Postsecondary educational opportunities in the United States have historically been and continue to be unequal for different groups of students. On average, the proportion of high school students who immediately transition into college increased from 50.7% in
1975 to 70.1% in 2009, but these transition rates vary greatly by race/ethnicity and income” (Taylor, 2015, p. 357). Moreover, “The 2009 college enrollment rate was 71.3% for Whites and 90.4% for Asians; yet, the rate was 62.6% for Blacks and 61.6% for Hispanics” (Taylor, 2015, p. 357).

Attending any of these universities equated to having access to a privilege that no member of my family had previously been afforded. Despite the discouragement from my family to leave the area for college and after much thought, I decided to accept the University of Pennsylvania’s offer of admission. In a matter of months, I went from living in Section 8 low-income apartments, in one of the poorest cities in the state of California to attending a world-renowned and elite private university. In the fall of 2002, tuition costs the first year at the University of Pennsylvania were approximately $42,000. However, my University of Pennsylvania admissions letter came with a financial aid package I could not reject—a full ride scholarship. The deal was better than other financial aid offers that I received from the UC system and later, from California State University, Fresno. At that time, University of Pennsylvania was already a “need-blind” institution, and they admitted students on merit and not on whether I would be able to afford that type of education. During my first year at the University of Pennsylvania, I realized that most of my roommates and friends did not get financial aid. I consider myself to be very spiritual and for that reason, do not believe in accidents; everything happens for a reason. I felt God wanted me to be there for a greater purpose. I was meant to be at The University of Pennsylvania and would put forth my full effort and dedication towards earning my bachelor’s degree.

For me, getting admitted to the University of Pennsylvania was like winning the lottery; this was the ultimate educational opportunity of a lifetime,
one that I will cherish forever. All of my hard-work and resiliency had finally paid off, in a big way. While at The University of Pennsylvania, I was exposed to other ethnic groups, international students, cultures, and students from primarily high socioeconomic backgrounds. Mostly everyone else was very wealthy and I quickly became conscious of the fact that I was from a different socioeconomic class. For the first time in my life, I was confronted with the concept of “class.” I did not really understand income inequality until a stepped on the University of Pennsylvania campus. According to Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017), “Class refers to relative social rank in terms of income, wealth, status, and/or power” (p. 160). Almost overnight, I found myself in a position of privilege. I experienced both class extremes and am very fortunate for the four years that I spent at The University of Pennsylvania. However, being around other socioeconomic classes made me value the power of humility and to be of service to others.

Being at The University of Pennsylvania for 4 years has also been the most rigorous academic experience I have ever had; all of my classes were full of valedictorians from all over the country and the world and the content was very demanding and time consuming. Most of my free time was devoted to studying. During the 2004-2005 school year, I was listed on the “Dean’s List” for maintaining an overall GPA of 3.9 or higher. When I shared the news with my roommates they were in shock; I did not know what being on the dean’s list meant until after I received their congratulations and admiration and did a little research on the internet myself. In 2006, I graduated from The University of Pennsylvania with honors and immediately returned to California to be closer to home and be of service to my community. In 2008, I earned a master’s degree in school counseling from California State University, Fresno; Dr. Sarah Lam was a great mentor to me while I was enrolled in the counseling program. My intent all along
was to eventually return to Parlier Unified and provide excellent guidance and high-quality educational opportunities to low-income students. When I was in high school, I had counselors who failed to support me with college applications, financial aid applications, and scholarships. As a result of my experience, I knew I would someday have to return to “fix” the issues and systematically improve guidance services at the district. I have spent the last 13 years serving as a guidance counselor, high school principal, and as a career technical education (CTE) district coordinator; through my work, thousands of first generation Mexican American students from Parlier have enrolled at various universities throughout California and the country. I have expanded CTE pathways and dual enrollment (DE) opportunities to students of low socioeconomic backgrounds in my hometown of Parlier, CA. I was also instrumental in securing a $1.6 million dollar state CTE grant for the construction of a brand new medical career technical education building at Parlier High which is set to open in the spring of 2023. In some respects, I am fixing what was broken back when I was in high school and I am devoting a big portion of my time to serving my community and “paying it forward” to future generations.

In 2006, I earned a bachelor’s degree in psychology from the University of Pennsylvania and graduated with honors or cum laude. One of my proudest life moments was when my parents and family joined me at my graduation; I took the opportunity to also take them on a short one day trip to New York City and visited Times Square and the Statue of Liberty. As a first-generation college student, the transition from a predominantly low income Mexican American high school to one of the most selective universities in the country was very challenging; I simultaneously experienced a culture, class, and racial shock. During the first semester, I also felt isolated and in a general sense that I did not belong there and
realized that few other undergraduates shared my linguistic and racial background; the imposter syndrome quickly and regularly kicked in. Thankfully, through the use of various CCW capitals (joining several language student clubs at my dormitory), I was able to survive and eventually thrive in a hugely academically competitive environment. My love for learning languages also helped me to adapt to a new college life through my involvement in several dormitory based modern language programs. During my first year, I joined La Casa Hispanica (The Hispanic House) and members of this club had dinner three times a week and we were only allowed to speak Spanish. During my sophomore year, I joined La Maison Française (The French House) and also joined the La Mesa de Português (The Portuguese Table) during my junior year. I love to learn other languages and to travel all over the world. Most importantly, these language programs helped me to socially and academically integrate into the University of Pennsylvania’s campus culture.

My dissertation topic is inspired by my own life experience and most recently, the work of Dr. Jesus Gonzalez, who graduated from the California State University, Fresno doctoral program in 2015; I will expand on his research regarding high achieving first generation Mexican American students. As a first generation graduate of an Ivy League University, I have a lot of personal knowledge and experience on the topic of use of various capitals to succeed at an elite university; I will be integrating T.J. Yosso’s CCW model and integrating additional capitals from Perez Huber’s (2009) and Rendon et al.’s (2014) research. I have worked in education for over 13 years and I am also a graduate of California State University, Fresno’s Masters of Science in Counseling Program and have assisted thousands of Mexican American, first-generation, and migrant students to meet eligibility criteria to the CSU, UC, and other elite universities. I
intend to do research on this topic in order to continue to expand access to the university system and break generational barriers and cycles of inequity.

I find relief in knowing that many first-generation college students are also very humble, hardworking, and resilient—which are strengths I am also interested in exploring through my investigations. I firmly believe that everyone has a purpose in life and when people find alignment with their divine life mission, everything else flows naturally. It is my personal belief that suffering might be the result of being out of alignment or out of balance with one’s life mission/purpose here on earth. I find comfort in helping others find solutions to issues that create an imbalance. I believe that my life purpose entails helping others find their own life purpose and be better prepared for succeeding at some of the most prestigious universities in the United States. In the midst of systemic challenges and oppression, there is always hope that first generation Mexican American students will transcend to the point of actualizing their maximum potential.

Eleven Cultural Wealth Capitals

I became interested in learning more about CCW as a result of my own PK12 to post-secondary educational trajectory. As I reflected, I became cognizant of the application of cultural capitals to my own story of survival, determination, persistence, and success. I was interested in academics from a very young age; at the age of 9, I was referred to the Gifted and Talented Program (GATE) by my fourth-grade elementary teacher, Mr. Apacechea (Academic and Social Capital). Beginning in eighth grade and thanks to the support of external nonprofits including the Ivy League Project and UC Scholars Early Academic Outreach Program (EAOP), I made it a goal of mine to be the first in my immediate and extended family to earn a master’s degree (Aspirational Capital). I set my eyes on a master’s degree because a few relatives had already earned a bachelor’s degree
from California State University, Fresno. Mrs. Mechigian was an excellent eighth grade social studies teacher; she saw potential in me and took action to move me from average to advanced classes by the end of my eighth-grade year (Social Capital). My family’s economic background and the positive influence of key mentors allowed me the possibility to dream big (Familial and Social Capital). My parents were both farmworkers and they always provided me with love, encouragement, and financial support.

At the age of 13, I spent a big part of my summer watching soccer games during the FIFA 1998 World Cup which took place in Paris, France. As a result of the World Cup, I was inspired to learn French; French became one of my favorite subjects to study, and I went on to be one of the top students in Mrs. Miller’s French class (Linguistic Capital). Since my ninth-grade year, a goal of mine was to learn the four main languages of the Americas – English, Spanish, French, and Portuguese; I am proud to be a multilingual world traveler (Linguistic Capital). Little did I know that having the ability to speak French would later allow me to adapt and navigate an Ivy League university (Navigational and Adaptability Capital). As mentioned previously, I joined several language houses and programs during my first few years at the University of Pennsylvania; these language programs helped me to adapt, socialize, and find a group of friends. Once enrolled at the University of Pennsylvania, I became aware that I was an outlier; few students shared by socioeconomic, racial, and cultural background. Being one of a few Mexican Americans on the University of Pennsylvania campus allowed me to push myself beyond ordinary limits; I did not want to become another elite university dropout (Resistant and Ethnic Consciousness Capital). Family support, the network of close roommates and friends, my participation in the Pre-Freshmen Program, and my ultimate goal of breaking intergenerational cycles of poverty
allowed me to develop a sense of belonging at the University of Pennsylvania and overcome feelings of imposter syndrome (Pluri Consciousness Capital). I graduated with honors from the University of Pennsylvania in 2006, earned a master’s degree in counseling from Fresno State in 2008, and I am very close to earning a doctorate. I believe that everything happens for a reason. At the age of 17 and during my first trip to the east coast while participating in the Ivy League Project, I had a conversation with God. That conversation was more like a prayer. I thought, “God, if I am accepted to the University of Pennsylvania, I will enroll, graduate, and make my family and community very proud!” (Spiritual Capital). God answered my prayers and continues to guide and enlighten me along my life path. In my current role as PK12 public education leader, I apply Don Miguel Ruiz’s *Four Agreements* into my leadership style. The four agreements that I have made to my personal life and leadership philosophy are as follows: I will not take anything personally, I will always try my best, I will not make assumptions, and I will always be impeccable with my word/language or walk the walk and not just talk the talk (Spiritual Capital) (Ruiz & Mills, 1997). These four agreements, which originate from ancient Mexican Toltec spiritual wisdom, have helped me and will continue to help me to be a great and ethical leader who will continue to promote social justice education. I will expand more on these 11 CCW capitals in Chapter 2 (Perez Huber, 2009; Rendon et al., 2014; Yosso, 2005).

I was recently asked to be the substitute administrator at the middle school where I am employed. On that day, an 8th grade male Mexican American student was expelled from a class and sent to the front office due to repeated tardiness. When I called him into my office, the principal’s office, the student assumed that I would use the opportunity to a deficit-based approach to disciplining him; instead, I provided him with much needed counseling and guidance. I noticed he was
wearing a red bracelet with the image of La Virgen de Guadalupe (Virgin of Guadalupe). Our conversation revolved around the protection that he was getting from wearing the red Virgen de Guadalupe bracelet. I asked what or who he was seeking protection from and assured him that I could assist him as necessary and in a confidential way. Almost immediately, tears began to roll down his face. I told him he was very special human being and that I would refer him to a counselor. Instead of using my words to disempower and discipline, I used my words and my position to validate and uplift him through positivity. It was clear to me that students resort to spiritual capital as early as middle school. It was also clear to me that students are called in to the principal’s office primarily when they are in trouble. Mexican American students resort to spirituality to seek protection and to overcome challenging situations.

**Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations**

One of the main assumptions made is that students, regardless of race or socioeconomic status, will have a fair and equitable opportunity to receive admission to Ivy League/elite universities; this assumption is rooted in hope that those who work hard will have a good chance of being admitted into elite universities. A limitation of this study is that the focus will be on undergraduate students of Mexican American ancestry and not inclusive of other Latin or Hispanic ethnicities. Another limitation of this study is that the focus will be on the experiences of high achieving students attending or who recently graduated from Ivy League/elite universities and will not take into account the experiences of other first generation Mexican American students who are attending state universities, like the CSU system in California. Finally, an additional limitation of this study is that it will take place during the global COVID-19 pandemic and that it might be more difficult to build rapport with future participants while on Zoom.
Summary

Ivy League and other elite universities in the country are among the most selective; they offer a variety of great benefits to students closely tied to higher retention and graduation rates. A 4-year degree can be life changing for anyone, especially first generation Mexican American students who are among the lowest enrolled groups at elite universities. There is a significant disproportionality in enrollment rates at elite universities; based on a review of the top 25 elite universities in this country, European American, Asian American, and wealthy international students are the top three undergraduate groups based on enrollment percentage rates. University degree completion can also exponentially change the economic outcomes of the entire Mexican American family. Upward mobility and positions of power can be accessed through completion of a bachelor’s degree; a bachelor’s degree is a first step in beginning to shatter glass ceilings for many students of color. However, as the data indicate, there is vast disproportionality and inequity when it comes to the Mexican American representation at elite universities. CCW was used to investigate the Mexican American student educational experience from an asset and strengths-based lens to help propel more high achieving students to elite institutions of higher education and positions of power. The findings of this research study on the generation and reliance of 11 cultural capitals can be used as a toolkit to better understand and support elite university bound first generation Mexican American students. Additionally, the 11 capitals can be used to critically address oppression and institutional racism.
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

According to the latest 2019 data from the U.S. Census Bureau (n.d.), Americans from Hispanic backgrounds now account for 18.5% (60.6 million) of the country’s total population (326 million), making them the second largest racial/ethnic group in the United States. Five major ethnic groups make up the majority of the U.S. population including European Americans/Whites (60.1%), Hispanics (18.5%), Black/African Americans (13.4%), Asian/Asian Americans (5.9%), and American Indians/Alaskan Natives (1.3%). At the turn of the new millennium in the year 2000, Hispanics accounted for 12.5% (35.5 million) while Whites accounted for 69% (194.5 million) of the country’s population. In the last 20 years, the Hispanic population has grown at an incredibly fast pace; specifically, by approximately 25 million, or by 71%.

In 2019, the population of California is quickly approaching 40 million, maintaining its status as the most populous state in the nation. California is also one of the most diverse states in the country. In California, there are approximately 15.5 million (39.4% of the state’s population) people of Hispanic backgrounds, making it the largest ethnical/racial group in the state. White non-Hispanics (36.5%), Asian/Asian American (15.5%), Black/African American (6.5%), and American Indian/Alaskan Native (1.6%) make up the remaining California population (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). Many counties within California also list residents of Hispanic backgrounds as the majority group. For example, the population in Fresno County is quickly approaching 1 million residents, of which 53.8% self-identify as Hispanic or Latino and 28.6% consider themselves “White alone.” In Los Angeles County, where the population is near 10 million residents,
48.6% of the inhabitants identify as Hispanic while 26.1% identify as White alone (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). Mexicans have been in California and the United States for many generations and prior to the official foundation of the country, yet Mexican American students continue to suffer from underrepresentation at elite universities. Although the total Hispanic population continues to rise, enrollment of Hispanic students at elite universities continues to remain low; this is an unfortunate reality and an access and equity barrier that many first-generation high achieving Mexican American students must face.

Despite the exponential growth in the Mexican American population across the country and state of California, the percentage of college age students earning a bachelor’s degree has remained relatively low compared to other racial groups. A report released in 2019 by the U.S. Census Bureau (n.d.) compared educational attainment by race and age (25 years of age or older), from the year 2010 to the year 2019; based on this report, the percentage of Asian/Asian Americans with a bachelor’s degree was 58.1%, for Whites it was 40.1%, for Black/African Americans it was 26.1%, and for Hispanic it was 18.8%. From 2010 to 2019, the educational attainment as a percentage grew for all racial groups anywhere from 4.9% to 6.9%, with Hispanic being the lowest of all four groups at 4.9%. A significant portion of all recently graduated students are also first-generation degree holders. In the United States, among all students who earned a bachelor’s degree during the 2015-2016 school year, 40% identified themselves as first generation students while 48% identified themselves as continuing generation students (Center for First Generation Student Success, n.d.). Additionally, out of the 40% who were classified as first generation students, 25% were of Hispanic backgrounds (Center for First Generation Student Success, n.d.) Upon further examination, “Though the number of Latinos attending college and earning
bachelor’s degrees has continued to increase, this increase can be attributed to population growth, not to the closing of the achievement gap” (Greenthal, 2021, p. 17).

While the racial, cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity of the United States continues to increase, efforts that promote college access among students of Hispanic backgrounds must also rise. For instance, “In 2014, the estimated percentage of students from ethnic minority groups made up more than 50% of the students in prekindergarten through 12th grade in public schools, an increase from 40% in 2001” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. 13). Although the United States is more racially diverse than ever before, some racial groups, specifically students of Hispanic backgrounds, are not benefiting from economic prosperity and are subject to a separate educational pipeline (Solorzano et al., 2005). As the Hispanic population and the diversity of this country continues to grow, research must be conducted to redefine cultural capital and highlight the many assets and positive stories that this sector of the population contributes to American society; researchers must be intentional towards diminishing and eliminating structural barriers that underestimate first generation Hispanic students (Gonzales, 2012). As a reminder, the average tuition costs of an Ivy League education are $56,746 per year or $78,417 when other living expenses and student fees are factored into the total cost of attendance (Rakoczy, 2021).

Although educational attainment grew for all racial groups in 2019, less than one in five Hispanic adults has earned a bachelor’s degree (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). Yosso and Solorzano (2006) made reference to the education pipeline and how Latina/o students continue to fall through the cracks, especially as a result of PK12 conditions. According to Yosso and Solorzano (2006),
Latina/o students have lower university attainment as a result of various early issues including unequal K12 conditions, failure of the community college transfer function, limited bachelor opportunities, experiencing educational isolation, alienation in grade school, and having to work harder than other races through personal persistence. (p. 2)

In line with CRT, the wide racial discrepancy in university degree attainment by race shows that higher education was designed by and meant for upper class European Americans and went from being a public good to more of a private good only to be enjoyed a certain sector of our society (Labaree, 1997, 2018; Solorzano et al., 2005). As educators, we must become aware of this unfortunate PK12/post-secondary pipeline for Latina/o students.

Twenty-two years into the 21st century, first generation Mexican American students still face many challenges and systemic barriers that prevent them from taking full advantage of elite post-secondary educational opportunities. Although the total Mexican American population continues to rise, the enrollment rate of Mexican American students at top tier prestigious universities continues to remain disproportionately low in comparison to other racial and ethnic groups. To make matters worse, students from Hispanic backgrounds are “often characterized as academically underprepared for college, lacking cultural fit, and having poor coping responses, all of which affect their overall well-being and reduce their chances of succeeding in college” (Kim et al., 2014, p. 247). Recent research also suggests that “Latino males are more likely to drop out of high school, pursue employment versus educational opportunities, and leave college before graduating” (Perez II, D., 2017, p. 123). Similarly, "Latina students are the least formally educated female ethnic or racial group in the United States. In nearly every measure of education achievement (achievement tests, high school completion, college participation, college graduation rates), Latina students lag behind their female counterparts" (K.P. Gonzalez et al., 2003, p. 147). The number
of challenges that first generation Mexican American students must overcome is overwhelmingly daunting. Despite being the second largest ethnic/racial subgroup in the United States and as presented in Chapter 1, Hispanic American students continue to be drastically underrepresented at elite universities. In order to get a more holistic picture of recent educational experiences by Hispanic undergraduates at elite universities, this qualitative narrative inquiry study has centered around the narratives of academically high achieving first generation Mexican American students currently or formerly attending an Ivy League or elite university.

**Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework used in the current research study is CCW, which is also an assets-based branch of CRT. According to McCoy and Rodricks (2015), CRT emerged from critical legal studies (CLS) in the 1970s, immediately after the Civil Rights Movement era of the 1960s, in direct response to oppressive social structures like the U.S. legal system, which resulted in disproportionate incarceration rates by race. Subsequently, Derrick A. Bell and Alan Freeman worked to highlight several shortcomings in CLS including (1) CLS did not offer strategies for social transformation; (2) CLS failed to incorporate an examination of race and/or racism; and (3) CLS neglected the counter stories of marginalized populations (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015). These various critiques of CLS paved the way for the emergence of CRT. Additionally, CRT sought to understand how white supremacy and its oppression of People of Color had been established and perpetuated while race and racism were placed at the center of scholarship (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015). CRT aims to investigate the multi layered and disproportionate allotment of power and resources for culturally diverse populations (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015). Along the lines of CRT, Paulo Friere
(1993) also sought to liberate oppressed people through the raising of critical consciousness; the ultimate goal is to make people aware of their oppressed situation in order to get them to take action and liberate themselves and others. Additionally, CRT continues to evolve as theoretical framework; it has the potential to increase consciousness and through increased awareness, slowly dismantle various forms of direct and indirect oppression.

Historically speaking,

CRT scholars initially critiqued ongoing societal racism in Black and White binary terms and focused on the slow pace and unrealized promise of civil rights legislation. They eventually advanced the framework to examine the multiple ways African Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders, Chicanas/os, and Latinas/os continue to experience, respond to, and resist racism and other forms of oppression. (Yosso et al., 2009, p. 662)

Solorzano and Yosso (2002) expanded on the CRT framework by including additional racial/ethnic groups, specifically people of Hispanic backgrounds, and made the theory applicable to the world of education by raising awareness on the Latina/o “educational pipeline.” The main seven tenets of CRT include: (1) permanence of racism, (2) experiential knowledge/counter storytelling, (3) interest convergence, (4) intersectionality, (5) whiteness as property, (6) critique of liberalism, and (7) commitment to social justice (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015). In addition, CRT addresses disadvantages that People of Color face as well as cultural advantages:

As a whole, this framework aims to reveal the powerful disadvantages that people of color face in institutional settings held over by dominant and narrow ideologies. At the same time, this theoretical frame attempts to demonstrate the positive values and assets that people of color bring to the institutional table. In other words, critical race theory provides the framework to redefine cultural capital and aims to reshape policy, programming, and practice in education institutions” (Gonzales, 2012, p. 128).
The first tenet, *permanence of racism*, can be summarized as follows: “CRT in education starts with the premise that race and racism are endemic to and permanent in U.S. society and that racism intersects with forms of subordination based on gender, class, sexuality, language, culture, immigrant status, phenotype, accent, and surname” (Yosso et al., 2009, p. 662). According to Yosso (2005) “Racism overtly shaped U.S. social institutions at the beginning of the twentieth century and continues, although more subtly, to impact U.S. institutions of socialization in the beginning of the twenty-first century” (p. 70).

The second tenet, *experiential knowledge/counter storytelling*, places emphasis on the importance of listening to the stories of People of Color in order to understand their truth; a truth that historically has been misrepresented and largely ignored and censured (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). In CRT, a counterstory is as a mechanism for sharing stories that normally would get very little to no attention; truth emerges through these stories of perseverance and resistance to oppression. (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). These “alternative” stories oppose dominant, and oftentimes Eurocentric narratives, and ultimately serve to empower the voiceless and invisible members of within our society (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Counter storytelling, and for that matter, testimonios, are of great importance since collectivistic cultures, including Mexican Americans, verbally pass on family stories from one generation to the next (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002).

The third tenet of CRT is *interest convergence*. Interest convergence is “Grounded on the premise that People of Color’s interest in achieving racial equality advances only when those interests ‘converge’ with the interests of those in power (typically white, heterosexual, Christian, able bodied males)” (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015, p. 9). As an example, affirmative action in higher education admissions is still seen by many as a threat to the status quo and many lawsuits
have been brought by white students. Several landmark cases have been brought to
the judicial system to address affirmative action:

Academically successful white students rejected for admission by highly
selective institutions have challenged the fairness of affirmative action in
the courts. Landmark cases such as Regents of the University of California
v. Bakke (1978), Grutter v. Bollinger (2003), and Fisher v. University of
Texas (2013) were all initiated by white plaintiffs. (Park & Liu, 2014, p.
36)

The theory of interest convergence was first presented by Derrick A. Bell Jr. who
is also considered to be the “Father of CRT” (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015). In
addition, “Interest convergence is grounded in Marxist theory—that the
bourgeoisie (middle and upper class) tolerate the proletariat’s (working class)
advances when those advances also benefit the bourgeoisie” (McCoy & Rodricks,
2015, p. 9). In the words of Paulo Freire (1993),

Money is the measure of all things, and profit the primary goal. For the
oppressors, what is worthwhile is to have more—always more—even at the
cost of the oppressed having less or having nothing. For them, to be is to
have and to be the class of the ‘haves.’” (p. 32)

Next, the fourth tenet of CRT is commonly known as intersectionality.
Intersectionality also brings to light the fact that everyone carries multiple
identities and that these identities intersect (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). In fact,
“CRT scholars recognize that racial identity and racism intersect with other
subordinated identities (such as gender, class, religion, dis/ability, sexual
orientation) and forms of oppression (sexism, homophobia, ableism, etc.) to
influence People of Color’s lived experiences” (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015, p. 10).

The fifth tenet of CRT is that of whiteness as property. According to this
tenet, “The assumptions, privileges, and benefits associated with identifying as
white are valuable assets that white people seek to protect” (McCoy & Rodricks,
2015, p. 11). Also, “individuals allowed to self-identify as white have social
advantages” that include privilege and protection (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015, p. 11). Historically speaking, white American men could own land and property, while enslaved Africans were brought to the Americans to serve as slaves, or as property, for white slave masters (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015). In other words, “Africans were viewed as property based on their race, while the ‘conquest, removal, and extermination’ of Native American/Indigenous Peoples from their lands took place” (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015, p. 12). Furthermore, “These periods in U.S. history led to whiteness as a racial identity serving as validation for property rights and ownership” (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015, p. 12).

Central to the topic of colorblindness in the United States is the sixth tenet of CRT, which is a critique of liberalism. CRT scholars are critical of and challenge the concepts of objectivity, meritocracy, color blindness, race neutrality, equal opportunity, and incremental change (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015). According to McCoy and Rodricks (2015) the above concepts act as a “camouflage for the self-interest, power, and privilege of dominant groups in U.S. society” (p. 12).

The seventh and final tenet of CRT has to do with a commitment to social justice. The work that CRT theorists do must revolve around helping to improve overall conditions for those who are continually oppressed. Furthermore, “CRT scholars are committed to the establishment of a socially just U.S. society and educational system and maintain a praxis of activism as a component of their scholarship” (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015, p. 13). As cited in McCoy and Rodricks (2015), Lee Ann Bell’s definition of social justice is as follows,

Full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs. Social justice includes a vision of society in which the distribution of resources is equitable and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure. (p. 3)
Among the main goals of CRT are the extermination of racism and the uplifting of disenfranchised groups that work hard to sustain American society. Most notably, in addition to other forms of power imbalances and oppression, “Critical race theory provides a way to understand and disrupt the system of structural racial inequality” (McCody & Rodricks, 2015, p. 3). Using CRT for higher education is of utmost importance since traditional U.S. schooling is based on dominant standards and practices and anything and anyone who deviates from these norms are subject to being viewed and treated as “other” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Daniel Solorzano and Tara J. Yosso’s (2006) research with People of Color, including first generation Mexican American university students, has helped to positively shift the narrative from deficit to asset based. Although there seems to be a lot of controversy around this theoretical framework,

CRT shifts the research lens away from a deficit view of Communities of Color as places full of cultural poverty disadvantages, and instead focuses on and learns from the array of 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. (Yosso, 2005, p. 69)

In contrast, “A traditional [Bourdieuian] view of cultural capital is narrowly defined by White, middle class values, and is more limited than wealth—one’s accumulated assets and resources” (Yosso, 2015, p. 77). CRT and CCW expand this view by “Centering the research lens on the experiences of People of Color in a critical historical context reveals accumulated assets and resources in the histories and lives of Communities of Color” (Yosso, 2005, p. 77). The six CCW capitals depicted in Figure 1 are aspirational capital, familial capital, social capital, navigational capital, resistant capital, and linguistic capital; these have been used
to describe how People of Color rely on various cultural assets to survive and persevere in education (Park et al., 2019). Furthermore, these capitals used separately or combined represent CCW. Specifically, “Community cultural wealth is an array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression” (Yosso, 2005, p. 77). The CCW model is being applied to this study due to its goal to expand social and racial justice through an assets-based approach. In sum, communities of color, often collectivistic in nature, rely on their own culture, family members, collective strengths, community assets, and other capitals in order to overcome challenges and ultimately, persevere. Refer to Figure 1 for Yosso’s CCW model.

The CCW model is appropriate to use for first generation Mexican American students since it will help to review any cultural capitals that might be used by students of color in order to survive and make it through a rigorous education at an elite university. The counter stories of Mexican American students “provide a clear message that Latino families, especially parents, offer rich, valuable, and transferrable cultural capital that can be mobilized in [students’] academic and professional careers” (Gonzales, 2012, p. 125). When applied to the transition between high school to elite university settings, the CCW helps researchers to explore the various talents, assets, and strengths that are utilized by students of color at predominantly white institutions (PWI) in order to thrive and ultimately find success. Yosso’s (2005) work has been expanded by other researchers and additional capitals have emerged from that research. For the purposes of this study, Yosso’s (2005) original six capitals, as well as, five additional capitals by Perez Huber (2009) and Rendon et al. (2014) are included in Table 4 with descriptions. A total of 11 capitals will be explored and will serve as the main theoretical framework for the present research study.
## Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Capital</th>
<th>Researcher(s)</th>
<th>Description of Capital</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Academic Capital</strong></td>
<td>Rendon</td>
<td>Many students are academically strong and enter as STEM Majors (Rendon et al., 2014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Adaptability Capital</strong></td>
<td>Rendon</td>
<td>Students are able to make academic, social, and cultural adaptations to be successful in college; apply “survival” skills; are able to dislocate and relocate; and, have the ability to operate in limited spaces (neither here, nor there). (Rendon et al., 2014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Aspirational Capital</strong></td>
<td>Yosso</td>
<td>“Aspirational capital refers to the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers. This resiliency is evidenced in those who allow themselves and their children to dream of possibilities beyond their present circumstances, often without the objective means to attain those goals” (Yosso, 2005, p. 77).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ethnic Consciousness Capital</strong></td>
<td>Rendon</td>
<td>Students are proud of their Mexican American heritage; are an example to other Mexican American students; recognize microaggressions and inequalities; would like to complete college because they recognize that others have paved the way for their success; and, know they can become role models to other aspiring Latina/o students. (Rendon et al., 2014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Familial Capital</strong></td>
<td>Yosso</td>
<td>“Familial capital refers to those cultural knowledges nurtured among familia (kin) that carry a sense of community history, memory and cultural intuition. This form of cultural wealth engages a commitment to community wellbeing and expands the concept of family to include a more broad understanding of kinship. Acknowledging the racialized, classed and heterosexualized inferences that comprise traditional understandings of ‘family’, familial capital is nurtured by our ‘extended family’, which may include immediate family (living or long passed on) as well as aunts, uncles, grandparents and friends who we might consider part of our familia” (Yosso, 2005, p. 79).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Linguistic Capital</strong></td>
<td>Yosso</td>
<td>“Linguistic capital includes the intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style. This aspect of cultural wealth comes from over 35 years of research about the value of bilingual education and emphasizes the connections between racialized cultural history and language” (Yosso, 2005, p. 78).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Navigational Capital</strong></td>
<td>Yosso</td>
<td>“Navigational capital refers to skills of maneuvering through social institutions. Historically, this infers the ability to maneuver through institutions not created with Communities of Color in mind. For example, strategies to navigate through racially-hostile university campuses draw on the concept of academic invulnerability, or a students’ ability to sustain high levels of achievement, despite the presence of stressful events and conditions that place them at risk of doing poorly at school and, ultimately, dropping out of school” (Yosso, 2005, p. 80).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pluri-Consciousness Capital</strong></td>
<td>Rendon</td>
<td>Students are able to entertain multiple competing and often contradictory thoughts and tensions (undocumented/documented; Mexican/American; Spanish/English, world of college/world of personal life, immigrant/American, etc. (Rendon et al., 2014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Resistant Capital</strong></td>
<td>Yosso</td>
<td>“Resistant capital refers to those knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality. This form of cultural wealth is grounded in the legacy of resistance to subordination exhibited by Communities of Color. Furthermore, maintaining and passing on the multiple dimensions of community cultural wealth is also part of the knowledge base of resistant capital” (Yosso, 2005, p. 80).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Table 4 (cont.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Capital</th>
<th>Researcher(s)</th>
<th>Description of Capital</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social Capital</td>
<td>Yosso</td>
<td>“Social capital can be understood as networks of people and community resources. These peer and other social contacts can provide both instrumental and emotional support to navigate through society’s institutions” (Yosso, 2005, p. 79).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual Capital</td>
<td>Perez Huber</td>
<td>The term spiritual capital describes assets and resources linked to spirituality and/or religion, as articulated by Pérez Huber (2009), “a set of resources and skills rooted in a spiritual connection to a reality greater than oneself. The term “spiritual” within “spirituality” is used to refer to a broader umbrella of beliefs, practices, and worldviews that links an individual and/or a community to a bigger sense of the divine, supernatural, and/or transcendent (Perez Huber, 2009, p. 721).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rendon</td>
<td>Students have a sense of meaning and purpose of life and earning a college degree; students have a strong connection to spiritual or religious beliefs guiding their college trajectories. (Rendon et al., 2014)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Review of the Research Literature**

**First Generation Students**

Although Hispanic Americans now compose the second largest racial group in the country, they are also the group with the lowest academic outcomes (Covarrubias & Lara, 2013). Many of these first generation university students are also undocumented and come from migrant family backgrounds (Covarrubias & Lara, 2013). Based on demographical data from the NCES (2016), out of all U.S. undergraduate first generation students, 61% were from Hispanic backgrounds. Overall, 35% of all undergraduates during the 2015/2016 school year were also first generation students (NCES, 2016). Compared to continuing generation students, or those whose parents graduated from a university, first generation students experience more difficulties and challenges in their transition from high school to a university (Pascarella et al., 2004). Three of the main barriers that Hispanic Americans must face in their educational trajectory are unequal school conditions, low community college transfer rates, and educational isolation (Covarrubias & Lara, 2013, p. 78). Looking back at their high school years, those that become first generation university students also were more likely to earn lower grades, take less credits, and have higher high school dropout rates...
(Stephens, 2009). The bigger concern is that first generation students struggle to fit in or belong while in college; research indicates that there is a cultural mismatch between elite universities and first-generation university students (Stephens, 2009). First generation students come from cultures where interdependence and collaboration are essential characteristics while elite universities promote the culture of independence and competition (Stephens, 2009). First generation students are also largely overrepresented in 2-year community colleges and 4-year public universities, while they continue to be overwhelmingly underrepresented at 4-year elite universities (Stephens, 2009).

Being university trailblazers for their families, first generation students also come across other barriers to earning a degree. One of those barriers is lack of knowledge about the university and how to access university resources. Many times, first generation students feel overwhelmed and lost, especially at elite universities where most students do not share their upbringing, culture, worldview, or socioeconomic status. Research suggests that first generation students are four times more likely to drop out of college compared to peers who have at least one educated parent (Greenthal, 2021). First generation students must also cope with feelings of guilt, loneliness, and homesickness for having “abandoned” their family, friends, mentors, and community members (Greenthal, 2021). An additional barrier has to do with student finances; first generation students attending Ivy League and elite universities tend to receive greater financial aid for tuition costs and other university related expenses; however, students still struggle to make ends meet when it comes to personal finances. Limited financial resources also lessen the likelihood that first generation students will have extra money to go out and have fun, in other words, to invest in a social life (Covarrubias & Lara, 2013; Greenthal, 2021). Furthermore, undocumented first generation Mexican
American university students must learn to navigate through one of their biggest barriers—being ineligible for federal financial aid which makes their access to higher education exponentially more difficult (Covarrubias & Lara, 2013). When first generation university students leave their home, they also leave a lot of resources that would have been available to them from family and friends; lack of support from home is also a barrier that students must overcome while attending an elite university (Greenthal, 2021). Indeed, “Lack of support from family and friends at home, as compared to other students around them, can make first generation college students feel abandoned and without the encouragement they may need to stay the course” (Greenthal, 2021, para. 8). Although U.S. born first generation Mexican American students face a multitude of barriers, Mexican born and naturalized first generation students face additional barriers that make it less likely for them to access the university and earn a university degree (Covarrubias & Lara, 2013). In other words, citizenship status magnifies barriers for Mexican born first generation students, creating an alternate and more challenging and exclusionary educational pipeline for this group of students (Covarrubias & Lara, 2013). Covarrubias and Lara’s (2013) research presents an updated and more detailed educational pipeline comparison for U.S. born Mexican Americans, naturalized, and undocumented Mexican students; their findings clearly reveal that “U.S.-born Mexicans show significantly higher high school, college, and graduate school attainment rates, and higher enrollment rates in higher education than foreign-born and noncitizen POMOs [People of Mexican Origin]” (Covarrubias & Lara, 2013, p. 87). Covarrubias and Lara’s (2013) research was heavily influenced by Yosso and Solorzano’s (2005) Hispanic American educational pipeline framework. Covarrubias and Lara’s (2013) research explored citizenship and gender, and their main conclusion was that,
U.S.-born citizenship and the privilege it commands is associated with the statistically highest level of educational attainment, and being undocumented, with the least level of legal and social status, is most associated with the lowest educational attainment rates, even when holding gender and Mexican origin the same. The gender question also reveals that Chicanos are most likely to be pushed out both from high school and college at significantly higher rates than U.S.-born Chicanas, who outdo their undocumented and foreign-born, naturalized counterparts (p. 95).

In sum, first generation students struggle to balance their academic, social, and personal responsibilities and are less likely to receive guidance from faculty, including professors; their overall academic and social integration is lower compared to other student groups (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Perez II, D., 2017). The generation level and gender of Mexican American students plays a significant role in the amount of challenges they must eventually face and overcome.

**Mentorship and University Readiness through Nonprofits**

First generation Mexican American high school students in California have access to various external university readiness nonprofits. School districts in central California are able to connect their students to university information and preparation thanks the support from these nonprofits. For example, a large number of school districts in central California have an active partnership with UC Merced’s Center for Educational Partnerships (CEP) office. According to information posted on their website, their mission is as follows, “The mission of the UC Merced Center for Educational Partnerships is to provide student, school, and parent-centered services that ultimately result in students having the greatest number of postsecondary choices from the widest array of options upon graduation” (Center for Educational Partnerships, n.d.). Through my own direct educational experience, advisors and directors at CEP regularly visit high needs districts with large Mexican American high school enrollments to provide direct
guidance services to students and parents that serve to increase overall college/career readiness rates including university admission and persistence rates. CEP has been around for close to 20 years and they have helped over 28,000 students and 9,000 families attain post-secondary goals through state and federally funded programs including UC Scholars/Early Academic Outreach Program (EAOP), Upward Bound, Talent Search, Gear Up, and the Parent Empowerment Program (Center for Educational Partnerships, n.d.). Advisors from nonprofits like CEP have helped thousands of first generation Hispanic American students to access the university system; they have done this by working directly with students and families and meeting with them at over 40 high schools (Center for Educational Partnerships, n.d.).

Another nonprofit organization that actively engages with students, parents, and school districts is the Ivy League Project (ILP). According to information on the ILP website,

The Ivy League Project (ILP) was founded by Martín Mares in 1992 to encourage economically disadvantaged students to apply to the most prestigious universities in America. The program selects the most talented and promising 10th and 11th grade students and takes them to visit the top universities on the east coast (Ivy League Project, n.d.)

Since the ILP was founded in 1992, hundreds of Hispanic American students, many also first generation, have been admitted to Ivy League and elite universities (Ivy League Project, n.d.). Students who join the ILP attend a series of workshops that are made available on Saturdays; these workshops range from information on financial aid, the university application, professional guest speakers, and student panels that serve to inspire students to network and ultimately apply to elite universities (Ivy League Project, n.d.). Every spring break, students are also able to take a trip to the east coast where they get to visit many Ivy League universities, other elite universities, and historical sites, museums, and monuments (Ivy League
Project, n.d.). This early and unique exposure to the Ivy Leagues has motivated many students to apply, attend, and graduate from some of the country’s top ranked universities (Ivy League Project, n.d.). Through his visionary lens and nonprofit organization, Mr. Mares has served as a transformational agent and mentor to hundreds of Hispanic American students in California and throughout the United States.

**Programs and Organizations for First Generation Undergraduates**

Since first generation students face various challenges, many universities have implemented programs specifically designed to support their academic, career, transitional, and personal/social needs. For example, elite universities like the University of Pennsylvania have created orientation programs designed to help first generation students or students to succeed; one of those programs is the Penn First Plus Pre-Freshman Program (PFP) (Pre-Freshman Program, n.d.). According to information on their website,

PFP is an academically rigorous and intensive four-week summer program preceding New Student Orientation (NSO). Program participants receive comprehensive support services that begin with PFP and continue throughout the students’ undergraduate experience at Penn. PFP is a chance for participating students to get an academic and social edge, while quickly becoming familiar with campus resources and the Penn community. The program, while academic in nature, encourages students to form lasting bonds of friendships through regular social and cultural activities. Students who have participated in the program report that it has made the difference in their life at Penn. (Pre-Freshman Program, n.d.)

The PFP provides early exposure to students that might experience adjustment challenges and allows them to network, socialize, and accommodate to new life at the University of Pennsylvania. In addition to programs like the PFP, various active Hispanic student organizations exist at the University of Pennsylvania under
the umbrella of La Casa Latina (Casa Latina, n.d.). According to Casa Latina (n.d.), over 15 Hispanic groups, clubs, and organizations exist in order to empower Hispanic undergraduates; these include Society of Hispanic Professionals Engineers (SHPE), Mujeres Empoderadas (ME), Istmo y Vos (I.Vos), Sigma Lambda Upsilon/Señoritas Latinas Unidas Sorority, Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlan (MEChA), Asociacion Boricua, Grupo Quisqueyano (GQ), Penn for Immigrant Rights (PIR), Wharton Latino, Queer People of Color (QPOC), Active Cross-Cultural Training in our Neighborhoods (ACTION), La Vida Magazine, Onda Latina, Cuban American Undergraduate Student Association (CAUSA), The Andean Representation (AREP), La Unidad Latina Lambda Upsilon Lambda Fraternity, Mex at Penn, Fuerza, Lambda Theta Alpha (LTA), and The Minority Association of Pre-Health Students (MAPS) (Casa Latina, n.d.).

In California, programs designed to support first generation students include Student Support Services (SSS) TRIO, Upward Bound, Talent Search, University of California (UC) Scholars, Campus Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP), Equal Opportunity Program (EOP), California Student Opportunity and Access Program (CAL-SOAP), and the Puente Program. Other programs that are specific to a university and major are also available to students; some examples are UC Davis’ First Generation Initiative and UC Berkeley’s PREP mentor program. According to the UC Berkeley Engineering Department website,

The PREP Mentor Program is a year-long program designed to provide individualized mentorship, professional development opportunities, and academic support to first-generation, low-income, and underrepresented students in the College of Engineering. As part of this program, you’ll build strong relationships with your mentor or mentee, increase your awareness of campus and off-campus resources, and gain the skills needed to succeed at Berkeley. (Berkeley Engineering, n.d., para. 1).
The University of California, inclusive of 10 universities, enrolls approximately 226,000 undergraduate students, of which 41% are first generation college students (University of California, n.d.-a; n.d. -b). According to the University of California (2020), 80% of students who identify as first-generation undergraduates eventually earn a bachelor’s degree within 6 years. Nationwide, 21% of first-generation students will earn a bachelor’s degree compared to 57% of continuing generation students after 6 years of undergraduate studies (NCES, 2012). Although 35% of all undergraduates in the country are first generation students, an average of 16.3% of undergraduates at all eight Ivy Leagues are first generation students (NCES, 2016). All Ivy League universities also count with their own programs for first generation students; these programs include the Community Initiative at Yale, the First Generation Low Income (FGLI) Program at the University of Pennsylvania and Cornell, and the Scholars Institute Fellows Program (SIFP) at Princeton University. It is important to keep in mind that,

College campuses may provide valuable support resources such as cultural centers and mentoring that contribute positively to student integration. Conversely, college campuses may inhibit integration by harboring hostile campus racial climates, maintaining conflicting core values and lacking visible commitment to diversity. (Lopez, 2013, p. 270)

Based on new research, first generation students continue to experience barriers as they transition from university to the workforce. Compared to continuing generation students who have a bigger social network and family members that can coach them, first generation students have difficulty with securing higher paying jobs, creating professional resumes, preparing for interviews, and are generally less confident as it pertains to the job search process (Marcus, 2021). Additionally, soon after graduation and compared to continuing generation graduates, first generation students make less money, accept job offers more rapidly, and are generally overqualified for the positions they accept
Ten years after earning their bachelor’s degree, first generation students make substantially less money when compared to continuing generation graduates as employers tend to hire “more prepared” students who also tend to come from high SES family backgrounds (Marcus, 2021). Also, “When first generation students do aim high, still other research shows that employers prefer candidates from elite universities who are more likely to be from higher income levels and social classes and families in which other people have degrees” (Marcus, 2021, para. 12). Due to financial pressures and other barriers, first generation students are less likely to be involved in extracurricular activities, seek on campus career counseling, and apply for paid internships which greatly help continuing generation students secure more high paying jobs (Marcus, 2021). Finally, recent research indicates that first-generation students have faced greater financial and family strains during the pandemic and were more likely to have lost on- or off-campus wages than their counterparts who aren’t first generation. They were also more than twice as likely to be responsible for children. (Marcus, 2021, para. 23)

Nationwide, first generation students are four times more likely to drop out of college during the first year of their undergraduate studies (Engle & Tinto, 2008). In addition, first generation students were seven times more likely to earn a bachelor’s degree if they started at a 4-year university right after high school compared to starting at a 2-year college (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Based on a nationwide sample, 52% of first-generation students entered a community after high school, whereas 13% went straight to a 4-year public university, and only 6% enrolled in a private 4-year university (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Transfer rates from a 2-year college to a 4-year university were also significantly lower for first generation students compared to continuing generation students. Specifically, “Only 14% of low-income, first-generation students transferred to four-year
institutions compared to 50% of their most advantaged peers within this time frame” (Engle & Tinto, 2008, p. 13). Additionally, first generation students were less likely to major in mathematics or science compared to continuing generation students (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

First generation students are overwhelmingly represented at for profit institutions and public 2-year colleges; an alarming 75% of low-income first-generation students enter these institutions after high school (Engle & Tinto, 2008). When reviewing the characteristics of first-generation college students, it is important to know that a large portion also come from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Based on recent data from the Center for First Generation Student Success (n.d.), the median family income for first generation students was $41,000 compared to $90,000 for continuing generation students. The median family income for first generation students is lower than the average yearly tuition rates at elite universities. First generation students would greatly benefit from better financial aid policies that do not require them to get school loans or require them to have to work part time to make up for personal expenses (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Those who earn a bachelor’s heavily rely on federal grants like the Pell Grant; however, they leave college with more student loan debt compared to continuing generation students (Engle & Tinto, 2008). The overall value of the federal Pell Grant has declined in past decades due to rising post-secondary education costs, making matters worse for first generation students and their families (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

Overall, first generation students are more likely to be older, identify as being female, have a disability, identify as a person of color, be a nonnative English speaker, have been born outside of the United States, have children, be single parents, and are financially independent from their parents (Engle & Tinto,
Compared to other “more advantaged” undergraduates, first generation students are also more likely to delay the start of their post-secondary studies, attend college nearby their home, attend college as part time students, live off campus, and have a full time job while attending a university (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Based on their analysis, “After 6 years, only 11% of low-income, first-generation students had earned bachelor’s degrees compared to 55% of their more advantaged peers” (Engle & Tinto, 2008, p. 2).

Driven to Escape Intergenerational Cycles of Poverty

About 10.5% of the U.S. population lives at or below the U.S. Census poverty threshold, which is measured by individuals making no more than $36 dollars per day or a family of four making no more than $72 per day; based on U.S. Census Bureau data from 2019, people who identify as Black/African-Americans (18.8%) or Hispanic (15.7%) are more likely to live below the poverty threshold compared to Asian/Asian Americans (7.3%) and Whites (7.3%) (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). Family stories of perseverance that would help to drive up a student’s motivation are left behind along with loved ones when students transition to elite universities. For example, “Latino males’ aspirations to graduate from a selective university were nurtured by hearing stories about the hardships parents endured in the United States” (Perez II, D., 2017, p. 126). Furthermore,

Coming from lower income homes, UFGLI [underrepresented, first generation and low income] students feel they do not have an option when it comes to succeeding. They are often their family’s key to exiting poverty and that is a huge motivational factor for being successful in college. (Ingersoll et al., 2021, p. 6)

The yearly tuition rates at Ivy League Universities is at least twice the amount of money the average low income Hispanic family makes in this country every year;
the average Ivy League tuition rate during the 2020/21 school year was $56,746 and estimated cost of attendance was $78,417 per year (Rakoczy, 2021). It is not surprising that many first-generation students are also driven to earn a college degree in order to “escape poverty” and assist their families financially (Perez II, D., 2017).

**Family Support**

As mentioned earlier, first generation university students experience a variety of barriers in their transition from high school to the university setting that affect overall retention rates. Separation from the family can be seen as a disadvantage for interdependent cultures as disconnecting minority youth from their community and collectivist cultures disempowers students to access their cultural capital and support, they would otherwise receive from family, community, and peers. (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). In addition,

Four common factors are identified as facilitating the college bound trajectories. These include: (a) Parental commitment to the importance of education, (b) parental support of adolescent autonomy, (c) nonverbal parental expressions of support for educational goals, and (d) the presence of faculty mentors in students' lives. (Ceballo, 2004, p. 183)

Coming from an interdependent and collectivist culture means that Mexican American students will rely on various people for information about college and overall support. Latina/o students establish networks of mutual support from family, friends, and high school staff to generate CCW and gain knowledge about the college admissions process (Perez, P.A. & McDonough, 2008). Applying for college or financial aid can be daunting tasks and can serve to discourage students from accessing the university. In a study conducted by Perez and McDonough (2008), Latina/o students relied on their parents, school counselors, siblings, relatives, peers, and other school staff for support with
college goals. Even if parents lack information about the college application process, they use encouragement and share stories of past struggles in order to motivate their children to get good grades, be respectful to others, and pursue higher education (Ceja, 2004). In addition to parents, mentors also help to pave the way for first generation students. Mentors can be teachers, religious figures, community members, and other educators that can serve to empower students. 

Paulo Freire (1993) referred to visionary mentors as *empowerment agents*.

Empowerment Agents, in contrast, not only understand the power of institutionalized support and social capital in the lives of youth and students from historically oppressed communities; they carry a vision of a more just, humanistic, and democratic society, deeply committed to an enlightened and fair distribution of societal resources, and to dismantling the structures of class, racial, and gender oppression. To alter the destinies of low-status students and youth, is not only to empower them with institutional support, but also to enable their lasting empowerment via a critical consciousness and the means by which they can transform themselves, their communities, and society as a whole. (Stanton-Salazar, 2010, p. 1098)

**Spirituality**

According to J. Gonzalez (2015), spirituality plays a significant role in Latina/o students’ decision to attend elite universities. Spirituality and or religion is used by first generation students to overcome multiple barriers (J. Gonzalez, 2015). Furthermore, “The spiritual faith was shared by their families and humbled the participants as they felt a sense of responsibility to their families and spiritual community to become successful and then return to their community to give back” (J. Gonzalez, 2015, p. 91). Additionally, “Many participants commented that as they researched and visited selective colleges and universities, spirituality played an important role in their view about campus life” (J. Gonzalez, 2015, p. 91). Recent research also found that first generation and low income students rely on religious and spiritual communities to persevere at universities (Ingersoll et al.,
Specificaly, “Affirming UFGLI [underrepresented, first generation and low income] students’ religious and spiritual identities and understanding how religion and spirituality work in their lives can assist these students in their acclimation to and success at university” (Ingersoll et al., 2021, p. 1). University counselors that assist first generation students can increase overall persistence and graduation rates by viewing students’ “religious and spiritual identities as resources that should be explored and supported” (Ingersoll et al., 2021, p. 1).

Spirituality and religion are cultural assets within the Latina/o community and these resources are used by undergraduates as perseverance tools.

Subtractive Schooling

According to research conducted by Yosso and Solorzano (2006), Latina and Latino students experience a much more challenging and inequitable educational pipeline that results in disproportionately lower post secondary completion rates. Out of 100 Latina/o students, 46 will go on to earn a high school diploma, eight will also earn a bachelor’s degree, two will earn a graduate degree, and less than one will earn a doctoral degree (Yosso & Solorzano, 2006). It is important to review the issue of subtractive schooling. According to Valenzuela (2005),

Schools subtract resources from youth in two major ways. The first involves a process of “de-Mexicanization,” or subtracting students’ culture and language, which is consequential to their achievement and orientations towards school. The second involves the role of caring between teachers and students in the educational process. De-Mexicanization erodes students’ social capital by making it difficult for constructive social ties to develop between immigrant and U.S. born youth. Social capital can be defined as the social ties that connect students to each other as well as the levels of resources (like academic skills and knowledge) that characterize their friendship groups. Regarding caring, teachers expect students to care about school in a technical fashion before they care about them, while
students expect teachers to care for them before they care about school. (p. 336)

Similar to elite universities, the PK12 educational system is generally subtractive to students of color in that the priorities and structures still revolve around Eurocentric values and expectations. Students who speak another language, like Spanish, are deficit labeled as “English language learners” (ELs) or “Long Term English Language Learners” (LTELs) instead using asset based terminology like “emergent bilinguals” and Spanish is ultimately replaced by English. Additionally and in regards to Mexican children, “When Mexican youth emerge from the schooling process as monolingual individuals who are neither identified with Mexico or equipped to function competently in the mainstream of the United States, subtraction can be said to have occurred” (Valenzuela, 2005, p. 339). As mentioned before, Latina/o students come from interdependent cultures that place high value on the immediate family, extended family or la familia, and the community. Latina/o students are nurtured and cared for by a large number of family members, mentors, and other empowerment agents.

In a recent keynote lecture uploaded to YouTube on the TED Talk Organization’s channel, Dr. Victor Rios, emphasized the importance of building “ecosystems of cariño” or ecosystems of care and validation in public education settings; Dr. Rios shared the responsibility that all district employees (classified, certificated, and administrators) have in caring for students and validating their existence and sharing interest for their culture (Rios, 2016). Rios (2016) also mentioned that school systems are still set up for middle class students and that many Latina/o students are in need to be cared for at schools, just like they are cared for at home. Along those lines, “Youth expect to be cared for before they begin to care about school” (Valenzuela, 2005, p. 336). Unfortunately, Latina/o youth in the U.S. experience a subtracting of the language and culture, and the
Spanish language is seen as “a barrier that needs to be overcome” (Valenzuela, 2005, p. 336). According to Valenzuela (2005), “Subtraction is further inscribed through tracking systems” (p. 336).

Oftentimes, students who are labeled as EL experience tracking through additional coursework requirements that limit their access to other academically rigorous programs and make them less likely to access the university and become first generation college graduates (Valenzuela, 2005). Students who are labeled as “English Only” (EOs) typically experience a different track system that allows them access to the university system as well as other college readiness programs. Valenzuela (2005) also alluded to a status hierarchy where ELs are at the bottom and EOs at the top, further dividing equity between both groups. As a result of subtractive schooling, Latina/o students tend to lose social capital and their second language after only two or three generations (Valenzuela, 2005). In order to reverse the negative academic outcomes that result from a Latina/o educational pipeline, Valenzuela (2005) emphasized the importance of caring relationships in the school setting and changing the culture of a school to be “authentically caring institutions.” According to Valenzuela, “lack of caring” was viewed as “lack of attention” that Latina/o students experienced from school teachers and staff and attention is the key to keeping students in schools and helping them pursue post-secondary educational goals (Valenzuela, 2005). Offering Latina/o students more cariño and looking at bilingual education from an asset-based perspective will help to change trajectories of students that we currently see in Yosso and Solorzano’s (2006) educational pipeline.

**Benefits of a University Degree**

With the aforementioned data in mind, college choice plays a paramount role in the post-secondary trajectories of many aspiring and academically focused
high achieving first generation Hispanic students. According to Solorzano and Yosso (2006), Latina/o students have lower university attainment as a result of various early issues including unequal PK12 conditions, failure of the community college transfer function, limited bachelor opportunities, experiencing educational isolation, alienation in grade school, and having to work harder than other races through personal persistence (p. 2). The decision to attend a 4-year university right after high school has the potential to transform the future outcomes of students and their families through long-term benefits of degree attainment including higher lifetime earnings, superior work options, improved health, a longer life, investments, and lower unemployment rates (Perna, 2000). The short-term benefits of attending college include the psychological benefits of a continued education, social benefits, exposure to cultural diversity, and increased social status (Perna, 2000). A study by Chan (2016) revealed that 87% of employers in this country still favor college graduates when making the decision to hire. In addition, “97 percent of good jobs created since 2010 have gone to college graduates” (Chan, 2016, p. 2). Also, on average, college graduates make $32,000 per year more than high school graduates (Edelson, 2020).

Even though labor market needs are drastically changing in the country, a university degree still holds a lot of value and most importantly, a degree holds power. Degree attainment would be able to fulfil various goals including social efficiency, social mobility, and democratic equality, but only if all students, regardless of race, are given an equal opportunity (Labaree, 1997). For instance, through their research, Carnevale and Rose (2015) discovered that college graduates (those with a bachelor’s degree or higher) generate above 50% of the country’s yearly economic worth. A study by Hout (2012) found various positive social and economic benefits that arise for individuals who earn a bachelor’s
degree including overall improvement on perception of life. “Education makes life better. People who pursue more education and achieve it make more money, live healthier lives, divorce less often, and contribute more to the functioning and civility of their communities than less educated people do” (Hout, 2012, p. 394). Overall, the U.S. economy also benefits from increased competitiveness that results from additional college graduates (Hout, 2012).

**Elite Universities**

Every year for the past 36 years, the *U.S. News and World Report* has published a report of the top universities in the country; these universities are among the most elite, but also offer a variety of attractive academic programs and student support services, including great financial aid packages to those who get admitted. In sum, a total of 1,452 post-secondary institutions are assessed to determine their national standing. According to the *U.S. News and World Report*, the following is a listing of the top 25 nationally ranked universities in order from first to 25th: Princeton, Harvard, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Yale, Stanford, University of Chicago, University of Pennsylvania, California Institute of Technology, Johns Hopkins University, Northwestern University, Duke University, Dartmouth College, Vanderbilt University, Rice University, Washington University in St. Louis, Cornell University, University of Notre Dame, University of California Los Angeles (UCLA), Emory University, University of California at Berkeley, Georgetown University, University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, and the University of Southern California (USC) (*U.S. News and World Report*, n.d.).

Students who decide to attend an elite university are presented with two major benefits including having a higher likelihood of earning a bachelor’s degree and receiving additional support and services as elite universities make, on
average, a higher financial investment per student than other universities; despite higher tuition rates, the additional investment was a direct cost to the university itself (Hout, 2012). Elite universities have significantly higher graduation rates than say, public universities (College Factual, n.d.). According to the 2021 *U.S. News and World Report* ranking of top universities, the top 10 universities in the United States are, from Number 1 to Number 10: Princeton, Harvard, Columbia, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), Yale, Stanford, University of Chicago, University of Pennsylvania, California Institute of Technology (CIT), and Johns Hopkins University (U.S. News & World Report, n.d.). Based on 2021 data, the average graduation rate for the above elite universities is 94.7%, with Harvard and Princeton topping the graduation rate listing at 98% each; the combined yearly average tuition rate exceeds $50,000 for each of these universities. (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). Melguizo (2007) also revealed that Latina/o students who attend an elite university entered with higher grade point averages and SAT scores compared to students who attended public 4-year universities. The success of student support programs at elite universities is helping more Latina/o students to earn degrees; first generation students have access to transition, academic, and attractive financial aid packages (Melguizo, 2007).

**Assimilation and the Imposter Syndrome**

Although very difficult, upward mobility for students of Latina/o backgrounds can still be achieved through higher education, however, at a cost linked to assimilation levels. A study by Lopez (2013) found that the more assimilated students were to European American culture, the higher the chances of being successful and graduating from a predominantly white institution (PWI); although they offered a lot of resources, there is no denying that Ivy League
universities also fall under the category of PWI institutions. First generation college students of color from Latina/o backgrounds will experience many challenges in their transition to an elite university. For example, “Latino students who experience a greater degree of stress during the first few months of the college transition are from racially homogeneous high schools, suggesting that they are less assimilated” (Lopez, 2013, p. 274). Furthermore,

Entering this unfamiliar environment may cause stress due to the social interaction in an unfamiliar context and the pressure to assimilate, which may explain why these students report more school, friendship, coming to college, intergroup, and achievement stress at the beginning of the year than their Latino peers who have more exposure to Caucasian students and may be more assimilated. (Lopez, 2013, p. 275)

First generation Latina/o students who attended a homogeneous high school where they received less exposure to other racial groups on a regular basis are also more likely to feel isolated and less integrated at an elite university than their European American peers (Lopez, 2013). In addition,

Latino students who attend elite predominantly White institutions may experience more challenges successfully transitioning into the campus community as racial and ethnic tensions may be high. Thus Latino college students may feel less comfortable and more isolated in a predominantly White environment. (Lopez, 2013, p. 270)

Because the structures of elite universities are still very Eurocentric, high schools and universities must be intentional about promoting multicultural events, hiring more professors of Color, as well as hiring university administrators that resemble the current racial diversity of the United States. On the other hand, Latina/o students who are provided on campus opportunities to embrace their cultural identity and join cultural clubs at predominately white institutions have a higher likelihood of remaining enrolled and graduating (Ceballo, 2004).

There are many costs and risks associated with attending an elite university, but there are also many advantages. Some of those costs are associated with the
fact that there is very little racial and cultural diversity on those campuses that can lead to feelings of imposter syndrome and make matters worse for first generation students. First generation students experience more stress than other students and that contributes to feelings of Imposter Syndrome (Holden et al., 2021). According to Holden et al., (2021), “Imposter Syndrome describes an individual who is high achieving yet fails to recognize their success as being earned, but instead attributes it to external factors such as networking, luck, timing, lowering standards, and their charm” (p. 2). Many first-generation students feel like a fraud and fear being discovered as not worthy or academically prepared enough to remain at the university (Holden et al., 2021). Additionally, “these high achieving individuals also fear being found out to be a fraud and having their achievements taken from them due to their inability to internalize their accomplishments” (Holden et al., 2021, p. 2). Research has also found the imposter syndrome to be associated with “mental health conditions, anxiety, depression, psychological distress, and reduced confidence in their own intelligence” (Holden et al., 2021, p. 2). On average, Hispanic undergraduate student enrollment across the eight Ivy League Universities (Brown, Columbia, Cornell, Dartmouth, Harvard, University of Pennsylvania, Princeton, and Yale) was 9.6% in the fall of 2012; during the same semester, the average enrollment of undergraduate White students was 45.6% (Patton et al., 2015, p. 203). Due to this reality, mentorship programs, rigorous academic tracks, and high-quality counseling services must be available to Mexican American students in the PK12 educational system to better prepare students for life at elite universities.

**Importance of Counseling and Early Planning**

School counselors, teachers, and other mentors can make a world of difference when it comes to encouraging high achieving high school students to
dream big. A high school campus culture of high expectations will help to positively impact the lives of low income and first-generation Latina/o students. According to McDonough (2005), “Improving counseling would have a significant impact on college access for low income, rural, and urban students, as well as, students of color” (p. 6). Early guidance and support from school counselors might better serve students who are from special population demographics. Academic planning, career exploration, and exposure to the university system should begin as early as the middle school level instead of the high school level. College access for “at promise” students would also increase if the student to counselor ratio was improved and counselors had less students on their caseloads and more time to provide quality guidance to students and parents (McDonough, 2005). Students would also benefit from acceleration instead of remediation, for example, taking advanced math coursework like Algebra in middle school would increase students’ likelihood of getting admitted directly into a 4-year university after high school (McDonough, 2005).

Summary

First generation students face a mountain of barriers as they transition from high school to post-secondary institutions. They are more likely to be of lower socioeconomic backgrounds, be Hispanic, apply directly to a 2-year college or a for profit university, are subjected to a PK12 educational pipeline that is culturally and linguistically subtractive, are less likely to earn a bachelor’s degree, and also experience a mismatch between their culture and that of an elite campus that leads to increased loneliness and homesickness. Due to their family’s socioeconomic status, they are also more likely to work part time while in college, have children, leave college with more student loan debt, and have a higher likelihood of dropping out after the first year of college. First generation students who enroll at
a 4-year university are seven times more likely to earn a bachelor’s degree compared to those who go straight to a 2-year college. Although drastically more selective, elite universities have higher student support services and higher graduation rates. Despite the various challenges, CRT and CCW allow us to review cultural strengths and capitals that are used by Hispanic students in order to survive and thrive at some of the country’s top universities.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Although Hispanic Americans are now the second largest racial/ethnic group in the United States, first generation Mexican American students still face various challenges that prevent them from gaining admission to elite universities. Despite the numerical rise in the Hispanic population, the undergraduate enrollment rate of Hispanic students at renowned universities continues to remain drastically low compared to other racial and ethnic groups including European Americans, Asian Americans, and International students (College Factual, n.d.). To make matters worse, students from Hispanic backgrounds are “often characterized as academically underprepared for college, lacking cultural fit, and having poor coping responses, all of which affect their overall well-being and reduce their chances of succeeding in college” (Kim et al., 2014, p. 247). The number of challenges that first generation Mexican American students must overcome is overwhelmingly daunting. First generation students also face a great deal of challenges that they must overcome in order to be the first in their families to earn a university degree. Recent research also indicates that “Latino males are more likely to drop out of high school, pursue employment versus educational opportunities, and leave college before graduating” (Perez II, D., 2017, p. 123). Additionally, "Latina students are the least formally educated female ethnic group in the United States. In nearly every measure of education achievement (achievement tests, high school completion, college participation, college graduation rates), Latina students lag behind their female counterparts” (K.P. Gonzalez et al., 2003, p. 147). This qualitative narrative inquiry study will center
around the experiences of academically high achieving first generation Mexican American students currently attending an Ivy League and elite universities.

**Statement of the Problem**

Based on 2019 census data, the number of enrolled Hispanic students at elite universities continues to remain disproportionately low despite Hispanic Americans being the second largest ethnic/racial subgroup in the country and the largest in the state of California (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). Although the United States is more racially diverse than ever before, especially at the PK-12 level, some racial groups, specifically students of Latina/o background are not benefiting from the economic prosperity of the country and are subject to alternate educational pipelines (Covarrivias & Lara, 2013; Solorzano et al., 2005). On average, Hispanic undergraduate student enrollment across the eight Ivy League Universities (Brown, Columbia, Cornell, Dartmouth, Harvard, University of Pennsylvania, Princeton, and Yale) was 9.6% in the fall of 2012; during the same semester, the average enrollment of undergraduate European American/white students was 45.6% (Patton et al., 2015, p. 203). Based on 2020/21 school year data, the percentage of undergraduate Hispanic enrollment compared to European American undergraduate enrollment at the Ivy Leagues was 9.2% versus 39.9%, respectively (College Factual, n.d.).

**Theoretical and Conceptual Framework**

The theoretical framework guiding this study is Yosso’s CCW model and includes Perez Huber (2009) and Rendon et al.’s (2014) expansion to the cultural capitals; CCW stems from CRT. T. J. Yosso is known within the research community for her commitment to shifting the narrative from deficit to asset-
based thinking when it comes to doing research with People of Color, including first generation Mexican American students. According to Yosso (2005), CRT shifts the research lens away from a deficit view of Communities of Color as places full of cultural poverty disadvantages, and instead focuses on and learns from the array of 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. (p. 69)

The six CCW capitals have been used as an asset based theoretical framework to describe how People of Color use these capitals or cultural strengths in combination or separately to survive and persevere in education (Park et al., 2019). The counter stories of Latina/o students “provide a clear message that Latino families, especially parents, offer rich, valuable, and transferrable cultural capital that can be mobilized in [students’] academic and professional careers” (Gonzales, 2012, p. 125).

This research study is framed on an asset-based approach and an elaboration on the CCW capitals including the work of Perez Huber (2009) and Rendon et al. (2014). Rendon et al. (2014) expanded cultural capitals to include academic capital, adaptability capital, ethnic consciousness capital, pluri consciousness capital, and spiritual capital. Furthermore, J. Gonzalez (2015) and Perez Huber’s (2009) research revealed the impotence of spiritual capital among Hispanic Americans. Spirituality is a cultural asset within the Latina/o community, and it is used as a perseverance tool. A more detailed description on these 11 capitals was presented in Chapter 2. When applied to the transition between high school to elite university settings, the CCW helps researchers to explore the various talents, assets, and strengths that are utilized by students of color at elite universities in order to thrive and ultimately find success. First generation
Mexican American students might rely on one, a few, many, most, or all of these cultural capitals to persevere in the face of adversity and to thrive at institutions that were not designed for them; the research will help to reveal more details. The integration of the CCW model will be used due to its goal to expand social and racial justice through an assets-based lens.

**Purpose of the Study**

A desired goal of this study was to increase the overall percentage of first generation Mexican American students who earn a bachelor’s degree from elite universities through a deeper exploration of new knowledge gained through the research process. The purpose of this research study was to obtain information from first generation Mexican American elite university students to add to the literature in regards to challenges, successes, motivators, and influences that are utilized to thrive at the post-secondary level. This study investigated the roles that *la familia*, high school educators, high school academic coursework, university readiness programs, counselors, and mentorship played in preparing students for admission and persistence at Ivy League and elite institutions. Additionally, the study investigated any challenges that first generation Mexican American students faced in their transition from high school to the university. An additional focus of this dissertation was to identify the relationship and/or impact of the various CCW capitals (Perez Huber, 2009; Rendon et al., 2014; Yosso, 2005) that are used by first generation Mexican American college students to survive, navigate, and/or thrive at elite universities.
Research Questions

The following research questions guided all aspects of the investigation in an effort to understand the educational experiences of first generation Mexican American elite university students.

**RQ1:** How do first generation Mexican American students utilize Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) capitals to prepare for and select elite universities?

**RQ2:** How do first generation Mexican American students use Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) capitals to navigate through their undergraduate studies at elite universities?

Research Design/Methods

Qualitative research, as defined by Bhattacharya (2017), “aims to work within the context of human experiences and the ways in which meaning is made out of those experiences” (p. 6). Unlike quantitative inquiry intended to reach a wider group, qualitative research goes deeper into understanding the human experience of a small group or an individual; it is not meant to discover patterns or make predictions for the general population. Qualitative inquiry is used to understand the experience of a small group or individual, to interrogate and identify workable solutions to issues related to inequities and marginalization, and to deconstruct assumptions or stereotypes (Bhattacharya, 2017). In qualitative research, various methods are used, including interviews, review of documents and artifacts, observations, and data from questionnaires (Bhattacharya, 2017). Qualitative inquiry was appropriate for this study because it allowed for the deeper and more meaningful understanding and documentation of the educational experiences of a historically underserved group, first generation Mexican American students, during a critical time in their educational journey. This
dissertation used narrative inquiry to document and validate stories told by participants. Participant narratives were used as the principal data source for this study.

Counter-narratives touch on the importance of personal narratives shared by People of Color that counter stories from the white/European American norm. Advocates of CRT transformed studies to focus on storytelling as a method for examining shared experiential knowledge among People of Color. An example of a counter narrative is documenting the sacrifices that first generation Mexican American students must experience in order to be the first in their family to earn a university degree; such stories are seldomly highlighted in U.S. mainstream media. Another example of a counter narrative is capturing the financial hardships that low income families had to face during the global pandemic; many farm working families had no choice but to keep on working in order to feed their families. Capturing the narratives of the farmworker experience during the global pandemic would give voice to the voiceless in our society; this is another great example of a counter narrative. The invisibility of certain social classes is essentially slowly eradicated through the counternarratives of oppressed and marginalized groups. Studies that use counter narratives provide insights into the disproportionate resources, opportunities, and access within races. Storytelling also allows culturally diverse populations to tell their truths instead of having the dominant culture narrate their stories. Through the storytelling process, Mexican American students can document their strengths and weaknesses, their needs, make connections, and create meaning of their experiences. Providing an opportunity for participants to tell their stories and define who they are is a way to humanize both the participants as well as the researchers as both “co-construct” their own truths, (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The qualitative research method is also
emergent in design, meaning that the researcher must be open to being flexible with the entirety of the research process and open to deviating from the research initial plan as future data or circumstances might slightly change the course of the entire study; a researcher must also be prepared to fully embrace whatever data results from the research process, even if that data was unexpected (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

As suggested by Bhattacharya (2017), the qualitative researcher will attempt to make information exchange bidirectional, sharing information about personal education in the public school system and responding to questions in order to assist participants feel more comfortable sharing their own educational experiences. Informal open-ended questions will allow for a more natural conversation focused on our area of interest while building a trusting relationship with the participants. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), the researcher is a “key instrument” in qualitative research as they “collect data themselves through examining documents, observing behavior, and interviewing participants” (p. 43). The interview instrument is also created by the researcher and includes many open-ended questions; this dissertation used various open ended questions.

The analysis of the data collected took into consideration “The issue of power relations as a principal concern of narrative inquiry. Multiple issues arise in the collecting, analyzing, and telling of individual stories and building awareness of this responsibility is crucial” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 73). Additionally, “Narrative researchers situate individual stories within participants’ personal experiences (their jobs, their homes), their culture (racial or ethnic), and their historical contexts (time and place). Being context sensitive is considered essential to narrative inquiry” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 72). The use of narrative inquiry allows researchers to review the life of one or various participants; these stories
that are often shared via interviews give researchers a glimpse into those lived experiences.

**Sampling and Setting**

Purposeful and snowball sampling was used to recruit participants for this study. Through the use of purposeful sampling, the researcher was intentional with selecting participants that met the established qualifying criteria. In the case of this study, the criteria for selecting participants was as follows: (1) participants had be 18 years of age or older, (2) self-identified as Mexican American, (3) self-identified as a first generation college student (parents did not have a bachelor’s degree), (4) must have attended a California high school, and (5) must have been enrolled or recently graduated from an Ivy League or an elite university (top 25 nationally ranked universities). Participants were asked to answer a brief survey inclusive of the above criteria to determine their eligibility for the study.

Snowball sampling was used to solicit participants for this study. Moreover, “In snowball sampling, a researcher identifies one or two people they would like to include in their study but then relies on those initial participants to help identify additional study participants” (PressBooks, 2018). In order to better understand the experiences of first generation Mexican American students who are currently or who formerly attended an elite university, participants were actively recruited through various means. First, the founder of the Ivy League Project mentorship organization was contacted regarding the purpose of this study in hopes that he would connect the researcher with currently or formerly enrolled first generation Mexican American Ivy League/elite university students. The researcher also contacted administrators within his network of contacts to recruit students that were attending an elite university.
Once participants were selected, details of the study were provided to them and they were kindly asked to share the contact information of other potential participants including close friends who met the study’s criteria. Initial contact with participants was conducted over the phone and interviews were conducted via Zoom. Pre-screening phone interviews were conducted to reach a target sample of at least 10 confirmed participants. As stated by Creswell and Poth (2018), the recommendation for a qualitative study is as follows, “Select one or more individuals who have stories or life experiences to tell, and spend considerable time with them gathering their stories through multiple types of information” (p. 71). Participants were offered a $25 Starbucks e-gift card as incentive for participating. In addition, participants were presented with various opportunities to withdraw from the study at any time.

**Participants and Levels of Participation**

A goal of this study was to obtain a sample of at least 10 confirmed participants. However, after many attempts to reach that target number, seven participants met the eligibility criteria and completed the entire study. The study consisted of two levels of participation. The first phase dealt with participant recruitment. Appendix A includes the researcher’s letter of introduction, participation eligibility criteria, and general information about the study. Appendix B includes all research consent forms. Appendix C includes a short 5-question demographic Google Form survey protocol that will be used to recruit participants and determine study eligibility. Responses to the recruitment survey were analyzed to confirm interview participants. Only confirmed participants were asked to complete the second level of participation, the semi-structured interview. The second level of participation was a semi-structured interview conducted via Zoom. The interview lasted anywhere from 60 to 70 minutes. The researcher took
a few minutes to build rapport with the participants by sharing the purpose of the research study and thanking them for their time. The researcher briefly shared his positionality and his own experience as a first-generation university graduate of an elite university, the University of Pennsylvania. Participants were interviewed individually. During the interview, the researcher used the following semi-structured interview protocol. Appendix D includes the 15 question semi-structured interview protocol that was used in this study.

**Data Collection Procedures**

Data were collected from the short demographic survey as well as the semi-structured interviews; transcripts from each individual interview were generated and carefully reviewed by the researcher. Since this study was conducted during the global COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews were conducted via the Zoom online video conferencing platform. As a result, no in person interviews or meetings were conducted with the participants. The interviews were conducted with an opportunity for participants to add personal anecdotes and did not necessarily follow the presented protocol. According to Swaminathan and Mulvihill (2017), “Interviews are complex interactions that require the researcher to simultaneously engage in listening, recording, thinking of follow up questions, figuring out what to pursue and what to back away from, and working through the general direction of the interview” (p. 45). Participant narratives gathered through the interview process served as the main form of data collection in this narrative study. Furthermore, “Open-ended questions are questions that elicit descriptive answers, stories, and experiences from participants” (Swaminathan & Mulvihill, 2017, p. 45). All interview questions that were used in this study were open ended questions.
Ethical Considerations

Prior to conducting the research, and since data was collected on human subjects, I sought formal permission from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) committee. At California State University, Fresno, the entity that reviews IRB approval for research on human subjects is the Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects (CPHS). CPHS provided IRP approval for this study on October 28th, 2021 (approval #1179). Soon after approval, study participants were given an informed consent form which served to explain to participants the purpose of the study, any potential risks, and confidentiality assurances. All participants were notified that their interview recordings would be stored in a password secured location. Participants were given the opportunity to choose a pseudonym instead of their real names for this study. The informed consent notified participants that they could withdraw from the study at any given time. Study findings will be shared with the participants once this dissertation is officially published.

Data Analysis and Coding Methodology

Participant interviews were audio and visually recorded and transcribed to ensure accuracy. As a first step, transcripts were read to get an overall feel for participant responses. The researcher also highlighted significant statements or phrases, identifying codes, and then created categories or themes. The data from interviews were first compiled, followed by the next step which was the capturing of “significant statements,” quotes, and lived experiences, which then led to the discovery of themes and eventually allowed for the understanding of students’ stories (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The five steps used by the researcher to analyze the data included: structuring unstructured data, reviewing data for accuracy, development of initial codes, grouping codes into themes, and narrowing down themes through the process of thematic analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Through
a qualitative data analysis process, new knowledge about the experiences of first
generation Mexican American students who attended or recently graduated from
Ivy League or elite universities was gained. The researcher paid close attention
and noted any major themes that emerged during and after each interview. In
addition to interview data, other sources of qualitative data collection included
personal, family, or social artifacts that belong to the participants (Creswell &
Poth, 2018).

**Limitations**

One of the possible limitations of this study was lack of in person access to
participants. Zooming during the COVID-19 pandemic made it more challenging
to build trust and rapport among participants since we had to meet virtually,
instead of face to face. Qualitative research calls for a “natural setting” and the
Zoom environment might itself be a limitation that made it a bit more difficult to
build deeper rapport with the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Another
possible limitation was the disproportionate gender distribution of the seven final
participants in this study. Although a goal of this study was to secure a balanced
number of female and male participants who majored in a variety of fields,
including STEM fields, the final distribution of participants included six females
and one male.

**Summary and Study Significance**

In conclusion, this study aimed to examine the experiences of first
generation Mexican American elite university students; this exploration took place
through listening to stories shared by participants. A theoretical and conceptual
framework was utilized that includes the integration of Yosso’s CCW; a total of
11 cultural capitals was explored. The goal of the study was to confirm at least
seven participants through purposeful and snowball sampling. The duration of interviews was between 60 and 70 minutes in length, per participant, and each participant was interviewed once. There were two levels of participation. The first level dealt with participant recruitment and asked for completion of a short demographic survey that was used by the researcher to determine eligibility. Once participants were selected, they were interviewed individually over Zoom and were asked the 15 questions that were part of the semi structured interview protocol. Participants who successfully completed the study were offered a $25 Starbucks gift card as an incentive and appreciation of their time and efforts. Qualitative data analysis was used to review the data and to find the codes and themes that helped to answer the research questions. An assets-based approach was used with this research study to elaborate on the various CCW capitals that first generation and Mexican American students relied on in their decision to apply, enroll, and be successful at elite universities.
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS/OUTCOMES

Introduction

This narrative inquiry research study analyzed the various cultural assets utilized by first generation Mexican American students to apply to and thrive at elite universities; this is social justice education and transformative research as evidenced by the significant racial discrepancy of Hispanic/Mexican American undergraduate enrollment across U.S. elite universities. The findings of this research study are presented through the application of a CCW theoretical and conceptual framework. As stated in Chapter 2, CCW originated from CRT (Yosso, 2005). Based on Yosso’s (2005) research, cultural capital refers to the talents, strengths, and positive experiences that People of Color learn from their cultures, communities, and families to access and thrive in environments that historically, were not designed for them. CRT and CCW served to positively shift the mainstream societal narrative for People of Color from deficit based to asset and strength based (Yosso & Solorzano, 2006). In this study, I expanded the original 6 CCW capitals (aspirational capital, familial capital, linguistic capital, navigational capital, resistant capital, and social capital) to include five additional cultural capitals (academic capital, adaptability capital, ethnic consciousness capital, pluri consciousness capital, and spiritual capital) for a total of 11 CCW capitals (Perez Huber, 2009; Rendon et al., 2014; Yosso, 2005). Together, the above mentioned 11 capitals were combined to form the main theoretical and conceptual framework that was used in the analysis of data for this study. Through research findings, this chapter details which capitals were used by first generation Mexican American elite university students that ultimately allowed them attain success and persevere at many of the-country’s elite universities.
The results of this study will add to the research literature on topics related to first generation and academically high achieving Mexican American students who aspire to attend an elite university. As we have learned in previous chapters, the odds are immensely against this demographic of talented students and compared to other racial and ethnic groups, only a small percentage of Hispanic Americans are able to earn a bachelor degree upon enduring a systemically and traditionally inequitable U.S. PK12 public education pipeline (Yosso & Solorzano, 2006). In addition to adding to the research literature, the results of this study will better inform the PK12 public education system as to how to best support first generation student in their trajectory from high school to elite universities. A semi-structured interview protocol was undertaken with seven participants that allowed the researcher to answer the study’s two research questions.

RQ 1: How do first generation Mexican American students utilize community cultural wealth (CCW) capitals to prepare for and select elite universities?

RQ 2: How do first generation Mexican American students use community cultural wealth (CCW) capitals to navigate through their undergraduate studies at elite universities?

Description of the Data Analysis

Although many potentially eligible participants were invited to participate, a total of seven participants met eligibility criteria and agreed to participate in this study. The methods that were described in Chapter 3 were used to explore the data that were compiled during participant interviews. Due to the ongoing global pandemic, all study interviews were held on the Zoom platform during the month of November of 2021. The Zoom platform was utilized to audio and visually record all interviews. The Zoom transcription feature was enabled and allowed for
the automatic generation of transcriptions for all seven semi structured interviews. Once an interview was finalized, the researcher took time to review the transcript and audio recordings for accuracy. The researcher carefully reviewed narratives and edited the transcript as necessary to ensure the precision of statements. The researcher followed the same process at the end of each interview, carefully reviewing the audio and video recordings against the auto generated transcriptions. The meticulous review of each transcript took anywhere from two to three hours per participant or about a combined 20 hours for all seven participants. The process of reviewing all transcripts multiple times made it possible for the researcher to acquire a deep level of understanding and form meaningful connections of the entire study. Once all transcripts were updated to accurately reflect participants’ voices, narratives were then reviewed for codes. In qualitative studies, codes are generated to describe a piece of text and help to reduce a large amount of narrative data into a single or a few words (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Codes also allow for the categorization of data, identification of key concepts, and analyzing multiple codes for a potential relationship among those codes (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The first step taken during the data analysis of this study was to carefully examine transcripts for accuracy which also allowed the researcher to become more familiar with the data. The researcher took time to read through the transcripts twice as an extra step to increase accuracy and to become very familiar with the data. Since transcripts were auto generated by Zoom’s audio transcription feature, it was important to review them for accuracy and fix any incorrectly generated words. For example, the word “Yale” would often transcribe as “Jail” and the Mexican state of “Michoacan” would often transcribe as “Michigan.” The second step in the data analysis entailed reviewing all transcripts, line by line, to
generate codes. Through analysis of the narratives, about 220 codes were generated to highlight areas in the narrative where the participants fully answered the interview question. The researcher manually coded all data and no qualitative data analysis software was used for the process. The semi-structured interview protocol that was approved for this research included a total of 15 questions. When all of the initially unstructured qualitative data were organized by the researcher into interview questions and participant name, the codes that were created resulted from highlighting statements into various colors. The color yellow was used when the participant answered the question, green was used for significant statements, and blue and pink colors were used for other closely related statements. Codes that were similar throughout the documents were reduced through the process of categorization or themes. Theme identification was the third and final step in the data analysis process. Once themes were finalized for each of the two research questions, the researcher carefully reviewed the themes to get an overall sense of the themes that emerged that ultimately responded to both of the study’s research questions. The researcher’s lens, experience, and reflections as a former first generation elite university graduate was critical in analyzing the themes that emerged. In conclusion, the researcher was fully satisfied with the final six themes that emerged from the entire data analysis process.

Findings (Organized by RQ)

As mentioned previously, in an effort to understand the educational experiences of first generation Mexican American students who at the time of the study, were either enrolled as elite university undergraduates or were graduates of those institutions, two research questions guided all aspects of the study. In order to discover findings through data analysis, the semi-structured interview protocol
included 15 interview questions. Seven participants fully completed the research expectations of this study.

During the interview, the first interview question asked participants to share a bit about themselves, their full name, their current or former elite university, and their undergraduate major. Table 5 summarizes that data which was also captured via the Google Form that was administered prior to the interview. In order to guarantee confidentiality, the table below includes pseudonyms for all seven participants. Participants were given the freedom to select their own pseudonym which included entering a first and last name as a free response in the Google Form. Out of the seven participants, two were graduates and five were still undergraduate students at various elite universities. Six participants identified as female and one identified as male. As part of the study qualification criteria, all seven participants self-identified as being at least 18 years old, Mexican American, first generation college students, California high school graduates, and having currently or formerly attended an elite university (one of the top 25 nationally ranked universities according to the 2021 U.S. News & World Report national university rankings report). The average age of all seven participants was 22. Except for one participant who declined the $25 Starbucks gift card incentive that was made available in appreciation of their participation, all other participants were sent their gift cards electronically. Additionally, the average duration of each interview lasted approximately 65 minutes via Zoom. Table 5 captures demographic details that were also used to answer the first interview question, “Tell me a little bit about yourself, including your full name, the university that you attend or attended, and your major.”
Table 5

Participant Demographics

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Questions 1 and 2 of the study were designed to determine whether cultural capitals were utilized by first generation Mexican American elite university students prior to and after enrolling at elite universities. The first research question attempted to capture narratives during and prior to the high school years and the second research questions was created to grasp any potential use of cultural capitals while participants attended elite universities. Questions 2 through 14 of the approved semi-structured interview protocol were intentionally created to capture on at least one of the 11 capitals that were fully defined in Chapter 2; these 11 cultural capitals were used by the researcher to expand on the original CCW framework. Each of the interview questions that were used in the semi-structured interview protocol addressed at least one of the 11 capitals. The following are situated narratives that bring life to the cultural capitals that were used by first generation Mexican American elite university students. Findings revealed that in order to survive and eventually thrive, first generation Mexican American elite
university students used a combination of all 11 cultural capitals to prepare for and select elite universities as well as to help them navigate through their undergraduate studies. Below are situated narratives from the participants that are first separated by the six main themes that answered both research questions. Additional situated narratives are included under each of the 11 cultural capitals.

**Research Question 1 Findings**

RQ1: How do first generation Mexican American students utilize community cultural wealth (CCW) capitals to prepare for and select elite universities?

The first research question was answered by three main themes that emerged from the data analysis process. First generation Mexican American elite university students and graduates were able to attain success because of the support of their families and support from mentors who represented external nonprofit university readiness organizations. The main driver or goal of these participants was to break cycles of intergenerational poverty for themselves and their families. One surprising and heartwarming commonality among all seven participants and the point at which they became the most visibly emotional during the interview was when they shared their main goal: to purchase a first home for their parents.

**Family Encouragement and Support**

Based on the research findings for the study, family support played a pivotal role in the trajectory of first generation Mexican American students who recently or formerly attended an elite university. Specifically, encouragement from various family members allowed participants to persevere. Six out of the seven participants grew up in traditional family backgrounds where both the biological mother and father were present. Once participant was raised by her mother and her
stepfather but her biological father was still very involved. Both, the father (or
father figure) and the mother, fully supported their children’s education since
elementary and into the post-secondary level. The coding process revealed that
participants’ family members encouraged them to persevere at elite institutions
after experiencing firsthand and/or witnessing the economic struggles of their
parents. Participants shared stories of their parents’ immigrating to the U.S., some
being undocumented, and all struggling financially. In addition to both parents,
participants were also encouraged by grandparents and extended family members.
The following narratives highlight the important role that family support and
familial capital play in supporting first generation Mexican American students to
fulfil their dreams. The family provided support prior to and after enrollment at
elite universities. The following participant narratives are provided as examples of
the family encouragement that they received while transitioning to elite
universities.

My parents played a huge role; they were very supportive. Luckily, my
father drove me to Los Angeles and took me to see the school [UCLA] and
he really liked it. I was really close to my family. So we would Face Time
all the time, and I would vent, and my parents would listen and
encourage me to keep going.” Mariana Rodriguez at UCLA

Both of my older sisters go to college and they pushed me to apply to
Berkeley. My parents also encouraged me to apply to good colleges.
However, once I enrolled, I wanted to leave right away…like every second
day…I was just crying, and I called everyone in my family, and I was like
‘please get me out of here’ and my mom was like ‘no,’ ‘you got this,
‘you can do it,’ and that really helped me.” Carla Gomez at UC Berkeley

Within my household, specifically, education was always emphasized. My
parents didn’t have the opportunity to go to college, so from a very young age, the focus on going to college was there…that was the expectation, it
was like ‘you’re going to do this kind of thing’…so from a very young age, these perceptions of college being the end goal were instilled in me.”
Marie Garcia at Dartmouth
As evidenced by the above three quotes, parents and siblings played a pivotal role in encouraging first generation Mexican American elite university students to persevere at elite universities. The encouragement that family members used is emphasized through the use of bold font. The three participant narratives are interconnected through family encouragement; without family encouragement, it would have been difficult for participants to thrive. Family members provided key encouragement and unconditional support that served as the emotional safety net for participants during challenging times. Students made use of communal thought and pushed themselves beyond ordinary limits to make their families proud.

**External Support: Mentorship and University Readiness Nonprofits**

Another revealing fact that surfaced during this study was the importance of mentorship. Participants were encouraged by key mentors in or outside of the school setting. Mentors were instrumental in not only providing information about the university application process but they also helped participants to believe in themselves and increase their overall self-efficacy beliefs. In the high school setting, various staff members including teachers, administrators, and library aides, and custodians helped to mentor and motivate students to dream big. As revealed by Rios’ (2016) research, mentors provided participants with validation, motivation, and overall cariño. Unfortunately, school counselors played a minimal role and made the least impact in encouraging first generation Mexican American students to apply to the nation’s elite universities. The few mentors that played a key role served as what Freire (1993) would refer to as “transformational agents;” these mentors are aware of inequities and are intentional about changing the status quo and helping more first generation and at promise students to accomplish their goals. These mentors continued to follow up
with participants while they were enrolled at the elite universities and provided them with emotional support and validation.

The research findings revealed that staff members or mentors who worked for external nonprofit university readiness organizations played the most significant role in exposing participants to a world of possibilities beyond their imaginations. Initially, most participants aspired to apply to and attend a university that was nearby their home. Staff members from these external nonprofits cared enough to the point that they became some of the most important mentors to the participants. External non-profit organizations helped students with the university application process, financial aid application, university entrance exam preparation (e.g., SAT Test Preparation coursework), as well as exposure to east coast elite universities via an annual trip designed for high school students. The data analysis process revealed that all seven participants were part of at least one external nonprofit university readiness organization. Some of the main organizations mentioned by participants were Better Angels, College Match, Ivy League Project, The East Los Angeles Community Union (TELACU), and Upward Bound. The following participant narratives provide a glimpse of the positive influence of mentors and university readiness nonprofits.

Mr. Mares, you know, he was the person who was checking up on us and he was one of those people that served as motivation too because you didn’t want to disappoint this man that worked so hard to get us admitted. But just the connections that were formed were great. We also met students from surrounding schools, so I actually went to Brown with two other students who got into Brown that same year, and one of them was part of the Ivy League Project.” Rebecca Hernandez at Brown

What comes to mind for me is the Ivy League project with Mr. Mares; he was a big mentor for me and he would teach us about networking and making connections and visiting colleges; he exposed us to the east coast and possible job opportunities. He would expose us to guest speakers; he played a big role in helping us see the possibilities. Mr. Mares believed
in me and he always encouraged me to apply to these colleges. Mariana Rodriguez at UCLA

These narratives are revealed that mentors go above and beyond providing university information to the participants. Mentors genuinely believed that these participants possessed the academic capital to succeed at elite universities. Mentors had high expectations for their mentees and in doing so, created a space for community accountability. Mentors were determined to help their mentees to succeed at any cost. Mentors saw potential in the participants that these participants did not see in themselves. Participants learned to depend on the continuous advice of these mentors and as a result, they were able to thrive at elite institutions. Similar to family encouragement, mentors also served as an emotional and psychological safety net for first generation Mexican American elite university students.

Driven to Escape Intragenerational Cycles of Poverty

All seven participants described growing up poor and shared stories on various economic hardships that their families faced and continue to face. Participants grew up in a variety of living situations, including multifamily rentals, that lacked basic necessities, for example, a working stove or a working air conditioner/heater. Participants often had to share a room with one or two other family members, and some lived in home garages that were later converted into rentals. One participant described feeling “invisible” while growing up because her family did not have their own mailing address. Another participant described dreading rainy days since their rental home’s ceiling leaked water and lacked a central heater. Another participant described growing up in a trailer that was parked behind the landlord’s home. Two participants had parents who worked as
street vendors in Los Angeles and described that as a risky and physically
demanding job. Another participant grew up in a mobile trailer that was parked
behind the landlord’s home. As a result of these and various other experiences that
were shared by participants, a main driver for them was to help their families to
escape poverty. During interviews, all seven participants become the most
emotional when they revealed their ultimate goal that drove their post-secondary
persistence: to purchase their parents their first home. First generation Mexican
American students push themselves beyond ordinary limits and used 11 forms
cultural capital in order to not only fulfill their own post-secondary dreams, but
more importantly, to fulfill their parents’ dreams of buying their first home. The
following narratives provide us with examples of participants’ desires to assist
their families financially.

My parents don’t own a home; they are still renting and they’re both
undocumented. I want to be the one to buy them a home, like my mom
keeps saying, ‘Oh, when you start working, I want you to buy me a home
with a garden in the front.’ It’s pressure because you are expected to
contribute to your family, to be my parents’ retirement; after everything
tey gave us, I have to give back. Alejandro Garcia at Yale

One of the things that motivates me is my family’s socioeconomic
status and getting out of it and not having the experiences that I have had
before, because of my low income and first generation and background. I
would definitely say that getting my parents a home is definitely the main
goal, I mean, I have multiple goals…but that’s definitely one of the main
goals.” Isabel Miranda at Yale

I want to provide for them [parents] after like they’re old, like after I
graduate. Hopefully, I am able to get a good job and can finally let them
rest and you know, get them a nice house. I want to do that for them.”
Carla Gomez at UC Berkeley

That’s the goal, buying my parents their first home. I want to buy it and buy
my dad a car. I think a lot of first generation students are in many cases
their parents’ retirement plan. We live very much like a day to day kind of
existence…we are just trying to make rent for the next month. I’m aspiring
to be the retirement plan for my parents and I am not being forced to
do this. Having seen their sacrifices...all of the things that my parents have gone through. I just don’t want them to be working into their 70s or so.” Marie Garcia at Dartmouth

The above narratives served to expose one heartwarming drive for many first-generation students: to someday assist their parents financially. Specifically, all seven participants expressed a desire to purchase a home for their parents and to support them financially for a long period of time. These excerpts also reveal that first-generation Mexican American elite university students could also be living out their parents’ social dreams. As a result, familial aspirational capital is birthed through these narratives. Knowing that their intelligent parents did not have the economic means to pursue higher education in Mexico, students aspired to fulfill their parents’ dreams of earning a university degree. The aspiration comes from a critical awareness that their parents, grandparents, and extended family members had to endure oppression and challenging labor histories both in Mexico and the United States. Having experienced many financial hardships themselves, participants and their parents envisioned a university degree as a liberation tool from working class labor oppression while creating a space for upward mobility/economic empowerment. Participants aspired to reward and liberate their family through accumulated wealth connected to the purchase of a home. A type of family affection is overcoming poverty, and in many cases, severe poverty.

Breaking intergenerational cycles of poverty is not seen as a burden, rather, it is a transaction; the parents did something for the students and now, they are willingly and wholeheartedly returning the favor.

To conclude, the answer to the first research question of the present study is summarized as follows. First generation Mexican American students prepare for and select elite university through the utilization of 11 cultural capitals, family
support, external support (mentorship and external nonprofits), and their internal drive to escape intergenerational cycles of poverty.

**Research Question 2 Findings**

RQ2: How do first generation Mexican American students use community cultural wealth (CCW) capitals to navigate through their undergraduate studies at elite universities?

The second research question was answered by three main themes that emerged from the data analysis process. First generation Mexican American students who were currently or formerly attending elite universities were able to persevere thanks to the support of programs and cultural organizations at elite universities, use of spirituality and/or religion, and were able to manage their thoughts and feelings around the imposter syndrome. While at an elite university, first generation Mexican American students continue to make use of various cultural capitals in order to persevere. Despite the challenges, participants thrived also because of their adaptability and resiliency.

**On Campus Community: First Year Orientation Programs and Hispanic Student Organizations**

Most participants described participating or being invited to participate in a pre-first year student orientation program. These orientation programs normally bring students to the university campus one or several weeks before the beginning of their first fall semester to experience life and coursework with other students from similar upbringings. Orientations programs are designed by elite universities to help students, including first generation students, to adjust to the university a bit before all other students arrive. In addition, nonprofits like College Match and the Ivy League Project also get first year students connected to other on campus
students, faculty, or contacts. First year orientation programs and the larger network support system from nonprofit university readiness programs help first generation Mexican American students to connect with other contacts and potential mentors during that critical first year of undergraduate studies.

On campus Hispanic organizations like *La Casa Latina, La Casa Hispanica, Hermanas Unidas*, and *Mecha* played a critical role in helping participants build community away from their families and hometowns. Participants often described not feeling ethnically, racially, or culturally represented across all elite campuses. Participants also expressed not seeing enough Mexican American students, especially Mexican American male students, in core classes, dining halls, or throughout campuses. The undergraduate enrollment data presented in Chapter 1 support the disproportionately low rates of Hispanic undergraduates at the top 25 nationally ranked universities; participants were conscious of the lack of diversity at elite campuses and were negatively affected by the low Hispanic on campus representation. On campus Hispanic clubs and organizations allowed participants to connect to other Spanish speaking Hispanics and provided them with a sense of belongingness on campus. In addition to on campus clubs, some participants also volunteered to be part of community-based nonprofits meant to support other Hispanics with immigration and translation services. All seven participants were fluent in Spanish, were proud of their cultural heritage, and expressed interest in retaining their Spanish speaking ability. Participants’ social lives were improved as a result of their involvement in on campus Hispanic organizations and clubs. Having the ability to speak Spanish gave an advantage to participants and they also viewed it as an asset, not a deficit. The following participant narratives provide us with evidence of the importance of building on campus community at elite universities.
During our freshman year, Brown did a really good job of building community with the freshman; you have to live on campus and be part of first year student groups. You live on the same floor. You have activities together to bond and meet other students. So, we really hit it off with a group of people on our floor; we had a really close group that stayed together throughout the year. Rebecca Hernandez at Brown

Yes, at Dartmouth it's called the First Year Student Enrichment Program. I think these pre orientation programs are very common across a lot of these liberal arts schools. It's expanded quite a bit but when I did it, it was just kind of like this one week introduction to Dartmouth. but it's been really helpful too because, in addition to an orientation period, they have their very own office, and they have been providing the first generation low income community here with continuous support throughout the four years. Marie Garcia at Dartmouth

So, speaking of La Casa [at Yale], I forgot to mention that being fluent in Spanish does allow me to communicate in Spanish with other people and just create this community with the things we have in common. Being fluent in Spanish has only helped me in one other environment in my undergrad experience, and that is in volunteering and specifically with a group, where I am I’m able to volunteer and translate for an initiative that helps immigrant woman meet their career goals and whatnot, so in that sense, being fluent has helped me to improve the lives of other immigrant women. Isabel Miranda at Yale

At Yale, few students share my background...they grew up in different environments and I think that for me, being able to speak Spanish with them and just sort of have conversations with them in Spanish, has been really helpful to just sort of get that sense of community. and feel like you know it's not just English here and by speaking Spanish I feel like I’m back at home. Speaking Spanish helps me to get that connection to my home; I am part of Mecha and attend various meetings. Alejandro Garcia at Yale

An analysis of the above narratives brings an important finding to light: first generation Mexican American elite university students possessed a strong desire to find and build community at these campuses. In order to survive and to ultimately thrive, it was important for participants to replicate a little piece of home away from home. The process of building community at these primarily white institutions entailed finding undergraduates with similar collectivistic
cultures, economic backgrounds, and racial profiles. Additionally, linguistic capital is revealed by participants desire to find other Spanish speaking Mexican Americans. Once participants found these undergraduates, they were very intentional in staying in touch and befriending other undergraduates who were similar to them and who might have also experienced a challenging transition from high school to these elite universities. Taking the initiative to build community with other similar undergraduates was key in building adaptability capital that allowed first generation Mexican American elite university undergraduates to not only survive but to thrive at institutions dominated by individualism and structures that were not racially and culturally designed for them. First generation Mexican American elite university thrived as a result of their action to build community.

**Use of Spirituality and/or Religion**

Most participants made use of spirituality and or religion while they attended an elite university. All participants identified as having Roman Catholic backgrounds; a few no longer attended mass but all seven believed in God. Participants prayed to God especially when times became tough. According to the participants, getting admitted to an elite university was not an accident, it was something that was meant to be or that they were destined for, and they committed to persevering, especially as they reflected on their parents’ hardships and economic struggles. The influence of religion and spirituality was significant as it allowed participants to persevere, develop a routine, develop a positive mindset, connect with other Hispanic Americans, preserve part of their culture, check in on their mental health, overcome doubts and fears, find peace, remain academically committed, and overcome homesickness. Several of the seven participants also attended Catholic mass on Sundays during their undergraduate years as it helped them to replicate routines from home while they attended an elite university.
Attending mass at the end of the week also gave them a mental health break from all of their studies and allowed them to more deeply and meaningfully connect with other undergraduates from various racial and ethnic backgrounds but especially with other first generation Mexican American students. Praying daily and/or when necessary provided participants with comfort, reassurance, and support from a divine higher power; the following participant narratives provide evidence of participant reliance on spirituality.

Spirituality is one of the main things that's kept me going right now. Like now I try to attend mass on campus on Sundays because I fundamentally believe that there isn't anything God doesn't throw at us that we're not ready for. Guadalupe Rodriguez at Cornell

I am a Catholic myself and so I would say that my faith and my spirituality does have a lot to do with how I go about things; it affects my everyday life and therefore affects my academics. I think [spirituality] played a major role, just because I feel that it helps me to become aware of my mental health. I also acknowledge my religion and it’s something that helps me to find peace for myself; praying and having faith and acknowledging that you know things happen for a reason and whatnot. What I’m trying to say is that my faith drives a lot of my peace and it's one of my main drivers for academia. Isabel Miranda at Yale

But it was through like the first few weeks, where I got to meet people in my college and I sort of saw that like you know there's other Mexicans, like me, and they we sort of just started going to church on Sunday so it's like you know, sort of like something that we grew up from home and we just wanted to like continue doing it here at Yale. So I wasn't religious, but I was like you know what I need to get a routine in place to get a sense of like something that would remind me back of like calm, so I tagged along and, like, still even to this day, I still go to church every Sunday. Maybe it’s not something spiritual; I think for me it's more like just having some sort of routine, some sort of semblance of a schedule and like just something to look forward to at the end of the week when it's like it's been a lot when it's like been a tough week, like, I know that I can go to church and sort of be mindful and be in my head and just decompress from the week and from the events of the week. Alejandro Garcia at Yale

When I was in high school, I actually became more involved in the Catholic Church. And so, when I left high school and went off to Brown, I was very
involved in the Catholic community there, and so it definitely was one of the places where I was able to reach out and to kind of get a little piece of home. A little bit different from my experience at home…Catholic priests are very different, you know in different places, depending on their background as well, so I really had a very positive experience with the church at Brown and actually was confirmed, I did my confirmation there as well. Rebecca Hernandez at Brown

These excerpts revealed that first generation Mexican American students rely on spirituality in order to thrive at elite universities. Participants learned to accept that their admission to an elite university was not an accident, but something that had a deeper, spiritual meaning. Participants reflected and had consciousness that God would not send anything their way that was not fundamentally meant for them. In acknowledging that their acceptance to an elite university was aligned to a divine life plan, participants also learned that failing was not an option. These narratives also revealed that cultural capital is not inherent, instead, it is generated. Participants found spaces, sometimes at church, that would not only replicate a piece of home away from home, but also allowed them to find inner peace that ultimately served to persevere at elite universities.

**Overcoming the Imposter Syndrome**

In the words of the participants, the imposter syndrome was primarily described as feelings of “not belonging” at an elite university or “not being smart or prepared enough” to academically compete against other classmates. A recurring code throughout the data analysis process was a description of the “imposter syndrome.” The researcher also coded this trend as “low self-efficacy beliefs” that originated since middle and high school. Participants seemed to be aware that the public schools that they attended back in California did not prepare them enough for the academic rigor of an elite university. Participants were quick to refer to this mental phenomenon, the imposter syndrome, as an obstacle they
had to continuously battle and overcome, especially during the first few years of their undergraduate studies. Participants often described their elite university classmates as being difficult to relate to, sounding more “polished” or “smarter” during class discussions, having “safety nets,” coming from high income backgrounds, being White, and having educated parents. When participants attended an elite university, they quickly became aware of class and socioeconomic status differences in this country; their classmates often shared stories of their summer breaks where they described experiences with summer camps, family summer cruise vacations, or travel to Europe. On the other hand, during the summer vacation, first generation Mexican American students often held part time jobs to support themselves and/or their families financially. The low number of Mexicans or Hispanics at elite universities also contributed lack of belongingness, low self-efficacy beliefs, and a recurring imposter syndrome. As the following participant narratives reveal, first generation Mexican American students struggled with belongingness in their educational transition from high school to elite universities; many of them were shocked of their admission to an elite university. In the end, they were able to adapt and thrive thanks to their resiliency.

I submitted my application to Cornell just 30 minutes before it was due. So, when I was notified of my admission, I thought someone was playing a prank on me; I couldn’t believe it. Now that I am here, I often think to myself ‘What am I doing here?’ Sometimes, I feel totally lost. I don’t know where I’m heading but I’m going to keep on going. I’m not giving up. Guadalupe Rodriguez at Cornell

I definitely think I have what they say is imposter syndrome. Right from the start, I felt like I just didn't belong there; I thought my acceptance to UCLA was a mistake. I just didn't feel comfortable every time I was in a class, and I would listen to these other students who, you know, grew up in nice schools. I just feel like I wasn't...I didn't feel prepared enough for some of the classes that I took; I struggled a lot with my classes. I just kind
of pushed through and joined an on campus organization that helps like tutor students like me who come from like lower socioeconomic backgrounds. So, I joined these classes and they were able to talk to me a little bit and so that helped me stay on top of my classes. They taught me how to study a little bit because I also felt like I didn't know how to study; I never had to study in high school, so that was new to me. Mariana Rodriguez at UCLA

Yeah it's something that often happens when you know, like midterm season is coming up, and you just wonder, ‘how do people go through this so gracefully and you're struggling’ so it's just difficult not to compare to other students and when that happens, it brings a lot of stress and anxiety and just not believing in yourself and underestimating your potential. Therefore, bringing down your motivation so sometimes it does feel like ‘why am I struggling?’ ‘Why isn’t my paper getting any better or why am I not performing well on the exam?’ It’s a lot of second guessing myself and a lot of I would say imposter syndrome is just feeling like I do not belong because while other people are succeeding in the different classes…I’m struggling.” Isabel Miranda at Yale

My transition to Dartmouth was very difficult. For a lot of different reasons, I felt very homesick. I also felt like this, like acute sense of imposter syndrome during my first and second year, and my mom and dad were just such superstars; I would rely heavily on them…definitely as a crutch, especially in the beginning, but I’m just having constant reassurance, self talk, that ‘I’m here for a reason’ and hearing it from my parents who constantly provided the much needed emotional and mental support, even though I was 3,000 miles away. Marie Garcia at Dartmouth

Brown was very different from California and my hometown and with the academic struggle that I experienced, I was having recurring thoughts and anxiety. Oftentimes, I had would just sit and think to myself ‘it would be so much easier if I just went home.’ Rebecca Hernandez at Brown

Although participants possessed the academic capital and determination to thrive at elite institutions, one of the main factors that affected them was the belief that they did not belong in these educational spaces. A few participants believed that someone was playing a prank on them when they received their initial acceptance letter. Somehow, participants had awareness that very few students that share their cultural, racial, and socioeconomic background are given access to elite
universities. There is not a lack of high achieving Mexican American students, rather, despite being overprepared for admission, fewer are intentionally given access to admission; becoming admitted to an elite is like winning the lottery. Once admitted, participants do not see themselves represented in the structure and culture of the campus. They also do not see many other people that share their racial, cultural, and socioeconomic background. Since it was too hard to get admitted, some then go on to believe that their admission was, in fact, maybe a mistake. Participants have to overcome the imposter syndrome through a critical awareness that promotes the generation of various cultural capitals in order to survive and thrive at elite universities. Participants must generate and utilize various capitals, including adaptability, ethnic consciousness, pluri consciousness, resistant, social, and spiritual capital in order to overcome the imposter syndrome. The overcoming of the imposter syndrome occurs when a first generation Mexican American student is able to graduate from an elite university. Once this important milestone is reached and the self is injected with a boost of self confidence and increased self efficacy beliefs, anything is possible.

The answer to the second research question of the present study is summarized as follows. First generation Mexican American students navigate through their undergraduate studies as a result of the utilization of 11 cultural capitals, elite university campus support (first year student residential programs and on campus Hispanic student organizations), spirituality (and/or religion), and successfully transforming thoughts and feelings around imposter syndrome. These main themes of the study are summarized in Table 6.
### Table 6

**Research Questions and Major Themes**

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<th>Major Themes/Research Findings</th>
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| **RQ1: How do first generation Mexican American students utilize community cultural wealth (CCW) capitals to prepare for and select elite universities?** | The first research question was created to gather participants experiences and narratives during high school and earlier years. Questions two, four, five, seven, eight, nine, ten, and fourteen of the semi-structured interview protocol were created around one or several of the 11 cultural capitals to help answer this first research question. The following three themes emerged from reviewing codes that emerged from participants narratives.  
  - Family Encouragement and Support  
  - External Support (Mentorship and University Readiness Non-Profits)  
  - Driven to Escape Intergenerational Cycles of Poverty |
| **RQ2: How do first generation Mexican American students use community cultural wealth (CCW) capitals to navigate through their undergraduate studies at elite universities?** | The second research question was created to gather participants experiences and narratives during while they attended an elite university as undergraduate students. Questions three, four, six, nine, ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen, and fifteen of the semi-structured interview protocol were created around one or several of the 11 cultural capitals to help answer this first research question. The following four themes emerged from reviewing codes that emerged from participants narratives.  
  - On Campus Community – First Year Student Orientation Programs and Hispanic Student Organizations  
  - Use of Spirituality and/or Religion  
  - Overcoming the Imposter Syndrome |
In addition to the main six themes, the data analysis process confirmed that the first-generation Mexican American participants in the study also generated and relied on all 11 cultural capitals before and after enrolling at U.S. elite university. The summary of those results is presented below and divided by each of the 11 capitals.

**Findings by Cultural Capital**

**Academic Capital**

All seven participants in the study shared stories of being academically driven since elementary and middle school; they shared stories of being attentive, studious, and interested in learning from a young age; however, it was the remarkable influence of a few key mentors that truly inspired them to someday attend an elite university. According to Rendon et al. (2014), Mexican American students possess academic capital; they are academically talented and have the potential to thrive in academically challenging environments. One participant, Mariana Rodriguez, eventually attended UCLA because of the influence of the Advancement via Individual Determination (AVID) program during her seventh-grade year and the influence of her teacher. During the interview, Mariana reflected,

I was in AVID and I had good grades. I got straight A's and I was able to maintain a 4.0 and my teachers would tell us all the time about the UC schools, and you know, the possibility of going away to a four-year college; that's when I just started considering it for myself. Mariana Rodriguez at UCLA.

Guadalupe Rodriguez who currently attends Cornell reflected on her challenging academic experience at an Ivy League university, “People always write books about making it right...about people like us making it through colleges like these, but no one tells us you ‘gotta survive to make it out.’ it's just so hard!” The
participants in this study were academically driven from a young age; they possessed and relied on their academic capital and the influence of family members, educators, school staff, and programs to aspire to attend and eventually thrive at elite universities. In addition, findings revealed that primarily during high school, mentors from outside organizations provided exposure and a positive shift in mindset about possibilities, encouragement, and preparation for admission to or attending elite universities. Participants in this study shared that high school university preparatory coursework generally did not prepare participants for the academic rigor, reading loads, independent assignments, writing requirements, test preparation, and overall competitiveness of an elite university. Participants also shared that taking Advanced Placement (AP) courses during high school helped to expose them to the structure and expectations of elite university coursework but AP courses still fell short of preparing students for the academic rigors of an elite university. Isabel Miranda at Yale reflected on her high school coursework and how it fell short of preparing her for the demands of an Ivy League university:

I think the courses that I took in high school just didn't prepare me because we were in an under resourced high school, in a low-income community. I don't think necessarily those courses that I took prepared me for these rigorous classes [at Yale] and what their expectations are. Yeah, I think it was more of these mentors and these connections from these networks that I made that gave me the reassurance that I needed.

Participants recognized that at elite universities, they took classwork with other valedictorians and academically competitive classmates from throughout the country and the world. Participants also shared that their elite university classmates were wealthy, had access to tutoring and other resources, and relied on parents with university degrees for support.
Adaptability Capital

According to research from Rendon et al. (2014), Mexican American students are able to make academic, social, and cultural adaptations to be successful in college; they are quickly able to adapt through the use of “survival” skills. In general, Mexican American students are able to dislocate and relocate and have the ability to operate in limited spaces (neither here, nor there). Participants in this study were determined, resilient, collaborative, social, competitive, organized, persistent, maintained a healthy sleep schedule, adopted a positive mindset, and took self-care seriously; these positive traits resulted from various life challenges and family difficulties that often came up as a result of economic challenges. Examples of positive self-talk included “I will get through this” and “I am smart enough to be at this university.” As far as personal qualities, participants persevered primarily as a result of their resiliency, determination, persistence, willingness to ask for help, vulnerability, navigational and networking skills. One participant, Isabel Miranda who attended Yale University had to quickly adapt by recognizing her vulnerability and learning to ask for help,

I think, also being a vulnerable person and what I mean by that is being able to reach out for help when needed, whether that's to peers or to faculty whether that's to other people on campus that you know can support, help, I think that has also helped me because without recognizing that sometimes you do need help, it's difficult to continue academically.

Participants in this study made use of adaptability capital not only at elite universities but also while growing up. Some participants shared of growing up without a heater, without their own physical address; until this day, many of their parents are still renting a home or an apartment. Participants did not allow their family’s economic circumstances or their own experiences to influence them and instead, adapted quickly to any challenges and difficulties that came their way. Oftentimes, this came as a result of embracing a positive mindset and learning to
Aspirational Capital

Yosso’s (2005) research on aspirational capital postulates that Mexican American students are able to dream big, remain resilient in the face of adversity, and aspire to reach goals that given their family’s economic background and the low number of Hispanic students at elite universities, could easily seem unreachable. According to Yosso (2005), “Aspirational capital refers to the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers” (p. 77). One of the participants, Alejandro Garcia, was the valedictorian and aspired to attend an Ivy League even though he was conscious of the fact that the odds were against him:

When college season came around, I was valedictorian and obviously I applied to Ivy's because they were sort of expected, but like to be honest, I didn't really think that I would get in. I was just applying just to sort of see but, I mean academically I just sort of did the work. I sort of did what any model student would do.

All of the participants who were admitted to elites could not believe their admissions letter. Many participants were under the impression that someone had played a prank on them. Despite being academically prepared and deserving of admittance to an elite university, participants were genuinely shocked to be admitted to an elite school, but they later processed the news and completely embraced the once in a lifetime opportunity. Participants possessed aspirational capital from a young age and continued to rely on those high-level aspirations while they attended an elite university.
Ethnic Consciousness Capital

Rendon et al.’s (2014) research discovered that Mexican American students are proud of their cultural, racial, and ethnic background. In addition, those who have already overcome many challenges are inspired to pave the way and serve as mentors and role models to the younger generation (Rendon et al., 2014). One of the participants, Isabel Miranda, planned to major in race and immigration at Yale University. Isabel was already volunteering for a local nonprofit organization in New Haven, Connecticut, (Yale University’s location) that helped immigrant families. Isabel helped to translate at that local organization and even wrote poems to express pride in her Latinidad, or background as a Mexican American and Hispanic student. After her interview, Isabel sent me one of her poems titled “Hoy Dedico este Poema” which in English means “Today I Dedicate this Poem.”

Below is the intro to her poem:

When I think of my culture, I think of vibrant colors: orange, yellow, and cyan blue. I think of the Brown people who echo these colors everyday through hard work, music, cooking, and conversations. This poem is an attempt to celebrate the beautiful Hispanic/Latinx culture via my personal experience. I love sharing this poem and, although I cannot share it out loud, I hope my pride and emotions are conveyed and relatable.

The following is a section of Isabel’s poem that highlights ethnic consciousness and how proud she is of her parents:

Hoy dedico este poema a mis papas. Where my culture stems from Guadalupe, my mom went to school only to sell dulces (candy) and fruta (fruit). One of the first of her siblings to move to the north. Crossed the border pregnant. A dedicated woman, standing tall at 5 foot 1. Accompanied everyday by an irritated expression and a hint of love. Juvenal, my dad, wears the trivial boots religiously. The pointy ones of 2010 subculture. Dances to cumbia and stomps to zapateado. A man that cries at my every milestone. Machismo where? He’s my soccer mom. Two immigrants. Who aren’t criminals or rapists but who are diligent Mexicans navigating through the busy streets of Los Angeles. Working their way through. Conversations that don’t validate “I no speak English.” Using
every day to comprehend what it means to be an immigrant in the U.S. and unsurprisingly they do this so quietly and gracefully.

All participants in this study were proud to be Mexican American; they spoke to proudly representing their Mexican ancestry as well as their communities while attending elite universities. Participants were conscious of the lack of Hispanic students at these elite universities and were motivated to increase the number of Mexican American students who aspire to attend these institutions by serving as a resource or networks that will help pave the way to younger students.

**Familial Capital**

According to Yosso (2005), “Familial capital refers to those cultural knowledges nurtured among familia (kin) that carry a sense of community history, memory and cultural intuition” (p. 79). Honoring and caring for the family or la familia is extremely important to first generation Mexican American students (Yosso, 2005). Isabel Miranda’s poem is also an example of familial capital.

Family support is one of the main themes that emerged from this study. Participants had the full and unconditional support of their family members as they were transitioning to elite universities despite not having complete awareness of what moving across the country entailed. Marie Garcia, who attended Dartmouth, talked about the support that she received from both parents when it came time to leave Los Angeles for Dartmouth: “My parents were very supportive about me going outside of California; although I do think there was some hesitation because they weren't entirely sure what that entailed.” Study findings revealed that both parents provided unconditional support early on and during the transition to elites; the mother, mother figures, father, and father figures provided emotional support and validation while participants experienced homesickness. Siblings and extended family members also provided encouragement. In general, the family
played a crucial role in supporting their first-generation Mexican American elite university children. In addition, participants directly experienced and grew up listening to family stories of economic hardships and poverty. Stories of parental immigration also served to inspire first generation students to attend an elite university; a main driver for every single participant was to get their parents their first home. In fact, throughout the entire process, participants became the most emotional when discussing one of their main lifetime goals: to buy their parents their first home. Parents were motivated to immigrate to the U.S. to provide a better life and opportunities. Students were driven to attend an elite university to help their families financially and actively break intergenerational cycles of oppression and poverty. Familial capital was utilized by participants before and after enrolling at elite universities.

**Linguistic Capital**

All of the participants that were interviewed for this study grew up speaking Spanish and were proud to be bilingual in Spanish and English. According to Yosso (2005), “Linguistic capital includes the intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style.” (p. 78). Findings from the study revealed that participants expressed a strong desire to retain their Spanish language. Speaking Spanish while attending elite universities allowed them to connect to other first-generation Mexicans/Latin Americans, Mexican clubs, community organizations, and replicate a “piece of their home” and culture at these predominately white institutions. Participants used their Spanish skills to complete university foreign language requirements early. Rebecca Hernandez attended Brown University and she reflected on how speaking Spanish allowed her to connect and build community with other Hispanics:
The number of Hispanics, especially Mexican American students, I think was very minimal. So being there, and you kind of become attracted to where your people are; that is very common. So just finding the Chicanos by being part of a club on campus and being involved in it. Being able to speak the language with people that grew up with similar backgrounds, as you. You know, similar music. You know just the get togethers at the university.

Another participant, Alejandro Garcia, who attended Yale University also reflects on the impact that a second language had on his ability to socialize with other on campus first generation Mexican Americans, and adapt:

I am taking a level five Spanish. like the top-level Spanish classes that they have here, legal Spanish. Knowing Spanish has been really good to speak with my friend group. Most of my friend group are first gen Mexicans as well; they come from Colorado and Texas. It’s been really good to find that community of just having other first gen Mexican students. For me, being able to speak Spanish with them and just sort of have conversations with them in Spanish, has been really helpful to just sort of get that sense of community and feel like you know it's not just English here and by speaking Spanish I sort of feel like I’m back at home.

The ability to speak Spanish served as a cultural asset that eventually allowed participants to find students form similar ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. Many participants shared that they took AP Spanish coursework while in high school and performed well in that course. Linguistic capital allowed participants to thrive prior to and after enrolling at elite universities.

**Navigational Capital**

When the participants left their homes to attend an elite university, a cost that came along with that decision was having to figure out how to navigate the elite university as well as other departments and resources within it. First generation Mexican American students make use of navigational capital, “Navigational capital refers to skills of maneuvering through social institutions. Historically, this infers the ability to maneuver through institutions not created
with Communities of Color in mind” (Yosso, 2005, p. 80). Many participants described being part of elite university programs designed for first generation students prior to the first semester of undergraduate studies. In addition, findings from the present study revealed that teachers and mentors from outside organizations continued to stay in contact with participants in their transition to the elite university and continued to connect them to on campus networks/contacts. Participants actively sought programs that exposed them to a new world of post-secondary opportunities, including external nonprofit organizations like College Match and the Ivy League Project. Since the PK12 educational pipeline that Hispanic Americans go through produces few students who end up earning a bachelor or post bachelor degree (Yosso & Solorzano, 2006), one can also argue that high school were not designed for culturally diverse students and they must find a way to navigate these educational systems. Guadalupe Rodriguez who attended Cornell was part of College Match as a high school student and later became a College Match advisor while attending Cornell; this program helps first generation students to maneuver their way around an elite university setting. Guadalupe stated, “Now that I’m a Cornell [College Match] representative and basically the students who are part of that program come to me to ask questions that they have about Cornell.” Elite universities support first generation students by inviting them to participate in summer residential pre first year programs designed for students who might experience additional challenges.

**Pluri Consciousness Capital**

Based on the findings of this study, the transition from high school to an elite university was not an easy one. While attending these elite institutions, many students had to develop a positive mindset, and improve their self-concept as well as overall self-efficacy beliefs. In fact, the participants in this study displayed the
capacity to entertain “multiple and often contradictory thoughts and tensions” or what Rendon et al. (2014) refer to as pluri consciousness capital. Various factors contributed to participants feeling that they “did not belong” at the elite university. The imposter syndrome was described as a recurring phenomenon for all of my participants and a major theme that emerged for participants while they attended elite universities. Although participants possessed various cultural capitals since a young age and they aspired to attend elite universities, they were completely shocked when they received admission to those elite universities. As mentioned previously, many participants could not believe their admission offers were real; some thought that when they received their admission notices, someone was playing a prank on them. Guadalupe Rodriguez reflected about the time when she received her admissions letter from Cornell University,

> It was my younger brother who encouraged me to apply to Cornell and there's times, where I’m like, what the heck am I doing here? I remember when I got admitted; I thought it was like a prank like someone's going to take it away from me and I was talking to another friend and she told me she felt the same way.

However, while attending an elite, all participants suffered from the imposter syndrome and had to overcome feelings of “I’m good enough” versus “I am not good enough.” A major challenge to overcome in their higher education trajectories was the student’s socioeconomic status. Some had to get part time jobs while enrolled at the elites. Attending an elite made participants aware of their economic disadvantages, lack of academic preparation, and lack of safety nets when they compared themselves to classmates with educated parents, resources, and wealth. Participants also experienced uncertainty about the future, guilt from possibly not giving back to their community, and guilt about attending an elite university while their parents continued to struggle financially back at home. Isabel Miranda alluded to the imposter syndrome,
I am thinking why isn’t my paper getting any better or why am I not performing well on the exam. So, it’s a lot of second guessing myself and a lot of, I would say, imposter syndrome is just feeling like I do not belong, because while other people are succeeding in the different classes, I’m struggling.

A way to overcome the imposter syndrome was to reflect on the family’s economic hardships and how a university degree will be the golden ticket to a better life for the student and her family. Isabel goes on to add, “One of the things that motivates me is my family’s socioeconomic status and not having the experiences I have had because of my low-income first-generation background.”

Many first-generation Mexican American students overcome the imposter syndrome by becoming empowered to lift their themselves and their families out of poverty; failing or becoming negatively impacted by the imposter syndrome is simply not an option. Participants were also motivated by their family’s constant encouragement and support. As mentioned previously, participants also overcame the imposter syndrome through a critical consciousness to resist oppression that led to the development and utilization of various cultural capitals.

**Resistant Capital**

Additionally, first generation Mexican American elite university students are conscious about oppression that is applied to People of Color in this country and actively seek to undo this oppression through action; this socioeconomic and racial consciousness was evident in this study’s participants which allowed them to make use of resistant capital as a way to positively transform their own as well as their family’s circumstances. According to Yosso (2005), “Resistant capital refers to those knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality. This form of cultural wealth is grounded in the legacy of resistance to subordination exhibited by Communities of Color” (p. 80). Isabel Miranda is aware of the oppression that immigrant families go through and was
already doing something about it. Isabel plans to major in race and immigration at Yale University. The following quote describes her desired future career:

As of now, I want to help immigrant communities; I want to advocate for them. I want to provide resources that aren't available at the moment, you know, for their legal rights, for their human right. I think that's how I would summarize my [future] career.

All participants were already or expressed interest in someday mentoring the next generation of Mexican American elite university students. They are actively resisting oppression and increasing equity and diversity by pushing other first-generation students to be admitted to universities across the country. One of the participants, Rebecca Hernandez, returned to her hometown after graduating from Brown University. As a teacher and through various other local initiatives, she has helped many students, especially first generation Mexican American female students, to become admitted to the CSU and UC systems. Participants consciously resisted oppression by never giving up, attending an elite university despite the lack of diversity, and serving as inspirational role models to their families and communities. Participants have actively challenged inequality before and after enrolling at elite institutions.

Social Capital

The participants in this study shared the significant impact that mentors had in their lives. These mentors exposed them to networking opportunities as well as contacts within their circle to continue to offer them mentorship. Moreover, “Social capital can be understood as networks of people and community resources. These peer and other social contacts can provide both instrumental and emotional support to navigate through society’s institutions” (Yosso, 2005, p. 79). Participants heavily relied on the lifechanging influence of key mentors prior to and after enrolling at elite universities. While in high school, participants relied on
classified (library aides, custodians, etc.), certificated (teachers and administrators), and mentors from external non-profit college/career readiness organizations for encouragement and information about the university system. Any employee within a school setting can play the role of mentor and can have a positive and lasting impact in the lives of first-generation students (Rios, 2016). In fact, one of the participants in the study, Marie Garcia at Dartmouth, shared who played the most significant mentorship roles while she was in high school:

> It was just my personal experience in high school where we just didn’t have the best interactions with our counselors. So, I think other educators, were the most influential. Just regular staff. So, I was very close to a custodian staff member who would recognize me; we would talk about academics and stuff like that. And then there was also the vice principal who I used to communicate a lot of my goals with and so forth.

Since mentorship was a major theme that emerged from the data, more information on this will be presented later in this chapter including the names of specific nonprofits and university readiness programs. High school resources did help some participants; however, those did not come from counselors, they came primarily from other caring educators as well as the strong influence of mentors from external nonprofits that came into the school settings to work directly with students. Participants’ school counselors played a minimal role in encouraging them to apply to elite universities. Mentors from outside organizations played the strongest role in providing information, exposing, and encouraging first generation students to apply to elite universities. Mentors from outside organizations had active partnerships with the school districts and visited with students on the high school campus. The following narrative exposes the value of external nonprofits:

> You know, growing up in East LA [Los Angeles], the quality of public-school education isn't the best. There were definitely times during school like middle school and high school, I felt like the resources weren't in place to sufficiently support my journey to like, you know, a school outside of California that’s located in the northeast, which is what I was shooting for,
and I think that’s when the role of these external nonprofit organizations becomes super essential. College Match is one of them, TELACU Education Foundation, and then Upward Bound was another one. Realizing the lack of support some of these students have within public schools in LA and that’s where these nonprofits just become super instrumental in making students realize that they actually have the potential to go to these types of schools and, of course, like giving them the resources that they need like a SAT prep and specific attention on their [university application] essays. Marie Garcia at Dartmouth

Teachers and mentors from outside organizations continued to stay in touch with participants in their transition to the elite university and continued to connect them to on campus networks/contacts. As mentioned previously, most participants were also part of or invited to join a pre first year student orientation program designed for first generation students. In addition, study findings revealed that first generation Mexican American elite university students have a strong desire to mentor younger Mexicans (including family members) who aspire to attend elites and were actively involved with on campus clubs and community organizations. Some participants returned to their hometowns to actively serve as transformational agents/mentors that inspire high achieving first generation Mexican American students to dream big. These participants returned to their communities to serve as role models and make a difference. Participant made use of social capital during high school and continued to reap the benefits of networking with others, including on campus Hispanic organizations, while attending elite universities.

**Spiritual Capital**

All participants in this study shared that they grew up in Roman Catholic religious backgrounds. Five of the seven participants considered themselves to be practicing Catholics as well as deeply spiritual. The two that did not view themselves as spiritual or religious still believed in God and resorted to prayer
while experiencing challenging times at the elite universities. According to Perez Huber (2009), those who possess spiritual capital use “a set of resources and skills rooted in a spiritual connection to a reality greater that oneself” (p. 721).

According to Rendon et al. (2014), students who make use of spiritual capital rely on spirituality to guide their university trajectories. Spirituality and religion played a significant role in helping first generation students to persevere at elite universities. All participants had Roman Catholic backgrounds and most resorted to prayer during difficult times. Some participants also attended mass on Sundays with elite university peers, similar to how they attended mass back at home since childhood. The few who did not consider themselves spiritual or religious expressed a desire to reconnect with the divine for guidance and reassurance.

Rebecca Hernandez who attended Brown remembers the key role that religion and spirituality played in overcoming the academic challenges she encountered at the Ivy League:

I definitely I think those were definitely the time when you know mass became very, very important, and you know, spend time just praying about it. Because it was tough, it was tough being away from home, it was tough academically and so you needed something to lean on and that definitely was something that got me through. I had a really close group of friends that weren't necessarily Catholic; I had a friend who was Christian and a friend who was Buddhist, and so there was always that religious outlet. Rebecca Hernandez attended Brown University.

The results of the study illustrate that first-generation Mexican American students generated and used all 11 cultural capitals prior to and/or after enrolling at an elite university to beat the odds and attain success. As evidenced through their inspirational narratives, the development of a critical consciousness allowed them to quickly prepare for, transition, and maneuver through an elite university. Failure was simply not an option for these participants and their families. To summarize, through the use of the 15 question semi-structured interview protocol,
the participants’ narratives validated the use of academic, adaptability, aspirational, ethnic-consciousness, familial, linguistic, navigational, pluri-consciousness, resistant, social, and spiritual capital to apply to, enroll, persist, navigate, and thrive at elite universities. Despite the various challenges that were presented to participants in their transition from high school to elite universities and while attending those elite universities, the utilization of CCW allowed participants to not only survive but also persevere at some of the most academically challenging and least culturally diverse post-secondary environments in the country. The findings of this study suggest that participants made use of 11 cultural capitals prior to and after enrolling at an elite university. Table 5 presents the major themes that emerged from the data analysis and thematic analysis process, divided by both research questions.

Beyond confirmation of the theoretical and conceptual framework used for this study which was the 11 cultural capitals and CCW, the six main themes that emerged from the data were the main research findings of this dissertation; these six main themes, three per research question, were presented in Table 5. The sections below present some of the most meaningful narratives that give credit to the themes that emerged during the data analysis process.

**Summary**

In summary, the researcher used several steps to analyze the data. Data went from being a compilation of unstructured data to being highly organized and separated by interview questions, then reduced to codes, and finally, codes were reduced to six major main themes. The researcher became familiarized with the data through a detailed review of all transcriptions. During the transcription process, codes were generated, searched for themes, and themes were then identified. The first research question allowed for the emergence of three themes:
family support, external support from nonprofit organizations, and family’s low socioeconomic status background as a driver for perseverance. The above three themes make it possible for a first-generation Mexican American student to prepare for and make the decision to attend one of the country’s elite universities. Analysis of data for the second research question allowed for the emergence of three additional themes: on campus programs (student organizations and clubs), use of spirituality and/or religion, and overcoming of the imposter syndrome. The above three themes make it possible to understand the areas that make it easier for a first generation Mexican American students to build community and ultimately thrive in environments where there is a severe cultural mismatch and very few other Hispanic students on campus. In summary, the six major themes that surfaced from the data were family support, external support (mentorship and university readiness nonprofits), breaking intergenerational cycles of poverty, on campus community (transitional programs for first generation students and on campus Hispanic student organizations/clubs), use of spirituality and/or religion, and overcoming the imposter syndrome. Finally, a review of the data revealed that all 11 cultural capitals that were presented as the theoretical and conceptual framework of this study were indeed generated and utilized by the participants prior to and after elite university undergraduate enrollment.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION/SUMMARY/CONCLUSION

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative research was to analyze the various cultural assets used by first generation Mexican American students to apply to and thrive at elite universities. A main goal of this study was to add to the research literature in regards to challenges, motivators, and factors that influence first generation Mexican American student perseverance at these elite institutions of higher education. When first generation Mexican American students enrolled at elite universities, they experienced homesickness, lack of academic preparation, and economic hardships. Participants were aware of the low Hispanic American undergraduate enrollment at elite universities, and this negatively impacted their self-efficacy beliefs which contributed to the development of academic self-doubt, the imposter syndrome, and issues with belongingness at those institutions. Having limited options allowed first generation students to navigate the university system very quickly and successfully overcame identity, cultural, and financial barriers. Findings of this research study revealed that first generation Mexican American students utilized 11 cultural capitals prior to and after enrolling at elite universities that helped them to survive, adapt, and attain success. Through their own narratives, participants expressed using academic, adaptability, aspirational, ethnic consciousness, familial, linguistic, navigational, pluri consciousness, resistant, social, and spiritual capital (Perez Huber, 2009; Rendon et al., 2014; Yosso, 2005) in order to overcome a large variety of obstacles. Six themes emerged from this research study. In summary, the six major themes that surfaced from the data were family support, external support (mentorship and university readiness nonprofits), breaking intergenerational cycles of poverty, programs/organizations at elite
universities (transitional programs for first generation students and on campus Hispanic student organizations/clubs), use of spirituality and religion, and overcoming the imposter syndrome. The results of this study support the use of CCW as a theoretical and conceptual framework that helps to understand the educational experiences of first generation Mexican American students.

Prior to deciding to enroll at these elite universities, first generation students rely on the unconditional support of both of their parents or parental figures as well as other immediate and family members. First generation Mexican American students rely on the encouragement of family and extended family members in order to apply to elite universities and remain enrolled during difficult times (Ceja, 2004). The results of this study support prior research that found that Mexican American students also relied on the support and validation of family, friends, and high school staff to obtain information about the college admissions process (Perez, P.A. & McDonough, 2008). Mentors from external nonprofit organizations are responsible for providing information about universities, including elite universities, to first generation Mexican American students; they are intentional about expanding students’ young minds and self-efficacy belief systems beyond their imagined possibilities. Study findings support the Freire’s (1993) research on the transformational impact of key mentors or what he referred to as empowerment agents. Empowerment agents deeply understand various forms of oppression and empower their mentees by raising their critical consciousness levels. Often times, these enlightened mentees return to their hometowns to serve as role models for younger students and to help positively transform their communities.

External nonprofit organizations play a key role in inspiring, encouraging, informing, and exposing first generation students to elite universities. Growing up
as a first generation, low income students encountered multiple obstacles that they
overcame and a pursued degree that they would ultimately earn; they quickly
realized that earning a degree would directly benefit their families and
communities. First generation students willingly submitted to and overcame
challenges to improve their economic backgrounds. Once enrolled at these elite
universities, participants relied on pre first year orientation programs to adapt to
their new college lives; these programs also allowed them to connect to on campus
resources, get familiarized with campus, and make lifelong friendships. As they
strove to find a little piece of home away from home, Hispanic on campus student
organizations also served to connect our first-generation undergraduates to other
undergraduates from similar racial/ethnic and economic backgrounds. Participants
resorted to spirituality and/or religion to overcome a wide array of personal and
academic barriers. Another way of looking at this is that participants relied on
spirituality and religion to survive at elite university environments that were not
created for culturally interdependent Students of Color. The findings of this
research study were similar to other research that revealed that Mexican American
students rely on spirituality to overcome barriers at the university level; in other
words, spirituality and religion are utilized as a persistence tool by students (J.
Gonzalez, 2015; Ingersoll et al., 2021).

In addition, participants had to continually deal with academic self-doubt
thinking patterns that arose when they got into the habit of comparing themselves
and their overall abilities to those of classmates from high income family
backgrounds who also benefited from educated parents and expanded safety nets.
Participants successfully overcame what many of them referred to as the imposter
syndrome. The findings of this study confirmed that first generation Mexican
American students must learn to successfully overcome stress and other challenges
that are generated as a result of imposter syndrome (Ceballo, 2004; Holden et al., 2021). Those students who found other undergraduates with similar spiritual and cultural backgrounds were able to find a support group and build community on campus. Imposter syndrome was a main theme of this study and it elaborated on previous research that found that first generation students generally feel like a fraud and fear being discovered as not worthy or academically prepared enough to remain enrolled at the university (Holden et al., 2021).

Finally, all participants had one ultimate goal in common; that was something that served to inspire me as I reflected on my own life and my own reasons from graduating from an elite university, the University of Pennsylvania. It is something that I did for my family too; one of my greatest life goals that I was able to accomplish in 2011. As first-generation elite university students, our ultimate goal was to be the first in our families to earn a university degree in order to help our parents buy their first home. Looking out for our families, serving as professional role models, and to meaningfully giving back to our communities served as our inspiration to earn a first university degree. Nothing in the universe is by accident, everything is by divine design. A main goal of first generation Mexican American students is to help break intergenerational cycles of poverty. Since Hispanic Americans are more likely to live below the poverty threshold (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.), it is not a surprise that many want to help their families financially. Having few to no safety nets, many first-generation Mexican Americans grow up with no other choice but to work hard and attain financial success through a universality degree to ultimately assist their families (Ingersoll et al., 2021).
Summary of Findings

The results of this study substantiated CCW (Yosso, 2005) as a theoretical framework for researchers conducting studies on first generation Mexican American students; CCW also helps to turn the mainstream narrative on Mexican American students from deficit to an asset based. Despite the various challenges and obstacles faced by first generation Mexican American students, they ultimately persevered and thrived at elite universities due to their reliance on multiple cultural assets and strengths. Prior to enrolling at elite universities, participants in this study relied on the unconditional of parents and other family members, the validation from key mentors and role models, and the proactive interventions from external nonprofit university readiness organizations. A key finding of this study was that participants were driven to escape poverty and assist their families financially through the upward mobility benefits that come along with a university degree. Additionally, all participants became emotional when they revealed one of their ultimate goals in life: to someday purchase a first home for their parents. Graduating from an elite university meant that they would have the possibility to assist their families financially. After enrolling at elite universities, participants in this study depended on first year student orientation programs, campus/community based Hispanic student organizations, and spirituality/religion in order to develop a sense of connection to the campus and with other Hispanic American undergraduates. A recurring theme that all participants shared was how they learned to cope with their imposter syndrome; participants first believed that they were not smart enough, prepared enough, or had the safety nets and resources that their high-income classmates enjoyed. This research revealed that the eleven cultural capitals presented in this study as well as
the six major themes of this research study were used by first generation Mexican American students to thrive at elite national universities.

**Conclusions**

The findings of the research study were presented in Chapter 4. The sections below presented this study’s conclusions based on those findings. Two research questions guided all aspects of the investigation in an effort to understand the educational experiences of first generation Mexican American students who were currently or formerly enrolled at elite universities.

RQ1: How do first generation Mexican American students utilize CCW capitals to prepare for and select elite universities?

Since participants expressed not being fully prepared for the academic demands of an elite university, first generation Mexican American students would greatly benefit from increased academic rigor and high expectations beginning at the elementary level. The family, specifically the support of both parents, and the support of mentors played a key role in helping participants to overcome challenges. Increased parent involvement for first generation students is another key to their academic success and outcomes. Since participants expressed pride to be first generation Mexican Americans, school districts need to embed more cultural activities into their academic calendar.

First generation Mexican American students grew up in low income family backgrounds and regularly listened to family stories of immigration and financial hardships; this understanding allowed them to have increased consciousness on issues pertaining to racial, class and income inequality. Elite universities should continue to expand financial aid packages so that low income students are not discouraged by the high tuition costs at elite universities and can graduate without any student loans that will lead to indebtedness. All participants aspired to earn a
degree that would provide them with the income to assist their families financially and ultimately, purchase a home for their parents. Both the mother and the father (or mother and father figures) provided unconditional support and encouragement to their children as they transitioned to elite universities; this means that support from the family, including extended family members, played a key role in allowing first generation Mexican American students to remain enrolled at the elite universities. Lack of parental and family support would have made it more difficult for participants to remain enrolled at elites. Supportive and involved parents, stepparents, and parental figures are instrumental in the success of their children.

Mentors included library aides, custodians, teachers, and school site administrators; this means that every staff member in a public-school setting is responsible to mentor and raise the academic bar for students. These findings closely align to research that supports the need for creating ecosystems of validation or cariño that lead to increased mentorship from any PK12 staff member (Rios, 2016). Mentors from outside organizations played the most impactful role in providing validation and understanding to participants. School districts would directly benefit low income and first generation Mexican American students’ future educational outcomes as a result of maintaining close partnerships with external university readiness nonprofit organizations. Since school counselors played a minimal role, school counseling program need to be restructured so that all at promise students are being actively mentored by their counselors and have an active educational plan that will lead to university eligibility. School counselors might benefit from training so that they spend more quality time with students on their caseloads and be more supportive and encouraging.
In order to better prepare first generation Mexican American students for the academic expectations at elite universities, high schools need to create or implement special programs for high achieving students. Programs like Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) are still available to California students; parents should attend school finance meetings to ask for these programs. In addition to Advanced Placement (AP) coursework, it might be beneficial to make more Dual Enrollment (DE) college level coursework available to high school students so that they get exposed to college coursework early in their educational trajectories. Additionally, we would want to review the rigor levels of coursework at elite PK12 schools and replicate that at PK12 schools located in low income neighborhoods. Some participants were also classified as English learners (EL) during their educational trajectories. English learners are also known as Emergent Bilinguals; these students would greatly benefit from having increased access to a course of study that leads to university eligibility in high school as well as access to Advanced Placement, Dual Enrollment, and other academically rigorous programs like GATE. Bilingualism and multilingualism need to be looked through an asset-based lens and not as a deficit, by the California public school system.

RQ2: How do first generation Mexican American students use CCW capitals to navigate through their undergraduate studies at elite universities?

First generation Mexican American students benefited from continued mentorship as they transitioned to the elite universities. Mentors continued to support and connect participants to a larger network of contacts. Elite universities need to continue to invest in pre first year orientation programs that allow students with early exposure to the university as well as the ability to connect to other classmates with similar backgrounds. Elite universities need to actively monitor
and continue to offer resources and services to first generation students beyond the first year of undergraduate studies.

Financial aid policies and packages at elite universities must continue to improve so that first generation Mexican American students do not feel obligated to get a part time job. A part time job might have a negative impact on students’ availability to spend more time to study and to connect with Mexican American or other undergraduates on campus and have a social life. Having time for a social life will also allow first generation students to connect to other undergraduates from diverse racial and economic backgrounds; this will help combat feelings of isolation and not belonging that are visible due to the high income gaps between students and their classmates. First generation students and their parents would be greatly served from understanding the benefits that come along with religion or spirituality. Religion and spirituality allowed students to resort to a higher power when experiencing personal and/or academic difficulties. Attending Catholic mass allowed participants to replicate “a piece of home” at the elite universities, connect with other Mexican Americans, and develop a productive and balanced school and personal life routine. Religion and spirituality allowed participants to maintain a good mental health state.

Use of the Spanish language positively served our participants to connect to other Mexican American undergraduates, other Spanish speaking undergraduates, on campus Hispanic student organizations, and community organizations that needed assistance with translation or immigration advocacy. In addition, many elite universities had dormitories devoted to languages; although they did not live in these language dormitories, participants shared the availability of these dorms at some elites and attending Hispanic student events at those locations. First generation students were easily able to meet the university foreign language
requirement. First generation students would greatly benefit from choosing to live in a language house/dormitory at these elite universities as it would help them to build community and maintain their culture. The findings of this study support the need to expand bilingualism and multiculturalism in PK12 educational systems (Valenzuela, 2005). In addition to CCW, first generation students rely on a large variety of personal characteristics that allow them to persevere and thrive at elite universities. Despite all of the challenges the faced, participants or gradually adapted to their new life at the elite university. Participants were determined to succeed at all costs. Participants understood the benefits of mentorship and were proud of their own ethnic/racial backgrounds. Participants were also inspired to mentor younger first-generation Mexican Americans and students from low-income backgrounds. Participants had a sense of responsibility to their family, younger mentees, and to their hometowns. Participants believed in paying it forward and were already actively supporting students in their communities and at the elite universities.

The imposter syndrome was primarily described by participants as feelings of “not belonging” at an elite university or “not being smart or prepared enough” to academically compete against other classmates who counted with the educated parents. Participants were able to manage negative thinking patterns that led to low self-concept. School districts would directly benefit low income and first generation Mexican American students by exposing them to a variety of leadership activities, field trips, and educational opportunities that will increase confidence, self-concept beliefs, contributions to their local community, and overall self-efficacy beliefs.
**Recommendations/Discussion**

Upon a review of the findings and conclusions which revealed the utilization of 11 cultural capitals, family support, external support (mentorship and university readiness nonprofits), a desire to break intergenerational cycles of poverty, programs/organizations at elite universities (transitional programs for first generation students and on campus Hispanic student organizations/clubs, use of spirituality/religion, and successfully overcoming the imposter syndrome, it is of critical importance that educators and leaders that work in the PK12 system and elite university system become conscious of the factors that positively impact first generation Mexican American elite university students. It is imperative the school districts become more intentional about involving parents and family members in any educational decision-making and improving the overall quality of educational services and opportunities that are made available to first generation Mexican American students. The absolute support of both parents and family stories of economic hardships played a critical role in the perseverance of the participants in this study. Six participants in this study attended public schools while only one attended a small charter school. The participants who attended public California schools did not feel prepared for the academic demands of an elite university while the participant who attended a small college preparatory charter school felt that all teachers and staff members used university practices and terminology, and expected him to succeed at a high level. There is a critical need to reform public education so that there is an increased level of academic rigor, support, and high expectations for all students, especially those that are traditionally categorized as first generation, English learners, or students from special populations who might be at a greater risk for dropping out of school.
Emergent bilinguals who also tend to be first generation Mexican American students are traditionally excluded from high quality and rigorous educational pathways. The quality of education, access, and opportunities is not equal across city, county, and state lines in this country, and public-school systems need to pay closer attention to the needs of their high achieving first generation Mexican American students. Reintroducing programs like GATE and expanding on Advanced Placement and dual enrollment programs will allow students to better prepare for the expectations of postsecondary coursework. Since mentorship was found to be a significant indicator of success of first-generation students at elite institutions of higher education, every staff member in public and charter school settings have a moral and ethical responsibility to guide, reassure, and validate students. Mentors make a lasting impact in the educational trajectories of students to the degree that those same students later on become mentors to others like them. In addition, school counselors need to play a more proactive role at motivating, guiding, and assisting students to apply to elite universities. The findings of this study revealed that mentors from external nonprofit university readiness organizations played the most important role in exposing students to elite universities and expanding their mindsets on available postsecondary opportunities; these transformational mentors continued to remain in contact and guide students as they transitioned to elite universities.

Although participants relied on their families, various cultural capitals, and personality traits that allowed them to adapt and persevere. Attending an elite university increased their consciousness level about income inequality in this country and throughout the world. Family stories on economic struggles and challenges around immigration inspire first generation Mexican American students to become active participants in the shaping of their own and their families
destines. The perceived economic upward mobility benefits of this country are accessed by first generation student through the completion of a university degree. However, participants reported feeling like they were still low income students as they transitioned to elite universities; having to devote time to their studies and their part time jobs severely limited their spare time to socialize and connect to other students and the campus culture. Many participants shared holding part time jobs in order to support their personal expenses and tuition costs. Elite universities can help to eliminate income inequalities by continuing to improve on the financial aid packages that are available to first generation Mexican American students to assure that students do not leave the university in debt. Elite universities can also address racial/ethnic undergraduate enrollment gaps by purposefully and actively enrolling more first generation Mexican American students to the level that is proportionate to the demographics of the country. One female participant in the study expressed anger at knowing that there were fewer male than female Mexican American students at her elite university; she made reference to male Mexican Americans having an array of family responsibilities that might also prevent them from fully committing to the academic demands of an elite university. Mexican Americans are the second largest racial/ethnic group in this country and ought to be the second largest racial/ethnic group at elite universities. The minimal Mexican American undergraduate representation at elite institutions is not an issue of lack of intelligence and competitiveness, it is an issue of lack of access.

Elite universities have implemented orientation programs designed to better help first generation students to adapt to their new lives on campus. These programs usually take place a few weeks before the start of the first semester of their first year at the university. Participants reported these pre first year
orientation programs to be helpful however, they felt that services needed to continue beyond their first year. First generation students also need to be better advised about signing up to be a part of a language house or dormitory. Language-focused dormitories allow students to keep practicing their language and culture; they also allow students to have a social life and connect to other Spanish speaking undergraduates. First year orientation programs and language houses can make the difference between a student dropping out or remaining enrolled at elite universities that largely embed the mainstream American cultural values of independence and competition. Language houses and Hispanic student organizations allow students to have a closer match between their own culture and the cultures of these dormitories and clubs which serve to increase their overall belongingness and sociability.

Public school districts can also be more intentional about exposing first generation Mexican American students to educational opportunities, activities, and field trips that will increase their self-confidence and overall self-efficacy beliefs. All participants made reference to experiencing the imposter syndrome while attending an elite university. Various factors might have been responsible for creating those feelings among academically prepared first-generation Mexican Americans. Perhaps elite universities can be a bit more proactive in providing one on one counseling to first generation students throughout their undergraduate years; proactive elite university counselors can intentionally make appointments with first generation students to build a four year plan that is maintained at the end of each semester to better assure that students are choosing the correct major and are staying on track to earning their four year degrees. Proactive elite university counselors or advisors can also serve as mentors for first generation undergraduates.
Suggestions for Future Research

Based on an analysis of the findings and conclusions that have been presented, future research is recommended in the following areas. The first recommendation is on public education reform in order to increase academic rigor and expectations for special population students starting at the elementary level. Some school districts might still have Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) or similar programs for their students; it would be interesting to know the postsecondary outcomes of students who were part of programs designed for high achieving first generation and low income students. An additional research topic recommendation is to investigate factors that are negatively affecting male Mexican American undergraduate enrollment at elite universities and actions to implement that intentionally support male students.

Additional recommendations can be the influence of early career readiness of elite university enrollment. One of the participants expressed a desire for early career pathways that will lead to first generation Mexican American students making more informed choices about their majors while at the university. Another research area to investigate are individual and systemic factors that lead to early increased self-efficacy beliefs that might support success for students while they are attending elite universities. Also, another recommendation is to expand the number of narrative inquiry studies that are conducted with Mexican American participants as narratives help counter mainstream societal stereotypes and help to empower the voices of marginalized members of our society. Narratives help to humanize participants and balance some of the oppression that continues to take place since colonial times. Participant narratives confirm that they must still resort to various cultural capitals in order to thrive in environments that were not designed for them but also environments where they belong.
Another area to consider is reduction of student to counselor caseloads so that counselors can have more time to meet with students, one on one, and provide them with necessary guidance that will increase college/career readiness outcomes. If school counselors continue to play a minimal role in effectively motivating and supporting first generation students to apply to elite universities, perhaps a new role they can take is assuring that these top students are referred to external university readiness nonprofit organizations. Through district partnerships, counselors can assure that top academic Hispanic students are referred to these organizations who typically meet with students on the high school campus to provide recourses and information connected to university and career readiness. Yet, despite the lack of proactive guidance, some students will still manage to thrive and attend elite universities thanks to the generation and utilization of multiple cultural capitals. This study sought to understand the racial/ethnic university undergraduate enrollment disparity that exists at elite university. Additional research can further the findings by also looking at the reasons behind computer science major racial/ethnic gaps at elite universities since many of the participants expressed a desire to have been exposed to Science Technology Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) coursework early on in their public school PK12 trajectories. As Table 5 demonstrates, none of the participants in this study majored in STEM fields. In conclusion, research can also look at ways in which school districts and district leadership can increase overall parent engagement in culturally appropriate ways so that the parents of first-generation students are informed of available high quality educational opportunities.

Finally, the results of this research study (confirmation of 11 cultural capitals) and six themes can be used as a social justice education toolkit for educational leaders in the PK12 and higher education level to motivate, guide, and
positively influence the lives of first generation Mexican American students to reach their full academic and God given actualizing potential. Mexican American students rely on, possess, and generate 11 capitals that can help them to overcome many obstacles that come their way. These 11 cultural capitals can be viewed as cultural gifts, strengths, talents that will ultimately serve to increase the number of first generation Mexican American students who earn a bachelor’s degree or higher. Increasing the critical consciousness of educational leaders on these 11 capitals and six themes will ultimately serve to positively and exponentially transform the lives of many Mexican American students, their families, and their communities. My hope is that the number of Mexican American elite university graduates will continue to drastically increase over the next several decades. I end this chapter with a picture of my parents, Esperanza Diaz and Rafael Iniguez, and me from the year 2006, when I graduated from the University of Pennsylvania.

Figure 2

*University of Pennsylvania Family Graduation Picture*
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Dear Prospective Participant:

My name is Rafael Iniguez and I am a doctoral degree candidate at California State University, Fresno. I am conducting a research study to better understand the experiences of first generation Mexican American students at elite universities. As a first-generation Mexican American graduate of the University of Pennsylvania and a public education professional who has worked with high school students for the past 13 years, I am deeply interested in examining factors that lead to increased academic success of first generation Mexican American students.

Your participation will help promote social justice education and advance efforts to highlight the various cultural capitals that are utilized by first generation Mexican American students to thrive at elite universities.

I am seeking participants that meet the following criteria:

1. Are you 18 years of age or older?
2. Do you self-identify as Mexican American?
3. Are you a first-generation college student/graduate (i.e. parents do not have a bachelor’s degree or higher)
4. Did you attend a California high school?
5. Did you graduate from or are you currently enrolled at an elite university? Listing of the 25 universities is included in this email.

Participation in this study will include one (1) short demographic survey via Google Forms and one (1) virtual interview that will be video/audio recorded and transcribed. The demographic survey will be used to determine participant eligibility in this study. The interview may take 60-90 minutes and will focus on your experiences as a first generation Mexican American student. Participants will be provided with a $25.00 Starbucks gift card as my way of thanking you for your time and participation once you complete both the short survey and the interview.

Data collected from this study will be used to inform the findings of the research study. Participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may end your participation at any time. If you would like to be involved in this study, please access this online form to access the consent form and short demographic survey.
Feel free to contact me at iniguez@mail.fresnostate.edu or at (559) 312-4057 if you have any questions. Thank you very much for your time and consideration.

List of top 25 nationally ranked universities: Princeton, Harvard, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Yale, Stanford, University of Chicago, University of Pennsylvania, California Institute of Technology, Johns Hopkins University, Northwestern University, Duke University, Dartmouth College, Vanderbilt University, Rice University, Washington University in St. Louis, Cornell University, University of Notre Dame, University of California Los Angeles (UCLA), Emory University, University of California at Berkeley, Georgetown University, University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, and the University of Southern California (USC) (U.S. News and World Report, n.d.).

Sincerely,

Rafael Iniguez
California State University, Fresno
Doctoral Candidate
APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT FORMS

Title of Research Study: Community Cultural Wealth and the Inspirational Narratives of First Generation Mexican American Students attending Elite Universities
Researcher(s): Student investigator name: Mr. Rafael Iniguez
Principal investigator name (faculty advisor): Dr. Christina Luna

Description: You are being asked to participate in this research study because you can provide valuable information about the experiences of first generation Mexican American students attending elite universities. The purpose of this research study is to obtain information from first generation Mexican American elite university students to add to the literature in regards to challenges, successes, motivators, and influences that are utilized to thrive at the post-secondary level. This study will investigate the roles that community cultural wealth (CCW) capitals, high school educators, high school academic coursework, university readiness programs, counselors, and mentorship play in preparing students for admission and persistence at Ivy League and elite institutions. Additionally, the study will also investigate any challenges that first generation Mexican American students face in their transition from high school to the university. An additional focus of this dissertation is to identify the relationship and/or impact of the various Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) capitals (Perez Huber, 2009; Rendon et al., 2014; Yosso, 2005) that are used by first generation Mexican American college students to survive, navigate, and/or thrive at elite universities. This document provides you with information about the study. Please read the information below and ask questions about anything you do not understand before deciding whether or not to participate.

Procedures: If you agree to be part of the research study you will be asked to participate in a short 4 Yes/No answer recruitment survey to determine your eligibility for the study. If you are selected as a participant and agree to participate, you will also be asked to complete a short demographic survey and be part of a 60-90 minute Zoom semi structured interview. Participants will be asked to devote no more than a combined 2 hours of their time on this study.
Possible risks: Participation in this study is associated with minimal potential risk. Potential risks and/or discomforts of participation may include the reflection of storytelling of past and current educational experiences. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to and may stop participating in the interview at any time. Participant names will be kept confidential and pseudonyms will be used for individuals and institutions.

Compensation: Participants will be provided with a $25 gift card in appreciation of their time and as an incentive for their participation in the study.

Audio-Recordings (If applicable): You will be video- and audio-recorded at each interview. The audio-recordings will be transcribed for the purpose of data analysis. After transcription, the audio files will be destroyed. If you do not want to be audio/video recorded, please inform the researcher, and only hand-written notes will be taken during the 60-90 minute Zoom interview.

Voluntary Participation: Participating in this research study is completely voluntary. You may choose not to answer any question or choose to end your participation with the study at any time for any reason without penalty. If you decide to withdraw early, the information or data you provided will be destroyed unless you give consent for it to be used.

Questions: If you have any questions about this study or your participation, please feel free to ask questions now or contact me at iniguez@mail.fresnostate.edu or 559-312-4057.

If you have any questions about your rights or treatment as a research participant in this study, please contact Dr. Nichole Walsh, Department of Educational Leadership Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects at 559.278.0350 or nwalsh@mail.fresnostate.edu.

The Department of Educational Leadership Committee on the Protection of Human Subjects at California State University, Fresno has reviewed and approved the research study.
Please take all the time you need to read through this document and decide whether you would like to participate in this research study.

If you agree to participate in this research study, please sign below. You will be given a copy of this form for your records.

_________________________________________  _________
Participant Signature                                  Date

Informed Consent-Survey

PLEASE EMBED THIS CONSENT FORM IN THE FORMAT IN WHICH IT WILL BE ADMINISTERED (E.G. QUALTRICS, GOOGLE FORM, ETC.).

Direct Link to Google Form Survey: https://forms.gle/6CC5xdkzaeQNJhS8

Title of Research Study: Community Cultural Wealth and the Inspirational Narratives of First Generation Mexican American Students attending Elite Universities

Researcher(s): Student investigator name: Mr. Rafael Iniguez
Principal investigator name (faculty advisor): Dr. Christina Luna

Description: You are being asked to participate in this research study because you can provide valuable information about the experiences of first generation Mexican American students attending elite universities. The purpose of this research study is to obtain information from first generation Mexican American elite university students to add to the literature in regards to challenges, successes, motivators, and influences that are utilized to thrive at the post-secondary level. This study will investigate the roles that la familia, high school educators, high school academic coursework, university readiness programs, counselors, and mentorship play in preparing students for admission and persistence at Ivy League and elite institutions. Additionally, the study will also investigate any challenges that first generation Mexican American students face in their transition from high school to the university. An additional focus of this dissertation is to identify the relationship and/or impact of the various Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) capitals (Perez Huber, 2009; Rendon et al., 2014; Yosso, 2005) that are used by first generation Mexican American college students to survive, navigate, and/or thrive at elite universities. This document provides you with information about the
study. Please read the information below and ask questions about anything you do not understand before deciding whether or not to participate.

Procedures: If you agree to be part of the research study you will be asked to participate in a short 4 Yes/No answer recruitment survey to determine your eligibility for the study. If you are selected as a participant and agree to participate, you will also be asked to complete a short demographic survey and be part of a 60-90 minute Zoom semi structured interview. Participants will be asked to devote no more than a combined 2 hours of their time on this study.

Possible risks: Participation in this study is associated with minimal potential risk. Potential risks and/or discomforts of participation may include the reflection of storytelling of past and current educational experiences. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to and may stop participating in the interview at any time. Participant names will be kept confidential and pseudonyms will be used for individuals and institutions.

Compensation: Participants will be provided with a $25 gift card in appreciation of their time and as an incentive for their participation in the study.

Voluntary Participation: Participating in this research study is completely voluntary. You may choose not to answer any question or choose to end your participation with the study at any time for any reason without penalty. If you decide to withdraw early, the information or data you provided will be destroyed.

Questions: If you have any questions about this study or your participation, please feel free to ask questions now or contact me at iniguez@mail.fresnostate.edu or 559-312-4057.

If you have any questions about your rights or treatment as a research participant in this study, please contact Dr. Nichole Walsh, Department of Educational Leadership Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects at 559.278.0350 or nwalsh@mail.fresnostate.edu.

The Department of Educational Leadership Committee on the Protection of Human Subjects at California State University, Fresno has reviewed and approved the research study.

YOU ARE MAKING A DECISION WHETHER OR NOT TO PARTICIPATE. BY SELECTING YES YOU ARE INDICATING THAT YOU HAVE DECIDED TO PARTICIPATE, HAVING READ AND AGREED WITH THE INFORMATION PROVIDED ABOVE.
For the section below:
- If "No, I do not consent" is selected, the form submits and the questionnaire ends.
- If "Yes, I consent" is selected, the form moves to the next section.
- If the participant selects "Yes" under the section that asks if the participant is under 18 the form submits and the questionnaire ends.
APPENDIX C: SHORT DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY PROTOCOL

INSTRUMENTS: A Short Google Form demographic survey will be administered to prospective participants to determine eligibility for the study.

Direct Link to the Google Form Survey: https://forms.gle/6CC5xdkzaeqNJhSQ8

1. I consent to this study. Answer options for this statement are “Yes, I consent to this study” or “No, I do not consent to this study.”
2. Are you 18 years of age or older? Answer options for this question are “Yes” or “No.”
3. Do you self identify as Mexican American? Answer options for this question are “Yes” or “No.”
4. Are you a first-generation college student/graduate (i.e. parent(s) do(es) not hold a bachelor’s degree or higher). Answer options for this question are “Yes” or “No.”
5. Did you attend a California high school? Answer options for this question are “Yes” or “No.”
6. Did you graduate from or are you currently enrolled at an elite university? List of top 25 nationally ranked universities: Princeton, Harvard, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Yale, Stanford, University of Chicago, University of Pennsylvania, California Institute of Technology, Johns Hopkins University, Northwestern University, Duke University, Dartmouth College, Vanderbilt University, Rice University, Washington University in St. Louis, Cornell University, University of Notre Dame, University of California Los Angeles (UCLA), Emory University, University of California at Berkeley, Georgetown University, University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, and the University of Southern California (USC) (U.S. News and World Report, n.d.). Answer options for this question are “Yes” or “No.”
7. If you are currently earning your bachelor's degree, please enter the name of your current university, major, and expected graduation year. (i.e. Princeton, Engineering, 2022). Option allows participants to enter a short response.
8. What is the highest level of education you have attained? Answer options are “currently an undergraduate,” “bachelor’s degree,” “master’s degree,” or “doctorate degree.”
9. Degrees attained, if any. List All and include University & Year of Graduation. (i.e. BA Sociology (Cornell, 2018), Master of Social Work
(UCLA, 2020), EdD Education (CSU, Fresno 2021), etc.) If no degrees have been earned, write "N/A." Answer option allows participants to enter a short response.

10. Are you interested in being interviewed for this study? Answer options are “Yes” or “No.”

11. If you are interested in being interviewed, please enter the day(s) of the week and times that work best for you to be part of a Zoom interview. Answer option allows participants to enter a short response.

12. Please enter your name below (last, first, middle). Answer option allows participants to enter a short response.

13. What is your current age? Answer option allows participants to enter a short response.

14. What is your gender? Answer options available are “Female,” “Male,” “Prefer not to say,” “Non binary,” or “Other.”

15. Please provide a pseudonym (fake) name for the study report (Last, First). Answer option allows participants to enter a short response.

16. Please enter your preferred contact E-Mail Address. Answer option allows participants to enter a short response.

What is a good contact cell phone number for you? Please include your area code first. (XXX) XXX-XXXX. Answer option allows participants to enter a short response.
APPENDIX D: SEMI STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Introduction

The researcher takes a few minutes to build rapport with the participants by sharing the purpose of the research study and thanking them for their time. The researcher shares his positionality and his own experience as a first generation university graduate of an elite university. Pictures, music, and other anecdotes can be shared to help build rapport with the participants.

Semi Structured Interview Protocol

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself, including your full name, the university you attend, and your intended major.
2. When and how did you realize that you had the academic potential to succeed at any Ivy League/elite university?
3. What role did spirituality or religion play in helping you to overcome any obstacles and persevere at an elite university?
4. What role did your family play in encouraging you to apply and remain enrolled at an elite university?
5. What stories, messages, or life experiences did your family members share with you that served to motivate you to attend an Ivy League/elite university?
6. Are you fluent in Spanish? If so, how has speaking a second language helped you to connect to other undergraduate students, Mexican American clubs/organizations, language programs, and to campus life in general?
7. Reflecting back on your high school years, what role did educators, counselors, and mentors play in motivating you to be successful at an elite university?
8. What unique early event(s) or personal experience(s) influenced your decision to apply to and attend an Ivy League or elite university?
9. How did networks of people (including teachers), community members, and mentors provide you with support and guidance in your transition from high school to an Ivy League or elite university?
10. What challenges (including any pertaining to your race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status) did you encounter in your transition from high school to an Ivy League/elite university and how did you overcome them?
11. What personal characteristics and experiences have helped you to adapt to life and the demands of an Ivy League/elite university?
12. What role has pride in your first generation and Mexican American cultural background played in possibly supporting younger high school students who also aspire to attend an Ivy League/elite university?

13. What competing and often conflicting thoughts have you had to entertain while attending an Ivy League/elite university (i.e. I will persevere vs. I will fail; I am Mexican but also American).

14. What high school college readiness programs and/or advanced courses, if any, helped to prepare you for the academic demands of an elite university?

15. Is there anything else you would like to share with me regarding your experience as a first generation Mexican American student attending an elite university?
Fresno State

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