A Narrative Inquiry on the Experiences of First-Generation, Latinx, Transfer Students,
who have their Bachelor’s Degree and their Utilization of Student Support Programs

A Thesis Presented to

The Faculty of the School of Education

California State University Channel Islands

In (Partial) Fulfillment Of the
Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

By

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May 2024
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Thesis/Project Title: A Narrative Inquiry with First-Generation, Latinx, Former Transfer Students who have their Bachelor's Degree and their Utilization of Student Support Programs

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Abstract

This study explores the experiences of first-generation, Latinx, transfer students with their Bachelor’s Degree and their utilization of student support programs in higher education. This narrative inquiry draws from data of interviews with five co-researchers, the research investigates the challenges and support encountered by these students as they navigate their educational journeys. The research is grounded within the broader context of increasing Latinx enrollment in higher education and the ongoing disparities encountered by minority students. This study aims to highlight the significance of ensuring equitable access to educational resources and support services.

The study is driven by the recognition of historical marginalization and exclusion within educational institutions, particularly for students of color and those from low-income backgrounds. By employing narrative inquiry and Critical Race Theory, Theory of Agency, Community Cultural Wealth, and Counter-Storytelling, the research aims to amplify the voices of underrepresented students and challenge dominant narratives that perpetuate inequities in higher education.

The findings highlight the pivotal role of student support programs in enhancing academic performance, promoting student success, and increasing the likelihood of degree completion. These programs, targeted at low-income, first-generation, and minority students, provide vital resources, mentorship, and community support necessary for navigating the complexities of higher education. The study underscores the need for institutions to cultivate inclusive, diverse, and culturally responsive environments that validate the experiences of minority students. Through collaborative efforts between students and institutions, disparities can be addressed, and opportunities for educational equity can be realized.
Ultimately, this research serves as a call to action for educators, policymakers, and researchers to prioritize the needs of underrepresented students and advocate for systemic change within higher education. By centering the experiences and voices of first-generation, Latinx, transfer students, the study aims to contribute to the ongoing dialogue on equity, inclusion, and social justice in higher education.
Dedication

For my Latinx family,

Maria, Temo, Yazmin, Jessica, and Anthony

and to all other first-generation college students.
Acknowledgements

In embarking on this scholarly journey, I have been fortunate to receive invaluable support from numerous individuals, including loved ones, friends, my cohort, my colleagues, the co-researchers who participated in this study, and most importantly, my thesis advisor, Nancy, and student support programs. All of your love, guidance, and constant encouragement has been instrumental in shaping my academic journey.

Para mi familia, les doy mis más sinceros agradecimientos por su constante amor y por siempre apoyar mis más grandes sueños y aspiraciones.

Sin su amor incondicional, este logro no habría sido posible.
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Chapter One: Introduction

Background

Higher education is composed of various unique populations. According to the Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) in California, 46.5% of the student population were first-generation college students, 10% were transfer students, and 25% were Latinx students in 2016 (NCES, 2023). In the last decade, there has been a noticeable rise in Latinx student enrollment in higher education causing a substantial increase in the demand for assistance within institutions due to students needing additional help from student support programs (Garcia, 2023). According to Heliyon (2022), student support programs in higher education are recognized globally for their ability to enhance academic performance, promote student success, and increase the probability of students completing their degrees. Unfortunately, these student populations experience marginalization and exclusion from accessing resources and support in higher education (Hamilton, 2021). The demand for student support programs stems from institutions admitting diverse student populations, including individuals from racial minorities, low-income backgrounds, and the Latinx community into institutions that were historically designed for white students in higher education (Garcia, 2023). The student support programs are based on students needing additional academic, social, personal, support to guide them throughout their educational experience. For example, one of the student support programs students benefit from is service learning programs. Service learning programs benefit students by enhancing their academic knowledge, fostering civic responsibility, and developing essential life skills through real-world community engagement (McKay & Estrella, 2008). An example from the literature is provided in the following Chapter. Many
students seek out assistance at higher rates due to them being the first in their family to pursue a degree, being low-income, and needing additional resources (Garcia, 2019).

Latinx students enroll in higher education due to a rising demand for skilled labor, to improve and pursue a better future, and to meet societal and familial expectations (California Community Colleges, n.d.). Through their aspirations for upward mobility and empowerment through education, with the help of support programs, students are also able to contribute to their communities. Students face the necessity of feeling supported within the institution as they navigate these barriers. They find themselves compelled to seek and accept guidance as they strive to achieve their goals. Acknowledging the barriers and emphasizing the importance of my study relies on talking about the problems and issues students are facing, barriers such as economic conditions, inequity within policies, and cultural attitudes towards education impact student success in higher education (Ortega, 2015). Therefore, I have chosen to conduct my research in the aim of empowering individuals who have faced these problems within education, while also emphasizing the importance of student support programs in shaping students’ educational journeys.

**Statement of the Problem**

Even though there is scholarship addressing the issue, the provision of need-based services for students remains an important exploration to ensure successful completion within higher education institutions, especially for students of color (Ortega et al., 2015). Institutions with a diverse population have the responsibility to provide equitable access to educational resources for minority students. In other words, considering larger historical inequities, institutions owe minority students, students of color, and Latinx students access to education (Ortagus et al., 2020).
Historically, educational institutions have lacked consideration for social equity, justice, and racial inclusivity (Arce, 2018) that serves the students of color. As Garcia (2019) has stated, “white voices, white histories, and white legacies are authenticated across campus, with little recognition or change of white dominance in policies, procedures and artifacts, and decision making” (p. 11). This statement suggests that within institutions, the perspectives and accomplishments of white individuals are often prioritized and given more weight compared to those of non-white students. The dominant influence of whiteness needs to be critically examined and reevaluated to better serve the needs of the first-generation Latinx population.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of first-generation, Latinx, transfer students with their Bachelor’s Degree and their utilization of student support programs in higher education. Student support programs in higher education provide the resources and equipment in order for Latinx, first-generation college students, and minority students to pursue a higher education. As Posselt et al., (2020) have argued:

Higher education administration for social justice and equity empowers all administrators in higher education to engage in their work—to make decisions, hire, mentor, budget, create plans, and carry out other day-to-day operations—with a clear commitment to justice, sensitivity to power and privilege, and capacity to facilitate equitable outcomes. (p. 9).

Understanding students' experience provides a blueprint for educators and leaders in taking minority, students of color, and Latinx students into consideration when advocating for social and educational equity.
The Department of Education secures program funds to be allocated to higher education institutions to facilitate academic, social, and professional development for students. Some of the programs they fund include Educational Opportunity Program, Transfer Experience Programs, programs targeting Basic Needs, programs that help Veterans, programs that guide First Year Experience Students, and more. These programs targeted non-traditional students and need assistance to support students to meet fundamental college requirements, and to encourage their progression towards successfully completing their postsecondary education (Quinn et al., 2019).

My thesis explores the following research question: What are the experiences of first-generation, Latinx, transfer students with their Bachelor’s Degree and their utilization of student support programs in higher education? In exploring my research question, I interviewed five co-researchers asking them to reflect on their educational experiences and reflect on the additional support they had to seek to meet their educational goals.

**Importance of the Study**

The importance of my study relies on demanding change within the social infrastructure of higher education. Evidence suggests that deficit models about Latinx students in higher education have failed us (Pineda, 2022). Utilizing critical race theories such as Community Cultural Wealth and counter-storytelling to acknowledge the funds of knowledge and cultural capitals available to all Latinx students and their true experiences.

A question I ask myself is, how can we better understand the experiences of Latinx students face within their educational journey? My narrative inquiry highlights the experiences of first-generation, Latinx, and transfer student experiences. Narrative inquiries encourage students to share their experiences and the inequities they face (Bryan et al., 2016). Through counter-storytelling, I present alternative perspectives and challenge the dominant narratives to
address power imbalances within educational institutions (Hubain et al., 2016). Fernandez (2002) has argued the numerous ways counter-story telling benefits qualitative research. Through counter-stories and sharing personal experiences, students express their first-hand experiences related to the inequities they have faced in higher education. Counter-storytelling opens the doors for marginalized students to share and challenge the narratives created in the image of whiteness (Fernandez, 2002). As Dai, a co-researcher in my study, told me during the interview:

Thank you so much…for really focusing on your research and the experiences of underrepresented students. I just want to say kudos to you, because you are just doing it all, and I appreciate you for creating a space for people like me to share stories.

My study is important because student experiences must be explored, especially those of students whose lives have historically been marginalized. My study is a call for action to educators and future researchers to highlight the importance of embracing counter-narratives for racial and social change.

**Definitions of Terms**

For the purposes of my study, the following terms play a crucial role within the research study; Latinx, first-generation college student, transfer student, community college, four-year university, and student support programs, the definitions of key terms are provided below.

*Latinx* refers to students who identify as being from Latin America (Garcia, 2019).

*First-generation college students* are first in their families to graduate with their Bachelor’s Degree from a four-year institution (Garcia, 2023).

Additionally, *transfer students* are individuals who initially attend community college before transitioning to a four-year institution.
Community college serves as an institution where students can earn either an associate degree, Associate’s Degree for transfer, or a certificate that prepares them for the workforce (California Community Colleges, n.d.).

While a four-year university is an institution where students can earn their Bachelor’s Degrees.

Finally, Domina (2009) stated that student service programs “[are] designed to smooth the path to higher education for students who have traditionally been underrepresented in higher education including poor students, minority students, and first-generation college goers” (p. 3).

In the following section, I set out the organization of the thesis.

**Organization of Thesis**

The following chapters of my thesis are organized in the following manner. Chapter one is an introduction to the statement of the problem and overall organization of this thesis. Chapter Two introduces the theoretical frameworks, Critical Race Theory, Theory of Agency, and Community Cultural Wealth, which helps us understand how systemic inequalities are perpetuated and questioned within powerful structures, how students exercise their capacity to act independently and make challenging decisions despite the barriers the face, and how marginalized communities utilize their unique cultural assets, strengths, and knowledge to navigate and resist oppressive institutions. Chapter Two also includes a review of the literature that focuses on the areas of my study. Chapter Three focuses on the methodology, setting, ways I recruited the co-researchers, and the tools used to collect the data. The data collection is followed by data analysis, and I used thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006). Chapter Four introduces the co-researchers, the findings within the transcriptions gained from the interviews and three
major themes. Lastly, Chapter Five focuses on recommendations and implications for higher education institutions for policy, programs, and future research.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

In the last decade, there has been a noticeable increase of first-generation and Latinx student enrollment in higher education, causing a substantial increase in the demand for student support programs within institutions due to students needing additional support (Garcia, 2023). First-generation college students encounter barriers during their college experiences due to their low levels of social engagement with campus life, leading students to experience challenges in maintaining and developing relationships with campus community (Pike & Kuh, 2016). The challenges students face force them to reach out to student support programs. These programs play a strong role in providing a safe environment for minority and marginalized communities. An increasing number of these students are seeking support and resources as they navigate challenges into their transition to higher education (Petrov, 2021). In other words, as this population increases there should be a corresponding increase in resource allocation. Specialized centers with advisors and peer mentors play a crucial role in providing guidance and support for students (Garcia, 2019). Therefore, institutions have the responsibility to identify, implement, and allocate resources for targeted populations who come from disadvantaged backgrounds, such as those from low socioeconomic status backgrounds, who identify as being first-generation, and who are underrepresented (Ingram & Schneider, 2008).

According to Title IV Part A, the Department of Education’s purpose is to create programs using federal funds to improve students’ academic achievement. One program they have created is the Extended Opportunities Program and Services (EOPS). EOPS provides services to students who are economically disadvantaged, are underrepresented, and are first-generation college students by supplying them with resources and funding students need. In order to promote equity for disadvantaged students, this program is guaranteed to implement
one-to-one support for students to achieve their goals which narrows opportunity gaps for students. A support system, valuable resources, and a well-equipped program can positively impact a student towards achieving their goals (McKay & Estrella, 2008). Thankfully, first-generation college students have become aware of the value of student support programs and recognize the importance of becoming involved in order to create connections with the campus community (Payne et al., 2023). Student success programs foster a college going mindset for students to become more aware of the value of actively participating in student support programs (Zuo et al., 2018). Engagement for first-generation college students’ success is essential in their higher educational journey.

In this chapter, I expand on a review of the literature that addresses the experiences of first-generation, Latinx, Transfer Students, who have graduated with their Bachelor’s Degree and their utilization of student support programs in higher education. The purpose of this literature review is to understand the important role student service programs have on first-generation, transfer, Latinx students. After, I discuss Critical Race Theory and Theory of Agency, which provide the conceptual framework for this study. Conceptual frameworks are used to provide additional support, in theory, through the lens of which I view this educational problem. Next, I provide a review of the literature that focuses on how this population found student support programs to be of value, such as cultivating community cultural wealth, belonging, and creating bonds with faculty. This qualitative study, aims to answer the following research question: What are the Experiences of First-Generation, Latinx, Transfer Students, who have their Bachelor’s Degree and their Utilization of Student Support Programs?

**Theoretical Frameworks**

*Theory of Agency*
In higher education, the theory of agency provides the lens of understanding the roles and relationship between students, administrators, and institutions (Jensen & Meckling, 1976). It examines how students navigate their educational journey, making difficult decisions about their experiences, academics, and trajectories based on their individual goals and needs (Kivistö & Zalyevska, 2015). Theory of agency lens will help us understand why our co-researchers made specific decisions to persevere in higher education. Navigating through the experiences and making challenging choices to continue their journeys in higher education.

First-generation Latinx transfer students face challenging circumstances that compel them to seek assistance. Administrators, staff, and faculty help in facilitating learning experiences, providing guidance and support to meet the diverse needs and challenges of students. Administrators and institutions play a crucial role in creating environments conducive to advancing, managing resources, and establishing policies that positively impact student’s academic, personal, and social outcomes (McKay & Estrella, 2008).

This lens enables institutions to tailor support for student needs and aspirations, to secure an environment of mobility away from inequities. I also use the lens of Critical Race Theory to examine the intersection of race, power, and privilege within academic institutions, aiming to uncover systemic inequalities and promote social justice initiatives.

**Critical Race Theory (CRT)**

CRT consists of five tenets. The first tenet acknowledges the permanence and pervasiveness of racism, racism is not temporary, and it affects all aspects of society including laws, institutions, social norms, and cultures (Kim, 2016). Permanence meaning racism is rooted in everything that surrounds us due to normative cultures molding social infrastructures. The second tenet of CRT asserts that race is not only socially constructed through these social
infrastructures, but stereotypes that create oppressions in class, gender, ethnicities, creating marginalizations and privilege (Kim, 2016). Third is the interest-convergence principle, meaning advancements of society only align with the interests of dominant groups (Kim, 2016). The fourth tenet of CRT is intersectionality; and fifth, storytelling and counter storytelling (Busey & Duncan, 2023). These five tenets are further elaborated below.

The permanence and centrality of racism begins with understanding the role of racism in society (Busey & Duncan, 2023). Racism is found in different political, social, and economic structures which affects people who are marginalized. CRT in education confronts policies that affect first-generation, Latinx, transfer students. By effectively using CRT, I will be able to understand where the issues for marginalized communities are stemming from as it relates to intersectionality. Intersectionality recognizes how an individual’s identity consists of various aspects of an individual's life (Runyan, 2018). When a student carries multiple identities, it influences their experiences and opportunities in higher education, whether it be unequal access to education, resource disparities, or poor campus environment. By dismantling systems and acknowledging white privileges, pushing for changes, and creating inclusivity, students may have access to higher education. Racism is socially constructed within higher education; it is essential to address the root causes and work towards equity and justice (Kim, 2016). By challenging existing forms of power structures and biases, we can shift to implementing practices which promote inclusion regardless of identities.

One example is affirmative action in admission processes. Affirmative action creates an increase of representation in higher education (Wood, 2023). An institution by law, cannot discriminate against a student due to their racial identity. The goal here is to promote diversity, inclusivity, and opportunity. The interest-convergence principle of CRT highlights how
institutional policies address issues of racial inequality (Bell, 1995). The interests of minorities are more likely to advance if they benefit and align with the interests of the majority group.

In this study, I utilize CRT to examine how race and racism intersect with institutions and structures influenced by whiteness and systems of domination (Harris & Poon, 2019). CRT points to the institutional practices and policies that perpetuate inequities in higher education impacting students of color. CRT illuminates' issues of power, race, and racism in order to break down barriers and to promote inclusivity and solidarity for all students, especially those who face disadvantages. As a theoretical framework, CRT is a useful perspective to examine the experiences of first-generation college students in higher education through counter-storytelling. Counter story-telling is used as a method that aims to disrupt the normative culture (Bryan et al., 2016). The next section will focus on the importance of community cultural wealth as it relates to students in higher education.

**Community Cultural Wealth**

First-generation college students are those who are first in their family to obtain a degree (Garcia, 2023). This student population often faces academic, financial, resource accessibility, and social disparities (Falcon, 2015). For example, social issues first-generation college students face is not understanding the importance of social engagement or how to become socially engaged on campus, or the need to pursue integration within their institution (Quinn et al., 2019). Social interaction enhances first-generation college students' community cultural wealth. This approach, developed by Yosso (2005), highlights the significance of cultural capital, social capital, and other capitals which enhance the community itself. Community cultural wealth acknowledges and values the cultural assets and resources which students in higher education bring to the table. Acknowledging that students possess unique forms of knowledge, skills, and
network, is essential for students to pursue and continue to modify their skills (Yosso, 2005). An example of this can refer to mentorship and alumni involvement (Garcia, 2023). Alumni involvement allows previous or transfer students to become involved with assisting first-generation college students with navigating any conflicts they may be experiencing.

By embracing cultural wealth, students foster a more inclusive and equitable society that appreciates the contributions of all its members, regardless of their background or socioeconomic status (Yosso, 2005). Yosso describes community cultural wealth as forms of capital which students possess to create social integration between students, first-gen students and faculty, first-generation students and alumni, and between first-generation students themselves (Yosso, 2005). These groups share experiences, stories, aspirations, and expectations, which can inspire first-generation college students to find pathways to build their own student identity and seek their purpose. Embracing cultural diversity encourages the creation of programs, these programs create a more inclusive environment for students to reach achievement.

**Benefits Support Programs Provide**

In this section, I explore the support programs typically available to first-generation college students to assist in their social integration into higher education. Social integration is a process in which minority groups, in this case first-generation college students, adjust to a new environment such as higher education (Follert, 2010). Social integration begins with interactions with faculty, students, alumni, and other administration personnel. Through interactions with these groups of people can share experiences, aspirations, and expectations. Understanding the importance of becoming involved with the support of these programs guides students toward finding the encouragement to pursue social interaction with the campus life. Moreover, because social integration is the foundation to becoming involved in a new experience, it may be a
challenge for them to take that initial step to discover the unknown. However, understanding the importance of seeking help and aid, support programs create pathways to make more integrated experiences attainable (Braxton, 2000). Support programs create a pathway for students to become integrated by offering resources including workshops, in service learning, one-on-one mentorship programs, internships, and volunteer work which aim to increase involvement and awareness (McKay & Estrella, 2008). These services enhance faculty-student relationships, cultivate social capital, and motivate students into becoming more involved within their higher education experience (McKay & Estrella, 2008). Enhancing faculty to student relationships allows students to develop mentor-like qualities and allows students to create a full circle and inspire other students like them to do the same.

Service-Learning Programs

Service learning is a way for students to engage in activities that serve the community as well as connecting them to hands-on activities for an end goal or community need (Wiegand & Strait, 2000). McKay & Estrella (2008) shared the impact service learning had among first-generation college students. It was seen as a positive social interaction because it created an easier form of integration for first-generation college students. Such programs consisted of recognizing the importance of students becoming involved in campus life. For example, some of the service-learning activities included research-based services (assessing what the community needed), advocacy and changes for institutional problems, and ensuring students were directly engaged with the campus community.

Students at Elon University also participated in forms of service learning, they described this as a form of bringing the college experience to life and bonding people together (Center for Engaged Learning, 2022). The programs offered workshops that allowed students to give
testimonials and answered open-ended questions on how these services made it “possible” to succeed in college (McKay & Estrella, 2008). Support programs provide resources for first-generation college students to pursue higher education in successful ways through their interactions and experiences with campus life which leads to students building community cultural wealth. In the next section, the importance of student belongingness with the institution is discussed.

**Belongingness**

According to the National Students Clearinghouse Research Center (2023), creating an environment where students belong, positively impacts student success, graduation rates, involvement, and leads to positive persistence in higher education. Belongingness is the spectrum of which students feel that they are valued individuals within their school’s community (Veach, 2023). By cultivating belongingness in higher education for marginalized communities, institutions promote equity, diversity, and inclusion. Ultimately enriching the educational experience for all students and fostering a more just and equitable environment for students to succeed. It is important for a student to foster belongingness with faculty and staff, along with those who share similar experiences to provide social, academic, and emotional support (Astin, 2012).

First-generation college students experience disparities into their transition to community college and continue to persist through their college experience. Low levels of social engagement lead students to feeling negative emotions such as feeling discouraged, lonely, and internalizing fear to pursue their goals. The foundation of keeping students connected to a campus is a fundamental component of a students’ academic and personal development. When a student feels belonging within their institution, they can be accepted, included, and connected to
a particular group, in this case, the institution (Tice et al., 2021). First-generation, Latinx, former transfer student graduates may encounter different scenarios when pursuing higher education such as moving away from home, being the first in their family to attend college, and not having familial support (Rodriguez & González, 2020). Therefore, when students feel these emotions, institutions should provide engaging campus activities, resource programs, to enhance their overall sense of belongingness. Feeling connected, valued, and a part of an institution is essential for student development. Thankfully, when students enroll in a student support program, staff and faculty can create relationships and connections with students. Then faculty can help ease issues of imposter syndrome, family responsibilities, lack of familial support, lack of preparation, low levels of engagement, and social isolation when they enroll in college (Graham, 2011).

**Building Relationships with Faculty**

Building relationships with faculty will help students with navigating their college experience (Yosso, 2005). An example of the positive outcomes of building relationships with faculty emerges from a research study conducted within the Business and Public Management Program at the University of LaVerne. The business student support program found a positive correlation between students who engage in the Summer Business Camp and students who persist in their pursuit of higher education due to their experiences within the program (Ghazzawi & Jagannanathan, 2010).

The University of LaVerne collaborated with Resource for Education Advocacy Communication and Housing (REACH). REACH is a program tailored for first-generation college students by exposing students to career success. REACH helps students who are economically and socially disadvantaged, by connecting them to scholarships, community
members, and other resources students need (Reach, n.d.). The Summer Business Camp consisted of a three-week program in which students were able to write their own business plans, ideas, and present them to professors and staff (Ghazzawi & Jagannanthan, 2010). This allowed the participants to gain hands-on experiences of building relationships with faculty and gain a college-going mindset. When the program completed, researchers interviewed the participants and asked the students to reflect on their experiences and collaborations. According to Ghazzawi & Jagannanthan (2010), participant Octavio stated:

I was always motivated in attending college, but what I did not know was what to expect or what was expected of me in college because I had no one to turn to for advice. That is where the REACH program came in hand. The REACH program gave me the personal experience of living on a university campus. It also showed me that networking with fellow students and instructors was an important aspect of success in college and in life (p. 134).

A total of 500 students, who participated in this program, came from underserved communities. Impressively, 90% of the participants continued and pursued higher education and 84% successfully graduated from a four-year institution. This is because programs like REACH, ensure college is reachable for students by demonstrating higher education being attainable regardless of how impossible it may seem. It is important to note the importance of testimonials and counter-storytelling because first-generation college students, like Octavio, set an example to other first-generation college students, Latinx students, students of color, because they are aware of the resources available to help them in reaching their goals (Ghazzawi & Jagannathan, 2010). This is bridging the gap, granting first-generation college students access to resources in higher education in order for them to be successful. First-generation college students who
submerge themselves in student support programs produce productive members of higher education. Building relationships with faculty is important, according to Garcia (2019), when faculty understands what a student has gone through, they are able to adequately serve them with appropriate resources. Faculty involvement is important in a student's educational journey because with direct interaction, faculty can tailor their teaching to meet individual needs, fostering a more personalized and effective learning experience. In Garcia’s book she stated:

We've also asked faculty to step up and serve more in an advisory role. In a lot of situations, especially with first-year students, I think that's helped, because we as advisors are not in the classroom with them. We don't see them on a regular basis. When you have a faculty member who can recognize when someone walks in the door, whether they're gloomy that day or something is going on with them, then the faculty member can check in more easily with the student. Having multiple advisors-and multiple people to care for students-is important. (p. 103).

Building relationships and having faculty involvement

**Self-Efficacy for Social Engagement**

When students first enroll in higher education, they may experience a sense of imposter syndrome (Graham, 2011). Imposter syndrome leads to students feeling negative emotions such as discouragement and doubtfulness (Garcia, 2023). However, student support programs can support students to dismantle these negative emotions by connecting students to resources that help them retain in higher education. Student support programs also help students find stamina and self-efficacy in wanting to continue their education. Self-efficacy refers to the belief that students can pursue and achieve their goals. Graham (2011) shared experiences as a first-generation college student and her desire for higher education through a program created by
TRIO. TRIO is a program implemented by the Educational Opportunity Act which helps disadvantaged students pursuing higher education:

The Federal TRIO Programs (TRIO) are Federal outreach and student services programs designed to identify and provide services for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds. TRIO includes eight programs targeted to serve and assist low-income individuals, first-generation college students, and individuals with disabilities to progress through the academic pipeline from middle school to post baccalaureate programs. TRIO also includes a training program for directors and staff of TRIO projects. This program helps disadvantaged students enroll and complete college.

With the help of one TRIO program, Upward Bound College Program (UBCP), she gained the necessary knowledge, skills, and attributes and turned imposter syndrome into self-efficacy. This was fostered by attending faculty-student workshops, finding mentors, and receiving scholarships. UBCP provides students with opportunities to understand other student experiences, ask questions, and feel connected to the university. Graham (2011) stated, “it was great having other students, who had similar experiences through TRIO, also working at being successful in college. It reinforced my belief that I could be successful, too” (p. 36). Similarly, as Octavio stated, “programs such as REACH help first-generation college students feel a sense of belongingness in a college environment” (p. 4). Feeling welcomed within an institution leads to self-efficacy leading to internalizing the inner confidence to achieving a purpose in higher education.

Conclusion

Chapter Three provides an overview of the methodology and tools I used to explore students’ experiences in higher education. By using narrative inquiries, I dive into understanding
the experiences of five co-researchers’ perspectives and unique challenges they faced in higher education.
Chapter Three: Methodology

The purpose of Chapter Three is to outline the methods I utilized to understand the lived experiences of first-generation, Latinx, transfer students having graduated with their Bachelor’s Degree and their utilization of student support programs. As mentioned in the literature review, in 2016 in California, 46% of the student population were first-generation college students, 10% were transfer students, and 25% were Latinx students (NCES, 2023). The Latinx population continues to grow as the years go by. Unfortunately, students experience marginalization and lack of equitable resources and support in higher education (Hamilton, 2023).

Chapter Three begins with an introduction of the research design and the theoretical framework that informs the study, Theory of Agency and Critical Race Theory (CRT). Next, I discuss the form of data collection of narrative inquiries used to collect the experiences of the co-researchers (Kim, 2016). The data collection is guided by the protocols and tools used to guide the narrative inquiries of semi-structured interviews.

Moving on from the data collection, I explore the measures taken to guarantee trustworthiness throughout the research process. I also reflect on my positionality as the main researcher, and associated responsibilities to accurately represent the stories, experiences, and words of the co-researchers. Lastly, to ensure ethical conduct and to safeguard the rights of my co-researchers, I explain the steps I took to protect sensitive information, and their identities as best I could. To conclude, I discuss some of the limitations of my study.

With pride, I look forward to addressing the research question guiding my study, with the purpose of amplifying the experiences of first-generation Latinx transfer student graduates in higher education to reclaim valuable insights for decision-making as it relates to securing funding for resources allocation and essential support programs in higher education.
1. What are the experiences of first-generation, Latinx, Transfer Students, with their Bachelor’s and their utilization of student support programs in higher education?

**Research Design**

The narrative inquiry tells the lived experiences of first-generation, Latinx, transfer students having graduated with their Bachelor’s Degree and their utilization of student support programs in higher education through narrative inquiries, specifically interviews. The next section will describe how Theory of Agency and Critical Race Theory (CRT) informs narrative inquiry (Kim, 2016).

**Narrative Inquiries**

Narrative inquiry is a qualitative methodology used for understanding and honoring lived experiences (Kim, 2016). Narrative inquiries focus on gathering personal narratives to gain a deeper understanding of experiences. With collaboration between the researchers and the co-researchers, serving to explore culture, social, institutional narratives which influence how individuals seek “hidden” knowledge (Kim, 2016). By asking a series of questions, this methodology places a strong emphasis on encouraging people to speak about their stories. It is important for me to note why I decided to use this form of inquiry as my research method. It is crucial to recognize the importance of subjectivity, everyone’s story must be told. Stories cannot be told through numbers or statistics, we need words, stories, and with the utilization of narrative inquiries, I can fill the silences. I gain meaningful insights, patterns, themes/codes, which go beyond statistical generalizations to amplify human life. The next section will describe how CRT/CCW’s will use narrative inquiries to explore social issues.

**CRT/CCW’s Application within Narrative Inquiries**
CRT and CCW share fundamental connections in their exploration of social issues and experiences of marginalized communities by offering unique perspectives on issues of race, culture, and education (Bell, 1995). Narrative inquiries set the foundation of emphasizing the importance of personal stories and experiences (Kim, 2016). Narrative inquiry illuminates powerful stories and experiences from individuals who have been affected by unfair structures and systemic racism. By giving voice to those who have been silenced, I will illuminate their experiences so others can find them accessible and relatable to those who experience inequities and exclusivity, ensuring that everyone has an equal opportunity to participate and be heard.

CCW examines forms of capitals which students of color benefit from in a positive way, one of them being: social capital. Social capital, as Yosso (2005) shares, “defines students' ‘peers and other social contacts’ and emphasizes how students utilize these contacts to gain access to college.” By sharing their experiences, they provide a platform creating an intense amount of community for marginalized students to stay connected to the communities and professionals who can guide them to success. Through networking and bonding, students can work together. In the following section, I discuss narrative inquiries and the interview protocols used to seek data.

**Data Collection and Procedures**

I provide an overview of where, who, and how I obtained my data. I will discuss the setting, the recruitment process, any materials or devices used to obtain data, and interview protocols.

**Setting**

The scope of my project involves conducting semi-structured interviews via the Zoom platform used for live video chats. With the utilization of Zoom, I was able to collaborate with five first-generation, Latinx, transfer students having graduated with their Bachelor’s Degree.
Considering the co-researchers have diverse educational backgrounds, for clarity, their community college will be called “Community College” and their university will be called “University.” These institutions were all located within Southern California. The recruitment process began with a post of the recruitment flier on Instagram (Appendix A) The Instagram post encouraged my fellow followers to participate in my project. Potential candidates were encouraged to message me through the platform if they wished to participate. Following, I informally asked for their emails through direct message so I could contact them in a more professional manner with further details.

**Recruitment**

I began the recruitment process by directly emailing five co-researchers and politely inviting them to participate in my study (Appendix B). Once they accepted the invitation and consent, I then proceeded to email my co-researchers with details regarding the data collection process (interviews) and consent forms (Appendix B) along with other information they should be aware of. The most important factor of the entity of my project was ensuring the safety of the co-researchers. Throughout the entity of my project, the co-researchers remain aware of the voluntary nature of my project as well as reassuring them of ending their participation at any time with no negative consequences.

**Purposeful Sampling.** Purposeful sampling is a targeted and focused approach to recruitment by ensuring that the selected co-researchers can offer specific information. I invited participants based on their experiences, or characteristics that align with the research question. For the purposes of the narrative inquiry, I strategically sought out the co-researchers who embodied the diverse perspectives essential to capture their unique experiences interacting with support programs at a four-year university. Recognizing the challenges and opportunities, I
purposefully selected co-researchers whose background and academic journey reflected the
diversity I was seeking. By intentionally including co-researchers who have engaged with
student support programs during their educational trajectory. I explored the narratives that unveil
the impact the programs have on academic, social, and personal success. My goal was to
construct an authentic portrayal of all of their experiences and seek to understand the
complexities of their educational journey.

**Convenience Sampling.** Convenience sampling is a method used by selecting
co-researcher from an easily accessible selection best fitting the purpose of my findings (Gall et
al., 1996). With convenience sampling, I used my personal social media app, Instagram, to
conveniently access co-researchers. I posted an advertisement asking potential co-researchers to
participate in my project if they met the parameters mentioned above.

**Co-Researchers**

I recruited co-researchers using a combination of purposeful sampling and convenience
sampling. Purposeful sampling is a non-random sampling technique which prioritizes the
selection of participants who exhibit the specific characteristics, experiences, or knowledge
relevant to the research goals (Patton, 1990).

By employing purposeful and convenience sampling, I recruited individuals who are best
suited to provide valuable insights on being 1) first-generation, 2) Latinx, 3) transfer students,
and 4) university graduates with a Bachelor’s Degree. Moreover, I wanted to speak with
individuals who also utilized student support programs in higher education.

**Semi-Structured Interviews**

For the planned interviews, I created a protocol form to guide the interviews (Appendix
E). The purpose of the protocol form was to establish the procedures, questions, and the steps
that will be taken throughout the project. The protocol form is a document used to guide interviews. The form helped ensure that all relevant information is gathered consistently across interviews and that important topics are either highlighted, questioned, probed, and openly discussed.

The protocol form consisted of five open-ended questions and probing questions, such as “how do you, as a first-generation college student, define success?”

**Semi-Structured, One-on-One Interview Protocol.** The semi-structured interviews were held via Zoom, lasting roughly 40-60 minutes each. Once the co-researchers returned their consent form, we mutually agreed on a date to meet, then they received a Zoom link.

As mentioned above, the most important factor of my project was securing the safety and identity of the researchers, therefore before the commencement of our meeting. I promptly notified them upon initiating the recording process and read them the consent statement I created:

All the recordings downloaded, zoom transcripts, and any other personal information will be kept on a password-protected hard drive and only I will be able to access it.

As mentioned, the interviews were guided by the interview protocol (Appendix E). I offered additional information and clarification if needed and participants/co-researchers were encouraged to talk about the experiences they had with student support programs in higher education. I also happily answered any questions they had.

The interview began with the statement of purpose and intent of the project, along with lots of gratitude and joy. As the interview began, I started by asking an open-ended question such as asking the co-researcher to tell me about something they are proud of, which helped with building trust and rapport. From there I guided the conversation by introducing my prepared
interview questions to commence with the interview. Probing questions were used to help my co-researcher elaborate on any key responses. I also used mirroring or paraphrasing responses like, “I hear you say...” to accurately portray their responses.

As the interviews concluded, I extended an invitation to the co-researchers, encouraging them to share any additional thoughts or important points they might have overlooked or forgotten. This allowed the co-researcher to guide their picture, reflect on their accomplishments, and tell their story.

After the interviews were done, I downloaded the transcription from Zoom and edited any words that needed to be corrected.

**Data Analysis**

The data analysis for the interviews involved a meticulous use of thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006). Thematic analysis is the process of identifying themes within qualitative data, which the transcripts gained from the interviews. Braun & Clark (2016) have stated that thematic data analysis should be the first analysis method taught to novice researchers as it provides core skills useful for analysis. Thematic analysis is a six-step process, I will only be using four out of the six which are stated below.

*Familiarize yourself with the data.*

The first step of data analysis is to read and understand the transcriptions. Before moving forward, reading over the transcripts was important so I could familiarize myself with the data gained from the co-researchers. I engaged with multiple rounds of careful reading, cultivating a deep dive in exploration. I read the transcripts about three times and carefully read the stories the co-researchers shared.

*Generating Initial Codes.*
The second step of data analysis shifts focus to a strategic organization of the data, making it meaningful. Coding is used by taking vast amounts of data, in this case the entire transcribed script, into smaller sections (Braun & Clark, 2006). I decided to analyze the data in a specific method by aligning it with the research question, focusing on what is directly aligned with my research goal. For example, I found recurring phrases, words, and feedback across all interviews. As I progressed, new codes emerged, and existing ones were modified.

I used pens, highlighters, and sticky notes to keep track of any valuable patterns.

**Search for Themes.**

The third step of the process calls for identifying themes. Themes describe patterns which signify something meaningful to the research question (Braun & Clark, 2006). While searching for themes, I analyzed the codes, grouped them, and categorized them into broader themes. Upon identifying recurring themes, I labeled them and matched them with relevant quotes. For instance, if participants discussed mentorship, I tagged the corresponding quote as "mentorship" and paired it accordingly.

**Review Themes.**

The fourth step I reviewed, modified, and ensured that all the themes are clear, strong, and labeled. I continuously questioned and thought about this step, reassuring that all themes made sense and accurately portrayed the co-researcher’s story appropriately.

**Role of the Researcher**

My role as a researcher is to acknowledge my diverse identities. My personal identities include being a woman, daughter, sister, graduate student, student advocate, among others. I am also a first-generation college student, Latina, working at a Community College, earning four
Associate Degrees, then transferring to a four-year university to pursue my Bachelors in Sociology.

My academic journey has been both challenging and empowering as it was positively influenced by great professors, faculty, student success programs, and successful mentorship. The student success programs and mentorship I received from programs like EOPS (Extended Opportunity Programs and Services) and Peer Mentorship Programs. These support systems played an instrumental role in my academic and personal growth, offering guidance, encouragement, and a sense of belonging. As a first-generation college student, the guidance and resources provided by EOPS were invaluable, helping me surmount obstacles and access essential services that allowed me to concentrate on my studies.

I recognize my diverse identities and invite co-researchers to tell me about their experiences in higher education. My identities influence my research design, from deciding who, what, when, and how I want to work on my project. I submerged myself in my research not only to understand the experiences of the co-researchers but my experiences as well.

**Trustworthiness**

To ensure trustworthiness in my qualitative research, I want to ensure my data accurately represents the co-researchers' experiences. Trustworthiness refers to the credibility and validity of findings (Stahl & King, 2020). I will foster a sense of partnership between my co-researchers and myself. I utilized three strategies to advance the goodness of the finding, through member-checking, researcher bias, and using a reflective journal.

**Member-Checking**

In advancing the trustworthiness of my findings, I utilized member-checking as one strategy. Member-checking is used when the transcripts are sent for the co-researchers to read by
themselves. Giving the co-researchers the transcripts opened them to verify the accuracy, authenticity, and credibility of my findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). By sharing the transcripts with my co-researchers I invited them to confirm, correct, or offer clarification with their experiences. Throughout the entity of my thesis, I continuously tried to seek accuracy of the data which was collected. I ensured the meanings and opportunities shared by the co-researcher are being represented and honored.

**Researcher Bias**

Researcher bias occurs when a researcher’s beliefs influence the overall research design and data collection (Noble & Smith, 2015). I share the commitment of minimizing my research bias. Research bias is a way to acknowledge to connect and disconnect with the co-researchers, with notes and phrases. I did this by not allowing my experiences away from what the co-researchers shared and keeping my thoughts and opinions away from the table.

**Reflective Journal**

My reflective journal was used as an auditing process to improve the reliability of my research and decisions (Lincoln & Gubba, 1982). The journal helped with developing a thought process of everything I was doing such as why I was coding in a specific way, or why I decided on a specific methodology. It was a written record of everything I was learning or changing.

**Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations describe my commitment which ensured my narrative inquiry was conducted ethically and safely. I used safety precautions throughout the entity of my project. I ensured informed consent and protection measures to safeguard the co-researchers. They were asked to choose pseudonyms to shield their identities and experiences. Additionally, pseudonyms were used for their educational institutions, as well as any other individuals or locations that
required anonymity. Any data, personal information, or documents I received are locked away in a secure location/hard drive with a password protected system, where only I can access and analyze.

**Limitations**

The limitations in my study encompassed a range of influences such as meeting strict deadlines, recruitment bias, and personal life which disrupted the entire progress with the entire thesis.

Meeting strict deadlines and time constraints presented a significant limitation during my research with the speedy intake of data collection/analysis, potentially resulting in a less comprehensive exploration of the research topic and limiting myself to specific findings. The limited time led to a smaller sample size (five co-researchers), making it challenging to obtain a more diverse and representative group of participants from diverse populations. A small sample size also influenced recruitment bias by only recruiting students from Southern California, had I been given more time, I would have the opportunity to interview students out of the county, state, and serving richer representation.

“Life happens.”

This last year, my personal life had a strong impact on my mental health which affected my education and career. Dealing with personal, professional, academic, and social problems within my life, and writing this thesis was very challenging, but now that I am at the finish line, I would within a heartbeat, do it again. All the experiences I have faced have only molded me into becoming a better person, student, and daughter. Additionally, my journey allowed me to understand the importance of self-care and prioritizing myself and my work. I took time away from my thesis, sometimes it was one day, one week, or weeks’ time which allowed me to
rejuvenate and feel stronger. As well as having a strong support system: my family, thesis advisor, cohort, and work colleagues truly helped make this accomplishment possible.

**Conclusion**

In Chapter Three, I outlined the methodological techniques used to delve into the narrative inquiries and listen to the co-researchers' experiences. Given the significant representation of students in California, it is crucial to understand the experiences and challenges they faced in higher education, it is also important to understand where marginalization and inequities form. The recruitment process, measures to ensure trustworthiness, ethical considerations, and protecting identities, took time and effort to best honor the narratives told by the five co-researchers. It began with the introduction of the research question and design, unfolding to the data collection with the guidance of thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006).

Chapter Four will dive into the discussion of the inquiry's findings as narrated by the co-researchers. Let’s look at what the five co-researchers had to say during their interviews.
Chapter Four: Findings

The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand the lived experiences with student support programs of our beloved, first-generation, Latinx, transfer students who have received their Bachelor’s Degree. The heartfelt narratives involved the 18-year-old who had to accept multiple family roles, or the migrant student who was shamed for speaking a language other than English. We explore what it felt to be the breadwinner while also being a full-time student and having a job, or being the first daughter to move away from their traditional family. However, these barriers did not stop them from succeeding. As Dai stated, “I would not be where I am today without their support” referring to the help of student support programs and the resources provided. Without further ado, in this Chapter, I highlight how I utilized the methods described in Chapter Three, to answer the following research question:

What are the experiences of first-generation, Latinx, Transfer Students, with their Bachelor’s and their utilization of student support programs in higher education?

As stated in Chapter Three, I employ thematic analysis, drawn from Braun and Clark’s (2006) methodology, to analyze the data obtained from interviews with the co-researchers. Thematic analysis is the process of identifying themes within qualitative data, which in this case are the transcripts gained from the interviews. This chapter is structured to commence with a concise introduction of the co-researchers, followed by an exploration of three main themes and their corresponding sub-themes, all of which resonate with the research question. The narrative unfolds through the voices of the co-researchers themselves. Finally, the chapter concludes with a summary of key insights gleaned from their stories.

The Five Frontliners
In this study, I collaborated with five co-researchers whom I named collectively as the Frontliners. This term represents the location of these co-researchers as both first in their families to engage with higher education and, first in their families as professional careers in their respective fields. I listened to their struggles and successes with respect and honor. Below is a brief introduction of who they are, their academic achievements, and aspirations.

**Dai**

Dai is a first-generation college student, Latina, former transfer student, and the eldest daughter in her family. Dai earned her Associate Degree in Communication at a Community College in Southern California, then transferred to a four-year University where she earned her Bachelor’s in Chicanx Studies. Currently, Dai is pursuing her Master’s in Educational Counseling and aspires to take on a leadership role in Higher Education.

**Steph**

Steph is a first-generation college student, Latina, former transfer student, and the eldest daughter in her family. Steph earned her Associate’s Degree in Health Science at a Community College in Southern California, then transferred to a four-year University where she earned her Bachelor’s in Health Science. Currently, Steph is pursuing her Bachelor’s in Nursing and aspires to become a Registered Nurse in her community in Southern California.

**Pancho**

Pancho is a first-generation college student, Latino, former transfer student, former migrant student, and a son. Pancho earned his Associate’s Degree in International Studies at a Community College in Southern California, then transferred to a four-year University where he earned his Bachelor’s in Political Science. Currently, Pancho is an advocate for migrant children.
He works in a Migrant Education Program at the state level. This program is a federal funded national program that provides support services to migrant children.

**Jackie**

Jackie is a first-generation college student, Latina, former transfer student, and the eldest daughter in her family. Jackie earned her Associate’s Degree in Psychology at a Community College in Southern California, then transferred to a four-year University where she earned her Bachelor’s in Psychology. Currently, Jackie is pursuing her Master’s of Arts in Higher Education and aspires to be a Director for a program that serves underrepresented students.

**Albe**

Albe is a first-generation college student, Latino, former transfer student, queer, and the eldest son. Albe earned his Associate’s Degree in Geography at a Community College in Southern California, then transferred to a four-year University where he earned his Bachelor’s in Geography and Educational Studies. Currently, Albe is an educational advocate for students at a Community College. He is an advocate for LGTBQ rights, free access to education for all including Dreamers and Undocumented Students, and environmental justice.

**Emergent Themes**

I identified three main themes, listed below, which address my research question. During my hour-long interviews with each co-researcher, I got to know about their experiences in higher education, seeking insights into their educational journey. A copy of the interview protocol with the interview questions is found in Appendix E. Each of their responses were impactful, as they carefully responded.

The first theme focused on existential benefits gained from student support programs. Existential benefits encompass the advantages that students derive from meaningful interactions
with faculty members and peers (Astin, 2012). These experiences foster equity and accessibility in facilitating personal growth and academic development (Astin, 2012). The second theme focused on resource benefits gained from student support programs such as receiving scholarships, leadership positions, and service learning. The third theme focused on building campus communities with the assistance of student support programs. New students sought identity-based organizations, community building opportunities, and finding familial support. Due to these balancing of identities, our co-researchers looked for the support they did not have at home, within their peers in higher education. In the following section, I explore the first theme.

*Existential Benefits: Finding a Purpose*

In this section, I will explain how the co-researchers gained existential benefits from student support programs. Existential benefits relate to finding a sense of purpose and belonging, feeling connected to peers and the campus community, finding emotional, academic, and social well-being (Astin, 2012). Due to being first-generation, students face a limit of family guidance considering they are the first in their families to navigate the college experience (Garcia, 2023), along with dealing with feelings of imposter syndrome (Falcon, 2015). As a result, they have to learn to be self-advocates and ask for help.

Both Steph and Jackie, expressed a pressing need for support. As Steph stated, “after high school, I did not have the resources to understand what classes I needed, I just knew I wanted to pursue a nursing degree.” Understanding the dynamics of college and university life was challenging for both, leaving them with feelings of uncertainty and a sense of inadequacy in terms of academic preparation. Furthermore, being the eldest daughters in the family, they felt a profound responsibility to make their parents proud, to set an example for their siblings', and to
become someone. Jackie explained “I would have to share my story with [faculty and staff] so they knew where I was coming from and the type of support that I needed.” Sharing their stories with faculty created a sense of cultural assimilation, relatability, and fostered belongingness. She had to be her own advocate. It was important for faculty and staff to know where she needed the most support, whether it was academic or social. Jackie also stated:

[The programs] were helpful because I was able to meet with the counselor one-on-one, and I could ask them any questions, to clear things up or anything that came to mind or you know, to make sure that I was taking the right classes to make sure that I was going to graduate on time.

Securing a relationship with staff and faculty was a must for students because they need support, whether it was for academic or personal advice.

Now, both Steph and Jackie have both become advocates. Jackie advocates for underrepresented students and Steph advocates for health patients. Their greatest motivation is becoming the person others can turn to for help. Steph stated, “I know in my community, I will be able to give Latinos the comfort and help they need because I speak Spanish.” They desire to make a positive impact on individuals who may experience similar situations.

Dai participated in the Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS). This program provides services for underserved students in California. Steph and Jackie also benefited from this program, which ultimately served to the benefit of their transfer to a four-year institution. Through the guidance of the EOPS Program, Dai was able to find her purpose and secure a stable plan for her educational journey. Dai stated “[The counselor and I] kind of started mapping out my educational plan and then they also were giving me resources to guide my experiences.” Dai took advantage of as many resources in community college and
university as possible to secure her foundation for success. She stated, “I joined the student
government in my community college, initially starting in a lower position, by the time I
graduated, I ended up becoming the student government President!” After high school, Dai
craved attending a four-year university, because that is what is expected of us Latinx. She felt
confused and miserable because those aspirations were crushed. Thankfully, attending a
community college and participating in student government, student support programs, transfer
programs, those emotions were quickly turned into bundles of aspiration, motivation, and
securing a purpose.

For Pancho, his citizenship status was a barrier to receiving adequate support. Stemming
from fear, Pancho questioned, “why did they [programs] need to know my citizenship status?”
Pancho contributed to his success simply by asking for help. Which was a big thing for him as a
Latino, asking for help has a negative stigma in the Latinx community, as Ortega (2023) stated
Latinx communities are proud people.

Commencing his educational journey, Pancho remembers failing 80% of his courses due
to his language barriers. He quickly had to learn English to progress and be able to pass his
classes. Pancho lacked familial support from his friends and family. He stated, “Once again it's
different not only being first-generation, but then also being someone coming from Mexico. I
didn't understand 100% of the [English] language... People can go to their friends and talk about
college. I did not have that, most of my friends dropped out of school.” However, the tutoring
center, empathetic professors, and mentors at his community college were enough for him to
continue his academic endeavors. It was up to Pancho to figure out how the system worked, and
he did, with the help of his mentors and accepting challenges he was able to persevere. Pancho
stated, “yeah, I almost thought of quitting because he was like, yeah, it's too hard, I wasn't aware
of all of the help that you can get within the college.” Today, Pancho gratefully stands proud and helps migrant students find the equitable resources. In the next section, I discuss the experiences of the co-researchers with the resource benefits they received from student support programs.

**Resource Benefits: Aid and Skills Gained**

What are student support programs? The purpose of student support programs is to furnish institutions of higher education with adequate resources, funding, and benefits to provide academic or social development for underserved students (Domina, 2019). By allocating funds from the state, institutions may provide a range of support for students such as financial aid relief, book/food vouchers, scholarships, tuition assistance, professional development workshops suited for student needs.

This theme is divided into three sub-themes which express the type of resources students benefited from. The first sub-theme explains the aid students received. The second one describes how the Frontliners are now giving back and the skills they gained. Finally, the third theme explains how the co-researchers learned to self-advocate for themselves.

The co-researchers each benefited from a specific resource provided by the student support programs in higher education. For example, Dai received scholarships from the Foundation at her community college which helped pay for her undergraduate degree. Steph received book vouchers from EOPS which assisted in paying for her Chemistry lab textbooks. Jackie participated in professional development workshops programmed by the First Year Experience Program which each played a pivotal role in her development. Albe received test and homework accommodations from the EAC (Educational Assistance Center) for him to succeed in the classroom. The programs served the students to better guide them throughout their educational journey.
Financial Aid Relief. Financial aid provided the opportunity for the co-researchers to obtain and maintain the pathway to an education. During my discussions with the co-researchers, a frequently echoed sentiment was their acknowledgment that they couldn't have accomplished their education without student support programs. All of the co-researchers depended on the services the student support programs provided, whether it was a meal, a voucher, or a lending textbook. As Dai expressed, “I was able to meet with the counselor that really understood me and believed in me and so having a really supportive counselor was crucial I think, and they helped me financially and gave me vouchers for books.” Similarly, Steph expressed, “I was able to transfer after three years, my community college did well in setting me up with financial aid, and how to adequately apply to the CSUs without an application fee.” The CSU application fee costs $70 per campus, luckily Steph was able to get that covered. The co-researchers mentioned that significant challenges they faced in pursuing higher education stemmed from limited financial resources. As mentioned in Chapter 3, 46% of college students are first-generation college students of those students 50% of them come from low-income families and from a minority group (Santilli, 2022).

Financial aid plays a crucial role in ensuring students access to an opportunity and mobility (Stantilli, 2022). By alleviating the burden of worrying about how educational expenses such as textbooks and tuition & fees, financial aid facilitates education, academic and social potential. Supporting first-generation college, Latinx students from underprivileged backgrounds, higher education is accomplishing a dream (Garcia, 2023). The co-researchers in this study not only achieved their dream of obtaining their Bachelor degree, they also fostered and secured a sense of belonging and empowerment in higher education. As a result, these students then become a role model to their families. For example, as Pancho mentioned, “I am a
proud DACA student. I know I empower my community because I was able to dream big and put in the work.” The co-researchers have benefitted from their teachings and used it for their benefit personally and in higher education.

**Giving Back.** Giving back is the act of contributing to others or to society in a positive manner. Each of the co-researchers took what they have learned and used their own experiences to help those who face similar experiences as them. Jackie is an advocate for underrepresented students. Steph advocates for health patients. Pancho advocates for migrant students. Dai demands and advocates for equitable resources. Albe advocates for those who constantly and meaningful way through acts of kindness and generosity. It involves sharing one’s time, skills, or expertise to support individuals and communities, for the better. Whether it be through advocating or community time, giving back is a way for individuals to express gratitude for the opportunities they've received; to connect with others, and to make a positive impact on the world around them.

During the interviews, one of the questions I asked the co-researchers was to tell me something you are currently proud of, their answers were remarkable, selfless, and beautiful. Pancho said, “I feel proud to be able to apply what I have learned to better my community.” Steph shared, “I am proud that I am not giving up, I want to make my family proud.” When I asked the co-researchers to tell me what success meant to them, Dai replied with “success is helping others.” The acts of kindness and generosity exhibited by the co-researchers highlight the various ways they have chosen to contribute to their communities, stemming from their own experiences of once being recipients of generosity. The community involvement showcases the various areas of advocacy and shared values held by all the individuals involved. Being an advocate is a skill gained from the student support programs. It is important to learn how to be an
advocate because it gives voice to the marginalized, creates awareness, and addresses systemic issues for positive societal change. It was fulfilling to hear how each one of them, coming from different backgrounds of struggle, now have the potential to give back.

**Self-Advocacy.** Self-advocacy is the ability for students to speak up for themselves and demand resources based on their needs involving making difficult decisions, solving problems, and navigating through the challenges of higher education (Garcia, 2021). Self-advocacy is an important skill for first-generation, Latinx, transfer students to undertake because it enables them to advocate for their accommodations and access to resources.

Student support programs provide the assistance first-generation, Latinx, transfer students need for them to meet their goals. It involves being seen, heard, and understood and creating spaces for students to feel safe and comfortable. For Jackie, seeking assistance was a big step in her journey as a transfer student transitioning from a community college to a four-year institution. She stated, “it is challenging for transfer students because you go from a community college where you already have a group established, to a four-year institution where you have to find that new support group, right?” She focused on establishing a sense of belonging and recognized the importance of reaching out for support. Fortunately, she found herself guided by a program tailored specifically for transfer students. Dai remembers the day she drove to her community college, all by herself, to secure a future. She walked into Financial Aid, visited counselors, and asked for help. The resources embedded in the programs helped her feel resilient, overcome the barriers, and helped her feel safe. Vulnerability began with the ability to find out who is listening, who wanted to help, who cared about their future endeavors.

In reflecting on my college journey, I'm grateful for the invaluable guidance and support of three remarkable Latina mentors who played pivotal roles in shaping my present and
futureOne mentor served as my EOPS counselor, provided a shoulder to cry on, and was “big sister”. While the other mentor was my boss when I was a student peer mentor. She was the person who influenced me to become a better person, student, and daughter. And lastly, my first boss who constantly reminded me to apply for scholarships and ensure I was receiving the help I needed. If it was not for them teaching me the ropes in higher education, I would not be where I am today. These mentors provided me with guidance, support, and advice.

**Campus Community**

In higher education, first-generation, Latinx, transfer students face unique challenges that can hinder their sense of community and belonging. Student support programs play a vital role in addressing these challenges. The foundation of higher education consists of administrators, faculty, and staff, figures who not only shape the academic environment but also serve as enduring role models on our pathways. First-generation students can seek identity-based events such as *Noche de Familia*, hosted by a university in Southern California which brings Latinx faculty, staff, and administrators together to meet Latinx students and their families. Latinas also have *Unidas-Hermanas* in which Dai participated. Dai mentioned:

> I ended up finding this organization called Unidas-Hermanas. It's a Latinx based organization. It kind of helps Latinx identifying students find a community to provide networking opportunities, academic opportunities such as study hours, fundraising opportunities, community service opportunities. It really helped me find my community.

Mentors are key here because they connect those who are less experienced with individuals who are advanced in their professions. Mentors share knowledge and insights to help students achieve their goals. These relationships foster success and inspiration, enabling students to reach their full potential (Garcia, 2021).
Through the discussion with the co-researchers, the last theme focused on the importance of campus community within higher education. Mentorship for marginalized students provides a sense of diversity, representation, and reflection in higher education. As Jackie mentioned, “I met with my peer mentor, a Latino, and I was able to create a community on campus. I knew where to go after classes if I needed a space to study or even just to hang out and meet other people that were like me.” Student support programs provided a home away from home for first-generation college students. Similarly, it was not until my transfer to a University that I finally began to meet other first-generation college students, Latinx, low-income students who were just like me. My parents worked minimum wage jobs, did not understand what going to school was, they just expected us to earn a degree.

I want to emphasize the struggles first-generation, Latinx, transfer students undergo when in higher education. It is tough to secure a degree, but what makes it more challenging is feeling alone and having to seek the support of faculty. Dai and Albe both had to move away from their families to pursue higher education. Dai stated, “I come from a low-income background, first-gen, Latinx. Let alone leave and move away from my hometown.” Fortunately, when they both moved away they were able to find support groups like the Undergraduate Fellow Program (NUFP). NUFP provided workshops on identity-based topics and specific transfer needs, such as what classes to take, secure a registration date, meet with counselors, and understand degree requirements, and give them the opportunity to meet with other students with a similar major. They shared the opportunity of meeting with people with their major and other first-generation college students. Dai mentioned, "I always reflect on the resources that helped me get here because without the resources and without the community that I've built along the way. There's no way I would be here today."
Moreover, the feeling of seeing yourself represented within administration is remarkable. Pancho had a challenging time in higher education due to his citizenship status. He lived in fear of releasing personal information. Now he provides services for migrant families who need help. For him, he did the full circle of being a migrant student who needed help. He wanted to become a mentor and share the experiences with people who are going through similar situations. He wants students to be able to comfortably say “I see myself.”

Steph is the first in her family to pursue a Nursing degree. Being a first-generation, Latina in STEM has its challenges. Of the nurses in the United States, only 5.4% of them are Latinx (Cheshire, 2020), there is an underrepresentation of women in STEM. The need for identity-based community is essential for Latinas like Steph to find support. Albe discussed the challenges he faced, being Queer, there was not a resource program available for him to connect with. In Chapter five, we will discuss recommendations for institutions, one of them being creating targeted services that meet an individual's needs.

Conclusion

In this Chapter I reported on the experiences of first-generation, Latinx, transfer students and their utilization of student support programs. The experiences they shared were impactful and inspiring. It is important to talk about these experiences and create awareness of the disparity’s students face.

In Chapter five, I will discuss the implications and recommendations for these findings and relating it to the larger conversations in higher education. As mentioned, CRT examines how race intersects with systems of power, in Chapter Five I will also highlight the ways racism is ingrained in higher education. Thinking about why having specific resources is important.
Listening to the experiences of the five frontliner, the adequate resources should be available for all students.
Chapter Five: Discussion and Conclusion

The previous Chapters of my thesis laid the foundation essential for understanding the background and methodology of this research project. Chapter One highlighted the statement of the problem and the purpose of the study. Chapter Two highlighted the review of literature, introduced the conceptual frameworks used to guide my research, and Chapter Three outlined the methods used to guide the narratives of the co-researchers. Chapter Four presented the findings and stories from Dai, Steph, Albe, Jackie, and Pancho. From these narratives, I discovered three overlapping themes which I named: (1) developing existential benefits, (2) resources benefits gained, and (3) building campus communities with faculty and mentors. Each of the co-researchers, in their own way, found successes, formed relationships, and paved their way into higher education.

Each co-researcher shared their story and perspectives as a first-generation, Latinx, former transfer student and their participation with student support programs in higher education. My qualitative study aimed to answer the following research question: what are the experiences of first-generation, Latinx, Transfer Students, graduating with their Bachelor’s and their utilization of student support programs in higher education? This study demonstrates the significance of continuing to advance faculty involvement with student engagement, community building among Latinx, first-generation college students in higher education and the importance of the student support programs.

This chapter is organized in different sections beginning with a review of the conceptual frameworks used to guide my research. These are Critical Race Theory and Theory of Agency. Then, I discuss three areas for further implications and consideration for higher education. The first area is being resilient and persevering through higher education. The second area addresses
using community cultural wealth to persist through higher education, and the third area entails extending fringe benefits of higher education. Moreover, I consider implications and appropriate recommendations for policy, programs, and practices for institutions to better support first-generation, Latinx, students in higher education. Additionally, I extend an invitation for future research in this field. In the following section, I return to the conceptual framework for my study.

**Critical Race Theory and Theory of Agency**

My study was guided by the tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Theory of Agency. CRT is a theory focusing on identifying racism embedded in structures of power (Kim, 2016), while Theory of Agency explores the ability to navigate and move structures of power through the agentic personal and academic decisions made by the co-researchers (Kivisto, 2015). With CRT, colleges and universities create awareness of the inequities and injustices rooted in racist systemic structures (Hiraldo, 2010) through counter storytelling and sharing lived experiences. Counter storytelling allows for the sharing of the experiences and truths of minority populations, challenging the dominant culture (Hubian et al., 2010). Moreover, it taps into lived experiences, questioning normalcy, and recognizing the significance of cultural knowledge, gaining insights into school dynamics and students' experiencing the unknown.

Student support programs are connected to combating racism by ensuring representation, a sense of belonging, and cultural competence is found for minority students (Pineda, 2022). Without student support programs, there would be a drastic decrease of achievement, increase of isolation, and lack of access to vital resources and services (Carrasco, 2023). As the first tenet of CRT suggests, racism is endemic in American society, and that includes higher education. Higher education would not be attainable without the support of student support programs specifically
because of the financial obstacles for Latinx students. For example, Carrasco (2023) stated, “the top reason why... students are currently still enrolled in both associate degree and bachelor degree programs is because of financial aid” (p. 2). By employing these frameworks, I can see how racism is rooted within the institution (Busey & Duncan, 2022). The co-researchers described how they persisted through the unfairness and inequities in their higher education journeys by seeking support. For example, despite the challenges the co-researchers experienced as low-income individuals from minority groups, they persisted by seeking assistance, asking for tuition fees, book vouchers, and Latinx mentors. As previously mentioned in Chapter One, 46% of college students in California are first-generation college students. Of those students, 50% of them come from low-income families and from a minority group (Santilli, 2022). The ability to persist relies on the growth-mindset and the ability to make informed decisions (Santilli, 2022). Decisions of wanting to persist, regardless of the challenges that students face.

In the following section, I discuss the major areas in relation to the research question used to guide the study.

**Discussion: Areas for Consideration**

The next section will dive into three key areas for discussion. Specifically, in the first section, I explore resilience and persevering through higher education. The second area for reflection is using community cultural wealth to persist through higher education. The last area is extending fringe benefits of higher education. These discoveries reinforce existing contemporary literature and explore the significance of the perspectives shared by the co-researchers.

**Resilience and Perseverance through Higher Education**

First-generation, Latinx, Transfer Students, face a variety of obstacles in their journey of attaining a degree (Sever, 2023). Additionally, these obstacles relate to experiencing family
obligations, facing financial disparities, and cultural assimilation barriers (Arce, 2018). The co-researchers shared the need for the institution to create support groups tailored to their specific needs. For example, Albe stated, “it was necessary to have someone that looked like me [in student services and higher education] because then they could understand what I needed.” The ability to persist and continue through the obstacles relies on students' willingness to make educated and informed decisions that pushes them. These first-generation college students have to make difficult decisions by themselves being the first in their families to attain a degree. Making difficult decisions leads to being resilient and persevering through obstacles in order to attain goals. Resilience and perseverance are essential qualities that empower an individual to overcome challenges, obtain goals, and navigate barriers. According to Luthar et al. (2000), resilience is the ability to adapt positively when facing tough situations. Perseverance relates to the ability to hold onto a goal, despite the obstacles which they face (Duckworth, 2016). I partnered these terms together because even though the co-researchers, first-generation, Latinx students faced disadvantages, disparities, and inequities, they continue to be resilient and persevere through challenges.

Students do not always know how to sign up for classes, file for financial aid, or even decide on a major (Garcia, 2019). When I embarked on my educational journey, at 17 years old, I had to rely on my older sister to help me with the college application process, assisting with filing for financial aid, which involved navigating through tough legal questions. Her challenges raise the question of who helped her during the challenging process? She took on the tough role of the older sibling, persisting and figuring things out on her own, so that her younger siblings always had someone to look up to. Being reliant on abilities and the desire to want to make a difference highlights the importance of resilience and perseverance. Changing first-generation
college students' mindset of dealing with imposter syndrome to a growth mindset and remembering why they rise. Utilizing the knowledge they have gained, learned, and attribute to persist in higher education.

**Using Community Cultural Wealth to Persist through Higher Education**

Building upon frameworks of CRT, the community cultural wealth model to examine educational access and opportunity for communities of color (Yosso, 2005). Yosso’s model consists of six different capitals; aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistance. These capitals inform how students best prepare themselves to navigate their educational experiences. Here, I want to focus on two capitals: aspirational and navigational capitals. Aspirational capital relates to the ability to remain positive regardless of obstacles and social challenges (Yosso, 2000). Navigational capital refers to how students navigate through challenging places in school (Yosso, 2000). These capitals consist of forms of knowledge that are gained through experience, the capitals inform how students utilize their knowledge towards achievements. The model challenges the deficit assumptions about students of color with achieving their goals.

**Aspirational Capital.** First-generation, Latinx, transfer students feel the responsibility to make their parents proud, due to our families leaving their home countries in pursuit for a better future for their families (Arce, 2018). For Steph, her biggest accomplishment was getting into nursing school. She mentioned:

My family was over the moon, overjoyed, when I told them that I was finally able to accomplish this goal. After having been rejected from nursing programs I have previously applied to. I thought I was not good enough, I felt like I was not smart enough. But you know, I see my parents are getting older every day, they work every day. That is
what reminds me, to never give up, because of everything they have sacrificed for me and my brothers.

Aspirational capital, gaining inspiration and value from these challenges. For first-generation college students, aspirational capital plays a crucial role in navigating the obstacles of higher education. Reminding ourselves, Steph had to overcome these obstacles on her own, due to the low Latina representation in STEM. Steph has worked with white practitioners. Her vision of seeing herself as a first-generation Latina practitioner, is an invitation for other students to envision themselves in her role and continue to pursue an academic and professional career.

**Navigational Capital.** First-generation Latinx transfer students utilize navigational capital to navigate through social institutions including higher education and their professional careers. Navigational capital encourages and empowers students to confidently navigate through unfamiliar environments. Navigating through the transfer experience is intimidating and intense for first-generation college students (Keever, 2022).

Dai’s experience of navigating through higher education, where she bravely ventured away from her family going from a small town of 30,000 people to a bigger town of 90,000 people. Dai navigated through the complexities of relocating to a bigger city; securing the apartment application on her own; saying goodbye to her loved ones, while embarking a new Chapter in her life. She mentioned:

Yeah, I think a lot of it is like… Yes, my family is happy for me, but I think kind of when you talk about being a Latina and like moving away. I [had] to provide a lot for my family before and [had] to help my mom in raising my younger brothers. I think it took a really big toll on me, like mentally knowing that I can't be there to help support like my brothers and my mom anymore.
Navigating through these tough emotions took a toll on Dai, but despite these emotions. Dai’s family understood the value and necessity of receiving an education. Dai receives endless familial support from her family. Once her family understood the importance of her moving away the conversations changed. Dai reflects on the conversation she had with her brothers:

It’s okay because at the end of the day you are doing what you love and you're doing stuff that's going to you know, not only benefit you, but like benefit our family. So my brothers even being supportive of me, I think that [conversation] kind of allowed me to like rest and to be at peace with the fact that I am doing this for a good reason.

Going from a community college to a four-year university is challenging, but what soothes the process is knowing you have a support system that is willing to be with you.

*Extending the Fringe Benefits of Pursuing Higher Education: Giving Back to the Community*

Fringe benefits encompass the post-graduation choices of a student to contribute to their community (Astin, 2015). Fringe benefits entail leveraging knowledge as a means to effect positive change in society and allowing people to learn and hear from your experiences. It encourages individuals to share their own perspectives and share their knowledge for the betterment of society overall. Fringe benefits resonate with Pancho's story, an undocumented student who had to navigate the complexities of higher education with little familial support and facing linguistic barriers; challenging normative cultural barriers and defying the odds. Pancho now gives back to the community because he wants to ensure the people he is representing feel heard and seen. Pancho works for a program that serves and supplies resources for first-generation and undocumented students. He mentioned, “I believe in working for things that will improve the lives of the people around you and creating a better life for those next to you.
Being happy to know I am making a difference.” Pancho agreed that his best opportunity in life begins with giving back to the community.

Fringe benefits are a takeaway point from my study because the benefits show that student support programs are preparing students to give back to their community (Astin, 2015). Students are taking the hardships they face and are turning them into learning opportunities for not only themselves but for those around them. Working with parents is another aspect of fringe benefits, which Pancho enjoys. In his work, he supports parents who face linguistic barriers by offering to translate documents and ensure people have accessibility to resources in the way they most need. Ensuring there is a parent-to-student and parent-to-staff is important because he did not have that kind of support.

**Implications of Findings and Recommendations: Thinking about Policy, Programs, and Practice**

Through the narrative inquiries, the co-researchers were curious to know what “a perfect world” meant. A perfect world for students of color, Latinx students, minority students would have everything wanted, to meet our desired outcomes and goals. In the next section, I want to utilize the knowledge I have learned and the literature from my research to understand how institutions, faculty, staff, and administration can support first-generation, Latinx, transfer students and secure the support they receive. Through engaging with the narrative inquiries, I gained valuable insights about the unmet needs of the co-researchers. The co-researchers mentioned ways that higher education could have been more just. First, I heard from Albe he stated, “I wish I had a queer mentor.” Stephanie stated, “I needed to see more Latina representation in STEM.” Pancho stated, “I wish someone understood my citizenship status.” Dai stated, “I wish I knew it was fine to change my major.” Jackie stated, “I wish I had more
Latina support.” Despite the support they received, I gained valuable insights into the unmet needs of the co-researchers.

Based on the literature and the findings of my study, I propose three recommendations for policy, programs, and practice. My recommendations stem from how to provide support and awareness of help for first-generation college students. Additionally, how institutions can define and utilize Servingness in higher education (Garcia, 2019). First, I advocate destigmatizing the act of asking for help and embracing attendance at community colleges. Secondly, I aim to enhance identity-based representation within higher education to promote diversity and inclusivity. Lastly, I propose the development of targeted services within higher education to meet diverse individual needs.

**Destigmatizing: Asking for Help and Attending a Community College**

Destigmatizing is the act of moving away from negative connotations to a more understanding, accepting, way of thinking (Ortega, 2023) The next section will focus on destigmatizing asking for help and attending a community college.

**Asking for Help.** Asking for help can have a negative perception for students, that perception may stem from fear of being seen as incompetent or weak (Ortega, 2023). By creating awareness, advocating, and eliminating these perceptions, collectively students can encourage each other to ask for support that can lead to greater opportunities within the classroom or in the campus community. Growth allows the individual access to more resources, gain skills, and collaborate with staff and faculty. Students connecting with faculty/staff can foster a sense of belonging (Garcia, 2023), gain trust, strengthen relationships, and be comfortable to seek guidance in the future. An institution is able to destigmatize seeking help by connecting students with positive role models and encouraging the role models to positively reinforce students who
seek help. Institutions can also have open forums or group counseling sessions where staff share their own experiences to demonstrate that seeking help is a normal and beneficial part of personal and academic growth.

Oftentimes, students do not know where to start or who to ask when they need help (Arce, 2018). Creating awareness of how to ask for help is important but before doing so institutions must ask the question, how can institutions best serve our students? An important to note, when serving our students, and they are asking for help, the staff who is being asked remains patient and empathetic towards the students' questions and requests. For example, Pancho remembers wanting to give up, he stated, “most [professors] only [spoke] English. So even for the classes it was hard because I didn’t have the tools to be successful”

Daily, students face limitations and have needs, and educators must also have an open mind to see an opportunity to help. Staff and faculty must be open to communication and encourage students to talk about what they need, what is missing, and accept the feedback.

**Attending a Community College.** Challenging the stigma of community college as most first-generation college families expect them to attend a four-year university (Kent, 2019). Dai, Jackie, and Steph mentioned the uncertainty their families experienced upon learning of their decisions not to pursue a four-year university. Their families expected them to attend a four-year university upon graduating high school. Despite these factors, it is crucial to consider the positive implications of attending a community college as they offer substantial support and financial aid to their students (California Community Colleges, n.d.). For example, when interviewing the co-researchers' experience with community colleges, they mentioned receiving more funding with scholarships, book vouchers, and overall financial aid due to them being more aware of the support they could receive. All co-researchers were able to qualify for two years
free tuition at their local community colleges. Resources were almost handed to them, compared to their experiences at four-year university, they felt they had to compete for the resources.

California Community Colleges offer different pathways of pursuing higher education, whether it be to attain an associate’s degree, associate’s for transfer, or a career education certificate (California Community Colleges, n.d.). According to California Community College website stats from the Chancellor’s Office, approximately 58,000 transfer degrees were awarded in 2020, compared to 19,000 in 2012 (California Community Colleges, n.d.). Clearly transfer rates are on a rise. Within my current role in higher education, working with incoming freshmen, I often witness them applying to four-year universities and labeling community colleges as their “last resort.” I am unsure if they are unaware of the resources they can take advantage of at a Community College. Destigmatizing attending community college, begins with outreach and awareness efforts. Meaning, K-12 administrators must provide outreach efforts to students, and families, who are planning or unsure of where to attend college. Outreach begins with inviting community college recruiters to share or present any resources and programs available at their respective community colleges. Additionally, inviting parents to college fairs, alumni visitations for students to hear their success stories, and more parental involvement.

*Increase Representation of Latinx Identity*

Reflecting on the stories the Latinx co-researchers shared, they stated that more Latinx representation is required in higher education. Data from the National Center for Educational Statistics show that in 2021, 51% of faculty members were white men, compared to the 2% Latinx men. As Latinx students attend predominantly white staffed institutions, they face considerable challenges with representation. Moreover, there has been an increasing number of Latinx individuals in higher education, as well as a rise in enrollment in public education Latinx
students (Fernandez, 2002). For Latinx students in higher education, locating Latinx mentors, faculty, and staff is a multifaceted hurdle. I assume it is a hurdle because hiring practices may be unfair, old ways of practices are still in play, or implicit biases are embedded within the institution. Additionally, educating staff and faculty with Latinx experiences, resources, and ways of thinking to better support first-generation and Latinx students. Dai has had a different experience within her Master's program as she sees herself being represented by colleagues and staff around her, she learned from her experiences during her undergraduate and applies them to her experiences now. Which makes navigating through challenges, connecting with others, and feeling a sense of belonging within the academic community more manageable. She stated:

[Four-Year University] is technically an HSI, a Hispanic Serving Institution, but when you walk on campus, it doesn't look that way and it also doesn't feel that way a lot of the time. I feel like a lot of you know, my experiences at [Four-Year University] were positive because I surrounded myself with, other Latinx identifying students who are going through similar challenges as me and so that kind of makes me feel less alone, but before I had found that community, I, like I said, I was questioning whether I made the right choice. I tried to like it there and so I really tried my best to join organizations like Latinx based organizations and it kind of helps a lot like Latinx identifying students kind of find community to provide networking opportunities, academic opportunities such as study hours, fundraising opportunities, community service opportunities. And so it really helped me. Find my community within [Four-Year Institution].

Latinx culture must be represented, appreciated, and reflected in faculty so students feel safe when entering a classroom, student support program offices, and when meeting staff, faculty, and administration (Garcia, 2019). Students must feel safe and secure when they enter a
new journey, especially when they are first-generation. I reflect on the conversation I had with Jackie, she mentioned, “if I could create my own student support program in higher education, I would have a program for Latinas, run by Latinas, and then, all Latinas would benefit from the services.” Being a Latina and the eldest sister for Jackie, was tough. She mentioned having to balance multiple roles while securing her college degree. Meeting other students who are Latinas would be helpful because then bonding, relationships, and networking occurs. Sharing her identity meant Jackie was able to comfortably share her experiences. If institutions have the capacity to admit first-generation and Latinx students, then they also have the capabilities to hire faculty and administration to meet the needs of and reflect the diversity of their student populations (Roberts & Gonzalez, 2020).

One of the biggest inequities students face is the lack of Latinx represented in higher education which highly affects their opportunities for success (Rodriguez & González, 2020). Representation within the institution is crucial because staff, faculty, and administration must be cognizant of students' upbringings, experience, and barriers they may face (Correa, 2023). In Garcia’s (2019) book Transforming Hispanic-Serving Institutions for Equity and Justice, she noted, “diverse faculty members are essential at HSI’s for several reasons. Latinx students want to see themselves in the faculty, because it is motivating to see successful Latinxs with terminal degrees” (p. 67). Having representatives of the Latinx community in higher education also serves students because they can relate, create connections, and enact social justice policies. Underrepresentation begs the question of how institutions are supposed to commit and value their mission statements if they are missing the representation aspect.

Targeted Services in Higher Education to Meet Individual/Identity Needs
As the demographic of students in higher education continues to diversify, there should be an increase of targeted services in higher education to meet individual identities. Identity refers to the experiences and values that create an individual whether it be their ethnicity, social identity, gender, religion, sexuality (Jenkins, 1996). Educational institutions should establish support systems for the diverse needs which are expressed by students. Offering students essential resources for them to persist, grow, and succeed in higher education. These services can range from creating identity-based services for students who are underrepresented (Garcia, 2023). Services such as counseling, accessibility to resources, and targeted services to empower students to overcome barriers or obstacles that get in the way. Moreover, committing to invest in targeted services reflects a commitment to student-centered education (Boggess, 2020). Every student should receive the essential support to thrive in every way. When students’ needs are not met, the number of retention, drop-out rates, and academic struggles increase. According to Ark (2018), an education advocate, students have a right to deeper learning found within student services because it welcomes “a consistent voice for all students to have a safe school environment” (p. 2).

During the interview I asked the question, “if you could create a student service program to support your education, what program would you have created?” Every response was unique and touching in their own way. In the next section, I would like to report on Albe’s response. Albe is a first-generation college student, Latino, former transfer student, queer, and the eldest son. He is an advocate for LGTBQ rights; free access to education for all including Dreamers and Undocumented Students, and for environmental justice. As Albe recalled his educational experience, he remembers the endless resources of financial, academic, and social support he received, which greatly aided his journey. However, one gap in support was the absence of
representation and support groups for the LGBTQ community. He recognized the importance of feeling included and wished for a greater awareness and advocacy for LGBTQ students within the community college and university experience. Albe stated:

I needed LGBTQ+ representation in higher education because I needed role models to look up to. As a first generation, it’s already hard enough, plus being gay which adds a whole other layer of challenges. I wish I had people higher who I saw myself in so I felt inspired and a sense of belonging.

As a Latina, first-generation, former transfer student, and a proud queer individual, I advocate for an increased support for students who are navigating, balancing, and growing into multiple identities. As Albe said, it is challenging enough balancing multiple identities, being Latinx. The LGBTQ community searches for belongingness within the institution, a place where community members can shine, instead of hide. Finding support and a community took 24 years of my life, to be able to accept and come out as a queer individual. I really wish I would’ve had more support within the institution to be able to navigate this sooner.

**Invitation for Future Research**

The next section focuses on the invitation for future research stemming from my project. My project focused on the experiences of first-generation, Latinx, Transfer Students, graduating with their Bachelor’s and their utilization of student support programs in higher education. To summarize, from Chapter Four, the co-researchers shared about the generous support they received from the student support programs, including receiving financial support, mentor support, and overall navigating through higher education.

The experiences which were shared is not a universal finding to all students who identify as “first generation”, “Latinx” and “Transfer Students.” However, the narrative inquiry is a
starting point for consideration of future research. For example, while my study explored the experiences of Latinx students attending Hispanic Serving Institutions, another project could consider the experiences of Latinx students attending a Predominantly White Institution (PWI). Additionally, I would also like to hear about the experiences of non-traditional college students, the kinds of support they seek and where their utilization of support stems from. Future research could also have a greater, more diverse number of co-researchers. What would a study of Latinas reveal in terms of their needs for support services? There are different aspects that can be considered in research and understanding the areas of whose voices need to be heard is a starting point.

**Conclusion**

I conclude this study recognizing that student support programs are the foundation for securing student success for students who come from minority backgrounds. The experiences of first-generation, Latinx, Transfer Students, graduating with their Bachelor’s and their utilization of student support programs in higher education demonstrate that the programs available to students play a crucial role in their academic, social, and personal trajectories. The resources, mentorship, financial aid, and community empower students to continue. Counter-storytelling provided underscore the importance of institutions being culturally responsive for validating student experience (Bryan et al., 2016). Cultivating inclusive, diverse, and equitable environments among minority students will cater to their needs. Through assessing needs and collaborating with minority students, institutions can serve students and effectively address disparities and turn them into aspirations.
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Appendix A

Recruitment Flier

Study on your Educational Experience.
If you identify as:

- First-Generation College Student
- Latinx
- Former Transfer Student
- Have a Bachelor’s Degree
- Utilized Student Support Programs

I would like to talk to you about your experiences with student support programs in higher education. I would like to meet with you on Zoom for a 40-60 minute interview.

INTERESTED? CONTACT ME VIA DM OR EMAIL VANESSA.VELAZQUEZ890@MYCI.CSUCI.EDU
Appendix B

Invitational Email Draft

Dear Co-Researcher (Name),

My name is Vanessa Velazquez, and I am completing the Master’s Degree in Educational Leadership with an Emphasis in Higher Education program at California State University, Channel Islands (CSUCI). Additionally, I have received four Associate Degree’s at Ventura College in 2019 and received my Bachelor’s Degree in Sociology in May 2021 at CSUCI.

My project explores the experiences of first-generation, Latinx, former transfer students with their Bachelor’s Degree and their utilization of student support programs while attending a higher education institution. First off, I would like to say thank you for your participation, effort, and time. Your participation in my research is very important and will forever have a profound impact on my educational journey.

What I need from you: to protect your identity, I kindly ask you to give yourself a pseudonym (fake name). This study involves one interview with you. The interview is semi-structured one-on-one session conducted over Zoom, I will send you the zoom link as soon as you give consent. The interview is expected to last between 40 to 60 minutes.

Finally, I want to reiterate, your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. If you ever wish to stop participating in this project, you are perfectly entitled to do so. Furthermore, if you become uncomfortable at any time during the interview, you are welcome to decline to answer any questions. Your agreement to participate in this study will be signified by your signature on the consent form.

If you would like to participate in this project, please review and sign the consent form. prior to our first zoom meeting. If you have any questions throughout the entity of this project, Please feel free to contact me.

Again, I appreciate your participation.

Best,
Vanessa
Appendix C

California State University, Channel Islands
CONSENT TO ACT AS A HUMAN RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

January 2024 - May 2024

You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Vanessa A. Velazquez. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. Please read the information below and ask questions about anything that you do not understand before deciding if you want to participate. A researcher listed below will be available to answer your questions.

PURPOSE OF STUDY

The purpose of this research study is to understand the experiences of first-generation, Latinx, transfer students having graduated with their Bachelor’s Degree and their utilization of student support programs within their educational journey.

SUBJECTS

Inclusion Requirements
You are eligible to participate in this study if you are:

- 18 years or older
- A first-generation college student.
- Latinx.
- A former transfer student (community college to a four-year university).
- Have a Bachelor’s Degree.
- Utilized student support programs in higher education.

Time Commitment

This study will involve approximately 40-60 minutes of your time over the course of one one-on-one zoom meeting.

PROCEDURES

The following procedures will occur:

To commence this research project, I will post a flier recruiting participants for participation in my project on my personal Instagram platform. The flier can be found on Appendix A. Through the Instagram post, I will encourage my followers to send me a private DM if they meet my requirements. After they send me a DM, I will privately ask for their emails and formally ask them to participate in my project. When acceptance of participation is received, they will be contacted by me via email, they will receive two forms agreeing to participate and an audio release form. When they return this, I will request a written description about themselves and anything you would like to tell me.
Together we will schedule a mutually convenient time and date to meet for the interview. They will receive a Zoom link where we discuss their experiences during a one-on-one, semi-structured interview.

I want them to be reassured, their participation is voluntary, and they may recuse at any point in the inquiry process without prejudice. Every effort will be made to assure your confidentiality throughout this entire process. I will be the only person who reviews the transcript. All digital data will be stored on a hard drive with a secure password. After the interview is completed, I will send the transcript back to you. Please review the transcript and let me know if it accurately portrays your story. Once this process is over, you will receive a thank you gift from me.

RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS
This study involves no more than minimal risk. There are no known harms or discomforts associated with this study beyond those encountered in normal daily life.

BENEFITS
Subject Benefits
You may not directly benefit from participation in this study. They will receive a swag bag from CSUCI with a pen, t-shirt, and a cup.

ALTERNATIVES TO PARTICIPATION
The only alternative to participation in this study is not to participate.

COMPENSATION, COSTS AND REIMBURSEMENT
Compensation for Participation
You will receive swag from California State University Channel Islands, as a thank you. Swag will include: a t-shirt, a cup, pen, and a tote bag! The items will be donated by the school California State University Channel Islands.

WITHDRAWAL OR TERMINATION FROM THE STUDY
You are free to withdraw from this study at any time without any penalty to you. If you decide to withdraw from this study, you should notify the research team immediately please. The research team may also end your participation in this study if you do not follow instructions, miss scheduled visits, or if your safety and welfare are at risk.

CONFIDENTIALITY
Subject Identifiable Data
Any identifiable data collected will be accessible only to members of the research team. School names will be given pseudonyms. The participant’s community college will be called
“community college” and their four-year university will be called “four-year university.” Participants' names will be given pseudonyms created by the participant.

IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS
If you have any comments, concerns, or questions regarding the conduct of this research please contact the research team listed on the last page of this form.

If you have concerns or complaints about the research study, research team, or questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact Research and Sponsored Programs, One University Drive, California State University, Channel Islands, Camarillo, CA 93012, or phone 805-437-8495.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION STATEMENT
You should not sign this form unless you have read it and been given a copy of it to keep. Participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to answer any question or discontinue your involvement at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you might otherwise be entitled. Your decision will not affect your relationship with California State University, Channel Islands. Your signature below indicates that you have read the information in this consent form and have had a chance to ask any questions that you have about the study.

I agree to participate in the study.

[If any part of the study is audio or video recorded, include a check box or signature line for consent to be audio and/or video recorded.]
For example:
___ I agree to be audio recorded.
___ I do not wish to be audio recorded.
___ I agree to be video recorded.
___ I do not wish to be video recorded.

Participant Signature  Date
Printed Name of Participant

RESEARCH TEAM
Researcher: 
Vanessa A. Velazquez
Master of Arts in Educational Leadership with an Emphasis in Higher Education
One University Drive
Camarillo, CA 93012

1-(805) 437-8400

Faculty Advisor: 
Nancy-Jean Pément
School of Education
One University Drive
Camarillo, CA 93012
nancy-jean.pement@csuci.edu
Appendix D

California State University Channel Islands
Audio/Video Release Form

Research Project Title:
Understanding the Experiences First-Generation, Latinx, transfer students Having Graduated with their Bachelor’s Degree and their Utilization of Student Support Programs while Attending a Community College or University

Principal Investigator’s Name: Vanessa A. Velazquez

As part of this project, I will be making video/audio recordings of you during your participation in the research through the Zoom Platform. Please indicate what uses of these video/audio recordings you are willing to permit, by putting your initials next to the uses you agree to and signing the form at the end. This choice is completely up to you. I will only use the video/audio recordings in ways that you agree to. In any use of the recordings, you will not be identified by name.

1. The video/audio recordings can be studied by the research team for use in the research project.

2. The video/audio recordings can be used for scientific publications.

3. The video/audio recordings can be displayed at scientific conferences or meetings.
4. The video/audio recordings can be shown in classrooms to students.
5. The video/audio recordings can be displayed in public presentations to non-scientific groups.

6. The video/audio recordings can be shown on television, or the audio portion can be used on radio.

7. The video/audio recordings can be posted to a website or social media.
I have read the above descriptions and give my consent for the use of the video/audio recordings as indicated by my initials above.

Name
(Signature) (Date)
Appendix E

Interview Protocol

Semi-structured Interview

Date & Time of Interview: TBD
Location of Interview: Zoom Platform
Pseudonym:
Graduate Student and Primary Investigator:
Vanessa Velazquez // vanessa.velazquez890@myci.csuci.edu

Description of Project

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this project. Our meeting will consist of one one-on-one interview and it will be recorded on Zoom.

Our interview will last approximately 40-60 minutes. We will discuss your experiences as a first-generation, Latinx, former transfer student having graduated with their Bachelor’s Degree and your utilization of student support programs while attending a higher education institution.

The interview will be recorded using the Zoom Platform and will be automatically transcribed via Zoom transcript function. You will have an opportunity to read the transcription of our interview and make any adjustments or give clarifications after the interview.

During this interview you must choose a pseudonym to protect your identity, your community college will be called “community college” and your four-year university will be called “four-year university.”

All the recordings, transcripts, and any other personal information will be kept on a password-protected hard drive and only I will be able to access it.

Description of Project:

The purpose of this project is to better understand the experiences of first-generation, Latinx, transfer students having graduated with their Bachelor’s Degree and their utilization of student support programs while attending a higher education institution. This project is guided by the following research question:

a.) What are the experiences of first-generation Latinx transfer student graduates in their utilization of student support programs in higher education?

Outline for an Interview Protocol
1) The first question should be an informal, ice breaker question to get to know your co-researcher (CR) and to warm up into the interview
   a. Pick something from the small description they sent me when they agreed to participate.
   b. Tell me about an accomplishment you had during your undergraduate experience.
   c. What did you do after receiving your bachelors?
   d. Spark up an old memory

2) Main Interview Questions
   1. So what was it like for you to attend community college? (use probing questions to elicit stories)
   2. Tell me about your experiences at a four-year university. What was that like for you? What did you learn? .
   3. In as much detail as possible, please tell me about your experiences with student success programs while pursuing your undergraduate degree.
   4. In your view, which resources at your two-year/four-year institutions did you most benefit from?
   5. In your own words, tell me what success looks like to you? How do you define success?
   6. What student support program do you think you would have benefited from, if it existed?

3) The last question is a closing statement followed by a question:
   We are nearly at the end of our time together, is there anything you’d like to add that, perhaps, I did not ask? Or anything else you’d like to say before we end the interview?

   Possible Probing Questions
   1. What makes you feel this way?
   2. Why do you think that way?
   3. How was that experience?

   Mirroring paraphrasing responses: I hear you say, did you mean?