Experiences That Support Persistence and Retention of Latinx First-Generation College Students (FGCS) at Community Colleges

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**Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership**

Date 05/18/2021

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School of Educational Leadership

Experiences That Support Persistence and Retention of Latinx First-Generation College Students (FGCS) at Community Colleges

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

by

Dr. Veronica Rios

June 2021
Dedication

My work is dedicated to God for granting me the strength and the will to persevere. This study resonated with me deeply because I am Latina. I am a first-generation college student, and I am a California community college success story; thus, I am evidence that success is attainable.

To my mom, Amelia, thank you for being a true example of strength. There are no words to describe the resilience, dedication, and hope that you represent. Your unconditional love and support have brought me far in life.

To my husband, Miguel, thank you for your love, support, motivation, and unbelievably patient demeanor through my challenges in this dissertation journey, but especially in our life together. I thank you for not allowing me to throw in the towel, even when I thought I wanted to.
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I would like to give special thanks to my committee members, Dr. Karmyn Downs and Dr. Clementine Msengi. Thank you for being part of my committee, for your support and flexibility.

I would also like to acknowledge and thank my family and friends who checked in on me throughout this journey and offered kind words along the way. Your support means more to me than you could imagine. Thank you for instilling the confidence in me that at times slipped my mind, and I forgot I had.
Abstract

The purpose of this instrumental case study was to describe experiences of successful Latinx first-generation college students that support persistence and retention toward graduation for Latinx first-generation college students at California community colleges. The study was framed using Tinto’s retention theory. Successful Latinx first-generation college students were defined as those who have attained graduation from a California community college. This study focused on Latinx first-generation college students not persisting toward graduation at California community colleges, a situation that extends to the national level. This case study included nine Latinx first-generation college students, and the researcher collected data through virtual semistructured individual interviews. The virtual interviews were recorded, analyzed, and transcribed. Findings from this study indicated that support is essential to the success of Latinx first-generation college students at California community colleges, which supports Tinto’s theory. The support can be experienced through community college support services or outside of college persons, such as family, friends, peers, significant other, coworkers, or inside the educational establishment such as faculty, administrators, or staff.

Keywords: Latinx, first-generation college student, community college, persistence, retention, support
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Since the first community college, Joliet Junior College, was established in 1920, two-year colleges have expanded to 1,600 in the United States, including 942 public institutions that offer certificates and two-year associate degrees (American Association of Community Colleges, 2020). Additionally, some began to offer four-year baccalaureate degrees. Today, community colleges have the highest enrollment of first-generation college students from low-income minoritized backgrounds (Felix & Castro, 2018). Recently, much focus has been placed on community colleges and understanding how data-driven intentional decision-making is critical for those considered historically marginalized, particularly Latinx students (Felix & Castro, 2018). This introductory chapter contains the study’s background and historical significance, which will help specify the issue, the statement of the problem, theoretical framework, the purpose statement, and the research questions and rationale for the study. Lastly, I will also list the definitions of the key terms used throughout.

Background of the Study

Burke (2019) acknowledged that student attrition in college occurs when students fail to persist in higher education, and this has been an issue at colleges since they were first established. Burke discussed the importance of increasing student retention by ensuring persistence toward graduation in higher education institutions and how it benefits both students’ success and institutional success by maintaining tuition and fees. González (2015) argued that student attrition had been a continuous issue that affects the population served at community colleges. González reported that community colleges have the lowest completion rates of all higher education institutions. For example, “on average, only 38% of students who begin their postsecondary education at a community college complete a degree or transfer to a four-year
institution” (González, 2015, p. 72). Additionally, the American Association of Community Colleges (2020) noted that there had been a decline in enrollment for new incoming community college students since 2009. For example, the decline reflects 358,800 less in enrollment compared to the year 2017 nationwide.

According to Bauman et al. (2019), successful retention and academic success for Latinx first-generation community college students (FGCS) comprise several protective factors that involve support within the college and extend outside of the college environment, which includes making sense of college, the individual definition of success, and sense of belonging. Vega (2016) noted how Latinx are one of the fastest-growing ethnic groups in the United States, yet somehow continue to lag academically compared to their White counterparts. Additionally, low educational achievement often leads to earning lower wages, unemployment, and poverty for Latinx.

Vega (2016) noted that it was not clear what factors helped college enrollment, persistence, and completion for high achieving Latinx FGCS and discussed the need for more clarity on the contributing factors. Obtaining clarity of the positive and negative contributing factors as they apply to equitable practices that affect minoritized students, including Latinx FGCS at community colleges, will help education leaders provide opportunities to support this historically marginalized population effectively (Felix & Castro, 2018). As part of the student college preparation, higher education institutions need to work collaboratively in a comprehensive manner to assist students in retention and counseling services (Francis et al., 2018).

A high number of Latinx students indicated that they prefer to attend a community college for various reasons, including staying close to home because of family obligations
(Murphy & Murphy, 2018). According to Portwood et al. (2015), research has demonstrated that parent involvement, a shared responsibility between educators and parents through in-home support, can impact student achievement. Vega (2016) suggested that by attaining parent involvement, student attendance increases, which leads to academic performance. Thus, when educators inform parents about college demands, parents’ concerns and questions are addressed while enhancing the collaboration between school and home on college or career readiness. Future research in parent involvement, its definition, and its role for college students, ages 25 and younger, is needed (Francis et al., 2018).

Among the protective factors in academic success, social capital plays a vital role in academic achievement for Latinx FGCS (Schwartz et al., 2018). Social capital is described as connections and links to groups, resources, and potential or actual support of networks (Bourdieu, 1986). Also, connectedness to peers, educators, and other campus personnel within the institution as it transcends to college and campus life is an identified factor contributing to academic success and student satisfaction (Jorgenson et al., 2018). Institutional practices are another crucial component in effectively assisting FGCS, particularly the pedagogical approach inside and outside the classroom (McCallen & Johnson, 2019). The facilitation of activities inside and outside the classroom creates a sense of belonging within the community college setting and effectively enhances students’ relationships (Gilken & Johnson, 2019).

**Statement of the Problem**

At a local community college in California, California Community College (CCC) (pseudonym), according to their 2016 Institutional Effectiveness Report, the overall course retention rate was 82%, and the overall course success was 67% in the spring semester of 2016. Course retention refers to students continuing from fall to spring, and course success pertains to
enrollment and completion with a passing letter grade for a credited course (California Community Colleges, 2020). For Latinx, the overall retention and success rate in 2015 was 64.4%. In their Institutional Effectiveness Report, CCC’s noted goal was to increase the percentage of retention and success by 2%. In 2015, CCC had 67% of the student population identify as FGCS. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2015), the student demographics for CCC in 2015 included 55% Latinx and 18% White non-Latinx. The data indicated that only 25% of Latinx students graduate from CCC, while the graduation rate for White non-Latinx was 37%.

The problem of Latinx FGCS not persisting toward graduation extends to the national level. For example, in 2011, the graduation rate for Latinx at all community colleges was only 13% (Murphy & Murphy, 2018). It is anticipated that Latinx will comprise 29% of the United States population by the year 2060 (United States Census Bureau, 2014). According to the U.S. Department of Education (2016), only 19% of Latinx are above the federal poverty level. It is imperative for students to pursue postsecondary options beyond high school, such as community college, to compete in today’s job market and rise above the poverty line (Perna, 2015; Vega, 2016). Many Latinx families are low-income, and their students are more likely to enroll in community colleges because of affordability (Murphy & Murphy, 2018).

Arredondo et al. (2014) reported that Latinx are the largest ethnic minority population in the country, yet they lag behind in educational outcomes. This lag in educational outcomes is a challenge because, as Arredondo et al. (2014) pointed out, “Education is an important component of success in the United States” and “the difference in lifetime income can be staggering” (p. 62).
Theoretical Framework

One theory cannot capture all outcomes and describe all students (Schuh et al., 2017). However, Tinto (2006) emphasized institutional activities and their importance in promoting academic and social success toward persistence and retention in higher education. Tinto described student persistence and retention as having many complexities. Additionally, Schuh et al. (2017) noted that Tinto’s student success and retention theories have several lenses, such as sociological, psychological, economic, and organizational lenses. Elliott and Healy (2001) suggested that “student life is a web of interconnected experiences which overlap and influence student satisfaction” (p. 2). They further emphasized the importance of student interactions and satisfaction and how they lead to retention in higher education. Interactions between students and staff or faculty inside and outside of the classroom were noted as experiences that contribute to student retention or the likelihood that they would recommend the institution to friends or relatives (Elliott & Healy, 2001; Schuh et al., 2017; Tinto, 2006).

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this instrumental case study was to describe experiences of successful Latinx FGCS that support persistence and retention toward graduation for Latinx FGCS at California community colleges. The study was framed using Tinto’s (2006) retention theory. Successful Latinx FGCS are defined as those who have attained graduation from a California community college.

The following research questions will guide the study:

**RQ1:** What academic and nonacademic experiences prepared or supported success prior to entering college for Latinx FGCS?

**RQ2:** What academic experiences supported Latinx FGCS success at college?
RQ3: What social experiences supported Latinx FGCS success while at college?

RQ4: What faculty and staff experiences supported Latinx FGCS success while at college?

RQ5: What challenges were encountered and overcome by successful Latinx FGCS?

Rationale

Arredondo et al. (2014) highlighted Latinx as the country’s largest ethnic minority population, yet they have the lowest educational outcomes. They pointed out, “Education is an important component of success in the United States” and “the difference in lifetime income can be staggering” (p. 62). As noted by Arredondo et al. (2014), it is essential to look at the complete picture of Latinx academic success and focus on the strengths rather than barriers. Research on community colleges needs to address the problem of Latinx students dropping out of college and not receiving a degree (Margarit & Kennedy, 2019; Martinez & Fernandez, 2004). Further research on reasons that Latinx FGCS persist through college graduation is needed (Vega, 2016).

Community college administrators, counselors, professors, and students can benefit from the research on this problem. There is an urgent need to address why such a significant representation of the CCC student population is not graduating at a higher rate. This study is important because it is crucial to find what helped Latinx FGCS at community colleges persist through graduation to help increase the completion rate at community colleges. I expected to learn what protective factors contributed to Latinx FGCS at community colleges persist toward graduation and hope that the findings will help future generations of Latinx FGCS graduate from college and attain their academic goals.
Definition of Key Terms

**Coding.** The process of analyzing data gathered in qualitative research and classifying words or phrases into segments (Leavy, 2017).

**Community college.** A higher education institution where mostly “associate’s degrees, certificates, and credit for courses designed to transfer to a four-year postsecondary institution” are awarded (Gregory & Lampley, 2016, p. 63).

**Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software.** A computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) that may be applied to the coding process along with using notes and looking for links between categories mentioned by participants or triangulation (Leavy, 2017).

**Familism/o.** According to Coohey (2001) and Morgan Consoli et al. (2016), familism/o, a term used interchangeably with family by Latinx, refers to the family structure that influences the decisions and lives of Latinx.

**Field notes.** Leavy (2017) noted that field notes are written and recorded notes of observations and could be based on the thick descriptions, on-the-fly (phrases) notes, summary notes, or interpretation of the interview.

**First-generation college student (FGCS).** Engle and Tinto (2008) define first-generation students as those students “whose parents may have some college, postsecondary certificates, or associate’s degrees, but not a bachelor’s degrees” (p. 8).

**Historically marginalized.** Historically marginalized is considered an umbrella term used to describe students facing inequities (Felix & Castro, 2018).
In vivo. In vivo coding will be utilized by using the participant’s own language. Saldaña and Omasta (2018) noted that in vivo coding could be used to see if any phrases or specific words stand out from multiple participants.

Latinx. Term used to replace Latino or Latina while recognizing the fluidity of gender (Felix & Castro, 2018).

Nontraditional college students. Nontraditional college students are age 25 or older, entered college upon taking a break after high school, do not have a traditional high school diploma, are part-time students, are married, work full time, or have children (Eckel & King, 2004).

Social support. Fortin et al. (2016) “define[d] social support as encouragement given by family and friends, and parental attitude toward education” (p. 442).

Triangulation. Triangulation is a strategy that builds confidence based on summary findings using multiple sources of data, creating meaning, and returning to the research purpose and a strategy where multiple sources are utilized in addressing the same question (Leavy, 2017).

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have introduced the study. Chapter 2 contains a review of the literature. Chapter 3 contains a description of the methodology used to conduct the study.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this instrumental case study was to describe experiences of successful Latinx FGCS that support persistence and retention toward graduation for Latinx FGCS at California community colleges. The study was framed using Tinto’s (2006) retention theory. Successful Latinx FGCS are defined as those who have attained graduation from a California community college. In Chapter 2, I include a literature review that focuses on the following topics: retention, persistence, and completion; Tinto’s theory framework; community college; Latinx college students; first-generation college students; student preparation for college; student experiences, which included social experiences, student academic experiences, student campus or faculty experiences, and student family or peer experiences. Lastly, I have a section on challenges.

Retention, Persistence, and Completion

Retention and persistence toward graduation are among the most challenging issues that higher education institutions face (Kemp, 2016). Theoretical retention models collectively suggest that retention and persistence are essential at colleges, but the models do not agree on how different systems interact pertaining to student retention (Burke, 2019). In fact, no single theory applies to all (Schuh et al., 2017). Barclay et al. (2018) asserted that retention has remained steady at colleges. Burke (2019) noted that understanding student retention was challenging and attributed the difficulties to various student characteristics and life issues experienced by students. Achinewhu-Nworgu (2017) suggested that in public colleges, students’ “retention and ultimately their academic success rested” on “wider support and encouragement of the students’ peer group and parents” and identified motivation as a major factor to success (p. 185).
Rubin and Wright (2017) noted that social integration leads to better academic outcomes, and learning of reasons behind nonintegration can lead to better-developing interventions that can address the issue. Thus, Arjomandi et al. (2018) emphasized the need for tailored teaching strategies to be inclusive of both traditional and nontraditional students and match their needs as well as their preferences. Ellis (2019) asserted a need for careful consideration of nontraditional college students’ when developing and delivering courses geared at supporting their persistence in degree program attainment. Additionally, it is vital to understand the “overall experiences in higher education” for nontraditional students (Bohl et al., 2017, p. 167).

**Tinto’s Theory Framework**

Student retention and completion have many complex aspects (Tinto, 2006). Tinto (2017) described persistence as “the quality that allows someone to continue in pursuit of a goal even when challenges arise” (p. 2). Thus, he discussed the importance of higher education institutions seeking to find what motivates the student’s drive and the student’s motivation to persist. Tinto (2017) asserted:

> To do so, universities have to see the issue of persistence through the eyes of their students, hear their voices, engage with their students as partners, learn from their experiences and understand how those experiences shape their responses to university policies. Only then can universities further improve persistence and completion while also closing the continuing equity gaps that plague our societies. (p. 6)

Tinto (2006) acknowledged that despite the wealth of research that has been dedicated to persistence and graduation, there is still much that is unknown and described it as a “complex web of events” (p. 1). He noted that retention had become a business in itself as the need to gain clarity on the complexities surrounding student retention continues, and businesses often suggest
that they have the solution to addressing the retention issue. Tinto (2006) asserted that “retention is everyone’s business” (p. 5), especially faculty who have a great responsibility as they are in the classroom, and classroom practices are crucial to institutional efforts. Tinto (2006) found that research demonstrated that the freshman year in college was the most vulnerable in terms of retention, and courses offered to first-year college students were often taught by adjunct faculty, less experienced, and less paid than the more seasoned faculty. Therefore, Tinto (2006) suggested that adjunct faculty may be effective in the classroom but argued there is a need to focus on institutional efforts and put the best first in first-year courses. Consequently, more research in the allocation of resources and faculty and the impact in terms of retention that provides reliable evidence is needed.

Engstrom and Tinto (2008) argued that providing access for students is equally as important as ensuring that the same students are provided with support. Engle and Tinto (2008) noted that for colleges to increase their retention and graduation rates, they must implement an “institution-wide effort” (p. 17). It is crucial to provide additional curriculum support for low-income and first-generation college students. They pointed out that research has demonstrated that entering college at a four-year college first rather than a two-year college, low-income and first-generation college students have a greater chance of completing a bachelor’s degree. Low-income and first-generation college students do perform extremely well in some majors and graduate at higher rates than other students from similar backgrounds with different majors. Engle and Tinto (2008) recommended further studies that centered on this population and applying similar departmental strategies on other majors where students are not graduating at the same rate to help improve graduation rates.
Engstrom and Tinto (2008) emphasized that the essential component of providing support to promote student retention and success required “institutional investment” (p. 50). Institutional investment consists of a strategic effort to improve courses already in place and not necessarily add more remedial courses. Engle and Tinto (2008) argued that a well-built leadership was essential from top administrators when creating a college climate supporting student success. They emphasized that administrators must prioritize retention as an institution-wide goal and follow through on this priority. Following through is characterized by allocating resources, coordinating and collaborating within the campus community, and rewarding those members who choose to participate. Engle and Tinto (2008) found that strategic planning and implementation are necessary for providing retention programs and reducing the barriers to obtaining the services. They noted that retention programs and services are likely to be acquired by the populations that need them the most, such as first-generation and low-income, when the programs and services are a requirement for all students.

**Community College**

There are 1,600 community colleges in the United States today since the establishment of the first community college in 1920 (American Association of Community Colleges, 2020). González (2015) reported that community colleges have changed over time, and leaders have learned that data matters in institutional efforts for student success. González (2015) emphasized that collecting, interpreting, summarizing, and articulating data findings are crucial for allocating success indicators. Consequently, community college educators have learned that targeting students on a larger scale is essential to increase student success numbers. Although targeting students on a smaller scale can be beneficial for certain groups, college educators must be tactful in strategic planning as a scale-up to increase student success on a larger scale.
Gregory and Lampley (2016) emphasized that community colleges are quite different from traditional four-year colleges. Two-year colleges offer a variety of academic and workforce development opportunities, which include associate degrees, certificates, and transfer units to a four-year college. Margarit and Kennedy (2019) emphasized that persistence and completion are an issue at community colleges and indicated that there is a need to further look at contributing factors that help or hinder completion rates at the community colleges in a timely manner. Additionally, González (2015) noted that community colleges have the lowest completion rates of all higher education institutions.

Felix and Castro (2018) argued that community colleges are considered an open institution due to their open admissions policies. Generally, the population includes more racial minority students who are also low-income and likely to be first-generation. Many of the community college students are considered nontraditional college students. Nontraditional college students are age 25 or older, entered college upon taking a break after high school, do not have a traditional high school diploma, are part-time students, are married, work full time, and have children (Eckel & King, 2004). According to Chen and Hossler (2017), “nontraditional students, in general, showed a relatively low level of social integration” (p. 46).

**Latinx College Students**

With the growing numbers of Latinx in the United States, there has been extensive literature on the issues affecting Latinx communities and their continued marginalization (Chandler et al., 2014; Olcoń et al., 2018). Latinx are anticipated to comprise 29% of the United States population by 2060 (United States Census Bureau, 2014). Arredondo et al. (2014) noted that Latinx represent the largest ethnic minority population in the country but continue to fall short on educational outcomes compared to their counterparts. Arredondo et al. (2014)
emphasized that education is an essential factor when considering success and income over a lifetime for Latinx, yet they continue to fall behind in education in the United States. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2016), only 19% of Latinx are above the federal poverty level. Many Latinx families are low-income, and as a result, their students are more likely to enroll in community colleges because of affordability (Murphy & Murphy, 2018). It is crucial for students to pursue postsecondary options beyond high school, such as community college, to compete in today’s job market and rise above the poverty line (Perna, 2015; Vega, 2016).

Paat (2017) found that students from ethnic minorities overcame challenges with much resiliency. The students’ challenges served as a significant motivator in their higher education goal attainment (Paat, 2017, p. 244). There are limited studies that focus on Latinx academic success and the stories behind them (Borrero, 2011; Morgan Consoli et al., 2016; Vega, 2016). Vega noted that despite continued Latinx higher education enrollment, persistence and completion continue to be an issue. Borrero (2011) emphasized:

Inquiry into the academic achievement of Latino/a youth in the United States should be of major interest to teachers, administrators, families, communities, scholars, and policymakers committed to equitable multicultural education in our schools. Not only are Latinos the most populous, fastest-growing ethnic minority group in our public school schools, but the very word “minority” is no longer accurate when describing the population of students in many of our city’s schools. (p. 24)

Estrada and Jimenez (2018) indicated that as Latinx student enrollment increases, colleges could reference cultural identity theories to tap into student strengths effectively to help them thrive. Through the multiculturalism approach, community colleges can focus on students’ cultural identity and encourage students to view education as a way to acquire economic progress
and cultivate knowledge as they apply critical thinking as a form of liberation (Martinez & Fernandez, 2004). Azmitia et al. (2018) suggested that there is much to be learned about first-generation college students. Learning about their sense of belonging and resilience in education, among many other factors, are areas that require further understanding. Even though colleges are aware of Latinx student attrition, few consider the students’ varied factors when programs are developed and executed (McCallen & Johnson, 2019).

There is a need for an institutional strategy to make college campuses inclusive for students of color and assume responsibility in creating an acknowledged sense of belonging (Harper & Kuykendall, 2012). Harper and Kuykendall insisted that to be equitable in education, higher education institutions and professionals need to respond effectively to the needs of underserved student populations. They explained that institutions in the midst of trying to address inequitable services could unintentionally dedicate efforts to programs that focus on “fixing the student” instead of identifying and addressing persistent toxic situations that hinder student success (Harper & Kuykendall, 2012, p. 25). According to Harper and Kuykendall, to be intentional in addressing inequity and student achievement, institutions must be transparent to help raise institutional consciousness and allow for informed choices about the investment of institutional resources.

**First-Generation College Students**

Schwartz et al. (2018) noted the recent emphasis on increasing access for historically underrepresented populations, such as first-generation college students. Ishitani (2016) indicated that first-generation college students are not as likely to persist toward graduation as their counterparts whose parents are college-educated. According to Ishitani (2016), first-generation college students are likely to drop out during their second year of college at a higher rate,
approximately by 80%, compared to those whose parents are college graduates. In fact, Azmitia et al. (2018) emphasized that 30–50% of entering first-generation college students depart during that first initial year. Taylor et al. (2019) noted that first-generation college students are generally perceived and identified as having fewer resources and having deficits that potentially hinder them from persistence and graduation. Additionally, Arch and Gilman (2019) emphasized that it is assumed that first-generation college students will experience challenges in their academics and expectations and not have the familial college knowledge that can benefit them as they progress through their college education. Too often, colleges “inherently privilege the dominant culture [White, middle-class, male, heteronormative]” (Arch & Gilman, 2019, p. 997).

Pratt et al. (2019) stated that first-generation college students experience many individual situations. Student life is described as a web of interconnected experiences (Elliott & Healy, 2001). Mitchall and Jaeger (2018) noted that understanding students’ experiences, adding motivational strategies, and promoting access could contribute to “leveling the playing field” for first-generation, low-income students (p. 603). Garriott and Nisle (2018) indicated a link between stress and perceived academic goals for first-generation college students. For example, they explained that first-generation college students’ support, such as helpful instructors, access to available services like tutoring, and having a sense of belonging while observing others similar to them at school, associates stress with the academic goal and its progress.

Ellis et al. (2019) noted that to promote an inclusive environment and offer genuine appreciation to lived experiences of first-generation college students, a crucial step is needed of higher education establishments, which includes the development of institutional strategies. They stated that understanding first-generation college students’ perceptions of on-campus interactions is vital and helps understand students’ connectedness. Carpenter and Peña (2017) indicated that
there are members within the higher education institutions that include faculty and staff, who play a crucial role in facilitating possible negative encounters for first-generation college students. According to Carpenter and Peña (2017), first-generation college students are typically considered to be at-risk because of experienced challenges. They described how structural opportunities embedded within the institutions could help students who are considered at-risk and may not typically develop relationships on their own.

According to Quinn et al. (2019), the experiences of first-generation college students are quite complex, and the factors that influence these experiences begin as early as secondary school. These influential factors impact first-generation student’s college transition, persistence, and experiences. Quinn et al. (2019) argued that opportunity does not automatically imply that equity is present in higher education establishments despite the large representation of a population like first-generation college students; thus, they frequently leave without a degree. Gregory and Lampley (2016) noted that higher education institutions experience pressure within the United States to increase educational attainment and success while meeting the students’ diverse needs. It is imperative to understand better how students can succeed despite adversity (Williams et al., 2017).

**Student Preparation for Success**

Engle and Tinto (2008) noted disparities that exist in educational access and success. Those disproportionately affected the most are minorities from racial and ethnic backgrounds. Ghazzawi et al. (2019) indicated that schools in the United States, in general, marginalize minorities and struggle to provide equitable opportunities to offset the privileged groups, which consist of the upper and middle class. Promoting college access and success for underrepresented
groups such as low-income and first-generation college students is critical since the majority of this population begin college and do not continue past the first two years (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

Engle and Tinto (2008) noted there are strategies that could be implemented prior to entering college and during college enrollment to help improve the enrollment and completion of college. These strategies provide rigorous courses to prepare the students better for the college-level coursework and offer support to build the skill level effectively. Engle and Tinto (2008) emphasized the importance of providing clear information on available financial assistance and workshops for assistance on applications for aid. They also noted the necessary support for students that provide social support, such as advising and faculty or peer mentoring, and connection to special programs. Precollege and outreach programs are known to contribute to college access and support academic and social effectiveness of underrepresented college students (Ghazzawi et al., 2019). It is becoming more evident that student preparation for college extends beyond academics (Millett & Kevelson, 2018).

Millett and Kevelson (2018) noted that being college-ready also requires noncognitive skills, which include attitudes and behaviors that will help the student succeed in the college environment. Ghazzawi et al. (2019) indicated that exposing students to precollege and outreach programs provides guidance and builds students’ confidence in succeeding in college. According to Engle and Tinto (2008), previous research suggests that minorities that are first-generation college students present the greatest risk of not having the necessary experiences that can aid in college success. For example, researchers have emphasized how first-generation and low-income students are less likely to immerse themselves in the college social environment and less likely to be engaged in experiences that foster college success. These experiences consist of academic and
social support, which includes study groups, interactions with faculty and staff, and off-campus school-related activities.

**Student Experiences**

According to Wu (2019), students become more autonomous when entering college than ever before as different components of their lives play heavily essential roles, and they become more self-determined. Engstrom and Tinto (2008) asserted that “access without support is not opportunity” (p. 50). They explained that even though institutions do not intentionally exclude certain student populations, it does not mean students are not unintentionally left out of being included as fully valued members of the institution. Supporting student success requires careful consideration, planning, and curriculum alignment to be implemented intentionally within the institution. In addition, students must feel that they belong and are a member of the community within the college, and daily interactions with faculty, staff, and other students contribute to this sense of belonging (Tinto, 2017).

Hoffman et al. (2019) emphasized that it is clear that in the United States, there are oppressive higher education establishments that marginalize students of color. Even though there are student services in place within higher education establishments, the need exists to achieve equitable outcomes for students of color given the gaps in educational achievement. Thus, they encouraged higher education establishments to focus on expanding their student services across campuses to foster a mission of inclusion. Also, first-generation college students having a sense of belonging or lack of are factors that contributed to poor student experiences (Azmitia et al., 2018). Ellis et al. (2019) asserted that institutions could promote a sense of belonging on college campuses for first-generation college students’ experiences by encouraging a campus community that affirms culture.
Engle and Tinto (2008) emphasized that student experiences in the classroom are considered the cornerstone of college and its function. For example, faculty can contribute to student persistence as they contribute to help students improve. Additionally, faculty can structure their activities facilitated in their classrooms to engage further peer interactions, learning, and problem-solving that lead to student success (Engle & Tinto, 2008). They urge higher education institutions to provide opportunities for professional development to faculty to improve their pedagogical skills and their skills in effectively working with high-risk populations, such as low-income and first-generation college students.

**Social Experiences**

Simmons et al. (2018) defined social and cultural capital and indicated that first-generation college students tend to lack these resources. Social and cultural capital is defined as having networks and access to people in high positions, and it is common among upper- and middle-class students who have the advantage of becoming familiar with college and its expectations. Simmons et al. (2018) noted that social capital and cultural capital heavily influence student college success. For example, students who lack the knowledge and preparation for college theoretically lead “to higher dropout and lower graduation rates” (p. 481).

Engle and Tinto (2008) noted that first-generation, low-income college students have a lower engagement in social experiences than their counterparts. Engle and Tinto (2008) suggested finances as a factor interlinked to low student engagement. Because of financial issues and lack of resources, first-generation low-income college students work off-campus. Consequently, their academics and the time dedicated to them become limited. Furthermore, the limited time vested on academics limits the time applied to social experiences on engaging in extracurricular activities and social interactions with peers and faculty.
Stage and Hubbard (2017) argued that social identity theories are useful in helping students understand different forms of oppression and privilege in society. Tinto (2017) noted that higher education establishments could provide social support for students and contribute to an inclusive climate. Ensuring pedagogical cooperative and problem-solving-based learning in the classroom can support in-class engagement. Additionally, Tinto (2017) described how institutions could create a culture of inclusion for all students by speaking about issues of exclusion.

**Student Academic Experiences**

Wu (2019) noted, academic motivation is crucial to academic outcomes, and college students need to be motivated. Wu (2019) suggested a few ways college students could be motivated, including placing value on their academic work or having a high expectation of their ability to succeed. Colleges can teach students various strategies that incorporate an academic motivation to help students appropriately. For example, among the many strategies that can support metacognitive skills, a particular set of strategies such as teaching self-regulation skills will encourage positive motivation, like goal-setting skills and independent and group study skills (Wu, 2019, p. 109).

Wu (2019) argued that in addition to providing engagement, interactions with peers and faculty could contribute to the motivation experienced by students. For example, collaboration and group learning can positively affect a student’s motivation level. Furthermore, in-class and out-of-class interactions with faculty contribute to motivation building. Wu (2019) noted that students were more likely to have a high expectancy to succeed in a school environment that supports them in their development. Furthermore, a school that maintains a supportive context
for its students will also encourage autonomy as they will experience more self-efficacy and engagement.

Engle and Tinto (2008) noted that first-generation college students from low-income backgrounds were less likely to be engaged in academic experiences. They identified academic experiences often referred to as academic integration and described it as interactions with faculty, students, or services on campus. Because many first-generation college students encounter various difficulties that could potentially become a risk to their academics, academic advising and other support services could support students in their academics.

**Student Campus and Faculty Experiences**

Historically, colleges have measured social integration “as time spent in purposeful social campus activities” (Holloway-Friesen, 2018, p. 82). However, other factors can contribute to the student’s sense of belonging for underrepresented groups. Tinto (2006) emphasized that there is not enough research and urges for additional research in student experiences and what supports their persistence, particularly for low-income students. He noted that there is much more that can be learned from both two-year and four-year higher education institutions and the student experiences in these establishments, along with the varied supports that are put in place that influenced their persistence.

Engle and Tinto (2008) argued that first-generation and low-income students often do not engage on campus, and there is a need for colleges to support students by alleviating that financial barrier that prevents this population from vesting time on campus and fully engaging in experiences that are associated with their academic success. They suggested that there are ways to remove barriers and engage students by offering more work-study programs and offering
intentional interactions in the classroom. This is especially important because time spent with faculty and classmates in the classroom could be the only time students engage on campus.

Ellis et al. (2019) suggested that higher education institutions help students engage in college by fostering a sense of connectedness. First-generation college students’ lived experiences can be listened to and valued. Ellis et al. (2019) noted that colleges could contribute to a campus culture that values first-generation students by strategically developing ways to convey a genuine appreciation by key stakeholders within the college. Additionally, demonstrating an appreciation can contribute to connectedness and retention.

Tinto (2006) argued that faculty were key institution agents who contributed to retention in colleges. For example, interactions between students and faculty are critical, and these experiences can support students tremendously, yet faculty are not trained to teach their students. Tinto (2006) emphasized that typically teaching first-year courses at colleges is performed by adjunct faculty, even though full-time faculty may be more experienced. The first-year courses and experiences in classrooms while effectively learning can support student retention since students may decide to depart from college during this critical year.

Student Family and Peer Experiences

Social support by family and friends is described as being a crucial component for first-generation college students and “may be more strongly related to stress in first-[generation] compared to continuing-generation college students” (Garriott & Nisle, 2018, p. 438). Others have defined social support as encouragement and attitudes that family and friends provide for students in their education (Fortin et al., 2016). Coohey (2001) and Morgan Consoli et al. (2016) used the term familism/o interchangeably with family and described the family structure that influences the decisions and lives of Latinx. The family constructs are viewed as holding
complexities that include the attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, and relational or family structures that take place within families. Because of the different experiences and their complexities, first-generation college students’ experiences deserve further consideration. Corona et al. (2017) suggested:

That familism support may be the most important cultural factor to target when designing and implementing mental health prevention programs for Latina/os on campus. Programs that center on parental and familial engagement may be especially important and help to foster and/or [sic] maintain students’ sense of social support, emotional closeness to members of their family, and maintenance of referent familismo. (p. 73)

Factors that contribute to resiliency in the “face of adversity” for Latinx students, as Morgan Consoli et al. (2016, p. 51) described, could also serve as a basis for further understanding of cultural values. Additionally, Morgan Consoli et al. (2016) suggested that understanding the unique constructs of Latinx students provides guidance to understand better how to assist students experiencing such challenges. Furthermore, it is essential to learn of the varied cultural perspectives and understand different views about education when assisting Latinx families (Vega, 2016).

Holloway-Friesen (2018) highlighted the importance of building effective relationships in college. Having healthy relationships that extend beyond the student friends’ circle is identified as a component needed in developing honest expressions, more so when these relationships are with others that hold different points of view than those of the student. However, for many first-generation college students, interlinked risk factors may prevent them from fully engaging with others on-campus, such as multiple outside-of-school responsibilities that include the necessity to work and difficulty balancing numerous obligations (Engle & Tinto, 2008).
Challenges

Hoffman et al. (2019) noted that there is extensive literature on student deficits, but less research and focus on spaces in colleges that support students of color and spaces that are inclusive of minorities but open to all students. Engle and Tinto (2008) emphasized that first-generation college students begin college facing many challenges that can potentially affect their degree attainment. Educators, policymakers, and researchers acknowledge that there is a need to service unrepresented students by recognizing the challenges they face (Ghazzawi et al., 2019). Engle and Tinto (2008) argued that colleges had increased their enrollment numbers, but the opportunity to succeed in college has not, particularly for first-generation college students who face many challenges and barriers. They noted a need to be proactive with students to strengthen their chances of degree completion and recommended that educators and policymakers provide students and parents with further counseling on gateway courses. They also indicated that creating a college-going culture at schools was equally important, providing support for challenging courses and greater access to college-preparatory classes, well-trained counselors, and having well-prepared teachers. Students will face challenges, and self-efficacy determines how the person will approach the challenge and ultimately whether the person will persist through the challenge or not (Tinto, 2017).

Various unique challenges faced by many first-generation college students create difficulties in completing college (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Ellis et al. (2019) reported that the challenges faced by many first-generation college students included various individual barriers that may not be faced by their classmates whose parents were college graduates. These unique barriers include the lack of familiarity with the college culture and its environment, the initial transition, and the life balance that consists of academics and family responsibilities.
Additionally, a possible lack of connectedness is another component that first-generation college students are faced with while interacting with persons such as faculty, classmates, or other key persons in college.

Among the many challenges that arise with the realities faced by unrepresented groups, it is crucial to provide information to students and parents prior to entering college and ensure that they have a clear plan and understanding of what college consists of and could project ahead (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Since economic challenges are often an issue and barrier in pursuing a college education for low-income and first-generation college students, Engle and Tinto (2008) urged for the need to ease the transition to college by informing students about their options. They suggested offering students a clear vision of a pathway that can lead to a four-year degree necessary to support students who face financial barriers. Counseling students on community college pathways before entering college while still in high school can help alleviate concerns pertaining to economic difficulties.

**Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I presented a review of the research on Latinx FGCS that contributed to Latinx college students, first-generation college students, college retention, persistence, completion, campus, faculty, staff, students’ experiences, and social support student experiences. Chapter 3 contains a description of the methodology.
Chapter 3: Research Method and Design

The purpose of this instrumental case study was to describe the experiences of successful Latinx FGCS that supported persistence and retention toward graduation for Latinx FGCS at California community colleges. The study was framed using Tinto’s (2006) retention theory. Successful Latinx FGCS are defined as those who have attained graduation from a California community college. This chapter discussed the research design and methodology, the population, data collection, methods for establishing trustworthiness, the researcher’s role, assumptions, limitations, delimitations, and ethical considerations.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this instrumental case study was to describe the experiences of successful Latinx FGCS that supported persistence and retention toward graduation for Latinx FGCS at California community colleges. The study was framed using Tinto’s (2006) retention theory. Successful Latinx FGCS are defined as those who have attained graduation from a California community college.

The following research questions guided the study:

**RQ1:** What academic and nonacademic experiences prepared or supported success prior to entering college for Latinx FGCS?

**RQ2:** What academic experiences supported Latinx FGCS success at college?

**RQ3:** What social experiences supported Latinx FGCS success while at college?

**RQ4:** What faculty and staff experiences supported Latinx FGCS success while at college?

**RQ5:** What challenges were encountered and overcome by successful Latinx FGCS?
**Research Design and Methodology**

This study was conducted as a qualitative, instrumental case study. A case study is an in-depth data collection and exploration of a bounded system requiring a comprehensive understanding of few cases to allow the researcher to devote more time to explore the depths of any case (Creswell, 2014, 2015). Yin (2009) noted that not only is it important to have “methodologically important issues” (p. 255), but researchers should also have topics of interest. Additionally, it is important for researchers to take practical considerations and substantive considerations into account during the beginning stages of a case study. Defining and selecting a case study is considered the first step as a measure to reduce the likelihood of a case study not working (Yin, 2009). I selected this design for my research because I believe that it is instrumental in gaining insight directly from participants who are living the factors being studied. Through a qualitative case study, I gained descriptions of lived experiences from participants and examined their experiences. Stake (2009) noted that through shared experiences, the inquiry could be carried out, and a further understanding could be gained to help and benefit persons of a certain audience. Leavy (2017) suggested that exploratory research is a way to learn and approach the topic from different perspectives to generate new insights. Additionally, Leavy (2017) discussed the importance of generating the “thick descriptions” of details and perspectives from those living the topic that is being studied (pp. 136–137).

**Population**

Purposeful sampling is important when seeking the best cases for the study and being strategic in selecting participants to produce richer data (Leavy, 2017). I sought to be purposeful in my sampling of participants by being selective when choosing those who met the required criteria to gain an in-depth qualitative understanding. The recruitment of participants involved
reaching out via email to former students who have successfully graduated from a two-year college to see if they would like to participate in my study (see Appendix A). I also reached out to colleagues and asked for referrals on recent graduates whom they assisted in the past.

The number of participants for this case study was limited to nine students from four community colleges in California in order to reach saturation. The four community colleges were selected because their student demographic population represented Latinx/Hispanic as the majority for each college. The specific criteria for participation were students who self-identified as Latinx, being the first to attend college in the family, and successfully graduated from a California community college (see Table 1). Using the snowball approach, I recruited and found participants who met the stated criteria from referrals. Creswell (2015) noted that the snowball sampling consisted of researchers asking participants to identify other participants.

**Table 1**

*Participant Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age at attainment of AA/AS</th>
<th>Year degree attained</th>
<th>State of community college attendance</th>
<th>Degrees earned</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Elisa                 | Female | 20                          | 2018                 | CA                                   | • AS-T in Sociology  
|                       |        |                             |                      |                                      | • AA in Humanities  
|                       |        |                             |                      |                                      | • AS in Communications  
|                       |        |                             |                      |                                      | • AS in Mathematics  |
| Elvira                | Female | 23                          | 2020                 | CA                                   | • AA-T in Communications  |
| Jesus                 | Male   | 25                          | 2020                 | CA                                   | • AS in Math and Science  
<p>|                       |        |                             |                      |                                      | • AA in Communications  |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age at attainment of AA/AS</th>
<th>Year degree attained</th>
<th>State of community college attendance</th>
<th>Degrees earned</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>2020</td>
<td>CA</td>
<td>• AA in Psychology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mayra</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2020</td>
<td>CA</td>
<td>• AA Degree in Psychology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monica</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>CA</td>
<td>• AA Degree in Social and Behavioral Sciences</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Noel                  | Male   | 27                          | 2020                 | CA                                    | • AA in Communication, Media and Languages with Distinction  
• AA in Humanities, Philosophy and Arts with Distinction  
• AA in Arts with Social and Behavioral Studies with Distinction  
• AA-T in Communication Studies for Transfer with Distinction |
| Saul                  | Male   | 23                          | 2007                 | CA                                    | • AA in Liberal Arts |
| Valeria               | Female | 23                          | 2020                 | CA                                    | • AS in Sociology Degree |

*Note.* Acronyms in Table 1 include Associate in Arts (AA); Associate in Science (AS); Associate in Arts for Transfer (AA-T); Associate in Science Degree for Transfer (AS-T).
Data Collection

The sources of evidence gathered in this research included virtual interviews, artifacts, and field notes. The artifacts gathered included the participant’s community college website information, programs, and services in which the participants were engaged at their community college. Leavy (2017) noted that field notes are written and recorded notes of observations and could be based on the thick descriptions, on-the-fly (phrases) notes, summary notes, or interpretation of the interview. Leavy (2017) stated, “Researchers may turn to rigorous observation or related methods of [the] interview in order to document how things are experienced with respect to the phenomenon under investigation” (p. 5).

Through the virtual interviews using a guided protocol (see Appendix B), data were gathered through participants answering the research questions. The guided protocol was based on the research questions, and prompts were suggested as needed based on the literature review. Saldaña and Omasta (2018) noted that with the use of semistructured, open-ended interviews, the interviewer has the ability to adjust the course of the interview as needed. The guided protocol underwent expert review; through this process, someone with knowledge of the topic participated in the protocol. After the individual reviewed the protocol and made suggestions for improvement, the protocol was modified. Saldaña and Omasta (2018) noted that a well-designed interview protocol would generally begin with an introduction by the interviewer and review of the informed consent while allowing time to answer questions. The interview questions should follow, and finishing the interview with a concluding script is typical. Additionally, the researcher can take notes of the participant’s verbal and nonverbal responses to interview questions as the interview is conducted. All interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes to an
hour and were facilitated virtually due to the current pandemic that requires social distance restrictions.

**Data Analysis**

Once the interviews were concluded, they were transcribed through the use of an online program called Rev.com. The gathered data was analyzed by first immersing myself in the content and listening to the interviews. Leavy (2017) noted that content analysis included getting the big picture, getting ideas on how to approach coding, and investigating meaning within the text. In the process of analyzing the interviews thoroughly and identifying values for coding, I took notes on themes that were brought to light through the interviews. Saldaña and Omasta (2018) noted that values coding needs to be applied to the analysis process to help condense the data that had been collected. They explained that notes on participant attitudes, values, and beliefs consist of participants’ rich descriptions of their perspectives and thoughts. In vivo coding was utilized by using the participant’s own language. Saldaña and Omasta (2018) asserted that in vivo coding could be used to see if any phrases or specific words stood out from multiple participants. In addition, process coding was utilized in the analysis process to help identify supportive factors of college attainment for the participants. Process coding helped identify actions, reactions, and interactions. Throughout the process, themes were identified and categorized.

**Methods for Establishing Trustworthiness**

Stake (2009) noted that case studies are nonisolated complex descriptions that involve many variables. Stake (2009) argued that data on case studies could be gathered through informal interviews and verbatim quotations. I collected data on this case study through virtual video interviews that I recorded with the participant’s consent and knowledge and documented
responses and later transcribed the recorded sessions. Leavy (2017) emphasized that open-ended questions in an interview allow participants to use their own language. I interviewed participants by asking open-ended questions that enabled the participants to elaborate on their experiences. Yin (2009) noted that when open-ended interviews are done correctly, they allow for detailed descriptions that provide further information about what the interviewees think about certain situations. Furthermore, less structured interviews allow for a conversation-like manner. The interviews were semistructured as they were physically at a different location from my own since they were held virtually.

Leavy (2017) suggested that a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) might be applied to the coding process. Using CAQDAS along with my notes and looking for links between categories mentioned by participants or triangulation helped with the methods for establishing trustworthiness. Leavy (2017) noted that triangulation is a strategy that builds confidence based on summary findings using multiple sources of data, creating meaning, and returning to the research purpose. Explicitly explaining what was done in the study is essential, and this was accomplished by being thorough.

Leavy (2017) noted that trustworthiness refers to the quality, credibility, and confidence of the project and findings. Certain techniques are used to solidify trustworthiness, such as gathering supporting archival data and records that are reviewed to validate the findings (Roberts, 2010). Additionally, the process of validation included member checking, which is obtaining feedback from participants based on the researcher’s findings to check for possible minor corrections on information obtained. In addition, the guided protocol underwent expert review, as noted previously.
**Researcher’s Role**

As a researcher in the study, I intended to be transparent and discuss my role with participants. I disclosed that not only am I conducting this particular case study to gain a deeper understanding of persistence and retention factors for Latinx FGCS at community college, but I am also a product of the community college system, and I identify as Latinx and FGCS. I assured my participants that although I have personal experiences as a Latinx FGCS at a community college, I remained objective throughout my research. I explained the importance of participants sharing their genuine thoughts and contributions and benefit to the issue.

**Assumptions**

Saldaña and Omasta (2018) noted that assumption is often referred to when describing generalizability and often used in quantitative research. Saldaña and Omasta emphasized that qualitative information “cannot be generalized” (p. 99). Roberts (2010) highlighted when it comes to generalizability, researchers must be ethical by reporting data accurately and ensure that they are not generalizing. To avoid naturalistic generalizations, I immersed myself on the descriptions that were provided by participants. Stake (2009) noted that naturalistic generalizations occur within a person based on their experiences. My plan was to avoid verbalizing my personal experiences as a Latinx FGCS at a community college so as not to influence the participant responses and not to draw my own expectations of what this population will respond. My plan was to prevent the projection of my own expectations of the result of the study. I also planned to avoid assumptions and generalizations that the participants had prior knowledge or experiences with my research topic. This particular form of generalization takes place when the researcher has their own expectations rather than predications (Stake, 2009, p. 5).
Limitations

Roberts (2010) noted that limitations are areas of a study that the researcher has no control over. Roberts (2010) argued that it is essential to be honest about the limitations to allow readers of the study to draw their interpretations of limitations that affected the research. The study was focused on exploring protective factors that contributed to the academic success of Latinx FGCS at community colleges. Through the participant’s shared lived experiences, in-depth, rich descriptions of what contributed to their persistence and retention were analyzed. Due to the current pandemic and required social distance regulations, the virtual interviews presented external limitations that would not be an issue during in-person interviews for this qualitative case study.

Participants may not have been as comfortable expressing their perspectives on the issues discussed. Another limitation consisted of the interviewer possibly not observing certain behaviors or raw emotions that could have occurred during an interview that would be more easily identified in person. Limitations extended to the possibility of not observing how honestly the participants were answering the interview questions due to the interviews being virtual. Another possible limitation consisted of questions not being clear or accurate to appropriately and genuinely allow participants to respond.

Delimitations

Delimitations are the boundaries of a study (Roberts, 2010). Roberts (2010) noted that in a study, the researcher controls delimitation, and it could include the sample criteria and sample size. This study’s criteria were focused on exploring protective factors that contributed to the academic success of Latinx FGCS at community colleges. Through the participant’s shared lived experiences, rich descriptions of what contributed to their persistence and retention were
analyzed in depth. I limited the interviews to nine students. The participants’ criteria were limited to students who self-identified as Latinx, who were the first to attend college in their family, and who successfully graduated from a California community college.

**Ethical Considerations**

Once approval was received from Abilene Christian University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to the data collection (see Appendix C), I ensured anonymity and confidentiality of my human participants by utilizing pseudonyms and stored all data in a secure password-protected space within my home laptop and workspace. I went over the importance of the setting when recording interviews with participants and made sure that participants understood the importance of being alone and not being distracted during an interview. I also made sure that participants understood their rights, and they could withdraw their participation if they chose to at any time. I ensured that all information was fully comprehended by participants by checking for understanding.

**Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I have included a description of the methodology used to conduct the study. I discussed the research design, population, and the data collection process. In addition, I identified the methods for establishing trustworthiness and the researcher’s role. I elaborated on assumptions, limitations, delimitations, and ethical considerations about the study. In Chapter 4, I report the results from the interviews and the data gathered during this qualitative case study.
Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this instrumental case study was to describe experiences of successful Latinx FGCS that support persistence and retention toward graduation for Latinx FGCS at California community colleges. The study was framed using Tinto’s (2006) retention theory. Successful Latinx FGCS are defined as those who have attained graduation from a California community college. The results of this research were used to identify lived experiences of self-identifying Latinx FGCS at California community colleges and what helped their persistence and retention, leading to successfully earning a two-year associate degree from a California community college.

Research Question 1: Academic and Nonacademic Experiences Prior to College

Research question 1 focused on participants’ academic and nonacademic experiences that prepared or supported success prior to entering college for Latinx FGCS. There were four themes that emerged when discussing high school coursework that helped prepare participants for college, college preparatory exams, academic programs or nonacademic experiences, and experiences with family or friends that supported or prepared participants prior to college for college success. The themes included guidance through a high school teacher, advisor, or counselor; support from a community college outreach program; experiences and exposure to roles outside of high school; and support from family or friends.

Guidance Through a High School Teacher, Advisor, or Counselor

Through the virtual interviews, participants discussed their experiences and what they believed helped them prepare for college based on their high school coursework. Although specific courses or subjects were not identified, a common theme that emerged was guidance obtained within a class or through a teacher, advisor, or counselor. Guidance was explained as a
process where a participant believed that the teacher fostered a sense of community. Mayra described her Advanced Placement (AP) Spanish class as a place:

Where you can openly discuss your concerns about college, what you don’t know about college. And it is comforting to know that you have that support there because as a first-gen student, your parents can only help you to [a] certain extent.

Advanced Placement is an exam-based program that offers College Board-approved courses within a high school to prevent course repetition in college, but the student subject exam must earn at least 3, on a scale of 1 to 5 to earn college credit (Burns et al., 2019).

Elisa described her experiences in her high school child development classes. She said:

Teachers there also helped me a lot. They would guide us through the whole application process, whether it was to Cal State [California State], UC [University of California], but for me, I knew community college was my choice from the very beginning. It was what I could afford.

Two participants specifically described dual enrollment classes as helpful in preparing for college and obtaining guidance through the courses and by the teachers. Dual enrollment (DE) classes are college courses offered to students who have not graduated from high school and offers the opportunity to be taken in-person or online, side-by-side with traditionally matriculated college students; additionally, the grades earned in the dual enrolment courses are posted onto the student’s official academic college transcript (Burns et al., 2019). Laura described how dual enrollment helped her. She stated, “The counseling class was actually from the community college, and it was just to help us choose the classes that we needed [for college].” Through dual enrollment, high school students are offered the opportunity to take college-level course(s) and gain an understanding of the difference between high school and
college. Figure 1 and Figure 2 are captured screenshots of the dual enrollment information found at two of the community colleges where participants completed their DE courses.

**Figure 1**

*Screenshot of Community College A Website*

**COMMON QUESTIONS**

**WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ADVANCE PLACEMENT (AP) AND DUAL ENROLLMENT (DE)?**

**WHAT ARE THE ADVANTAGES OF DUAL ENROLLMENT?**

- Earn your college degree in less time.
- Eliminate duplication of coursework between high school and college.
- Save money. Concurrently enrolled students are not required to pay tuition. All materials and books will be purchased by the student or by the participating high school and/or district.
- Explore career fields before starting college.
- Easier transition to college.

**Figure 2**

*Screenshot of Community College B Website*

**Important Program Facts**

- Classes are offered before, during, or after normal high school schedule
- Student participation requires both parent and counselor approval
- Classes offered: vary by semester
- Courses are transferable to most four-year universities (UC and CSUs)
- Courses and textbooks are FREE

High school experiences and interactions described by participants that helped in preparing for college success included those with counselors and advisors. Participants expressed that the interactions helped in the transition process to community college. Valeria shared how
meeting with a counselor before starting the first semester of college helped. She stated, “Before going into the community college, we had that meeting with the counselor before I started the semester. That helped me. Prepared me for work for college.” Elisa explained that having the experience with counselors while in high school eased her transition to college. She stated:

So, when I did student government in high school, we would connect with [my local community college] and other surrounding colleges. So, I already had the connection to those networks with the counselors. So even before starting at [my local community college], I was already meeting with the counselors there.

**Support From a Community College Outreach Program**

Another theme discussed pertained to support obtained through an outreach program by the participants’ local community college in preparation for college success and to facilitate the transition from high school to college. The Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS) was one program that was discussed in assisting students with the college application. Five participants discussed support by EOPS. Two of the five participants identified EOPS as helpful and as a great opportunity that contributed to the participants’ decisions on going to college. Monica recalled the moment she first heard about EOPS at her high school. She stated:

For senior year, someone from EOPS came out and spoke to us about community college. There wasn’t really anything that helped me. I remember I was in class, and one of my girlfriends came in, and she was filling out some paper, and I was like, what are you doing? She was filling out some paper for EOPS for community college. I was like, I don’t know what that is. She wanted me to sign up for EOPS in community college. So, that’s what I did.
Participants included those in comprehensive traditional high school settings and some in a nontraditional alternative high school. Extended Opportunity Programs and Services was mentioned in both settings as a contributing component in the decision to apply to the community college. Elvira stated:

What did help me a lot is when EOPS from [a local community college] showed up, and we didn’t really receive that much assistance at a continuation school. So, when they showed up, I just went for it because I knew that was like my only opportunity.

Figure 3 and Figure 4 are captured screenshots of the EOPS outreach programs found on two California community colleges.

**Figure 3**

*EOPS Flyer Screenshot Found on Community College Website*
Support From Family or Friends

Supportive encouragement from parents and friends was another theme that was vivid within the expressed experiences of participants. Mayra described how her parent offered encouragement, even though her parent could not guide in a practical manner because they were not fully aware of the college application process. Yet, they still offered support the best they could through advice. Mayra stated:

My dad decided to go back to get his GED [general equivalency diploma]. And so, he had to even though he was unable to pursue a higher education after obtaining that GED. He did do his research and what colleges were the best for him, so the little knowledge that he did have about it he did share with me.
Valeria discussed how her sibling supported her by offering guidance on the steps to start college since her sibling had applied before her to a local community college. She stated, “When I was applying to entry at college, he helped me do those steps.” The support and encouragement extended beyond family to friends and even a significant other. Monica described her friends as her primary support to apply to college, as they offered some form of hand-in-hand guidance among themselves; she and her friends were learning the college process together. Monica stated, “They didn’t know what they were doing either. We would both find out together.”

**Experiences and Exposure to Roles Outside of High School**

Another identified theme included experiences and exposure to roles such as working as a teen and coming to the realization that earning paycheck to paycheck would not be a desirable life option after high school. Saul explained his unique experience by saying, “I started working when I was 16. I was working at fast-food restaurants, hotels, and that kind of just helped me envision myself. Like, I don’t want to do this forever. I want to do something better.” Mayra explained her involvement as a leader through nonacademic experiences and how it contributed to her going to college. She stated:

I was involved in my church community, and being involved in there sets you up for some leadership roles. And it’s in those moments, you’re like, okay, I need to take initiative. Applying to community college, even though it’s an easier process, I was still frightened about it. But my nonacademic experience prepared me to just take risks, step out of your comfort zone.

**Research Question 2: Academic Experiences at College**

Research question 2 focused on academic experiences that supported student success at college for Latinx FGCS. Three themes emerged when participants discussed courses in college
that helped their success, programs that supported them in college, and acquired helpful services while in college. The themes included counseling and supportive college courses, support services programs, and acquired supportive services that contributed to academic focus in college.

_Counseling and Supportive College Courses_

A total of seven participants highlighted taking guidance and counseling courses in college and described the classes as helpful in their college success. The identified counseling courses included an introduction to college, a college prep course, a guidance class, and career exploration. When asked what college courses helped toward success, Noel stated:

So, I think initially it was the introduction to college course, the college prep course and having a good instructor and then also my own motivation because I think a lot of that, the impetus to engage and to learn came from my own motivation. But I think it was, yeah, the introduction to college course.

Noel followed his description of helpful courses by identifying his participation in the honors program and how the courses and the professors shaped his college experience. Noel stated:

And then also, later on, engaging in the honors program, I think that was really, really crucial at my college. And I found my mentor in my honors communications class, or honors public speaking class, and interpersonal communication class. And really engaging at a really in-depth kind of inquiry with my honors courses; I think really motivated me and gave me that intellectual satisfaction that has prepared me to be at a higher academic standard.
Elisa recalled taking a guidance class that helped her examine her interests and personality, which she found helpful in identifying her major. Elisa said:

I think the class that did it for me was having a guidance class where I really got to examine not just my way of learning to help me through college, but also, we did questionnaires. Okay, depending on your personality, your interests, it would match you to your career, and that’s really where I decided, like, okay, sociology is the path for me.

Elvira identified additional counseling classes as supportive of her academic success. Elvira attained the courses through the disability support service program at her community college. She commented:

I would say Counseling 141, which is career exploration. And then I would also say Counseling 71 or 75, which was based on [disability support service], adaptive computer lab, which help[ed] students with learning disabilities to have like their own tutor and their own space to study. So that’s two of the main courses I would say that helped me succeed.

The courses described by Elvira extended beyond general education guidance courses that contribute to a variety of options offered to college students, which support student success. Figure 5, Figure 6, and Figure 7 are captured screenshots of the counseling course information found on one of the California community colleges.
**Figure 5**

*Counseling Course 141 Information Screenshot Found on Community College Website*

**COUN 141 F Career Exploration (1 Unit)**

Letter Grade or Pass/No Pass option. 18 hours lecture per term. This course is designed to introduce students to a career decision-making process which includes both evaluation of the self and exploration of the world of work. Self-evaluation activities include identification of personality/temperament, interests, skills, goals and values. Career research activities are utilized to examine the world at work. The focus of the course is on self-description in relation to the choice of occupation and career. (CSU) (Degree Credit)

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**Figure 6**

*Counseling Course 71 Information Screenshot Found on Community College Website*

**COUN 071 F Adaptive Computer Access (.5 to 2 Units)**

*Pass/No Pass only.*  
*Open Entry/Open Exit.*

**Advisory:** Actively participate in the Disability Support Services (DSS) intake process with a DSS counselor.

4.5-27 hours lecture and 13.5-81 hours lab per term. This course is designed for students with learning, visual, physical, communicative disabilities or acquired brain injuries. Students will receive guided instruction/application in the introduction and use of computers and adaptive computer access technologies within the context of word processing.
Three participants also described courses that assisted them in various ways to enable them to be successful college students. Jesus discussed how his first rigorous class set him up for success. He learned about the demands of being a science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) major and applying successful strategies to his academics. Jesus recalled:

[Anatomy] was the first class that I took that was very demanding. And the professor was very flexible and was always there for the students, making sure, like, okay, this is coming up. He was always there to help the students because it was such a demanding class. So that’s the one that helped me the most to succeed because it made me realize, okay, this is how it’s going to be from here on. It’s going to get harder, and I had to get better at it, figure out my study habits, figure out where I’m lacking, where I had to improve.

Mayra and Saul recalled core subject courses such as English as the foundation in helping them succeed in college. Mayra described her experience in this way:
My English course with the same professor that allowed me to grow as a student and helped me prepare myself for other subjects. Because we covered a lot of things, in terms of research, in terms of preparing for doing the research stuff. It prepares you for your time management skills. It prepares you for the reality of the reading work that you have to do for other classes. I would say that’s the course that most impacted me and helped me succeed.

Saul emphasized that he had to take assessments to identify his math level and English skills when he began his college career. Saul identified this process as helpful when he said:

You have to test into English and math. So, I think that helped me because I tested quite low for math. I think maybe a level lower for English as well. So, I had to take those classes that were not college credit. You had to take those in order to move to the college-level classes. So, I think those were helpful because it helped me realize that I didn’t have all the tools necessary to be successful.

Saul found some benefits to the assessment process and taking the core courses at the placement level to build on his knowledge and skills in math and English. However, it is essential to note that the California Governor signed Assembly Bill (AB) 705, which required California community colleges to maximize students’ probability of entering and completing college-level courses in math and English within one year’s timeframe. Additionally, high school coursework, among other multiple measures, was to be used in placing students in these courses. Assembly Bill 705 was implemented in all California community colleges in January 2018 (California Community Colleges, 2018).
Support Services Programs

The second theme that emerged was support services programs that helped participants’ success in college. Among the nine participants, they each described several on-campus college support services programs. Still, five of the nine participants specifically mentioned EOPS. Three participants attributed their success to the La Casa Engagement Center. Two students vividly described the Puente Program as their guide toward success. Through the many mentioned programs, participants named academic counselors and the academic counseling services provided and embedded as part of the program services. Participants described the counselors as helpful to their educational college journey. Participants thoughtfully mentioned many other programs within the community college as they expressed appreciation. The following programs were mentioned at least once by participants: transfer center, Foster Youth Success Initiative (FYSI), work-study, student government, disability support services, and Promise.

Participants described their experiences at community college as specific programs that helped their success through the academic counseling services that provided direction. Elvira specifically discussed the impact that EOPS had on her as a community college student. Elvira stated:

I would say the only program that I was truly involved with was Extended Opportunity Programs and Services. So, EOPS. And I can like go more in-depth about it. I would say that the counselors really made a huge impact, and just the student support specialists and informing all the students like what services [the college] does offer. I feel like that made a huge difference.
The many forms of financial assistance from the support services programs were described as contributing factors that alleviated financial stressors for participants while they were students. Monica stated:

I was always on and off [college], and I was unsure of what to do—money was one of the issues—[I] had to work two jobs, and that’s where EOPS helped me by providing gas cards and help with books.

Valeria recalled both EOPS and FYSI as financially helping her and offering counseling services. When asked what programs helped her succeed in college, Valeria responded, “EOPS and FYSI. So, with EOPS, they can give you money to help with your textbooks, counseling as well, guidance to what classes and what you have to do to graduate.” Noel expressed the ways that EOPS and other programs helped him. Noel stated:

EOP[S] financially, the fact that sometimes they provided breakfast and stuff like that was a big help for me and the counseling services. And La Casa [Engagement Center] too, the La Casa being able to get textbooks for free with the program. I think that was huge to being able to foster my success and access to computers and printing and stuff, that really helped me out a lot.

Mayra discussed with gratitude her participation in multiple support service programs that helped her succeed. She stated:

Well, I was pretty lucky, I would say, to get into the EOPS program, but most importantly, the Puente Program. The Puente Program, I was lost, I had no idea what college was, I mean, what units were, what credits were. I was completely lost in the terminology of college. But I guess I’m trying to say that they helped me, they helped me build skills, they helped me get involved on campus, they helped me ... I keep saying
grow as a student, but that’s what really helped me, that they really did push for all of that. And making sure that you know what resources are available to you. And knowing that those counselors are going to be there to support you because it’s part of the cohort, it’s part of the program. So that’s what really did lead to my success in college so far.

Elisa also described her experiences as she participated in multiple support programs at her community college. Elisa responded:

[Aside from financial aid,] having the Puente Program and La Casa, specifically, La Casa because they provided not only textbooks but meal vouchers. After completing certain requirements, you get gas cards. So, being a college student trying to handle [a] full-time load but also working part-time, sometimes it just wasn’t enough. And also, having to help support my family. So, having those resources just made it a little bit easier where I didn’t have to worry about food; I didn’t have to worry about textbooks. When I was running out of gas, I would just go to those gas cards, and I had a way to get to school, and I wouldn’t have to miss class.

Jesus described the La Casa Engagement Center as the main support program that assisted him while at the community college aside from Promise, which offered him a priority in registering for classes. Jesus stated:

La Casa, which was an equity engagement center that helps students within the poverty, with the equity gap, and they focused on Latino, Hispanic, and me being a Latino, Hispanic, [I] was able to qualify for it. And they provided me with textbooks, tutoring, mentorships, [and] counseling. They provided me with everything I needed to be successful. And the other one was Promise, which also helped me with textbooks and
other stuff. But they also helped me get my priority registration, so I was able to get into classes and not be wait-listed.

Figure 8, Figure 9, Figure 10, and Figure 11 show screenshots of the La Casa and Puente Programs found at two California community college’s websites.

**Figure 8**

*La Casa Information Screenshot Found on Community College Website*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sí Se Puede</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>La Casa is an in-depth Latinx focused academic support program and center. Our main goal is to serve the Latinx student community by engaging students in their personal, social, and academic development through a cultural, historical, social awareness and empowerment program.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visit Us</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 9**

*La Casa Equity Commitment Information Screenshot Found on Community College Website*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>La Casa – A Foundational Student Equity Program at</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>We support equity groups with academic, instructional, self-affirming, and direct support. This allows students to remain engaged in campus life while successfully completing coursework, leading to degree completion and/or transfer opportunities. Students who fall within an equity gap will be:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Supported throughout the four Pillars of the Pathways</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Given the opportunity to engage in academic and equity activities within a supportive community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Provided opportunities to explore unique academic and professional areas of interest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Valued and supported in the successful attainment of their academic, career and personal development goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Anyone Can Apply</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To be part of the La Casa program, students must fall within an equity gap identified in the Student Equity Plan 2019-2022 - Executive Summary. La Casa’s equity target group is Latinx students, however, any qualifying equity student can participate.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 10

Puente Program Information Screenshot Found on Community College Website

The Puente Program
The Puente Program is an academic, counseling and mentoring program that has improved college persistence and success rates for thousands of California’s educationally under-served students. The Puente mission is to increase the number of community college students who:

- Transfer and enroll in four-year colleges and universities
- Earn college degrees
- Return to the community as mentors and leaders

Program Benefits
- Guaranteed English and Counseling courses for one year (Fall & Spring semesters)
- Assistance over Summer with getting started, selecting classes, and registration
- Learning Community that links English & Counseling classes
- Designated Puente Counselor
- Local college field trips and cultural events
- Annual Northern California College Tour
- Mentoring and networking with community leaders
- Leadership and volunteer experience
- University and college transfer preparation

Figure 11

Puente Program Components Screenshot Found on Community College Website

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PUENTE COMPONENTS: An Investment in Leadership</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Counseling</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Provides personal, academic and career counseling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Selects students and mentors and monitors students interaction with mentors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Participates in classroom activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Coordinates students’ academic progress throughout their community college career</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Prepares students for transfer to four-year colleges and universities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mentoring</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Shares with students their personal, academic and career experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Introduces students to professional and community organizations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Demonstrates that success is possible without having to abandon cultural identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Provides resources for Puente writing assignments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Writing</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Teachers’ methods draw on the student’s cultural and character strengths</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Classes are conducted as writing workshops with students working in small response groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Students remain together with the Puente English instructor, for the entire academic year completing ENG 1A and ENG 1B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Library works by Chican@/Latino authors are used to provoke stimulating classroom discussions and to explore the Chican@/Latino experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Benefits</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Puente Students will:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Develop reading and writing skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Meet professionals in our community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Learn strategies for success in college and in life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Make university contacts and visit universities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Create a successful transfer plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Make new friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Participate in culturally-enriching activities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Acquired Supportive Services That Contributed to Academic Focus in College

The acquired supportive services revealed by participants and described as helpful to their educational focus in college included academic counseling services, health services, and a variety of acquired services and workshops facilitated by various departments within the community college where the participants attended. At least one participant discussed the array of acquired services through departments and facilitated workshops during the interviews. These services consisted of financial aid assistance and workshops, transfer center assistance and workshops, tutoring center, math lab (for math tutoring), writing center (for tutoring), Umoja Program, library services, CalFresh, and law help workshop.

Academic counseling services were discussed by seven participants and described as helpful, but also health services that participants acquired were revealed as a vital service by three participants. Monica expressed gratitude from the experiences with her counselor at the community college and obtaining the encouragement to continue with her goal. Monica stated:

I believe having the counselor there at community college can really change everything, and I know contacting a counselor can be hard, especially because there are so many students that they need to see. I know this is a lot, but [my counselor] stuck to my educational plan, and I remember I wanted to get my associates, and [my counselor] was like, you can get your bachelor’s degree, let’s do this!

Valeria discussed her experiences with academic counseling services and mental health counseling as a student at the community college. Valeria stated, “[I used] tutoring, repeat classes on writing and math … I also … had some counseling support, counseling, in general. So, for like my well-being.” When asked to elaborate, she expressed that the counseling she referred to included mental health counseling and academic counseling services. Participants
identified health services as an available service on campus that supported them and allowed them to focus on their academics. Physical health services and mental health services are among the many services that the health centers provided for college students on community college campuses. Jesus recalled utilizing the mental health services offered at his community college and how this helped him while concurrently obtaining other services on campus. Jesus stated:

> Every semester I would meet with a counselor to make sure I was on track, where if I had to move stuff around, I had an educational advisor that I would talk to quite frequently to make sure everything’s going on track. Like how’s everything going. And working with them also helped me prepare for transferring, like look into colleges, look into where I want to go … I used the health center. There was a time period where I was going through therapy there. I utilized a lot of tutoring, especially with classes like physics, calculus, some of the ones that I am not good at or have the strongest foundation in. I wanted to ensure I passed it, so I began going to tutoring through those.

Figure 12 and Figure 13 are screenshots of health services at California community colleges.
Figure 12

*Health and Psychological Services Webpage Screenshot Found on Community College Website*

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*Psychological Services*

Students enrolled at [redacted] may receive mental health counseling, psychological services and referrals at no cost. These services are designed to help students adjust to college life, cope with personal challenges, gain self-awareness, and address psychological concerns. Students may meet with a licensed mental health professional for an initial screening and evaluation to determine how the student's mental health needs can best be met.

*Concerns Frequently Addressed*

- Stress, Depression, Anxiety
- Self-esteem and Body Image
- Concerns related to identity
- Concerns about family, romantic, or interpersonal relationships.

Students with presenting issues that are best addressed by mental health counseling, psychological services and referral can participate in brief individual, couples, or group sessions. If it is determined that the student's needs are best met by another agency, the student will be provided with appropriate referrals or resources.

*Counseling Sessions*

During a brief individual mental health counseling sessions students can expect: a private, one-on-one session with a licensed mental health professional for a limited amount of sessions that are typically 45-50 minutes in length. This is a collaborative process where the licensed mental health professional and the student work together to help the student reach specific goals. Brief mental health counseling is most effective with students who have the capacity to solve their own problems with some assistance and are willing to work hard at changing dysfunctional behavior patterns and practicing healthier, more adaptive behaviors. Most students can be helped significantly in as few as 3-4 sessions if they work at it.

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Figure 13

*Health Services Webpage Screenshot Found on Community College Website*
Saul described his experiences obtaining essential services as a community college student, which helped him focus on his academics. Saul stated, “I went to the nurse when I didn’t have insurance, I believe. And then it was a workshop with lawyers for people that were undocumented. So, I attended that as well.” Financial and food insecurities were revealed as realities that participants faced when they were students in their community college, and the variety of services they acquired contributed to alleviating those stressors. Noel stated,
“CalFresh, using food stamps and stuff, it was one less thing that I had to worry about in terms of that service” (see Figure 14).

**Figure 14**

*CalFresh Screenshot of Flyer Found on Community College Website*

Research Question 3: Social Experiences at College

Research question 3 focused on social experiences that supported student success at college for Latinx FGCS. When participants shared their interactions and social experiences with classmates, friends, and family that supported their success at college, three themes emerged: peer support and engagement, experiences with peers or friends outside of college, and family support.

**Peer Support and Engagement**

All nine participants described their interactions with classmates who supported them before college and once in college. Laura described the peer support she experienced in high
school and after she attended her community college. When asked what supported her before college and while in college, Laura stated, “I had a few friends from high school and having like friends going through the same experience as me, it was very helpful. Yes. Just being able to study with them or take [college] classes with them.” Monica described her experiences with peers before college and after her college enrollment and attributed her persistence to networking in college. She said, “If I didn’t network with anybody there, I know that I would have been dropped.” Before entering her community college, Mayra experienced peer support then, and the support grew once in college. Mayra explained her experiences and stated:

So prior … as in high school, well, I would see other students applying to their UCs and Cal States and private schools, and I felt like the underachiever, but I had the support of other friends who decided to take the community college route. And that helped a lot feeling not alone, and knowing that you’re lost together, but you’re going to figure it out together. Then we move into college; I get into college through the Puente Program, I was able to make these incredible connections with a lot of the students, and the way we refer to it is, like, a familia, and they support you.

Elvira recalled the support she experienced as a community college student among her peers in this way:

I would say that in all of my classes at community college, all of my classmates and I were all very supportive, and I always felt like since I knew so much about school and all the services and depth because I worked there, I kind of always felt like I had to like do outreach and help support rank classmates because we’re all in this together. It’s not just like one or another. It’s like all of us together. And then if we, one didn’t know
information, another one would help because, at the end of the day, like we’re all students and we all just, we all want to get like our bachelor’s or associate’s [degree].

Elvira provided detailed experiences and interactions with other students that supported her experiences as a college student. She commented:

I would say that all my interactions with my college friends, it always has to do with college and like learning. So, going to museums or going to like on-campus workshops and meetings together and scheduling appointments with our counselor, talking about our classes. I would also say like sometimes I would get really into politics, and we would just go meet like these politicians for fun and see like what they’re about. So, I would say like all that supported me in college, and it all connected to my studies and my major, that kind of just expanded my critical thinking.

Elisa described how her engagement in the Puente Program offered her the opportunity to take cohort-based classes, which she believed enabled her success. Elisa stated:

We were a cohort of about 30 students, and these 30 students, you were taking the same English class and the same guidance classes together. So, it made it more comfortable where I was familiar with the people around me. So, I didn’t have that social anxiety of having to worry like, who’s going to be in my classes? Am I going to be able to socialize with anyone? So just seeing the same faces made it a little bit more comforting.

Saul specifically described how his interaction with college peers outside of college contributed to his performance in classes he took alongside these peers. He commented:

I did have a couple of friends that we were working in the same grocery store, and we were going to the same college. So that was really cool, really useful. [Be]Cause we would take the same class and then we would be able to talk about it during work or
we’re on our way to school. Like I noticed that when I was taking those classes, friends or people that I knew I tended to do a lot better.

**Experiences With Peers or Friends Outside of College**

Experiences with peers or friends outside of college were expressed by eight participants and described these experiences as positive interactions, which supported them in college. Of the nine participants, six participants described that they would encourage their friends to go to college within their interactions with outside-of-college friends. Outside-of-college friends included former high school peers, older friends who had never attended college, and befriended coworkers who were not college graduates.

Noel expressed that he would motivate his friends who were not going to college. Noel stated, “At my community college, I had my core group of friends within community college and then I did have other friends that were outside, I would encourage them to go to college.” Valeria expressed how her three best friends encouraged her to enroll in college and work toward graduating from college. Valeria stated:

Basically, my friend group, like my best friends, they never went to college. So, I was the only one in the group that was in college, in general. So, they always pushed me to do assignments and get good grades because they were like, “We wish we would have went,” and they would make more money, and so they wanted me to be the one to succeed. I got a lot of support from my friends.

Elisa described her experiences with friends who did not attend college because they believed it to be unattainable but encouraged her to complete her higher education. She commented:
I think this would be a different form of support, but I had a lot of friends from high school that didn’t go to college, some of them being undocumented because they just thought that they couldn’t afford college or get the financial support. So, I myself, I’m a DACA [Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals] recipient. So, I didn’t know I had these opportunities, but once I got into college and I realized how many opportunities there were for us, it just … How do I explain it? It just made everything feel like it’s possible for me. So when I would meet with these friends that weren’t in college and just hearing their stories and then tell me, “I can’t go to college because I’m undocumented in this,” and I was able to share my experience with them and seeing them be able to transition and actually apply for colleges because they knew that I, as an undocumented student, was able to go through it, it kind of just, I would say, motivated them to go. So, seeing them going into it, it just kind of pushed me to keep going because I had people, and not just like friends, but also my siblings, looking up to me. So, it was those experiences that is [are] very eye-opening, and I was like, I’m not just doing this for myself, but other people are really looking up to me.

Saul described his interactions with older working adults who had younger children at the time and how he provided guidance for his befriended coworkers when asked on the steps to go to college. Saul stated:

I was working in grocery stores or a seafood market. So, I had a lot of work with a lot of older men and women that had children, maybe 10 or five years younger than me. So, they were, they were still in middle school or high school. The little knowledge that I had from community college, from after high school, I was able to share with them, and they would, in return, they would ask me about it. And it was a nice interaction with them
because they would also provide me with that support. Like, “Oh, you’re going to do it. You’re going to do great. It’s going to be really cool that you’re going to graduate.”

Because again, it was not a lot of us would be like graduates or know people that were graduating from college.

Monica recalled her befriended coworker and how he encouraged her to persevere. She recalled:

I would say that an executive chef that I worked with, I would vent to him and share my struggles, and he would say we all have struggles, you can get through them. He would say if you don’t stay around for the struggles, then you won’t be around for the good. He would say to me, stay in school. You don’t want to stay as a server. If you don’t want to do that for the rest of your life, stay in school.

**Family Support**

Family support was the third theme that emerged when participants were asked about their interactions with family and their support before college and while in college. Six participants described experiences with family and friends as supportive even though they did not know how to help or demonstrated their support through engagement in conversations about college.

For Monica’s family, graduation from high school was important, but her parents did not discuss college. Monica shared that her family practically demonstrated support by providing housing for her as a college student. Monica stated:

In high school, for them, it was important for me to graduate from high school, other than that, you know, furthering my education wasn’t really thought about or that they really needed me to. And you know, during college, they were willing [to provide housing] as
long as you’re going to school for you. So that’s one way that they were supporting me, that was one way of support from my family.

Jesus vividly recalled the support that his family provided for him despite not understanding his academic career choices or pathway. Jesus stated:

So, my family, they always supported me going to college. And since I’m the only one that has gone through a STEM field, none of them really understand what it means to go through STEM, what it means to be majoring in biology or science. So, they’re always questioning me, like why aren’t you going to business? Why don’t you go to become a lawyer or a doctor or something that they see could be a real career? And then I always go and try to explain it, like I’m going to go do this, to do that, go work here. But although they have like questioned my choices, my career path, they have still always supported me. They were like, how are your grades going? Are you turning in your assignments? Like how did you do on your test? They’re always making sure I’m not falling behind.

As Elvira discussed her family’s support for her in going to college, she expressed appreciation. She said:

I would say all the support I got from my family, like my parents, was, you could do it. My parents didn’t really have that much background or knowledge about college or anything. So, the only support they ever gave me and I completely understand. It’s just like, you could do it, and if you don’t know, just go ask. Since they didn’t really like, they didn’t go to college or go to school here or really know about the college system. They weren’t able to assist me. So, they were just telling me, like, seek help and don’t be
shy and, like, don’t be scared and you could do it. That’s the support. But that was, I appreciate that.

Engagement in conversations about college was discussed as a way that family offered support for participants. Elisa specifically recalled her parents supporting her through her career decision-making process in college and offering financial and emotional support. Elisa responded:

I was really blessed to have parents that just supported me through everything. Regardless of how many times I changed my major, they always just reassured me that I was doing it for me, and any change or decisions that I wanted to do that I knew was best for me, they would support it. Also, not really having to worry about paying as much for rent or food, things like that with my family, it just took that little bit of stress off my shoulders. So, it was easier for me to focus in school. When I did need help financially, my parents were always there. Even though they didn’t have the education to support me in that sense, they were there financially and emotionally.

Laura described how her parents did the best they could to assist her by being proactive in her education and financially supporting her to focus on college. She commented:

My parents didn’t want me to work when I was in college. So, I feel like that was very helpful to me because I just had to focus on school. If I had like any questions, or if I needed anything, my parents were there to support me or just do like search for answers to whatever questions I had. Or they would attend, let’s say, workshops or anything that was at school, like any events sometimes.

Mayra identified the conversations that she had with her parents as her motivation in college. Mayra stated:
I would say it was those conversations that I would have with my parents and if I was going to go to college. And if I was going to go to college, was I going to go to a Cal State, UC, or a community college. And they supported me in my decision to go to a community college not only because of the leniency in the financial sense. But also because they valued education, they see the value in education. It doesn’t matter if I go to a Cal State or UC or a community college as long as I obtain the education that I was meant to get, to take advantage of the opportunity that not many individuals have. And so, I would say that, that’s a big part of my motivation for why I am in college, and that’s the support that I get. And when I’m struggling with a class and about to break down or in tears, they’re like, “You know what, you’ve been working hard, you shouldn’t just give up now.” So those are the kinds of things that keep me going.

**Research Question 4: Faculty and Staff Experiences at College**

Research question 4 focused on faculty and staff experiences that supported student success at college for Latinx FGCS. When participants were asked about their interactions and experiences with faculty, professors, instructors, administration, and staff, the following three themes emerged: positive interactions with faculty inside the class or during office hours, positive interactions with faculty and staff outside of class for those involved on campus, and positive interactions with administration for those involved on campus. Faculty for this study included professors or instructors and academic counselors who assisted students in academic planning and taught courses that helped students in many aspects of life. Involvement on campus in this study referred to leadership roles, activities, or program engagement.
Positive Interactions With Faculty Inside the Class or During Office Hours

The first theme that emerged was positive interactions with faculty inside the classroom or during office hours. Nine participants discussed support and successful engagement by professors or instructors inside the class. Saul described his minimal interactions with professors in larger classes but described his experiences as more personal and helpful for smaller classes. Saul stated:

The smaller classes, especially classes about politics or history. I would engage with teachers. They were really, they would open up my mind about everything about this country, everything about politics, policy, how things are done. So, they did help me develop a better understanding of the, what you call the real world. So, it was really good to learn from them.

Monica shared her experiences with faculty inside the classroom and described them as encouraging and personal, especially with professors who shared their backgrounds, and she found similarities. Monica commented:

I would say I recommend community college. The reason why is because I have to say all the professors there [were] amazing, all the ones that I’ve had. Not all of them went to a four-year [college], and they mentioned, “I wasn’t good at math or science, and I started at community college just like you did, and I am a professor now, I know you could do this.” I would stay positive when going to classes, and that’s where I would get my motivation. My professors would be like, “I know this could be challenging, but you can get through this.” They were great. I would definitely go with a community college; the classes aren’t as big as, you know, a four-year [college]. It’s a lot more personal. At
community college, the classes were smaller, so I would say I had [a] really great experience.

When asked what his faculty interactions looked like, Jesus described them as positive and inspiring, primarily with STEM professors. Jesus responded:

It was more my science classes where I really interacted with them. I knew I liked science, and they liked science, and we got to build connections, like networking with them, which is what helped me when I graduated. They were the ones that wrote my letters of recommendation and stuff like that. They were the ones that supported me. They wanted me to succeed. So, because I built that connection with the science faculty mainly, they helped me, like they became like an inspiration. This is where they’re at. I want to get to that level too. And they were always, especially many of them, were very enthusiastic. And that’s also one of the main reasons I went into science.

Valeria described her experiences with faculty as positive. Valeria stated, “Every single faculty and everyone who interacted with me, they helped me, guided me in classes or in college, in general.” Elisa described her experience in the process of navigating college and locating people to help her in college and obtaining assistance from academic counselors in support programs, such as the Puente Program and La Casa. Elisa stated:

I always had one-on-one meetings. I got close with a lot of my counselors and advisors where I have personal contact information or emails, and I could just reach out to them, and they were there. So, it was more on like a personal level than just faculty to student. So, I think that’s what really made the difference. Also, hearing them, some of their stories were similar to mine where they were first [generation college] students. So that was also inspiring.
Saul discussed his experiences with faculty that consisted of academic counselors and described them setting realistic goals for him during his time at the community college. Saul said:

[The counselors] wouldn’t sugar coat anything. They would be straight with you, and they, they just ... you could tell or I could tell their demeanor. They really wanted to help you, but then they’re letting you know it’s going to be challenging. It’s going to be harder, but you just got to stick with it.

Laura described her interactions with professors as helpful outside the classroom during their designated office hours when she sought support. Laura stated:

If I had like any questions, or if I was doing bad[ly] in my classes, I would go to the office hours, and the teachers were very helpful, and they would guide me through the class and how I can do better.

Noel expressed that he engaged with professors prior to and after classes started and made it a goal to remain proactive in his classes with professors. Noel said:

I would always make it a goal to reach out to my professors before the semester started. So, obviously, months ahead, you register for classes and stuff, so before classes started, probably like a month or two before, I would draft an email that I would send out to the professors introducing myself and saying like, is there anything that I could do before class starts to kind of be prepared to hit the ground running and stuff? And that kind of interaction, it helped in establishing who I was with the faculty and the instructors, and then just getting a heads up on anything that I had to do. I would go to office hours. I would make it a goal to at least go to office hours at least once every two weeks. I would always come prepared to office hours to be able to engage and not just sit there because
I’d be nervous even just going to office hours every single time I would go, but I’d still make it a goal to go to office hours.

Elvira described her experiences with professors and being proactive about her options, classes, and grades. Elvira stated:

I would always ask questions if I didn’t know what service specifically, what it was, what it offers, or I would just try to join meetings too, like faculty meetings, even if I was a student because I wanted to know more about my school. And I think that would help like my success overall at [my community college]. And then with my professors, I would always go to professor’s office hours, like every single week, so they could check like my homework and like my writing or anything, or just prepare for an exam. That’s how I passed a lot of my classes.

Mayra described good interactions with professors after having a good interaction with one professor, who encouraged her to reach out to professors after that one positive experience continuously. Mayra said:

You have that false sense of this notion that professors are cold, and they’re going to think you’re dumb. But after having a pretty good interaction with one of my professors, I just continued to seek help from my professors through their office hours and build that relationship because I knew that not only was it going to help me in the class in that moment, but it was also going to help me in the future as I built the relationship with them. They can help you with letters of rec or just if you need any advice in the future from them, you know that you know each other, that that relationship has been established already. So, they were pretty positive for the most part. I can’t really say I’ve had any negative experiences with any professors or faculty.
Positive Interactions With Faculty and Staff Outside of Class for Those Involved On Campus

The second theme that emerged was positive interactions with faculty and staff outside of the class, specifically for participants involved on campus. Seven participants described their experiences with faculty and staff outside of the class while being involved on campus. When asked what experiences he had outside the classroom with faculty and staff, Noel described his experiences building connections with faculty and described interactions and opportunities while working with staff on projects. Noel recalled:

My mentor, one of my greatest mentors that I have now, which I spoke with her last week, she was a professor. She was a communications studies department chair, and she was my professor for two of my communication studies classes. And we still connect. So, fostering that kind of mentorship relationship has really helped me.

Working on projects with staff and faculty and administrators with college events and stuff, planning a lot and stuff like that, and also, I was a student representative for the Academic Senate and other parts of other committees on campus. So, in those interactions, I helped give input, student input in regards to how to shape the students’ experience on campus.

Valeria described her experiences interacting and working alongside faculty and staff outside of class and recalled being encouraged and supported through her interactions. Valeria commented:

I spent a lot of time with the faculty and staff outside of the clinic. Going to games, traveling, and other times. They’d always be very supportive and offer how to better succeed in that field. And helped me figure out what classes I could take to succeed.
Elvira discussed her experience as a student worker and how it helped her as a student by attending meetings with professors. Elvira stated:

I would say the experiences that I had inside and outside was I was always a student worker. So that’s probably how they saw me, a student worker. And it helped me inside and outside because sometimes I would attend like meetings at my professors’ rooms, which was kind of odd, but it would help me know more about the school and what plan it has for its students. And I would say that also the faculty and staff, like, they would support me and they would understand me.

Mayra recalled her experiences in solidifying a relationship with her English professor; after she completed the course, she had the opportunity to be a tutor for her former English professor’s class. Mayra described how this role allowed her to develop further as a student and as a role model to her peers. She commented:

Even though the class was over, and the other [Puente] Program was technically over, I would say they would still reach out to us. My [English] professor would reach out to me, actually. She would ask me how my experience went with that [University of California conference]. Establishing that student-professor relationship, after not being their student anymore, I was able to become the tutor for my English class with the professor that I had previously my first year. And so, I guess that would step into. …Yes, it’s in school, but it’s not, I don’t have any academic responsibility within that class but rather now as a tutor, as a different role in that class. So, I would say that for my English professor.

**Positive Interactions With Administration for Those Involved On Campus**

The third theme that emerged was positive interactions with administration, particularly for participants that were involved on campus. A total of five participants described some direct
interaction with the administration while being involved on campus. Elisa was familiar with administration at her community college, and they were familiar with her. She described positive experiences and expressed gratitude for their support and believes that her role as a student body president opened up opportunities for her to interact with administration more so than other students. Elisa commented:

I think I had a little bit of a different experience with administration than most students did. So, [in] my last year in community college, I was actually a student body president there. So, I had more meetings, actual one-on-one meetings or group meetings with administrators, so the different deans and vice presidents. So, I always had a good experience with them. I remember my very last year when I was applying to transfer to [a UC], I was having trouble with financial aid, and I actually had the dean of student services sat with me, and she did the whole application with me. I had people from financial aid that were calling for me, trying to figure out why they had lost my application or what was going on. So, it was just those little things that they did ...

Because they already knew I was in my last semester, and I had the stress of having to pass all my classes, [and] they were doing these little acts of kindness for me that were just taking off so much stress.

Noel discussed how his on-campus involvement through work-study allowed him to get involved on campus and develop connections with administration and staff. Noel commented:

For my work-study positions, when I worked in the counseling department, also, I worked in the welcome center toward the end of my community college time. Being familiar with the staff, everybody kind of knew who I was, and I mostly knew who everyone was in a way. And then also once I started getting involved with student
government, I started knowing exactly who were the people in like academic senate, the people in different committees, classified staff, and actual the deans of departments. And then I started getting acquainted with them too, and they knew who I was. And that was with student government but also work-study jobs. The higher-ups kind of, they were more like every once in a while ... I feel like I had more of a relationship with classified staff.

Valeria described her interactions with the administration as brief but positive. Valeria said:

I think the most interaction I’ve had was when I was working in the athletic training clinic. So, administration, I would walk them to the athletic department. And the dean came to a few games and also thanked us for volunteering and help supporting. They were good [interaction]. It just wasn’t very much interaction. It was just like, “Oh, you’re doing a great job.”

Jesus expressed that he had a brief interaction with the college president when attending an event where he was part of the representation of the college. Jesus identified that more interactions with the administration were attributed to his work with the La Casa Engagement Center. Jesus stated:

I didn’t really get to interact with a lot of the administration. I was invited to be part of the president’s dinner. I did work with the president of [my community college] in a sponsored dinner where the sponsor would come, and we would be there as representatives of the college. But apart from that, the main interactions I had with the staff was because I also worked in La Casa [Engagement Center]. So, my boss [the program coordinator] was the main person I would interact with, as well as the
counselors. And like I said, he was an educational advisor, and the [academic] counselors were like the counselors. They always made sure I was on track to graduate.

In describing the support obtained by the administration, Elvira attributed support to many within her community college. She recalled:

Administration or staff that supported me was like the president of the school, his assistants. I would say everyone within like, the school’s communication marketing team, all in the [specified location] building, they’re all like very helpful. I would say I’ve never really met a staff member at [my community college] that did not support me while I was in college. If anything, like, they would all give me advice from like the [vice presidents] to like the president himself of the school. And I think that was like the most amazing interaction.

**Research Question 5: Challenges**

Research question 5 focused on challenges encountered and overcome at college for Latinx FGCS. When participants were asked about the challenges and difficulties they experienced and overcame or persevered in college, the following four themes emerged: internal stressors, external stressors, financial problems, and individualized learning pace on skills, subject, or knowledge.

**Internal Stressors**

When participants were asked about the challenges they experienced at college, seven of the nine identified internal stressors; internal stressors were verbalized in descriptions of or feelings of not belonging or expressing thoughts of the imposter syndrome. The imposter syndrome is described as having the feeling of not belonging or feeling like a fraud in certain successes (Slank, 2019). Additionally, internal stressors were attributed to self-motivation and
confidence level, which were described as well. Noel described his internal struggle as causing stressors for him in college. Noel stated:

I think most of the challenges that I experienced, it wasn’t a lot of outside stuff, it was more just like me, me battling with myself and my own background, and me battling myself really was where a lot of the pushback came. My challenges came from before college, if that makes sense, or precollege, I don’t know if that makes sense, but with family and just negative self-talk and do I really fit into this? What am I doing? Questioning stuff.

Saul communicated how getting outside of his comfort zone challenged him, but he realized that he had potential and the ability to succeed. He commented:

Challenge? I think one of the biggest ones is, was getting out of my comfort zone. I was always ... I think I still am, but for the most part, being one of the students that’s quiet or stays in the back and doesn’t interact with a professor or like in group discussions as much. So that was a little bit hard for me at the beginning. Kind of feeling, having that feeling you don’t belong there. Feeling of not belonging, it was always going into a class and just seeing other students that come from more affluent backgrounds and just so eloquently, like giving, talking to the professor or a group discussion and just being there, so their ideas are expressed so well, it sounds like they have a good understanding of everything. Like were a lot of things in the world or how things go in and going in there. I’m very, not exposed to a lot of things in high school, middle school, like growing up. So that was when I felt, “Oh, maybe I don’t belong here.” Maybe college is not for me, but one of the things would be just sticking it out, doing the work. Maybe I wasn’t ... At the beginning, I wasn’t saying my thoughts out loud or in those discussions. But when we
were writing papers, when we were doing other assignments, I was able to voice my opinion. The way that I overcome it, I think it was just by sticking it out, being there and getting good grades, help like motivated me or helped me see that I do belong, that I can do the work. I can do the college-level courses.

Mayra discussed her experience as she battled her internal stressors in college and how she approached these challenges to overcome them. Mayra recalled:

I would probably say that the most difficult thing was understanding that you are meant to be in that space, that you are able and allowed to take up that space in that classroom, that you have a voice in that classroom, and as a very shy ... in class, I can be very introverted, very shy, very closed, but because and it was really hard to understand that, I guess it kind of touches upon that imposter syndrome, kind of thing. It was at times, I still struggle with it. But I was able to overcome a lot of those fears of not being good enough academically, with all the support from tutoring, to discussions with professors during our office hours.

Valeria described her challenges with self-motivation and what helped her overcome the challenges. She said:

I think a lot was that they weren’t very supportive, like support from my family. So, I had to be self-motivated, and even driving to school was kind of draining sometimes. I got a lot of support from my academic counselors and my counselors from other programs. That’s where most of my motivation came from.

Monica discussed the internal stress she encountered while working and focusing on being a college student and what helped her alleviate stress. Monica stated:
One of my challenges was my classes and working both jobs. All the stress I put on myself and all the work I had. What helped me, my yoga instructor. I took that class with all the anxiety I would have with work and school and personal life. I remember that semester was like, you’re here, you are taking yoga, and you need to relax and not think of all the assignments you have to do. The other professors were about self-care, there has to be balanced, and I managed my anxiety with self-care. So, I was thinking [about] that advice. I believe it’s not really talked about, at least in my family culture, that really exists. If you have do, do, do in the Latino culture, you have a lot to do, and that’s all you have to do. So, I believe at the community college, they taught me about self-care.

**External Stressors**

External stressors described by seven participants consisted of situations or circumstances out of the participants’ control while they were community college students. Jesus told about his experience as an undocumented student and the limits set for him when trying to obtain specific opportunities as a college student. Jesus shared:

The biggest [challenge] was being an undocumented student. I was also born in Mexico. So just going through my education journey as an undocumented student, it made it not harder, but it also created more barriers for me, especially in STEM, where everything tends to be nationally funded. I wasn’t able to take as much resources. Like I couldn’t apply for this summer program because it was nationally funded, and I have to be a citizen. Or I couldn’t apply for the scholarship because you had to be a U.S. citizen. And so, me having to look to find other resources, looking for stuff that doesn’t require that was how I was able to get to where I am.
Stressors caused by external sources presented to be a challenge and barrier for FGCS at community colleges. Participants expressed outside factors or situations that occurred while they were students in the community and how they managed to persist through. Noel expressed that his lack of family support for him in seeking a higher education was an external stressor that he faced. He commented:

I felt like family support was lacking. I think [this was] one of the most kind of crucial blows that I’ve had and it kind of sums up how it is with the rest of my family. I was selected as a McNair Scholar recently, and that’s a pretty big deal in academia in a way for undergrads and stuff. And I shared that with my family members, and they didn’t really care, and then I actually had one brother who said, “I don’t want to hear this,” pretty much thinking that I’m not a part of the family, I’m not part of the religion, and that whatever I am doing now is invalid. So, I think that has been like one of my more difficult stuff.

Laura discussed how transportation was an external stressor since she would board multiple buses to get to her community college. Additionally, Laura also found that finding space for studying became a challenge for her. Laura recalled:

I think it was transporting from school to college, you can say. I would have to take two buses. Also, I think it would be that I have to find a personal space to work on homework and make time for it.

Elisa shared her challenge with focusing and finding a space at home as a barrier, which she needed to overcome so she could study. Elisa commented:
When I wasn’t in the classroom or on campus, it was hard for me to really find a place where I could sit and focus, and especially living at home with siblings that were younger. So that was the hardest thing for me.

Elvira shared the challenges that she faced yet continued to persist through graduation. Elvira stated:

My [biggest] challenges were always like, my mom was always sick because when I was younger, she had a stroke, so she would always be in the hospital in and out when I was like during school. So sometimes I would just be at the hospital like all night. And then the next morning, I would go to school like nothing happened. And I think I kind of just became used to it, like it hurt, but I kind of just became used to it. And school was a great distraction, or that time, like when my dad, when he had a stroke, and I was in school, I didn’t feel like I responded correctly because I did have to drop a class. But whatever came, it’s just, I’m already here. I’m not going to quit. And I have to do this. And I think it goes more into like, I think more about like my future children. And if I don’t offer them a great future, I feel like I’m failing them because I want to provide them what I didn’t have and the support that I didn’t have.

Financial Problems

Financial problems were described by eight participants and identified as encountered challenges while they were college students at their community college. The economic difficulties consisted of obligations, responsibilities, or ineligibility to resources. Saul described his living expenses as a challenge. Saul had to work and provide for himself with limited resources available to him because he was undocumented. He commented:
I’d say maybe having expenses, as in having to pay rent, having to pay bills, having to work full time. Because I didn’t have papers. I wasn’t legal at the time. I wasn’t able to apply for any financial aid or any Cal grants, any of that. So, everything had to be out of pocket. So just living expenses was one of the most difficulties.

Monica expressed her struggle with prioritizing education instead of working and managing to balance her responsibilities. Monica stated:

The difficulties that I experienced outside of college [were] prioritizing education for work, I would say okay to stay longer hours at work to buy the stuff that I need to buy or make less money and struggle later. What do I need to prioritize? Financially or education. Balancing the possibilities I had with community college and my outside personal life.

Jesus identified some of the reasons that he faced financial stressors while at the community college. Jesus stated, “I come from a low-income family, so that’s one already harder for college, like getting all the resources, making sure I had enough money for textbooks and stuff like that.” Valeria described her financial struggles with working an undesirable work schedule and not earning enough, which limited her regarding required expenses as a college student. She commented:

I would say [I struggled] financial wise. Like having a crazy work schedule but not getting enough hours. Struggling with money. So, I struggled with gas for using the car to get to class. Yeah. My hours were cut sometimes. And work was 30 minutes from school, so it was quite a lot of gas.

Elisa described her financial challenges as she contributed to her family’s household income. She stated:
At one point in my college career, community college, I was working a full-time job, I was working a part-time job, and I was going to school full-time because my family was really struggling financially. So being the oldest, I had to step up and start bringing in more income to the family to be able to support us, to even just have a roof over our heads or just have a meal for the day. So that was the biggest struggle that I had, but having the support from my counselors in the two programs that I was involved in, it just made it easier because they were able ... I had counselors who were working with me and professors directly during that time that it wasn’t like I was getting special treatment, but the professors for being more understanding.

Elvira shared her financial struggles and challenges that she faced as a community college student. Elvira commented:

Sometimes I didn’t have a car. I had a broken car. I had to get the bus so many times to class. Those are challenges. Sometimes I would always help my parents, and I wouldn’t fully eat or buy myself things just to like help them. I would say for my age, I don’t really dress up or like buy myself a lot of stuff because it’s like that financial, and I don’t know if that’s the correct word, instability, I’m just not financially stable. So, I feel like that’s a big one.

In describing financial stressors, Noel discussed his financial situation outside of college and the stress it caused. Noel commented:

Financial kind of hardships, dealing not only with family stuff but also financial situations and having to plan out certain things or how certain things are going to work. And then scheduling because I would be in charge of paying the mortgage of the house that I was living at with my parents. I lived separately, but I would [be] in charge of
payments and insurance and bills, so I think sometimes it would be a little bit overwhelming to kind of juggle everything. Yeah, those are kind of some of the things that were difficult outside of college.

Mayra shared that after a vehicle collision, the repercussions after the event caused her stressors that pertained to financial issues while a student at the community college. Mayra recalled:

I was unfortunately involved in a car accident that impacted me very ... It was very, very frightening. But that affected me academically because I was just worried of all the problems financially, all the legal problems that come with it, and that really did mess up my focus. And it’s a very stressful thing that it makes it so hard to focus in class, to focus on just even the smallest assignment. It makes it very challenging. But financial problems at home can be challenging as well.

*Individualized Learning Pace on Skills, Subject, or Knowledge*

In sharing challenges faced and overcome by participants in college, individualized learning pace on skills or subject emerged as a theme. Six participants discussed their individualized challenges, which they were able to persevere through at their pace. Elisa discussed her individualized challenge as she transitioned from high school to a college student and what available support helped her with this challenge. Elisa commented:

I think the biggest struggle that I had at the beginning, I think like any other student, was the transition, especially going straight from high school, where I feel like more of the community in the high school and the teachers. College, you’re basically on your own. You realize that you don’t have anyone holding your hand to walk you through it. So that was the biggest struggle for me, just realizing that and making the transition. But the
Puente Program was really what helped me because, like I mentioned, we were the same cohort of students taking two of the same classes every semester for the first two years. So, it just made it easier and a little bit more comforting because you had an advisor and you had the same English teacher. So that was easier for me. Once I found La Casa, I found my place, my safe place on campus.

Overcoming challenges in classes or courses were part of the theme in the individualized learning pace for participants. Jesus discussed how he overcame his writing skills and abilities for classes and subjects that were not his strengths. Jesus said:

Well, first, it had to do with like the subjects. I’m not the best when it comes to English or history. I’m bad at writing and all that stuff. So, that was one of my biggest challenges. I was scared to take English just because I was like, I’m most likely going to fail it. And so, I had to go take it. I went to tutoring. And it was always [grammatical errors]. But that pretty much helped me overcome that.

Valeria discussed her struggles in studying and finding a way that worked for her. Valeria commented:

I had a hard time learning. My type of way that I was used to studying. So, I would go over them in advance because I would just study or review my notes but not actually put in the time and hours. So, I mentally learned how to do my own things or my own way of learning with studying. I tried note cards, I tried rewriting my notes. It was just a trial and error type of thing.

Laura expressed her individualized situation and challenges that she overcame as an FGCS at her community college. Laura stated:
Since I’m a first-generation student, and I came here when I was 14 years old, so like my English wasn’t very good. So, I would have to work harder to pass my classes and understand the material, like some words that I didn’t know. And I would go to the tutoring center to get help. Like for example, in my English classes, if I needed to write an essay, then I would go to the tutoring center, and they would help me.

Challenges faced by participants created barriers, but participants managed to navigate these barriers and persevered. Elvira described her experiences navigating some of her obstacles and what helped her. Elvira commented:

I went through a lot of challenges. I went through way more challenges. I would say the first challenge that I went through was, I didn’t know how to do FAFSA [Free Application for Federal Student Aid], like the application. I didn’t know how to choose classes. I just didn’t know anything with like registration and doing online my first semester. So, I would say that I overcame them because I asked my boyfriend if not. I just went to financial aid. And I was just like, I’m confused, I’m lost. I need help.

Not understanding the college admission requirements, purpose, or benefits of the SAT (Scholastic Assessment Test) or ACT (American College Testing) was an issue that participants brought to light throughout the interviews. Six of nine participants stated they never took the SATs or the ACTs. One participant expressed that she took both college preparatory exams but found no benefit. Elisa stated, “I don’t think I needed them much going to community college. So completely honest, I didn’t feel that they really benefited me.” Jesus discussed how he took both the SAT and ACT examination after high school graduation. He stated:
I did end up taking them like two years later after I had graduated high school, only because I thought I needed them. But I ended up going to a community college that didn’t require it. And then I transferred. So, I never really used the SAT or ACT.

Monica expressed that she took the SAT twice with peers but did not use the scores toward anything. She recalled:

I believe I took [the SAT] twice, the reason I did that was because a lot of my friends were doing that, to go to a four year. One of the staff members from the school district mentioned that they look at your high school transcripts, and he said you need all your A-Gs. I was like, “Oh.” He said, “Have you thought of community college?”

Although most of the participants for this study did not take the SAT or ACT, it is important to note that those who did take the examinations did not clearly understand how their scores could have benefited them or what was required of them for various college system admissions in California.

**Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I discussed the findings from nine Latinx male and female participants who identified as FGCS and successfully attained graduation at a California community college. The interviews produced many themes during this qualitative case study. The experiences of these nine successful Latinx FGCS shared themes that support persistence and retention toward graduation for Latinx FGCS at California community college. Chapter 5 contains the summary, discussion, and recommendations for future research.
Chapter 5: Summary, Discussion, and Recommendations

The purpose of this instrumental case study was to describe experiences of successful Latinx FGCS that support persistence and retention toward graduation for Latinx FGCS at California community colleges. The study was framed using Tinto’s (2006) retention theory. Successful Latinx FGCS are defined as those who attained graduation from a California community college. This chapter includes a summary and discussion of the findings and sections dedicated to recommendations for practice and future research. The reflections and closing remarks conclude this chapter.

Summary of the Study

This study focused on Latinx FGCS not persisting toward graduation at California community colleges, a situation that extends to the national level. For example, in 2011, the graduation rate for Latinx at all community colleges was only 13% (Murphy & Murphy, 2018). It is anticipated that Latinx will comprise 29% of the United States population by the year 2060 (United States Census Bureau, 2014). According to the U.S. Department of Education (2016), only 19% of Latinx are above the federal poverty level. It is imperative for students to pursue postsecondary options beyond high school, such as community college, to compete in today’s job market and rise above the poverty line (Perna, 2015; Vega, 2016). Many Latinx families are low-income, and their students are more likely to enroll in community colleges because of affordability (Murphy & Murphy, 2018).

Overview of the Problem

At a local community college in California, California Community College (CCC) (pseudonym), according to their 2016 Institutional Effectiveness Report, the overall course retention rate was 82% and overall course success was 67% in the spring semester of 2016.
Course retention refers to students continuing from fall to spring, and course success pertains to enrollment and completion with a passing letter grade for a credited course (California Community Colleges, 2020). For Latinx, the overall retention and success rate in 2015 was 64.4%. California Community College’s noted goal in their Institutional Effectiveness Report was to increase the percentage of retention and success by 2%. In 2015, CCC had 67% of the student population identify as FGCS. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2015), the student demographics for CCC in 2015 included 55% Latinx and 18% White non-Latino. The data indicated that only 25% of Latinx students graduated from CCC, while the graduation rate for White non-Latinx was 37%.

Arredondo et al. (2014) reported that Latinx are the largest ethnic minority population in the country, yet they lag behind in educational outcomes. This is a challenge because, as Arredondo et al. (2014) pointed out, “Education is an important component of success in the United States” and “the difference in lifetime income can be staggering” (p. 62).

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this instrumental case study was to describe experiences of successful Latinx FGCS that supported persistence and retention toward graduation for Latinx FGCS at California community colleges. The study was framed using Tinto’s (2006) retention theory. Successful Latinx FGCS are defined as those who have attained graduation from a California community college.

The following research questions guided the study:

**RQ1:** What academic and nonacademic experiences prepared or supported success prior to entering college for Latinx FGCS?

**RQ2:** What academic experiences supported Latinx FGCS success at college?
RQ3: What social experiences supported Latinx FGCS success while at college?

RQ4: What faculty and staff experiences supported Latinx FGCS success while at college?

RQ5: What challenges were encountered and overcome by successful Latinx FGCS?

Review of the Study Design

This study was conducted as a qualitative, instrumental case study. A case study is an in-depth data collection and exploration of a bounded system requiring a comprehensive understanding of few cases to allow the researcher to devote more time to explore the depths of any case (Creswell, 2014, 2015). Yin (2009) noted that not only is it important to have “methodologically important issues” (p. 255), but researchers should also have topics of interest. Additionally, it is important for researchers to take practical considerations and substantive considerations into account during the beginning stages of a case study.

I selected this design for my research because I believe that it is instrumental in gaining insight directly from participants who are living the factors being studied. Through a qualitative case study, I gained descriptions of the lived experiences from nine voluntary participants who identified as Latinx FGCS who attained graduation from a California community college and examined their experiences. The data collected from the nine participants through virtual interviews were analyzed, and the interviews were transcribed. The interviews followed a guided protocol that was based on the research questions and the literature review. The transcribed interviews were read, and virtual video recordings were viewed multiple times, and phrases were grouped and highlighted, then categorized onto themes. The categorized themes became the identified emerging themes. Stake (2009) noted that through shared experiences, inquiry can be carried out and a further understanding can be gained to help and benefit persons of a certain
audience. Leavy (2017) suggested that exploratory research is a way to learn and approach the topic from different perspectives to generate new insights. Additionally, Leavy (2017) discussed the importance of generating the “thick descriptions” of details and perspectives from those living the topic that is being studied (pp. 136–137).

**Summary of the Findings**

The significant findings in this study are summarized based on each of the research questions.

**Research Question 1**

Research question 1 focused on participants’ academic and nonacademic experiences that prepared or supported success prior to entering college for Latinx FGCS. The findings were:

- Guidance through a high school teacher, advisor, or counselor.
- Support from a community college outreach program.
- Experiences and exposure to roles outside of high school.
- Support from family or friends.

**Research Question 2**

Research question 2 focused on academic experiences that supported student success at college for Latinx FGCS. The findings were:

- Counseling and supportive college courses.
- Support services programs.
- Acquired supportive services that contributed to academic focus in college.

**Research Question 3**

Research question 3 focused on social experiences that supported student success at college for Latinx FGCS. The findings were:
Peer support and engagement.

Experiences with peers or friends outside of college.

Family support.

**Research Question 4**

Research question 4 focused on faculty and staff experiences that supported student success at college for Latinx FGCS. Faculty for this study included professors or instructors and academic counselors who assisted students in academic planning and taught courses that helped students in many aspects of life. Involvement on campus in this study referred to leadership roles, activities, or program engagement. The findings were:

- Positive interactions with faculty inside the class or during office hours.
- Positive interactions with faculty and staff outside of class for those involved on campus.
- Positive interactions with administration for those involved on campus.

**Research Question 5**

Research question 5 focused on challenges encountered and overcome at college for Latinx FGCS. The findings were:

- Internal stressors.
- External stressors.
- Financial problems.
- Individualized learning pace on skills, subject, or knowledge.

**Interpretation of the Findings and Discussion**

The instrumental qualitative case study was configured to describe successful Latinx first-generation college students’ (FGCS) experiences that support persistence and retention
toward graduation for Latinx FGCS at California community colleges. This study was framed using Tinto’s (2006) retention theory. An overall conclusion of the findings from this research revealed that support is essential to the success of Latinx FGCS at California community colleges, which supports Tinto’s theory. The support can be experienced through community college support services or any outside-of college persons, such as family, friends, peers, significant others, coworkers, or inside the educational establishment such as faculty, administrators, or staff. One theory cannot capture all outcomes and describe all students (Schuh et al., 2017). However, Tinto (2006) emphasized institutional activities and their importance in promoting academic and social success toward persistence and retention in higher education. Tinto (2006) described many complexities for student persistence and retention. Additionally, Schuh et al. (2017) noted that Tinto’s student success and retention theories have several lenses, such as sociological, psychological, economic, and organizational lenses. Elliott and Healy (2001) suggested that “student life is a web of interconnected experiences which overlap and influence student satisfaction” (p. 2). They further emphasized the importance of student interactions and satisfaction and how that led to retention in higher education. Interactions between students and staff or faculty inside and outside of the classroom were noted as experiences that contributed to student retention or the likelihood that they would recommend the institution to friends or relatives (Elliott & Healy, 2001; Schuh et al., 2017; Tinto, 2006).

**Research Question 1**

Research question 1 focused on participants’ academic and non-academic experiences that prepared or supported success prior to entering college for Latinx FGCS. Based on the findings, guidance from a high school teacher, advisor, or counselor played an important role in preparing for a smooth transition to college. Becoming familiar with a counselor or meet with
one prior to entering college helped in the transition process. According to Quinn et al. (2019), the experiences of first-generation college students are quite complex and the factors that influence these experiences begin as early as secondary school. These influential factors impact first-generation students’ college transition, persistence, and experiences. Quinn et al. (2019) argued that opportunity does not automatically imply that equity is present in higher education establishments despite the large representation of a population like first-generation college students. It is imperative to understand better how students can succeed despite adversity (Williams et al., 2017).

Also, classroom experiences where participants thought they could express their concerns and felt supported was a notable finding. These experiences included teacher guidance and were explained as a process where a participant believed that the teacher fostered a sense of community. Courses described as helpful in preparing for college included regular general education, Advanced Placement, and dual enrollment. Engle and Tinto (2008) noted there are strategies that can be implemented prior to entering college and during college enrollment to help improve the enrollment and completion of college. These strategies consisted of providing rigorous courses to prepare the students better for the college-level coursework and offer support to effectively build the skill level. Engle and Tinto (2008) also noted the necessary support for students that provides social support, such as advising, faculty and peer mentoring, and connection to special programs.

Obtained support from a community college outreach program was noted as an important component, particularly for those who would otherwise not have gone to college. Precollege and outreach programs are known to contribute to college access and support academic and social effectiveness of underrepresented college students (Ghazzawi et al., 2019). Engstrom and Tinto
(2008) similarly argued that providing access for students is equally as important as ensuring that the same students are provided with support. Ghazzawi et al. (2019) indicated that exposing students to precollege and outreach programs provides guidance and builds the student’s confidence in succeeding in college. Additionally, experiences and exposure to roles outside of high school and support from family or friends were also important contributing factors that led to Latinx FGCS going to college. Findings from this study are consistent with Millett and Kevelson (2018), who noted that being college-ready also requires noncognitive skills, which include attitudes and behaviors that will help the student be successful in the college environment. This suggests a conclusion that it is evident that student preparation for college extends beyond academics.

Research Question 2

Research question 2 focused on academic experiences that supported student success at college for Latinx FGCS. The conclusions based on the findings suggested that counseling and supportive college courses were helpful to college success. The identified counseling courses included an introduction to college, a college prep course, a guidance class, and career exploration. Engle and Tinto (2008) emphasized that student experiences in the classroom are considered the cornerstone of college and its function. For example, faculty can contribute to student persistence as they contribute to help students improve. Additionally, faculty can structure their activities facilitated in their classrooms to engage further peer interactions, learning, and problem-solving that lead to student success. They urged higher education institutions to provide opportunities for professional development to faculty to improve their pedagogical skills and their skills in effectively working with high-risk populations, such as low-income and first-generation college students. Arjomandi et al. (2018) emphasized the need for
tailored teaching strategies to be inclusive of both traditional and nontraditional students and match their needs as well as their preferences. Ellis (2019) asserted a need for careful consideration of nontraditional college students’ when developing and delivering courses geared at supporting their persistence in degree program attainment. Additionally, it is vital to understand the “overall experiences in higher education” for nontraditional students (Bohl et al., 2017, p. 167).

Another finding indicated that support services programs and acquired supportive services contributed greatly to academic focus in college. Engle and Tinto (2008) noted that first-generation college students from low-income backgrounds are less likely to be engaged in academic experiences, thus they identified academic experiences, often referred to as academic integration, and described it as interactions with faculty, students, or services on campus. Findings from the current study were consistent with Engle and Tinto (2008) since many first-generation college students encounter various difficulties that could potentially become a risk to their academics, thus academic advising and other support services could support students in their academics. Hoffman et al. (2019) emphasized it is clear that in the United States, there are oppressive higher education establishments that marginalize students of color. Even though there are student services in place within higher education establishments, the need exists to achieve equitable outcomes for students of color given the gaps in educational achievement. Thus, they encouraged higher education establishments to focus on expanding their student services across campuses to foster a mission of inclusion. Also, first-generation college students having a sense of belonging or lack of is a factor that contributed to poor student experiences (Azmitia et al., 2018). Findings from this study suggest the conclusion is in agreement with Ellis et al. (2019), who asserted that institutions could promote a sense of belonging on college campuses for first-
generation college students’ experiences by encouraging a campus community that affirms culture.

**Research Question 3**

Research question 3 focused on social experiences that supported student success at college for Latinx FGCS. The research findings indicated that support from college peers and engagement or positive experiences with peers or friends outside of college were important to college success. Additionally, family support was a significant contributing factor to Latinx FGCS success. Social support by family and friends is described as being a crucial component for first-generation college students and “may be more strongly related to stress in first-generation] compared to continuing-generation college students” (Garriott & Nisle, 2018, p. 438). Others have defined social support as encouragement and attitudes that family and friends provide for students in their education (Fortin et al., 2016). Holloway-Friesen (2018) highlighted the importance of building effective relationships in college. Having healthy relationships that extend beyond the student friends’ circle is identified as a component needed in developing honest expressions, more so when these relationships are with others that hold different points of view than those of the student. Historically, colleges have measured social integration “as time spent in purposeful social campus activities” (Holloway-Friesen, 2018, p. 82). However, other factors can contribute to the student’s sense of belonging to underrepresented groups.

**Research Question 4**

Research question 4 focused on faculty and staff experiences that supported student success at college for Latinx FGCS. The results suggested that positive interactions with faculty inside the class or during office hours or positive interactions with faculty, staff, or administration outside of class for those involved on campus added to the contributing factors in
Latinx FGCS success. Faculty for this study included professors or instructors and academic counselors who assisted students in academic planning and taught courses that helped students in many aspects of life. Involvement on campus in this study referred to leadership roles, activities, or program engagement. Ellis et al. (2019) noted that to promote an inclusive environment and offer genuine appreciation to lived experiences of first-generation college students, a crucial step is needed of higher education establishments, which includes the development of institutional strategies. They stated that understanding first-generation college students’ perceptions of on-campus interactions is vital and helps understand students’ connectedness.

Tinto (2006) acknowledged that despite the wealth of research that has been dedicated to persistence and graduation, there is still much that is unknown and described it as a “complex web of events” (p. 1). He noted that retention had become a business in itself as the need to gain clarity on the complexities surrounding student retention continues, and businesses often suggest that they have the solution to addressing the retention issue. Tinto (2006) asserted that “retention is everyone’s business” (p. 5), especially faculty who have a great responsibility as they are in the classroom, and classroom practices are crucial to institutional efforts. Engle and Tinto (2008) argued that well-built leadership is essential from top administrators when creating a college climate supporting student success. They emphasized that administrators must prioritize retention as an institution-wide goal and follow through on this priority. Following through is characterized by allocating resources, coordinating and collaborating within the campus community, and rewarding those members that choose to participate. Engle and Tinto (2008) found that strategic planning and implementation are necessary for providing retention programs and reducing the barriers to obtaining the services. Harper and Kuykendall (2012) agreed that to be intentional in addressing inequity and student achievement, institutions must be transparent to
help raise institutional consciousness and allow for informed choices about the investment of institutional resources.

**Research Question 5**

Research question 5 focused on challenges encountered and overcome at college for Latinx FGCS. The findings suggest the conclusion that internal or external stressors, financial problems, and individualized learning pace on skills, subjects, or knowledge of specific areas in college presented to be a challenge. Still, these challenges were overcome. Student retention and completion have many complex aspects (Tinto, 2006). Tinto (2017) described persistence as “the quality that allows someone to continue in pursuit of a goal even when challenges arise” (p. 2). Thus, he discussed the importance of higher education institutions seeking to find what motivates the student’s drive and the student’s motivation to persist. Paat (2017) found that students from ethnic minorities overcame challenges with much resiliency. The students’ challenges served as a significant motivator in their higher education goal attainment (p. 244). There are limited studies that focus on Latinx academic success and the stories behind them (Borrero, 2011; Morgan Consoli et al., 2016; Vega, 2016). Pratt et al. (2019) stated that first-generation college students experience many individual situations. Student life is described as a web of interconnected experiences (Elliott & Healy, 2001). Mitchell and Jaeger (2018) noted that understanding students’ experiences, adding motivational strategies, and promoting access could contribute to “leveling the playing field” for first-generation, low-income students (p. 603). Garriott and Nisle (2018) indicated a link between stress and perceived academic goals for first-generation college students. For example, they explained that first-generation college students’ support, such as helpful instructors, access to available services like
tutoring, and having a sense of belonging while observing others similar to them at school, associates stress with the academic goal and its progress.

Students will face challenges, and self-efficacy determines how the person will approach the challenge, and ultimately, whether the person will persist through the challenge or not (Tinto, 2017). In agreement with Engle and Tinto (2008), findings from this study suggest that among the many challenges that arise with the realities faced by unrepresented groups, it is crucial to provide information to students and parents prior to entering college and ensure that they have a clear plan and understanding of what college consists of and project ahead. Since economic challenges are often an issue and barrier in pursuing a college education for low-income and first-generation college students, Engle and Tinto (2008) urged the need to ease the transition to college by informing students about their options. They suggested offering students a clear vision of a pathway that can lead to a four-year degree as necessary to support students facing financial barriers. Counseling students on community college pathways prior to entering college while still in high school can help alleviate concerns pertaining to economic difficulties.

**Recommendations for Practice**

The findings for this study can be used by professionals in education, such as high school teachers, counselors, advisors, administrators, and community college faculty, administration, or staff. Professionals in education can apply the detailed descriptions obtained from lived experiences as examples of success stories and implement strategies or situations discussed in the study to their everyday work with Latinx FGCS. Administrators could incorporate this study’s implications to encourage professional development (PD) opportunities to high school teachers, counselors, advisors, and community college faculty or staff to pave the way in supporting Latinx FGCS on their college success in the following ways:
• Provide professional development opportunities to high school faculty and staff on best practices for encouraging students to attend college. Preparing students for college can be obtained by familiarizing them with college and its expectations through knowledge and network development (Simmons et al., 2018).

• Collaborate with local community colleges through outreach programs to offer a smooth transition from high school to college and encourage dual enrollment courses to high school students. Better partnerships are needed to strengthen the chances of student success to serve underrepresented populations better (Ghazzawi et al., 2019).

• Encourage students to meet with a counselor once enrolled in college, at least once per semester, to maintain a clear plan on academic goals and stay motivated. Continued student motivation on academic work and academic success can be obtained by appropriately helping students by teaching them strategies such as metacognitive skills, self-regulation, and goal-setting (Wu, 2019).

• Offer informational presentations and workshops on obtaining available services and resources for students on campus. Administrators should prioritize retention as an institution-wide goal and ensure allocation for resources by coordinating with the campus community; thus, if all students are required to obtain programs and services, this increases the chances that they will be acquired by the populations that need it the most, such as first-generation and low-income students (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

• Provide professional development opportunities to community college faculty and staff on ways to engage FGCS inside and outside of the classroom. Providing engagement and motivation inside and outside the classroom increases students’ chances of having high expectancy and encourages autonomy (Wu, 2019).
Additionally, supporting student success requires careful consideration, planning, and curriculum alignment to be implemented intentionally within the institution; thus, students must feel that they belong and are members of the community within the college and daily interactions with faculty (Tinto, 2017). Interactions between students and faculty are critical, and these experiences can support students tremendously, yet, faculty are not trained to teach their students (Tinto, 2006).

- Offer precollege financial aid and on-campus student services’ informationals and workshops for students and parents to help them learn of available resources. Understanding the unique constructs of Latinx students provides guidance to understand better how to assist students experiencing challenges (Morgan Consoli et al., 2016). Furthermore, it is essential to learn of the varied cultural perspectives and understand different views about education when assisting Latinx families (Vega, 2016).

**Recommendations for Future Research**

There is much to be learned about first-generation college students. Learning about their sense of belonging and resilience in education, among many other factors, are areas that require further understanding (Azmitia et al., 2018). Even though colleges are aware of Latinx student attrition, few consider the students’ varied factors when programs are developed and executed (McCallen & Johnson, 2019). The family constructs are viewed as holding complexities that include the attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, and relational or family structures that take place within families. Because of the different experiences and their complexities, first-generation college students’ experiences deserve further consideration (Corona et al., 2017). Additionally, the freshman year in college is the most vulnerable in terms of retention, and courses offered to first-
year college students are often taught by adjunct faculty, less experienced, and less paid than the faculty who are more seasoned, and institutional efforts need to focus on putting the best faculty first in the first-year courses (Tinto, 2006). Consequently, more research in the allocation of resources and faculty and the impact in terms of retention that provides reliable evidence is needed. Persistence and completion are an issue at community colleges, and there is a need to further look at contributing factors that help or hinder completion rates at the community colleges in a timely manner (Margarit & Kennedy, 2019). Because Latinx FGCS not persisting toward graduation at California community colleges is an issue, which extends to the national level, this study examined experiences of successful Latinx first-generation college students that supported persistence and retention toward graduation at California community colleges. Future research recommendations could include the study of:

- Latinx FGCS first-year college experience, courses, and sense of belonging in college and its impact on college retention.

- Latinx FGCS’ withdrawal of courses or college departure within their first year in college and identifying reasons behind their decisions.

- Comparing Latinx FGCS’ completion of a community college degree in a timely manner to those completing the degree within a lengthier timeframe and examining contributing factors that helped or hindered completion rate.

- Comparing Latinx FGCS’ retention and completion of courses taken by FGCS and taught by adjunct professors and more seasoned faculty.

**Reflections and Closing Remarks**

This study examined experiences of successful Latinx first-generation college students that supported persistence and retention toward graduation at California community colleges.
Throughout the semistructured, open-ended virtual interviews, the participants vividly and genuinely described their experiences, and I became highly impressed by their level of resilience and commitment to persevere toward graduation. Each unique experience was valued and brought to light some of the countless interconnected factors contributing to Latinx first-generation college students’ success at California community colleges. The case study examined merely a few cases of Latinx first-generation college students’ demonstrating strengths and assets that they bring with them in their pursuit of degree attainment. I intend to share my research with both students and colleagues in the education field and apply my abilities to my everyday work with students and as an educational leader while growing professionally.
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Appendix A: Recruitment-Participant Solicitation

Date:

My name is Veronica Rios, and I am a doctoral candidate under the direction of Dr. Sandra Harris in the Department of Organizational Leadership at Abilene Christian University. I am conducting a qualitative instrumental case study to describe experiences of successful Latinx first-generation college students (FGCS) that support persistence and retention toward graduation for Latinx FGCS at California community colleges. For this study, successful Latinx FGCS are defined as those who have attained graduation from a California community college. I am interested in hearing about successful Latinx FGCS’ lived experiences and what helped their persistence and retention, leading to successfully earning a two-year associate degree from a California community college.

I am recruiting participants who meet the following criteria:

- Participants who identify as Latinx/Latino/Latina.
- Participants who are the first to graduate from college in their family.
- Participants who have successfully earned a two-year associate degree from a California community college.

Your participation in this research will involve the following at an agreed date and time:

- Review of Informed Consent ~5 minutes through Zoom.
- 1:1 interview ~30 minutes through Zoom.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. Your interview and the responses you provide will be kept anonymous. I, as the researcher, will make every effort to preserve your confidentiality, including the following:

- Assigning pseudonym names for participants that will be used on all research notes and documents.
- Keeping notes, interview transcriptions, and any other identifying participant information in a locked file cabinet in the personal possession of the researcher.

Thank you in advance for your interest. If you have any questions about participating in this study, you may contact me.

Veronica Rios
Doctoral Candidate
xxxxx@acu.edu
Appendix B: Interview Protocol

**Background Information on Voluntary Participant**

Date: __________________________________________
Name: __________________________________________
Gender: _________________________________________
Race: __________________________________________
State in which you attended community college: ______
Degree(s) earned: __________________________________

**Review of Participation Rights to This Interview**

Initial Statement of Inquiry: Before the interview questions begin, I would like to inform you about my study:

The purpose of this instrumental case study is to describe experiences of successful Latinx first-generation college students (FGCS) that support persistence and retention toward graduation for Latinx FGCS at California community colleges. This study will be framed using Tinto’s (2006) retention theory. Successful Latinx FGCS are defined as those who have attained graduation from a California community college. Your participation is completely voluntary, and you have the right to end the questioning and your participation at any time. There are no risks in your participation in this study.

The following research questions will guide the interview for this study.

**Guided Protocol**

1. **What academic and nonacademic experiences prepared or supported success prior to entering college for Latinx FGCS?**
   
   a. What high school coursework helped to prepare you for college?
   
   b. What college preparatory exams, such as the SAT/ACT, helped to prepare you for college?
   
   c. What other academic programs or nonacademic experiences helped in preparing you for college success?
   
   d. What experiences prior to college did you have with family or friends that supported you or prepared you for college success?
2. What academic experiences supported student success at college?
   a. What courses in college helped you succeed?
   b. What programs helped support your success in college?
   c. What services did you acquire that helped you in college?

3. What social experiences supported student success while at college?
   a. What interactions did you have with classmates that supported you prior to and while in college?
   b. What interactions did you have with family that supported you prior to and while in college?
   c. What interactions did you have with outside of college friends that supported you prior to and while in college?

4. What faculty and staff experiences supported student success while at college?
   a. What did your interactions with faculty, professors, or instructors look like?
   b. What types of interactions with administration or staff supported you while in college?
   c. What experiences did you have inside and outside of class with faculty and staff?

5. What challenges were encountered and overcome?
   a. What challenges did you experience at college, and how did you overcome them?
   b. What difficulties did you experience outside of college?
   c. What challenges did you experience in your classes that you were able to persevere?
Appendix C: IRB Approval Letter

Abilene Christian University
Educating Students for Christian Service and Leadership Throughout the World

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120 Hardin Administration Building, ACU Box 29103, Abilene, Texas 79699-9103
129-674-2985

March 15, 2021

Veronica Rios
Department of Organizational Leadership
Abilene Christian University

Dear Veronica,

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board, I am pleased to inform you that your project titled "Experiences that Support Persistence and Retention of Latinx First Generation College Students at Community Colleges", (IRB# 21-024) is exempt from review under Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects.

If at any time the details of this project change, please resubmit to the IRB so the committee can determine whether or not the exempt status is still applicable.

I wish you well with your work.

Sincerely,

Megan Roth

Megan Roth, Ph.D.
Director of Research and Sponsored Programs