The number of Latino students who enroll in an institution of higher education rose almost 8 percent between 2000 and 2008, from 20 percent to 27.9 percent. While researchers and institutions are responding to the needs of this increasingly large student population, the attainment gap persists between Latino students who obtain a bachelor’s degree and Black, White, and Asian students. Latino students commonly have a language barrier, low income status, and poor academic preparation during their K-12 schooling, affecting their ability obtain a four-year degree. Recent research has focused on the ways in which Latino students overcome these barriers. The purpose of this study was to discover the success stories of Latino seniors and was framed with resilience theory and social capital theory.

This study focused on the success stories of academically high-performing Latino seniors at one large public institution. Using a qualitative narrative inquiry framework, students were asked questions through one semi-structured interview and a demographic survey. All students had at least a 3.0 GPA and were in fourth year of a four or five year academic program.

Key findings were that being independent, having a centering passion for academic work, biculturation/multiculturation, and giving back to the community contribute to resilience. Also, Latino students who hold leadership positions outside their community increase their social capital and that of the community in general. Recommendations for future practice include assisting Latino students to find an academic fit, encouraging cultural identity development, and creating opportunities to establish a personal service vision.
Successful Latino Seniors: Stories of Resilience and Social Capital

by
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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of North Carolina State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Science

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to Patria Elena, Guillermo, Beatriz, Paloma, and Yarilis, who inspired my interest in differences in student affairs practices across borders; the 2011 Higher Education Administration cohort, who have lived with incessant thesis discussions for the last several months; to my family and friends for supporting me through the process from start to finish; and to Dr. Bryant, for her patience, detailed eye, and kind but pointed feedback for each version and revision.
BIOGRAPHY

Beth Ashley Staples is currently completing her Master of Science degree for Higher Education Administration at North Carolina State University. She graduated with two business degrees from the University of Maryland in 2004, and then went on to work in human resources for two years before changing careers into the field of student affairs. After working for three years, she entered graduate school to complete her master’s degree. The summer before she entered the program, she spent three weeks in the Dominican Republic, testing the limits of her Spanish and solidifying an interest in Latino culture. Ashley goes by her middle name, and in addition to enjoying her work with college students, she spends time traveling when possible, reading interesting fiction, and taking and retouching photographs.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Tables ............................................................................................................ vii
Successful Latino seniors ......................................................................................... 1
Chapter 1: Introduction ............................................................................................. 2
  Barriers to Education .............................................................................................. 3
    Language. .............................................................................................................. 4
    Low income levels ............................................................................................. 4
    Academic preparation .......................................................................................... 5
Purpose and Research Question ................................................................................ 5
Scope of the Study .................................................................................................... 6
Methods .................................................................................................................... 7
Delimitations and Limitations .................................................................................. 8
Significance of the Study .......................................................................................... 9
Chapter 2: Literature Review .................................................................................... 9
  Picture of Latinos Entering Higher Education .................................................... 11
  Barriers to Higher Education .............................................................................. 13
    Information access ............................................................................................. 14
    Academic preparation ....................................................................................... 15
    Financial aid. ..................................................................................................... 16
  Challenges during college. ................................................................................... 18
Influences for Success .............................................................................................. 19
  External influences. ............................................................................................. 19
  Internal influences. .............................................................................................. 23
Conceptual Framework ............................................................................................. 25
  Social capital theory. ........................................................................................... 26
  Resilience ............................................................................................................. 28
Problem and Research Question ............................................................................. 29
Chapter 3: Methodology ......................................................................................... 31
Recognitio
81
Peer support ................................................................. 83
Family support ................................................................. 84
Counsel ........................................................................ 86
Summary ...................................................................... 88
Theme 4: Motivating Factors ................................................. 88
Family expectations .......................................................... 89
Giving back to the community .............................................. 91
Role modeling ................................................................ 92
Summary .................................................................... 94
Chapter 5: Discussion .......................................................... 95
Defining Success Holistically ................................................ 95
Review of the Findings ....................................................... 96
Participant Characteristics ................................................. 97
Presence of External Factors ............................................... 98
Presence of Internal Factors .............................................. 100
Theoretical Implications ................................................... 103
Social capital .................................................................. 103
Resilience ..................................................................... 106
Implications for Practice .................................................... 108
Limitations .................................................................... 110
Implications for Future Research ........................................ 111
Conclusion .................................................................... 112
References ..................................................................... 114
APPENDIX .................................................................... 123
Appendix A .................................................................... 124
Appendix B .................................................................... 125
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Theme Definitions and Sub-Themes ................................................................. 40
Table 2. Participant Summary......................................................................................... 41
Table 3. Traits and Abilities: Sub-Theme Definitions and Characteristics .................. 57
Table 4. Cultural Identity: Sub-Theme Definitions and Characteristics ......................... 67
Table 5. Encouragement: Sub-Theme Definitions and Characteristics ......................... 81
Table 6. Motivating Factors: Sub-Theme Definitions and Characteristics ..................... 89
Successful Latino seniors:
Stories of resilience and social capital

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Latino college students are a population of interest in higher education and have been increasingly represented in the field over the past 25 years. In 1986, the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU) was founded with 18 member institutions committed to the goal of Hispanic higher education success (HACU, 2010). Four years later, the Hispanic Outlook in Higher Education Magazine (H/O) published its first issue in 1990 (About us, 2009). Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs) were officially recognized under Title V of the Higher Education Act in 1992 (HACU, 2010) and in 1995 were appropriated federal funding. The American Association of Hispanic Higher Education (AAHHE) evolved from the Hispanic Caucus of the American Association of Higher Education, holding its first independent conference in 2006 but celebrating a 20 year history between the two organizations (Matthews, 2006). In 2002, the first issue of the Journal of Hispanic Higher Education was published, a new journal from Sage Publications that was geared to combat “the apparent paucity of significant scholarly and practical research on Hispanic higher education worldwide” (Lopez & Mulnix, 2002, p. 3). This journal is now published in association with AAHHE.

The increasing representation of Latinos in the literature of higher education reflects the increasing in the Latino population in the United States. More Latinos are present in schools and colleges, and recently it has become more likely that a Latino student will graduate high school and attend college (Campbell, 2011). The number of Latino students who complete college, however, continues to fall below the numbers for White, Asian, and
Black students. Campbell (2011) reports that “just 13 percent of Hispanics over the age of 25 hold a bachelor's degree or higher, compared with 53 percent of Asian-Americans, 33 percent of Whites and 19 percent of African-Americans” (p. 46). As educators, we have a responsibility to know what barriers Latino students encounter and to do our part to assist Latino students to succeed in college.

**Barriers to Education**

A significant population of Hispanic students is in the K-12 school system, and over 90% will have some expectation of going to college upon graduation (Hearn, 2001). This group of students will have the traditional challenges of minority students, but will also face additional obstacles to higher education based on access factors specific to cultural practices. Culturally, the family context of Latino students is more likely to involve generations of family members in their choice of college and field of study. Additionally, some Latino students are more likely to feel it important to live at home until marriage and less likely to consider on-campus housing (O’Connor, Hammack, & Scott, 2009). Latinos do not yet have a long history of college attendance in the United States, so typically a much higher percentage of Latino students are first-generation enrollees (Horwedel, 2008).

Many Latino “children speak English as a second language and share a culture that is distinctly different from mainstream America. Many recent Hispanic immigrants…live in conditions of poverty or near-poverty. The parents frequently have limited English and lack the academic skills needed to help their children with their schoolwork” (Bollin, 2007, 177-
Language, low income levels, and academic preparation are significant barriers to access that will affect a significant portion of the Latino population before college.

**Language.** The language barrier, exacerbated by the size of the Latino population, will continue to be an issue. Though three in four Hispanics are able to speak English, only one in five speak English in the home (Martin, 2007).

The language barrier between informants and the Latino community can impact both information channels and academic preparedness. The informants, such as guidance counselors, may not speak the same language as the parents or the student. If this is the case, needed information cannot be appropriately conveyed and may be lost. Early in school, this may include information about parent meetings, behavior issues, or compliments and recognition. If the barrier persists, the parents will not get information about college fairs or Free Application for Federal Student Aid applications, and then are unable to support the student through the college-going process.

**Low income levels.** Economic barriers to access may also be influenced along ethnic lines. Migrant workers who bring their families with them are less likely to see the value in schooling, and will encourage their children to find employment to help meet the family’s economic goals more quickly (Bohon, Macpherson, & Atiles, 2005). Though approximately 70 percent of the Hispanic population in the United States is comprised of citizens (Martin, 2007), that leaves a significant percentage without access to federal financial aid, private loans, or other means to assist with funding higher education. Many Hispanic families are
also working to send money to family in their country of origin, and are therefore may be less willing to take on debt or pay for college.

**Academic preparation.** Many Latino students often have access to the least advanced, funded, resourced, and staffed schools due to family income factors (Mellander, 2008). It is difficult for a school in that situation to handle the students on an individual basis, especially if the teachers that are staffing the school do not speak the Latino child’s language. However, even if the child is a good English speaker and can perform well in the classroom, language impacts academic preparation because much is done outside the classroom, in the form of homework or extracurricular reading. The parents may be unable to read the assigned work with the child, and therefore not be able to help complete it.

**Purpose and Research Question**

Despite the amassing literature pointing out both barriers to education and the factors that affect Latino students success when entering higher education, the attainment gap continues to persist at the college level. Gonzalez (1997) calls institutions of higher education to “recognize the role that the family plays when developing strategies to retain Latino college students” (p. 270), along with the other assets that prepare Latino students for higher education. Rosa (2009) encourages researchers “to continue to study success stories for this population of students. An emphasis on success can combat all the negative narratives and prevent self-fulfilling prophecies for Latino students” (p. 153).

While examining the stories of Latino students as high school seniors or college first-year students has allowed us to explore the factors in college attainment (e.g. O’Connor et
al., 2010), this study examines these factors from the perspective of the successfully persistent Latino student. College enrollment numbers continue to increase, but “because Latinos have higher attrition rates than do Whites and Asian Americans, the Latino share of degrees has continued to be considerably lower than their share of enrollment” (Miller & Garcia, 2004, p. 193). We need to examine the stories of persistent students in order to see what they identify as important along their path of success. If there are commonalities among the way Latino students come to feel supported in their educational quest, it will be possible to make recommendations for how an institution can foster retention and completion for Latino students.

Two theoretical frameworks used to examine student success in this study are social capital theory and resilience theory. Social capital is the resources that a person has access to based on their network of connections, including parents, teachers, counselors, and peers (Coleman, 1988). Using this theory, a successful Latino student will show evidence of accessing a significant amount of social capital in order to be successful in their college journey. Resilience theory is the idea that students who have high risk of failure based on their circumstances are able to overcome the risk and be successful due to the presence of protective factors (Garmezy, 1991). Protective factors for Latino students could include financial stability, being academically prepared, having good mentors, and being comfortable with a bicultural identity. With these in mind, the primary research question is:

What are the stories of successful Latino college seniors?

Scope of the Study
The scope of this study included Latino undergraduates enrolled at Southeast State University pursuing their first Bachelor’s degree in any field. Southeast State is a land-grant research university with a focus on science, technology, engineering, and math. Though it is a predominantly white institution it enrolls the third highest number of Latino students in the state’s 16-college system.

For the purpose of this study, “success” was defined as a fourth-year student in either a four- or five-year academic program with a cumulative grade point average of 3.0 or higher. Latino students who met the criteria were recruited through the Office of Multicultural Student Affairs and campus groups that cater specifically to the Latino population on campus. Students were asked to fill out a short demographic survey that included details about their Latino heritage as well as other demographic information. This data was used in order to convenience sample (Patton, 2002) the Latino population for five to seven study participants. As the participant pool evolved, maximum variation was obtained in that there are male and female participants, fourth and fifth year participants, and a variety of ethnic backgrounds within the sample.

Methods

This study examined the narrative accounts of the participants. Narratives were gathered through one semi-structured interview (Creswell, 2009) with each participant that touched on the student’s journey to the university, the events that shaped his or her college career, and an exploration of the student’s success. The interviews were audio recorded, with permission from the participants, and transcribed removing identifying data. Additionally,
field notes were taken after the interviews, and the iterative process of qualitative research was documented in a journal of researcher reactions, interpretations, and general discussion. Each individual transcript was analyzed thematically as described by Reissman (2008) to look for dominant themes, and then the themes were compared for overarching similarities and/or dissimilarities. Each participant was sent his or her transcript, participant profile, a summary of the themes, and an abbreviated version of the findings for member checking purposes. The findings were abbreviated to protect the identities of the study participants, as the Latino community at this campus is closely associated and the uniqueness of each story may have resulted in a breach of confidentiality.

**Delimitations and Limitations**

One delimitation of this study is the small number of participants, five. This number is limited due to researcher resources, and while it provided a reasonable sample for the narrative study, the results are not generalizable to the entire population of Latino college students. Another delimitation is the institutional context from which participants were drawn: a single land-grant research university that is a predominantly white institution. A third delimitation is the definition of success for this study, as utilizing time to degree completion and grade point average as initial limiting factors may have disregarded other forms of success that are valuable in the student development process.

A key limitation of the study was utilizing narrative inquiry and relying on the research participants to be able to identify factors that they perceived led to their status success. It is possible that the students did not have the capacity for self-examination
required to drill down to specific examples or stories that reveal their journey to success, leading them to create stories that answer the questions. The researcher utilized questioning techniques that ask for specific examples and had additional questions prepared for each interview, but ultimately the ability to choose appropriate experiences for analysis rested with the student research participant. Another limitation was the lack of easy access to the participant pool; because the qualifying population on campus is small and the definition of success is narrowly drawn, it was difficult to find enough participants without significant access to their contact information.

**Significance of the Study**

This study shows that the concepts of social capital and resilience hold true at this particular university. First, by identifying what the stories of the students revealed about the characteristics that induced success, one can see which programs from various university departments are actively engaging the Latino population and where there are areas of improvement. Second, this information assists the university in the admissions process by showing which high school and on-campus information channels are proffering the most social capital to Latino students. Third, this study asked the interview participants to define success in their own words, highlighting new areas for study that were excluded initially due to the narrowly drawn definition of success.

**Chapter 2: Literature Review**

Latinos have spoken – education is important. “Nearly nine-in-ten (88%) Hispanics agree that a college degree is important for getting ahead in life, greater than the share (74%)}
of the general public that says the same” (Lopez, 2009, p. 3). However, the expectations of Latinos are low, with just under half of those who feel education is important for success expecting to receive a bachelor’s degree (Lopez, 2009). The literature concerning the Latino population and its relationship to higher education is quickly expanding, but the question is staying the same: how do we close the attainment gap between Latino students and the general population? The research consistently begins with numbers, primarily the following four statistics: the number of Latino people in the United States, the immigration and birth rates leading to rapid population increase, the relative youth of this population, and the comparatively low achievement numbers on standardized testing (Martin, 2007; Miller & García, 2004; U.S Census Bureau, 2006; Zalaquett, 2006). Across the board, it is agreed “that expanding the number of Latinos who successfully pursue associate, bachelor’s, graduate, and professional degrees is one of the most important and complex challenges for American colleges and universities” (Miller & García, 2004, p. 189). Institutions are accepting the challenge, changing services, recruiting practices, and hiring motives, but the myriad parts of the Latino situation prove difficult overcome.

Moving into the following description of the Latino or Hispanic population in the United States, please note that the terms Latino and Hispanic are used interchangeably. Within my work, I try to use the word Latino as it tends to be regarded more broadly than the word Hispanic; for example, it may include Brazilians and Portuguese where the traditional definition of Hispanic does not (Passel & Taylor, 2009). However, as the large majority of the scholarly literature uses both terms, I will do so as well. The Pew Hispanic Research
Center noted that the U.S. government has two approaches, one for keeping track of how many Hispanics are being served by a given institution and the second used by the U.S. Census Bureau to determine a count of the Latino population. The first approach “defines a Hispanic or Latino as a member of an ethnic group that traces its roots to 20 Spanish-speaking nations from Latin America and Spain itself (but not Portugal or Portuguese-speaking Brazil). The other approach is much simpler. Who’s Hispanic? Anyone who says they are. And nobody who says they aren't” (Passel & Taylor, 2009, p. 1). The Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU) takes a broad approach similar to the second option, representing institutions “nearly 450 colleges and universities committed to Hispanic higher education success in the U.S., Puerto Rico, Latin America, Spain and Portugal” (HACU, 2010). Additionally, Hispanic or Latino are not considered race designations, but one of ethnicity, and so a person may identify as white and Hispanic, or black and Latino. The data that follows is primarily based on the U.S. census data, and therefore also on the self-reporting definition of Hispanic or Latino.

**Picture of Latinos Entering Higher Education**

In 2008, 15.4 percent of the United States population was Latino, constituting the largest minority (Blacks/African Americans were 12.1 percent) and demonstrating a growth rate of 33 percent between 2000 and 2008 (Pew Research Center, 2010). According to the projections of the U.S. Census Bureau (2008), the Latino population will continue to grow to over 100 million and approximately 25 percent of the United States population by 2050. The 24.3 percent growth rate of the Hispanic population between 2000 and 2006 was triple the
growth rate of the general population (6.1 percent) during those same years (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008).

The Latino population was also the youngest, with a median age of 27 compared to the White median age of 41, Black of 32, and Asian of 36. Approximately one in three Latinos is under the age of 18, compared with one in five Whites (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). Additionally, when age is broken down into native- and foreign-born Latinos, the median age of the native-born population is just 17 years old, while the foreign-born age is 37 (Pew Research Center, 2010). This finding may account for the gap in Hispanic college competition rates because the population is so young. Further, it provides incentive to address access issues and remove barriers for this growing college age population. A change in the youth population (16-25 years) of Latinos in the United States has occurred twice since the 1970s, with the foreign-born population spiking from one-third to one-half of youths, and then dropping again as the native-born children of the earlier immigrants entered young adulthood (Fry, 2009).

In terms of education, while there is consistent growth in the numbers of Latinos enrolled and participating at all levels, an attainment gap still persists. In 2008, 23.5 percent of Latinos over 25 years old had only completed some schooling up to the 9th grade, compared to 9 percent within every other racial category (Pew Research Center, 2008). The number of high school graduates for that same population was around 26 percent, only 2 percent behind the completion rate for the entire population. However, only 12.9 percent of
the Latino population obtains a bachelor’s degree, compared to 27.7 percent of the overall United States population – a huge attainment gap.

**Barriers to Higher Education**

Both quantitative and qualitative research has identified barriers that Latino students must overcome to obtain a college degree. The first is graduating high school – 39 percent of Hispanic people are not high school graduates, compared to the 15 percent non-graduation rate for the U.S. population overall (Pew Hispanic Center, 2010). The problem of access generally involves three parts: information, preparation, and funding (Baum, 2001). In order to make the decision to attend a college or university, the student first has to receive and understand the information about the purposes and goals of higher education from meaningful sources, such as family, school, or community members (Venezia, Kirst, & Antonio, 2003). The Bridge Project, a Stanford study that looked at barriers to college for Latinos in six states, determined that the student then has to be able to demonstrate an ability to learn at the collegiate level through test scores, recommendations, and past performance depending on the colleges he or she attempting to attend (Venezia, Kirst, and Antonio, 2001). Finally, the student must determine what combination of resources will be used to fund their education (Volkwein et al., 1998).

The information that follows reflects the aggregate experience of the Latino population, but it is important to note that the diversity of the Latino experience is equal to the diversity of the Latino population. One particular distinction to keep in mind is that the aggregate reflects the experiences of both foreign-born and native-born populations, which
are often reported as a whole. An example of how this can skew the data is the percentage -
23.5 percent - of Hispanics who did not complete a ninth grade education (Pew Hispanic
Center, 2010). That number represents the average between foreign-born Hispanic
attainment (34.4 percent) and native-born attainment (8.9 percent). In terms of numbers, the
broader data set is reflective of the trends for both populations. For data presented from
qualitative studies, a similar principle applies - there is a trend within the population that is
reflected by the data, but not every Latino person will have had an experience with English
as a second language, immigration issues, or under-resourced school environments. It would
be helpful for future research to focus on the populations separately in order to get a clearer
sense of the particular needs of each group. Generally, however, access to higher education
is a documented and persistent problem for the Latino population.

**Information access.** For three-fourths of Latinos, the primary language spoken at
home is not English (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). Often, children and youths speak English
well, but the parents do not speak it well if at all, resulting in a reluctance to engage with the
school environment due to language barriers (Mellander, 2008). Additionally, materials
about the process of applying to colleges are not routinely conveyed in Spanish to the parents
of qualified students (Marisco & Getch, 2009). Mellander (2008) states that “vast numbers
of Latinos/ Hispanics are very uninformed, and even misinformed, about the advantages of
college, the costs involved, and the financial aid opportunities that exist” (p. 1) according to a
California-based study of Latino youth.
O’Connor, Hammack, and Scott (2010) indicate that “less access to desirable social capital may result in a lack of adequate information about higher education finances, and that, in turn, may result in college-qualified Hispanic high school graduates applying to community colleges instead of 4-year schools” (p. 215). Students who attend community college first as opposed to a 4-year institution are more likely to not complete their degree within 6 years, if at all. Brown, Santiago, and Lopez (2003) point out that the process of applying to college is often daunting to a first-generation family; not only do they need to know to take the SAT, apply for financial aid, and then apply to college, they need to know how to accomplish all of those tasks given the deadlines involved.

Academic preparation. Becoming academically prepared for college may be challenging for the Latino population for numerous reasons. Overall, the schools that they attend are over-populated and under-resourced (Mellander, 2008), resulting in a poor learning environment for all students. Latino students are overrepresented in these types of schools because of other factors (SES, immigration patterns, etc.) that affect their families. Common language often is a barrier for both students and parents. Latino children are often categorized as “English learning” students and enrolled in classes that are not challenging or they are asked to learn in a language they do not understand (Pompa, 2000), though in other instances the students are classified as “Spanish speaking” when they speak English at home most of the time (Mellander, 2008). Latino parents are not as involved with the school as other parents because of the language barrier (Mellander, 2008), causing their children to
miss out on the information provided to parents through forums such as the PTA or volunteering in the classroom.

**Financial aid.** As with all college-bound students, Latino students expect to utilize some combination of scholarships, grants, and loans to subsidize their education. Volkwein et al. (1998) discuss the college investment decision of students in terms of reduced costs. By receiving subsidies like grants or scholarships in any form, the direct costs of attending college are lowered. If a student is also employed while attending school, the indirect costs of foregone earnings are lowered. The Latino student is 1.7 times more likely to be below the poverty level than the average U.S. citizen (Martin, 2007) and also has a greater amount of cultural capital associated with employment than with education. “Through working, instead of attending school, Latinos can also more easily obtain desired material goods that raise them above their immigrant background. Furthermore, many males work at an early age out of necessity to support their families” (Bohon, Macpherson, & Atiles, 2005, p. 54).

Choosing employment over education in high school may prevent preparation for college at all, but if the high school degree is obtained and seen as more than adequate, the notion of paying money for an intangible education will affect the student’s college decision making.

The subsidies such as grants, loans, and scholarships are presented to students in combinations based on a number of factors, including economic status, academic preparedness, racial/ethnic identification, and ability to navigate application processes. Students from lower-income families are more sensitive to the differences in aid packages, and are more responsive to grants than loans when considering the financial burden of
attending college (Hearn & Holdsworth, 2004, p. 52). Income is also a factor in persistence, as evidenced in the Baum and Ma (2007) report where “differences in degree completion rates by income were largest for Hispanic students, among whom 74 percent of those from families with incomes of at least $70,000 completed a bachelor’s degree, compared to 48 percent of those from families with lower incomes” (p. 37). The economic status of the potential borrowers is an important factor that shapes decisions to accept loans and ability to repay loans after college (Volkwein et al., 1998).

As the financial aid spectrum has shifted towards offering primarily loans, Perna (2008) cautions that a low-income student’s ability to repay loans should take income levels but also academic preparation into account. She contends that the student’s ability to repay a college loan is dependent on obtaining the college degree, thus earning the increased income that comes with that degree. However, if a student chooses to attend college for one year and then drops out due to being unprepared for the coursework, then the degree is not earned, there is no additional income, and the former student is in debt with no additional skills or qualifications to repay the loan. Cook and King (2007) reports that “paying the average posted price for tuition, fees, and on-campus room and board at a public four-year college or university now requires a much larger share of income for families in the lowest quintile. In 1973–74, these prices represented 43 percent of annual income; by 2005–06, that proportion had grown to 82 percent—more than three-fourths of annual income” (p. 8). The Pell grants that are available to supplement the cost of education currently leaves 55 percent of the cost to be absorbed by the family, because the amount available per grant has remained steady.
since 1973-74, while the price of higher education has climbed dramatically (Cook & King, 2007). This may come back to the difficulty in receiving good information about financing college, because if the parents of a Latino student had known to save over time to send their student to college, they may have been better prepared to deal with the financial reality of higher education (O’Connor, Hammack, & Scott, 2010). Once Latino students gain access to college, they continue to face the challenges of obtaining information, maintaining their levels of academic achievement, and paying for their education.

**Challenges during college.** Latino students, despite successfully navigating through the barriers of information, finances, and academics to enroll in higher education, face significant levels of stress once they arrive on campus. Castellanos and Jones (2003) reported that in addition to academic stress, Latinos additionally cope with minority status, campus climate, finding role models, financing, and different value systems. Each of these additional stressors affects the student’s ability to be successful academically. “Research indicates that, on average, Hispanic students achieve at somewhat lower levels in college, as measured by GPA, than their White and Asian American counterparts, even when they have apparently similar levels of preparation, such as similar SAT scores and similar high school grades” (Miller, 2005, p. 253). Hurtado, Carter, and Spuler (1996) identified campus climate as a primary stressor; not overt acts of discrimination, but a more subtle but pervasive environment of hostility. “Even the most talented Latinos are likely to have difficulty adjusting if they perceive a climate where majority students think all minorities are special admits, Hispanics feel like they do not ‘fit in,’ groups lack good communication, there is
group conflict, and there is a lack of trust between minority students and the administration” (Hurdato, Carter, & Spuler, 1996, p. 152).

**Influences for Success**

More recently, research has begun to reflect the stories of students who have successfully navigated the higher education system and attained their bachelor’s or graduate degrees. The majority of the studies that discuss the emerging themes and factors for success are qualitative in nature. This is most likely due to the comparatively small number of students who do persist to the junior or senior class and are available to be sampled, making quantitative analysis more difficult for this population (Miller & Garcia, 2004). Both external and internal influences have an effect on a student’s success.

**External influences.** Studies have been conducted to determine what influences Latino students after they enroll in college. Receiving support from family members (Linares, 2008; Rosa, 2009; Zalaquett, 2006) is mentioned repeatedly. Having the ability to access sufficient financial means throughout college (Gonzalez, 1997; Rosa, 2009) influences Latino persistence. Also, a supportive on-campus environment, including academic personnel (Gonzalez, 1997; Rosa, 2009; Zalaquett, 2006), the institution (Linares, 2008), and the living environment (Gonzalez, 1997; Zalaquett, 2006), is identified as a factor in Latino success.

**Family.** The success factor indicated in almost every work concerning Latino students is family or *familismo*, particularly with regard to financial support (Gonzalez, 1997; Jodry, Robles-Pina, & Nichter, 2005; Rosa, 2009; Zalaquett, 2006). Zalaquett’s (2006)
research “reported that the strong family support helped them [Latinos] succeed in high school and pursue a college education” (p. 40) across the boundaries of foreign- or native-born status as well as first- or second- generation college history. Rosa’s (2009) study indicated that the support of the student’s grandparents positively impacted their success and attainment, broadening the importance of family within the literature from the nuclear to the extended family. The definition of “family” continues to be expanded to include sisters, brothers, and spouses in addition to parents and senior extended family (Linares, 2008). Linares (2008) recorded the following varied responses referring to family: “family support,” “high family expectations,” “family values,” and “emotional support from family” (p. 88), showing that the involvement or influence of family can be direct or indirect. The expanding definition also provides an avenue for children or younger siblings to be considered as a source of support, not in a more traditional sense because their support does not carry financial weight, but for emotional support and the drive to succeed to improve the children’s future success (Rosa, 2009). Gonzalez (1997) puts it simply: “The family is an important factor in Latino persistence” (p. 149).

**Financial support.** During the process of accessing a college education, financial support can mean either actual monetary support from the family or that the student or family understand the financial aid options available well enough to move forward with the process of applying to college (Perna & Titus, 2005). Either way, the family and finances are closely tied together. The concept of affordability has been shown to affect the persistence of students through college (St. John, 2001). For example, the Latino students studied by
Zalaquett (2006) all had access to a scholarship that would cover college expenses, and 100 percent of those students identified the scholarship as a reason that college was accessible to them. Accessing college is often ruled out by Hispanic students because the opportunity cost that they forfeit by going to school instead of working is too high (Mellander, 2008).

Experiencing financial stress during college has been linked to high rates of attrition for Latino students (Castellanos & Jones, 2003). Therefore, assisting Latinos with the burden of paying for college may encourage them to continue towards a degree. A student faced with financial stress may cope by stopping out or cutting to part-time status – both circumstances which are considered risk factors for drop out (McGlynn, 2004).

Organizations like the Hispanic Scholarship Fund (HSF) recognize that financial security leads to completion; HSF reports that “scholars supported by HSF worked less than most students, enabling them to focus more on their academic tasks…. Financial hardship is cited as the principal reason many Latinos discontinue their education, according to numerous studies. Researchers concluded that HSF support diminished the fiscal pressures students faced” (hsf.net, 2010). A recent study by O’Connor, Hammack, and Scott (2010) showed statistically how the factors of financial knowledge and family were integrated for Hispanic students. They found that “with every additional action Hispanic parents take, they close more of the gap with Whites. This is very strong and significant evidence of the importance of knowledge about financial aid and college finances in directing students to 4-year schools” (p. 214). Perna and Titus (2003) found that key actions include parent-initiated discussions with the student regarding academics, parent-initiated contact with the school
including volunteering and academic discussions, and parent contact with the parents of their student’s peer group.

**Institutional support.** In recent literature, a major topic of institutional support concerns Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs), which are institutions permitted access to additional funding under Title V if 25 percent or more of their enrolled population is Hispanic and 50 percent of that population is low-income. It is important to note that some researchers, including the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), use the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU) definition of HSI, which is that 25 percent of the enrollees are Hispanic but does not include that 50 percent of the population must be low-income (HACU, 2010). When conducting research, they are better able to capture data about schools that are graduating the majority of Hispanic students (Stearns, Wantabe & Snyder, 2002). According to the HACU (2010) membership list, there are 233 recognized Hispanic-serving institutions. The most recent report from NCES showed that in the decade from 1990 to 1999, the Hispanic enrollment proportion at HSIs grew to 42 percent, making Hispanic students the majority population at those institutions (Stearns & Wantabe, 2002). “While most HSIs were not created explicitly to serve Latinos (except in Puerto Rico), they are located in communities that have high concentrations of Latino students” (Brown, Santiago, & Lopez, 2003, p. 44). Rosa (2009) discussed the advantages presented to the Latino students from his study by living in a Latino-majority city. Other studies have concerned programs that are geared toward Latino students who are now successful, and in those studies the finding is that the community created by that program is a factor in success
In either case, a supportive reference group in proximity to the student has been a factor for success.

The other recurring institutional factor is the involvement of the student with faculty members. Linares (2008) found that “among the institutional resources associated with their success, students most frequently named professors as a supportive institutional resource” (p. 89). Gonzalez (1997) noted that each of his 12 participants reported faculty interaction as “a determining force in their persistence and success” (p. 217), although his discussion included that negative interactions would affect the student’s success in a negative manner. Kuh et al. (2006) links time spent with faculty outside the classroom to gains in interpersonal competence for all students, leading to greater satisfaction with the college environment and therefore to student retention. By contrast, in some cases focused on Latino students, the benefits that are found from involvement with faculty were experienced through students’ interactions with peers or administrative staff (Gonzalez, 1997; Rosa, 2009). In either case, the theory that success is encouraged by having an established network is upheld.

Internal influences. In addition to external factors, researchers have also identified internal characteristics that accompany Latino persistence. The first significant internal influence is academic preparation, because although being academically prepared may depend on external factors before college it is exhibited during college as an internal strength. The second internal influence I have termed “readiness” because it is a combination of several characteristics that reflect the student’s ability to move forward in the college environment.
**Academic preparation.** Linares (2008), Rosa (2009), and Zalaquett (2006) all reported academic preparation as a factor in success, undergirding the abilities of the students. Kuh (2006) summarized that “those students who are best prepared coming out of high school are best positioned to do well in college, regardless of who they are, how much money they have, or where they go” (p. 19). While access to the same level of secondary education is an ongoing issue for Latino students, those who have the opportunity to take four years of English, math, and science have an 87 percent college graduation rate (Kuh, 2006). Rodriguez et al. (2000) noted that “Latinas who attend schools in integrated or middle-class school districts are able to measure their success against those of other high achievers, while benefiting from high teacher expectations” (p. 520); it can be inferred that this is true for Latino males as well. Students who perform well in high school, as measured by GPA or SAT scores, regularly perform well in college (Miller, 2005). Latino students’ challenges to being academically prepared for higher education are primarily due to access, not ability.

**Readiness.** Resilience can be summarized as including personal or external protective factors such as self esteem, motivation, school counselors, or community mentors that contribute to the success of the student (Linares, 2008, p. 28). Ten years ago, Hernandez (2000) found that Latino college seniors who are successful demonstrated resilience, positive attitudes, and personal drives. In more recent studies, Linares (2008) found that successful undergraduate students primarily attributed their success to resilience. Zalaquett (2006)
determined that personal drives such as responsibility toward others and feeling accomplished were supporting factors for persistence.

Some personal protective factors correlated with Latino students in the literature are a desire to succeed (Linares, 2008), an “I can do it” attitude (Rosa, 2009), responsibility, a sense of accomplishment (Zalaquett, 2006), and personal drives (Hernandez, 2000). Morales (2008) found that resilience factors persisted in four Dominican Americans over a ten year period, contributing to the success of the students studied well beyond their attainment of a bachelor’s degree. Generally, students who have been successful and are Latino have developed an internal stick-to-it-ness, or gumption, that is the result of a combination of factors and allows them to persist through to their goal of graduation.

**Conceptual Framework**

The literature on the topic of Latino student success points to a balance of an external support network and an internal motivation system that carries the student through to degree completion. Social capital theory concerns the networks that a person deals with to receive information, understand norms, and establish societal trust (O’Connor, Hammack, & Scott, 2010; Perna & Titus, 2005), and will be used within this study to understand the external support network that a Latino student has access to throughout college. Resilience theory is based on Garmezy’s (1991) work in the psychosocial field, but has been more recently used to concentrate on academic resilience where a student achieves a high level of education despite significant risk factors associated with poor academic performance (Morales, 2008). Academic resilience has been consistently associated with underrepresented populations
achieving academically, and will provide the framework for understanding Latino students’ internal motivations for success. For a Latino student, the combination of social capital and resilience has been shown to impact success in college.

**Social capital theory.** Social capital is the sum of resources that a person is able to harness based on their network of connections (Bourdieu, 1986). The amount of social capital possessed is dependent on the size of the network and the ability of the person to use the collective to generate capital of another type: physical, cultural, or human (Coleman, 1988). Physical, or economic, capital is tangible and able to be readily exchanged for a good or service (Coleman, 1988); a scholarship is an example of physical capital in the student setting. Cultural capital is a set of attributes, such as language, mannerisms, and customs, acquired from the home environment (Bourdieu, 1986). Human capital is the skills and abilities possessed by a person, and one can acquire more of this type of capital by adding skills or abilities to one’s repertoire (Coleman, 1988).

A student’s ability to access social capital is impacted by race or ethnicity, gender, and amounts of human, cultural, and economic capital (Perna & Titus, 2005). Generally, a student will tend to form the strongest ties to the group that is most like them, and therefore that group’s social capital is that to which the student has access. Often, this group has the most pertinent information to share, but in the case of Latino students “the same information channels that may be very helpful for an immigrant community in some instances (how to get around in the new country, etc.) may turn out to be the opposite in the instance of higher education” (O’Connor, Hammack, & Scott, 2010, p. 197).
Lin (2001) points out that though strong ties within a social network will preserve the information available in that network, individuals will seek out relationships with “better” social networks in order to gain resources. Perna and Titus (2005) discuss that a student who forms a loose tie to the most natural sources of social capital, such as a parent or peer group, may gain access to different information from another social network, with the loose tie forming a “bridge” that would not have otherwise been available. O’Connor, Hammack, and Scott (2010) additionally discuss the concept of “unsocial” capital which prevents students from gaining information effectively and does not promote upward social mobility.

Actions by parents such as encouraging the student’s academic achievement, making contacts with the schools, speaking with other students’ parents, and bringing information from the surrounding community into the home will increase the social capital available to the student (Coleman, 1986). For Latina students, it is particularly important that the mother be involved in her education (Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996). Perna and Titus (2005) found that, regardless of other types of capital, the social capital obtained by students who go to high schools where parent contact is primarily about academics is correlated to their enrollment at an institution of higher education.

Latino students who are successfully completing their degrees have negotiated a substantial amount of social capital either through strong or loose ties to their native networks. Research suggests that the successful student’s capital will have increased either with the parent or with the student, and that gain will be reflected in the student’s story.
Resilience. In 1991, Garmezy introduced the concept of “resilience” as it relates to disadvantaged or impoverished children. He noted that intergenerational continuity is not a given, meaning that a child who grows up in poverty is not per force going to live in poverty, or that any other disadvantage is also not hereditary. Garmezy (1991) points out “that many children and adults do overcome life’s difficulties…. [and] it is critical to identify those ‘protective’ factors that seemingly enable individuals to circumvent life stressors” (p. 421). Potential protective factors are temperament, family support, and external support with community ties (Garmezy, 1991).

In 1997, Gonzalez and Padilla found that Mexican American high school students revealed that the sense of belonging to the school and supportive environments can have a positive effect on academic achievement. The study compared high-achieving students to low-achieving students in order to determine what factors, given the same or similar high school setting, determine a student’s academic resilience – ability to attain high academic standards in the presence of significant risk factors (Gonzalez & Padilla, 1997). “Researching and understanding academic resilience has as its primary mission the desire to learn about and thus spread resilience to underachieving groups” (Morales, 2008). Resilience is fostered by stakeholders in the student’s life believing in the capability of the student, their ability to exercise control and make choices (Nadge, 2005). “Resilience offers a new perspective from which to view academic achievement… [and] attempts to identify the factors that account for success” (Gonzalez & Padilla, 1997, p. 315). Nadge (2005) describes characteristics of resilient students as having a sense of self-esteem or efficacy, being
actively able to handle obstacles or difficulty, seeing difficult problems as having workable outcomes, being persistent, and being able to develop flexible problem solving strategies.

Recently, more research has been completed documenting the resilience of specific Latino populations. Contreras (2009) discusses the resilience of many undocumented students:

The undocumented students interviewed had one word in common that described them—ganas, which, when translated, means “the will or determination to achieve.” One example of ganas was the work ethic that many respondents discussed: the determination to earn money for school and to help with family expenses. These students worked tirelessly in restaurants, cleaning offices, and doing construction work to pursue their dream of earning a college degree (p. 625).

In an ethnographic study of Dominican students who were determined resilient ten years earlier, Morales (2008) finds that resilience is persistent. Of the four students who participated, three had earned graduate degrees despite continued obstacles, placing them in the top four percent of the Latino population in terms of education (p. 243).

Generally, academic resilience is used as a framework when the achievement outcome is very unlikely to be accomplished given the student’s risk factors (Morales, 2008). In this study, the concepts of academic and psychosocial resilience, specifically protective factors that allow individuals to excel despite risk, will be used to make meaning of the internal motivational processes of successful Latino students.

**Problem and Research Question**
College degree attainment continues to be an issue for Latino students, who lag 6 percent behind Blacks, 20 percent behind Whites, and 40 percent behind Asian Americans who receive a degree by the age of 25 (Campbell, 2011). Gonzalez (1997) asks researchers to remember the role of family amongst other protective factors, and Rosa (2009) encourages that future studies emphasize stories of success instead of failure. Venezia, Kirst, and Antonio (2003) recognize that access to college is only half the battle, saying, “it is time to expand policy attention to emphasize not just access to college, but also access to success in college…. so that students are clear about what it takes to succeed in college, including community college” (46).

In general, looking at student success is important because the percentage of college graduates in the United States has increased only slightly since 1980, though attendance numbers have climbed considerably (Venezia, Kirst, & Antonio, 2003). Studies such as O’Connor et al. (2010) have allowed us to study Latino students as high school seniors or first-year college students, but more research is needed concerning Latino student persistence. This study examined the factors that contributed to the success of college students who have been both persistent and highly successful based on time to completion and GPA. A focus on student success is important for Latino students because there is more attrition between enrollment and graduation for that population than for White or Asian American students (Miller & Garcia, 2004). In light of this, the primary research question of this study is:

What are the stories of successful Latino college seniors?
Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter focuses on the methodology that will be used to explore the stories of successful Latino seniors. The main areas related to the design of the study include the qualitative method of narrative inquiry, participant selection and screening, the process of collecting narratives as data, and the data analysis method. The purpose of the study is to examine the lived experiences of the participants, and to learn from their stories what the most important factors were in their higher education journey. The research question guiding this study is: What are the stories of successful Latino college seniors?

Narrative Inquiry

Qualitative research is often defined as inquiry that primarily uses words as data and that “aims at understanding the meaning of human action” (Schwandt, 2007, p. 248). Creswell (2009) discusses that qualitative research holds to an inductive style that focuses on exploring or understanding the meaning and complexity that individuals or groups ascribe to a particular problem. Qualitative “researchers begin to question the ability of numbers, particularly numbers collected in standardized ways, to reveal deep understandings about human interaction” (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 16).

Narrative inquiry is a particular form of qualitative research that focuses on the stories that research participants use to describe their lived experiences and assumes that the story itself is a foundational account of the human experience (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). Narrative research centers on the role of the story in everyday life, revealing truths about human experience as perceived by the individual (Reissman, 2008). In the narrative
paradigm, there is an emphasis on thick description that encompasses “literal description of the entity being evaluated, the circumstances under which it is used, the characteristics of the people involved in it, [and] the nature of the community in which it is located” (Lincoln & Guba, 1982, p. 119). Lincoln and Guba (1981) discuss the pertinence of interpreting the data in light of the demographics, descriptors, community contexts, and value-systems of the research participants as a part of the thick description process. Because narrative methods are based on interaction between the researcher and the researched, it is imperative to “recognize that the researcher and the researched in a particular study are in relationship with each other and that both parties will learn and change in the encounter” (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 9).

The literature available on the higher education of Latino students continues to expand, but most researchers agree that the issues concerning this population are complex. Some researchers have examined the stories of Latino students, which have revealed significant and complex barriers to educational attainment (Bergerson, 2007; Hall & Rowan, 2001; Bohon, Macpherson, & Atiles, 2005). Recently, researchers have begun looking for supporting or success factors as well; Zalaquett (2006) used a qualitative study to identify the following eight success factors: family, education, responsibility toward others, sense of accomplishment, friendship, scholarships, community support, and school personnel.

Generally, research studies tend to focus on high school or first-year students, their families, or students who have not managed to complete their degree. Little research exists concerning Latino students who have performed above average compared to all students and
are on track to graduate before within six years of beginning college. Miller and Garcia (2004) discuss that due to the barriers present for retention, the number of junior and senior Latino students in any given major across a university may be very small, making it difficult to target this population programmatically. By that same logic, it would be difficult to pursue the population with a broad research effort, pointing to the qualitative paradigm as the logical research tool. Due to the complexity of the context surrounding and affecting each student’s educational journey, the thick, descriptive stories and interpretive data analysis that serve as the basis of narrative inquiry are key to the selection of this methodology as the tool for unpacking the successful Latino college senior experience.

**Participant Selection**

Five undergraduate students at Southeast State University, a large, public, land-grant institution, were recruited to participate in the study. Subjects were initially recruited via snowball and convenience sampling (Patton, 2002) by posting flyers around campus in areas likely to have access to Latino seniors and by requesting emails through the campus Office of Multicultural Affairs (see Appendix A). As recruitment continued, a multiple-purposive technique that included maximum variation sampling in addition to sequential sampling was utilized (Teddlie & Yu, 2007). Prospective participants were asked to complete a brief demographic survey that included their specific Latino heritage, their family history with college attendance, their current GPA, expected graduation date, and their year in college (see Appendix B). Participants were selected based on the following minimum criteria:
undergraduate status, currently in their fourth year of school with plans to graduate in May 2011 or May 2012, and a cumulative GPA of 3.0 or higher.

**Data Collection**

My primary method of data collection was one semi-structured interview with each participant. As participants agreed to take part in the study, I scheduled a 1-1.5 hour interview with each student. Participants were asked to complete the demographic survey and emailed the informed consent form in advance of the interviews so that they were aware of the general content of the interviews, the purpose of the study, and how the information would be used within the research.

At the beginning of the each interview, participants were thanked for their involvement, told about the study and the nature of the interviews, informed of their rights as a research participant, asked to read and sign the consent form, and asked for their permission to record the interview. Each interview focused on the story of the student, specifically how he/she recounted coming to the point of graduation from college. The interview began with questions about their choice to attend State University, then moved into what activities and priorities they have had during their college experience. The next section focused on the shaping factors of their higher education journey, generally beginning in high school and concluding at the time of the interview. Students were asked to identify important events, key people, significant challenges, and then give an overall impression of their college experience. The last section focused on success; the participant’s definition of success, their experiences with doubt or challenge, and stories of potent moments of success.
There was no imposed time restriction on the interview sessions, though it was mentioned that the interviews were expected to take about an hour. The interview guide assisted the participants to add breadth and depth to their stories about attending the State University and important points, moments, or relationships within that window. I audio-recorded all interviews with the permission of the participants and generated deidentified verbatim transcripts and field notes based on all interviews.

Throughout the research process, I kept a research log containing field notes and journal reflections to document the observable details and also my thought process throughout the course of the project (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). I also transcribed the data that I collected personally, which allowed me as the researcher to know which choices were made within the process data re-presentation (Bird, 2005). The log was helpful in documenting the context for the interviews and initial interpretations, and assisted with developing findings from the iterative process of narrative research (Riessman, 2008).

**Data Analysis**

Each interview was analyzed thematically (Reissman, 2008), with attention to the key elements within each individual story. Stories of each participant were considered in their own right, but the analysis also involved identifying common themes present for the students as a group (Baptiste, 2001). In consideration of the narrative paradigm, coding was completed with long, thick story threads as opposed to shorter, disconnected segments (Reismann, 2008, p. 74). Though the literature revealed several success factors found by
other studies (Zalaquett, 2006), the themes for this study were determined by the data and not imposed from a pre-determined framework.

**Researcher Role**

Jones, Torres, and Arminio (2006) describe positionality as “the relationship between the researcher and her participants and the researcher and her topic” (p. 31). They go on to say that we have a responsibility as researchers to be aware of our own influence within the research process and potentially on the research participants. In qualitative research, the researcher is the instrument (Patton, 2002), so it important to explore the strengths and limitations of the research tool in order to contextualize the researcher’s findings.

In qualitative inquiry, one of the primary departures from objective, scientific research is the concept of the researcher as the instrument. Narrative inquiry relies on the researcher identifying and creating spaces for narrative data to be generated (Riessman, 2008). As Riessman (2008) points out, “by our interviewing and transcription practices, we play a major role in constituting the narrative data that we then analyze” (p. 50). In light of this, transparency about my background as the researcher is important for understanding the research context.

I became interested in the learning environment for Latino college students when I was working for a non-profit organization in a rural mountain town in the Dominican Republic. I volunteered with a local church and health clinic for three weeks the summer before beginning my graduate program in higher education administration. As I was attempting to explain my career path to my host family in a second language, I realized that
the culture has no context for that career path. At that moment, I felt I had a small sense of what it might be like to be a Latino college student in the United States. As I returned to the States and began observing the learning environment through a new experiential lens, my interest in the stories of Latino students who were actively overcoming various oppressions to succeed grew.

My interest in researching Latino college students has developed out of an interest in Spanish culture, highlighted in recent years by a deeper understanding of my own privilege as a white person (McIntosh, 1988). I am interested because I do not fully understand the struggle of constantly working against systemic oppression to achieve a goal. I believe there is an opportunity to create a more conducive learning environment for Latino college students and make a difference in how higher education in the United States fosters the educational growth of its fastest growing minority group.

I am a student who shares university resources with her research participants. As a graduate student at the school which attended by participants, and as someone who also completed her undergraduate degree at a large, public, land-grant university, I have some characteristics of an insider. My identity as a white, female, English-speaking, middle-class graduate student creates distance between me and my participants, and may have affected the level of comfort within the interviews because privileged aspects of my identity translate into power within our relationship. Additionally, I am in an administrative position on campus which holds perceived power. To mitigate these circumstances, I focused on my identity as a graduate student researcher when requesting and conducting my interviews.
Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness (Schwandt, 2007) of a narrative research project can be defined as situating the research work clearly and up front by describing the perspectives of the researcher (epistemology, strategy of inquiry, paradigm, evaluation criteria, etc.) and the demographic and other participant data (Reissman, 2008). Additionally, grounding any claims with evidence from participant data, including negative or contradictory cases, and exploring alternative interpretations of the data within the discussion increase transparency, thus increasing the validity of a research work (Lincoln & Guba, 1981).

In order to accomplish the task of validity, I practiced reflexive processes throughout my research. Mauthner and Doucet (2003) state that, “subjects are reflexively constituted between the researcher and the researched, and that while they are therefore always incompletely unknown, it is possible to grasp something of their articulated experience and subjectivity through a research encounter” (p. 423). At each stage in my research, my knowledge of the topic, and my own identity, has changed slightly to allow for the new knowledge to become integrated. As I learned more about the lives of my research participants, I attempted to incorporate the new viewpoints into my interpretive lens.

Through engaging in reflexive practices (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003) including field journaling and regular conversations with my thesis committee, I have been able to see how my opinions have been formed and reformed through contact with my participants. Additionally, I used member checking (Creswell, 2009) to allow the research participants an
opportunity to comment on the findings of the research. This step helped to ensure that my representation (Schwandt, 2007) of their stories reflected their experiences.

Authenticity is another factor important to this work of narrative inquiry because the goal is to capture the participants’ experience on a deeply personal level. Tanaka (2002) discusses that authenticity is established by locating the researcher and the participants in his or her own time and history in a personal way by “studying the historical context of power for the ethnic culture, gender, sexual orientation, and other social identifiers.” The reader of my study must understand as closely as possible the history and educational environment of the participants to best understand the context of the research, and from there how to apply it to new research or knowledge creation (Lincoln & Guba, 1981). In order to accomplish this goal, my findings incorporate the participant’s own words whenever possible. The participants are described in detail to allow the reader the appropriate level of familiarity with their context in order to answer the question:

What are the stories of successful Latino seniors?

**Chapter 4: Findings**

The stories of the participants were detailed and very personal. Before presenting the bulk of the findings, I summarize the demographics of the participants, offer participant profiles, and present discussion of how the participants defined success is in order to frame the findings. Analysis of the data resulted in four themes present across all of the participant interviews: traits and abilities, cultural identity, encouragement, and motivating factors. Each theme had several sub-themes to better capture the nuances present in the stories of the
participants. The table below shows each theme, its definition, and lists the sub-themes that are present within it.

Table 1. Theme Definitions and Sub-Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Sub-Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Traits and Abilities</td>
<td>attributes that the student possesses based on life experiences or personality that allows him or her to succeed in the college setting</td>
<td>Academic focus, Confidence, Dedication, Independence, Passion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Identity</td>
<td>the interaction between the cultural identity of the participant and his or her success, or the ways in which the student’s cultural identity has shaped success in college</td>
<td>Family Heritage, Language Learning, Exploring Ethnicity, Encouraging Community, Negotiating Experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouragement</td>
<td>different types of support the student receives that assist with individual success</td>
<td>Recognition, Peer Support, Family Support, Counsel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivating Factors</td>
<td>actions that a student wants to take that encourage him or her to continue forward along their path to success</td>
<td>Family Expectations, Giving Back, Role Modeling</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Participants**

This study examined the stories of five successful Latino students in their fourth year of college at Southeast State, a large, public, land-grant university. The sample was diverse, including two male and three female students. One student is completing her schooling through distance education, two others are completing traditional four-year programs, and the remaining two are completing five-year programs and are currently in their fourth year. All students are in-state students. Three are graduating in May 2011 and two in May 2012. The table below (Table 2) summarizes the participants. The identities of the students are protected by pseudonyms and detail substitutions when appropriate.
Table 2. Participant Summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Expected Graduation</th>
<th>Current GPA</th>
<th>Academic Program</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ivette</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Puerto Rican and Panamanian</td>
<td>May 2011</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>One 4-year degree, one minor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julie</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Portuguese</td>
<td>May 2012</td>
<td>3.77</td>
<td>Two 4-year degrees, one minor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portentia</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Latina, from Ecuador</td>
<td>May 2011</td>
<td>3.64</td>
<td>One 4-year degree, distance education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rick</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>½ White, ¼ Puerto Rican, ¼ Black</td>
<td>May 2011</td>
<td>3.702</td>
<td>One 4-year degree, two minors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rodrigo</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>½ Puerto Rican, ¼ Irish, ¼ German</td>
<td>May 2012</td>
<td>3.296</td>
<td>One 4-year degree, one-year co-op</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interestingly, though several participants have multicultural backgrounds, throughout the interviews they all identified primarily with their Latino identity and contrasted it only with a white identity or dominant culture. This may be due to the framing of the study, which specifically mentioned the Latino identity, and the fact that the institution was predominantly white. However, the students expressed different parts of their identity in different places. For example, Julie identifies herself as Portuguese on the demographic survey, but said during her interview that her father was from France and that she has family there. Rick identifies on the survey as a quarter black, but only mentions it as part of his background during one story and seems to identify only with Hispanic culture in addition to his white heritage. Rodrigo describes his mixed white ancestry on the demographic survey, but simply refers to himself as “half-white” during his interview.

This study focused on the success of these students, and across the participants’ stories four themes emerged as significant: traits and abilities, cultural identity, encouragement, and motivating factors. However, it is important to recognize that each of
these students also has experienced at least one event that commonly prevents Latino students from attaining a college degree. While the themes were similarly significant in each story, an introduction to each participant is provided below.

**Ivette.** From a military family, Ivette has lived on or near an Army base for her entire life. Her father is in the military, and after her parents’ divorce when she was ten her mother kept her, her older sister, and her younger brother in the base community. Ivette lost contact with her father and his family at that time. A consistently high performer in high school, Ivette was initially planning on enlisting in the Army after graduation because she did not have an example of another option within her family to follow.

… my mom, she went to community college. Did a year and that was it. My sister, like, she quit after a year. My cousin quit after a year. … I didn’t know anybody who went to college besides, like, my teachers. … So, there was no, like, role models. Like, ok, if my mom can’t do it, my sister, my cousin –like, if nobody I know can do this, then how am I going – how am I supposed to do it? … So there has just never been, like, a legit, hard core example of, “I went to college. I finished. And now I’m doing something successful with my degree or with my, like, college education.” To see how, actually, higher education can better someone’s life and I can have that too.

But during her junior year in high school, after attending a college fair, Ivette started working with her high school counselor and eventually enrolled at Southeast State, funding her college education through a combination of scholarships and financial aid. In a similar timeframe, Ivette also reestablished communication with her father and his family during her
senior year. When she graduates in May 2011, she will be the first in her family on either side to receive a Bachelor’s degree.

She has maintained a 4.0 GPA in college while pursuing a degree in textiles and a minor in Spanish over the course of four years. Ivette is significantly involved as a student leader on campus, and has progressively taken on more challenging leadership roles including two terms as president for two different organizations. She was recognized for her scholastic excellence and campus involvement with the Student Leader award, which is awarded at Homecoming by a campus committee through an application and interview process. When asked what her next steps are when she graduates in May 2011, Ivette responded:

…well, I don’t really know how I’m going to get here but my ultimate goal in life would be to be the CEO of Nike…. it was really one of the first companies to target, and, like, market to African American and minority populations…. I grew up with Nike. My brother, when he was 1 years old [sic] had Nikes on and now he’s, like, 16 and he still wears them. So, like, it, to me is just very nostalgic, like, the family brand. And so that is my ultimate goal.

Ivette’s goal is commensurate with her college career, but she is planning to begin her professional career teaching math in middle or high school with Teach for America. She is interested in giving back to the educational system because so much of the financial aid she received to attend college was federally funded.
Julie. At the age of eight, Julie visited the United States with her mother for an extended vacation and ended up immigrating when her mother married a U.S. citizen before the vacation was over. She shares the story, saying:

…my mom was actually an English teacher in Portugal, and… you get three months paid vacation. We came to stay with one of her previous students who was living here [in the United States] and working. …. So, we were like, yeah, we’ll come, and we were planning to stay six months cause that was what our visa, or whatever, we could stay. My mom ended up getting married. She met this guy within the six months, and he was like, you’re not leaving, I want to get married…

Julie spent her formative years in the southeastern United States. While she was enrolled in an ESL program at her school she had additional language reinforcement at home, with her mother speaking English answers to any questions in Portuguese. Internally driven, Julie was captain of the cheerleading squad in high school and maintained an above 4.0 GPA while working a part-time job. She often needed to find her own way to get where she wanted to go because her mother was working full-time.

As high school graduation approached, Julie was faced with a major dilemma because she did not have a Green Card and so could not get in-state tuition at any institutions she applied to. When her mother married, she was never legally adopted. Julie describes the path she took to be admitted to college:

… I actually had a boyfriend in high school since I was 15 years old – I met him when I was 15…we were together at that point probably for four years. We decided
to get married because it would be the easiest, fastest way to do the whole green card thing. So we got married. …I couldn’t apply to any other schools because of the whole green card thing and since I got married … November… before I graduated high school there were certain schools that the application process, …just the deadline was gone. And [Southeast State] was one of the ones that weren’t. … first I got accepted as an…out of state student, but then once my, ah, paperwork, green card and stuff like that went through, then they gave me, they honored the in-state tuition. Because of my husband was, you know, a [United States] resident.

Exceedingly independent, Julie started her college career as a business major and is now enrolled in a program at State that offers a dual degree in a humanity and business. She lives with her mother and commutes to campus, maintaining an off-campus job in addition to her studies and her participation in campus life. Julie will graduate in May 2012 with two degrees in five years, and will have completed a four-year Servant Leadership program, gone on three or four Alternative Spring Break trips, and contributed to numerous other clubs and organizations in addition to maintaining an excellent GPA.

**Portentia.** A distance education and non-traditional student, Portentia is completing her degree at the age of 39. She is from Ecuador, and moved to the United States several years ago. When she was in high school, Portentia was a good student and consistently did her homework and received good grades without prompting. Her grandmother was a proponent of education, and with her encouragement Portentia was enrolled in English lessons at the age of five and then worked with a tutor until she reached TOEFL level 8.
While she did take some classes in Ecuador immediately after high school, Portentia describes herself as unmotivated and so never obtained a degree. At the age of 20, she had a significant falling-out with her mother and moved out of the house and into her own place. As a result, she needed to work in order to pay her bills and school fell by the wayside.

Portentia moved to the United States with her husband, but the two later divorced. She points to that event as a motivating circumstance in her educational journey, in addition to realizing she wanted to be recognized for the work she was doing. Portentia began her undergraduate career at a for-profit college before transferring to Southeast State. She describes her enrollment and transfer process:

…pretty much as soon as I started working I realized that I would not be able to move on, you know, to doing anything other an office assistant until I got a degree. And then, for about four years, it wasn’t the right time. My husband was laid off, and then we got divorced…And then, finally …I was really feeling very frustrated, I wasn’t able to do what I wanted to do. I was doing [work beyond my pay grade] but I wasn’t recognized for it either by salary or by other type of recognition. … I came across one of these private universities, University of Phoenix….I decided to just go ahead; I didn’t think about how much it would cost, I got loans. So I got my associate’s degree there….And then I realized that… that I wasn’t getting the quality of education that I was hoping for….. [Southeast State] really started to offer more and more online classes and I found out about the [Public Leadership] program. And so, I called the advisor and I got really excited about it, and just, you know, transferred.
Having successfully enrolled at Southeast State, Portentia began her academic program by taking two courses per semester, but slowly ramped up until she was taking five classes the fall before her graduation. She works full time at a local community college assisting students in getting the GED diploma. As a non-traditional student, the stresses and schedule of her life are different. She has “stopped out,” where she was not attending school in her normal schedule, in order to marry her second husband and travel to Ecuador for the wedding. More recently, she has been handling a long-distance family situation with her grandmother being extremely ill. She shares:

Well, it’s been, emotionally, devastating, really. Because [my grandmother] has health problems, but they are brought about by emotional problems that she has. You know, her husband, who is not my grandfather, they’ve been together for 40 plus years, and he’s a complete jerk. He abuses her emotionally. And she doesn’t have any place to go. She has to stick around and take all that in. And so, I’ve felt helpless. And, you know, I wanted to bring her here to me with us but we can’t because of the immigration laws. So, it’s been really hard.

Despite her winding educational path and the challenges she faces as a non-traditional student, Portentia will graduate in May 2011 with a Bachelor’s degree. She will be the first in her family to do so, and will have completed it part-time in five and a half years. Portentia has maintained an excellent GPA and generally done very well in her classes. During the same period, she has also been recognized in her workplace as a community leader who is significantly contributing to the success of the Latino population.
Rick. While Rick has spent his college career exploring and embracing his Hispanic heritage, his family is all white. Rick lives with his biological mother and step-father (dad), and his biological Hispanic father has been out of the picture since before he was born. His dad is in the military and Rick grew up in a military school system for his early years. His parents were involved in his success, expecting him to go to college from an early age though neither of them had received a four-year degree. They motivated him with money awards for grades, and then later with the idea that he had to go to college but also had to fund it himself.

Rick applied to two schools to pursue an engineering degree. He was accepted to both, but ended up making the decision to attend Southeast State based on finances. Rick applied for and won a $40,000 scholarship during the spring semester of his senior year of high school, and at the in-state tuition rate the scholarship would cover four full years. As he entered college, Rick was optimistic about his education, but quickly experienced a setback with his intended major. His grades dropped, and then dropped again, before he fully recognized that he needed a new career path.

…my freshman year I went from 17 hours to 14 hours, and that… I had like, a 3.5 at the end of my first semester of college, and…[then] I dropped down to like a 3.1 in a semester and I was just like, I probably need to fix this…That’s when I was really scared. I was like, I’m not going to be able to keep this up. Because, I’m the type of person that would, you know, cut myself off and become, like, a recluse and do all the
stuff I need in order to, like, get the grades I need. Because I, like, that’s just who I am. Keep my scholarship and stuff.

Rick journeyed through several majors before deciding to pursue a degree in technology education and graphic communication, both subjects he had been interested in during high school. He started taking those classes fall of his junior year. While his career path was in question, Rick was very active in his extracurricular activities. In describing his involvement, he says he is “one of those people with … a two line email with like a seven line signature.” For on-campus employment, Rick was hired as a Resident Advisor (RA) starting his sophomore year, and is now in his third year of that position. When asked what shaped his college experience, he responded:

The RA thing. Just because of the amount of preparation time you have to put into it.

And then, also, I mean, I was a very subtle, non-confrontational type in high school. That’s changed…. as far as, like, you know, like, managing time, you know, if you look at my resume, it’s like, dealing with emergency situations and conflict mediation and getting people on the same level, and like, working out schedules and time management. The RA job has been awesome for that.

In addition to being an RA, Rick is involved with several Latino organizations on-campus and is one of the six leaders for a regional organization that brings the college Hispanic populations together for events and networking. After four years, Rick will graduate with his technology education degree, a minor in graphic communication, a minor in Spanish, and is hoping to have high honors based on his GPA in May 2011. He hopes to
obtain employment in the graphic communication field at first, and then eventually teach once he has settled down and has a family of his own.

**Rodrigo.** Education was important in Rodrigo’s family. Both of his parents and his older brother had obtained Bachelor’s degrees before him, and his father was intent on Rodrigo doing better in school than his brother who had majored in baseball. Math and science had always come easily to Rodrigo, and so engineering seemed to be a good fit. A scholar at heart, Rodrigo entered college with his major well-researched and future career paths explored through a program that offered tours to prospective engineering majors. Rodrigo’s college choices were between Southeast State and an out-of-state institution, and he made the choice based on both location and finances.

Entering college with a plan, Rodrigo absorbed information from his introductory classes that told him how to get experience for his career. With that background, Rodrigo chose to participate in Southeast State’s cooperative education (co-op) program to gain a full year of first-hand experience while in school. He received his first-choice position, and completed a full year of work between his sophomore and junior years. Rodrigo also became a peer mentor to minority students and prospective engineers, and is working to found a Latin fraternity on campus. When asked why he decided to start that group, Rodrigo responded:

> Coming into school I was like oh, fraternity …and I was a nerd so I read a book on it. …And then I kind of met a couple people and …it’s all more about partying and stuff, you know. … But then [my third year, I was introduced to this Latin fraternity and]…. it wasn’t like a typical fraternity, and they started, you know – it just seemed
like something that I would be interested in. So it was more about like, chivalry above self, and, you know, they don’t party all the time and stuff. Enriching Hispanic culture…

For Rodrigo, gaining access to college and paying for school were not major challenges. He was supported by his mother and father, had role models, and his father was paying for school so he did not have to take out loans. But during the last rotation of his co-op, fall of his third year, Rodrigo’s family experienced a tragic loss. When asked what the most challenging event of his college career has been, Rodrigo shared:

...the biggest event was actually, like, um… my dad passed away, like, a year ago. Like, in November. Like, while I was working and stuff. And, uh, so that was, like, pretty big for me. You know, obviously. Um, but, it just kind of like, ever since then we’ve been on, you know – you’re financially drained, and then, emotionally and everything. So, um, that was definitely – not having him around, because he was always supportive of what I did, as far as school, and always on me about that. So now, I kind of, like, as far as school goes, I have to push myself a lot more and then just – we’ve – bringing me a lot closer in my family, and stuff, um, and my mom, and stuff. And then also, pushing me to finish school, and do well. So that was probably the biggest – definitely the biggest event.

As a result of this event, Rodrigo has regained contact with his father’s side of the family and tries to keep in touch with them. His desire to understand more about the
Hispanic culture and learn to speak Spanish appears heightened by the loss, as his father was Puerto Rican and his mother is white.

Now back in school full-time and looking forward to graduation in May 2012, Rodrigo has gotten involved on-campus and works hard to maintain his position on the Dean’s List. He has enjoyed not having to leave the campus environment to work, though he values the experience that the co-op gave him and became a co-op ambassador in order to officially encourage others to take advantage of the opportunity. Rodrigo is still working through the new normal of his family, and graduation brings extra concerns about location, finances, and family following his father’s passing. After graduation, he hopes to be gainfully employed as a mechanical engineer.

**Summary.** As you can see from the descriptions above, the information shared with me ranged from highlights to challenges. Each participant is unique, but tied together by their time spent at Southeast State completing at least one four-year degree and by their Latino background. In light of the diversity of the sample, themes I have found across their stories will be explained and represented by an example from several participants to demonstrate how theme expression varies.

**Definition of Success**

A successful Latino student for this study was defined as having a 3.0 GPA or higher and completing a degree program on time in four or five years. When asked why they felt successful, most participants mentioned their academic standing. However, they also mentioned making a difference, succeeding after college, and improving their lifestyle as part
of their overall picture of success. Every participant used a variation of the word “happy” while discussing success, pointing to this feeling as what would help them have a holistic sense of well-being. Most said that they would not feel successful at all if they only had their academic standing and were not successful as leaders, friends, or family members. For these students, success is not simply hitting a benchmark, but doing it in a way that enriches their whole experience as college students. Their definitions of success drive their success.

Several participants described their level of effort as a parameter for success, particularly concerning academics. Julie said, “My success is that I do the best I can do this semester. If I know that I can get an A in that class, then I get an A in that class.” Similarly, Portentia stated, “…in school I judge it by my grades. Even those classes that I’ve gotten a C, I’ve given my 100% and I know I’ve never slacked off and I know I’ve been fully dedicated.” Rick commented, “I should be suma cum laude by the end of this semester….I think finishing a degree and getting out of college in four years, no matter how many times I switched my major, with two minors –that’s pretty damn awesome.” Performing at their personal best is one of the ways participants measured success.

Most participants mentioned that they wanted to be holistically successful, and that finding a balance between work and their personal lives would constitute “an important component of their success. Many students used the word “happiness” to describe the emotion that should go along with success. They felt that it would be possible to be competent in one area of life such as work or academics, but that without finding a balance there would not truly be success. Julie and Rick both described what they would not
consider successful in themselves, pointing out personal motivations, social life, and engaging in the college experience as aspects of success they appreciate in their own stories.

So what does success really mean? Is it up to that person? If you look at success as, oh, I’m passing my courses, I’m going to graduate, good for you. That’s not my success. I don’t want money to make my happiness. I don’t want money to drive me as a person…. I want to –live comfortably, but I want to have other reasons to be successful as a person. (Julie)

…because you could have a 4.0, you could meet all these other markers that people would define as success, but if you’re just sitting there, you know, I’ve only been able to take 12 hours a semester for five and a half, six years and I haven’t had any social life and I barely have any friends, then, well, what has college been to you? Oh, it’s been a means to an end to get a job …That’s not me. (Rick)

For most participants, success is a combination of accomplishment and happiness, achieved by balancing the various aspects of their lives. Rick, after discussing his ability to graduate in four years with high honors and debt-free, stated, “…if you do all that, and you’re happy with what you did, then yeah [you’re successful].” Rodrigo also discussed balance during his interview, sharing that he had felt less successful recently because he was not able to balance a personal relationship and his school work in the way he wanted. He was able to maintain his overall academic standing, but looks forward to success after graduation. He describes:
…so, success is, like, having a good, well-paying job, that you’re… happy with, and then not working all the time and having time for a personal life with like relationships and friends and stuff….So, finding a good balance between all that. I think that would be – and to be happy in that life and in your work life. Be able to support and provide for a family, definitely, that’s part of it too. That goes with the job thing. So, that’s what success would be. (Rodrigo)

In addition to an overall balance, participants pointed to specific components that they would require in their lives to feel successful. Julie talked about incorporating her passion for servant leadership, saying, “service and leadership…. needs to be part of my life for me to feel content or successful as a person.” Portentia discussed using measurable goals to define success, but also maintaining relationships that she has formed along her path. In her work, the gratitude of the students she has worked with is a measure of success.

…I judge [success] by numbers. And, you know, the relationships that I’m [able to] forge [with students] and that over time I continue to stay in touch with them, and, you know, I talk with them and see if they remember me. You know, in a good way. They’re still grateful, you know, that makes me happy. (Portentia)

Ivette discussed progressing from where her parents started as her measure of success.

… if you haven’t improved your life-style or life-status, however you’re living, I don’t consider that necessarily successful. Like, even if you’re happier than your parents you’ve improved your life. Or, if you’re wealthier than your parents or if
you’ve traveled more and you have more life experience – as far as global experiences – then you’re more successful. Like, there’s got to be some kind of improvement to how your parents lived. Like, something that you got out of life that they didn’t. (Ivette)

For these five participants, success involves a measure of happiness in addition to hitting goals. Being “happy” is a state of mind, but many go on to define it as continued personal relationships, getting to experience new things, finding balance, and being driven by something that has deep meaning. They also identify that success is an individual marker, something that a person needs to define for him or herself. For example, Ivette said, “…success, it really depends on the person,” and both Julie and Rick described what success might look like for someone else while ascribing to a different definition. All the students determined that they were successful by their own standards, and generally thought that an outside observer would also consider them successful.

**Theme 1: Traits and Abilities**

The first theme focuses on internal characteristics that the student expresses as being important to his or her success. It is defined as attributes that the student possesses based on life experiences or personality that allows him or her to succeed in the college setting. The theme has five parts: academic focus, confidence, dedication, independence, and passion. Table 3 below delineates, defines, and shows characteristics of each sub-theme.
Table 3. Traits and Abilities: Sub-Theme Definitions and Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-theme</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic focus</td>
<td>Prioritizing and recognizing the importance of school work.</td>
<td>Getting excellent grades</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Giving 100 percent on tasks</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Making good choices</td>
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<tr>
<td>Confidence</td>
<td>The belief that it is possible to achieve goals with current abilities.</td>
<td>Recognizing own abilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Knowing own limits</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>A commitment to putting in the time and effort needed to achieve goals.</td>
<td>Sacrificing other activities</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Patience with results</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Discipline</td>
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<tr>
<td>Independence</td>
<td>Comfort with making decisions or taking actions with a minimum of support.</td>
<td>Defining own path</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Autonomy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passion</td>
<td>A centering enthusiasm for the academic and social work that will be their career.</td>
<td>Application to current goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Verbal excitement</td>
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**Academic focus.** Every participant expressed academic focus a number of times, generally in short phrases near the beginning of the interview and with longer stories later. Rodrigo simply said, “School is number one.” Julie stated, “I take school very seriously…. I just, I feel like that’s the only guaranteed thing you have for a better future in a way…. So, yeah, school’s definitely my top priority.” Portentia involved her family in her focus, sharing, “My husband understands that… I have a commitment to school and I’ve been able to get all As.” Ivette commented on her focus: “When I’m in the classroom I’m not thinking about the stress and other things going on, I’m thinking about school.”

For most participants, the focus on academics has carried forward from high school. Rick talked about having “the smarts” in high school to elevate himself above the general community and carry that momentum into college. Ivette and Julie both shared that they had GPAs above a 4.0. Portentia said, “…I was a really good student in high school. My mom
never had to nag me to do my homework, and you know I always got A’s, you know, and
graduated with honors.” Rodrigo expressed that his continually pushed him through high
school to get good grades, and he responded by prioritizing grades over athletics.

Most students shared an experience where they made the choice to focus on
academics in order to meet an academic goal. Julie spoke in general about coping with the
increased academic levels of college classes; Portentia spoke about a specific class that she
sought assistance to perform at her best.

...there have been challenging courses but I’m the type of person that, when I set my
mind to something, I get it done…. I’d go to office hours or I’d go to tutoring, or, you
know, whatever it took to get the grade that I knew I could get because… I’m not
stupid, you know? Academically it might have took [sic] a little bit more work than
high school, of course, but I took the steps necessary to get there. (Julie)

So I took geology, and I was challenged. I was on my way to get a D in that class.

But, I went, [the community college] has a program called the Individualized learning
center where they, they have tutors. They can help you, you know, figure out what
your learning style is and what was going on and how to improve your grades. And I
went just a couple times, and just with that, I got a B in that class. (Portentia)

Another participant, Rodrigo, regretted a relationship that caused his academic focus
to falter, and discussed his commitment to not allowing that to happen again.

I’m not going to eliminate girls altogether. But, definitely just not let them take over
your life cause it hurt my grades a little bit too. I still made Dean’s list, but definitely
there was one class where I knew I could’ve done better if I wasn’t dating her. Cause, the day of the final… it was hard to get out, I didn’t study as much as I wanted to. (Rodrigo)

All students expressed that the majority of their academic focus came from within. They also all mention their academic success, which stems from that focus, as a key part of their success in college. Their exceptional academics make it possible for them to succeed on campus and also set the students up for success after they graduate. Ivette’s sentiments speak for the group:

But as far as the pressure, I put it on myself. Like, nobody told me that I needed that GPA, they just wanted me to graduate. And obviously I don’t need that to graduate. That was, like, my own pressure to be successful. I need to set the bar high; maybe a little too high for my brother or other people because I know that GPA isn’t attainable for everyone. But I put a lot of pressure on myself to do well. (Ivette)

**Confidence.** This trait of confidence was expressed by all participants, but more by Rick, Ivette, and Portentia who are graduating in May 2011. For example, Portentia felt very confident about her impending graduation though no one else in her family has yet accomplished that goal, saying, “…[out of] five siblings, …I’ll be the first one to have a college degree.” While confidence was most often displayed as the participants’ knowledge of their ability to complete the tasks required of them, at times confidence appeared as cockiness or self-assurance. This combination of confidence with self assurance is exemplified by Rick and Ivette describing their successes as student leaders.
And then, [my involvement] just kind of, it perpetuated itself into, you know, I’m good at this, I’m good at that, I could give back, why not…. And then I was approached at the end of my freshman year to, like, start taking the reins for that organization [Juntos]. And so, I was like, well, why not that’d be cool….It put me in a good position to become, like, a leader and stuff like that. And so, I was good at it. I’m not going to say everything I touch turns to gold because a lot of it I do have to work at it, but it was fun. (Rick)

…winning [Student Leader Award] said – that, right there, said I can do really whatever I want. Just, cause, I was going to go into the army with an above 4.0 GPA. Like, that just sounds ridiculous. And so, when I won that, it was like, out of 33,000 people I’m on this field, and I could really, like, do whatever I want…. That was something that made me realize, whatever I want, I actually can get it. (Ivette)

Rodrigo, who will be a May 2012 graduate, struggled with not wanting to be over-confident, fearing to count on his success when it was not yet entirely achieved. When asked if he is confident in his abilities to be successful, he expressed, “I know I’ll graduate and everything. And have a good GPA, hopefully….I feel pretty good with where I’m at. As far as resume and ability to get a job afterwards.” Julie’s confidence came through as she discussed “connecting the dots” of her college experiences and finding a career path that will combine her business and international relations degrees with her community service passions when she completes her degree in May 2012. After describing how she chose to concentrate in entrepreneurship based on an alternative spring break trip, Julie said, “Thank
God I figured that out because a lot of people don’t figure that out, you know. They’re not so confident in what they want to do and what they’re passionate about.” For most participants, confidence was about looking at what they had accomplished and feeling confident in their capacity to succeed in the future.

**Dedication.** Participants expressed dedication to a myriad of goals, but the concepts of prioritizing, sacrifice, and patience were present in each. Two participants were dedicated to overcoming an initial failure, and did additional work in order to achieve their goals.

I also kind of saw co-op as not only … increasing job opportunities and, like, chance at a job, …but also, like, helping pay for school…. So yeah, I was just applying everywhere, and, … I was doing it because I had one interview and I just bombed it real hard and so I was like, gosh, and so I just wanted to practice. And then I just went to ones – even ones I didn’t really care about, which is kind of bad. (Rodrigo) 

[In order to pass my geology test, which was] open book, but you just don’t have time to look, you know. Even if you read it and studied. [The learning center] gave me some strategies, you know, writing in a piece of paper the concept in my own works, and then writing the page number. So I did that with all the chapters of the book, and it was just amazing the change. I went from getting a 50% on my test to 60 like that. (Portentia) 

Julie was oriented towards a specific goal, discussing that she would “succeed during the semester so that … my summers are basically free so that I can go back to Portugal because that’s the only time I can see my family….” Rick was dedicated to his
extracurricular involvements, saying to himself, “I’m already doing so well, why not do a little bit better. Why not do a little bit better.”

Ivette’s dedication was shown through perseverance. She describes feelings of loneliness and isolation during her first year on-campus, but maintained her academic standards during that time. She said, “…my first semester I didn’t really talk to that many people. I mean, I didn’t talk to anybody in that way…. it was frustrating at times just being alone.” Though the need for dedication varied for each participant, it was clear through their stories that the holistic success that they each desired would only have been achieved by making educated sacrifices.

**Independence.** Context factored heavily into how participants expressed this trait because the basis for “independence” was affected by how family, school, or work situations were structured. Two discussed experiences of being “on their own” as times when they experienced significant personal growth that increased their ability to be successful at a later point. Julie describes her experiences in a single-parent family, saying:

…I’m very independent. And I had to be, you know, single mom for most of the time. … I learned to be very independent [in middle school], always go after my own stuff, like, my mom didn’t have time. And I was really involved with school and cheerleading and stuff. It wasn’t so much community service and leadership stuff but I was, like, hard core, like, cheerleader, like, captain. Like I said, when I put my mind to something, like, I got – that’s what I’m going to do…. I learned how to network, you know, in sixth grade because I had to. Cause, how am I going to get
home, how am I going to get to do this, how do I do that – if I want to do these things, I’ve got to find my own way to do it. So, um, I’ve just been very independent and I’ve always kind of figured out my own way. (Julie)

Rodrigo experienced being on his own during his co-op rotations his second and third years in college. For him, the growth was in basic life maintenance, having to navigate real-world realities with the intermediaries of his parent or the campus environment. For example, he shared that hygiene was initially an issue, saying, “I had to clean up after myself like a lot more…I don’t like to clean. You know, it’s a guy thing.” He also discussed finding his way around a new city, getting cable, and handling being ill as growth experiences. Rodrigo said that “just having to do things on [my] own in general…it gave me more initiative” and carried over into his life once he returned to campus.

Finances and how to pay for college was a factor for all five participants. Two, however, specifically point to financial independence during college. Ivette, when asked if paying for college herself, replied, “Not out of, like, my pocket but out of scholarships and financial aid and stuff… so, yes, technically. I mean, I worked really hard to get them, so, I guess I’m paying for it….” Later, she points to a different financial situation: “…I bought my first car while I was in college with my money, and, I did it on my own – well, not completely on my own, but I paid for it on my own.” Rick also talks about finances, but in terms of money management skills that have allowed him a level of financial freedom.

…if I’m saving up, you know, roughly $3500 per year from being an RA then maybe I can put that toward something else. So, you know, I was able to pay off, like,
school books and I actually used the money I saved up from last year to pay for summer school which I needed in order to graduate on time. And I’m doing it again this year because I’m trying to study abroad again. So it’s kind of like, it’s not, completely necessary but it’s helping me pay for all the stuff I want to do to make the most of my college experience….I could’ve, probably, taken out like a small loan in order to cover miscellaneous expenses but with the RA job on top of me, like, being good at it has allowed me to, like, do the things that I want to do. (Rick)

The participants’ independence supports their success by allowing them to take advantage of opportunities autonomously. It also contributes to their decision making in that each student can make the best decision individually. They take the opinions of family, co-workers, and friends into account but ultimately rely on their own evaluation.

**Passion.** Throughout the interviews, every participant explained his or her story with a level of passion. The students clearly believed in what they were accomplishing in the realms of academics, organizations, and community impact. The examples below are instances where it was easier to see passion clearly through the words of the participants, and are generally linked to their academic program.

Julie expressed a generalized passion for the education she is receiving. She said, “So just going through that immigration process made me serious about my school, like, because – I could not have this experience.” She is also passionate about community service and leading by example, which she found at way to fit with her major by concentrating in entrepreneurship with hopes to start a micro financing company. Ivette has been passionate
about her academic path since her high school decision to major in textiles. She started exploring fashion and apparel management during high school, continued to learn about the field through college, and has an ultimate goal to be CEO of an apparel company. Both participants find it easier to engage in their coursework and appreciate their academics because of their passion.

Rick, who switched majors while completing his degree, speaks of his excitement about finding the right fit. He shared that his first year he became progressively unmotivated because his fit with his major was poor, but that the change to coursework that was more engaging centered him and enabled him to put in the time and effort needed to graduate on time. He said that he “was initially looking for a graphic communications major…[and found out about] the technology engineering and design education degree that…combines all those different components…[and] once I switched I found out that’s where I needed to be…”

Two participants discussed passion based on their work experiences. Rodrigo shared that after his co-op experience, he became involved on campus as a co-op ambassador. He is passionate about sharing the opportunity with other students because of what it has contributed to his own success. He said, “I’m a big supporter of co-op…[because] that was one of my biggest accomplishments … [and] I definitely want every other engineering student to take that seriously.” Portentia described finding her passion for a type of work, saying, “…I like the behind the scenes coordination, and you know, help[ing] resolve problems….I like being in contact with the students or, you know, the customers, but those
who we’re serving.” These participants passion help keep them centered on their academic work so that they will be able to pursue their goals post-graduation.

**Summary.** Participants use their innate traits and abilities in order to be successful in college. Each student described a background of strong academic work that carried into college as an ability to achieve at high academic levels. These participants portrayed the traits of confidence in their abilities, dedication to their work, independence in decision making, and passion about their career goals. This combination of traits and abilities provides a strong internal core that allows these students to pursue their goals and be successful in the presence of distractions and other stresses.

**Theme 2: Cultural Identity**

The second most prevalent theme was the interaction between the cultural identity of the participant and his or her success, or the ways in which the student’s cultural identity has shaped success in college. This theme had five sub-themes: family heritage, language learning, exploring ethnicity, encouraging community, and negotiating experiences. The table below (Table 4) summarizes the themes, definitions, and characteristics.
Table 4. Cultural Identity: Sub-Theme Definitions and Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-theme</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family heritage</td>
<td>Parent’s background, situation while growing up, family history, etc.</td>
<td>Affected learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Has cultural implications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language learning</td>
<td>Ways in which learning or not learning a language has impacted the student’s success.</td>
<td>Where knowledge acquired Reasons to learn language Implication for current life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploring ethnicity</td>
<td>Explorations of their heritage while in school relating to their motivation.</td>
<td>Caused deeper involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Changed relationships with peers or family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouraging community</td>
<td>Involvement with the cultural group as a backdrop to education.</td>
<td>Identifies with the group based on cultural heritage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Benefits the student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negotiating experiences</td>
<td>Dealing with the events related to cultural identity that impact success.</td>
<td>Overall positive outcome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Present-day scenario is caused by a cultural factor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An additional consideration for this theme is the demographic data of the participant sample. Ivette, Portentia, and Julie all identify as fully Latina, of Panamanian and Puerto Rican, Ecuadorian, and Portuguese descent, respectively. Rick and Rodrigo both identify as partially Latino in terms of heritage. Rick is half white, a quarter Puerto Rican, and a quarter black. Rodrigo is half white and half Puerto Rican. The three females grew up learning about their cultural identity from their families; both male participants experienced primarily white acculturation through high school. As noted previously, while the participants identified themselves as multicultural students, they generally expressed ties only to the Latino/Hispanic community and the dominant white culture.

**Family heritage.** The participants’ family situations are important because each spoke about receiving a form of support from their families as they pursued their college degrees. The participants shared complete pictures of their family background over the
course of the interviews. Of the five participants, three were from families with fathers in the military. Julie and Portentia were immigrants, who both arrived in the United States under legal visas. Only one participant, Rodrigo, was part of a family through high school that included his blood-related mother and father. The story of Ivette’s family is the most complicated of the participants, including two sets of family because her parents divorced when she was younger. In all, she has three full siblings who grew up with her in her mother’s house, and two half siblings from her father’s second marriage. While family is clearly important to each participant, it also constitutes a stress factor had the potential to negatively impact the student’s success.

Three of the participants are first-generation students, and will be the first in their families to graduate with Bachelor’s degrees. Rick shared that information in his demographic survey only, but Portentia and Ivette both mentioned it as important background during their interviews.

I don’t think education was a, an important component in my upbringing. Ah, so, my mom didn’t finish high school. Um, my grandmother finished sixth grade. I will be the first one – I have four brothers, you know, we’re five siblings, and I’ll be the first one to have a college degree. (Portentia)

And then nobody in my dad’s family has, like, gone… cause like my grandma finished sixth grade, and then my father finished high school, so like for me to finish college is a huge, like, change within three generations. (Ivette)
Julie, Portentia, and Ivette all have experienced either divorce or separation within their parents’ relationship growing up. Rodrigo’s nuclear family was stable while he grew up, but he recently experienced the loss of his father. Rick has had the same father figure for his entire life, but that person is not his blood relative. Both Rick and Rodrigo were raised as white children. Rick shared that being raised white cause a certain amount of identity crisis, sharing at one point that “both sides of the family, all [are] Anglo Saxon. Everybody. I’m the one mixed kid in the entire family. So like, I could see where they’re coming from [by having me mark ‘white’].” He concluded this statement with a sound of frustration, indicating that not being able to express his heritage or have it acknowledged by his family was a difficult circumstance. Rodrigo’s experience differed because he grew up with his parents acknowledging his mixed heritage, but the family experience concentrated on his white ancestry and not the Hispanic side. He said, “…I was pretty much raised white. And I guess - cause my dad, he never taught me Spanish or anything, and even like, the Hispanics in my family we never really saw, like, my dad wasn’t too close with them growing up.” It was not until he wanted to get involved with the Latino community at Southeast State that his lack of Hispanic cultural knowledge became an issue.

Julie was specifically affected by her move from Portugal to the United States and subsequently not having the appropriate paperwork to travel. She shared that while she was in the United States, between the ages of 7 and 18, her family in Portugal did not visit as much as she feels they should have. However, she has committed to rebuilding the connection with her family now that she has the ability to do so.
The family situations of these participants are important because they create the background to the students’ success. Each shared the story of his or her family as the foundation of why or how they are pursuing their degrees. The family is foundational to who they are as people, and shapes the ways they have responded to each challenge they encounter and goal they accomplish. The families represent the cultural capital of the student; they learned how to respond to the world around them primarily from their parents. Most of the family situations contribute some amount of stress to the students’ lives. However, for these participants the combination of stress and support represented by the family has been turned into motivation that pushes them toward their goals.

**Language learning.** All participants were invested in being at least bilingual in Spanish and English. Four of the participants expressed knowledge of their non-native language, either Spanish or English, as part of the interactions that affected their success in college. Portentia and Julie, who immigrated to the United States, were both exposed to English early in their childhood. For them, learning English at a young age was foundational to their success in the United States in general and college in particular. They describe successful interactions at school, work, and with their peer group that are built around their identities as multi-lingual people.

I think this was my grandmother’s influence, my mom sent me to a bilingual school when I was in kindergarten until like second or third grade. And then, after that, I went back to public schools. But I continued taking private English classes until I was like an 8 TOFEL level. … I like the English language and I had - all the jobs I
had in Ecuador were at companies where English was required cause I had to communicate with people overseas. (Portentia)

My experience with that is probably unique because my mom was an English teacher…. I would talk to her in Portuguese and she would just reply in English…..

But, when I learned English and I was fine with it, she wouldn’t have a problem speaking Portuguese with me…. I think it’s more comfortable for her to speak English versus Portuguese. … we do speak Portuguese here and there, but it’s mostly English now, just because we’ve been here for so long. (Julie)

Julie also learned Spanish in high school and then chose to obtain a minor in the language during college, so she is now trilingual. She said, “Spanish –I mean obviously Portuguese and Spanish are very close, it’d be, just, a clutch to go ahead and minor in it.”

Learning Spanish was important to two others and has helped them to achieve success in their chosen social circles. Neither Rodrigo nor Rick grew up speaking Spanish, and the opportunity to learn it has positively affected their explorations of their Latino heritage. Both describe gaining perspective, accountability, and strength from their Latino peers. Rodrigo is learning casually through his activities and relationships in college, sharing, “…I didn’t feel right starting up a Latin fraternity when I didn’t speak Spanish, so. I’m working on it now, though. They talk to me in Spanish a lot.” Rick made this decision in high school and then integrated his knowledge into a Spanish minor.

Then, about, eighth grade, one of the girls who lives across the street from me was half Panamanian. So like, her mom spoke Spanish and her dad was white but like she
spoke Spanish and her sisters. I would go over and say, “Hi,” and her mom would just speak to me in Spanish and I had no idea what was going on, whatsoever. And it got to the point when I would go out in public, maybe to like a Mexican restaurant and they would always look at me first, and start speaking in Spanish, and I had no idea what was going on and it pissed me off to not end. And I was like I don’t know what they’re saying!! And I got fed up with it. And then, sophomore year in high school I had to take a language and I was like, you know what, I’m tired of not knowing what’s going on. I’m taking Spanish. And, it was actually pretty easy and I liked it. And so I started to get pretty good at it; people tell me I’m fluent now, but I don’t believe them. (Rick)

Ivette, the one exception, clarified in a later communication that she spoke Spanish in the home when very young, then her family switched to English when her mother remarried, and then she continued her Spanish through work at home and at school until going to college. When she enrolled at the university, she was bilingual and went on to complete a Spanish minor by her junior year. Language learning as a process was not important to her success in college; however, her ability to interact in both Spanish and English supported her social endeavors in the same manner as the other students. At Southeast State, knowing both English and Spanish allowed these students access to the mainstream and Latino communities on campus, increasing their support networks and therefore ability to succeed.

**Exploring ethnicity.** This theme is heavily centered on Rick and Rodrigo and their experiences finding out about their Latino culture during college, but not important at all for
the female participants. For example, Portentia identifies as a Latina from Ecuador, moved to the United States when she was 30 years old, and still actively communicates with her family. In her story, there was no evidence of the “exploring ethnicity” theme because that part of cultural identity did not shape her experience in an explicit way. Julie and Ivette also did not express the “exploring ethnicity” theme during their interviews, and all three Latina participants expressed a more developed sense of cultural identity. For both male participants, however, exploring culture has been integral in their journey to success. They derive motivation from their explorations by embracing their own culture, finding a personal fit, and helping others within the Latino community embrace their culture and their potential.

Rick has experienced two facets that relate his explorations to his success. First, his leadership position with the regional organization, Juntos, is one he identifies as extremely successful and is tied to his experience with the campus Latino community. Second, he feels more personally comfortable as a Latino and that identity has provided him a community in which he is supported and appreciated. He shared his experience of finding his Latino niche in college.

…didn’t really experience anything until I got to college. But then, when I did, I was just, like, this feels right. This is good. The Hispanic people, Spanish, they start partying at 11, awesome….So, like, it kind of fit in to like, I’m a night owl, I’m late to a whole bunch of stuff, I like the language, the people, this just fits. And then, like, from there, it’s really the embracing of the culture. My girlfriend’s Mexican. It feels right. So I guess that’s the Hispanic blood coming out there. (Rick)
Rodrigo has also invested in his Latino heritage since coming to college, and has been more intentional about pursuing his heritage since the passing of his father during the fall of his third year. In addition to an element of honoring his father, he has also found a supportive peer group and gained access to the close-knit Latino group on campus through founding the Latin fraternity.

And yeah, [founding] the fraternity… definitely a big thing. Just getting more into the Hispanic culture and developing a strong bond with these brothers, or these friends I have now. That’s really cool…. And, um, I guess – expanding more of the Hispanic culture on campus, I’m really interested in doing that. (Rodrigo)

He hopes that his efforts with the fraternity will lead to greater success in mentoring Latino students on campus, in a way that he has not been as successful as he would like with peer mentorship.

While neither student speaks of this directly, their stories about heritage exploration imply that finding a way to balance their Latino heritage with their white upbringing is an important element of having a successful college career. When they began their college careers, both quickly found an avenue to get involved in and invest in the Latino community even though it was not something they were a part of in college. Neither was specifically encouraged by their families to explore their Latino roots, but much of their success is intertwined with their cultural interactions.

**Encouraging community.** Each participant is currently involved with the Latino community at Southeast State, or in Portentia’s case the Latino community in the
surrounding area and at her workplace. For most participants, being involved specifically with their cultural group is important because there is generally an added element of succeeding for the good of the Latino reference group. Also, most have developed their closest friendship bonds with others who share their Latino background.

Ivette and Rick both quickly involved themselves with the larger Latino community during their first year on campus. They frequently refer back to their friend groups and leadership experiences based in and round these communities. Ivette was particularly grounded in the on-campus Latino group, gaining strength and encouragement from the relationships she formed through these organizations. Through her service on the executive boards of Latin groups, she was able to gain skills and experiences that supported her success in other areas.

And then getting involved with the Latino community here was a big thing cause that’s where I met a lot of my friends and a lot of people I hang out with. …that happened, like, freshman year of college…. Fall semester of sophomore year I pledged the Latina sorority that’s on campus with my two line sisters who are, like, my best friends here. And then, [my leadership experiences] just kind of spiraled off from there. (Ivette)

Rick also discusses his participation in several Latin organizations on campus, though he limited his leadership experiences to the regional Juntos organization. Over the course of his interview, he describes each organization in terms of its benefit to his campus experience. One is a “socialization organization, although [there is] a lot of community service stuff as
well,” another provides opportunities for “marketing [himself] in the right way if they have a workshop or a job interview,” and a final group allowed him to get “teaching reinforcement… but it was mostly just for fun.” Each offered an opportunity for networking, friendship, or fun that he found important for a successful college experience.

Rodrigo engaged primarily with peer mentoring in his early college years and then began getting more involved with the Latin community later. He has primarily gotten involved with founding the Latin fraternity on campus, and while he has networked with students in the other Latin groups he has not committed time to them. Working on the fraternity has created new opportunities for his involvement with Latinos on campus. He said, “I’m talking to a lot more Hispanic students than I would have really met, that might not have talked to me if they did have a peer mentor.” As one of Rodrigo’s personal goals is to enhance Latino culture on campus, this involvement is particularly important to his success.

Julie was not significantly exposed to the campus Latino group until her friend and fellow participant, Ivette, introduced her to the activities. Julie appreciates the community, but does not feel the need to be immersed in it, keeping some distance. She derives more of her support through the members of her Servant Leadership program. At one point, she discusses that most Latino people she has met feel isolated because they are such a minority population on campus. She attributes a portion of her comfort with the majority white population on campus with her ability to pass as white.
I didn’t even get involved with Latina community at State until, like, my junior year. Because I guess I don’t fit. Like, if people look at me they think I’m white. And, so, I can fit in fine and feel like I’m part of the white people at State. And I feel like a lot of this – a lot of Latinos don’t feel like they belong, or they don’t – that people don’t have their experiences. (Julie)

Portentia, who is rarely on campus and also a non-traditional student, has also found support within her cultural identity but from the students she serves through her employment. First from her students, who are all Latino and working towards their GED. She shared one particularly impactful story in which a student publicly thank her for her contributions, saying, “…he started talking about his experience in the program and how grateful he was to the teacher and then to me….he said, …‘You’re a great leader and this community needs you,’ and… that was really touching.” Second, through her efforts with her students she was able to become involved in a regional community that is working to support the efforts of Latinos across the country. Finding others who share a passion for encouraging the Latino population encouraged her overall success.

**Negotiating experiences.** An important part of the participants’ determinations that they are successful was their ability to meet and overcome obstacles. For many participants, these obstacles were rooted in some measure in their cultural identity and family heritage. Each situation that was successfully negotiated resulted in an outcome that they would later use to support a different facet of their success. The following examples showcase a primary identity as it relates to the participant’s cultural background
Ivette identified often as a first generation student who was dedicated to having a
different life experience. She pointed to family’s transition after her parents’ divorce as a big
transition, saying, “I think I was ten, and that’s when I became a mom.” Over the course of
her college experience, she has drawn motivation and strength from moving through that
transition. She shared that she realized, “I don’t want to do this when I get older. I mean, not
that I don’t want to take care of a kid but I don’t want my kids to take care of kids.” Ivette,
who defined success as an improvement of lifestyle from one generation to the next,
continually negotiates this family experience by striving for her degree.

Rodrigo most often associated his identity with a lack of Hispanic acculturation.
Having been raised primarily in white culture, negotiating how he would fit into the Latino
culture on campus was important to his personal success. He continually comes back to this
issue when describing his ability to found the Latin fraternity, stating, “[We] talked about the
Latin fraternity…[but] we didn’t speak Spanish, he’s not Hispanic, I’m only half, I knew it
would be hard … to start a Latin fraternity, oh, here’s a white guy and like a half - and I
didn’t speak Spanish.” In this same story, Rodrigo mentions his lack of Spanish language
two more times. For him, finding people to partner with who had more Latin background,
spoke Spanish, and would potentially help him learn the language were important
components for his success.

In contrast, Portentia gained much of her identity from being a fluent Spanish
speaker. She worked to negotiate her situation as a bilingual employee, balancing the
expectations of an English-speaking workplace with the strengths of the people she works
with. She said, “It’s hard to find people who are bilingual, and caring, and who will stick around. And so, some of my instructors, they don’t speak really good English. And so, in order to get my point across, often I have to talk to them in Spanish.” Portentia relies on her ability to speak both Spanish and English to ensure her success. Finding an environment that appreciates her bilingual abilities and requests her use of them has become motivation to graduate and consider new future career paths.

Rick’s identity was grounded in being multiracial, sharing at one point that he “was so happy when they had a bubble that said ‘other’ or ‘check more than one.’” As he has moved into college, Rick has come to recognize his multiracial background as an asset as opposed to a misunderstood burden. He says, “I’ve got, like, the cultural background of, like, a white family to succeed in like a white society. But, I’ve got the ethnic background to, like, throw some variety in there.” Rick’s story shows that he attributes his successful balance of work and social life to a congruent balance of White and Latino heritage.

Julie identified more regularly with her status as an immigrant than as a Latina, though she recognized that her story as an undocumented student was very different than those around her. One of the ways she negotiated being undocumented was by working where she could in high school. She shared, “I did have the immigrant job, I worked at McDonald’s…from when I was 15 until I was, like, 18.” Her determination that she would not be limited to this type of employment focused her efforts on gaining college admission. Julie shared that at one point, she stated, “if I don’t get a green card, or if I don’t go to
college, I’m going back to Portugal.” Her circumstances were important in her eventual enrollment and continuing success.

Summary. As the participant experiences that are highlighted in this theme would suggest, how each student navigated their cultural identity within their own sphere and used it to achieve success is very diverse. The family heritage of each student provides the backdrop to their success as it defines the cultural capital with which each student entered college. The ways that the students engaged with their culture through language lessons, exploration of ethnicity, and community involvement provided access to a bicultural/multicultural world that each student uses to support and enhance their success. For all participants, navigating their cultural identity is a part of achieving their goals and being successful. Evidence of the students negotiating their identities was woven throughout their stories. It was clear, however, that the result of negotiating an experience based on a cultural factor most often lead to increased motivation to succeed.

Theme 3: Encouragement

Encouragement is the sub-theme that encompasses different types of support the student receives that assist with individual success. The support can be verbal, emotional, take the form of accountability, money, or any other type of support that is meaningful to the student. Four sub-themes emerged as particularly relevant to this group of participants: recognition, peer support, family support, and counsel. Table 5 below explains the sub-themes in detail.
Table 5. Encouragement: Sub-Theme Definitions and Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-theme</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recognition</td>
<td>Formal or informal feedback acknowledging the student’s success.</td>
<td>Not internal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Affirms efforts or actions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer support</td>
<td>Contemporaries helping the student move forward toward success; can be through a formal or casual relationship.</td>
<td>Exclusive of family</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Recognized by the participant as a support source</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family support</td>
<td>Family members helping the student move forward toward success.</td>
<td>Regular contact</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Evolving relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counsel</td>
<td>Senior staff members holding students accountable, teaching life lessons, or providing an example along the path to success.</td>
<td>Counsel has a greater knowledge base than student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Does not include parents</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While all participants exhibited the parent theme of encouragement in some form, Julie in particular did not express this theme as strongly as the other participants.

**Recognition.** Being recognized for their efforts or actions was something that most participants pointed to as affirming that they were progressing toward or achieving their goals. Most did not share small “pat on the back” stories. Julie did not express this theme during the course of her interview. In telling their stories, participants most often acknowledged a moment of recognition that encompassed efforts in several areas of a participant’s life. For example, two students shared moments of reward and excellence that recognized their full range of abilities in granting the awards. In both of these examples, the recognition lead to a life-changing circumstance; this was not true for every story that was shared.

[It] ended up I was a semi-finalist for the [full ride scholarship] here, and then I got a $40,000 scholarship from a private donor, which basically would take care of all of
college for four years as an in-state student versus a little bit more than one year out-of-state. So, I decided to come here…” (Rick)

…getting the first [co-op] offer was neat. Because I was like, I wasn’t sure how I was doing, but getting the first offer, and like, seeing how much money I could make was pretty cool. I definitely, when I got the BMW offer and I made that, like, I knew. I guess that was life-changing because I thought, like, well, this could lead to a real career. (Rodrigo)

Portentia and Ivette both shared stories of being recognized with a culminating award as well. However, they also spoke of the importance of recognition by their peer groups as part of their success stories. Ivette said, “for the last four years, [one of my best friends], she’s been trying to get me to [say], like, Ivette, it’s ok that you’re awesome. And I’ll only do that in private with her; I am awesome, I am great.” Being recognized by a peer in this manner has allowed Ivette to grow in her ability to talk about her own accomplishments with a balance of humility and pride.

Informal recognition from peers in conjunction with formal learning through her Public Leadership academic curriculum has allowed Portentia to better define what she wants to do after she graduates. She shared, “I’ve been called by my students a good leader, and I’ve often been called by my peers a leader. And that’s something I never thought of myself, you know, being a leader.” In this case, the recognition changed the way that Portentia viewed herself and her own accomplishments.
Peer support. All the students spoke of being supported by their peers in some way that they recognized as supporting their eventual success. Three students identified strongly with a particular group of peers. Rodrigo said, “I definitely feel a really close bond with [the other fraternity men], almost like… most people feel like brother status, you know. But we’re almost there now. A lot of things we’re doing now is [sic] to get closer as a group.” Ivette discusses her relationship with her line sisters in the Latina fraternity regularly, along with two other friendships. She shared, “the friends that I have here [at college], I’m really, really close with them. So they’re more like family. Like, I would do anything for them, and vice versa….” For both Rodrigo and Julie, the deep friendships offer practical support to their success, including getting rides when needed and venting frustrations after a long day.

Julie identifies her primary support group as the other students in the Servant Leadership program that she has been a part of for all four years of her college career. Additionally, she has been encouraged by the people she served with during alternative spring break trips. She stated, “I appreciate [my fellow alternative spring break students] as people and I shared that experience with them and I learned a lot from, you know, being in the group setting, having to work with groups.” Julie garners support from these groups by mutual edification and lateral support, expressing that something she has learned through these experiences is how to mix the good of another person with her own successfully.

By contrast, Portentia and Rick both relate that they have been encouraged by peers but appear to contribute more of their success to their individual abilities. Rick discusses his involvement at length, and briefly mentions, “My RA was, she was actually the president of
[a Latin group], and so she encouraged me to, like, get involved with them.” Similarly, Portentia discusses her academic commitment regularly, and remarks, “…I have my really good friend who is also a colleague. She helped me with some math and biology concepts, so understanding that. But, I pretty much learned on my own.”

Overall, the support of peers assisted the participants’ success by creating safe spaces for exploration and encouraging them on a personal level. At the minimum, the participants recognized that they were not alone on their educational journeys. The deeper peer relationships tended to take on characteristics of family and helped the students feel grounded and supported as they pursued their goals.

**Family support.** Family was an integral component of every participant’s story. The ways in which the family supported the student on the path to success varied, as did the family unit with which the student most closely associated. For some students, support was explicitly seen in the words or actions of the family members. For others, it was more the confidence that the family member is providing the support needed to succeed.

Indirect support was more evident in the stories of Julie and Portentia. Julie experienced that type of support from her mother, who provided housing at all stages of her life, including during her brief marriage. By not mentioning any major rifts with her mother, Julie also implied that with the support of physical shelter her mother consistently provided emotional stability and shelter while she navigated her relationship. When asked about her family, Julie stated that her mom is “all [she] has right here.” Portentia recognized similar support from her husband, pointing out physical supports like cooking and taking care of the
kids so that she can use that time for school work. She also mentioned that he encouraged her to apply and transfer to Southeast State so that she would get the most out of the money she was paying for her education, implying emotional support for her success.

The other three participants all recognized the impact of the direct support of their parents on their ability to succeed. These students also mentioned verbal and emotional encouragement, but the following examples are more narrowly defined.

…when you’re around military kids, a lot of parents don’t really care that much about their students’ education. They view it as the responsibility of the teachers; if the student isn’t doing well it’s the teacher’s fault and not any of the factors at the house or anything like that. And so, my parents, like, they helped me, made sure I did my work. (Rick)

My mom was definitely really important. Like, she was encouraging. She might have just signed papers, and she didn’t know what she was signing, but… she was really important to, like, yeah, you’re doing good! (Ivette)

Rodrigo mentioned that his family helped with college finances, stating, “[In terms of] money, like, we didn’t qualify for financial aid but my dad’s trying to pay as we go, which is nice….‖ These three examples show how the participants’ families supported them with different facets of their journey. One showcases academic support in high school, and the other two show financial support for accessing college and then persisting through college. Additionally, the families of each student provide an emotional base of support that is encouraging and stable.
Counsel. Though the level of dependence on good counsel was different for each participant, every one recognized the importance of having a trusted source of information in an advisory capacity. Perhaps the most significant relationship of this type was Ivette’s source of information about college, her school counselor. Without this relationship and access to the information the counselor possessed, Ivette may not have pursued a college education or may have been significantly less successful at navigating the process.

I finally went to my counselor. I had never been to... I went like the end of my junior year. They were talking to me about, like, college and about, like, things that I should be doing. And I just had never, like, like really realized. I mean, I knew I was – I knew I was supposed to get good grades in high school but it never occurred to me, like, oh, well, you’ve got to apply, there’s a process to go to college; you don’t just go. So I didn’t really, like, know the actual details of how you get to school and what happens after you get there, like, how do you pay for it, all those little things, I didn’t know any of that stuff, and my mom couldn’t really help me, so I started just – I started going to my counselor. And then, when she started talking about all these things, and I saw the, what’s it called, like a college fair thing they have at the school, that really encouraged me to keep doing more research, as far as how I was going to go, what I was going to do, and how I was going to pay for it. (Ivette)

Three other students identified the importance of a staff advisor in the student affairs department at Southeast State. Rick and Rodrigo identified the same person, Alfredo Vasquez, who was the advisor for several of the Latin groups on campus. Rodrigo said, “I
first met him and he was real cool and … he’s really about the Hispanic culture and … encouraged me to get into it…. I was also applying for [co-op] stuff and he was just really interested and supportive.” Rick shared that his relationship was primarily about accountability, stating, “You know, you’ve got people you look up to and they’re looking back at you saying, you know, well is he doing a good job or not. I’m not going to try to disappoint anybody.”

Julie identified the staff director of her Servant Leadership program as an individual who had an impact on her college journey. She said, “Misty, which is like the director of that [Servant Leadership] program, she’s definitely been there through some of the almost breakdowns” that come along with the learning process. However, Julie primarily viewed her as a teacher with knowledge to impart, but not an integral part of her college career. In general, advisors offered advice and gave some input, but were not integrated into the participants’ college career. However, they served as resources that shared knowledge the participants used to pursue success in other areas of life.

Portentia and Rodrigo discussed counsel that was found in the work place. In these instances, the nature of the advice and information shared with the participant seemed more personal. The participants related that the person had a sincere interest in their well-being. Portentia identified her boss as a person “who pretty much said, in more than one occasion, you know, you’re not going to get anywhere without a degree.” She names him as her first motivation to pursue a degree.
Rodrigo discussed a co-worker, Karen, who taught him about office life while he was working at his co-op placement. He did not know the importance of some parts of office life, and Karen taught him “how the office works” and generally kept him in check. Intricacies such as office politics, using email to communicate, and balancing life and work were lessons he learned from her. Both Portentia and Rodrigo identify the people who counseled them in the workplace as primary people they would thank for helping them reach their goals and be successful, pointing to a strength of relationship that was not present in the other participant’s relationships with counsel. However, overall the effectiveness of good counsel on relies on the counsel’s sincere interest in the participant, ability to disseminate pertinent information, and ready faith that guides or encourages participant success.

**Summary.** Overall, having multiple sources of encouragement contributed to the success of the participants because it created a safe and stable base for them to pursue their goals from. Formal and informal recognition allowed participants to see how their actions were viewed or appreciated in the real world. Peer and family support created a relationship web that the participant’s could draw on for a myriad of needs. Good counsel helped students gain access to pertinent information and guidance when needed to be able to take the next step toward overall success.

**Theme 4: Motivating Factors**

The motivating factors of the participants were often what kept them moving forward toward success during times of doubt. The definition of this theme is: actions that a student wants to take that encourage him or her to continue forward along their path to success. The
three components of this theme are family expectations, giving back to the community, and role modeling (being an example). These sub-themes are defined and characterized in Table 6 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-theme</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family expectations</td>
<td>The student “living up to” or beyond their family’s predictions.</td>
<td>Spoken or unspoken by the family (or family members)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giving back to the community</td>
<td>Wanting others to have similar or better experiences.</td>
<td>Defined population Feasible actions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role modeling</td>
<td>Moving forward to show the way for those following.</td>
<td>Specific constituency Inspiring others Accountability</td>
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**Family expectations.** Participants expressed this sub-theme by either positive or negative expectations from their families. Positive feedback included driving expectations founded on the family’s confidence in the abilities of the student to perform well. Ivette expressed this sub-theme the least, stating often that “it was never an option to quit,” but it seems that pressure was internal rather than from her family. Rick and Rodrigo were both received positive encouragement from their parents, who expressed high expectations of their ability to succeed in high school and college.

I was like, kind of, incentivized to get good grades. And then after awhile it became, like, motivation, cause they’re like, ‘We’re not going to be able to help you pay for college so you really gotta bust ass.’[sic] And whatever, to get your grades, to get to school, get a good scholarship, and so that was kind of like, my motivation, just like, do well that way. Because I knew my parents weren’t really going to be able to pay for it that much. (Rick)
…during high school, like, my dad always told me…He always put a lot of pressure on me because, like, my brother was all about sports and I was all about school. I kind of did both but more school-oriented, so he knew I’d go on further and stuff. So, he always put a lot of pressure on me. “Oh, Rodrigo, you gotta, like, be paying my bills when you get out” and stuff, so, I was like, ok. (Rodrigo)

Other participant families expected the student to do poorly based on prior behavior or perceived circumstance. Portentia and Julie both experienced overcoming their family’s expectations with their success. In Portentia’s case, it was due to her own prior track record with completing higher education. When discussing her college enrollment in 2006, Portentia said, “I was afraid I was going to, that again my family was going to say, ‘See, I told you, you weren’t going to finish, you know, something else that you started and didn’t finish.’” Julie experienced some negative and some positive familial expectations. Her mother had simply stated high expectations; Julie shared, “…my mom would be like, well, if you don’t do this, well, you know you can.” Her family in Portugal, on the other hand, expected little of her.

…a lot of people in Portugal were like, ‘Oh, the poor child got ripped away from her family and is in this country da da da da da.’ So people really expected nothing out of me…. Like, oh, she’s going to do nothing with her life. … because people expected so less, maybe, of me in Portugal, I turned out to be so much better because when people tell me, oh, you can’t do this, I’m like, yeah, right watch. (Julie)
The expectations of family members were an important motivating factor for the participants. Whether the expectation was positive or negative only determined whether the student with try to live up to or overcome, but ultimately familial expectations drove the student along the path to success.

**Giving back to the community.** An important element for all participants was the opportunity to invest in the communities that they feel have invested in them. For four of the participants, the community of interest was the Latino community. Portentia was nominated as a community leader by the Mexican consul who is already investing in the Latino community around Southeast State by helping Latinos of all ages through the GED program she works for. Helping the students succeed is motivational for her success.

Rodrigo involved himself with the Latino fraternity effort in order to explore and enrich Hispanic culture on campus. His primary motives always come back to reaching students who felt isolated and could benefit from a support system because “sometimes peer mentoring [does not] work.” Rick’s area of focus was drawing the Latino communities from the colleges surround Southeast State together to be united, because “at the end of the day … we’re all a minority group and we’re all going for education to make… the system easier for others like us to come through.” Ivette was extremely invested in campus leadership opportunities, taking on executive board positions when candidates were scarce and working to make improvements in the on-campus community.

Julie’s experiences were outside the Latino community, but she also expressed the most growth about the place of “giving back” and servant leadership in her life. She has
taken advantage of community service opportunities while in college, and ultimately hopes that her chosen career path will allow her to have a global impact. She started by asking herself what she can do to change the world with her own knowledge, and concluded that start socially responsible businesses is something she can do. Julie discussed, “I’m trying to develop a micro financing company in Uruguay…. that branched off of me going to Guatemala… when I lived with my host family and they had micro financing that helped them sustain their living.”

Giving back to the community is tied directly into the students’ current activities. Most participants felt that they had been assisted on their path to success and that re-investing in the community was the appropriate action to show their gratitude. The opportunity the participants had to use their current success to help create opportunities for others motivated them to continue performing at their highest levels.

**Role modeling.** Only one participant does not explicitly state role modeling or being an example as one of his motivations for success. The participant, Rick, is in many leadership roles including being a Resident Advisor, which has role modeling imbedded in it. However, he did not correlate a desire to be a role model with his success story.

The two participants who have younger siblings both spoke about being a role model and example within their family. In this instance, both students happen to have younger brothers.

…my brother was really important, the one who lives with my mom, cause he was always like – me and him were really close growing up, even though we’re five years
…he’s sixteen. So, it was like, I was his role model so making sure that I succeeded was important to me so that he could see – he could have a role model to, like, look up to and, not necessarily follow but have – have a resource. (Ivette)

…I think my youngest brother, he’s also in college in Ecuador…I think he looks up to me and I am his motivation so I have been able to stay focused and remember that I’m helping him stay on track, you know, so… you know, for the longest time he didn’t know what he wanted to do either. He found, he hopped from school to school finding the right one. And now, you know, he’s finally on track. (Portentia)

Rodrigo and Julie both discussed the opportunity to be a role model to their peer groups. Peer mentorship, co-op ambassador, and the fraternity were Rodrigo’s avenues for reaching out to people. Julie was more intent on her friend group, specifically from high school or work.

…becoming a peer mentor. Definitely, um, talking to other freshmen and just kind of sharing my experiences and how they can learn from that better, you know, being in that role of mentoring definitely makes you feel like – obviously if you’re in a role to mentor people you’ve got to be a good example…. So, and then becoming a co-op ambassador [after my rotations]….I’m always, anyone I talk to I always encourage them to do co-op, but now that I’m actually related with the co-op program at State in academic affairs, and that kind of stuff, or whatever the co-op program does. Ambassadors just kind of go to fairs and talk to other students. So now, actually,
officially being, like, an ambassador and being able to talk to people on that level feels pretty cool. (Rodrigo)

So I feel like once I learned that maybe my friend choices weren’t the best I turned that experience into a positive one. To where I was, maybe, shedding positive to them and not letting them negatively affect me. Maybe setting – like, being a role model to them. … I need to be doing this so that they can see that somebody from their group or somebody that sees where they’re coming from can do this too. That kind of took, like, that let me be this role model type of thing and that helped me stay where I needed to stay. Because I didn’t want to fail. Not because of me – I mean, yeah, because of me, but – more because I didn’t want them to see me fail because I wanted them to see success out of, you know, out of somebody like them. (Julie)

The desire to be a role model stemmed from the participants’ wanting others to be able to follow in their footsteps and achieve comparable success. The participants could see how success had changed their lives, and wanted to offer the opportunity to others coming along beside or behind them.

**Summary.** The motivating factors discussed in this theme are expressions of the students’ inner success process to the outside world. Showing your family that you are moving steadily towards your goals, finding a place in the community to reinvest your time and energy, and encouraging others to achieve their dreams are all ways that students can use their current level of success to make a difference more immediately. The interactive
Motivators described through this theme create a flow of motivation that both pushes and pulls the student toward their goal of success.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The research question for this study was, “What are the stories of successful Latino seniors?” The findings of this study indicate that stories of successful Latino seniors are impacted by four components: traits and abilities, cultural identity, encouragement, and motivating factors. It is important to note that the discussion that follows refers specifically to the participants of this study. The Latino population is very diverse, to the point where even these participants have cultural and ethnic diversity within individuals, and therefore the implications cannot be generalized. However, we are able to use these stories as accounts of five students’ success that may help other students achieve similar goals.

Defining Success Holistically

First, it is important to discuss how these five participants defined success. This study defined a successful Latino senior as someone with a 3.0 GPA or above, is currently in their fourth year of school, is graduating in May 2011 or May 2012, and is an undergraduate student. However, based on the definitions provided by these five students, a key component is missing: happiness. This word is taken directly from the participant stories, and seems to reflect the participants’ desire for a holistic sense of well-being as a part of their success.

Julie indicated that to her happiness and personal drives are interrelated, saying, “I don’t want money to make my happiness. I don’t want money to drive me as a person.” Rick discussed his own accomplishments and then said that “if you do all that, and you’re
happy with what you did” then you had reached a measure of success. He also discussed the importance of a social life, friends, being busy, and not using college as merely a means to an end as part of what makes him content. Rodrigo discussed a good job, personal life, not working all the time, relationships, and supporting a family as dimensions of life, and that “to be happy in that life and in your work life” is what makes you successful. Portentia judged her success “by the numbers” but also by the relationships she was able to maintain over time. When she speaks with her students, she says, “They’re still grateful, you know, that makes me happy.” Ivette reflected that “even if you’re happier than your parents you’ve improved your life.”

For these participants, a driving factor is that their success includes work or academics, personal life, having meaning, and relationships that make them happy in addition to helping them accomplish goals. While most participants mentioned meeting certain benchmarks as a component of success, they also included continued personal relationships, getting to experience new things, finding balance, and being driven by something that has deep meaning. For these participants, success is highly personal, and can only be measured by a student’s individual measures. Therefore, when considering the following components that impact success it is important that we use the participants’ definition of success that includes happiness or holistic well-being.

**Review of the Findings**

In addition to using the holistic definition of success, it is important to consider the themes as parts of a story that interact fluidly throughout the participant stories. Accordingly,
a brief overview of the findings is followed by a review of how the findings of this study are placed in the current literature. The traits and abilities reflected most strongly in the participant stories were academic focus, confidence, dedication, independence, and passion. This combination provided an internal core that allowed the students to cope with challenges they encountered as they worked to achieve their goals. Participants’ described their family heritage, experiences learning English or Spanish, explorations of Hispanic ethnicity, and membership in encouraging cultural communities, which were aspects of their cultural identities. They also shared stories of effectively negotiating potentially negative experiences related to their cultural identity. Embracing their identity as a being of culture allowed the students to utilize every resource in both the general community and the Latino community along their path to success, instead of getting stuck in a trap of stereotypes and low expectations. Understanding their sources of encouragement, including recognition, peer support, family support, and counsel, enabled to participants to gather strength from those sources and to tap them as needed in order to keep their momentum. Finally, making a place in their life for interactions with motivating factors was important to the participants’ success because it gave them a sense of greater purpose. Students thrived on living up to or exceeding family expectations, giving back to the communities in which they are stakeholders, and being an example or role model to those who may come after them.

**Participant Characteristics**

The participants in this study represented a mix of the characteristics that are typically associated with Latino college students. This participant pool tended to be more English-
speaking, have access to better secondary school environments, and be less likely to contend with immigration issues than the statistical picture of Latinos would suggest. Additionally, the participants were extremely well-prepared academically for college-level work and did not mention typical barriers such as language or under-resourced schools as factors they encountered (Mellander, 2008). The pool had some similarities to the larger population. First, access to good information about how to navigate the college system, institution types, and deadlines was a barrier for three of five participants (Brown, Santiago, & Lopez, 2003). Second, though no participants encountered an inability to pay for college that caused them to stop pursuing a degree, every participant mentioned affordability and paying for college as a significant factor in their college choice (St. John, 2001). Of five participants, one incurred significant loan debt, two chose in-state tuition and are paying as they attend, and two received scholarships large enough to cover four years of college.

**Presence of External Factors**

The external factors of family, financial support, and institutional support were confirmed again by this research. In terms of external factors, Linares’ (2008) emphasis on the importance of family at all levels can be clearly seen through this study, particularly in the family support, family expectations, and role modeling themes. Linares (2008) recommendation that “family” should include siblings, children, and other extended family in addition to parents is confirmed by this study. For these participants, the concept of affordability (St. John, 2001) was particularly important in the area of financial support, with an emphasis on the student’s perception of affordability as opposed to the entire family.
Recognition as evidenced in this study can be seen in part under financial support (Castellanos & Jones, 2003) as it concerns scholarship awards or job offers during college. The findings concerning recognition also extend the research because other examples of the recognition sub-theme point to the importance of informal acknowledgement in meaningful settings as influencing student success.

Having an encouraging Latino community, peer support, and access to good counsel are discussed as key factors by Gonzalez (1997) and Rosa (2009) as sources of support that impact the Latino community in the way that faculty member involvement impacts other student types. The importance of encouraging community and peer support confirmed that a reference group is important component of institutional support for Latino student success (Gonzalez, 1997; Zalaquett, 2006). This study confirmed that peers and administrative staff (Gonzalez, 1997; Rosa, 2009) are also important sources of institutional support, and in addition suggested that supervisors invested in the success Latino students should be considered “counsel” as well.

The themes of role modeling and giving back to the community also support Zalaquett’s (2006) conclusion that responsibility toward others is a supporting factor for persistence. However, the findings suggest that both could be considered protective factors under resilience theory. In terms of being a role model, the students described deriving motivation to succeed by knowing that there was someone who would benefit from their success. Portentia and Ivette pointed to their brothers, Julie to peers, and Rodrigo to fellow engineering students as constituents they felt they were assisting by succeeding. Similarly,
the participants described giving back to the community through service as motivation to continue along their success paths. Each participant served by providing leadership to an organization. They felt that would positively impact their communities in the long term and people with similar backgrounds or cultural heritage would have more opportunity to succeed.

This extends the idea of resilience because role modeling and giving back to the community have not been included as potential protective factors. Literature about African American graduate students has documented a sense of mission to better the education situation of future generations (Antony & Taylor, 2001) and also indicated that those students have a higher sense of purpose or meaning associated with their life path (Constantine et al., 2006). However, the relationship between the African American graduate students and their mission or purpose is more directional and less interactive than the findings in this study. It suggests that these undergraduate participants translate their similar activities into a loop of motivation and success. By looking “behind” them, the Latino students in this study are encouraged forward toward their goals.

**Presence of Internal Factors**

Similar to previous studies, my results revealed that Latino student success is dependent on both external and internal factors. Internal factors such as academic preparation or focus (Kuh, 2006; Linares, 2008; Miller, 2005), confidence (Rosa, 2009), and dedication (Zalaquett, 2006) were found again. Evidence of internal factors such as passion and independence extend the current literature regarding internal factors for success. Passion
emerged as a protective factor that allowed students to continue through more difficult classes or other circumstances without losing focus. The participants expressed that because of their commitment to a particular path (e.g. major or career) they were able to persevere through any challenges in order to achieve their end goals. An important nuance of this finding is that participants expressed their excitement about the work they would be able to do after they graduated as what motivated them and added value to the result of overcoming the challenge. This finding suggests a “next step” in to academic preparation entering college which is the importance of major or career path fit in order to maintain academic engagement.

Hurtado, Carter, and Spuler (1996) found that independence, which reflected the student’s ability to separate from the family while maintaining family relationships and support, may allow Latino students to adjust better to the college environment. This study supports that finding, and suggests that independence may also be considered a protective factor under resilience theory because the students were able to navigate potential risk factors such as financial difficulty (Rodrigo), undocumented status (Julie), or low family support (Portentia) utilizing their independence. Researchers have alluded to independence in finding that successful Latino students have a desire to succeed (Contreras, 2009; Linares, 2008) or an “I can do it” attitude (Rosa, 2009) that allows them to achieve at high levels. However, independence that reflects a balance of family distance and support is not well-linked in the resilience literature concerning Latino student success.
A new concept in terms of success research that was evident in this study is the importance of bi- or multi-culturation, or bicultural/multicultural self-efficacy, for student success. In the case of these participants the term “bicultural” seemed most appropriate because they primarily expressed their involvement with Latino/Hispanic culture and White culture. However, several participants have multicultural heritage that may be more relevant than expressed during these interviews. Bicultural self-efficacy is defined as “the belief, or confidence, that one can live effectively, and in a satisfying manner, within two groups without compromising one’s sense of cultural identity” (LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993, p. 404).

The theme of cultural identity, a concept much larger than family, emerged as a protective factor relevant to the success of the student. It includes the participant’s interaction with his or her family heritage, including learning the language, exploring the ethnicity, and becoming involved in the community as factors that are important for success. The final sub-theme of the cultural identity theme is negotiating experiences, which is expressed through the participants’ stories of transition through situations rooted cultural identity in which they emerge with a new perspective or skill set that will help them continue toward success.

Julie and Portentia discuss how their ability to blend their Latina and dominant culture experiences have assisted them succeed in work and school. Ivette, Rick, and Rodrigo speak at length about the social success that they have experienced by drawing from both cultures, which is important in light of the participants’ holistic definition of success.
Previously identified protective factors that seem related to this area are self esteem (Linares, 2008) and positive attitudes (Hernandez, 2000) because they would be relevant in making meaning of a bi- or multi-cultural identity. The findings in this study suggest successful multicultural identity integration, or feeling able to accomplish that goal in the future, is in itself a protective factor that assists students succeed.

**Theoretical Implications**

The concepts of social capital (Bordieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988) and resilience (Garmezy, 1991; Morales, 2008) undergird this study. Social capital is the idea that human capital can be created through the networks and channels of the relationships that to which one has access. Resilience is the concept of protective factors a student has access to that allow him or her to move forward when faced with crisis. Both constructs are supported by the data found in this study, and expanded by it.

**Social capital.** The concepts of social capital are upheld by the findings of this study, most significantly under the theme of encouragement. The theme, defined as sources of support, is primarily concerned with the formal and informal connections that the participants make with peers, family, and campus constituents. According to social capital theory, any increase in the size or strength of the network will in turn strengthen the social capital available to the student (Bordieu, 1986). The students in this study experienced an increase in social capital when their networks expanded to include new connections.

For example, Rodrigo experienced this when he received his co-op appointment, allowing him access to new role models and counsel, in addition to a network of fellow co-op
students from across the country. Rick made new contacts, particularly within the student affairs administration at Southeast State, when he accepted a position as a Resident Advisor and also when he took a leadership position with the Latino organization Juntos. Finally, Portentia expanded her network by inviting the local Mexican consul to speak at her school, and then drastically increased her capital by taking the opportunity to travel to Mexico to attend the community leader conference.

The access to greater information for these participants allowed them to gain new information about themselves, their opportunities, and how to be successful going forward. By taking advantage of these information sources and opportunities that arise from these connections, the participants will personally gain new knowledge and skills. They will be able to increase their human capital, which will eventually become economic and cultural capital (Becker, 1992).

The participants’ definition of success, as holistic and generally including an element of happiness, seems more conducive to the creating of social capital alongside human capital. Social capital requires maintenance (Adler & Kwon, 2002) and therefore taking time to care for the social network is an important component of success beyond making the connections initially. This allows an avenue for the participants dimensions of holistic success, including personal relationships, meaning, and sense of well-being, to be developed alongside their human capital. A more narrowly drawn definition, such as the parameters of the study, could discount an important aspect of successfully leveraging social capital.
A potential implication for this study is the “sharpening stone” effect of social capital and human capital within the college setting, meaning that the first enhances the second which in turn enhances the first in a cycle of development. An example of the “sharpening stone” effect of rapid social and human capital gains are is the friendship of two of the participants in this study, Ivette and Julie. Because of this, Ivette has access to the Servant Leadership network through Julie, and Julie access to the Hispanic community through Ivette. In addition to the social network access they grant each other with their associates, they both have access to each other. When Julie incorporates new knowledge from her alternative spring break trip to Panama into a skill, her human capital increases, thus increasing Ivette’s social capital. Similarly, Julie’s social capital increases when Ivette is trained for the Teach for America program, which increases her human capital. The effect, which happens in the normal workplace as well, may be magnified by the amount of human capital development on a college campus, the encouragement of established networks, and the sheer number of people who are available to be part of social capital networks on or around a campus.

Social capital theory is predicated on the idea that each time you add a connection, you gain more social capital and therefore more access to resources through your network (Bourdieu, 1986). When examining the college environment today, both the physical environment and the digital environment governed by social networking websites, it is clear that students are able to rapidly add connections to their resource networks. Most student
and academic departments actively encourage students to get connected. Thus, they can rapidly increase the amount of social capital that they have available in their network.

“Like human capital and some forms of public goods, such as knowledge, [social capital] normally grows and develops with use” (Adler & Kwon, 2002). By implication, this means that a person’s human capital can be developing at the same rapid rate that their social capital is developing. In the college setting, keeping in mind that “education and training are the most important investments in human capital” (Becker, 1992), each student is constantly increasing the “value” of their connection by increasing their human capital. In turn, they are then increasing the “value” of their social capital connection because their human capital is now more developed, and therefore so are the resources available to their entire social capital network.

**Resilience.** Traditional protective factors were observed in the participants’ stories in the area that Garmezy (1991) described as temperament, which is the modification of stressors by activity level, ability to reflect on new situations, good cognitive development, and positive interactions with others (p. 421). He also indicated that other modifying factors could include family support, information channels, and family background. The findings are in line with Contreras’ (2009) study of undocumented students, in which she finds that extreme determination is a key to success. The participants in this study exhibited that sort of determination through their displays of academic focus, confidence, and dedication. In addition, this study found strong evidence that independence was important for the participants to be able to succeed at a high level. While they all stated clearly that family
was important, every participant also stepped out on their own in some fashion in order to achieve their success. Often, they were acting independently of their family’s initial wishes; the participants show respect for their families but also are willing to pursue their goal without family support if necessary.

Additionally, each participant exhibited a centering academic passion that grounded them in their coursework. While all of these students were high achieving in high school, it was evident from their stories that when they were not passionate about a course or their coursework in general, their grades fell significantly and that impacted the rest of their lives as students. The passion for the academic work goes beyond the academic focus that is required to do well in school and make the goal about doing well in life. Some examples are Julie finding a way to combine her passion for servant leadership with her business concentration, Rick drastically rebounding from his first year in engineering to be excited about working in the graphic communications industry, or Portentia finding a place for her Public Leadership coursework in her community college work life.

Other findings that extend the idea of resilience are the motivating factors. Resilience is the ability of a person to overcome stress and risk by taking advantage of the ‘protective’ factors available to him or her (Garmezy, 1991). In the success stories of these Latino students, the opportunity to give back to the community that had invested in them or to be an example for a sibling or peer was clearly a protective factor that helped modify the stress of school. Julie discussed wanting to succeed so that her peers would see that someone like them was able to attend college successfully. Ivette and Portentia are both persevering
towards their degrees with their younger brothers in mind. Rodrigo devotes intense amounts of time to starting the Latin fraternity in hopes that it can reach students that have not been reached by peer mentoring. Not only did these students want to succeed for themselves, but for the rest of the community that they had the ability to impact.

Finally, the last concept that extends resilience is the protective nature of biculturation or bicultural/multicultural efficacy that participants displayed through the cultural identity theme. The participants each told a story of successful, or approaching successful, integration of the two cultures that enhanced their social, cultural, and human capital. The participants shared experiences of navigating situations that were directly tied to their cultural identity that gave them motivation to succeed later in their career. Ivette knew that she did not want to have her children take care of themselves, Portentia determined that she would change career paths, Rick has become comfortable with his dual heritage, Julie never again faced a hurdle as large as her immigration paperwork, and Rodrigo learned the value of partnerships when working to enhance Latino culture on campus. The interactions of the two cultures provided a protective factor that allowed the students to cope with stressors.

**Implications for Practice**

Based on the findings in this study, I have three recommendations for promoting the success of the Latino population at Southeast State. First, increase the efforts to match Latino students with academic work that is a centering passion and excites the student. Each of the five participants identified having a passion for their major, which was then a protective factor that allowed them to work through other challenging courses or personal
crises to achieve their goals. Reaching out to students who have already declared majors, especially at Southeast State where a majority of first-year students come into college with a declared major, and offering to help the students explore other options early in their college career before their academics suffer. Additionally, continuing to promote programs like peer mentoring and involvement on campus, increasing the social capital of the student and therefore their knowledge of the campus and community resources that can assist them if they do not complete a goal.

Second, continue to celebrate the cultural identities of the Latino population, helping students to move toward bicultural/multicultural efficacy, which is “the belief that one can develop and maintain effective interpersonal relationships in two cultures [and] is directly related to one’s ability to develop bicultural/multicultural competence” (LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993). It is particularly important to make students who are multiracial feel that they have a place on campus and welcomed into the community. The more comfortable students are with their cultural identities, the better they will be able to negotiate experiences related to those identities with a positive outcome. Also, students who are multiracial may allow more capital to accumulate within the Latino community as they have access to networks that are not traditionally within that community (Perna & Titus, 2005).

Continuing to support and encourage the formation of Latino groups is important, but it is also important to help Latino students find leadership opportunities with students from other backgrounds. Encouraging Latinos to apply for RA positions, get involved with Servant
Leadership groups, go on alternative spring breaks, or take on campus employment will help the social capital network expand.  

Finally, find a way to incorporate vision creation into the Latino activities on campus. Providing opportunities for Latino students to define success for themselves and determine a “motivating factor” to fulfill as part of that success may keep students motivated when they would otherwise quit. This could be through an orientation event, but the community as a whole is better served if Latino leaders are encouraged to join leadership programs, become resident assistants, or participate in Leadershape. Additionally, making sure that there is an active presence with the TRiO program on campus or tutoring opportunities in low-income areas will provide outlets for students to invest in the community or feel that they are a role model for someone else. 

Limitations 

This study has several limitations that should be mentioned. The first is the size of the participant pool, five students, out of the entire Latino population on campus. Based on the criteria of the study, there were approximately 42 students who could have participated (personal communication, Dr. Tracey Ray), so the study included a small number of viewpoints. Every participant in this study also did well in high school, and had a certain amount of family stability despite the obstacles mentioned for each participant. Additionally, most students did not have an overlap of several stressors to contend with during their time in college. It is possible that this set of participants does not meet the criteria that they are
“very unlikely” (Morales, 2008) to succeed. While this was not a parameter for the study, the resilience framework is usually used when a researcher begins with a population that is unlikely to succeed. It is possible that by applying the resilience framework after the participant selection allowed new findings to emerge, but it is also important to point out that the framework was not used in the traditional manner.

Finally, as the researcher, my reactions as the participants told their stories affected how they shared information. Though I attempted to remain upbeat but detached, the participants were very vulnerable and I am aware that I honored that vulnerability with emotion at times. Also, I am a student on campus and a student affairs staff member, so my own outlook colors my interpretation of the data. Additionally, the sampling was done with a combination of convenience and maximum variation sampling, which means that the participants have some knowledge of each other and their stories overlap at points, which may have caused participants to expand or withhold parts of their stories within the research process.

**Implications for Future Research**

The first area for further study is determining a more holistic definition of success. Hearing the stories of students who feel intrinsically successful as opposed to those who meet benchmarks may reveal new information about both resilience and social capital. Future research could also benefit from differentiating between foreign- and native-born Latino students and statistics when framing and organizing studies. This would allow results to emerge that reflect the difference between the two populations. Also discussing success with
college students throughout their years, or non-traditional students only, may give added dimensions to success that have not yet been explored.

The findings of motivating desires present a possible research area for future study. Resilience has traditionally focused on the individual student’s ability to overcome stressors (Garmezy, 1991) but not on the way their success will impact others, which is the crux of the motivating desires theme. Another area for study is the impetus for success that a Latino student feels based on a motivating desire, and whether there a balance between an internal and external locus of motivation that is ideal for achieving success.

Finally, in this study the student’s cultural identity generally worked in their favor. Cultural identity, especially for the Latino population, is often seen as a barrier to success due to the associated stereotypes. An area for future research would be to examine the student’s acceptance of their own cultural identity, their use of any social capital available to them, and then their level of academic resilience. This study showed that there was a positive relationship between embracing cultural identity, acknowledging stressors, and attaining academic success. A larger or different participant pool could give provide more insight on this relationship.

**Conclusion**

The stories of successful Latino seniors show that they are driven toward an individual, holistic success that includes reaching benchmarks and happiness, among other factors. By embracing their cultural identities, Latino students are able to move forward and negotiate experiences based on their culture in a positive way. Biculturation/multiculturation
is seen as a protective factor based on the findings of this study. Latino seniors have several traits and abilities as well as sources of encouragement that make them resilient in the face of stressors. One key finding is the importance of motivating desires in the ability of a Latino student to overcome stressors and grow in resilience, and an important theoretical implication is the potential “sharpening stone” rapid growth effect between social capital and human capital on a college campus.
References

About us (2009). Retrieved from hispanicoutlook.com


APPENDIX
Appendix A

Recruitment Flyer

LATINA/O?
MAY 2011 GRAD?
3.0 GPA?

I want to hear your story!

Are you a Latino or Latina student who is proud of your educational journey? Someone working on successfully graduating in May 2011 with a degree and a GPA of 3.0 or above? I want to hear your story! How did you get here, what was important to you along the way, and to what do you attribute such success?

To be a participant in this study you must be a Latino/a senior planning to graduate in May 2011 with at least a 3.0 GPA. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to participate in one interview, scheduled to take place in October, November, or December, and also respond to an email describing initial findings in the month of January.

I am seeking a diverse sample of participants in terms of gender, ethnic make-up, family history, and college major. If you agree to participate, the information you share will be kept confidential, and your name and other personally identifying information will not be associated with your comments or perceptions. Also, please be assured that participation in this study is completely voluntary.

If you would like to participate, please email me at bastaple@ncsu.edu. I look forward to hearing from you!
Appendix B
Demographic Survey

Please provide the following information to help us ensure that participants in this study reflect diverse perspectives.

1. Gender:

2. Ethnicity:

3. Year in College:

4. Academic Major:

5. In-state or Out-of-State student?:

6. Current number of credits and current GPA:

7. Are you an international student?:

8. Who in your family has graduated with a 2-year degree? 4-year? Master’s or Doctorate?
9. How did you hear about this study?

10. Please provide us with a pseudonym (i.e., a fictitious name) so that this survey will not be associated with your actual name: