

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

What are the social challenges of first generation college Latino students and who do they reach out to for social support?

A graduate project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of Master of Social Work

By

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in collaboration with  
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## Dedication

I would like to dedicate this research to my parents Erick and Mirna Argueta. Thank you for giving me the opportunity of becoming a first-generation college student, my accomplishments would have not been possible without you both.

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## Abstract

What are the social challenges of first generation college Latino students and who do they reach out to for social support?

By

Flor Argueta

Master of Social Work

Although, there are current social support interventions, first-generation college Latino students continue to lack social support necessary to successfully complete higher education. This project explored the social challenges that first-generation college Latino students experience and from who they receive their social support from. The principal objectives were to increase the understanding of protective factors as well as risk factors with Latinos' success in higher education by: analyzing the social challenges that first-generation college Latino students have, and identifying from where the first-generation college Latino students receive their social support. Fifty-eight first-generation Latino college students participated in our study. The study concluded that First-generation college students have unique challenges and barriers that negatively impact their academic performance. Based on this study, first generation Latino college students enter college academically unprepared, lack a sense of belonging to the college environment, and lack confidence in their academic abilities.

**Key Words:** college, first-generation, social support, challenges

## **Introduction**

According to the United States Census Bureau (2016), the U.S. Latino population reached 57 million as of July 2015 up by 2.2 percent since July 2014. Krogstad (2014) shares Latinos are accounted for more than half (54%) of total U.S. population growth from 2000 to 2014 (Krogstad, 2016, Para. 4). Although Latinos make up a vital number of the U.S. population they continue to lack accomplishment with postsecondary education. Latino students continue to be the largest underrepresented group in higher education. The U.S. Census Bureau (2016) states, in 2015, a majority of Asians 25 years and older had a bachelor's degree or higher (54 percent) more than one-third of non-Hispanic Whites had a bachelor's degree or higher (36 percent), 22 percent of Blacks had this level of education, as did 15 percent of Hispanics. There is an obvious disparity when comparing racial groups and their level of higher education achievement.

First-generation students face various social challenges when pursuing higher education. Banks-Sanyilli (2015) shares that not all first-generation college students are the same, but many experience difficulties within four distinct domains: 1) professional, 2) financial, 3) psychological and 4) academic (Banks-Santilli, 2015, Para. 13).. First-generation students worry about their families, paying for college, lack the expertise on how to submit applications and feel uncomfortable asking faculty for help. First-generation students feel extremely uncomfortable asking for help on academics and the college experience because they feel underestimated by others. For example, Banks-

Santilli shares their background is viewed as a deficit rather than a strength. And they are unnecessarily pitied by others, especially if low-income (Banks-Santilli, 2015, Para. 22).

### **Literature review.**

First-generation college students are those who are the first from the immediate family to attend college. First-generation college students face unique social challenges when earning a higher education degree. Choy shares, first-generation college students represent approximately 50% of all college students and roughly 34% of the students enrolled in 4-year institutions (Choy, 2002, Para. 34). Latinos are taking large steps forward in higher education. According to Pew Research Center (2016), in 2014, 35% of Hispanics ages 18 to 24 were enrolled in a two or four-year college, up from 22% in 1993—a 13- percentage-point increase (Krogstad, 2016, Para. 5). Although, more Latinos are now achieving a postsecondary education compared to earlier years, Latinos are still behind in other groups in obtaining a four-year degree. This study aims to find what social challenges affect the first-generation Latino students and from where do they receive their social support.

Saunders and Serna (2004) state that as first-generation Latino college students make the transition from high school to college, a reconfiguration of relationships and constructive social ties transpire (Saunders & Serna, 2004, p. 146). Latinos hold strong collectivistic values that are centered in the importance of the family. “The potential

for home-school value conflict- conflict between the individualistic behavioral demands of college and collectivistic behavioral demands of family- could peak in a 4-year college where the demands for individual academic achievement become noticeably greater than in high school, while spending time with family and assisting family with tasks becomes much more difficult” (Vasquez-Salgado, Greenfield & Burgos-Cienfuegos, 2015, p. 272). First-generation college Latino students are challenged by the responsibilities of the home role and college role. Furthermore, Banks- Santilli (2015) explains, that by choosing to attend college, he or she experiences a shift in identity, leading to a sense of loss, not prepared for this loss, many first-generation students may come to develop two different identities- one for home and another for college (Banks-Santilli, 2015, para. 3).

A major social challenge that first-generation college Latino students struggle with is the fear of not belonging in college. “Many students expressed feeling out of place when they arrived at the university, because their home communities did not resemble the university in terms of racial/ethnic composition, adjusting to a college environment composed largely of White and Asian American students posed a challenge for many of them who tended to be more familiar with a predominantly Latino or African American environment” (Nuñez, 2011, p. 645). First-generation college Latino students feel stressed with the thought of not being societal accepted in the college/university

campuses. However, Longerbeam, Sedlacek and Alatorre (2004), share that a welcoming campus environment that provides opportunities to incorporate Latino culture is an important institutional contribution to lowering Latino students stress (Longerbeam, Sedlacek & Alatorre, 2004, p. 541).

In addition, a great number of first-generation students are the eldest sibling in the household therefore they hold a great amount of responsibility that can become a challenge when attending school. “Due to being the eldest sibling and their parents working full-time, they were left with the responsibility of caring for younger siblings while attending school full-time” (Kouyoumdijan, Guzman, Garcia & Talavera-Bustillos, 2017, p. 68). This becomes a social challenge because the students need to manage the greater demands that higher education requires while still holding the responsibilities that need to be taken care of at home. Family demands create a threat to being able to be completely academically engaged and be successful in college. For example, Stebleton and Soria share that first-generation and other historically underserved students tend not to participate in high impact educational practices as frequently as traditional students despite evidence that they benefit from participation on par or even more so than their non-first-generation peers” (Stebleton & Soria, 2012, p. 8).

Although first-generation college Latino students face many social challenges they also have access to social support that makes their

navigation through higher education a lot easier. “A dominant and deficit view of Latino parents is that they are not invested enough in their children’s academic lives and that they perceive of school as a separate realm from family and the workplace” (Early, 2010; Clark & Flores, 2007, p. 277). Latino parents also hold important parenting foundations that encourage their children to continue with higher education. Early (2010) states that although first-generation students saw their parents’ limitations and described them as such they were also aware that combined with strictness and encouragement, this lack of cultural capital could be overcome (Early, 2010, p.288). Therefore, Latino parents are strong supporters of their children’s higher education goals although they may not present their belief in education like the White middle-class parents.

**Aims and objectives.**

Although, there are current social support interventions, first-generation college Latino students continue to lack social support necessary to successfully complete higher education. This project explored the social challenges that first-generation college Latino students experience and from who they receive their social support from. The principal objectives were to increase the understanding of protective factors as well as risk factors with Latinos’ success in higher education by: (a) identifying the social support needs of first-generation college Latino students, (b) analyzing the social challenges that first-generation college Latino students have, and (c) identifying from where the first-generation college Latino students receive their social support.

The study used survey design to conduct the research on first-generation college Latino students. The data was collected by using an anonymous online survey through Qualtrics.

## **Method**

### **Participants.**

Each of the participants (n=58) were first-generation Latino college students. 37 of the participants were females and 20 were males. The anonymous survey was posted on social media for students to take. A link to the survey was posted on different social media sites such as, Facebook, Universities Facebook pages, Latino college group Facebook pages, Instagram and Twitter. A flyer with the survey link was also advertised (See Appendix A, Flyer) at different college campuses. The introduction asked that only first-generation Latino college students could complete the survey. Of the 62 participants who began to complete the anonymous online survey, only 58 completed the survey and 4 declined.

### **Measures.**

The target population of this study is the first-generation college student. The research question, what are the social challenges of first-generation college students was explored by constructing a survey. The online survey was written by the researchers based on the relevant publish research. The online survey consists of twenty-seven questions. The twenty-seven-item survey focused on two aspects: (1) the social support first-generation Latino college students receive; and (2) the social challenges first-generation Latino students encounter. The survey consisted of closed and open ended questions. The open-ended questions such as, “Who are your mentors?” provided a deeper understanding of the social support the students receive. Open ended questions allow the respondent to provide answers in their own words. The researchers decided to use an anonymous survey, to maintain respondent’s confidentiality.

**Research Design.**

Research question- The study was designed to address the following research question, What are the social challenges of first-generation Latino college students and who do they reach out for help. This research is a survey design, correlational study. The challenges and social support of first generation college students were measured by using closed ended questions. The closed ended questions were supplemented by asking open ended questions. The open-ended questions provided qualitative data which gave more detailed about the challenges of social support.

**Procedure.**

The first step, of the study was to complete all application forms to the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The second step, was to submit the application to IRB. Once IRB reviewed and approved the research, the IRB process was completed. The researcher then proceeded to conduct the study, the survey was completely anonymous; no names, phone numbers or email addresses will be collected. The online survey was completed through Qualtrics. The researchers confirmed with Qualtrics that no identifiable data was collected. The researchers created a survey and used flyers with an anonymous survey link that was posted online and in social media forums such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. The flyer described the research and who can participate in the research. The flyer also provided information about the researcher; stating that they are a second year MSW student from California State University, Northridge (CSUN). The survey read as follows: “You are being asked to participate in a research study; What are the Social Challenges of First-Generation College Latino Students and who do they reach out to for social support conducted by Flor Argueta and

Angelina Barvoza as part of the requirements for the MSW degree. This study will state the possible challenges first-generation college Latino students face. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. This study will take approximately 15 minutes to complete. This study is anonymous (we will not ask your name or any identifiable information) and all data will be reported aggregate. You can choose not to take this survey or answer any specific questions without consequence. Thank you for your participation.” The researchers distributed the survey electronically over a period of three months. Data was downloaded from Qualtrics; SPSS was used to analyze the data.

## Results

In terms of what are the social challenges of first generation college Latino students and who do they reach out to for social support, 58 accepted (93.5%) to take the survey and 4 declined (6.5%). All completed responses were anonymously recorded. Each of the participants (n=58) were first generation college Latino students that answered the survey in its entirety.

Respondents were 18 years and older (n=58, 100%). Most of the respondents were female 37 (63.8%), 20 were male (34.5%) and 1 respondent choose other (1.6%). Of those that answered the academic support at home question 24 reported “strongly agree” (41.4%), 11 reported “somewhat agree” (19.0), 18 reported “neither agree nor disagree” (31.0), 2 reported “somewhat disagree” (3.4), 3 reported “strongly disagree” (5.2). (See Appendix B, Challenges of First Generation Latino College Students). Additionally, respondents were asked if they have a mentor/advisor who they check in with regularly, 15 reported “Yes” (25.9%) and 43 reported “No” (74.1%). (See Appendix C, Having a Mentor/Role model).

The relationship between first generation Latino college students feeling anxiety about their academic performance and being employed was explored. A chi-square analysis revealed that there was no relationship between feeling anxiety and being employed while attending college ( $X^2 = 15.67, p > .05$ ). (See Appendix D, Anxiety and Employment).

## **Discussion**

This was a quantitative study that used an online anonymous survey to identify some of the challenges of first-generation Latino college students face. Fifty-eight respondents participated in our study. Our respondents were between the ages of twenty-one through twenty-four. (See Appendix F, Age). In summary, the data collected concluded that first-generation Latino college students have unique challenges and barriers that negatively impact their academic performance. For instance, based on this study, first-generation Latino college students enter college academically unprepared, lack a sense of belonging to the college environment; thirty-seven respondents stated they rarely attend college campus events, and lack confidence in their academic abilities.

Our capstone project provided us with real world-experience in data collection and research. The findings from this project can be used to identify some of the struggles first generation Latino college students encounter. Additional studies that can further evaluate the challenges and barriers of first generation Latino college students should continue to be explored.

## **Limitations**

Respondents may not have felt comfortable to present themselves in unfavorable manners and may have not responded truthfully, therefore, many of the responses neither agreed or disagreed with the questions that contained unfavorable results. The majority of the respondents were women. As a result, there was an over representation of women (63.8%) and under representation of male respondents (34.5%) (See Appendix F, Gender). That being the case, our findings may not have been generalizable. Another

limitation in our study was the number of respondents who didn't complete the survey in its entirety. The length of the survey might have discouraged respondents. Given these limitations we can now take into account that the data may not be a general representation of first-generation Latino college students. Future studies should include larger samples and shorter surveys.

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## Appendix A

### Flyer



# Are you a *first-generation* college *Latino* student?

If so, we are conducting a research on the social challenges of first generation college Latino students. We would like to hear about your social challenges and from where you receive your social support.

Your participation is **voluntary** and your responses are **confidential**.

#### **Eligibility Requirements:**

- First-generation college Latino student
- 18 years of age or older

#### **What does the study involve?**

- Completion of a 15-minute anonymous online survey

If you are interested in participating please click on the link to take an anonymous survey.

Thank you!

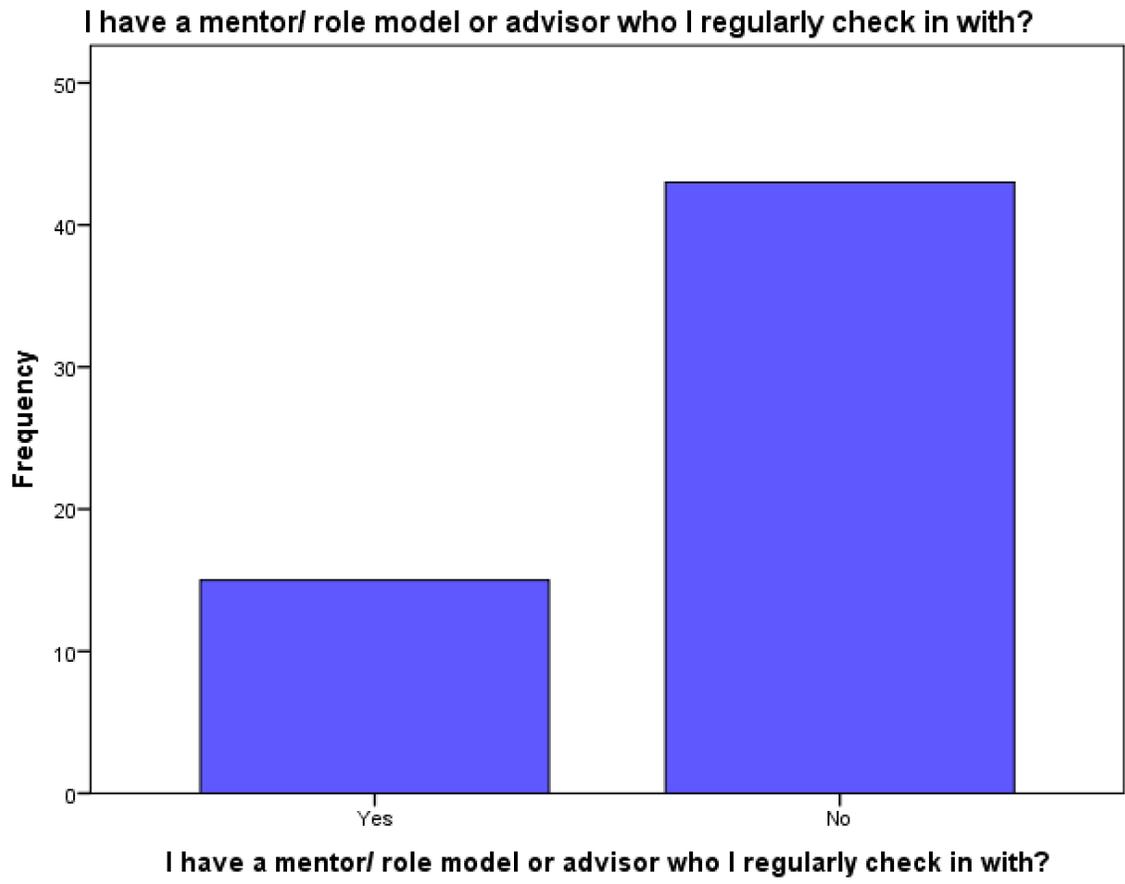
## Appendix B

**Table 1: Challenges of First Generation Latino College Students**

	Strongly Agree % (n)	Somewhat Agree % (n)	Neither Agree or Disagree % (n)	Somewhat Disagree % (n)	Strongly Disagree % (n)
Do you have academic support at home?	41.4 (24)	19.0 (11)	31.0 (18)	3.4 (2)	5.2 (3)
Prepared to attend college?	29.3 (17)	34.5 (20)	25.9 (15)	8.6 (5)	1.7 (1)
Confident in ability to succeed in college?	50.0 (29)	25.9 (15)	17.2 (10)	5.2 (3)	1.7 (1)

## Appendix C

**Graph 1: Having a Mentor/Role model**



## Appendix D

**Table 2: Anxiety and Employment**

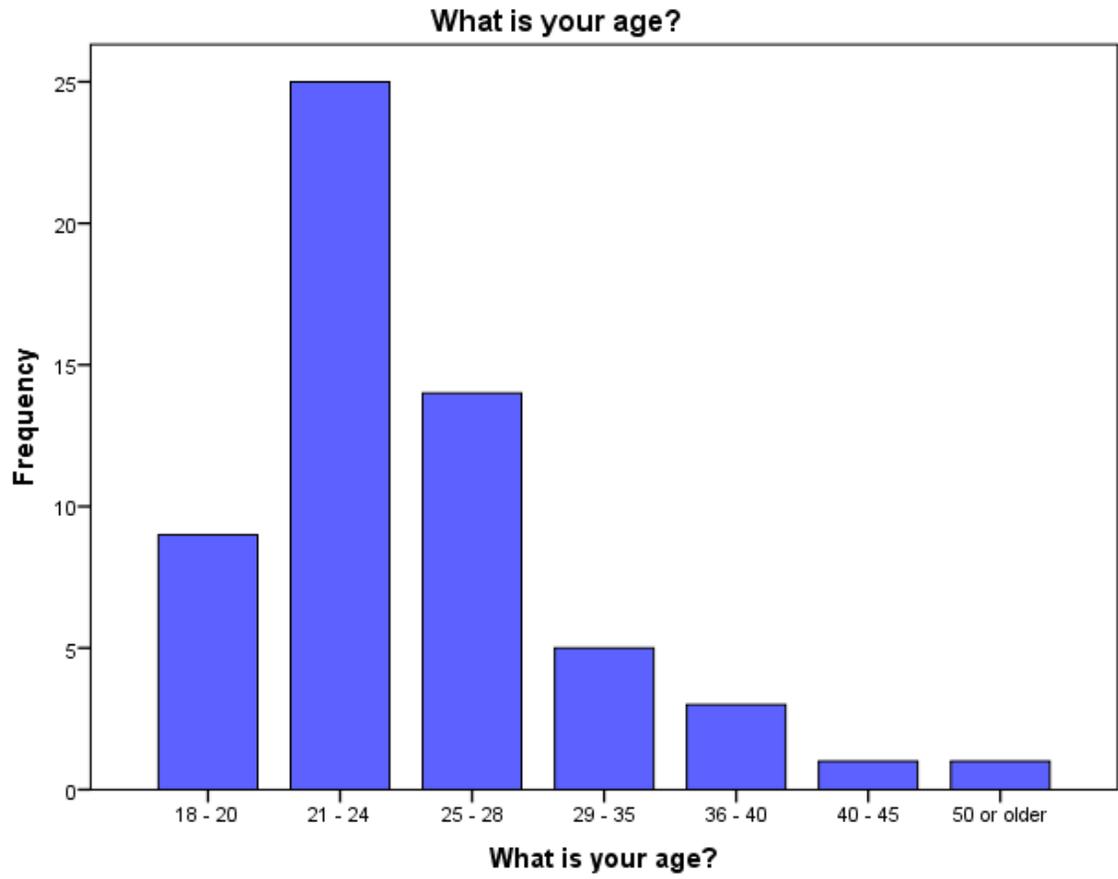
		I often feel anxiety about my academic performance?					Total
		Always	Most of the time	About half the time	Sometimes	Never	
I am employed while attending college?	Not Employed	0 0.00% 0.00%	1 11.11% 11.11%	0 0.00% 0.00%	4 44.44% 28.57%	4 44.44% 44.44%	9 100.00% 15.52%
	Part Time	6 23.08% 60.00%	2 7.69% 22.22%	9 34.62% 56.25%	6 23.08% 42.86%	3 11.54% 33.33%	26 100.00% 44.83%
	Full Time	4 17.39% 40.00%	6 26.09% 66.67%	7 30.43% 43.75%	4 17.39% 28.57%	2 8.70% 22.22%	23 100.00% 39.66%
	Total	10 17.24% 100.00%	9 15.52% 100.00%	16 27.59% 100.00%	14 24.14% 100.00%	9 15.52% 100.00%	58 100.00% 100.00%

 Add Stub

		I often feel anxiety about my academic performance?
I am employed while attending college?	Chi Square	15.67*
	Degrees of Freedom	8
	p-value	0.05

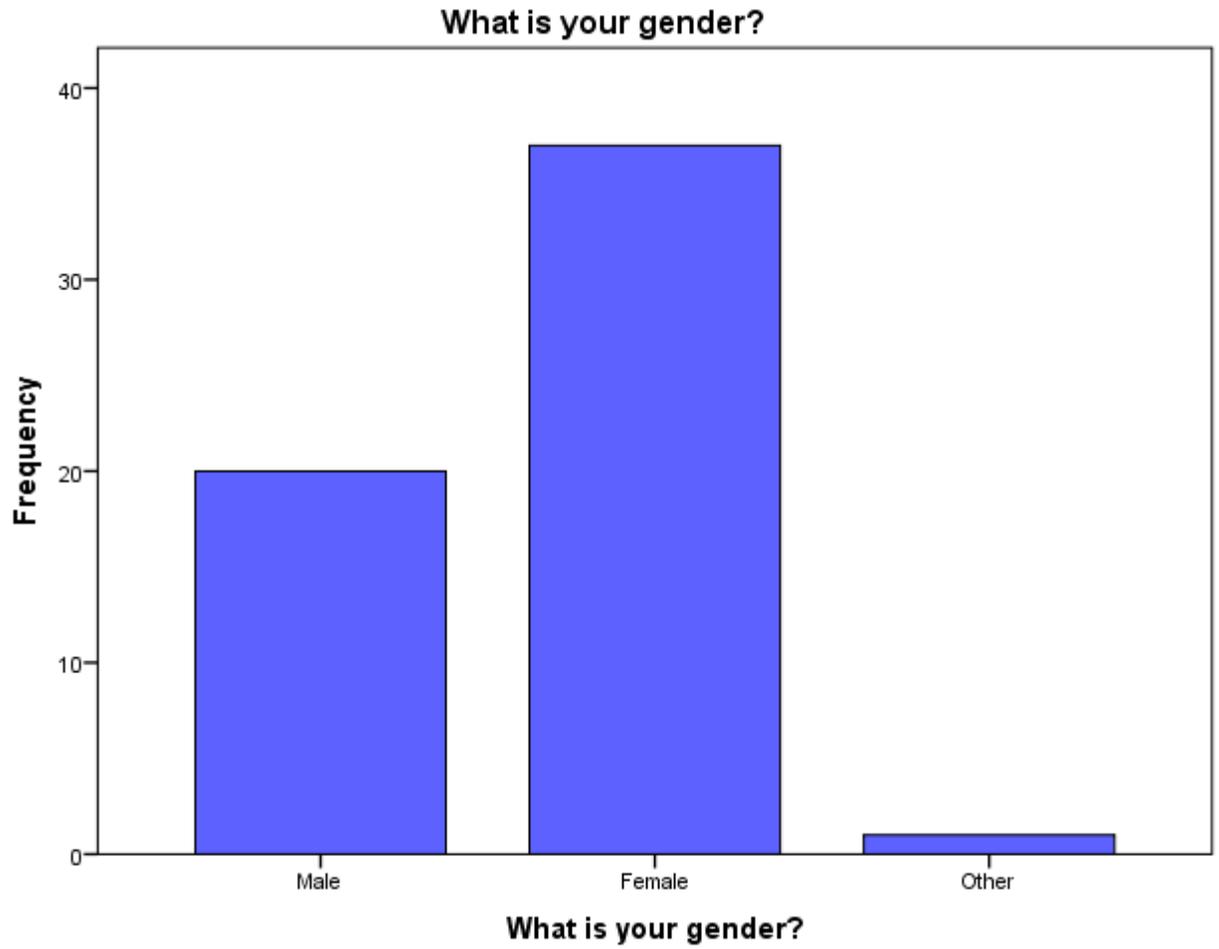
## Appendix E

**Graph 2: Age**



## Appendix F

**Graph 3: Gender**



## Appendix G

ADDENDUM – What are the social challenges of first generation college Latino students and who do they reach out to for social support?

What are the social challenges of first generation college Latino students and who do they reach out to for social support is a joint graduate project between **Flor Argueta** and **Angelina Barvoza**.

**Flor Argueta** is responsible for all the following tasks/document sections:

- Introduction (Introducing the project and summarizing components of project)
- Literature Review (Evaluation of available information)
- Procedure (Description of series of steps to collect data)
- Results (Explaining outcomes and effects on population)
- Flyer (Brief description of survey and flyer design)
- Formatting

**Angelina Barvoza** is responsible for all the following tasks/document sections:

- Methods (Explanation of instruments used for data collection)
- Measures (Reviewing and analyzing measures)
- Limitations (Reviewing limitations of project)
- Discussion (Reviewing limitations of project and conclusion)
- Abstract Section

Both parties shared responsibilities for the following tasks/document sections:

- Data Analysis (interpretation of data; graphs, charts and percentages)
- Survey Questions (formulated questions for survey)
- Survey Distribution (shared link on social media)
- Editing (ensure format and spelling were correct)

<u>Flor Argueta</u> <b>Student Name #1</b>	_____	<u>Angelina Barvoza</u> <b>Student Name #2</b>	_____
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	Date		Date
<u>Eli Bartle</u>	_____	<u>Eli E Bartle</u> <b>Department Chair</b>	_____
	Date		Date
<u>Jodi L. Brown</u>	_____		
	Date		