CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

NAVIGATING THE FIRST YEAR OF COLLEGE: EXPERIENCES OF FIRST-GENERATION, LOW-INCOME CHICANA/O STUDENTS

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the Doctor of Education Degree in Educational Leadership

By
Louis Jason Beck

May 2013
This Dissertation of Louis Jason Beck is approved:

Raul J. Cardoza

Date

Miguel A. Ceja

Date

William De La Torre, Chair

Date

California State University, Northridge
DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to the memory of my grandparents, Louis John Beck and Dorothy Beck. They moved their family across the country so their children and grandchildren could access an affordable college education.
ABSTRACT

NAVIGATING THE FIRST YEAR OF COLLEGE: EXPERIENCES OF FIRST-GENERATION, LOW-INCOME CHICANA/O STUDENTS

by

Louis Jason Beck

Doctor of Education Degree

In Educational Leadership

Though Latino students are one of the fastest growing populations in higher education, they are among the least likely to persist through graduation. This phenomenon is particularly pronounced amongst Chicana/o students. Similarly, first-generation, low-income students are less likely than their more advantaged peers to persist through graduation. For these students, the first year of college is the most critical. This study examined the experiences of first-generation, low-income Chicana/o students who successfully negotiated the academic and social environments of college and persisted to the second year. The findings of this study illustrate the influence of familial support and the role of cultural identity upon feelings toward academic persistence. Further, the Educational Opportunity Program at Santa Ana University, a research site pseudonym, validated participants’ experiences and cultural identity; prepared them for college; and assisted in negotiating both the transition to college and the academic and social environments of the university.
CHAPTER I: PROBLEM STATEMENT

Navigating the first year of college: The experiences of first-generation, low-income Chicana/o students

First-generation, low-income students have historically been underrepresented in universities across the nation. Low income is defined as having a household income of less than $25,000 and first-generation college student refers to a student with neither parent having earned a bachelor’s degree (Engle & Tinto, 2008). First-generation, low-income students meet both of these criteria.

Of the first-generation, low-income students that withdraw from a four-year institution prior to degree attainment, 60% will not persist beyond the first year. Only 11% of first-generation students that enter a four-year university will attain a bachelor’s degree (Engle & Tinto, 2008). The first year of college represents the most critical stage of the educational career for first-generation, low-income students and focusing on the supports that increase persistence is of the highest importance (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1983; Tinto, 1988, 1998, 2008; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Engle & O’Brien, 2007; Rendon, 1994).

First-generation, low-income student groups are disproportionately comprised of people of color, specifically African American and Latino students (Engle & O’Brien, 2007). This is a noteworthy characteristic since the Latino population doubled between 2000 and 2010, making Latinos one of the fastest growing ethnic/racial groups in America, (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Similarly, Latino students now represent the largest ethnic/racial group on U.S. college campuses (Fry, 2011). Though the number of degrees conferred to Latino students is at an all-time high, the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics tells us Latino students continue to
remain behind other groups in degree completion (Snyder & Dillow, 2012). The college completion gap is particularly pronounced for Mexican-American students, who are among the most educationally at risk of all Latino subgroups and suffer one of the lowest educational attainment rates of any major racial or ethnic group in the United States (Ream, 2003; Yosso & Solorzano, 2006).

In 2011, Santa Ana University, a research site pseudonym, boasted a diverse student body of more than 35,000. Roughly 5,200 first-time freshmen were admitted to Santa Ana University, a Hispanic Serving Institution, in the fall 2010 term. Chicana/o students represented the largest ethnic/racial group, making up approximately 30% of the total cohort. White students, the second largest ethnic group, represented approximately 23% of the total cohort. During the following fall 2011 term, less than 72% of Chicana/o students had re-enrolled, a rate lower than the approximate 84% of White peers who re-enrolled and lower still than the institutional average of 74%.

In the late 1960s, the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) was devised to increase access to many of the state universities and increase the persistence rates of low-income and/or first-generation students. Over the past forty years, EOP has assisted more than 250,000 low-income and first-generation students attain a bachelor’s degree (www.csumentor.edu). By providing services, such as admission counseling, academic advising, peer mentoring, courses offered in conjunction with academic departments, student success workshops, tutoring, Graduation Writing Test preparation, and supplemental financial assistance, EOP has been able to increase persistence rates of students who are educationally disadvantaged and/or from low-income families (www.calstate.edu). In 2011, Santa Ana EOP had an almost 80% first-year Chicana/o
student retention rate and increased retention rates for other student groups by approximately 10% above the university average of approximately 70%.

At Santa Ana University, EOP utilizes the Academic Resources Center, Bridge programs, and faculty mentor programs to ease the transition from high school to the academic and social culture of college. The institutional supports and agents — teachers, faculty, students, and counselors — possess a degree of human, cultural, and social capital, and are committed to transmitting or negotiating highly valued EOP resources (Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995; Stanton-Salazar, 2011), to provide new funds of knowledge and experiences that can assist in the transition from high school to college.

The definition of funds of knowledge, in this study, is adapted form Stanton-Salazar (1997) and refers to the “implicit and explicit socialization into institutional discourses that regulate communication, interaction, and exchange in mainstream education” (p. 11). At the crux of these programs, there is an emphasis placed on validating students’ cultural identity. In doing so, EOP empowered students as they negotiated the academic and social environments of college.

**Problem Statement**

Though Latino students represent one of the fastest growing populations in the United States, they also represent the group least likely to persist on to degree attainment. In the past, researchers and educators relied on deficit models to explain variations in educational performance by race and ethnicity (Brice-Heath, 1983; Ogbu, 1979, 1981, 1994; Steele 1990; Harry & Klingner, 2007). However, this model applied background and characteristic traits — which negatively portrayed students, families, and communities — to explain low educational attainment for students of color. Additionally, deficit models did not take into account the precollege experiences, funds of knowledge,
and social or cultural capital students bring to college. Further, deficit models detracted from or condemned a student’s cultural identity, thereby shifting the responsibility for educational success away from institutional and organizational factors that marginalize students of color and project shortcomings onto the students (Solorzano, 1992; De La Torre, 1996). In this study, cultural identity refers to the traditions and practices associated with racial/ethnic background and socioeconomic background.

As it relates to developing the funds of knowledge necessary for institutional negotiation and integration, other researchers focused closely on the importance of involvement and the relationship between students and institutions. (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1983; Tinto, 1988). Yet, some researchers question past integration models because they focus on placing the responsibility of collegiate success on the student, are preoccupied with acculturation of students, and neglect to address personal variables, such as gender and race/ethnicity (Attinasi, 1989, 1992; Tierney, 1992). Thus, revised models focus on membership, belonging, and the steps institutions can take to ease the college transition process (Tinto, 1993; Yang, Byers, Salazar, Salas, 2009; Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005; Hurtardo & Carter, 1997).

Additional research explores the importance of factors such as institutional agents and supports, which validate and build upon students’ funds of knowledge and social and cultural capital. The research also explores how factors like institutional agents and supports help students cultivate the additional social and cultural capital to negotiate the social and academic environments of college (Rendon, 1994; Cabrera & Nora, 1999; Ream, 2003; Tinto, 1998, 2008; Stanton-Salazar, 2011). Lastly, Hurtardo and Ponjuan’s (2005) study affirmed the importance of academic support programs that increase sense of belonging, enhance skills, build confidence, and diminish marginality. By
understanding the role and significance of supports and services offered by the Educational Opportunity Program at Santa Ana University, I uncovered the elements of EOP that first-generation, low-income Chicana/o students felt were most influential toward persisting beyond the first year of college.

**Purpose and Significance**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine the experiences of first-generation, low-income Chicana/o EOP students who have successfully negotiated the academic and social environments of college and persisted to the second year.

For many, the goal of attending a university is the attainment of a bachelor’s degree. A bachelor’s degree carries with it many opportunities and benefits, some of which include increased wages and the possibility to rise above poverty. The average annual income for an individual with a bachelor’s degree is $40,000; the average income for a person with a high school degree is $17,000.00 (Beegle, 2006). Yet, many first-generation and low-income students have never seen the benefits of higher education (Beegle, 2006). For this reason, it is especially important that additional supports are provided to those who have earned their admittance to a university.

Attaining a degree from a four-year institution is not only vital to the success of the student, but also to that of the state and nation. With the need to remain competitive in the global economy, the nation must act now to increase the number of students who enter college and, most importantly, attain a bachelor’s degree (Engle & Tinto, 2008). By 2025, 60% of jobs within the U.S. will require some form of post-secondary education (Reed, 2008). Similarly, two out of five California jobs will require a bachelor’s degree (Reed, 2008). If current trends continue, California will fall one million college graduates short of economic demand (Johnson, 2012). Nationally, a shortfall of 3 million graduates
is projected by 2018 (Engle, Yeado, Brusi, & Cruz, 2012). To increase degree attainment, the U.S. must expand access to low-income students and students of color, those who will soon constitute the majority of young people in this country (Engle, Yeado, Brusi, & Cruz, 2012). “Reaching underrepresented groups, particularly the large and growing Latino student population, is key to closing the gap” (Johnson, 2012, p. 3).

Despite having one of the highest college-going rates in the world, in the U.S. large gaps in access to and persistence in college exist, especially for first-generation, low-income students of color (Engle & Tinto, 2008). This can be rationalized by the contrast of the uniform profile of past college students, largely white male students, and today’s student body that represents a tapestry of differentiation in social background, race/ethnicity, gender, disability, lifestyle, and sexual orientation (Rendon, 1994). This explains an educational structure that is inherently focused on generating results for individuals representative of the mainstream culture who share the funds of knowledge necessary for success in college. Rendon (1994) argued that college was originally designed for the privileged and often still functions as such. Therefore, it becomes necessary to investigate the steps colleges are taking to increase the persistence of students who are not representative of the mainstream culture.

The Educational Opportunity Program at Santa Ana University focuses on validating the cultural identity of first-generation, low-income students and building upon the students’ funds of knowledge and cultural and social capital. In doing so, EOP seeks to ease the transition from high school to college and increase the persistence for first-generation, low-income students.
Research Questions

In examining the experiences of first-generation, low-income Chicana/o students during the first year of college, the following questions guided this study.

1. Which supports and services did students find most important during the first year of college?

2. How did the funds of knowledge provided by EOP assist participants in negotiating academic and social environments during the first year of college?

3. To what extent did the supports and services provided by EOP validate participants’ cultural identity and social and cultural capital?

4. Which supports or services, outside of EOP, did participants feel influenced toward persistence?

Theoretical Framework

Social capital served as a lens through which this study identified the people that supported participants during the first year of college, and cultural capital assisted in describing cultural identity and further outlined how supports and services influenced perceptions toward academic persistence. Resiliency relates to the intrinsic characteristics that provide students the ability to persevere despite oppositional forces. This study identified three characteristics of cultural identity: being a person of Mexican descent, being a first-generation college student, and socioeconomic background. Each characteristic was influential upon feelings toward academic persistence. Additionally, the findings of this study examined the success stories of resilient students who persisted beyond the first year of college, and how the supports and services provided by the Educational Opportunity program validated their cultural identity, prepared them for college, assisted in the transition to college, created a sense of belonging, and ultimately
influenced feelings toward academic persistence. With a greater understanding of the lived experiences of first-generation, low-income Chicana/o students, and the students’ perception of the influence of supports and services during their first year in college, this study provides recommendations as to how institutions can move beyond the conformist and marginalizing notion of integration, and toward supports and services that remove the impetus of accessing supports; validate the cultural identity of its students; and make a concerted effort to support students.

**Overview of Methodology**

This qualitative case study took place at a large university, given the pseudonym Santa Ana University, and provided an in-depth analysis of a phenomenon bounded in time (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Merriam, 2009). As this study sought to understand the essence of participants’ experiences as they related to the first year of college, and increase the understanding of the first year experience, a heuristic phenomenological research tradition was utilized (Creswell, 1996). Nine participants were selected utilizing criterion-based and snowball sampling strategies. The participants were first-generation, low-income Chicana/o students who completed their first year of college and enrolled in second year courses. To better understand the perspectives of the participants, the primary data collection consisted of one-on-one semi-structured in-depth interviews (Creswell, 1996) that took place during the fourth week of the second year of college.

**Limitations and Delimitations**

A delimitation of this study is that it focused on a single data collection method. This limited the opportunity to offer generalizable implications. A phenomenological case study, by definition, is bounded and focuses on the lived experiences of individuals at a specific place (in this case, the EOP at Santa Ana University) and, therefore, is not
representative of all four-year public universities. Finally, the EOP is limited to the state’s public university system and varies at each campus, further limiting the generalizability of the data to greater system.

A limitation of this study is the sample size. In the end, this study examined the experiences of nine students and is not adequately representative of a larger population. Also, as the participant selection was based on certain criteria, it was difficult to gather a large number of participants meeting the first-generation, low-income Chicana/o criteria.

**Organization of Dissertation**

The following chapters will include a review of literature and methodology. The review of literature will provide additional insights into the problem statement and development of research questions. The review of literature will also outline primary sources and empirical evidence related to the research questions; synthesize findings across studies; and compare and contrast different research outcomes, perspectives and methods. Finally, the review of literature will note any gaps, debates, or shortcomings in the literature and provide rationale for the study.

Following the review of literature, the methodology will be introduced. The methodology chapter will focus on describing the methodological tradition utilized in this study and a rationale thereof. The methodology chapter will describe, in detail, the setting and sample. Finally, the third chapter will describe the data collection process, instruments, procedures and the analysis of methods used therein. Analysis of the data will be provided in the fourth chapter. The fifth and final chapter will provide a recap of the entire study and provide implications for policy and practice, review limitations of the study, and offer suggestions for further research.
CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Many first-generation low-income students will not persist beyond the first year of college. Though this group is disproportionately consistent of African American and Latino students, this phenomenon is especially pronounced for Chicana/o students, who represent one of the fastest-growing ethnic/racial populations in higher education, but also the group amongst the lowest representation in degree attainment (Ream, 2003; Yosso & Solorzano, 2006).

As the experiences associated with the first year of college are the most crucial to persistence, this study focused on examining the experiences of students who have successfully negotiated the academic and social environments of college and persisted to the second year thereof. This chapter will begin by examining past integration models and the influential factors of integration. This section will briefly describe the past use of deficit models, integration models, and how such models fail to recognize the forms of capital students bring with them and the marginalizing effects of the acculturation process. Also, this section will describe forms of capital and define the importance of validation upon feelings of belonging. The next section will describe the experiences of students of color during the integration process, and the importance of understanding how Latino students resolve transitional dilemmas and strategies for student success. Within this section, the literature will also explore the role of gender during the transition process and the importance of familial support. The following section will detail the influence of finances and socioeconomic background upon the college experience. Then, the culture of college and how agents and supports can assist in negotiating the academic and social environments of college will be described. To further this understanding, description of programs that offer student support services will be explored. The chapter will then be
tied into theoretical framework, in which social capital, cultural capital, and resiliency will be described.

Integration

Historically, low persistence rates for Chicana/o students were explained by deficits related to factors such as upbringing, parental involvement, and access to resources (Brice-Heath, 1983; Ogbu, 1979, 1981, 1994; Steele 1990; Harry & Klingner, 2007). These explanations focused on describing rationale for students’ inability to become integrated into the academic and social culture of the mainstream university. However, focusing on students’ inabilities downplays the importance of their cultural identity, while simultaneously detracting focus from the institutional practices and policies that serve as barriers to success in college. For example, the work of Cerna, Perez, and Saenz (2009), which examined the pre-college attributes and values of students that were valuable to college completion, argued that deficit models failed to consider the importance of different forms of capital a student will utilize to earn a degree and how they can vary between ethnicity and gender. In their study, they defined four forms of capital: *social capital*, or the relationships that can provide a student access to resources and knowledge; *cultural capital*, student perceptions, aspirations, and cultural values; *economic capital*, a student’s financial condition and their attitude about college cost and future financial aspirations; and *human capital*, or a student’s abilities and educational achievement based on performance measures (Cerna et al., 2009).

Integration models have been utilized to illustrate how student participation can increase social and cultural capital, and lead to academic and social integration into the academic and social environments of college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1983; Tinto, 1988, 1998). Yet, past integration models have been critiqued for placing the responsibility of
collegiate success on the student and neglected the importance of pre-college and cultural variables in the integration process (Attinasi, 1989, 1992; Tierney, 1992). Additionally, the process of acquiring cultural and social capital valued by the mainstream institution can lead to feelings of marginalization, inadequacy, and isolation (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1983; Tinto, 1988, 1998).

It was thought, the more academically and socially involved a student is, the more likely they are to persist to degree completion (Astin, 1984; Pascarella, 1980; Tinto, 1998). However, concepts of integration did not provide culturally supportive alternatives to collegiate participation and instead emphasized mainstream activities that may not foster Latino success (Hurtardo & Carter, 1997; Johnson, Soldner, Leonard, & Alvarez, 2007). The critique of integration is the underlying concept of acculturation, or the assumption that cultural differences between ethnic groups should be diminished and that Chicana/os must adopt the values of the mainstream culture in order to succeed (Attinasi, 1989, 1992; Tierney, 1992). Rather than emphasis on conformity, Tinto’s (1993) revisited integration theory focused on the premise of membership, an understanding of how students of color function in their own and other cultural groups, and infers greater diversity in modes of participation. Similarly, rather than relying solely on participation, Hurtardo and Cater (1997) utilized sense of belonging, the social interactions that shape student affiliation and identity within the university, to describe the subjective sense of students’ adjustment to college. They contend the key influence to belonging is perceptions of a supportive campus (Hurtardo & Carter, 1997).

Rendon (1994) found that participation during the first year of college is contingent upon whether students can get involved in institutional life on their own or if external agents can validate students in an academic and interpersonal way. Rendon
(1994) described validation as an enabling, confirming, and supportive process through which agents foster academic and interpersonal development. This includes focusing on the cultural identities of students and validating past experiences. Borrowing from the work of Sysoev (2001a), cultural identity is described as a “realization of his or her place within the spectrum of cultures” and the “characteristic features of a particular group that assign an individual’s group membership” (pp.37-38.) Characteristic features of cultural identity include race, gender, language, socioeconomic status, and religion (Sysoev, 2001). Classmates, faculty, significant others, family, counselors, and friends are examples of agents capable of influencing perceptions of validation (Rendon, 1994). These agents thereby increase the feelings of connectedness within the culturally diverse academic and social environments of college.

Whereas deficit models downplayed the importance of cultural identity and subjective adjustment, current integration models address the importance and influence of cultural strengths, values, and pre-college variables of students of color as they relate to the process of negotiating the college environment (Cerna et al., 2009; Tinto, 1993; Yang, Byers, Salazar, Salas, 2009; Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005; Hurtado & Carter, 1997). The influences vary by gender and will be discussed in greater detail later in the chapter.

This study is not preoccupied with the acculturation of students. Rather, it aligns more closely with Rendon’s (1994) concept of validation and Oetting and Beauvais’ (1990) two-dimensional model, wherein the mainstream institutions work to reshape their culture to one that places greater value on the cultural wealth a student brings, while simultaneously enhancing students’ social capital in such a way that does not lead to feelings of isolation and marginalization.
This study also borrows from the works of Yang, Salazar, and Salas (2009), which describes bicultural identity and the importance of identifying cultural translators, who pass on information about their own experiences and knowledge of White, dominant, middle-class culture, and assist students in the process of navigating the mainstream institution without compromising their own cultural identities (Barajas and Pierce, 2001). The understanding of how such students negotiate the academic and social environments of a university during the first year of college can be enhanced by examining the unique characteristics and experiences of first-generation, low-income Chicana/o students, and how institutional agents and supports of the Educational Opportunity Program act as cultural translators.

Experiences of Students of Color

External and institutional factors play a major role in influencing attitudes and decisions of students of color while they are attending college (Bean, 1982, 1990). For example, negative experiences stemming from perceptions of isolation and racism interfere with the integration process (Cabrera & Nora, 1999). The institutional fit models of Bean (1990) and Tinto (1993) view prejudice and discrimination as factors interfering with a student’s integration into his or her social and academic environment (Cabrera & Nora, 1999). Nora and Cabrera (1996) found that students of color perceived more acts of discrimination and prejudice than White students. Though it had a mostly indirect effect on persistence, perceived discrimination created disincentives for students of color to interact with mainstream students, faculty, and campus administrators (Nora & Cabrera, 1994).

Other studies have validated the harmful influence a hostile racial climate and how perceptions of prejudice can negatively influence integration (Hurtardo & Carter,
1997; Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Hurtardo & Ponjuan, 2005). Hurtardo, Carter, & Spuler (1996) found Latino students who perceived a hostile racial climate expressed greater difficulty in building a sense of attachment to the institution. Furthermore, building upon Tinto’s (1993) concept of membership, Hurtardo and Carter (1997) theorized a sense of belonging, which captures individuals’ view of whether or not they feel included in a college community, is negatively influenced by hostile or unsupportive racial climates. Students who perceived a negative climate reported significantly lower sense of belonging in college (Hurtardo & Ponjuan, 2005). Lack of membership and belonging negatively impacts students’ adjustment to and persistence in college (Hurtardo et al., 1996).

Transactional models posited that experiences of racism and discrimination on campus are psychological and sociocultural stressors, and that such experiences are unique to students of color (Cabrera & Nora, 1999). The result is heightened feelings of not belonging at the institution and low involvement with different campus communities, thus impinging upon a student’s cognitive and effective development and their decision to persist in college (Cabrera & Nora, 1994). In comparing this against the institutional fit models of Bean (1990) and Tinto (1993), it becomes clear that perceived discrimination and prejudice are factors that interfere with a student’s integration into his or her social and academic environments (Cabrera & Nora, 1999, p.135).

Yet, the influence of experiences on persistence, and the way students mobilize different forms of capital to cope with such experiences vary by individual and gender. Integration can mean something different to student groups who have been historically marginalized in higher education (Hurtardo & Carter, 1997). This underlines the importance of understanding students’ strategies for success and how Latina/o students
resolve transitional dilemmas, especially as it relates to the challenges they face in multiple racially and culturally diverse environments (Hurtardo & Carter, 1997). Gloria, Castellanos, and Orozco (2005) expand upon the earlier work of Lazarus and Folkman (1984) to define coping strategies as the cognitive behavioral efforts to manage internal and external demands that are considered to exceed one’s resources. Gloria et al. (2005) also noted coping strategies differ by gender. The following section will explore some of the gender-based variations of how Latino, specifically Chicana female and Chicano male, students utilize and access cultural and social capital to navigate the college environment as it relates to persistence.

*Chicana and Chicano Students*

In their study of pre-college attributes and essential forms of capital that Latina/o students drew upon to help them attain degrees, Cerna et al. (2009) found cultural capital and values serve as a positive influence on degree attainment for Latina/o students. For Latina/o students, having access to a large number of culturally similar peers provides the cultural reinforcement necessary to feel comfortable and be successful in college. Yet Latino males, in Barajas and Pierce’s (2001) study, were often supported by such mentors as White athletic coaches and more likely to view their individual hard work as a reason for success. Thus, Latino males saw themselves as part of a larger Latino cultural group, but tended to have less positive cultural identity than Latina peers (Barajas & Pierce, 2001).

Additionally, Saenz and Ponjuan (2009) found Latino males do not show the same agency toward tapping networks and relationships to maintain positive outlook throughout college. Many students who lack validation find the transition to college difficult and are unaccustomed to taking advantage of opportunities to participate in
social and academic environments (Rendon, 1994). Unfortunately, young Latino males pay a psychological price for accepting the individualist ethos of the mainstream culture (Barajas & Pierce, 2001). This can result in an out-of-group orientation, negative self-evaluation (Barajas & Pierce, 2001), and a decreased sense of institutional congruency, which is associated with increased non-persistence decisions for Latino undergraduates (Gloria et al., 2005). This may describe why Latino males are less likely to achieve educational success than their female counterparts (Cerna et al., 2009), a disparity that is most pronounced, almost two to one, among Chicana/o freshman entering a four-year college (Saenz and Ponjuan, 2009).

Barajas and Pierce (2001) found that Latina females navigate negative racial stereotypes by maintaining positive definitions of themselves and emphasizing their memberships as Latinas. Latina females access multiple sources of cultural and social support. For instance, Saenz and Ponjuan (2009) found, through formal and informal relationships with Latina peers, Latina females successfully navigate college by sustaining a positive self-image, and theorized such relationships may be the missing link in Latino male students’ experience. Moreover, Chicana female students expressed more positive help-seeking attitudes than their male counterparts and were more likely to rely on family or friends for advice, even if they had not attended college, before seeking outside resources to achieve educational goals (Gloria, Castellanos, Orozco, 2005).

Maintaining cultural affiliations is an important factor for maintaining cultural identity, which positively influences persistence. For both Chicano males and Chicana females, participating in sociocultural and religious organizations during the first year of college can reinforce a sense of belonging at a university (Cerna et al., 2009). Similarly, the concept of familismo, which involves a strong identification to immediate and
extended family and embodies strong feelings of loyalty, responsibility, and solidarity in Latina/o families, can act as a strong form of social capital that can facilitate lifelong educational success (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 1995; Valenzuela, 1999). As strong social and family networks are associated with academic achievement, *familismo* can serve as a sociocultural asset to assist Latino males and Latina females in navigating the educational system (Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009).

**Finances**

Finances are an important factor related to student persistence, especially for first-generation, low-income students. Many first-generation, low-income students are older and thus less likely to have financial support from their family and more likely to have dependent children (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Engle, O’Brien, 2007). Having fewer resources of economic capital explains why some students may be more likely to live and work off campus and take classes part-time while working full time. These factors limit the amount of time a student spends on campus (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Engle, O’Brien, 2007) and thus hinder the opportunity for first-generation, low-income students to engage in academic and social experiences, study in groups, interact with faculty and staff, partake in extracurricular activities, and take advantage of supports and services (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Engle & O’Brien, 2007). By missing the opportunity to spend as much time on campus, low-income students may sacrifice opportunities that increase participation and academic and social integration. For students of low-income families, the difficulty of attending and completing college is compounded by current economic trends.

The price of college and availability of funding has the most significant impact on low-income students of color (Higher Education, 2012; Johnson, 2012). Families with the lowest income have seen a 7% decrease in earnings over the last 30 years (Lynch, Engle,
Analyzing trends in student aid from 2010, Lynch et al. (2011) determined that after grant aid was awarded, low-income families must shoulder a tuition burden of roughly 75% of their income to send a single child to college. Comparatively, families in the highest-income quartile spend approximately 14% (Lynch, Engle, & Cruz, 2011). The researchers argued, “declining purchase power of grants, combined with the rise of federal student loans and tax breaks,” in addition to non need-based state grants outgrowing need-based grants at three times the rate, siphons funds away from low-income students and students of color (Lynch, Engle, & Cruz, 2011, p. 2).

For Latino students, decreased affordability is exacerbated by the perception of tuition costs and availability of aid. Referencing a 2002 Tomas Rivera Policy Institute study, Zarate and Fabienke (2007) concluded, “Latino parents and students lacked significant information about financial aid for college and often received information too late to consider attending college” (p.130). For instance, many Latino parents and students lack adequate knowledge to accurately estimate college costs (Chan & Cochrane, 2008). Many low-income students of color are likely to estimate the cost of a four-year college by twice the actual price; similarly their parents tend to overestimate the cost of attending college (Grodsky and Jones, 2004; Horn, Chen, and Chapman, 2003). When the perception of the inflated costs of tuition is compared to the findings of Lynch, Engle, and Cruz (2011), wherein post-aid contributions represent 75% of a family’s income, college can appear entirely unaffordable.

Those who are “most eligible for aid, are the least likely to know about it” (Chan and Cochrane, 2008, p.2). Similarly, Chan and Cochrane (2008) cited a survey conducted by the Sallie Mae Fund and Harris Interactive (2003) that found 83% of Latino parents did not mention grants as a source of aid, compared to 58% of White parents, Sixty two
percent of Latino parents said they need more information about how to pay for college. For those students aware of aid, their perception of eligibility is often inaccurate (Chan and Cochrane, 2008). For example, Zarate and Pachon (2006) found that many California Latino students who were eligible for aid did not apply for Cal Grants because they believed high grades were a requirement. Lastly, the 2005 Advisory Committee on Student Financial Aid determined the complexity of the application process is daunting and burdensome for many students (Perna, 2006).

Even when aid has been awarded, financial concerns remain and continue to negatively impact persistence. Bresciani and Carson (2002) found that students with large loans and little grant aid persist at lower rates than students with smaller loan amounts and those who have no or unmet need. In their study of pre-college attributes and values of Latino students that are beneficial to undergraduate completion, Cerna et al. (2009) found Chicana/o students are significantly more likely than their White counterparts to have elevated financial concerns about paying for college. Concerns related to finances negatively affect persistence. As Chicana females enter college, major financial concerns decrease the likelihood of graduating by 20% (Cerna et al., 2009). For Chicano males, major financial concerns decrease the likelihood of degree attainment by 23% (Cerna et al., 2009). For Chicano males, this became a strong negative predictor once institutional variables were considered (Cerna et al., 2009).

Saenz and Ponjuan (2012) described Marin and Marin’s (1991) concept of *familismo* as loyalty to family that is accompanied by a strong desire to provide financial and emotional support. The strong association with extended and immediate family embodies deep feelings of loyalty and responsibility within the family, which remain constant across generational lines and immigration status. The association serves to
define gender roles and expectations for family members, so much so that placing the needs of the family over the needs of the individual is commonplace (Saenz and Ponjuan, 2012). The traditions of working, contributing to the family, and assuming traditional gender roles remain predominant characteristics of the Latino male experience (Saenz and Ponjuan, 2012). This understanding may provide a single explanation as to why Chicano male students appear more susceptible to financial concerns than Chicana female students.

The Role of Family

Opposing cultural deficit perceptions toward the role of Mexican families, (Sowell, 1981) many researchers have validated the importance of the role of parents on academic success and perceptions toward academic persistence (Ceja, 2004; Ceballo, 2004; Zalaquett, 2005). For parents from working-class backgrounds, education was viewed as the best and only method to escape poverty. Even though parents did not know about specific educational goals or requirements, they supported any attempts made by their children in educational settings (Ceballo, 2004). Similarly, Ceja’s (2004) study of the Chicana college-decision process found that children’s knowledge of parental economic struggles and working conditions became a “catalyst for wanting to expand their educational opportunities beyond high school” (p.355). Also, Ceja’s (2004) research reinforced the notion that despite specific knowledge, parents still managed to “transmit powerful educational messages that were pivotal in the development of their daughters’ college aspirations” (pp. 354-355). Further, Zalaquett (2005) found that families positively influenced their children’s educational interests and served as supports and motivators toward academic persistence, regardless of the amount of information they had related to the educational system. These supports came in the form of emphasis on
the importance of education, support of their children’s autonomy, and nonverbal backing for educational endeavors (Ceballo, 2004). The forgoing illustrates the importance of the role of the family upon educationally supporting and motivating Latino students. The following sections will describe the incongruity between the forms of capital first-generation, low-income students of color bring with them to college and those valued by the mainstream university, as well as offer ways institutions can assist in the negotiation process.

**The Culture of College**

Some students are more capable than others of jumping into the social and academic environments of college, and it has been argued that most of these students possess a greater understanding of college culture; they come from middle-class and upper-class parents who attained college knowledge and experience, such as the admissions criteria and the importance of extracurricular activities, and guide their children through college (Cabrera & Padilla, 2004). Access to this requisite knowledge often poses a major challenge for low-income, first-generation students and can make the adjustment period difficult for them. In many cases, first-generation, low-income students are unprepared for the scale of academic and social change required and may not possess the coping skills necessary to deal with the situation, resulting in early departure (Tinto, 2008).

Drawing from the Maton & Salem’s (1995) definition, Stanton-Salazar (2011) described empowerment as the “active participatory progress of gaining resources, competencies, and key forms of power necessary for gaining control over one’s life and accomplish important goals” (p.1075). Empowerment agents facilitate and enable
development of coping strategies to overcome stressful institutional barriers and harmful ecological conditions (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). This process is referred to as decoding.

Decoding occurs when a youth from a historically oppressed community enters into a resourceful relationship, wherein funds of knowledge, related to what is needed to achieve within a system at a precise moment in time, are shared (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). This becomes especially important for low-income, first-generation students who may not harbor the funds of knowledge held in regard by the mainstream university or know how to navigate its many channels. This is not to downplay the cultural and social capital students bring with them; rather, it illustrates the opportunity for institutional agents and supports to validate such capital and provide additional funds of knowledge necessary for negotiating the social and academic environments of college.

**Agents and Supports**

Further research has focused on the ways in which institutions interact with students to build upon the cultural and social capital they bring (Rendon, 1994; Cabrera & Nora, 1999; Ream, 2003; Tinto, 1998, 2008; Stanton-Salazar, 2011). For example, though much of their research focused on primary and secondary education, Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch (1995) defined institutional agents as individuals who have a degree of human, cultural, and social capital; occupy hierarchical positions of relatively high status; and are committed to transmitting or negotiating the highly valued resources, such as four-year university requirements. In the context of a university, institutional agents can refer to professors, teaching assistants, counselors, peers, and staff members.

These agents are vital, and as many members of the non-mainstream society look for ways to empower themselves, they often do so with the aid of high-status agents who can strategically provide institutional supports (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). For first-
generation, low-income students of color, these agents seek to validate cultural identity and build upon a student’s social and cultural capital, and provide additional information that will assist students negotiate the social and academic environments of the mainstream institution. In doing so, institutional agents work as cultural translators who pass on information about their own experiences and knowledge of White, dominant, middle-class culture; assist students in the process of achieving a bicultural identity; and help them navigate the mainstream institution without compromising their own cultural identities (Barajas and Pierce, 2001). Additionally, they work in opposition to individuals known as gatekeepers who are consciously or unconsciously oriented toward rendering services and supports based on class, race, and to those who demonstrate institutionalized symbols of ability and merit (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, 1997).

The same can be said for institutional supports, which refer to the resources of moral and emotional support that ensure students become “effective participants within institutional spheres that control resources and network pathways associated with different forms of empowerment, including school achievement” (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p. 1079). A method of increasing effective participation is the “provision of funds of knowledge,” which is comprised of the implicit and explicit socialization into intuitional discourses that regulate communication, interaction, and exchange within mainstream educational institutions (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p. 1070). Funds of knowledge include information about applying for financial aid, registering for classes, approaching and interacting with faculty, and accessing additional campus resources.

Additionally, institutional supports focus on advocacy and related forms of intervention, role modeling, provision of emotional and moral support, regular and personalized feedback, advice, and guidance (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). Institutional
supports represent the embodiment of social capital and are representative of funds of knowledge necessary to overcome barriers related to integration into the academic and social environments of college.

This is especially important for students of color. Borders and barriers alert people to the rules and requirements for participation in a social setting. When borders are stressful or trying, students of color find movement difficult and adaption within the mainstream institution problematic (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). Overcoming these barriers requires attainment and development of sociocultural and institutionally sanctioned discourses necessary for effective relations and problem solving (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). Yosso’s (2007) concept of aspirational capital refers to the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, despite real or perceived barriers, and is developed in social and familial contexts through stories and advice. It is possible to surmise that through the stories and advice of institutional agents from similar cultural backgrounds and educational experiences, aspirational capital can be enhanced. This demonstrates a means by which institutional supports and agents provide the funds of knowledge that aid in navigating institutional barriers and enhance student resiliency.

Empowerment agents are similar to institutional agents. Having drawn upon Maton and Salem’s (1995) definition, Stanton-Salazar (2011) described empowerment as “the active participatory process of gaining resources, competencies, and key forms of power, necessary for gaining control over one’s life and accomplishing important goals” (p.1075). Empowerment agents facilitate and aid in the development of coping strategies. Such strategies are expressed in terms of problem-solving capacities, help-seeking orientation, networking skills, and behaviors necessary for overcoming institutional barriers and harmful ecological conditions (Stanton-Salazar, 1997, 2011; Stanton-Salazar
& Spina, 2000). Though it is possible to learn to navigate without intervention, the personal and psychic costs are either inhibitive or degenerative (Stanton-Salazar, 1997), thus strengthening the basis for the necessity of institutional supports and agents, which assist in transmitting important funds of knowledge as students negotiate the social and academic environments of college.

**Programs**

Institutional agents and supports are often programatically provided. Many federally funded programs, such as TRIO programs, provide resources to first-generation and low-income students. TRIO programs include Upward Bound, Veterans Upward Bound, Math-Science Upward Bound, Educational Talent Search, Student Support Services, the Ronald E. McNair Post-Baccalaureate Program, and Educational Opportunity Centers. The term TRIO stands for the original three programs designed to promote access to higher education. Upward Bound was the first TRIO program and sought to encourage low-income students to complete high school and prepare for college (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). A year later, Talent Search was created to assist students applying for postsecondary education financial aid (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). Next, the Student Support Services program was developed to help students stay in college until they earned a degree (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). Additional programs assist adults in selecting and paying for higher educational institutions, foster doctoral degree attainment for students from underrepresented segments of society, and provide specific assistance in the fields of science and math (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). The common components between the Upward Bound, Talent Search, and Student Support Services are mentoring programs, tutorial services, exposure to college campuses, and institutional navigation assistance, such as
completing applications for admission and financial aid (U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

Relatedly, TRIO programs provide financial information and opportunities for low-income students. As mentioned, Chicana/o students are more likely than many of their peers to have financial concerns, which can negatively influence persistence (Cerna et al., 2009). It stands to reason that by providing access to financial aid and application information, TRIO is capable of offsetting some of the factors that negatively contribute to student persistence.

Yet, the effectiveness of these programs has been mixed. For instance, in a 2009 analysis of the effectiveness of Upward Bound, Seftor, Mamun, and Schirm found that Upward Bound students are more likely to enroll in postsecondary education than their similarly disadvantaged peers, but the program did not affect the type or selectivity of postsecondary institutions. Also, despite efforts to link students to financial aid resources, Upward Bound did not have an “effect on the percentage of eligible Upward Bound applicants who at some point applied for financial aid or received a Pell Grant for postsecondary education” (Seftor et al, 2009, pp. 44-45). Lastly, Upward Bound did increase the percentage of students whose highest credential was a certificate or license, but had no effect on students completing a postsecondary credential within seven to nine years of graduating high school (Seftor et al, 2009).

The findings of Brewer and Landers’ (2005) longitudinal study of a Talent Search program were more favorable. In their analysis of 789 participants, they found that Talent Search students were 50% more likely than members of the non-Talent Search control group to enroll in postsecondary education (Brewer & Landers, 2009). They concluded
that Talent Search staff and interventions helped students access cultural capital, thereby allowing them to overcome obstacles to higher education (Brewers & Landers, 2009).

Findings related to the Student Support Services program were the most promising of all. Comparing the national annual performance report data for the 2002-03 and 2003-04 school years, with select data from 1998 - 2002, Zhang (2007) found that of the full-time freshman cohorts, over 82% of participants enrolled in the second year of college. The study also found that over two-thirds were enrolled in the third year and just under two-thirds in the subsequent year (Zhang, 2007). The study also illustrated the importance of the length of time services are offered. For instance, approximately 25% of students who were continually enrolled in a Student Support Services program received a bachelor’s degree, compared to 11-15% of those who received only one year of services (Zhang, 2007). In some cohorts the percentage difference was as much as 20-30% (Zhang, 2007). The findings from the three studies suggest that the TRIO programs are effective in increasing college-going rates, but supports and services offered during college are the most influential toward increasing persistence.

Similar to the Student Support Services of the TRIO program, the Educational Opportunity Program seeks to increase persistence to graduation for first-generation and low-income students. By encouraging and empowering students, the Santa Ana University Educational Opportunity Program builds upon students’ pre-college experiences and cultural identity, and assists them in adjusting to the college environment. This is accomplished through interventions, such as the Advising Resource Center, Bridge Programs, and the Faculty Mentor Program. The EOP program at Santa Ana University also serves as a model for student advisement in student resource
centers/EOP satellites located in each academic college, which provide resources to over 10,000 non-EOP students each academic year.

By providing students the ability to sample the college experience prior to their first semester, and continuing to support them over the additional semesters, the supports and agents of EOP seek to ease the transition from high school to college. By pairing students with mentors, EOP increases the funds of knowledge necessary for successful integration into the academic and social environments of college. The most vital aspect of the supports offered by EOP is the focus on validating the students’ cultural identity and the funds of knowledge they possess. In doing so, EOP places emphasis on the social and cultural capital a student brings with them and creates a sense of pride related to their ethnicity/race, which, in turn, empowers the student and enhances their resiliency.

Limited research has been conducted on the systemwide effectiveness of the Educational Opportunity Program. Yet, when compared to the national evidence that approximately 11% of first-generation, low-income students will attain a four-year degree (Engle & Tinto, 2008), the following information illustrates the potential of Educational Opportunity Programs. In the 2004 EOP update brief, which compared fall 1995 and fall 1996 EOP and statewide mainstream institutional retention data, Garcia found that first-time EOP students attained eventual graduation rates of 58%, which were on par with the system average of 60%. As compared to the 17% of the mainstream system, approximately half of EOP students are specially admitted, meaning they do not meet all of the requirements for university eligibility (Garcia, 2004). The systemwide graduation rate for specially admitted students was 37%, which is comparable to the 36% of EOP. Though these figures provide support for the success of EOP programs within
the system, they are merely a snapshot within years of data. The following chapter will provide greater insight about the influence of EOP at Santa Ana University.

Theoretical Framework

Social and Cultural Capital

Past research has theorized that effective participation in the world requires adoption of specific social identities and accommodation to a system of beliefs, values, language, and emotional responses that are familiar to those within the mainstream group (Stanton-Salazar, 1997; Gee, 1989). Social capital is the medium by which this conditioning takes place. Bourdieu (1986) viewed social capital as the investment of the mainstream class to maintain group solidarity and as a tool of reproduction. Bourdieu (1986) defined social capital as the aggregate of the actual potential or resources linked to possession of a durable network of more institutionalized relationships or acquaintances.

In Bourdieu’s view, the volume of social capital a person maintains is based on the size of the network of connections and volume of capital possessed by each individual with whom one is associated (Bourdieu, 1986; Dika & Singh, 2002). Bourdieu’s take on social capital highlights the hierarchally embedded reproductive structures that promote privilege and inequality (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). When situated within the context of higher education, social capital begins to illuminate the experiences of first-generation, low-income Chicana/o students as they exist within an institution that is comprised of and perpetuates the ideals of mainstream society. This, thereby, exposes the challenges first-generation, low-income Chicana/o students face when navigating social and academic environments in college.

The most commonly applied concept of social capital to the field of educational literature is the work of Coleman. Coleman (1988) described social capital as intangible
and consisting of three components: a level of trust evidenced by obligations and explanation, information channels, and norms and sanctions that promote common good over self-interest. As opposed to Bourdieu’s view of social capital, Dika & Singh (2002) interpret Coleman’s concept of social capital as being a positive social control where trust is a key component and norms are conveyed through information channels.

As some students are not allowed to use them, Stanton-Salazar (1997) would challenge that these information channels function as pathways of privilege, power, and inequity. This emphasizes the notion that ingrained mechanisms in mainstream institutions account for problems in the accumulation of social capital for first-generation, low-income students of color (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). Though trust is important, it is often undermined by alienating and exclusionary factors that inhibit the development of trust and solidarity amongst minorities.

One such alienating and exclusionary factor is differential value based on social class, ethnicity, and/or gender. In their study investigating the macro-institutional conditions reflecting inequality among schools, Oseguera, Conchas, and Mosqueda, (2011) found that ethnicity, in particular, influences the resources that students obtained through non-family relationships. Similarly, in a study that compared experiences of 16 Latino and 16 non-Latino White high school students, Ream (2003) determined trust was undermined by the teacher/student interaction wherein school personnel offered patronizing forms of social capital to Latino students. This social capital focused less on academic achievement and more toward social expediency in the classroom (Ream, 2003). Assuming such high school experiences influence perceptions of trust amongst Latino students in the college setting, the absence of trust may limit opportunities for building the social capital necessary to succeed academically.
Similar to social capital, cultural capital is the socially inherited cultural competencies that facilitate achievement in school (Bourdieu, 1970). Examples of cultural capital include knowledge about college, such as institutional navigation and applying for financial aid (Brewer & Landers, 2005). Additionally, cultural capital relates to styles of interactions and varying dispositions toward school (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003). Schools transmit knowledge in cultural codes, which automatically afford advantages to those who possess cultural and linguistic capital and disadvantages those who have different forms of cultural capital (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003).

As particular social and cultural capital are revered at college institutions, it becomes important to not only note the differences in social and cultural capital between members of the mainstream institution and first-generation, low-income Chicana/o students, but to focus on what an institution can do to assist those with varying degrees of social and cultural capital. Most importantly, it is necessary to validate and build upon the social and cultural capital a student brings with them. By identifying student relationships with institutional agents and supports affiliated with easing the transition or adjustment to college, a clearer picture of the academic and social integration process is revealed.

Yosso’s (2007) concept of aspirational capital refers to the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future despite real or perceived barriers, and is developed in social and familial contexts through stories and advice. It is possible to surmise that through the stories and advice of institutional agents, from similar cultural backgrounds and educational experiences, aspirational capital can be enhanced.

Presuming many students of color are under extreme pressure to academically and socially integrate, Yang, Byers, Salazar, and Salas (2009) theorized that representatives of ethnic support services, who have suffered some the same stigmatization and have
similar experiences, can be utilized to facilitate bicultural adaptation. Thus, acting as cultural translators, who pass on information about their own experiences and knowledge of White, dominant, middle-class culture, assist students in the process of achieving a bicultural identity, and navigating the mainstream institution without compromising their own cultural identities (Barajas and Pierce, 2001). Assuming lack of cultural validation (Rendon, 1994) and encountering unsupportive racial climates (Hurtardo & Cater, 1997), can negatively influence Latino students’ ability to adjust and persist in college (Hurtardo et al., 1996) the representatives of the ethnic support group, in Yang et al.’s (2009) study, exemplify how institutional supports and agents work toward enriching students’ cultural and social capital. Thereby, enhancing Latino students’ ability to negotiate institutional barriers and student resiliency.

Resiliency

Resiliency refers to the attribute of students who achieve at high levels despite economic, cultural, and social barriers (Cabrera & Padilla, 2004). It is important to determine how students negotiated various social, economic, and cultural forces that led them to develop a consciousness that allowed them to form critical perspectives of their surrounding and experiences, that in turn allowed them to persist beyond the first year of college (Stanton-Salazar-Spina, 2000). Resiliency, explains the relationship between barriers and how Latino students mobilize social, cultural, economic, and human capital to persist despite economic and institutional barriers. Yet beyond that relationship, resiliency signifies the subjective and individual experiences that result in persistence.

As previously mentioned, Latino students draw upon cultural and social resources to enhance their success in college. Yet, the method by which they do so and the types of capital mobilized varies between individual, race/ethnicity, and gender. For example,
*familismo* can serve as a sociocultural asset to help Latino males and Latina females navigate the educational system (Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009). Yet, Chicana female students are more likely to display positive help-seeking attitudes than Chicano males and more likely to rely on family and friends for advice (Gloria et al., 2005). Though having access to large numbers of culturally similar peers provides necessary cultural reinforcement for Latina/o students to feel comfortable in college (Cern et al., 2005), Latino males are more likely to view their success as a result of individual accomplishment (Barajas & Pierce, 2001). By understanding differences between race and gender, the conformist nature of older models of integration is challenged and additional focus can be paid to the way individual students have accessed different forms of capital to draw the inner strength necessary to persist in college.

Chavkin and Gonzalez, (2000) outline five key factors related to resiliency: supportive relationships, encouragement by school adults, student characteristics such as self-esteem and motivation, family factors, community factors, and school factors, such as academic success and pro-social skill training. In understanding these factors, it is easier to recognize the relationship between institutional agents and supports and their influence on increasing resiliency of Chicana/o students. Agents and supports personify supportive relationships, build self-esteem and motivation in students, and assist in pro-social skill training.

For example, empowerment agents aid in the facilitation of coping strategies for overcoming institutional barriers. Through stories and advice, institutional agents can increase the aspirational capital of students. Thus, despite perceived or real barriers, institutional agents enhance a student’s ability to maintain hopes and dreams of the future (Yosso, 2007). Finally, acting as cultural translators, institutional agents assist students in
the process of navigating the mainstream institution without compromising their cultural identity. As previously explained, positive cultural identity, feelings of belonging and connectedness to the institution, and supportive racial climates can positively influence persistence (Hurtardo & Carter, 1997; Hurtardo & Ponjuan, 2005; Johnson, Soldner, Leonard, & Alvarez, 2007; Tinto, 1993).

**Summary**

Though former concepts of integration focused on the conformist nature of participation as means of developing the social and cultural capital necessary to be successful in college, the focus of integration should rely on the subjective nature of the college transition process. As such, greater emphasis is placed on validating the experiences of first-generation, low-income Chicana/o students, and the role of cultural identity during the process of transitioning to college. Similarly, the variations in the methods that Chicano male and Chicana female students mobilize, different forms of capital should also be considered. Finally, the role institutional agents and supports, wherein they act as cultural translators to enrich the social and cultural capital of first-generation, low-income Chicana/o students, should also be examined.

The Educational Opportunity Program at Santa Ana University is an exemplar of how institutional agents and supports work in a capacity to assist students negotiate between their own culture and that of the mainstream institution. Yet, which supports and services offered by EOP best assist first-generation, low-income Chicana/o students still has to be examined. As noted in the literature, experiences during the first year of college are the most important in shaping persistence. Therefore, this study will examine the experiences of first-generation, low-income Chicana/o students who have successfully
negotiated the academic and social environments of college and persisted to the second year.
CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine the experiences of first-generation, low-income Chicana/o EOP students who have successfully negotiated the academic and social environments of college and persisted to the second year. Having used a phenomenological tradition, this study qualitatively described the lived experiences of nine Educational Opportunity Program students who have persisted to the second year of college. The following questions guided the study: Which supports and services do students find most important during the first year of college? How did the funds of knowledge provided by EOP help participants negotiate academic and social environments during the first year of college? To what extent did the supports and services provided by EOP validate participants’ cultural identity and social and cultural capital? Which supports or services, outside of EOP, did participants feel influenced their feelings toward academic persistence?

The remainder of this chapter will focus on providing additional explanation related to the selection of research design and traditions, including a rationale as to how they assisted in answering the research questions. The setting of the study will also be discussed in greater detail and will provide justification for the selection thereof. Then, the sample will be thoroughly discussed and include justification for the types of participants, the characteristics, and the size of the sample and how the rights of the participants were protected. The following sections will provide rationale for the use of the qualitative instrument utilized in this study. Next, the data collection and analysis sections will justify the data collection methods and tools used in analysis, as well as describe measures taken to increase the validity of the study. The role of the researcher will also be discussed and will focus on the researchers’ relevant assumptions, beliefs,
and biases. Lastly, the methodology chapter will conclude with a summary of the aforementioned sections.

**Research Design**

This phenomenological study contained the four components characteristic of a case study and will investigate a bounded system, be descriptive, particularistic, and heuristic (Merriam, 2009). As incorporated interviews of participants who have persisted to the second year of college, the research was bounded in time. As it focused on specific events, programs, or phenomena defined in this study as the Educational Opportunity Program at Santa Ana University, this study is particularistic. The primary data collection methods included interviews, thereby providing a rich description of the phenomenon being studied. Finally, as it led to richer understandings of the experiences of first-generation, low-income Chicana/o students who have persisted beyond the first year of college and provided an enhanced understanding of the supports and services offered by the Educational Opportunity Program at Santa Ana University, this study was heuristic.

**Research Tradition**

As I sought to understand the essence of the experiences related to a phenomenon, in this study I utilized a phenomenological research tradition (Creswell, 1996). A phenomenological study seeks to describe the meaning of lived experiences for individuals related to a concept (Creswell, 1996). In this study, I sought to understand how the participants felt the EOP supports and services influenced their experiences at the university and feelings toward academic persistence during the first year of college. Specifically, I identified how participants experienced validation of cultural identity and social and cultural capital, and how this influenced feelings toward persistence. I wanted to probe the memories of the participants to derive their interpretation of past events and
what meaning, or influence, those memories held for them. Through the collection of multiple personal experiences, I related similarities between experiences to create a picture of the essence of the participants’ collective experience. The ultimate goal was to inform and enhance the methods utilized by EOP to increase student persistence and provide rationale for adoption of such practices by the greater university.

Site Demographics

Santa Ana University began in the 1950s with an enrollment rate of roughly 2,500. It was constructed in the middle of a then-developing suburban area and largely comprised of agriculture. During the 1960s, in order to match the quickly expanding and diversifying community, the administration decided to increase enrollment for students of color. Though the university sought change, it was slow in coming. To demonstrate need for increased student and faculty diversity, members of a student-organized club took 30 staff and administrators hostage. As a result of negotiations made during the demonstration, the administrations agreed to further increase enrollment for students of color and increase the number diversified staff.

In 2011, Santa Ana University boasted a diverse student body of more than 35,000 and is considered a Hispanic-Serving Institution, meaning it serves a Latino student population representing more than 25% of the student body. The largest racial/ethnic group is Latino students, followed by Whites, Asian American students, and African American students. Despite representing the largest racial/ethnic population on campus, Latino students do not represent largest percentage of students who persist beyond the first year of college.

Roughly, 5,200 first-time freshmen were admitted in the fall 2010 term. Latino students represented the largest ethnic group, making up approximately 30% of the total
cohort. White students, the second largest ethnic group, represented approximately 23% of the total cohort. At the time of census, during the following fall 2011 term, fewer than 72% of Latino students had enrolled, as compared to 80% of their peers. Comparatively, the Educational Opportunity Program was able to increase the total percentage of Latino students who enrolled in the following fall term, yet a similar percentage variation between Latino and White students was still present. Within the EOP cohort, approximately 78% of Latino students continued on to the second year, as opposed to roughly 91% of their White peers.

*Educational Opportunity Program History*

As the civil rights movements of the 1960’s marked a turning point for marginalized social and ethnic groups, it encouraged members of those groups to play a role in changing social and economic barriers. The Educational Opportunity Program was a prime example of this change. The reformation began when student groups, namely the Black Student Association (BSA) and the United Mexican American Student Union (UMAS), organized to question issues of access and usage of university funds as it related to the Mexican and African American populations. Their diligence led to the discovery of the two-percent rule, often used by universities to admit athletes, which allows individuals meeting some or none of the admissions criteria to be admitted. After a protest and years of hard work, the Harmer Bill was eventually passed, which established EOP at state-level institutions of higher learning and ensured resources to increase persistence to graduation for first-generation and low-income students.

*Educational Opportunity Program at Santa Ana University*

Created by mandate in 1968, the Educational Opportunity Program at Santa Ana University seeks to bridge the gap between the pre-college and college experiences of the
students and the university by encouraging and empowering the students. This is accomplished through the Academic Resource Center, Bridge Programs, and the Faculty Mentor Program. The EOP program at the university also serves as a model for student advisement. More than 10,000 non-EOP students are served through student resource centers/EOP satellites located in each academic college.

**Site Selection**

As explained above, though Latino students represent the largest student group on campus, and within EOP, they are not the most likely to persist beyond the first year of college. Though EOP is capable of increasing the total number of first-generation, low-income students who persist beyond the first year, there still exists room for improving the persistence rates of students of color, specifically Chicana/o students. As Chicana/o students are also widely represented in the EOP program, the selected site is particularly suited for this study. Therefore, this site provided access to a large number of participants meeting criteria of first-generation, low-income, Chicano/a students. Further, this site provided me the opportunity to investigate the lived experiences of students who have taken advantage of the EOP and explore those experiences as they relate to persistence.

**Research Sample and Data Source**

In this study I examined students’ first year experiences. As the students are the most qualified to report on their experiences, I worked with EOP to identify those students they felt would like to participate in one-on-one interviews. EOP let them know that I would be contacting them, and then I sent them an email asking for their participation.

Working with EOP and utilizing criterion-based sampling, we were able to identify six students who were interested in participating. Falling short of the 10
participants I was looking for, I turned to snowball sampling. Students who did participate recommended three other students, who also chose to participate. Ultimately, five Chicana female students and four Chicano male students agreed to participate.

Ethical issues related to this study included respecting the safety, dignity, and privacy of the participants. These concerns were kept in mind during the development of the interview questions, data collection, and during the reporting phase of the study. To protect the identities of participants, pseudonyms were used in place of participants’ names, university, campus location, and EOP staff names. Informed consent, collected prior to the interviews, indicated the voluntary nature of the study, identified aspects that may have affected participants’ well-being, and notified participants that the interview could be stopped at anytime (Glesne, 2001). In order to meet federal guidelines, I received permission to conduct the study through the Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects at the research site.

**Instruments and Procedures**

I conducted interviews with first-generation, low-income Chicana/o college students. The goal was to devise an instrument that provided the opportunity to delve into the memories of the participants and pull forth their accounts of reality during their first year in college and how EOP may have influenced their experiences. During the interview process, as I began to reduce and make sense of each participant response, I also worked to suspend recollections of my experiences, thereby providing me the opportunity to inquire more deeply into the past experiences of the participants without influence of my bias. I learned from the students’ perception of reality as they identified supports and services within and outside of EOP, and how those supports and services assisted participants negotiate the academic and social environments of college, as well
as influenced their perceptions toward academic persistence. Based on that insight, I was able to identify implications for improvement within the Educational Opportunity Program and steps the university can take toward moving beyond the marginalizing process of acculturation.

**Interviews**

The interviews took place on campus at locations chosen by participants and lasted approximately an hour. Each interview began with an introduction, which included background information about the study, a summary of the informed consent agreement, and general instructions related to completing the interview. Upon obtaining the participants consent, the interview began.

The interview began with more general question related to background characteristics of the student and a reflection of their first year of college. From there, we moved on to the first section of the protocol. During this phase of the interview, I asked questions related to participants’ experience as an EOP student and for descriptions of supports services they took advantage of during the first year. Probing questions were utilized to gain a richer understanding of participants’ experiences.

The next section of the protocol focused on identifying the supports and services the students found to be the most helpful in negotiating the academic and social environments of college. In this section, I also asked participants to describe their academic and social experiences during the first year of college and how the supports and services offered by EOP may have influenced feelings toward the campus and mainstream institution. The third portion of the protocol focused on determining the extent to which students felt EOP validated their cultural identities and social and cultural capital. In this section, I examined the interpersonal experiences of the students and the
institutional agents, and then identified how those interactions influenced students during the transition and integration processes. The final question was attuned to the supports and services students took advantage of outside of EOP. In describing supports and services not offered by EOP, or relationships and services students relied upon for additional support, a clearer interpretation of areas of programmatic improvement surfaced, and provided an opportunity for comparison between student experiences and literature related to how first-generation, low-income Chicana/o student mobilize different forms of capital.

Once the final question of the protocol was completed, I asked the students if they had anything else they would like to add, if there was something they felt I might have missed, or if there was anything they felt the university or EOP could improve. Also, I provided participants an opportunity to ask me any clarifying questions related to any aspect of the interview or study.

**Data Collection**

Data was collected during the fourth through sixth week of the first semester of participants’ second year of college. As mentioned, utilizing criterion-based sampling, I worked with EOP to identify possible participants. Yielding only six participants, I utilized snowball sampling to identify further participants who met the criteria of first-generation, low-income Chicana/o EOP student who persisted beyond the first year of college and was also beginning the second year. As the literature addressed gender differences in the way social and cultural capital is accessed and mobilized, I tried to select a gender-equal participant group. Fortunately, five female students and four male students chose to participate. As such, I was able to identify similarities and differences
amongst gender. This also led to a greater understanding of the subjective nature of experiences during the first year of college.

I had planned to use a focus group to collect additional data. Unfortunately, after I coded and analyzed the data, participants had begun studying for finals. To clarify data from the initial data collection, I was capable of following up with some participants. I did my best to ensure I did not lead the responses with my own personal reactions (e.g., excessive head nodding, facial expressions, etc.), which could have potentially, negatively or positively, affected participant answers. Further, I tried to refrain from asking questions that were value-laden or leading.

**Data Analysis**

Through the examination of previous studies, theory, and articles written on student persistence, retention, resiliency, social capital, cultural capital, low-income/first-generation, and Chicana/o students, I developed preliminary themes and codes. These initial codes and themes were kept in my analytical memos. However, by developing initial codes during the literature review process, I may have developed a bias and anticipated outcomes of the study. To ensure the integrity of the data, I carefully analyzed participant responses and searched for all possible meanings therein. I also relied upon peer review to ensure I was not gleaning more meaning than existed in the data.

To reduce the bias with which I analyzed the data, I had the interviews transcribed verbatim. I incorporated pauses and fill words such as “uh” and “um” and referred to observer comments related to a heavy sigh or long pause. In doing so, I was able to relate responses to my field notes that captured participant body language and intonation in responses delivered. In order to ensure my interpretation of the data was correct, I compared the transcripts, field notes, and audio recordings to each other. However, to
more clearly convey meaning, during the presentation of the data in chapters four and five, I removed fill words from some quotes.

**Coding**

Once I triangulated the data and rationalized its trustworthiness, I began to look for words or phrases that were representative of participant experiences and related to the research questions. During this process, I took participants’ individual statements and looked for clusters of meaning and formed codes. I utilized an Excel spreadsheet to perform coding and used the Excel filter to search for codes during the analysis.

As I analyzed the transcripts, I continued to expand, collapse, and rename codes. During this process, I developed code themes. I then drew conclusions based on those themes, making note of themes I expected and did not expect to find, as well as unexpected themes that emerged. During this process, I referred back to the analytic memos I developed during the process of collecting data and writing the literature review.

**Roles of the Researcher**

I made multiple assumptions related to this study. As a university professional, student, and researcher I believe that: (a) access to education is not a privilege, but a human right; (b) by understanding the experiences of the participants, I will be able to make informed suggestions that can improve the supports and services offered; (c) historically marginalized student groups need to be held in the same esteem as their White counterparts; and (d) understanding the experiences of those who have persisted beyond the first year of college can enhance the experience for future students. Being knowledgeable of these biases was important.

There are many ways in which my role as a researcher may have affected participants’ reactivity. I am not a member of the participant population and, therefore,
may have been seen as an outsider. This may have affected the extent to which the participants felt comfortable answering questions, thereby influencing the quality and integrity of the data collected. To develop cultural and experiential understanding, I, immersed myself in literature related to the history and experiences of first-generation, low-income, students of color, in addition to the literature represented in this study. Additionally, I had continued conversations with friends, administrators, and faculty who are experts in the field of Chicana/o studies and/or work closely with low-income, first-generation college students. In doing so, I tried to act in a culturally competent fashion.

On the other hand, participants may have recognized me as an advocate and potential reformer. This may have brought a level of conformability to the data collection process, wherein participants felt compelled to provide information. Similarly, this may have encouraged participants to answer questions in a manner they felt would be correct or most helpful to the study.

It is likely that my bias affected the way in which I collected and interpreted the data. I may have been more likely to select or dismiss themes based on my belief system. To work beyond the influence of my bias, I sought peer feedback during the data analysis to ensure consistency in theme generation. In doing so, I tried to ensure that only the student experiences, and not my bias, were reported in the findings.

**Summary**

By conducting this phenomenological case study, I sought to add to the body of literature related to persistence for first-generation, low-income students of color. This qualitative study examined the experiences of first-generation, low-income Chicana/o students who persisted beyond the first year of college. By being aware of my positionality and influence as a researcher, I worked to limit the impact I had in shaping
the participant responses. By triangulating my data, I sought to limit the amount of bias with which I analyzed the data and developed codes and themes. By reporting on the challenges and success participants experienced during the first year of college, this study adds to the larger body of literature related to academic persistence amongst first-generation, low-income Chicana/o college students.
CHAPTER IV: ANALYSIS OF DATA

This section will begin by introducing the importance familial support upon feelings toward academic persistence. The following section will introduce the motivating role of cultural capital upon feelings toward academic persistence. The next section will describe an explanation toward the interrelation between familial support and cultural identity.

Then, the role of the Educational Opportunity Program upon the development of feelings toward academic persistence will be described. This section will focus on the methods by which EOP worked toward validating participants’ cultural identity and built upon their social and cultural capital. It will also discuss how EOP prepared participants for the first year of college, worked toward easing the transition to college, and developed a sense of belonging within EOP and the greater university.

Familial Support

When asked to describe the most important supports during the first year of college, family was often mentioned as most important. For instance, Maria commented, “First of all is my family.” Tom added to this as he explained:

Number one is my parents, my family. Anytime I needed money for books, or money in general they were there for me.

Familial support represents a vital element of participants’ social capital. Participants drew upon this form of social capital to negotiate the transition to college. Familial support, as identified by the interview data, consisted of three elements: maternal support, paternal support, and sibling support.
Maternal Support

Some participants described their mothers offering such logistical support as driving them to campus. For instance, Jake described how his mother gave him rides to and from college:

Well first there was my mother, cause she was the one that provided the vehicle, transportation. Cause without that there wasn't a way I would have been coming here to Santa Ana University. I mean I could have taken the bus but that's like two hours each way.

However, maternal support mainly came in the form of emotional support. Rosie described her experience of living in the dorms with a disrespectful roommate and how her mother assisted in negotiating that social environment:

I dormed my freshman year and it was the worst experience ever… So I would go to her and talk to her about it, “Hey you know I'm really having trouble being in the dorms.” They had no respect for noises, no respect for us, or like that. They would always have parties or get-togethers. I would tell them, “Hey I'm trying to study, and can you keep it down,” because they didn’t respect that I was trying to do homework, and were being rude about it. And she would just say, “You know it's an experience, you're going through it, so that you'll get to know what type of person… later on in life you'll know how to deal with that type of person if you ever run into them again.”

In this regard, maternal support assisted in the development of coping strategies to deal with social interactions of the dorms, thus lessening the potentially adverse influence on feelings toward academic persistence. As such, we see how maternal support may motivate participants in negotiating the social environments of college.

Beyond negotiating the social environment of college, maternal support also influenced participants’ experiences in transitioning to the academic environment of college. Sarah recalled how her mother supported her within the academic environment:

I used to get phone calls every day from her, like "have you done your homework?" "Are you studying, when's your next test?" So she was there constantly, pushing me to strive for the best. And pass my classes, and she would actually come over sometimes while I was studying and she would cook for me,
because you know it's not the same when you're by yourself, you have to, from class, go home and if you're hungry you have to cook for yourself so that takes up time, you know. But she was always there.

Sarah’s experience illustrates how the support of a parent, who may not possess academic subject knowledge or have experience in the college environment, can assist students negotiate the academic environment of college. Additionally, it demonstrates an endorsement of participants’ decisions to attend college. The maternal support of personal decisions was a source of reaffirming support, which influenced participants’ feelings toward academic persistence. Robert explained how his mother endorsed his decisions in life, remained supportive during challenges, and how that support influenced his experience during the first year in college:

But always having my mom at my side, helping me out, that was one way. Never give up, you know, she was like no matter what you do I'll be there for you. So having her, thinking whatever I do she would always be my mother, she would never be like, oh you messed up, [instead] you messed up, you know, I understand, you're a teenager, and you don't know what you want as your future. So as time went on, she was like, “Wow you know who you're gonna be now.” So that helped me out.

**Paternal Support**

Accounts of paternal supports were less frequently mentioned, but nonetheless important. Fathers were primarily responsible for such logistical support as providing rides and making certain participants were on task. However, fathers also served as motivational and emotional support. Similar to Sarah’s example of maternal support, Rosie recalled how her father aided in negotiating the academic environment:

My dad was there for the academic side and if I needed help…He kept on telling me "so how's your application doing? What do you need to do to be ahead? Are you reading ahead? Are you doing this, doing that?"

Though he may not possess first-hand knowledge related to completing college applications and assignments, Rosie’s father took a concerted interest in supporting her
through the process of negotiating the academic environment of college. This support further motivated participants to remain academically persistent. Sarah added by describing the support she received from her father:

Well, my dad, because my parents are divorced. We don't see him often. So for him to come by or give me rides to my house or whatever, it was important to me…when I needed a ride to go home on the weekends… He would come and pick me up. …When he was in the area, he would drop off money or ask me if I needed anything.

Sibling Support

Siblings emerged as a third form of familial support and manifested as emotional, academic, and motivational support. For some, being a role model for their siblings indirectly motivated participants. Robert recalled his experience:

He's (brother) like damn I want to go to college as well, I don't want to be a f— up. He never messed up in high school. I was always the one messing up and he was like damn I don't want to mess up like you…whenever he has questions he calls me up "hey help me out with this," and I'll help him out, no matter what. And the support he gave me, I don't know, his vibe is like that feeling, that brotherhood, that feeling you have with your brother, that's what helped me out in college. Still.”

In addition to the intrinsic motivation of serving as a role model, sibling support also came in the form of encouragement. When she described her experience in which her brothers and sisters motivated her, Mary added to this understanding:

My two older brothers and sister didn't go to college. My sister went to community college but she just got her A.A. and she stopped at that. But they encouraged me, like just continue, you're good at school, do what you do best, and succeed in life.

Regardless of personal educational achievements, all siblings supported her educational pursuits. However, one sibling had attended college and attained a degree. As such, that sibling was also capable of providing funds of knowledge directly related to the
academic environment of college. In telling of her experience, Sarah described similar academic assistance:

My brother. He's an auto mechanical engineer, so if I needed help with math, they have to do a lot of math, so when I needed help he would always be there and he would help me…

Sarah continued to give an example of how her brother also emotionally supported her during a break up with her boyfriend during the first year of college:

My first semester when I started, I had a boyfriend that didn't want me to come here. He didn't want me to move out, he didn't want me to go to school. …In the beginning there would be a lot of arguments and fights because of that. But I just kinda had to let him go, cause I feel like, if you really wanted to be with me, you're going to want me to do what I like. My brother knew about all of that. He's the one that kind of pushed me into letting him go, because, you know when you like someone, you don't want to let them go, but he made me realize that wasn't what was best for me.

Emotional support of siblings assisted participants in negotiating the transition to college. Though it will be explained in greater detail in a later section of this chapter, the transition between home life and the academic environment can prove challenging for some participants. Though challenging, it is clear familial support was crucial during the transition process.

The aforementioned examples show ways in which familial support can assist participants negotiate the transition to the social and academic environment of college. It is clear that family members are supportive of participants’ decisions to attend college and try to deliver support to assist participants achieve their academic goals. Though, Tinto (2008) suggested first-generation, low-income students may not possess the coping skills necessary to deal with the transition to college, the data reflects how familial involvement and support positively influenced feelings toward academic persistence.
Hence, it is important to recognize familial influence upon academic persistence and family as a vital form of the social capital that a student brings to college and.

**Cultural Identity**

Borrowing form the work of Sysoev (2001a), cultural identity is described as a “realization of his or her place within the spectrum of cultures” and the “characteristic features of a particular group that assign an individual’s group membership” (pp.37-38.) Characteristic features of cultural identity include race, gender, language, socioeconomic status, and religion (Sysoev, 2001). In this study, participants were asked to describe the cultural characteristics they identified with. Common amongst the responses were identity as a Latina/o, specifically referring to being of Mexican decent, a first-generation college student, and of a particular socioeconomic background. Instead of socioeconomic status, I use the term “background.” As such, I try to capture the positive association amongst participants’ previous experiences and financial aspirations without tying them to what may be interpreted as an educational barrier or hindrance to academic persistence. Accordingly, I try to move beyond deficit models of thinking wherein such factors as upbringing, parental involvement, and access to financial resources (Brice-Heath, 1983; Ogbu, 1979, 1981, 1994; Steele 1990; Harry & Klingner, 2007) were utilized to provide rationale for students’ inability to become integrated into the mainstream university.

In describing each characteristic of cultural identity, participants linked characteristics of their cultural identity to educational experiences, family, and community. Further, participants were asked to describe if and/or how they felt characteristics of their cultural identity influenced their academic persistence during the first year of college. Participants also explained how characteristics of their cultural
identity influenced motivation toward academic persistence. Resiliency refers to the attribute of students who achieve at high levels despite economic, cultural, and social barriers (Cabrera & Padilla, 2004). The following sections will illustrate how factors of cultural identity also influenced resiliency amongst participants.

**Mexican descent and resiliency**

Participants explained how being a member of a Mexican family or community influenced their perceptions of education and shaped orientation toward academic persistence. Participants shared their understandings of Latino stereotypes and described how those stereotypes acted as a driving mechanism to disprove social and academic stereotypes. For instance, Maria shared the importance of her identity as a Mexican American and how her perception of Latino stereotypes influenced her disposition toward academic persistence:

I would say that it's important because not a lot of people expect Mexican Americans or Latino people in general to actually make it big out there. So I believe I'm breaking what's the word, a statistic or something, I'm showing that, I'm actually proving and going out of my way and being successful out here, right? Like, living my dream and proving others wrong who would look down on me. So it is a very important factor variable cause like, so many stereotypes against us.

Similarly, Andrew added his view of Mexican American academic stereotypes and its influence on his educational experience:

Knowing our heritage, culture, or our race, doesn't have that much success during college, it gives you more motivation to try to increase it. So our future generations, our family generations will keep the idea of being successful throughout the years.

Maria recounted how her cultural identity as a Mexican American led to feelings of marginalization within society and the university, and how those feelings motivated her to change mainstream perceptions of Mexican people:
I'm Mexican and I live in a Hispanic community. So I see a lot of girls my age, girls that were my friends, guys that were my friends too, are already young parents. And that's kinda like something to see, that I'm not supposed to do… Because many people see us as minorities and I would like to prove a lot of people wrong.

The above narratives illustrated some of the stereotypes participants faced and their awareness thereof. It is clear the stereotypes, potentially harmful emotional and academic outcomes notwithstanding, manifested in a form of motivation propelling participants to disprove the stereotypes associated with Latinos. As such, the participants felt a sense of responsibility in disproving academic stereotypes, thus motivating them toward academic persistence.

First-generation and Resiliency

Moving beyond ethnicity, participants also reported that being the first in their family or community to attend college served as motivation to remain academically persistent. Participants wanted to set a standard for future generations and felt they acted as role models for their family and community. Rosie described how she had to move beyond the outcomes of her brother’s academic experience, and how doing so resulted in a sense of responsibility to academically persist:

Well I guess the main thing for me is I'm the second oldest in my family. And yeah I'm Mexican American but my first brother… so he wasn't really, a good influence to my family. He barely graduated high school, and I'm the first one from my family to attend four-year college. So I guess that helped a lot, to go to school, get pushed to go.

The data does not reflect possible challenges associated with the pressures of being the first in one’s family and community to go to college. Yet, as a role model to his family and neighborhood, Andrew explained his sense of responsibility and how it influenced his feelings toward academic persistence:
Where I'm from I don't see many Latinos go to college as it is. And since I'm the first one from my family, from my whole neighborhood, everybody looks up to me. My neighbor, because of me, he wants to go back to school. He's like two years older than me. So I feel like a role model not just to my family but others around me.

 Lastly, Lucinda added her experience as the first member of her family to attend college:

Since I'm the first one to go to college, that made me want to succeed even more and setting an example for my sister, and then coming from a low income family, that was like the main thing. I don't want to be low income anymore. I want to pursue something higher. So that's it, mainly, coming from low income and wanting to be a motivation to my sister and my mom.”

Lucinda’s example reiterated the impetus related to culturally identifying as a first-generation college student and how that influenced her feelings toward academic persistence. Culturally identifying as a member of a working class family also instilled within her the aspiration to model economic success for her family. This aspiration seems to illustrate the interrelated role of cultural identity and family. Also, Lucinda’s experience represents the motivational influence of socioeconomic background upon academic persistence.

*Socioeconomic Background*

During the first year of college, socioeconomic background, described herein as being from a working class family, served as a motivator toward academic persistence. Specifically, participants understood how being from a working class family can constrain the opportunity to escape one’s socioeconomic background. Participants understood that doing well in and completing college was essential toward improving their economic futures. Though having a better economic future is inherent in many other supports and services mentioned, a direct expression of striving toward an improved economic future and the promise of such is expressed below. Sarah described how her
desire for a better economic future influenced her commitment to academics as she thought about joining a sorority:

I think I want to focus on school more than anything. I want a good future and I want to move on and move quicker, you know, and I feel like sometimes sororities have different events that are mandatory or... I don't know, things they have to do that can take up time from your education.

Rosie added to the understanding of how coming from a working class family influenced her feelings toward academic persistence:

I want to have a family, and I don't want my kids going through the struggles of not having enough food or having enough money. And that was a big thing in my family because I have four brothers and one sister, so six of us in total. I want to have a better life for me and my children in the future, that's what's motivating me the most.

As Rosie’s example suggests, the challenges associated with growing up in a working class family are never far from thought, yet those challenges instilled within her a desire to work toward providing a better future for herself and family. As such, we see how the cultural characteristic of coming form a working class background serves as a motivator to academically persist. Additionally, we see an example of the interrelation between cultural traits, such as socioeconomic background, and how they relate to their families. The following section will discuss this in greater detail.

Shared Role of Family and Cultural Identity

As discussed, participants’ parents significantly influenced attitudes toward academic persistence. This emerged from a consciousness that education was critical to enhancing opportunities to move beyond their socioeconomic background. The data identified this as the interrelation between familial support and coming from a working class family. Mary described how her parents conveyed this understanding, thus influencing her feelings toward academic persistence:
My mom and my dad they would push and give me advice and tell me you need to get your education so you could get a better life for yourself so you could have a better life than what we gave you.

Mary continued by recalling how, despite perceived cultural traditions of male-centric patriarchal families, wherein women are not expected to attend school, her family recognized the importance of education in moving beyond economic background:

In our culture not a lot of women are expected to go to school because we live in mostly, I'm not going to say all, but mostly everyone lives in a patriarchal home where they say that the women have to stay at home and do all the housework and man go out there and get the money. But not in my household. They actually encouraged me, we need you to go to school, we want you to go to school, so you could get a better life for yourself.

Sarah added to the understanding of how gender cultural traditions influenced her desire to remain academically focused:

The Mexican tradition, or at least in my family, you can't, well you could have a boyfriend, but you can't leave your house with a guy, or you have to ask your parents' permission before you do anything. And I guess she (mother) was afraid that people would talk about me because I was on my own. Like our family, because even though they're your family, they can talk. And she was afraid…she's told me this before, she was afraid that I would make a mistake. Something that maybe I didn't… it wasn't meant to happen, or weren't my intentions but it happened, and later could affect my future.

Sarah’s example illustrated how familial cultural traditions in gender-related dating practices, familial involvement in relationships, and preserving familial and community perceptions toward her own family shaped her mother’s feelings of Sarah going to college. Two things can be gleaned from this example. First, knowledge of cultural traditions, such as the influence of community and family upon shaping parental expectations, motivated participants to remain academically focused. Similarly, participants’ aspirations to remain academically focused were influenced by knowledge of their culture and desire to improve their economic future. Secondly, despite concerns related to community and cultural gender norms, participants’ parents understood the
importance of attending college and supported participants during their experience.

For other participants, familial and cultural support, being first-generation, and coming from a low-socioeconomic background further enhanced motivation to academically persist. Andrew described the support he felt from his family:

As a Mexican, everybody (family members) wants you to succeed in life…My family because they want to be (successful) and they don't want me to go anywhere else right now. They just want me to be the first one in the family to actually graduate from college… In the end, they support me, by knowing that they're "don't worry about us, take care of what you've got to do, and that we want you to be successful." And then they're always there, every time I'm about to go back home or about to go back to college they're always like "do you need any money or any food" or anything like that.

This exemplifies the interrelation between being a member of a working class family and how members of Mexican families supported participants during college. The example also reiterates the notion that parents took a concerted interest in the participants’ academic success and understood the importance of graduating college so participants might improve their economic future.

The above section described the influence of aspects of cultural identity such as being from a working class Mexican family and a first-generation college student. It is clear participants’ parents and siblings understood the importance of attending college and played significant roles in emotionally supporting participants as they negotiated the first year of college. For instance, as first-generation college students, participants felt they served as role models to their family and community, which motivated them to show their communities and families what academic persistence looked like. Also, participants want to move beyond their working class background and create a better economic future for themselves and their families. Participants and families understood that finishing
college is the primary method to move beyond their socioeconomic background. This understanding further influenced feelings toward academic motivation.

**The Influence of EOP upon Academic Persistence**

In this section I will describe how the institutional agents and supports of the Educational Opportunity Program at Santa Ana University influenced academic persistence. I will begin by describing the influence of the summer bridge programs on preparation for the first year of college. Secondly, I will address how EOP assisted participants during the transition to college. Lastly, I will describe EOP’s influence on feelings of belonging within the EOP program and within the mainstream university.

**Preparation**

This section will discuss how the institutional supports and services of the Educational Opportunity Program residential and summer bridge programs influenced feelings of college preparedness and the resulting effect on academic persistence during the first year of college. Preparedness refers to participants’ feelings toward their capacity in negotiating the academic and social environments of college. Specific examples of preparedness will be provided throughout the section and offer a richer understanding of what preparedness meant to participants. Guiding this section are validation, and cultural and social capital frameworks. Each will be identified in relation to creating feelings of preparedness amongst participants.

The experiences that participants found challenging inform an understanding of how the residential and commuter bridge programs prepared students to negotiate the academic environment of college. For example, participants found the academic rigor of college courses challenging. One of the most challenging aspects of the academic environment was time management. Rosie described the challenges of time management:
It was just like you said adjusting to the college life. I think the other negative thing was I would kind of push my homework to the side, procrastinate, that was maybe a negative thing that happened on the academic side.

Similarly, Mary talked about how she procrastinated and put off assignments:

My first year I'm not going to lie, and I'm pretty sure a lot of people go through it too, but I procrastinated way too much. I did not give 100 percent of my effort that I should have… Because I'm first and foremost out here to get my education and not for anything else, so that's what I should really be concentrated in.

Lastly, Lucinda described the challenges time management presented during the summer bridge program, “So coming in I had no time management skills, I rarely did homework…”

Above, the participants described how the rigors of college work and managing time was challenging during the first experiences in college. It becomes clear that one of the methods EOP employed to prepare students for the first year of college was to expose them to the academic environment prior to the beginning of their first academic year experience. During this time, participants were provided the funds of knowledge to overcome challenges, such as time management. Exposure to specific experiences, in turn, enhanced the cultural capital of participants.

Cultural capital relates to styles of interactions and varying dispositions toward school (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003). By applying this explanation to EOP’s process, it informs us of how EOP facilitated experiences that enhanced participants’ cultural capital. Specifically, EOP imparted the necessary funds of knowledge to negotiate the academic environment of college. Funds of knowledge are described as “the implicit and explicit socialization into institutional discourses that regulate communication, interaction, and exchange in mainstream education” (Stanton-Salazar, 1997, p. 11). Though numerous experiences and interactions likely influenced feelings of
preparedness, the interview data identified two EOP facilitated experiences that offered funds of knowledge resulting in enhanced cultural capital. The first of which was the classroom experience.

Classroom experience

During the summer bridge programs, participants enrolled in classes that exposed them to the academic environment of college. Residential and commuter bridge programs participants felt the programs enhanced their understanding of expectations and exposed them to the academic environment of college. Angelica described her summer class experience and how it informed her of first-year expectations in college:

During the summer time when we had to come during summer sessions, the classes, well the English class, that helped a lot. I got to know the school well, deal with college, the feel of it, what to expect the first couple of days and stuff like that.

Informational videos are an example of funds of knowledge that are being directly translated to participants. Jake discussed how videos introduced him to the academic culture of college. The videos covered a variety of topics, such as class and professor expectations, the dos and don’ts of college, partying and substance use.

The videos, that kinda prepared us and not being so culture shocked about it coming here, kinda giving us the heads up, this is how it runs, your teachers may not know your name like in high school, but they will if you go to their office hours or talk to them.

Similarly, participants mentioned time management as a challenging obstacle during the residential and summer bridge programs. Again, the funds of knowledge provided by EOP assisted participants in negotiating this challenge. Lucinda recalled her experience attending the EOP-facilitated time management workshops:

During the bridge process we had workshops on how to -- time management and how to not lack focus and I'm putting those skills into practice and it helped me a lot with my schedule and now I have really great time management.
Here we see how the funds of knowledge, which enhanced participants’ ability to manage their time during the summer bridge program, not only enhanced participants’ ability to negotiate the academic environment of summer classes, but had a direct influence on future academic experience. Thus, it represents a further example of how the residential and commuter bridge programs prepared students for subsequent years in college.

Exposure to the college classroom provided participants with a sense familiarity and comfort within the college classroom and gave them confidence to engage in discussion, resulting in feelings of empowerment. Empowerment is defined as “the participatory progress of gaining resources, competencies, and key forms of power necessary for gaining control over one’s life and accomplishing important goals” (Stanton-Salazar, 2011p.1075). Through empowering students, the summer commuter and residential bridge programs assisted students in decoding and negotiating the academic environment of the first year of college. Decoding is described as overcoming stressful institutional barriers and harmful ecological conditions (Stanton-Salazar, 2011).

Though rationale for such feelings can vary by student and experience, the interview data suggested past academic experiences influenced feelings of inadequacy, marginalization, and isolation. For instance, Sarah described how insecurities related to her academic ability, and subsequent fear of being negatively judged by faculty and peers, made her feel intimidated and unready to participate in college discussion.

I think for me it opened up that…it made me less shy. I feel like I could participate in class now without thinking "Oh that's the wrong answer," or without feeling "Oh they're gonna laugh at me." It made me realize that people are more mature here. They're more mature, and that you can speak up and not be afraid of being judged, I guess.
Sarah’s experience describes how exposure to the academic environment led her to gain confidence and negotiate what she perceived as an intimidating classroom experience. Further, the experience empowered her with the confidence to contribute to the student-faculty conversation. Participants were then capable of drawing upon these experiences to negotiate similar classroom and faculty-student experiences.

Workload

Through exposure to the college workload, participants were prepared to meet the academic demands of the first year of college. For instance, during the summer, residential and commuter bridge programs participants had to enroll in classes such as English and math. For many, these classes represented the first exposure to the rigors of college assignments. Jake described how the amount of work he had during the summer math class was unexpected and overwhelming:

It was just math, like literally five pages back and front of pure notes. And then everyday maybe over 100 math problems and I was just like, it was overwhelming, it was just too much for me…

Though the workload of summer courses was challenging for some participants, exposure to the workload assisted them in managing their expectations of workloads during the first year college. Additionally, experiencing academic workload during the summer served to empower participants during the first year of college. Participants realized they persevered through the challenge of completing the summer work and could do so again in subsequent academic settings. When the workload became stressful or overwhelming, participants drew upon their experience to remain academically motivated. For instance, Sarah described how the summer workload empowered her toward persistence:
I realized that I did it in the summer for so long, why can't I do it again? And that summer, it was exhausting, a lot of homework, but it prepared me and it got me ready and made me realize it's college now. You can't slack off, you really can't.

Beyond the exposure to the stressful realities of college, there was the assistance in negotiating those challenges and how it influenced feelings of preparedness. The EOP staff and faculty mentors served as institutional agents, individuals who have a degree of human, cultural, and social capital; occupy hierarchical positions of relatively high status; and are committed to transmitting or negotiating highly valued resources (Dornbusch, 1995). In doing so, they enhanced participants’ social capital. In effect, the EOP staff, faculty mentors, and counselors imparted funds of knowledge used to negotiate the academic environment of college.

Sarah recalled an experience in which faculty mentors imparted participants with funds of knowledge, such as acquiring access codes, submission websites links, and explanation of the process of digitally submitting work:

I had the homework online and I did not have a clue what I was doing in the beginning, but they explained it to us. My professor explained exactly what we had to do and they gave us our codes to access the homework and everything. And after that, I started getting the hang of it, so that once I was coming to fall, I already knew how to access the websites … I was little bit more ahead than other students that had not been in the program.

The connection to such social capital is important in preparing participants for the first year of college. However, more crucial is the experience of accessing important forms of social capital, interpreted by the data as interacting with college professors. Such interactions allowed students to experience the benefit of doing so and familiarized them with experience of accessing professors as a means of negotiating academic barriers or challenges. In this regard, faculty mentors provided the cultural capital necessary to
negotiate the academic environment. For instance, Tom recalled his experience with EOP professors during the summer bridge:

My EOP professors, when I needed help with work of course, they, just so welcoming, they boosted my chances of even getting an A.

As such, the experience prepared students to access professors during the first year of college. As maintenance of grade point average is necessary to remain at the university, empowering students with the capacity to access academic assistance is one of the most vital components of academic preparedness.

Transition to College

Though the experiences amongst residential and commuter bridge participants varied, participants felt their bridge program prepared them for living on campus or commuting to campus. In this section, I will discuss how those experiences empowered students and prepared them for the first year of college. The first component is exposure to the realities of either living on campus or commuting. Second, and more importantly, is how EOP assisted participants to negotiate the logistical and emotional realities of transitioning back and forth between academic and home life.

Though some residential bridge students ended up commuting during the first year and commuter bridge participants lived on campus during fall and spring semesters, for those who continued to live on campus or commute, the bridge program experiences prepared participants for similar circumstances during the first year of college. For those students who switched, EOP continued to assist participants as they negotiated the logistical and emotional experiences throughout the first year of college.

For some participants, the experience of commuting exposed them to time commitments and the resulting stress of commuting. As time management was a common
challenge amongst participants, exposure to commuting allowed participants to experience the hardships of time spent in transit. Further, it prepared participants to overcome similar challenges during the first year of college. Sarah recalled her experiences of commuting and how she felt the experience prepared her for the first year of college:

I was in the commuters (bridge program) so I had to go back and forth, a two-hour drive because I came on the bus. But I think it was worth it because I experienced what it would be like to be a college student before I actually started my fall semester as a freshman.

Similarly, Jake recalled the tedium of commuting in traffic, attending class, and then returning home:

I didn't like it because it was commuting. It was like an hour each way… The traffic was just bad. But it gave me like a little heads up on how it was gonna be in college where you have to come over, go to a class, and then it pretty much gave me a little heads up to what it's really gonna feel like…

Again, we see how the experience of the commuter bridge program led to feelings of preparedness and empowerment. Participants of the commuter bridge were familiarized with the realities of commuting, thus, mentally preparing EOP participants for negotiating the challenges of commuting prior to their first year of college. As participants continued to commute during their first year in college, they were capable of drawing upon their bridge program experiences to negotiate the challenges of associated with the time commitment of commuting. As such, participants were better capable of negotiating the potentially challenging influence of commuting during the first year of college.

For participants of the residential bridge program, exposure worked in a similar fashion. Participants who lived in the dorms during the residential bridge program or during the first year of college were faced with the realities of living away from home
and negotiating the constant transition between family and academic life. For example, Maria described how a visit home resulted in an argument with her mom:

One night I went back home and we got mad at each other and then she, out of her anger, she told me to not come back. So I was hurt in that way. So I didn't go back for a month, and she was really worried about me, I heard from other people.

After hearing about her mother’s worry, Maria decided to confide in one of EOP mentors, a person who had experienced a similar situation. By relating her story and experience, the mentor was able to assist Maria in negotiating the situation with her mother and suggested Maria go back and talk to her mother. As it turned out, Maria’s mother was also having a difficult time with Maria’s transition to college, which influenced Maria’s transition to college. Maria recalled the experience and how working with a mentor helped her see the issue from her mother’s perspective. Leading her to reconcile with her mom:

And I talked to one of the mentors and she, well that person told me that she went through the same thing and to go back and to talk to her. And I talked to her, and yeah it turned out good and now we're talking again and I'm commuting.

With the assistance of the EOP mentor, Maria discovered she needed her mother as much as her mother needed her and decided the best way to negotiate the situation was to move back home and commute to campus. As a result, she was capable of mitigating the influence that living away from home had on her academic persistence.

Maria’s example highlights a challenge of the transitioning to college and how EOP assisted participants in negotiating them. The EOP mentor validated Maria’s experience. By connecting participants to mentors, EOP enhanced participants’ social capital. Mentors validated participants’ experience and related their own experience, thus creating a supportive and enabling environment in which mentors were then able to translate coping mechanisms for addressing the situation. In this regard, we can
understand how the EOP mentor in Maria’s example built upon the participant’s experience to impart coping strategies, such as understanding the mother’s perspective and the necessity of repairing the relations with her mother. In assisting her negotiate the home life issues and the resulting influence on Maria’s academic experience, the EOP mentor enabled her to work toward a solution to the challenges of living away from home.

In a situation wherein a student feels isolated from his or her home, creating a supportive and enabling environment is essential. In the absence of such validation within the university, the pull to leave the institution and address familial issues may prove too great for students. For example, Lucinda described her experience of living away from home, and how issues at home influenced her experience:

It was kinda hard, since I live on campus, adjusting to the whole dorm situation and like living away from home and having, like, say there's problems over there and your being here… Moments where I just wanted to go back and stay there and not come to school because of what was going on… The fact that my dad isn't taking responsibility and it's just my mom and my little sister and I feel like my mom still needs like the male side to help her out. But then I just feel like I have to be there.

In Lucinda’s experience, EOP faculty mentors were responsible for assisting her negotiate the cyclically reinforcing relationship of home and academic life. In this example, the absence of Lucinda’s father influenced her perceptions toward the need to remain at home to support her younger sister and mother. Yet, this conflicts with the familial and cultural motivation to remain academically persistent, which Lucinda described as “coming from low income and wanting to be a motivation to my sister and my mom.” On one hand, she would like to take care of her family. On the other, Lucinda recognizes she must complete college to move beyond her working class background.
To negotiate these challenges, participants recalled how faculty mentors served as supportive agents and empowered participants through the use of reflective essays. The reflective essays were given to students during the bridge program and over the first year at college. Lucinda recalled how a reflective essay topic, which asked students to reflect on personal, family, and other challenges they faced during the transition to college, influenced her relationship with her mother:

What helped me the most was my professor, he would assign essays based on ourselves so we can figure out who we are and how to change the way we think and that made me change a lot… Me and my mom never really got along but the essays made me realize why we didn't get along and it actually created a better relationship. Because it sounds weird but if it wasn't for the essays I don't think I would have tried as hard as I am right now. And that's why I keep myself motivated, because of the essays….

In this regard, EOP faculty mentors provided participants with culturally relevant teaching and learning opportunities. Mbugua (2010) built upon the work of Ladson-Billing (1995) to describe culturally relevant pedagogy as empowering students “intellectually, socially, emotionally, by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (p. 88). With guidance from the faculty mentors, participants were encouraged to evaluate underlying stressors in their life and address them. In doing so, faculty mentors gave participants a platform to discover their intrinsic strength in negotiating challenges associated with transitioning between home and academic environments. The essays allowed participants to develop a deeper understanding about challenges in their personal lives, which also assisted them in identifying personal coping strategies. This allowed participants to recognize their personal strength and ability to negotiate future challenges.

*Belonging*
Hurtado and Carter (1997) defined belonging as the social interactions that shape student affiliation and identity within the university, significant to which are perceptions of a supportive campus. The interview data suggests participants sense of belonging was reinforced through relationships, peer support, and faculty and peer mentors who validated characteristics of participants’ cultural identity and past experiences. Further, participants’ identity as members of EOP had a reinforcing influence on feelings of belonging. Lastly, the exclusivity of supports and services influenced perception of a supportive environment. The perceptions of support enhanced a sense of belonging amongst participants.

**Counselors**

The EOP counselors represented increased access to social capital and cultural capital. One component of the capital included the accessibility of the counselors and another was the actual support and validation provided by the counselors. Andrew described the perceptions of availability of the EOP counselors and their willingness to assist participants in negotiating challenges associated with transitioning to college:

…Because they're literally, they're always right there. And they're always there to help me out. Like for example, if you ever have any trouble with emotional or family go through problems... They're gonna let someone from EOP know who can actually relate to that problem and could talk about it. And like in the end it will help you settle down your feelings over what's going on.

When challenges fell outside the scope of support they could provide, the Educational Opportunity Program counselors also enhanced the social capital of participants, connecting them to resources to negotiate the challenges of transitioning to college. Rosie recalled her experience:

I was having personal problems at home and I would ask is there any way I can talk to anyone, and they would say, Oh there's counseling place you can go to. So
I went to one of the sessions and that's helped, and that's a way I got help from EOP.

Beyond the access to support, the exclusivity of the support influenced a sense of belonging. Having access to counselors, faculty, and services designed for and provided solely to EOP students reinforced feelings of a supportive environment. The supportive environment directly influenced feelings of connection within the program and resulting sense of belonging. Lucinda recalled how access to EOP tutoring services and resources, as compared to those outside of EOP, influenced perceptions of a supportive environment:

Having your own math tutors on Mondays and having a place to go instead of going to the (Building Name) one where it's like crowded but it was really awesome that we had our own tutors to help us…Yeah you (don’t) get your own computer and then there's only like 4 tutors helping you out. And there’s a lot, like usually you don't even get a seat at the computer. So having your own for EOP students, helped me a lot.

*Faculty Mentors*

The EOP faculty mentors understood that participants often faced challenges during the first year of college. As such, it was their job to assist in the process of negotiating those challenges. Validation of participants’ experiences was influential upon senses of belonging. One method of validation was the reflective essay. The assignment recognized that participants may face challenges, which vary by individual, during the first year of college. The essay writing validated the subjective nature of experiences during the first year of college in two ways. First, they served as recognition of possible challenges. Secondly, faculty mentors’ willingness to assist participants negotiate challenges, further enhanced feelings of a supportive campus.

Beyond those experiences identified in the reflective essays, participants recalled how they could discuss academic and personal issues with faculty mentors. The exposure
to and meeting with professors during the summer bridge programs likely influenced seeking assistance from EOP faculty mentors. Yet, it was the mentors’ connectedness to EOP, validation of experiences, and willingness to assist participants negotiate challenging experiences that was critical. Tom recalled his experience with faculty mentors:

“Within EOP, professors know we're EOP and a family within, I feel that they… I mean the coursework is more how can I put it, they're just more helpful towards us.”

Lucinda added:

“Having my professor not as a professor but as a mentor as well and going to him and telling him my problems. There was a lot of support.”

Tom and Lucinda described how faculty mentors influenced perceptions of support, which led to a sense of belonging. Yet, it was the overarching sense of support derived from being a member of the Educational Opportunity Program that reinforced perceptions of support. Participants’ perceptions of support influenced a sense of belonging.

*Peers*

Relationships developed amongst EOP participants often represented their first at college. Participants often relied upon peers for motivation and support. The availability of this support reinforced feelings of belonging. Rosie recalled her experience:

“Well first of all, my peers, my friends I met during summertime. They’ve helped a lot too because we always have that community amongst each other. So that if we had any trouble on math or English, we would get together, I would ask them, they would ask me, questions to help each other with the homework.”

Tom added the support he received from peers when he wanted to give up:

“At times, sometimes when I wanted to give up, they were always encouraging me, you know "stay on track, we're EOP, remember what we're here for" so keep that in mind.”
Both examples illustrate peer support. As such, the relationships facilitated by EOP increased the social capital of participants. As participants negotiated the academic environment of college, they were able to share funds of knowledge. These funds of knowledge came in the form of explicit subject knowledge, resulting in enhanced opportunity for learning and completing academic assignments. Other funds of knowledge related to meeting assignment deadlines or attending important workshops and meetings.

Additionally, EOP introduced participants to racially and ethnically diverse peers, whom shared such cultural similarities as coming from a working class family or being the first in their family to attend college. This experience enhanced participants’ feelings of comfort within the program, enforced feelings toward membership, and led to greater comfort in accessing social and cultural capital. Sarah’s experience exemplifies how exposure to peers from different ethnicities with similar cultural characteristics led to feelings of self-comfort and empowerment:

I think everybody in EOP came from a variety of ethnicities. And nobody judged anybody for the way they dressed or the way they spoke or any of that. And I think that in EOP, at least I felt comfortable being myself. I didn't have to pretend to be anybody else. And I think they made us feel comfortable.

Similarly, Rosie added how associating with other first-generation students influenced her sense of belonging within the program:

It did help me fit into college better because for the fact that EOP had other students, first time (first-generation). And I guess we could talk among each other, I guess understanding where we came from and stuff like that.

Thus we can see how being connected to culturally similar peers, albeit not specific to racial or ethnic culture, and including socioeconomic background and educational experiences, can lead to increased feelings of belonging. Validation of such
cultural traits was also important. Tom’s experience with EOP suggests the validation of cultural traits, such as being a student of color or coming from a low-socioeconomic background, and how doing so was essential to negotiating challenges associated thereto:

They knew the struggles that some of us have overcome while we were growing up, in the hood, the bad decisions that our parents have made, the bad decisions that we've made for ourselves, with low GPAs. They really know that the help they gave us, it was really needed much. That's (validation) what helped out the most. Since they know that EOP is predominately low income blacks and Latino, just minorities, we all understood each other, we knew that in the hood, as people might call it, many things go down and many people look down on us saying that we will never make it to college. So knowing that the experiences and struggles that we came across, it wasn't together, but we knew what we meant when we would talk about experiences like that. So I guess that brought us even more together.

In addition to validation, Tom’s example builds upon those of Sarah and Rosie’s, in which he discussed the opportunity to share and recognize similarities between such experiences as academic challenges, feelings of marginalization and isolation, and coming from a less fortunate socioeconomic community. The validation of which led to a greater sense of belonging within EOP.

*Within the Campus*

What is important in these examples is the reference to being a member of a “community.” This sense of community is consistent with Tinto’s (1993) revised theory of integration, which focused upon the notion of membership. The notion of membership provided greater understanding of how students of color function in their own and other cultural groups, and infers greater diversity in modes of participation. Feelings of membership were further influenced by the culturally supportive nature of EOP and the involvement of students from similar background experiences. The interview data suggests the feelings of membership and opportunity to learn from individuals of different ethnic and racial backgrounds was important. Participants felt, in addition to
recognizing racial and cultural diversity, EOP served first-generation, low-income students. As characteristics of each participant’s cultural identity were validated, feelings of being an outsider from EOP were lessened. Andrew added to this by recalling how the supportive atmosphere of EOP influenced his feelings of belonging:

They always brought a positive atmosphere, like, motivation, like "oh, you can do it, don't worry" or EOP is always telling me "don’t worry, if you ever need anything we'll always be here for you no matter what. We're like family." And then my friends will be there for me, like don't worry you've got to take care… or if you ever need a book for class, I'll be here for you.

The relationships and subsequent sense of belonging extend beyond the EOP-facilitated experiences manifested on campus, in and outside of the classroom. The ability to see familiar faces on the campus and in courses gave a wider sense of membership within the larger university community and reinforced feelings of belonging. As such, we see how the feelings of membership within the EOP community influenced a sense of belonging within the mainstream part of the university.

Jake recalled how his feelings of belonging as a member of the EOP community influenced feelings of comfort and belonging within the mainstream part of the university:

The EOP peers, there's a lot of them so like I'll be walking down to the bookstore or something of that nature and I'll be able to see them and say “Hi,” and just talk to them for a bit and catch up on what they've done, so for example their summer or what classes are they doing. I actually have like 5 peers in my sociology class so that's pretty good cause we all sit together and it feels kinda like high school, you know you know them and you know where they come from so it's kinda like a little brotherhood kind of.

Jake’s perceptions of a “brotherhood” signified the connection within EOP. As previously discussed, the families of participants were influential upon academic persistence. The cultural influence of which appeared to reinforce resiliency. As such, we can draw a similarity between familial support and the feelings of being a member of a
“family within” EOP. The sense of belonging was reinforced by commitment to and membership within the EOP family. In this regard we can understand the relationship between a sense of belonging within the Educational Opportunity Program and feelings of belonging within the university.

The presence of EOP peers within the non-EOP classes were underlined by feelings of being a member of a family. Participants were connected to students they knew would not negatively judge them for being a member of a particular race/ethnicity. As a result, having EOP peers visible on campus and in the classrooms led to instances in which participants felt a connection within the larger university community.

Campus Diversity and Racial Climate

Perceptions of campus diversity were similar amongst participants. All participants mentioned the campus being diverse. Yet, in some instances, participants described a social separation amongst races. Specifically, some participants saw groups of African American students hanging out together in certain areas of campus. Rosie recalled her perceptions of this separation:

I know the school is really diverse but based on my opinion I did see separation of ethnicities. Like for example in front of (campus building), I guess there's like a little sitting place, I would see a lot African Americans there.

Though other participants mentioned a change in perceptions, Robert’s experience best exemplified how some participants’ perceptions changed over the first year of college:

I saw mostly African Americans, you know, but that's nothing, that's cool you know. Everybody's trying to get an education. We should all be part of it, we should all be cool with each other. So that's cool. I never saw racism on campus. It's all good. So I guess being to a college that's all diverse it was like, at first I saw certain spots where there were certain people. But in my second year I was more open minded, I see everybody all around me. And again, all my classes, are diverse as well.

Robert went on to describe how he felt EOP influenced his change in perception:
EOP, definitely, because when we were having all those meetings, the auditorium meetings and all that, it was like a family in there, everybody knew each other. Like we knew where we come from and why are we here. We're not here to be racist and all that stuff, we're here for education. We're not here to make drama in our life, we're here for something. We're not here to fight. That's why you're in college. That's for high school people right there if you think about it. EOP really helped me out. That's why I'm open minded.

As we saw in the previous section, relationships with EOP peers who shared culturally similar characteristics led to a sense of belonging within EOP. Robert’s example broadens the notion of being a member of a family within EOP and relates his experience to the development of feelings of belonging within the greater institution. Robert’s experience describes how EOP shaped his attention beyond differences of race and toward the common purpose of attending college. Robert’s experience suggests exposure to students of different backgrounds within the Educational Opportunity Program led to feelings of recognition that all students were at the campus to learn, regardless of race. Perceptions of difference were shifted toward perceptions of common purpose, which may have assisted participants in navigating the university’s racial and cultural diversity. Though the notion of a common purpose did not serve to distract form racial and cultural differences, it did influence participants to look beyond differences and toward similarities between different groups. This allowed some participants to feel a greater sense of belonging amongst racially and ethnically different peers and within a racially and culturally diverse campus. In some instances, non-EOP members of the university furthered these perceptions. Jake recalled how his biology professor reinforced the idea of the common purpose:

So he says everyone is paying tuition in this room, so if you have a question, go ahead and raise it, no matter if it's dumb or not cause we're all paying the same tuition, so that's one way of saying you know we all paid the same amount, or we
all paid to be here, so if you have questions, no one's going to think you're oh he doesn't know the answer to that question.

Feelings of a common purpose were reinforced by perceptions of a supportive racial and ethnic climate. Participants recalled how they felt that the university recognized the diversity of students and offered opportunities to explore campus diversity. Sarah recalled her perceptions of the supportive racial climate within the university:

Oh yeah, I think so, I think they are because of the different clubs they have, you know clubs can't really happen if it wasn't for the university and students of course. But there's different clubs from different cultures and stuff like that. So I think they do, they support.

Tom added to this by explaining the institutional recognition of diversity and the representation of people of color within publications and university events:

You know they always start with the posters and they have people and they have books pretending to be reading them, there's always all different kinds of people, like different ethnic groups on there. Just the things they have, for example they have (campus event), it was Latin or something of that nature, so pretty much like, Middle Eastern and then last semester it was like Alice in Wonderland. So they have a lot of programs to support everyone's little needs and like, little, it's a little home. Because a lot of people come from all over the world. But I believe it does, the way everyone is friendly to everyone no matter whether you're white or black.

Maria expanded on the notion of friendliness:

Everyone I've talked to here in school is open-minded. So I think they would accept any race.

This is not to imply that racism and marginalization does not exist at the university or that student groups don’t self-organize based upon racial similarities. There are examples that the university took steps to enhance feelings of a supportive climate amongst students. As some participants came form less supportive high school and community environments, and, in some experiences, racially isolated communities, the
perception that the university made attempts to recognize racial and cultural differences amongst students was significant for participants. Robert explained how his experiences influenced his perceptions and how his college experience challenged those perceptions:

Yeah, I feel comfortable here in Santa Ana University. Cause it's very diverse, you see Hispanics, Asians, African-Americans, Whites. I don't think anyone believed that I don't belong here. I think everyone was like positive, I don't think anything was negative. I guess the person I was, I was always like the, more the street person... So I guess the drama I had in my life, I don't have it no more, so I always … I feel comfortable here, you know?

Jake added to how his precollege and cultural experiences led to feelings of a lack of congruency within the institution but how his perception of a supportive climate within the university increased feelings of comfort:

Pretty much my culture is more about being defensive but here it's like trying to be open… Cause that's where I grew up, it's survival of the fittest, you have to adapt to your environment…(Here) you're able to go out I guess and sit in the grass and talk when over there it's like you have to have a specific reason why you're in the grass or the park or whatever it is because it might be territorial to someone.

Jake’s example stresses the importance of recognizing characteristics of students’ cultural identity and experiences and the influence upon feelings of belonging within the university. Additionally, the data represents ways in which EOP shaped perceptions of and assisted in navigating racial and cultural differences within the university. By validating characteristics of participants’ cultural identity, EOP reinforced a positive self-identity. Further, EOP assisted participants in maintaining their cultural identity as they navigated the diversity within EOP and the campus. Supported by the perceptions that the university was supportive of racial and cultural diversity, participants felt a greater sense of belonging within the institution.
Summary

The data of this study illustrated the importance of familial support upon attitudes toward academic persistence. Though some parents may not have been familiar with all opportunities and resources of the educational system, they are aware of the role of education’s influence upon future outcomes. Similarly, though some had college experience, siblings along with parents offered forms of emotional, logistical, academic, and financial support. Hence, the role of familial support is related to attitudes toward academic persistence.

Secondly, cultural identity and its interrelation amongst familial support played a significant role in shaping attitudes toward academic persistence. Participants identified cultural identity characteristics as Mexican descent, first-generation college student, and socioeconomic background. Each had an influence related to developing resiliency amongst participants and were reinforced by familial support. For example, understanding the way in which people of Mexican descent are marginalized and underrepresented in higher education instilled participants with the desire to improve the mainstream consciousness toward Mexican families, students, and communities. Further, cultural traditions associated with being from a Mexican family were influential. For some female participants, knowing they had familial support, despite families’ exemplifying patriarchal traditions, was motivating. Also, the trust associated with familial support as it related to the importance of attaining a college education instilled participants with the impetus to academically persist.

As first-generation college students, participants felt they served as role models for their family and communities. This understanding represented a form of motivation to academically persist. For other participants, we see the support associated with being
member of a Mexican family. Lastly, socioeconomic background represented a motivator toward providing a better life for participants’ current and future families. Participants drew upon the life experiences and importance of education conveyed by parents as means of motivation toward a better financial future.

The institutional agents and supports of the Educational Opportunity Program were also influential during the first year of college. By exposing participants to the classroom, college workload, and funds of knowledge to negotiate the academic environment of college, EOP prepared participants for the first year of college. Secondly, EOP built upon participants’ social and cultural capital, validated their experiences, and empowered them during the transition to college. By validating experiences and enhancing cultural capital, EOP assisted participants in negotiating between home life and the social and academic environments of college. Further, through enhancing social capital of participants, EOP provided opportunities to build peer, faculty, and counselor relationships, resulting in feelings of membership within EOP. Such relationships and feelings of a supportive climate led participants to develop a sense of belonging within EOP and the mainstream institution.

Similarly, participants recognized the diversity of the mainstream university, and the university recognition and support of diversity. However, in some instances participants described the social separation of race within the institution. EOP facilitated opportunities to meet members of different racial or ethnic backgrounds who shared similar cultural characteristics, such as being a first-generation college student or coming from a working class family. This influenced feelings toward a sense of belonging. The following section will recap this study and provide policy implications and suggest additional areas of research.
CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study are important in that they expose the subjective nature of persistence. Though statistical data may describe Latino success rates and correlational variables related to persistence, the findings of this study place emphasis on the personal nature of encountering and overcoming challenges. Though this study sought to determine the social and cultural capital that influenced participants’ resiliency during the first year in college, this study is ultimately concerned with what institutions can do to validate cultural identity and increase resiliency of students. In an attempt to identify the supports and services that increase first year persistence, the participants of this study shared their experiences of challenge and success during the first year of college. The findings based upon their experiences will be described below.

Overview

Of the first-generation, low-income students who withdraw from a four-year institution prior to degree attainment, 60% will not persist beyond the first year (Engle & Tinto, 2008). The first year of college represents a critical stage for first-generation, low-income students. Thus, identifying the supports that increase persistence for first-generation, low-income college students is of the highest importance (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1983; Tinto, 1988, 1998, 2008; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Engle & O’Brien, 2007; Rendon, 1994).

First-generation, low-income student groups are disproportionately comprised of people of color, specifically African Americans and Latinos. Despite the Latino population doubling in size between the year 2000 and 2010, (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010) and representing one of the largest racial/ethnic groups in the nation’s college campuses (Fry, 2011), the number of degrees conferred on Latino students continues to lag behind
other student groups (Snyder & Dillow, 2012). The completion gap has been most pronounced amongst Mexican American students, who are among the most educationally at risk of all Latino sub-groups (Ream, 2003; Yosso & Solorzano, 2006). This reinforces the need to focus on the supports that influence persistence for first-generation, low-income Mexican American students. Informing this study are the concepts of social capital, the relationships that can provide a student with access to resources and knowledge; cultural capital, student perceptions, aspirations, and cultural values (Cerna et al., 2009); and resiliency, the attributes of students who achieve at high levels despite economic, cultural, and social barriers (Cabrera & Padilla, 2004).

As it relates to this study, social capital included parents and siblings. Despite limited knowledge of or experience within the university setting, the cultural capital provided by these supports served as motivation to remain academically persistent. Upon arrival to college, EOP expanded participants’ social capital to include peers, counselors, and faculty mentors. By sharing the funds of knowledge to negotiate the academic and social environments of college, the expanded social capital enhanced participants’ cultural capital within the university. With the additional social and cultural capital participants’ were better capable of negotiating the challenges associated with transitioning to the academic and social environments of college.

This study examined the experiences of first-generation, low-income Chicana/o students who have successfully negotiated academic and social environments of college and persisted to the second year. In order to identify first-generation, low-income Chicana/o students, this study accessed the Educational Opportunity Program at Santa Ana University. The EOP at Santa Ana provides supports and services for first-generation, low-income students of all race/ethnicities. The study sought to answer the
following questions: Which supports and services did students find most important during the first year of college? How did the funds of knowledge provided by EOP assist students to negotiate institutional, academic, and social environments during the first year of college? To what extent do the supports and services provided by EOP validate students’ cultural identity and social and cultural capital? Which supports or services outside of EOP do students feel influenced their persistence?

Findings

In answering the question, “Which supports and services did students find most important during the first year of college?” participants also answered the question, “What additional supports or services outside of EOP do students feel influenced their persistence?”

Importance of Family and Cultural Identity

Of the supports outside of EOP, the data identified familial support and cultural identity. When describing the transition to college, Tinto (2008) posited that in many cases first-generation, low-income students are unprepared for the scale of academic and social change required of them and may not possess the coping skills necessary to deal with the situation, resulting in early departure. Gloria, Castellanos, and Orozco (2005) defined coping strategies as the cognitive behavioral efforts to manage internal and external demands that are considered to exceed one’s resources. The data of this study suggests familial support and cultural identity were instrumental in the development of aspirational capital, which assisted participants to negotiate the academic and social environments of college.

Aspirational capital refers to “the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real or perceived barriers” (Yosso & Garcia, 2007, p158).
Through stories and advice about maneuvering through and challenging oppressive conditions, aspirational capital develops within social and family contexts and is intersected by “social, familial, navigational, linguistic and resistant capital” (Yosso & Garcia, 2007, p. 158). Familial capital models lessons of caring, coping, and providing, which helps to develop an “emotional, moral, educational, and occupational consciousness” (Yosso & Garcia 2007, p. 164).

Fathers, mothers, and siblings represented forms of social and cultural capital, upon which participants relied for emotional, logistical, financial, and academic support. Parents often followed up with participants on the progress of their assignments and completion of documents, such as financial aid applications. So participants could remain academically focused, parents were explicit in letting participants know that they supported their decisions to attend college and were available to provide participants any support possible. Examples of familial capital also included visiting participants in the dorms, providing rides to and from campus, and offering financial assistance. This is consistent with the work of Ceballo (2004), wherein Latino parents supported their children by allowing them not to work a job or providing them money, so they could focus on school.

Challenging the deficit notion, which posits the negative influence of parental educational experience upon educational outcomes of their children, this study found that despite parents’ lack of knowledge and experience within the educational system, they understood the importance of education and transmitted important messages, which influenced feelings toward academic persistence. Also, participants’ parents represent a vital form of social capital. Parents provided important forms of support and resources that positively influenced participants’ feelings toward academic persistence.
Similarly, siblings represent an additional form of social capital and offered important forms of emotional and academic support. In some cases, siblings had not attended college. Yet, these siblings, like the participants’ parents, recognized the value of a college education and encouraged participants to pursue their academic careers. This mostly came in the form of verbal encouragement. Beyond verbal encouragement, siblings also assisted participants in negotiating experiences that had potential to disrupt academic focus. For instance, one participant had a boyfriend that was not attending college, was not comfortable with her living on campus, and wanted the participant to move out of the dorms. The pull of the emotional concern was academically distracting. In this example, we see how siblings assisted participants in working through relationship issues that would have otherwise academically distracted participants.

In some instances, siblings had attended community colleges and were able to relate their academic experiences and institutional knowledge to participants. This support is significant because siblings were then capable of assisting participants navigate the college environment. Also, in some cases, siblings had subject-specific knowledge. For example, one participant’s brother worked as an auto engineer and was good at math. As such, he was capable of assisting his sister with math assignments.

Cultural identity also played a significant role in shaping the attitudes toward academic persistence and the development of aspirational capital. Similarly, the cultural capital associated with characteristics of participants’ cultural identity influenced resiliency. The cultural characteristics defined in this study are Mexican descent, first-generation college student, and socioeconomic background. By seeking to disprove Latino stereotypes, participants were motivated toward academic persistence. Participants felt they served as representatives of the Mexican community and larger Latino
community, and were responsible for challenging mainstream perceptions of the Mexican community. Similarly, participants felt they served as role models to family and community in being the first in a family or community to attend college. The stress associated with such responsibility not withstanding or described in this study, being a role model instilled participants with a sense of responsibility to academically persist. When facing challenges during the first year of college the responsibility to academically persist was an influential factor upon participants’ resiliency. Lastly, socioeconomic background influenced participants’ feelings toward academic persistence. For instance, participants and families thereof recognized the importance of a college education and how attaining a college degree offered an opportunity to create a better financial future. Further, participants recognized the economic struggles of their parents. In order to move beyond the working-class background of their family, the importance of attending college was conveyed directly by parents.

Furthering participants’ aspirational capital, parents conveyed how going to college was essential to moving beyond a working class background. With this understanding, participants developed an aspiration to attend and persist in college. This is consistent with the findings of Ceja’s (2004) study of the Chicana college-decision process wherein knowledge of their parents’ economic struggles and working conditions students to expand their educational opportunities beyond high school” (p.355).

This study also found the interrelation between cultural identity and family, and how each reinforced feelings toward academic persistence. For example, knowledge of cultural traditions, such as the influence of community and family upon shaping parental expectations, motivated some participants to remain academically focused. Similarly, participants’ aspirations to remain academically focused were influenced by knowledge
of their culture and desire to improve their economic future. Also, despite concerns related to community and cultural gender norms, participants’ parents understood the importance of attending college and supported participants during their experience. Parental support of their daughters’ decision to attend college meant a break from traditional cultural norms. This seems to support the findings of Ceballo (2004), wherein supporting their children’s educational choices occasionally entailed allowing parents to break with traditional ethnic customs. Recognizing this significance, participants did not want to disappoint their families who supported their decisions to attend college. This form of cultural capital served as an additional motivator to remain academically focused.

The Educational Opportunity Program

This study also sought to answer the questions, “How did the funds of knowledge provided by EOP assist the students negotiate institutional, academic, and social environments during the first year of college? and “To what extent do the supports and services provided by EOP validate students’ cultural identity and social and cultural capital?”

When it comes to understanding the experiences of students during the first year of college, the conformist nature of past integrations models are challenged (Hurtardo & Carter, 1997). It then becomes necessary to work toward developing methods that remove impetus of integration away from students and identifies the institutional practices that can assist students to academically persist. As Pascarella & Terenzini, (1983) and Tinto (1988, 1998) described, the process of acquiring cultural capital valued by the institution can lead to feelings of marginalization, inadequacy, and isolation. To this end, the institutional agents and supports of the Educational Opportunity Program validated and built upon the social and cultural capital of participants. As Latino students who lack
validation find the transition to college difficult (Rendon, 1994), validation is essential
toward decreasing feelings of isolation and marginalization within the university.

Through immersion within the academic and social environments of college, the
Educational Opportunity Program enhanced participants’ cultural capital and prepared
them for the first year of college. During this period, EOP provided funds of knowledge
necessary to negotiate those environments. For instance, the commuter and residential
summer bridge programs introduced participants to college workloads and the rigors
associated with completing course assignments. This experience allowed participants to
better their mental and academic preparation for the rigors of college. Also, the
residential and commuter bridge programs exposed participants to such realities as living
on campus with other students from different cultural backgrounds and ideals, or
commuting to campus and enduring hours of traffic on public transportation.

Beyond the exposure to university life, EOP provided assistance so participants
could meet academic demands. For example, EOP provided tutoring and faculty
mentoring to assist students with completing their assignments. Introduction to faculty
mentors enhanced participants’ social capital. This experience also introduced
participants to accessing professors as a form of support, thereby enhancing their cultural
capital. As such, the experience empowered participants with the ability to negotiate the
academic challenges of the first year of college.

Similarly, participants were exposed to the classroom environment of college. In
doing so, EOP exposed participants to the expectations of college professors. To meet
academic expectations, such as timely completion and submission of assignments, EOP
provided participants with time management skills and introduced them to the process of
submitting assignments online. Further, participants experienced the participatory nature
of the college classroom. As a result, participants overcame fears of being judged as academically insufficient when participating in professor-student and student-student conversations. With enhanced cultural capital, participants were capable of drawing upon the aforementioned to navigate the academic environment during the first year of college.

As EOP validated participants’ cultural identity, the faculty, peer mentors, and EOP counselors enhanced participants’ navigational capital. Borrowing from Yosso and Garcia’s (2007) work, navigational capital refers to the skills in “maneuvering through social institutions not created with communities of color in mind” (Yosso & Garcia, 2007, p. 162). For instance, participants were able to access forms of social capital to negotiate the challenges of transitioning between home and academic life. For some participants, the challenges they faced in the home environment influenced their experiences on campus. Participants were able to access EOP staff whom experienced similar home life situations and challenges when they attended college. As such, the EOP staff was able to validate participants’ experiences and provide relevant support, so that participants were then able to negotiate the transition between the home and academic environments.

For example, some participants had to deal with such home environment issues as not having a quiet place to study or the stress associated with the economic status of the family. In these instances, participants were not capable of completing assignments at home. As a result, trips home proved challenging toward remaining academically engaged. Similarly, as participants came back to campus, the challenges of home lingered and further distracted participants in the academic environment. In these situations, EOP staff was able to relate similar stories of their experience and offer coping strategies for overcoming those challenges.
Similarly, EOP professors utilized culturally relevant assignments to assist participants in the process of negotiating the transitional challenges. One example was the use of reflective essays that allowed participants to developing a deeper understanding of challenges in their personal lives. The reflective process allowed participants to identify personal coping strategies. As such, the EOP faculty mentors validated participants’ experiences and assisted them in remaining academically persistent.

Lastly, EOP assisted in developing a sense of belonging within the EOP program. The Educational Opportunity Program facilitated relationships with ethnically diverse peers who shared similar cultural characteristics. Significant to this experience were some participants’ feelings of “a family within.” I expand the concepts of familial capital and familismo to capture a sense of belonging on campus. Similar to familismo (Saenz & Ponjuan, 2012), familial capital is extended to those outside the immediate family and includes friends considered to be part of the family (Yosso & Garcia, 2007). What is important to this experience is the notion that feelings of isolation can be lessened as families come together around similar issues (Delgado-Gaitan, 2001). Being a first-generation college student and coming from a working class family were amongst the shared cultural characteristics. Participants were able to share similar experiences with their peers. This resulted in a greater sense of belonging within EOP.

Peer relationships facilitated by EOP also served to enhance participants’ social capital. Peers provided funds of knowledge and cultural capital to assist students negotiate the academic environment of college and remain academically focused. For example, peers were able to assist participants with homework assignments. Peers also shared knowledge of assignment deadlines and reminded participants of meetings and
events. In some instances, participants’ relationships with peers and connection as members of EOP led to feelings of a supportive climate? Feelings of support and belonging appeared to influence feelings toward academic persistence.

The relationships participants made with other EOP peers also influenced feelings of belonging within the university community. For example, participants were able to see familiar faces as they walked across campus or in non-EOP classes. Participants were capable of accessing the sense of community supported by the Educational Opportunity Program within the larger university community.

This sense of belonging was further enhanced by what participants described as culturally supportive efforts by the university. For instance, the existence of numerous clubs and organizations that represented different races and cultures created a sense of a culturally supportive climate within the university. This is not to say that racism and marginalization does not exist on campus or that the campus validated students’ cultural identity. As the literature described, Latino students do experience feelings of isolation and racism within universities (Cabrera & Nora, 1999; Hurtardo, Carter, & Spuler 1996). Though students of color may assert that a university may express the value of diversity, universities do not always offer diverse programming and exclude voices of certain student groups (Museus, 2007). Additionally, cultural assumptions of the academic ability of students of color may permeate campus culture and diminish desire to participate in and out of the classroom (Museus, 2007). However, to some participants, the efforts of the university opposed pre-college experiences wherein they may have come from unsupportive or ethnically homogenous communities or academic environments. This contrast led participants to feel that the university was taking steps to,
on some level, validate their cultural identity, resulting in feelings of belonging within the university.

**Gender**

The primary purpose of this study was not to describe the role of gender upon persistence. However, gender represents a characteristic of cultural identity and some gender differences were represented in the data. In examining differences amongst gender, there appeared to be little difference in the frequency with which familial support was mentioned. Yet, female participants were more likely to identify the ways in which mothers offered emotional support. Though emotional support was not absent from their responses, male participants were more likely to recall familial support in terms of logistical support and encouragement. For instance, they more often recalled the availability of financial assistance or rides to and from campus.

Both male and female participants identified themselves as being Mexican or as coming from a Mexican family or community. This appears to challenge the Barajas and Pierce’s notion that Latino men have a less positive racial and ethnic identity than their female peers (Barajas & Pierce, 2001). However, the findings of this study appear to support the notion that male and female participants had positive associations between characteristics of their cultural identity and academic persistence. For instance, male and female participants were equally as likely to mention the motivating influence of being a first-generation college student or coming from a working class family.

The findings of this study do appear to align with Gloria, Castellanos, and Orozco (2005), in which Chicana female students expressed more positive help-seeking attitudes than their male counterparts. This is not to say that male participants did not seek or recognize the familial, peer, or EOP supports. However, when referencing negotiating the
challenges of the first year of college, female participants were more likely than male participants to express use of counseling services or describe the supports that assisted them in negotiating the emotional transition between the home and academic environments. Male participants were more likely to rely upon the indirect support of feelings toward being a member of a “family within” the program, signifying the importance of belonging amongst Latino male participants. This appears to challenge the findings of Saenz and Ponjuan (2009), in which Latino males were less likely than their female peers in tapping networks and relationships to maintain a positive outlook throughout college. Male participants of this study recognized and described the importance of peer and faculty relationships upon feelings of belonging and academic persistence.

**Implications for Policy and Practice**

Moving beyond past integration models that focused upon the necessity to conform to the mainstream institution, this study supports the importance of looking at what universities can do to influence academic persistence amongst first-generation, low-income Chicana/o students. As the findings of this study suggest, in order to increase academic persistence institutions must look toward validating students’ cultural identity and work toward building upon students’ social and cultural capital. In doing so, institutions can work to assist students of color negotiate challenges during the transition to the academic and social environments of college. Ultimately, universities must move beyond the notion that students of color must acculturate to mainstream norms, and work toward developing supports and services that validate students’ cultural identity and assist them during the transition process.

Though the sample size of this study was not representative of a larger population, there are important implications to consider. In understanding familial influence upon
feelings to academically persist, universities should look at ways to engage parents in the academic environment of college. Such practices will enhance parents’ cultural capital of the college environment and allow them the opportunity to transmit funds of knowledge to their children. This challenges the mainstream notion that college students are adults and therefore must make it in college on their own. I am not making an argument related to student efficacy, only pointing out that participants of this study made clear the importance of familial support upon their feelings toward academic persistence. As such, institutions should work to enhance parental understanding of students’ college experience. This can be achieved by expanding the access of information to parents. Most colleges have an online portal for students, where they can access information related to the application process and requirements. Similarly, institutions could offer parent portals that exclude, for privacy reasons, such student information as class schedules and course grades. Yet, the portal could provide university-related information, such as important deadlines, policies, a calendar of events, and a list of available student services. Further, universities might want to consider offering these services in Spanish and other non-English languages. As a result, parents who would not otherwise have an intimate understanding of the institution would become more informed and better capable of assisting their children navigate the university.

Further, universities should take steps to include culturally relevant teaching practices. Culturally relevant class assignments may include reflective essays in which students could identify personal challenges and work toward developing coping strategies to address those challenges. These essays could be offered during students’ first year of college, in such introductory classes as university 100, which give students an idea of university policies and practices. Service learning should be provided. Service learning is
an experiential form of education, which can be implemented at any educational level, fosters a sense of caring for others, and allows students to actively participate in experiences and reflect on those experiences in discussion and writing (Mbugua, 2010). Though service learning typically happens outside the classroom, classes could offer literature or video that illustrates experiences of racially and culturally diverse communities. In doing so, members of the racial or cultural group being portrayed may identify with individuals in the example, and thus feel validated in the knowing their cultural is recognized. Further, students would have the opportunity to learn about experiences of other groups, perhaps leading to a greater appreciation of the racial and cultural diversity at the university.

One argument against service learning is that it may force students to enroll in additional classes, thereby incurring additional costs and decreased ability to enroll in credit classes. However, such opportunities could be offered in freshman English classes. This study examined the experiences of first-generation college students during the first year of college. Therefore, I cannot make informed suggestion on how a four-year university should address first-generation college students who transfer from a community college. However, I can argue that such opportunities could also be afforded to community college students during their freshman year of college.

Lastly, it is clear that the Educational Opportunity Program positively influenced feelings toward academic persistence. Accordingly, it can be argued that the existence of a similar program available to all students within university may lead to increased feelings amongst the larger student body. Further, as the supports and services of EOP validated students’ identity, prepared them for college, assisted in the transition to college, and influenced feelings of belonging within the university. Given this
understanding, universities should work toward implementing similar programs at the institutional level. Though it is typical for counseling services and racially and culturally supportive clubs and organizations to exist on university campuses, the impetus remains on students to take advantage of such programs. Students of color may assert that a university may express the value of diversity, though universities do not always offer diverse programming and exclude voices of certain student groups (Museus, 2007). Additionally, cultural assumptions of the academic ability of students of color may permeate campus culture and diminish desire to participate in and out of the classroom (Museus, 2007). Further, in the absence of programs that validate individual student identity and build upon the funds of knowledge students bring to college, there will remain incongruence (Museus, 2007) between the institution and culturally diverse students. In turn, students will be influenced to submit to the conformist and marginalizing nature of integrating into the mainstream culture of the university. Detracting from the cultural identity of students could negatively influence a sense of belonging amongst students and feelings toward academic persistence.

Through validation of cultural identity, EOP was capable of assisting participants negotiate the social and academic environments of college. In order to achieve this throughout the university, all faculty and staff should undergo professional development to serve as culturally responsive educational counselors. Additionally, this could be conducted during new faculty orientation. As such, members of the university would be better capable of recognizing educational experiences amongst a racially and culturally diverse student body and offer support, or direct students to supports, which validate their cultural identity. Though not every faculty or staff member will participate or be able to share experiences similar to those of every student, a culturally responsive support
system would create a greater sense of belonging amongst students and provide opportunity for faculty and staff to identify other university employees who can empathize with and serve as a support to a particular student.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

First, this study examined the experiences of nine students. Therefore, I recommend a similar study be conducted amongst a larger number of participants and include the experiences of first-generation, low-income Chicana/o students who were not members of an Educational Opportunity Program, thereby providing a richer understanding of and expanding upon the forms of support that assisted students negotiate the first year of college.

Though *familismo* and familial capital describe the cultural relation toward feelings of commitment to family and community, a more in-depth understanding of the influence upon academic persistence associated with being a role model or representative for family or community needs to be developed. Though the positive influence of being a role model for a Latino community and being the first in the family to attend college was identified by this study, the influence thereof warrants further investigation. As a result, a better understanding of ways in which being a role model or representative for a community can be developed.

The findings of this study identified siblings as a valuable form of social capital. In some instances siblings drew upon their post-secondary educational experiences and shared funds of knowledge to assist participants negotiate the academic environment of college. Other siblings had no college experience, but provided emotional and motivational support. Research investigating the roles of siblings upon the development
of feelings toward academic persistence in college, is limited. Therefore, I recommend additional research into the influence of siblings.

Additional research needs to be conducted on the ways in which individual characteristics influence feelings toward academic persistence. As the literature and findings of this study suggested, the role of gender within its relation to cultural identity represented the subjective experiences of participants during the first year of college (Gloria et al., 2005; Saenz and Ponjuan, 2009; Barajas & Pierce, 2001; Cerna et al., 2009; Gloria, Castellanos, Orozco, 2005; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 1995; Valenzuela, 1999) Accordingly, the influence of gender in developing feelings toward persistence deserves to be expanded and more deeply explored.

Summary

As many first-generation, low-income Chicana/o students do not persist beyond the first year of college, it is worth investigating the experiences of those students who have persisted beyond the first year of college. This study identified the importance of the role of family in shaping feelings toward academic persistence. Despite not having direct knowledge of the educational system, mothers and fathers provided vital forms of emotional, motivating, and logistical supports. Further, siblings also offered encouragement, emotional support, and, in some instances, institutional and subject-specific knowledge, which assisted participants in negotiating the first year of college.

The role of culture identity was also important in influencing feelings toward academic persistence. In identifying as being Mexican or coming from a Mexican family or community, participants explained how they served as representatives of the Latino community. As such, they set to challenge the negative mainstream stereotypes associated with Latino success. As first-generation college students, participants served
as role models for their families and communities, which further instilled participants with the responsibility to academically persist. Lastly, socioeconomic background influenced participants’ feelings of moving toward a better financial future.

Through validating the cultural identity of participants, the Educational Opportunity Program built upon the funds of knowledge participants brought with them to college. Through exposure to commuting or living on campus and college assignments and classes, the Educational Opportunity Program was responsible for preparing participants for the first year of college. As institutional agents, EOP staff and faculty mentors provided participants with funds of knowledge and empowered them to negotiate challenges in transitioning to the academic and social environments of college. Through the facilitation of relationships with racially and culturally diverse students, EOP assisted participants to better negotiate a racially and culturally diverse university. Being able to see EOP peers around campus and within the general university classes further enhanced this sense of belonging in the university. Lastly, participants felt the university took some efforts to recognize the racial and cultural diversity of the college. However, it remains necessary for the institution to develop diverse programing that represents the voice of all members of the campus community.

Universities should provide access to educational opportunity for culturally and racially diverse students. This can be achieved through the use of culturally relevant pedagogy, assignments and texts that allow all students to gain perspective of the experiences of other racial and cultural groups. Through professional development that will encourage faculty and staff members to serve as culturally responsive counselors, universities can increase opportunity for educational success.
Through such access and opportunity, universities can increase the graduation rates of first-generation, low-income Chicana/o students. In doing so, we can work toward providing opportunity for students to move beyond their working class backgrounds. Additionally, by increasing the number of graduating Latino students, we can hope meet the state and national economic demand for college graduates. Through the inclusion of culturally relevant and supportive practices and by providing equitable opportunity for members of all racial, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds, universities can create a more informed populace capable of accessing knowledge and skillsets to compete economically and politically within a culturally and racially diverse global environment.
REFERENCES


Butler, L. (2011). Do we have a retention problem ... or do we have a problem "about" retention. *New England Journal of Higher Education, 44*(3), 732-771.


Higher Education (2012). Replenishing opportunity in America; The 2012 midterm report of public higher education systems in the access to success initiative. *The Education Trust*


database. (ED50206)