CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

Expanding the Pathway to the Ph.D: Exploring the Role of Terminal Master's Degrees on Latina/o Doctoral Student Production

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By

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Abstract

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Despite representing the largest ethnic minority group in the United States, Latina/os are underrepresented in graduate school and continue to fall behind in doctoral achievement when compared to White, African American, Asian American, and Native American populations (Pérez Huber et al., 2015). The Latina/o attrition rate indicates significant obstacles in Latina/o educational pathways throughout the postsecondary system. This study explores the personal and academic experiences of Latina/o terminal master's degree students in order to unpack the potential of the terminal master's degree as a pathway to the doctorate for Latina/o students pursuing programs in the humanities and social sciences. A terminal master's degree refers to an academic master's earned at an institution that does not offer doctoral work in that field of study. This study builds on research recognizing the need for expanded diversity efforts in the doctoral and professoriate pathways. Using Critical Race Theory, Community Cultural Wealth, and Domains of Power as theoretical perspectives, particular attention was paid to how the intersection of race, culture, and socioeconomic status influenced the participants' experiences and how institutional norms and policies shaped their educational trajectories. Drawing on interview responses from five terminal master's students and four Latina/o doctoral degree holders who pursued terminal master's degrees from a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI), the study identified four broad themes – fifteen subthemes – centered on the 1) process of selecting a graduate program; 2) institutional failures and self-advocacy; 3) institutional context around challenges and support structures; and, 4) the impact of race/ethnicity within a Hispanic Serving Institution. These findings might affect recruitment, retention, and completion strategies for institutions that enroll or aspire to enroll Latina/o graduate students.

Chapter 1- Introduction

Introduction

The United States presents a complex location to study the achievement gap, broadly defined as the difference in educational achievement between groups of students, as it has a unique history of slavery, segregation, and racial discrimination (Massey et al., 2003; Yosso, 2006; Darder, 2012; Patton, Harper, & Harris, 2015). Racism has been normalized through racist laws constructed to benefit and center whiteness as the dominant norm through restrictive property and voting laws, as well as restrictive civil liberties for anyone falling outside of this norm (Patton, Harper, & Harris, 2015). These historical constructions have shaped or, in some way, influenced present-day contexts, understandings, and operations of race and racism within societal systems, including higher education (Patton, Harper, & Harris, 2015; Darder, 2012). For example, historically, black colleges were celebrated as progressive institutions; in fact, they were created to avoid the admission of black students to white universities and ultimately furthered racial segregation in higher education (Patton, Harper, & Harris, 2015; Darder, 2012). Systemic segregation and exclusion have plagued the academic experiences of Latina/o and minoritized students (Acuña, 2011). A critical analysis of higher education institutions demands acknowledging the impact race makes in student experiences and exposing the norms established in the colonial college, an institution built for white elites (Patton, Harper, & Harris, 2015).

At present, that minoritized groups achieve at lower rates once they enter higher education is not a controversial claim (Massey et al., 2003; Yosso, 2006; Darder, 2012). While Latina/os and other minoritized groups have gained access to higher education institutions, systemic barriers exist that disenfranchise many of them. In the Latino/a community, low degree attainment is a particularly salient reality exacerbated by socioeconomic and generational status

(Saenz et al., 2007; Yosso, 2006). Additionally, in academia, Eurocentric ideals of merit fail to recognize students' gifts and talents that fall outside of normalized achievement standards (Yosso, 2006). This is arguably by design to ensure admittance and opportunity are only afforded to those who will sustain this system (Darder, 2012). While the civil rights movements of the 1960s led to enrollment gains (Acuña, 2011), once in the university setting, Latina/o students are once again at the mercy of Eurocentric notions of merit that rely heavily on a winner take all systems that do not care how or why someone is ahead (Tough, 2019) - economic resources, and stores of accepted forms of capital (Calarco, 2018; Lareau, 2011) - thus leaving minoritized communities behind. After 51 years of "access" and post-civil rights movements that rallied for equal institutional representation, we find ourselves still underrepresented in academia (Acuña, 2011) and again confronted with the reality that "equal access" does not necessarily benefit minoritized communities as it rarely means equitable treatment.

A review of the literature demonstrates that a great deal of effort has been made to study minoritized students and their lack of social, cultural, and human capital. Yet first-generation college students, most of whom are students of color, from low-income households (Engle, 2006; Saenz et al., 2007), continue to face many challenges and are the most likely to withdraw from postsecondary institutions before graduating (Vega, 2016; Yosso, 2006). Much of the research around minoritized student populations has emphasized exploring barriers instead of pathways of opportunity; in addition, this research often fails to acknowledge racism, racist institutional practices and environments, and historical conditions of access as being potentially influential to the experiences of minoritized student populations (Patton, Harper, & Harris, 2015). More attention needs to be placed on institutionalized and systemic practices that affect and potentially facilitate opportunities for minoritized students, as we not only need more underrepresented students graduating but in order to diversify higher education, we need them entering doctoral

degree programs and the professoriate. Currently, despite representing the largest ethnic minority group in the United States, Latina/os are underrepresented in graduate school and are less likely to pursue a doctoral degree (Martinez, 2018; Zambrana et al., 2017).

It is noteworthy that by age 24, only 5.7 percent of Latina/os have attained a bachelor's degree or higher (NCES, 2019). By age 25 and over, this number almost triples to 16 percent NCES, 2019). If we look at the Mexican American population alone, the largest Latina/o demographic (Noe-Bustamante, 2019), by age 24, only 4.8 percent have received a bachelor's degree, though this number more than doubles to 11.9 percent after age 25 (NCES, 2019). This is important, as it indicates that Latina/os earn their undergraduate degrees at later ages that fall outside of the traditional college student mold. The "traditional" college student is typically an 18-22-year-old non-minority student from a middle-class background whose parents have attended college (Strage, 2008). Thus, when considering doctoral pathways for Latina/o students, it is productive to consider options outside of the traditional pipeline. Studying Latina/o graduate student experiences at broad access Hispanic Serving Institutions may highlight the significance of the terminal Master's degree pathway to the professoriate and enable Hispanic Serving Institutions to reflect on institutional practices and bolster institutional accountability efforts to meet diversity initiatives. Increasing the diversity of doctoral recipients is pivotal to changing college faculties' demographics to reflect the increasingly diverse undergraduate population in the nation's institutions of higher education (Contreras & Gandara, 2011).

It is significant to note that master's education is a growing component of graduate education enrollment for students of color, specifically Latina/o students (Clark, 2011). In 1995, only 1.6 percent of Latina/o adults had attained a master's degree before age 30 – but by 2019, this share had doubled to 3.4 percent (NCES, 2019). In 2018, Latina/os received 10.7 percent of all master's degrees conferred (NCES, 2018b). However, professional graduate education has

become the primary source of gains. Latina/o students are primarily concentrated in professionally oriented programs such as business, education, public administration, social services, and health professions. These fields make up 70 percent of all master's degrees conferred to Latina/os (NCES, 2018a). The growth of minoritized students at the master's level raises questions about the relationship between master's and doctoral education. Little research has been conducted on graduate degree pathways for underrepresented groups or the transition from master's programs to doctoral programs (Contreras & Gandara, 2011; Clark, 201; Vining Brown, 1994). Vining Brown (1994) suggested that more information is needed on the pathways taken by underrepresented students to and through graduate school to identify points where students enter and leave the system and assess the viability of master's programs to produce doctoral students.

Anecdotal experience suggests that master's education is an entry to doctoral education for many underrepresented students, Latina/os included. This thesis addresses these observations and contributes to the limited literature concerning the relationship between terminal master's degrees and doctoral education for Latina/o students. Research on master's to doctoral degree pathways is crucial to uncover the potential of terminal master's education in the doctoral education pipeline. In addition, this research project will take place in a broad access Hispanic Serving Institution, exploring Latina/o graduate student experiences in this setting allows for a critical analysis of institutional and structural practices that impact the educational opportunities and experiences of Latina/o students, given that a large percentage of Latina/o students attend such institutions (Garcia, 2019). Lastly, a Hispanic Serving Institution setting also allows for the ability to unpack structural challenges faced by Latina/o students and for the impact of race to be explored in a "Latina/o friendly" setting, which may shed light on the relevance of such a characteristic within the structure of graduate education and higher education norms.

Purpose

As a group, Latina/o students are heavily impacted by poverty, low educational attainment, and limited access to educational opportunities (Saenz et al., 2007). Latina/o students are still subjected to racial prejudice and hindered by low teacher expectations (Yosso et al., 2009). As a result, Latina/o students have high college attrition rates and low overall college completion numbers. For every 100 Latina/o elementary school students, only eight will complete a bachelor's degree, and only .2 (less than one) will earn a doctorate (Yosso & Solórzano, 2006). The Latina/o educational pipeline presents a troubling image of the Latina/o student experience. Although the Latina/o student enrollment has significantly increased, the Latina/o attrition rate indicates significant obstacles in their educational pathways. Latina/o students and faculty report significant barriers that are of a cultural (social expectations for different groups), structural (historical laws and regulations that barred the entry of minoritized students into education), and institutional (discriminatory policies and practices) nature (Yosso et al., 2009; Zambrana et al., 2017; Darder, 2012).

Cultural, structural, and institutional opportunities and challenges that Latina/o students encounter must be recognized to increase Latina/o student doctoral degree attainment. Still, such work must be approached with a critical race theory lens that challenges student deficit perspectives (Yosso, 2006; Darder, 2012). Harper (2012) recognizes that most empirical studies in higher education research fail to acknowledge or discuss the impact of race on student educational experiences and thus amplify deficit perspectives. As such, Harper advocates a critical analysis of the impact of race in order to move beyond student deficits and acknowledge the many ways institutions fail students. Given the "traditional student" and meritocracy narratives that permeate across academia (Darder, 2012; Tough, 2019), it is not surprising that existing research fails to recognize terminal master's degree programs as training grounds and

viable entry points to the doctorate and professoriate. To address the potential of terminal master's degrees as pathways to the doctorate for Latina/o students, as well as fill a gap in the literature, this study will move beyond deficit student perspectives by acknowledging and exploring the impact of race, cultural, structural, and institutional practices on Latina/o student experiences. In particular, this research will explore the dynamic experiences of four Latina/o terminal master's students and four Latina/o doctoral degree holders who attained terminal master's degrees at broad access Hispanic Serving Institutions on their path towards the doctorate. This thesis focuses on sources of strength that have shaped and continue to influence Latina/o student doctoral pathways. Institutional setting is relevant as Hispanic Serving Institutions represent only 9% of higher education institutions but enroll 54% of all Hispanic students in the United States (Mendez, 2015). Focusing on student experiences within a Hispanic serving context may allow us to unpack the socio-historical academic norms that impact Latina/o student experiences, even within "friendly" environments. This qualitative study was guided by a critical race research paradigm and domains of power framework and complementary qualitative phenomenological study methods.

Significance of the Study

The United States is projected to become more racially and ethnically diverse than ever before. The Latina/o population is the second-largest racial or ethnic group, behind white non-Hispanics, and accounted for about 52 percent of all U.S. population growth between 2010 and 2019 (Noe-Bustamante, Lopez, & Krogstad, 2020). Given that shifting demographics will extend to higher education, especially since the under 18(age) population in 2019 was already nearly majority-minority (Frey, 2019), minoritized student populations' experiences cannot be ignored. As of 2018, 63.4 percent of Latina/o high school graduates between the ages of 16 and 24 enrolled in college (NCES, 2018c). It is projected that by 2026, 4.1 million Latina/o students will

be enrolled in all levels of postsecondary education (Hussar & Bailey, 2018). These numbers are bound to continue to trend up; to address many of the social, cultural, and institutional barriers that currently exist in academia for Latina/o students, culturally relevant institutional practices and a more racially diverse faculty is needed as this has shown to increase Latina/o student success (Zambrana et al., 2017). As it stands, Latina/os are poorly represented in the professoriate. Nationally, approximately 4.5 percent of faculty tenure track positions (professor, associate professor, and assistant professor) are held by Latina/os (NCES, 2018d). The need for racial diversity and Latina/o representation in academia, fueled by our nation's shifting demographics and educational disparities among minoritized students, necessitates research on Latina/o doctoral pathways.

At the cultural level, this study can change perceptions of terminal master's programs and the students that pursue that pathway to the doctorate by providing context to the educational realities faced by Latina/o students. These experiences will provide a reference point at the structural and institutional level by which institutions can understand how to better resource, encourage, and support a master's to doctorate pathway. The shortage of Latina/os in the doctoral pipeline is a severe concern for the Latina/o community as academics play an essential role within higher education and the community as mentors, leaders, and knowledge producers on issues pertinent to minoritized populations, the Latina/o community, and society as a whole (Contreras & Gandara, 2011). Ultimately, however, this work is not merely about adding more Latina/os to the professoriate but about challenging the status quo in higher education that reproduces and promotes normative standards of achievement to facilitate self-reflection and advocate for genuine diversity and inclusion efforts.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review is to discuss how institutional practices and dominant ideologies have shaped the pathway to the doctorate and notions of merit and potential in higher education for Latina/os. A brief review of Latina/os' historical context in higher education leads to a discussion of the current doctoral pipeline and an examination of the environment and ideology in academia. The conversation will then discuss the possibility of affirming strength-based ideologies to more fully understand how to work toward authentic and sustained change and inclusion for Latina/os in higher education.

Historical Context of Latina/os in Higher Education

Examining the Latina/o experience through a historical lens reveals the discriminatory and exclusionary practices that denied them, and Mexican Americans in particular as the largest Latina/o demographic (Noe-Bustamante, 2019), access to educational opportunity (Acuña, 2011; Zambrana et al., 2017). Phenotype and linguistic differences were central components of the exclusionary practices that disproportionality affected Latina/os (Acuña, 2011; Zambrana et al., 2017). In California, for example, the University of California opened its doors in 1869 with forty students. Between 1870 and 1872, about two dozen Mexican-born Californians enrolled in the pre-college preparatory courses called the fifth class to gain full admission – only two students eventually made it to the freshman class (Castellanos & Jones, 2003). Subsequently, the abolition of the preparatory course to "raise" standards resulted in the virtual disappearance of Latino students in the UC system. Over the next one hundred years, a sprinkling of Latino students attended the University of California, Berkeley, but it was not until after 1970 that Latina/o students were no longer a rarity (Castellanos & Jones, 2003)

The scarcity of Latina/o students in higher education institutions is explained by both exclusionary practices in higher education, as evidenced by the elimination of the pre-enrollment

preparatory courses, but also as a result of the exclusionary practices occurring in the K-12 pipeline (Acuña, 2011; Zambrana et al., 2017). In the early 1900s, discriminatory educational policies segregated Mexican American children from White classrooms and placed Spanish-speaking students and children with Spanish surnames in segregated schools with ever-decreasing funding as more immigrants entered (Acuña, 2011; Zambrana et al., 2017). Tremendous institutional and personal barriers such as racial hostility, lack of school facilities, poverty, and discriminatory school policies such as English-only laws were encountered when students attempted to enroll in public schools (Acuña, 2011). Local and state school systems systematically enforced this marginalization of Mexican Americans along the educational pipeline (Acuña, 2011; Zambrana et al., 2017). Before Brown v. Board of Education (1954) ruled that segregation was unlawful in the United States, Méndez v. Westminster (1947) and Delgado v. Bastrop Independent School (1948) challenged segregation practices between Mexican Americans and Whites that were still in effect in "white" public institutions since the end of the U.S.-Mexico War of 1848 (Acuña, 2011; Zambrana et al., 2017).

While incremental improvements were being made in the K-12 pipeline after World War II, Latina/os and communities of color were still falling behind Whites (Acuña, 2011). For example, the GI Bill and the development of the California state college system allowed millions of Americans to attend college; however, in California alone, the majority of high school graduates were white – black students only studied a median of 9.4 grades and Latina/os a median of 7.7 grades in the 1960s, making the majority ineligible for college admission (Acuña, 2011; Castellanos & Jones, 2003). Students in other southwestern states such as Arizona and Texas fared worse (Acuña, 2011). As a result of the Civil Rights Movements of the late 1960s, students of color gained traction in academia. However, that window of opportunity began to close again after the Vietnam War as institutional racism, and racist attitudes remained intact

(Acuña, 2011). Many educators – liberal and conservative alike – still attempted to explain the educational disadvantages as a result of deficits in students of color and denied the glaring inequality in the schools (Acuña, 2011; Castellanos & Jones, 2003; Darder, 2012). It was not until the last quarter of the twentieth century that Latina/os entered higher education in significant numbers (Castellanos & Jones, 2003). The increase of Latina/o college students in many regions and institutions has led to the growth of Hispanic Serving Institutions, though this is more a result of population growth and changing demographics than structural changes (Garcia, 2019).

Nevertheless, there is still significant underrepresentation of Latina/o students and faculty in academic institutions and the literature (Zambrana et al., 2017). Historians of higher education have virtually ignored the presence of Latina/o students and faculty, as evidenced by the lack of representation in the journal specifically devoted to this topic (Castellanos & Jones, 2003). In the *History of Higher Education Annual*, not one article on Latina/os had been published as of 2003. Additionally, the existing research concerning the historical relationship between Latina/os and higher education has been primarily pioneered by Chicano and Puerto Rican scholars (Castellanos & Jones, 2003).

Furthermore, in 2006, Yosso and Solórzano documented the Chicana and Chicano educational pipeline and highlighted the poor academic outcomes for this student population. Out of every 100 students that enter through the elementary school system, 46 eventually graduate from high school, only eight graduates from college, two earn a graduate degree, and only .2 earn a doctoral degree (Yosso & Solórzano, 2006). With such a small pool of students eligible for doctoral study, it is no surprise that the pipeline slows to a trickle at the level of the Ph.D. (Clark, 2011). As Castellanos and Jones (2003) discussed, Latina/o experiences remain underexplored in academia. Additionally, research often fails to acknowledge racism, racist

institutional practices and environments, and historical conditions of access as potentially influential to minoritized student populations' experiences (Patton, Harper, & Harris, 2015). As such, narrow paths to the doctorate and professoriate for Latina/o students may result from the oversimplified or neglected effects of historical segregation and institutional practices that limit access to opportunities for Latina/o students (Zambrana et al., 2017).

Institutional Impact, Environment, Norms, and Scripts

Academia is a microcosm of society that creates the illusion of self-governance (Acuña, 2011), though the very nature of an institution is to constrain action (Posselt, 2013). The illusion is that the administration is fair; however, the reality is that higher education institutions are governed by politics that maintain the status quo (Acuña, 2011; Darder, 2012). As it stands, upper and middle-class norms are infused in many university practices, from hiring faculty to student interactions and expectations (Jack, 2019; Lee, 2017). The history of higher education contextualizes colleges and universities as places where the well-to-do sent their children to complete their transition into adulthood and stands as a reminder of the norms, scripts, and practices that were and continue to be prized by these institutions (Martinez -Aleman, Pusser & Bensimon, 2015).

Norms and scripts are "the socially constructed, historical patterns of material practices, assumptions, values, beliefs, and rules by which individuals produce and reproduce their material subsistence, organize time and space, and provide meaning to their social reality" (Thornton & Ocasio, 1999, p. 37, as cited in Posselt, 2013). These norms and scripts create institutional practices and preferences that are embedded in cultural and historical contexts. Norms are crucial to understanding social preferences, as judgments that one thing is better or preferable than another arise from culturally and socially embedded norms. Thus, norms offer a guide for action and decision-making and set the rules of expected and accepted behavior that embodies the

interests and preferences of community or group members (Posselt, 2013). Institutions – higher education institutions included - are essentially systems of norms that have been collectively recognized and reified through institutional members' actions. Furthermore, as individuals find meaning in norms and begin to take them for granted as normal, institutions can enforce normative behavior through incentives for conformity (Posselt, 2013). Normative behaviors informed by dominant values, beliefs, and agreed-upon rules lead to expected actions (scripts) from which all group members are measured (Posselt, 2013).

Serna and Woulfe (2017) provide an overview of how social reproduction impacts the U.S. educational system for people of color, from the inability of African American slaves and early-emancipated slaves to seek education to Native American Indian youth being forced to assimilate into white school systems that attempted to wipe away their heritage. Additionally, they highlight that Latina/o students throughout U.S history have faced educational disparities through segregationist practices. As a result of the educational inequities students of color face, the achievement gap created from decades of opportunity loss for nonwhite students cannot be repaired overnight (Serna & Woulfe, 2017). As Robinson (2000) states, "no nation can enslave a race…pit them against privileged victimizers, and then reasonably expect the gap between the heirs of the two groups to narrow. Lines, begun parallel and left alone, can never touch" (p.74). As noted previously, the data and research show a persistent disparity in achievement between white students and students of color. Furthermore, it is essential to acknowledge the role of higher education institutions in actively sending messages regarding values and expectations which influence the academic trajectories experiences of students of color. Serna and Woulfe advance that higher education institutions not only reproduce and relay social messages but that they also passively set college-going expectations through marketing. Marketing efforts may become problematic, however, when the material used implicitly devalues certain types of

capital and promotes the norms and values of the dominant group to the detriment of non-dominant populations (Serna & Woulfe, 2017).

MacLeod (1987) provides a synopsis of class-based sociological theories advanced by Bourdieu and Bowles and Gintis and emphasizes that individuals of middle-class backgrounds inherit different capital than working-class individuals. The capital inherited by the middle class is in line with valued social norms and thus rewarded in kind. Additionally, the American educational system functions at an ideological level to promote the attitudes and values required by a capitalist economy. MacLeod thus advances that "by embodying class interest and ideologies, schools reward the dominant classes' cultural capital and systematically devalue that of lower classes" (p.14). Thus, students who have a weak reserve of the forms of cultural capital highly valued by the dominant society are at a decided disadvantage. While Darder (2012) took a critical race approach to examine educational inequality, both Darder and MacLeod advance that the academic hierarchy ensures that students from the dominant culture will end up at the top of the hierarchy, and students from the subordinate culture will end up at the bottom (MacLeod,1987; Darder, 2012). Thus, both MacLeod and Darder make the case that schools are part of a larger "social universe of symbolic institutions that reproduce existing power relations by privileging dominant norms" (MacLeod, 1987, p. 14). MacLeod asserts that "schools reproduce social inequality, but by dealing in the currency of academic credentials, the educational system legitimizes the entire process" (p.14). In legitimizing dominant norms, institutions place the burden of "success" on students and absolve themselves of responsibility (Darder, 2012). It is vital to acknowledge the importance of environments and the institution's role in creating and promoting inclusive environments; this is the one variable that had the most impact on students having thoughts of and taking steps to leave an institution (Freeman et al., 2007).

Armstrong and Hamilton (2013) further highlight how institutions bear the primary responsibility in creating educational pathways for students and reinforcing dominant norms. Institutions choose which types of activities and students to support based on their internal agendas, which can be influenced by several factors, such as finances, "seeking prestige," desire to attract more affluent students, and so on. These choices impact the trajectories of underrepresented students who may not be the target demographic in many ways, but mainly by devaluing their needs and subjecting them to subprime experiences that may not foster their growth. However, notions of meritocracy – embedded at every stage of the achievement process – silence these students' experiences as these notions do not question how or why a student landed at the top but simply rewards those who do (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013). This piece provides insight into how institutions control their narrative and notions of belonging; this may be in opposition to the needs of Latina/o students. While normative standards of academic success rely heavily on notions of independence and self-reliance (Yosso, 2006), Latina/o students' academic confidence rises when faculty engage with them and may lead to more interaction with faculty, which assists in their academic adjustment (Yosso et al., 2009). This interaction is crucial as Latina/os perception of a hostile campus racial climate can also potentially damage their academic adjustment, and by extension, perceptions of academic merit (Yosso et al., 2009).

Correspondingly, Lee (2017) found that being from a working-class background was a marker that clashed with higher education institutions across the spectrum from broad access to elite settings. In 46 in-depth interviews with professors with working-class backgrounds, Lee uncovered that while these individuals had successfully transitioned to faculty positions, they still often felt instances of class alienation and hostility. The majority of those interviewed recounted stories of class-based microaggressions or devaluing of their lived experiences. Thus,

the respondents felt they had to assimilate and emulate middle to upper-class norms to succeed, lest they be stigmatized and penalized for their class upbringing. Similarly, Langhout et al. (2009) advance that classism in higher education institutions affects students' emotional and psychological well-being, feeling of belonging, and desire to complete their degree. Langhout et al. – much like Jack (2019)- emphasize that it is not enough for academic institutions to simply admit low-income students; they must also address classism issues and implement policies to ensure the campus climate is welcoming for all students, including working-class students, Lee (2017) extended this assertion to include working-class faculty as well.

It is also essential to acknowledge the salience race plays in student experiences, Yosso et al. (2009) highlight how prejudice and discrimination are factors that interfere with student achievement. Through a qualitative study conducted via focus groups, Yosso et al. examined how Latina/o students experience campus racial climate. The study participants consisted of Latina/o college students attending three predominantly White, elite research institutions spread out from the East Coast, Midwest, and West Coast. Thirty-seven participants self-identified as Latina/o and had completed at least one year of study at their respective universities. The findings uncover racial microaggressions as a consistent theme in the experiences of Latina/o undergraduates. The three main types of racial microaggressions experienced were: interpersonal microaggression (comments which make race salient and at times devalue a student's experience), racial jokes, and institutional microaggressions (which refer to how institutions exclude Latino/a representation or diminish students' abilities- i.e., campus culture, lack of representation in faculty, lowered-expectations from existing faculty). Per Yosso et al. (2009), racial bias – from students and faculty- not only negatively impact students' feelings of belonging, but it also exposes students to undue stress that may negatively impact their academic performance, which may lead to students departing an institution.

Additionally, it is important to note that the growth in student diversity has not been matched with increased faculty numbers from historically underrepresented groups; approximately 5 percent of faculty at baccalaureate-granting institutions self-report as Hispanic (Zambrana et al., 2017). While Lee (2017) discusses the prevalence of class, Zambrana et al. (2017) discuss the prevalence of racial bias in the professoriate pipeline and profession. The study gathered qualitative data from faculty who hold tenure-track assistant or associate professor positions at research universities that are predominantly White institutions (PWIs). The sample includes 133 Mexican American participants. The findings detail how at least 41 percent experienced racial/ethnic discrimination by a superior or colleague. The participants describe experiences dealing with racial microaggressions, stereotypes, and implicit bias that devalues their credentials and even their ability to speak English - other experiences detailed stereotype misidentification where the participant was identified as the janitor only due to his racial/ethnic identity. This study did not delve deeply into socioeconomic status other than to mention that participants whose mothers had higher levels of education fared slightly better. It would have been constructive to explore the impact of socioeconomic and generational standing in this discussion; however, much like Lee (2017), Zambrana et al. (2017) detail how those who wish to advance in academia must do the emotional work required to make peace with the elitist and racially oppressive environment and move on, so as not to be further penalized professionally.

Faculty representation is a critical component of diversifying academia as faculty members assume key decision-making and gate-keeping roles in graduate education, and the academic and social integration of graduate students is, in large part, under their control (Clark, 2011). Faculty, for example, determine who is admitted into their graduate programs, what financial and research opportunities are available to students, who serve as presenters at national conferences, and who is offered opportunities to co-author manuscripts and scholarly works.

Additionally, the research shows that the most prevalent factor for success in graduate school is the role of mentorship relationships, especially for Latina/o students who often struggle to find mentors with expertise within their chosen field or within the diaspora of Latina/o culture and literature (Kamimura-Jimenez & Gonzalez, 2018). Mentors demystify the graduate school process, assist in building networks across academia, and facilitate career pathways (Posselt, 2013). Given the significant role of faculty in building positive campus climates and academic/career opportunities, Latina/os must increase their numbers in the faculty ranks to increase the recruitment and retention of Latina/o students in graduate programs (Clark, 2011; Kamimura-Jimenez & Gonzalez, 2018).

Lastly, social class, socioeconomic status, and race all remain salient and highly researched topics within higher education; however, little has changed for those from non-dominant backgrounds (Serna & Woulfe, 2017). Thus, more concerted research efforts that center a critical analysis of the impacts of norms and scripts and their role in social reproduction in relation to dominant and non-dominant group relationships are warranted (Serna & Woulfe, 2017).

Power Dynamics Affecting Latina/o Students

To further understand the impact of institutional norms on Latina/o student experiences, it is important to examine the nuance and impact of institutional actors through their exertion of power and influence, as this is how norms are reified. Acuña (2011) and Pusser (2015) point out that colleges and universities are not neutral sites; instead, they are locations where power is exercised in various forms. For example, power not only shapes research and norms of analysis but also influences decision-making contexts and results in institutional actors enacting their preferences, such as selectivity for programs. Pusser (2015) asserts, "it is taken for granted that selectivity is needed instead of pushing and advocating for the creation of new well-resourced

institutions or research opportunities" that may benefit more diverse groups (p. 62). Pusser elaborates that power is shaped by the process of constructing normative understandings through the mobilization of bias, as "norms are shaped by history, context, and power, but lived, legitimated, and enacted by individuals and groups who make decisions about what is known and what the impact of that knowing will be personally and globally" (p.72). Unchallenged settled notions of the appropriate and inappropriate uphold the status quo that negatively impacts Latina/os and students of color.

Social capital theory suggests that membership and participation in social networks provide individuals with potential access to vital resources, support systems, and opportunities. Dominant group members are thus advantaged in their ability to build social ties with influential institutional agents and can translate their privilege into access to resources and opportunities within mainstream institutional settings (Ramirez, 2017). Ramirez further highlights that opportunities for entering into different social and institutional contexts and for forming relationships with agents who exert various degrees of control over institutional resources are unevenly distributed within U.S. society. This is an important point as social capital accumulation – which can translate to funding, mentorship, network development, and career placement - depends on successful interactions with institutional agents, who serve as gatekeepers to various institutional supports (Ramirez, 2017). In essence, exclusionary ideologies within the educational system and the larger society inform institutional practices that can limit underprivileged students' access to institutional supports and accumulation of social capital (Ramirez, 2017).

Institutional ideologies and practices are powered and framed through the reliance on norms that serve to gatekeep opportunities and shape what counts as legitimate (Pusser, 2015). From its inception, the university has privileged western epistemes and narrow notions of what

counts as knowledge, research, and best teaching practices (Monzo & SooHoo, 2014). Monzo and SooHoo, advocate for the widening of what is considered legitimate to include multiple knowledge systems and a shift from "a neoliberal agenda in universities that emphasize efficiency and competition in the market above quality and the diverse perspectives of those whose voices have been lost for centuries." Monzo and SooHoo highlight the work of Darder (2012) to discuss how the work of the civil rights movement has been "domesticated," and diversity has been valued and encouraged through a capitalistic "economic Darwinism" that promotes the status quo and circumvents any action that challenges existing power relations. Academia domesticates potentially rebellious academics with diverse world views and life experiences by socializing them into "careerist," focused on career advancement and tenure, thus subdued by dominant norms and expectations (Monzo & SooHoo, 2014). Failure to follow the status quo can be detrimental to an academic's career.

Furthermore, Monzo and SooHoo, assert that individuals who fall outside of accepted norms are excluded through testimonial injustice, in that their different ways of knowing are dismissed because they are not considered legitimate knowers (they are not White, male, middle-class, heterosexual, or members of another dominant category). Additionally, Latina/os and people of color are excluded through hermeneutic injustice as well, where their experiences are not recognized in society as an issue of significance (Monzo & SooHoo, 2014). Hermeneutic injustice leads to the lack of contextualization and conceptualization of the experiences of people of color and the marginalization of these individuals as they lack "legitimate" frames of reference for their unique experiences and may even doubt themselves about whether their concerns are real (Monzo & SooHoo, 2014). Pohlhaus (2012), discussed by Monzo and SooHoo, affirms that hermeneutic injustice is a sort of willful epistemic violence. This violence is not always a matter of innocent ignorance; instead, individuals and groups are vested in not having particular

epistemologies legitimized because this would threaten the system of privilege and power from which they benefit. This epistemic injustice positions non-dominant group members as non-knowers, even concerning their own social and material realities (Monzo & SooHoo, 2014).

Higher education has been devoid of an in-depth examination of racism and white supremacy and their role in "institutionalized inequalities that perpetuate discriminatory practices and the systemic reproduction of wealth and the status quo" (Patton et al., 2015, p. 194). Racism naturally extends to all systems, and covert racism in academia dictates that the "most qualified" is offered opportunities, but the criteria are shaped by the bias of selections committees usually comprised of predominantly white and middle to upper-middle-class individuals (Patton et al., 2015; Delgado & Stefanic, 2012; Darder, 2012). Additionally, Patton et al. point out that methods, theories, and frameworks in the student development literature have not been adequately critical of whiteness or the universal application of dominant epistemologies in the studies of minoritized students in college contexts. Thus, the underutilization of racial lenses has far-reaching implications. The way students learn about these lenses (through color-blind frames) is likely to influence how they utilize them when they become practitioners. Still, also it leaves the study of college student development incomplete and in need of more diverse perspectives as most early theories are based on the experiences of white students, especially males, as the primary samples (Patton et al., 2015). In this manner, mainstream research has fueled racist ideologies such as the notion that the experiences of white students are general ("traditional" or foundational) and broad enough to capture all students' experiences regardless of race (Patton et al., 2015). These narrow views ensure that only those that reference older theories are perceived as credible despite their inherent flaws, which promote a small body of scholars and allows them to dictate the narrative and discourse surrounding a body of knowledge "that rarely accounts for

the perspectives and experiential knowledge of communities of color" (Patton et al., 2015, p. 206).

Darder (2012) further challenges norms that perpetuate the status quo by affirming that supporting and reinforcing universalized, decontextualized, and ahistorical knowledge reinforces a classicist, racist, and discriminatory social order that underpins educational gaps. Darder asserts that though they may appear ideologically different on the surface, current liberal and conservative perspectives both place the burden of responsibility for academic failure on students' shoulders. Conservative viewpoints are more pronounced and clearly function to support the status quo, whereas liberal "victim-blaming ideologies" function more discreetly and subtly as they attempt to prepare (change or fix) students to be able to compete better in the (unequal) educational system (Darder, 2012, p. 3). In essence, both perspectives "fail to move beyond a relativistic notion of knowledge and hence disregard the ideological and structural constraints of the dominant culture that inform school practices that function to the detriment of students of color" (p. 11). As a result, even well-meaning liberals uphold the status quo as they stop short of deeply analyzing the prevalent norms, how they are maintained, and how they shape student narratives. Pusser (2015) highlights how little work has been done to examine how the construction of discourse and explicit marginalization of minoritized voices shape relations of power – and resulting policies – in higher education.

Monzo and SooHoo (2014) pointedly observe that in higher education, diversity needs to move beyond simply bringing in more people of color (faculty and students alike). To challenge the status quo, there needs to be an inclusion of diverse epistemes and the ability for students and faculty of color to make spaces defined by their own ontologies and epistemologies, especially in relation to the manner in which they engage with traditional White academic structures, including the way they define their scholarship, the types of work they deem important, and the

methods they choose to use (Monzo & SooHoo, 2014). Lastly, Monzo and SooHoo assert, drawing from Freire (1970), that epistemes rooted in histories of oppression may be more likely to challenge existing conditions as they have insights into the nature of oppressions that are fundamentally hidden from the Oppressors. Thus, people of color must lead the struggle on their own behalf, as they not only bring insight but because power is not truly distributed when the oppressor is the only one dictating reform (Monzo & SooHoo, 2014).

Meritocracy/Merit in Higher Education Context

Darder (2012) defines meritocracy as "an educational practice whereby the talented are chosen and moved ahead on the basis of achievement" (p.12). However, a characteristic that supports inequity in American schools is the traditional uncritical acceptance that those deemed talented, for the most part, are members of the "dominant culture whose value comprise the very foundations that inform the knowledge and skills a student must possess or achieve to be designated as an individual who merits reward" (p.12). Schools are generally viewed as neutral and apolitical institutions; however, as Darder asserts, it is this acceptance that allows the structure and ideology of the dominant culture to be legitimized as unproblematic and "the oppressive contradictions inherent in this oppressive view of the world to remain concealed within the mainstream educational process" (p.8). Darder advances that the reality is that the schooling systems are ingrained with culture and historical context in which select groups are privileged by asymmetrical relations of power based on race, class, and gender rather than being the value-free and neutral sites they are perceived to be. Thus, Darder highlights Mclaren's point (1989/1998), that missing from the logic is a "recognition that students from White, affluent backgrounds are privileged over other groups, not based on merit but because of the advantage that comes with having money and increased social status" (p. 163).

Per Darder, meritocracy is merely a form of systemic rule implemented and advanced by the dominant culture/group to control the structure of schools and secure positions of power for their children. Public school legitimizes meritocracy to ensure that those who acquiesce to this structure are rewarded with higher social status. This process is visibly legitimized as fair and objective so that the structure of meritocracy is maintained as the acceptable pathway to societal success. As such, the perpetuation of a meritocratic system that rewards "individual" achievement reinforces the reproduction of hierarchical structures in both academia and society by reinforcing patterns of social class, racial, and sexual identification among students and thus keeping in place the inequality of the status quo (Darder, 2012). In this manner, schools enable the perception of social mobility by establishing the merit of the dominant culture as the primary criterion for achieving recognition and social positions, while simultaneously perpetuating and reinforcing deficit notions of achievement that blame marginalized students "for their underachievement by implying that they do not have the necessary intelligence, motivation, and/or drive to partake of the educational opportunities so readily, fairly, and freely offered them by a system of free public education" (Darder, p. 13., 2012). Educational credentials signal that an individual possesses the legitimate cultural capital that prospective employers and society recognize, which then entitles the individual to access to, jobs, social mobility, and economic security, thus further securing their allegiance to the status quo and the expansion of the role of schools in the process of social domination (Darder, 2012).

The social domination discussed by Darder (2012) is prevalent but also covert. It is the intangible and invisible forces and structures that people of color encounter but struggle to name or expose. These structures are perpetuated and reinforced by power dynamics that favor the dominant group. Darder leans on Foucault to accentuate the importance of understanding the covert role and fluidity of power dynamics by highlighting his point that "power is everywhere,

not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere…power is not an institution, and not a structure… it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society" (p.26). Thus, power is a force that works both on and through people. The concentration of power within the dominant culture has allowed them to benefit from covert avenues of control with which they have been able to shape what constitutes "truth" in society (Darder, 2012). In academia, student experiences are being shaped by the social relations associated with power/knowledge encountered daily. Students from the dominant group benefit from a privileged familiarity of covert power dynamics and dominant notions of what constitutes "knowledge" and the resulting "hidden curriculum," which entails the prevailing social values that are systematically enacted within academic life to produce, reinforce, and perpetuate the dominant culture of privilege and power (Darder, 2012).

Understanding the "hidden curriculum" allows students with knowledge of dominant norms the ability to position themselves in such a way as to gain access to merit-based resources and recognition. Per Posselt (2013), merit means worth, and at the graduate level, an individual view of merit often emphasizes beliefs about what makes a "better" student in the short-term and/ or scholar in the long term. Furthermore, Posselt argues that institutional notions of merit are embedded in organizational and political contexts that extend beyond the students' personal qualities to preferences for traits that further organizational objectives and personal faculty/administrative preferences that may be unrelated to a student's prospects for success. It is important to acknowledge the role institutional preferences and norms affect notions of merit as research suggests that some faculty may view certain students as more deserving of their support than others based on dominant norms (Ramirez, 2017). As it stands, White men (the dominant group represented in academia) are viewed as the default and 'ideal student,' resulting in faculty typically investing less in women and racial/ethnic minority doctoral students— especially

women of color (Ramirez, 2017). Inequities in access to faculty mentorship and professional development opportunities are significant and problematic because these support structures are essential for graduate student success and professional development for academic careers.

The Master's Degree

The master's degree in the United States is dated to the 1870s and came to signify advanced study in a particular academic discipline; however, at the end of the nineteenth century, the master's degree garnered little respect in academia (Katz, 2005). In Katz's research of the master's degree, he came across one extensive study about the master's degree conducted by the Association of American Universities (AAU) in 1936 (Katz, 2005). The committee found that the master's degree takes many forms as a research degree, a professional degree, a teacher's degree, and a cultural degree and may serve any or all of the following objectives: as preparation for further graduate work, as preparation for the practice of some profession including teaching, as an extension of the cultural objectives ascribed to the Bachelor's degree, or as a period of advanced study (Katz, 2005). Though the AAU had a robust and optimistic view of the master's degree, the well-entrenched view of the degree dictated that the degree was primarily "a balm for discouraged, incompetent candidates for the doctorate," perhaps with some utility for schoolteachers but not for serious scholars (Katz, 2005; Giordano, 2000; Schneider, 1999).

As a result of this marginalized position, few studies have explored the master's degree resulting in gaps ranging from the quality of the degree, the effectiveness of coursework, the role and effectiveness of the master's thesis (most research focuses on doctoral dissertations), the goals and desires of graduate students at the master's level, the social mobility afforded by a master's degree, among others (Katz, 2005). Compared to the volume of research on the doctorate, very little has been devoted to master's degrees in any discipline, and the research that does exist is "diffuse and fragmented" (Katz, 2005). Nonetheless, the master's degree serves

multiple functions (different students pursue the same degree, in the same academic department, for quite different reasons) and a diverse group of students across American higher education (Katz, 2005). In fact, master's degrees attract a much more diverse pool of students than doctoral programs. As of the 1990s, the number of minority students earning master's degrees began to increase substantially - the number of African Americans earning master's degrees rose by 132 percent, and Hispanics saw an increase of 146 percent (Katz, 2005).

Furthermore, a 2003 pilot survey conducted by the American Historical Association (AHA), Katz (2005) found that a small but significant number of minority Ph.D.'s got their start with a master's degree from a minority-serving institution. In fact, public colleges and universities are significantly over-represented in master's degree enrollment (Katz, 2005). This may result from student preference to pursue master's programs more locally or regionally situated – per the AHA, eighty-six percent of their survey respondents identified "geographic location" as a significant reason for selecting their graduate institution. Not surprisingly, Katz found that thirty-one of the top M.A. producers were public institutions.

The positioning and discussion around the master's degree highlight an explicit hierarchy. The doctorate is the exalted degree, and there is an implicit disparagement of any student who undertakes master's training but does not reach the doctoral level (Katz, 2005; Giordano, 2000). Per Schneider (1999) and Casanova (1992), it was not until the late 1990s that perceptions of the master's degree began to change as programs intensified, became more academically focused, and introduced broader professional context. Before these changes, students seeking only master's degrees were seen as uncommitted to a "life of the mind." While master's students were not outrightly mistreated, they were not treated particularly well and seen as "cash cows" for universities as the majority of resources were allocated to doctoral students (Schneider, 1999). However, per Schneider and Katz (2005), the master's is an excellent way to upgrade skills and

serves as a pre-professional initiation into academic discourse, culture, and writing. Yet, per Katz, the data does not support the notion that the master's degree plays a large role in the "pathway for minority students to and through graduate school," though he still considers the master's degree an important point of access for minority students who want to enter academia. Katz hypothesis that this may be as a result of doctoral programs discrediting the master's degrees offered by "low status" programs with doctoral programs being liable to count all, some, or none of a student's coursework from the master's degree towards a Ph.D., depending (in part) upon the perceived quality of the M.A.-granting institution. Katz asserts that this narrow-sighted view of the master's degree hinders the utility of the degree. Katz, along with Giordano (2000) and Casanova (1992), challenge academia to shed their preconceived notions of the master's degree and instead view it as an intrinsically significant accomplishment and imagine it as a gateway to various types of opportunities. In most cases, however, the master's degree is an important stop on the path to the Ph.D., both as a point of transition to candidacy for the doctorate and as an accomplishment in its own right (Katz, 2005).

Latina/o Students in Postsecondary Institutions

Although the literature demonstrates that selective and private universities may offer the most likely pathway to doctorate degrees, most Americans, especially underrepresented students, attend other segments of the U.S. higher education system (Deil-Amen, 2015). In particular, Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) are important points of entry to U.S. higher education for Latina/os—especially those who later earn doctorate degrees making HSIs an important group of institutions for improving Latina/o doctoral attainment (Contreras & Gándara, 2011). In the fall of 2015, three million Latino/a students enrolled in undergraduate programs in the United States, accounting for 17.6% of the U.S. undergraduate population. Of these students, 64% were enrolled in Hispanic Serving Intuitions (Garcia, 2019). Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) are

"public and private, two- and four-year, not-for-profit, degree-granting, postsecondary institutions that enroll at least 25% full-time equivalent enrollment Latinx undergraduate students" (Garcia, 2019). HSIs are significant in that they represent only 9% of higher education institutions but enroll 54% of all Hispanic students in the United States (Mendez, 2015). Thus, these institutions have a critical mass of Latina/o students who can help to provide a supportive and more familiar environment for incoming classes.

Importantly, HSI status is conferred only by enrollment and not a commitment to the Latino/a population; thus, these institutions are not prone to incorporate Latina/o students in their institutional missions (Mendez, 2015). This is significant because it is not required that an institution identifies as Latino/a serving as part of its mission to be granted HSI status or funding (Vargas & Villa-Palomino, 2019). However, it is suggested that HSIs may also open the path for Latina/os to later pursue graduate education, partly because HSIs are accessible and are perceived as having more welcoming racial campus climates (Contreras &Gándara, 2011). Latina/os who attended HSIs and emerging HSIs tended to have lower levels of academic confidence at the outset of their academic career than similar students attending non-HSIs. However, by graduation, their confidence rose to match the confidence level of students at non-HSIs (Cuellar, 2014). HSIs, however, have been criticized for not necessarily serving the interest of Latina/o students and for being strictly enrollment-driven. Despite demographic changes in the student population at HSIs, the organizational structures of many of these institutions are largely unchanged (Garcia & Okhidoi, 201; Mendez, 20155). Thus, as HSIs continue to emerge, it is necessary to evaluate the praxis of institutions to determine how they are serving, not just enrolling, Latino/a students.

Traditionally, the study of organizations and institutions in American higher education has focused on elite institutions and bypassed the majority of institutions that offer broad access

to students, otherwise known as Broad Access Institutions (BAIs) (Stevens, 2015). The literature tends to overlook the more than one thousand public, broadly accessible colleges and universities - HSIs are included in this demographic - which enroll four-fifths of all students in American higher education (Fernandez, 2018). Most selective institutions serve a small percentage of postsecondary students making up a mere five percent of degree-granting, non-profit U.S institutions, while BAIs are more accessible, granting admission to all or the majority of applicants (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013). Additionally, four-year BAIs have been found to enroll about 60 percent of all students in postsecondary education, to serve significantly older student populations, and a higher percentage of students receiving Pell Grant support when compared to more selective institutions (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013; Jenkins & Rodríguez, 2013). Although the majority of four-year BAIs are not HSIs, nearly all four-year HSIs are classified as baccalaureate or master's institutions and admit the majority of applicants (Nunez & Elizondo, 2015). However, only 2 percent of HSIs actually offer a doctorate, meaning that few Ph.D.s are produced in HSIs (Contreras & Gándara, 2011). Hence, it is vital to examine the path traversed by HSI alumni to the doctorate as Latina/os can use broadly accessible public universities to chart multiple pathways to the doctorate (Fernandez, 2018).

Latina/o Student Experiences in Postsecondary Institutions

Despite the continued increase of Latina/o enrollment in higher education, Latina/os have enrolled in a disproportionately small number of higher education institutions throughout the United States, and these institutions continue to struggle to retain and graduate them (Mendez, 2015; Garcia, 2019). The Latina/o attrition rate indicates significant obstacles in Latina/o educational pathways, and it is seen throughout the k-12 and postsecondary systems (Pérez-Huber et al., 2015). Despite representing the largest ethnic minority group in the United States, Latina/os are less likely to enroll in 4-year universities, attend selective postsecondary

institutions, enroll in college on a full-time basis, earn bachelor's degrees, attend graduate school, and are less likely to pursue a doctoral degree (Fry & Taylor, 2013, Pérez Huber et al., 2015). A 2015 study that examined the educational pathways of Latina/o students found that for every 100 students that entered the k-12 system, only 3 to 4 attended graduate school, and only .3 graduated with a doctorate (Pérez Huber et al., 2015). As a doctorate education is the main gateway to research careers and the professoriate, it is not surprising that Latina/os remain underrepresented in faculty positions across the United States, making up only 4.5 percent of faculty (Martinez, 2018; Zambrana et al., 2017). Katz (2005) speculates that an increase in minority earning master's degrees could increase representation in the professoriate. For example, previous studies have shown that representation of black faculty members would double if the black share of earned doctorates increased by only 2.5 percent.

Research on undergraduate and master's program choice has found that several institutional characteristics influence students' selection of a postsecondary educational program, including distinct academic program offerings, tuition and costs, financial aid availability, academic reputation, location (proximity to home), and social atmosphere, though the importance that students attach to these institutional characteristics vary by race and ethnicity (Katz, 2005; Ramirez, 2013). For example, research has found that compared to White students, Latinos/as and minority students have a stronger preference for living close to home, are more cost-sensitive (Katz, 2005; Garcia 2019), and are more likely to enroll in community colleges or less prestigious institutions (Fernandez, 2018; Pérez Huber et al., 2015). Research has also found that gender and class inequalities shape Latinos/as' college choice process where Latinos/as, women and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely to attend selective institutions. This is important as the type of higher education institution a student attends significantly impacts educational and occupational outcomes (Ramirez, 2013). Thus, scholars

must examine students' college choices and experiences, especially Latinos/as in light of the group's dramatic underrepresentation in graduate education (Ramirez, 2013).

While Hispanic Serving Institutions have increased access to higher education for Latina/os, they are a challenge for both researchers and practitioners as they are not like Historically Black Colleges in that they are not required to have specific mission statements or curricula to serve Latina/os (Sanchez, 2019; Martinez, 2018; Garcia, 2019). Many HSIs have longer histories as Primarily White Institutions and have only recently started experiencing increases in Latina/o enrollment due to their geographic location and demographic shifts (Garcia, 2019). Consequently, the attention and research to improve Latina/o students' overall educational experiences in these institutions still require attention (Sanchez, 2019; Garcia, 2019). For example, while the research indicates the majority of Latina/o students' study at HSIs, much of the research around microaggressions, student experiences, and students' perceptions of campus racial climates focus on minority and Latina/o students at Predominantly White institutions (Sanchez, 2019; Garcia, 2019). Yet, perceptions of hostile racial climates lower Latino students' sense of belonging and commitment to finishing college and contribute to feelings of alienation/isolation and otherness (Sanchez, 2019; Yosso et al., 2009), which can equally be experienced at an HSI.

HSI research thus far has provided a number of insights into these institutions. For example, findings show that while these institutions graduate a large proportion of Latina/os, they have lower graduation rates than institutions that are more selective and have greater resources (Garcia, 2019). Furthermore, there is evidence that attending an HSI leads to Latina/os developing a strong sense of racial-ethnic identity and increases in their sense of belonging and positive perceptions about their academic abilities (Cuellar, 2014; Garcia, 2019). Yet, some research has also found that Latinos at Hispanic Serving Institutions share similar struggles with

their non- HSI attending counterparts regarding the lack of outlets for cultural expression like organizations or programs (Medina & Posadas, 2012) and facing unwelcoming campus climates. Unfortunately, attending an HSI does not shield Latina/o students from acculturative stressors as aspects of the curriculum and overall institutional structure may conflict with cultural and familial expectations (Sanchez, 2019). Sanchez also found that students attending HSIs must still contend with physical and social segregation and racist stereotypes and assumptions in the classroom (Sanchez, 2019; Flores Pacerco, 2016). It is important to note that the majority of research on Latina/o student experiences has focused on the undergraduate level. Little research has examined the experiences of students at the master's level, let alone the experiences of Latina/o master's students (Katz, 2005; Vining Brown, 1994)), and there remain significant gaps in the literature concerning the experiences of Latina/o students at the doctoral level and their feelings about their ability to obtain mentorship and preparation for academic careers (Ramirez, 2016).

Latina/o Doctoral Pipeline

The primary pathway towards a degree for Latina/o students is through a nonselective institution— often a community college (Martinez, 2018). This is facilitated by the United States' inequitable educational system that creates an inadequate pipeline for underrepresented students to earn degrees (Fernandez, 2018; Gandara & Contreras, 2009; Yosso &Solórzano, 2006). Furthermore, the research indicates several reasons for smaller pools of Latina/o graduate students and faculty across fields (Gandara & Contreras, 2009; Zambrana et al., 2017). Not only do Latina/os have lower high school graduation rates than their white peers when they do attend postsecondary education, but they also enroll in less selective institutions with limited support structures and lower graduation rates (Fernandez, 2018; Pérez Huber et al., 2015). One of the gravest challenges to increased representation in the doctorate is the lower college completion rates

among Latina/o students than their peers, as admission to post-baccalaureate degrees is contingent on completing the undergraduate degree (Gandara & Contreras, 2009). Limited Latina/o and minority students are pursuing doctoral-level education as a result of the low persistence numbers overall. In addition, well-documented issues of persistence help to explain the limited number of Latina/o faculty across the United States, including subpar K-12 education, high levels of remediation, being first-generation with limited knowledge of the "hidden curriculum," and working more than 20 hours per week to name a few reasons (Contreras, 2011; Gandara & Contreras, 2009). The literature shows that underrepresented students have higher odds of earning undergraduate degrees and pursuing doctoral education when they attend selective institutions (Fernandez, 2018), yet they are highly concentrated in broad access institutions.

Consequently, as population demographics in the U.S. continue to shift, Latina/os are increasingly finding themselves in higher education institutions with limited faculty representation. Latina/os account for only 4.5 percent of the professoriate in the United States (NCES, 2018d). This is problematic for equity and representation reasons, as research has shown that increased representation in the faculty has positive outcomes for students of color (Darder, 2012). To increase representation in the professoriate, we must graduate more Latina/os with doctorates and support their success in academia. Given the porous pipeline Latina/os traverse, doctoral pathways programs should focus not only on traditional and undergraduate pathways to the doctorate but also on the master's level students as a source of pre-doctoral students.

Statistics indicate that Latina/os earn their undergraduate degrees at later stages of life and fall outside the traditional college student mold. The "traditional" college student is typically an 18-22-year-old non-minority student from middle-class backgrounds whose parents have attended college (Strage, 2008). However, if we look at the Mexican American populations alone, the largest Latina/o demographic (Noe-Bustamante, 2019), by age 24, only 4.8 percent have received

a bachelor's degree, though this number more than doubles to 11.9 percent after age 25 (NCES, 2019). It is additionally significant to note that master's education is a growing component of graduate education enrollment for students of color, specifically Latina/o students (Clark, 2011). In 1995, only 1.6 percent of Latina/o adults had attained a master's degree before age 30 – but by 2019, this share had doubled to 3.4 percent (NCES, 2019). In 2018, Latina/os received 10.7 percent of all master's degrees conferred (NCES, 2018b). Clark (2011) advances that for many first-generation college students, the undergraduate degree represents a milestone that temporarily satisfies their educational needs. Accordingly, Latina/o students often work for several years before entering a master's-level program (Clark, 2011). Yet, older students are an often-overlooked population in graduate education pipeline studies (Clark, 2011).

Existing literature regarding pathways to the professoriate focuses on traditional and undergraduate student experiences towards doctoral degrees (Clark, 2011; Contreras & Gandara, 2011; Martinez, 2018). However, the rise in master's level enrollment raises questions about the relationship between the master's and doctoral education for Latina/o students, yet this particular pathway remains underexplored. Perhaps this is because a majority of Latina/os who attend graduate school complete professional degrees rather than pursuing research masters or doctorates (Clark, 2011). While this is a great achievement in its own right and contributes to professional diversity, increasing diversity in the professoriate can have similarly impactful outcomes as representation at the faculty level can promote retention of Latina/o students in addition to creating spaces in academia for diversity of thought and culturally relevant pedagogy. Faculty diversity is also essential as the literature points out that Latina/os graduate students enter the system through their own persistence and determination, rather than due to faculty intervention and assistance (Clark, 2011). Conceivably, well-structured master's to doctoral pathway programs can facilitate Latina/o student transitions from master's to doctoral education.

Acknowledging Latina/o Students through a Re-conceptualization of the Student Model

Deil-Amen (2015) highlights how when a norm of behavior becomes the exception numerically, but the social construction of that norm remains prominent, those who do not conform are marginalized despite their existence as the collective majority. Conceptually, they become a marginalized majority, which is what has occurred for the majority of postsecondary students in the United States (Deil-Amen, 2015). Much of the research on minoritized students initially focused on their deficiencies – low test scores, lack of motivation, a dearth of capital – this was extended to include the experiences of Latina/os students. Tinto (2006) asserts that in its infancy, retention research was focused on examining student deficiencies and not institutional faults – "students failed, not institutions" (p. 2). This framework originated with traditional residential students in mind, but it now discounts the experiences of more than half of our undergraduate population (Deil-Amen, 2015) and has led to literature advocating for student rehabilitation instead of how colleges can adapt their approaches to meet the needs of students from marginalized backgrounds (Beattie, 2018; Demetriou et al.,2017; Darder, 2012). The inherent problem with drawing from "traditional" theories to understand marginalized students' experiences is that those who do not fit "traditional" molds are framed as deficient in some manner. By using traditional theories, students are measured against the parameters that are not comprehensive of the current student majority (Deil-Amen, 2015). Not surprisingly, nontraditional students are found at fault instead of focusing on improving the deficiencies of institutions that fail to serve the new underrepresented majority (Deil-Amen, 2015).

Yosso (2006) asserts that capital deficiency narratives are grounded in a legacy of racism and centered on white and middle-class privilege. It is crucial to acknowledge that other models – models focused on a strengths-based perspective- can provide insight into the experiences of first-generation Latino/a students and shed light on the capital these students carry with them that

allows them to succeed. Yosso (2006) proposes that Latino/a students find strength in their community, and by reconnecting with their community, they can augment their strengths to navigate educational institutions better. A community cultural wealth model (Yosso, 2005) further explores how Latino/a culture can be an asset for students in higher education. Through a critical race theory lens, the community cultural wealth model delves into the strengths that students bring with them - such as aspiration capital, linguistic capital, familial capital, social capital, navigational capital, and resistant capital – allowing for a reconsideration of what is considered 'capital' (Yosso, 2005). As Yosso (2005) advanced, students may find success through alternative measures; however, institutions are not currently receptive to recognizing non-normative measures of success. This was interestingly alluded to in the work of both Lareau (2011), and Calarco (2018), wherein the working-class students in their studies were marked as academically deficient though they were seen as cultivating resourcefulness, a sense of responsibility, interconnectivity, and respect for others, not traditional meritorious achievements in academia. Perhaps Yosso's framework can also lead to a broader definition of success.

Uncovering differential experiences of student achievement may reveal the possibility of more nuanced approaches to student success that counter normative notions of meritocracy. By deconstructing assumptions about this fictional ideal student norm, we can better focus on how postsecondary education is structured to perpetuate inequities (Deil-Amen, 2015).

The current literature does not provide deep insight into the experiences of terminal master's degree students or their trajectory towards the doctorate. To address this gap in the existing literature, this study will move beyond deficit student perspectives by acknowledging and exploring the impact of race, cultural, structural, and institutional practices on Latina/o terminal Master's student experiences. In particular, this research will explore the dynamic experiences of students who have obtained or will obtain terminal Mater's degrees at broad access Hispanic

Serving Institutions on their path towards the doctorate. Institutional setting is relevant as Hispanic Serving Institutions represent only 9% of higher education institutions but enroll 54% of all Hispanic students in the United States (Mendez, 2015). In focusing on student experiences within a Hispanic serving context, we may be able to critically assess the socio-historical academic norms that impact Latina/o student experiences, even within "friendly" environments, in order to unpack structural and cultural challenges overcome by the terminal master's students on the road to the doctorate.

Theoretical Framework

This study advances that master's programs can serve as a distinct stage on the doctoral pathway. Interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks are utilized to critically analyze the challenges and strengths of master-doctoral pathways as perceived by Latina/o students. This study will draw upon three theoretical lenses: Critical Race Theory, Community Culture Wealth (Yosso, 2005), and Domains of Power (Hill Collins, 2013).

Critical Race Theory: Critical race scholars advance the argument that racism is embedded in institutional structures where it is enacted (Yosso, 2005; Darder, 2012), and visible and invisible normative expectations serve as barriers or hidden curricula "that hinder the progress of the historically underrepresented" (Jack, 2019; Yosso, 2005; Darder, 2012). Racism is a common, normalized occurrence, not an outlier encounter, experienced by people of color in American society. Thus, racism is not a unique phenomenon; instead, racism is ordinary, and the usual way society functions and affects the everyday experiences of people of color. Additionally, institutionally embedded racist practices in U.S. society are based on a "White-overcolor ascendancy" that advances White supremacy. Combined, this implies that racism is difficult to address or remedy because it is covert and not acknowledged as it, in fact, allows a racially dominant group to manipulate and exploit subordinate groups for their gain (Delgado &

Stefanic, 2012). Consequently, it is crucial to critique race-neutral policies in academia that promote and center notions of meritocracy. Critical race theory will be used in this thesis as an analytic tool to explore how racist notions are embedded within and influence educational environments which impact Latina/o student experiences. Critical race theory provides a necessary lens for deconstructing barriers and challenges and examining an assets-based approach to the reviewed literature and experiences gathered. Critical race theory in education is essential for challenging the dominant discourse on race and racism as they relate to education by examining how educational theory, policy, and practice are used to subordinate certain racial and ethnic groups (Solorzano & Yosso, 2000).

Community Cultural Wealth: The conceptual framework of Community Cultural Wealth, coined by Yosso (2005), is a critical race theory-based departure from Bourdieu's (1986) cultural capital, or the "accumulation of cultural knowledge, skills and abilities possessed and inherited by privileged groups in society" (Yosso, 2005, p. 76). A number of educational researchers cite Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital in their work examining the experiences of low-income students, and to some degree, the experiences of 'first-generation' and Latino/a students. Yosso, however, critiques the cultural capital deficiency notions that have emerged in educational research and additionally challenges Tinto's "stages of passage" model, which asserts that in order for students to integrate and see success in academia, they must disconnect from their community and pre-college life (Yosso, 2006). Yosso advances that the application of Bourdieu exposes "White, middle-class culture as the standard, and therefore all other forms and expressions of 'culture' are judged in comparison to this 'norm'" (p. 76). Additionally, Tinto's student integration model – well regarded in education research- frames Latino/a students as 'devoid' of capital (Yosso, 2005; Yosso, 2006). Accordingly, this model is not developed to account for the experiences of Latino/a students. Instead, Yosso proposes that Latino/a students

find strength in their community and a host of alternative capital, which the dominant culture does not value.

As Flores Pacerco (2016) found in the literature surrounding Latina/os in graduate education, this student group faces issues with school/life balance, self-doubt, and racism which often stems from the way that departmental/institutional cultures may only see certain types of capital as "legitimate," marginalizing Latina/o graduate students and their experiences. Consequently, community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) provides an asset-based lens to understand the forms of capital Latina/o students bring to their postsecondary educational experiences. Through a critical race theory lens, the community cultural wealth model delves into the "non-traditional/dominant" strengths students possess - such as aspiration capital, linguistic capital, familial capital, social capital, navigational capital, and resistant capital. Aspirational capital refers to the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers; Linguistic capital includes the intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style; Familial capital refers to those cultural knowledge's nurtured among familial (kin) that carry a sense of community history, memory, and cultural intuition; Social capital can be understood as networks of people and community resources; Navigational capital refers to skills of maneuvering through social institutions; and Resistant capital refers to those knowledge's and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality (Yosso, 2005). A community cultural wealth framework allows us to unpack minoritized students' experiences and reconsider what 'capital' is, thus allowing for the re-imagination of the Latino/a student (Yosso, 2005).

Domains of Power: Feminists and intersectional scholar Hill Collins (2013) developed the Domains of Power framework to examine how power is manifested and organized in all structures. The framework identifies four interrelated domains where power is organized:

> 1) a structural domain, where social institutions of a society, such as banks, hospitals, schools, corporations, retail establishment, government agencies, and health care, routinely discriminate in favor of whites and against everyone else; 2) a disciplinary domain, where modern bureaucracies regulate race relations through their rules and practices, primarily surveillance; 3) a cultural domain, where ideologies, such as white supremacy, patriarchy, and heterosexism, are constructed and shared; and 4) an interpersonal domain that shapes social relations between individuals in everyday life. (Hill Collins, 2013, p. 72)

A Domains of Power framework allows for the examination of higher education institutions to determine how structural forces may promote unequal treatment and segregation of opportunity. Disciplinary forces may promote different roles for individuals based on race, in addition to advancing policies that benefit one group over another. The deconstruction of the cultural domain allows for the unpacking of colorblind ideologies and faux notions of diversity. Lastly, the interpersonal domain focuses on the everyday racism experienced by students in academic settings. All four of these domains are interrelated and shift and change and act upon each other. By focusing on power within the domains it is organized in, scholars can create space for change (Hill Collins, 2013) and challenge traditional notions of merit and achievement.

This thesis gathers information as Latina/o students reflect upon their master's program experiences en route to the doctorate, drawing attention to the ways that race and power inform student experiences in the master to doctoral pathway. Revealing the pivotal points and existing support resources can counter institutional barriers for Latina/o students and support efforts to diversify academia. Utilizing critical race theory frameworks allows for the exploration and reexamination of existing literature to uncover the ways in which minoritized students may have

been overlooked. Using an asset-based approach in the analysis creates an opportunity to provide solutions to long-term systemic barriers to graduate student success.

Chapter 3 – Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of Latina/o terminal master's degree students. This study paid particular attention to social and academic experiences related to race and socioeconomic status and how these interacted with institutional settings to inform and impact student experiences. Additionally, how departmental and/or institutional norms contributed to obstacles and/or support structures for Latina/o students was explored.

Methodological Approach

Using a phenomenological approach to qualitative inquiry, this study focused on the experiences of Latina/o terminal master's students as they navigated through the masters to doctoral pathway. A qualitative design was chosen for this study because it is concerned with exploring and extracting meaning from individual or group experiences. This emergent design acknowledges the complexities of the human experience and honors the idea that there is no one truth following an inductive process from data collected to extracted themes to a generalized model (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach to inquiry was appropriate for this study because it sought to understand how Latina/o students experienced this pathway and how it prepared them for matriculation into doctoral programs in the humanities and social sciences. Academics have the potential to be leaders in society, this is especially true for academics in the humanities, and social science fields as graduates in these fields are uniquely prepared to address problems related to social, educational, and economic inequality (Fernandez, 2018). A phenomenological approach allows the researcher to study what participants experienced, how they experienced it, and the meaning-making of their shared experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Through in-depth semi-structured interviews, I explored how participants' aspirations to pursue masters and doctoral degrees in the humanities and social sciences developed, to what extent their attendance at a broad access Hispanic Serving Institution assisted them in developing and reaching their

ambitions, what barriers or challenges they experienced, and how they persist despite these barriers or challenges.

Sample Population

Due to its student population and ease of access, this study drew participants from the alumni and student population of California State University, Northridge (CSUN), a sizeable broad access four-year public institution designated as Hispanic serving. According to CSUN's Office of Student Success Innovations, as of the Fall 2020 term, CSUN serves nearly 39,000 students, and its admission rate hovers around 50 % of applicants. In addition, 54.2 percent of students and 11.3 percent of tenured track faculty at CSUN are Latina/o., though it is notable that the Latina/o faculty are concentrated in the Chicana/o Studies Department. Lastly, of the 1,694 master's degrees conferred in the 2019-2020 academic year, 178 (~10 percent) were in research-based programs in the Social Sciences and the Humanities. Thus, CSUN facilitated access to the target student population in the desired institutional setting.

The participants were identified through purposive sampling. More specifically, criterion sampling was implemented, whereby all participants had to meet predetermined participation criteria. The criteria for selection of the study participants are as follows: for group one, (a) identify as Latina/o (b) currently enrolled in a College of Social Science or College of Humanities master's degree at a broad access Hispanic Serving Institution (CSUN) in the last year of master's study (c) aspiring doctoral candidate; for group two (a) identify as Latina/o (b) have completed a terminal Social Science or Humanities master's degree at a broad access Hispanic Serving Institution (c) doctoral degree holder.

Solicitation emails were sent to the Colleges of Humanities and Social Sciences and the Graduate Studies Office. Ten master’s track and/or doctoral holders expressed initial interest; nine participants completed the IRB-approved consent form, brief demographic questionnaire,

and interview during a two-week period. The nine participants included in this study varied in age and length of study. The nine participants were comprised of three females and six males. Five of the participants will graduate with their master's degree program in the Spring 2021 term. The doctoral participants all graduated within the last five years and hold teaching positions at the university level.

Table 1.1 Participant Profiles

Name	Ethnicity	Gender	Discipline/Field	Year Master's/Ph.D. Earned
Dan	Chicano	Male	Social Science	M.A. 2014/Ph.D. 2019
Ed	Chicano/Mexican American	Male	Humanities	M.A. 2010/Ph.D. 2017
Rene	Chicano	Male	Humanities	M.A. 2008/Ph.D. 2017
Victoria	Chicana	Female	Humanities	M.A. 2009/Ph.D. 2018
Rose	Mexican/Chicana	Female	Humanities	M.A. 2021
Maria	Latinx	Female	Social Science	M.A. 2021
Somotl	Chicano	Male	Humanities	M.A. 2021
Pablo	Latino	Male	Humanities	M.A. 2021
Ryxi	Latinx/Chicanx /Indigenous	Male	Social Science	M.A. 2021

Data Collection

Study participants were provided with a letter of informed consent to review prior to selection. Once participants submitted a signed informed consent form, they were asked to fill out a brief demographic questionnaire, which also aided in confirming eligibility to participate in the study as well as provide some background information about the participant. Drawing from critical race theory in education traditions, this study used a qualitative approach to empower the voices of Latina/o participants through semi-structured in-depth interviewing. The application of critical race theory in education scholarship acknowledges using direct experiences and knowledge of minoritized participants through their narratives to understand and analyze experiences of racial subordination (Solorzano & Yosso, 2000; Sanchez, 2019). Accordingly, data was primarily collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews to allow the

participants the flexibility to explore their experience; 90-120-minute individual interviews were conducted with each participant. Semi-structured interviews were ideal for this task as they provided structure for the conversation through predetermined questions but allowed the participants' flexibility to discover or elaborate on information that was important to them.

Due to safety precautions resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic, the interviews were conducted using the Zoom video conferencing platform. Video conferencing allowed for a more personalized interview experience as the participants and I could see each other, which allowed me to observe and respond to the participants' reactions. In order to build rapport, the interviews began with a brief informal ice-breaker encompassing a review of the research study, the inspiration for the study, a brief opportunity for the respondent to ask questions or express concerns and review the signed informed consent form. Interviews were recorded via the video conferencing platform, and, on occasion, brief notations were made as a reminder to follow up with a response. To ensure confidentiality, interviews were performed in a private setting, and participants were encouraged to participate in a private setting as well. Additionally, the interviews were conducted, recorded, and transcribed by the primary researcher. All of the participants have been assigned pseudonyms, and their department affiliation will not be disclosed but will generally be referred to as either under the College of Humanities or Social Sciences.

Research Question

Through the questions asked, this study attempted to provide insight into what experiences, values, and strengths might result in students deciding to pursue terminal master's degrees at a broad access Hispanic serving institutions, enabling these types of institutions to better serve this student population and propel them to doctoral education. The research results

from this qualitative study will contribute to the formation of more inclusive and diverse environments for Latina/o students and support efforts to diversify the professoriate.

Rarely is the modus operandi of institutions questioned, or is its centering of knowledge around white middle-class experiences acknowledged (Yosso, 2006; Darder, 2012; Tough, 2019). This study is based upon the premise that structural and institutional forces, as shaped by socio-historical context, directly affect Latina/o students and their access to doctoral education. This study, in sharing the experiences of Latina/o students in the masters-doctorate pathway, takes an asset-based approach to understanding Latina/o graduate students by exploring the following overarching question: What is the role of the terminal master's degree in the doctorate pathways traversed by Latina/o aspiring doctoral students?

The following sub questions inform the overarching question and allowed for the in-depth exploration of the participant's experiences:

1. How do Latina/o students navigate the masters-doctoral pathway (from selecting a research/academic terminal master's program to degree completion and finally to the doctorate program)?
2. What challenges and barriers do Latina/o students encounter and overcome on their journey through the terminal master's – doctoral pathway?
3. What institutional factors support Latina/o students through the master-doctoral pathway?
4. What role do broad access Hispanic Serving Institutions serve in the production of master's degree recipients who pursue doctoral education?
5. How do Latina/o students see their culture and their identity being represented in their institution?

Data Analysis

Notes and memos were written following each interview, reflecting on the experiences shared and tracking emerging themes and patterns. These notes allowed me to make connections to previous interviews and focus on specific questions that should be asked in upcoming interviews. I took minimal notes during the interviews, relying on video recording to capture the dialogue for future transcription purposes. Recording the participants allowed me to focus on the participants' responses and consider follow-up questions to encourage more profound responses. After the interviews, the next step was to transcribe and code the data. Analysis in a qualitative study is an interpretive process, however, care was taken to follow established analysis protocol. I transcribed all of the audio files, which allowed for a more accurate capturing of the context of the participants' reports and familiarity with the data given the truncated analysis period. Once the audio files were transcribed, each transcript was reviewed numerous times using an open inductive coding technique. After various reviews of the transcripts, codes and themes were assigned. I coded my research by placing the transcribed interviews into a three-column table, with the codes identified in the right column, identified themes in the left column, and the transcript in the center. Codes were identified by a line-by-line analysis and interpreted through a holistic analysis of the case setting, allowing focused themes to emerge around key issues (Creswell & Poth, 2018). After sorting the themes, I looked for overlapping themes and then revised the coded transcripts for consistency.

Researcher's Role

In qualitative research, the researcher is considered the instrument of data collection. In order to effectively relay the rich data collected from participant experiences, it is essential to be aware of one's stance, and the effect one may have on the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To qualify my ability to conduct this research, I need to position myself and describe relevant

experiences that may have influenced how my research interest and topic emerged and how the data was interpreted (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

As a first-generation Latina, I decided to pursue a graduate degree in Chicana/o Studies at California State University-Northridge (CSUN) because of the diverse student population served as a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) with a large first-generation and low-income student body– a student demographic I identify with. Consequently, as I have traversed my master's program, I have come to understand the manner in which my own experiences have shaped my academic research interest and the theoretical frameworks and methods that inform them. Speaking to the influence of our lived experiences, Jones, Torres, and Arminio (2006) share that we are "never far from our [lived] experiences, motivated in part by something we did not understand about ourselves or by a part of our own experience that had not been investigated before but was very present" (p. 189). My experiences and identity have become some of my greatest strengths in that they provide a point of departure and fuel the passion for my work.

My perception of the world and academia in many ways was shaped by my early years - I grew up in a household overwhelmed by poverty, food and shelter insecurity, substance abuse, domestic violence, and mixed immigration status. Still, I quickly internalized that education could be used as a vehicle to maneuver away from these circumstances. Consequently, I was the first in my immediate family to obtain a college degree, and I am the first in my immediate and extended family to pursue a graduate education – the majority of my family has not had the opportunity or resources to study beyond middle school. These circumstances are experienced by many Latina/o students across the country (Saenz et al., 2007), and it impacts their academic journeys in a myriad of ways. During my first year as an undergraduate, I recall meeting with a college advisor and expressing how I had never before been confronted with so much affluence – not just among the student body, but also across the campus, as evidenced by the well-paved

pathways, colonial-style arched hallways, manicured lawns, and all you could eat dining halls. I attended college wholly dependent on financial aid, scholarships, and a series of on-campus and off-campus jobs. My mother was not in a position to financially support me, so much so that I was pressed to work nearly full-time to support myself and help her purchase groceries, pay rent, school tuition, among other essentials for her and my sisters – this was only possible as they lived in Mexico and the cost of living was so much lower. I attempted to navigate a sea of White wealth and privilege, absorbing as much information about this world as possible in order to financially situate myself to help my mother and sisters return to the United States.

Upon graduating from college, I thought that to help my mother and sisters, I needed to attend law school so that I could manage their immigration cases and bring them back home. After a year of clerking for a non-profit legal aid, under their immigration and family law unit, I discovered my mother and sister could return to the United States under U-Visas – visas granted to victims of crime. Fortunately, I had learned enough about this immigration process to handle the cases myself. As I navigated this process, I realized that my true passion lay in education, and my dabbling in the legal realm was more out of a perceived necessity. My motivation to reunite my family in the United States paid off. By the age of 25, I had not only personally handled my mother's and sister's immigration case, but I had also relocated my mother and three sisters back home to the United States. I share my story because it provides the context for who I am and how I came to my research interest and offers insight into how my identity may influence my purpose and subjectivity within this work.

When discussing the academic aspirations or achievements of Latina/o first-generation students, I am often met with deficit-based notions of their experiences – often along the lines of "if these students had the motivation, they could attend graduate school" and so forth. This perspective leans on the assumption that minoritized students who fail to achieve within

normative standards of academia lack motivation. My personal and professional experience dictates that motivation is construed subjectively, and often minoritized students have explicit objectives and goals – though perhaps these goals are not "meritorious" per academic standards and the road to achieving them is not paved within the narrow socially constructed pathway of success.

At this point, my professional and academic experience doubly position me as both an “insider and an outsider” within higher education settings. Negotiating the standards of knowledge production as an "outsider within" has presented challenges, though I strive to develop alternative narratives of student achievement that scholarly audiences will find credible. My professional and academic experiences, along with my positionality, compel me to pursue research aimed at countering the homogenized and "cultural deficiencies" narrative of minoritized students in higher education. Too often, the literature overlooks the intersectional complexity of minoritized student experiences and oversimplifies or neglects the effects of historical segregation and institutional practices that limit access to opportunities for these students.

I have come to both recognize and understand the nuances of my academic journey, and I have come to find my academic voice though I am still forming my "intellectual activist" identity. In contemplating what I wish to achieve as an intellectual activist, I am drawn to Sandoval's (2000) notion of differential consciousness, which represents a strategy of oppositional ideology that permits functioning within, yet beyond, the demands of the dominant ideology. Differential consciousness requires the perpetual reformatting of consciousness and practice and the acknowledgment and positioning of power. In addition, differential consciousness recognizes and works upon other modes of consciousness in opposition to transfigure their meanings. Per Sandoval, subjectivity is continually redetermined by the

fluctuating influences of power that surround and traverse us. Through differential consciousness, the practitioner breaks with ideology while also speaking in and from within ideology, which "generate the other story — the counterpoise" (Sandoval & Davis, 2000, p. 72). Differential consciousness depends on the practitioner's ability to read the current situation of power and self-consciously choose and adopt the ideological stand best suited to push against current norms (Sandoval & Davis, 2000). To create change, the differential consciousness requires:

> Enough strength to confidently commit to a well-defined structure of identity; enough flexibility to self-consciously transform that identity according to the requisites of another oppositional ideological tactic if readings of power's formation require it; enough grace to recognize alliance with others committed to egalitarian social relations and race, gender, sex, class, and social justice, when these other readings of power call for alternative oppositional stands. (Sandoval & Davis, 2000, p. 59)

Differential consciousness is a tactic that enables movement "between and among" ideological positioning in order to enlist and secure influence. In reflecting on Sandoval's notion of differential consciousness, it becomes clear that within this frame, one can position themselves as "an outsider within" academia in order to push against normative standards of achievement. My work is not merely about adding more Latina/os to the professoriate but assessing the systems in place in higher education that reproduce and promote normative standards of achievement and engage them in self-reflection to encourage the exploration and facilitation of diversity and inclusion efforts. We need to acknowledge the manner in which race and socioeconomic status impact the way merit is assigned and recognized in order to implement transformative change.

Ethical Considerations

This study presented no known risk to the participants. All of the participants were briefed on the purpose of this phenomenological study and their role before any interviews were undertaken. All of the participants were also asked to provide informed consent before they participated in the research, and adequate steps were taken to protect their confidentiality and identity. The informed consent document ensured participants knew their rights to withdraw from the study voluntarily, the central purpose of the study, and the procedures that would be used to collect the data. In addition, this document also contained information describing how the participants' anonymity would be protected – each participant has been given the opportunity to select their own pseudonym. The original copies of the participants' consent forms and audio files, and transcripts were all stored in separate secure locations. All of the interviews were transcribed by the primary researcher, thus further securing participant confidentiality.

Chapter 4 – Findings

The purpose of this study was to examine how Latina/o graduate students perceive and experience the terminal master's to doctoral pathway. The analysis is guided by a community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) and domains of power framework (Hill-Collins, 2013) grounded in critical race theory. Critical race theory advances that racism is not merely the product of individual bias or prejudice; it is also systemically embedded in institutional policies and structures. Community cultural wealth dissects these barriers – such as implicit rules of conduct (i.e., the hidden curriculum) – and advances that Latina/o students find success by utilizing alternatives funds of capital. Through a domains of power framework, which allows for the examination of power structures at varying levels, I paid particular attention to social and academic experiences related to race and socioeconomic status and how these interacted with institutional settings to inform and impact student experiences. I explored how departmental and/or institutional norms contributed to obstacles and/or support structures for Latina/o students. This chapter discusses the experiences of the nine participants that are traversing or have traversed the master's to doctoral pathway and provides insight into their trajectories. The participants were very candid about their experiences and challenges. I analyzed their interviews and identified four broad themes – fifteen subthemes – centered on the 1) process of selecting a graduate program; 2) institutional failures and self-advocacy; 3) institutional context around challenges and support structures, and; 4) the impact of race/ethnicity within a Hispanic Serving Institution. A selection of excerpts illustrates the broad themes and subthemes in each section.

Selecting a Graduate Program

The participants interviewed appeared to lack significant institutional knowledge and accessed minimal services/resources when selecting their master's institution and programs. The subthemes that emerged around this broad theme included a limited knowledge regarding

graduate studies, readiness, accessibility and location, perceived career benefits, assumed racial climate of Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs), and aspirational capital. The majority of participants indicated they pursued their academic terminal master's because they perceived it as a career advancement possibility; in some cases, the particular program pursued may not have had relevance in their expected career trajectory. Others had been encouraged to pursue a doctoral program but, because of their limited knowledge of the graduate application process, did not gain admission to a Ph.D. program. Additionally, while a number of the participants indicated they had received academic praise in their undergraduate career, they did not feel they were ready for advanced graduate-level coursework.

Limited Knowledge Regarding Graduate Studies: The majority of the participants interviewed indicated that they had little knowledge of the graduate program application and selection process and the rigor and expectations of graduate studies. Out of the nine participants interviewed, only one had participated in a graduate preparation program as an undergraduate student. Two other participants had gained admission into the Sally Casanova Pre-Doctoral Program as master's students, allowing them to further tap into resources to pursue doctoral education.

In speaking about pursuing a master's degree, Rose (M.A. 2021) indicated that she wanted to pursue a Ph.D. but ultimately pursued a master's degree because she did not feel ready for doctoral/graduate-level coursework. Not being familiar with master's level coursework, she assumed that the rigor would be similar to that of undergraduate coursework:

> To be honest, I really didn't know a lot about master's programs when I applied. I really thought they were a continuation of undergraduate studies. I think it wasn't until I started the program that I came to understand what a master's actually was.

Similarly, Samotl (M.A 2021)- indicated that he was unfamiliar with graduate-level expectations and initially applied to doctoral programs though he was not accepted. Instead of pursuing another round of doctoral admissions, Samotl pursued a master's degree in order to prepare. Samotl attributed his unsuccessful round of doctoral applications to his lack of process knowledge:

> You know, I just didn't know, I just applied. I wrote my best letter to get in and then, you know, threw the dice. I didn't get in. It's pretty disappointing. I didn't have any edge, you know, teaching experience or research experience, and it was a long break between undergrad in that time period because I worked. So, I think that all those things combined definitely didn't create the best the best package probably.

Likewise, Maria (M.A. 2021) also had little information regarding Ph.D. programs, which ultimately led her to pursue a master's degree:

> I applied [to doctoral programs], but I wasn't sure how to apply or get the letters of recommendation, or you know all those things you're supposed to do before [applying]. I just knew I wanted a Ph.D., but I didn't know I needed all those extra materials, and I did have a couple of faculty that I was close to at the University of Santa Barbara, but I didn't want to be an extra burden on them since they're working on research, and they're just like really busy all the time, so I didn't want to ask them. I was rejected to like all top schools, so I didn't even know what I was doing. I mean, I felt it coming because I was not prepared at all.

These student's pursuit of master's programs in place of doctoral programs stresses their determination and drive, but their initial approach to their applications highlights their limited understanding of the graduate education process. Maria's comment that she did not ask for help because she did not wish to be a burden further highlights her limited grasp of university and

graduate culture. Faculty, especially at research institutions such as UC Santa Barbara, expect to write letters of recommendation and serve as mentors for graduate admission – it comes with their profession (Jack, 2019). Yet, students from underrepresented groups are unaware of this and thus hit the "hidden curriculum" wall.

Readiness, Accessibility and Location: The majority of participants decided to attend California State University, Northridge (CSUN) because it was accessible, both in admission requirements and location. While some participants indicated they first pursued doctoral admission, the majority indicated they applied directly to a master's program due to its perceived ease of access. Though all of the participants indicated they were performing well in their master's program, they noted that their academic confidence was low at the outset, and they chose to forgo seeking doctoral admission because they did not feel prepared for graduate coursework at the doctoral level.

When asked why she decided to pursue a master's degree, Rose (M.A 2021) expressed concerns about her readiness to pursue doctoral-level coursework. She indicated that she perceived the master's degree as a training ground:

> I didn't think I was ready for a Ph.D. I decided to do a master's because it seemed like a good way to start. Like to understand what higher education was instead of just throwing myself in, and also, I really didn't have a very strong undergraduate background [GPA]. I had a lot of involvement on campus, but it was kind of at the cost of my grades, so I didn't think I was competitive enough, and I didn't really do good on the GRE. I just didn't feel like I was mentally ready, and I felt like I was kind of young still, and I didn't really know a lot. So, it seemed like a master's was a good start. I can do my masters for two years, figure out what I wanted to research, I had an idea, but I didn't know different methodologies and theoretical frameworks.

Similarly, Dan (M.A. 2014/Ph.D. 2019) expressed feeling unprepared for doctoral studies and indicated that he saw the master's degree as a bridge that could expose him to graduate coursework and also help him determine if a Ph.D. was the correct next step for him career-wise:

> I personally didn't feel like I was ready [for a Ph.D.]. I felt like I at least wanted that master's to like serve as a bridge because I felt like I was underprepared, you know, to go straight to a Ph.D. even though, like I constantly got compliments on my writing, I just felt like I just remember my writing wasn't always there. Another thing, too, is for the type of jobs that I wanted to go into, I knew that a bachelor was not enough. If I wanted to teach or work in the museum or administrative setting in higher education, I knew that - at least for the positions that I wanted - that I would have to at least get my master's.

When Ed (M.A. 2010/Ph.D. 2017) discussed why he pursued a master's degree over a doctorate, he indicated that it was due to its accessibility. He did not feel his academic credentials were competitive. However, he felt that admission into a master's at a broad access institution was attainable:

> The academic eligibility was a bit more accessible. I guess the other footnote to that was there weren't that many options per se for myself because when I left my undergraduate, I worked a lot, and I was heavily involved in activism, so my grades were kind of low. I knew that at the Cal State, there was an opportunity with even that low GPA, and that's actually kind of what happened. Mostly it was the fact that academically, like the eligibility requirements, I met the criteria.

The participants' experiences highlight how a broad access institution and the master's degree can serve as both vehicles of access into graduate work and a bridge into doctoral programs. Out of the nine participants interviewed, all but three have either gained admission into a doctoral program or completed doctoral studies. Notably, the six doctoral level students pursued

admission out of the local area, though they had all indicated that they pursued their master's degree at CSUN because of the program's proximity to home. Most of these participants had grown up in (or close to) the area, were married or partnered, had children, and/or were employed full-time in the region. Given their strong social ties and extensive familial and employment obligations, the majority of interviewees felt compelled to stay in the area as they pursued their master's. However, as one of the participants indicated, the Ph.D. became their passport and allowed them the ability to move as they pursued their educational aspirations.

Perceived Career Benefits: A significant number of the participants pursued a master's degree because they vaguely perceived career benefits. However, it is notable that a few of the participants simply sought a program they believed accessible to them and not necessarily because they had a clear notion of how the particular degree would benefit their career. Again, this speaks to the students' limited knowledge surrounding academia and varying types of graduate programs. Indicating that more advisement services are needed pre-enrollment to ensure students are pursue programs that will advance their educational and professional aspirations.

Ed (M.A. 2010/Ph.D. 2017) explained that while he has worked for nine years at a non-profit in the west side of Los Angeles, he knew that he needed an advanced degree in order to achieve career advancement:

> I thought the next step for me was to be the executive director. My mentor at the time [the executive director] said, "Hey, you know I know the politics, how it runs here, you won't be the executive director if you don't have a master's in public administration you know, this is a white city that you know there's no way they're going to grant you funding they're always going to look at you as not being qualified."

Pablo (M.A. 2021), similar to Ed in terms of seeking a graduate degree for career advancement, lamented not knowing about more career appropriate programs:

> I did question whether I was in the right program or not after I started seeing the type of work and research that I'm doing. [I found out] a lot of that work is being done in social work. Social workers with a master's degree and with clinical licenses. They're doing work that is certified when it comes down to developing interventions. I did question myself, like, I might need a second master's degree.

While the students' career aspirations did not necessarily align with their program choices, both participants later indicated that they were content with their outcomes and, ultimately, with their chosen academic master's program. Once students found support and built relationships with professionals, that contributed to their persistence and ability to visualize a career trajectory with their chosen program.

Assumed Racial Climate of Hispanic Serving Institution: All of the interviewees cited a perceived racially friendly campus as a factor shaping their graduate school choice process. Besides the program being pursued, all of the participants found CSUN appealing because of the significant presence of Latina/os on campus. Maria (M.A. 2021) indicated that a major draw for her was that the CSUN was designated as Hispanic serving. She appreciated that the campus had a sizeable Latina/o population and the faculty had some diversity:

> I was reading about it, it was a Hispanic serving institution, and it was very big. I was looking at the numbers of the population, and the numbers are huge for Latinos. There are Latino students or other races and not just white, and I was like, that's so cool, and also the faculty is very diverse.

Ed (M.A. 2010/Ph.D. 2017) also explained that his decision to attend CSUN was in part because of its significant Latina/o presence and the fact that it had the largest Chicana/o Studies department in the United States – he equated this fact with potential access to resources and it potentially being the "best" program due to its size and location:

> The fact that it had the largest Chicana/o Studies department in the U.S. It was just really the idea that the department was there, they had a master's program, and I guess it was the largest, so in my mind, if it's the largest, it's probably the best.

Similarly, when considering graduate programs, Samotl (M.A. 2021) indicated that a significant draw to CSUN was its history and the friendliness of his chosen program's faculty:

> You know Northridge [CSUN] is historical. A 50-year program [Chicana/o Studies] was definitely a draw and reason. When I did the site visit, I had a chance to meet with my future chair, and she was just open-armed and amazing.

In contrast, Rose (M.A. 2021) – did not feel the campus as a whole was welcoming to Latina/os, but she perceived her chosen program as a promising site due to its academic approach and focus on Latina/o populations:

> I think it's hard to feel like you belong on the campus sometimes. Being in ethnic studies, it's hard to feel like you belong on a campus that wants to push you out. The [master's] program [however] had a decolonial approach, and I looked at some of the classes online, and they looked interesting.

The participants' responses support the literature that asserts that racial representation in the student body and faculty is meaningful for minoritized students. A significant draw to the CSUN campus for the participants was its large Latina/o population and its perceived commitment to them through its standing Chicana/o Studies department/program, one of the oldest and largest in the country. The Chicana/o studies program was a draw not only for students pursuing humanities degrees but also for students that pursued programs in the Social Sciences.

Aspirational Capital: The participants expressed that pursuing a graduate degree and ultimately a career in academia would serve their family and community. They intended to

promote the value of education, become a role model, and use their future positions to serve their community either through research, activism, or representation as faculty. All of the participants indicated to some degree that their families were a source of strength and that their aspirations (and personal drive) fueled their persistence to obtain their degrees.

While the participants' families could not always identify with their experiences, they were still a source of comfort and support. The participants described that their families assisted them by providing stable homes, resources, and/or emotional support – allowing them to persist through grad school. Samotl's (M.A. 2021) mother, for example, provided much needed encouragement:

> You know, just really telling me how you know she struggled to receive her A.A. degree, and how it was such a pivotal moment for her to receive that degree after, you know, tons of years of not going to school, I think she received it at 60 or maybe even later than that. Education, she explains, it's like food; you know it fuels you, it sustains you, that will give you strength, and it's that honor you know like you're fulfilling their vision now it's not really my vision anymore. It's like you're fulfilling them. You're returning that back to them. So, I think that, if anything else, that would be why I continue to push forward, like fulfilling their vision through my actions.

Additionally, while the students could rely on their family for support, they were also transferring their newly acquired social/cultural capital to younger generations and providing their younger family members with college support or knowledge. A few of the participants indicated that as a result of finding their academic footing, they were able to push their younger siblings and cousins to follow in their footsteps. Samotl reflected that he had to make personal sacrifices to pursue a master's degree, one of them being spending less time with his children.

Nonetheless, he perceives the sacrifice as worth it because of the cultural capital his children have acquired as they witnessed him pursue his degree:

> I might have lost some very precious time there, but again the fact that they know what the word thesis is, the fact that they know what a master's is, the fact that they know that there's a cohort, the fact that they know that he's going to get a degree, all those are things that I didn't have. You know, and ultimately, it's not like I'm trying to give that to them, but I just want them to have the knowledge.

The participants indicated that they had their own drive and aspirations driving their academic journey along with familial support. When the participants were asked if they ever considered leaving their master's programs, every single participant indicated that quitting was not an option. All of the participants had a strong desire to obtain their degrees. Samotl captured the sentiment of the group when he said:

> Like there's nothing that's going to stop me. You know, there is no 'not graduating, there is no not passing this class, there is no not going to my desk, there is no not,' and that's from day one, how I walked in and, hopefully, when I graduate I'll have that sense of accomplishment of you know. I mentioned it earlier that I just didn't falter in manifesting my vision.

The participants' willingness to pursue their degree and openness to transfer their new found social/cultural capital speaks volumes about their character and resilience. Even though their path has not always been straightforward, the student's alumni status - or imminent graduation – demonstrates their resilience, adaptability, and strength. While the students alluded to their struggles, they never once wavered in their aspiration to obtain their degrees.

The experiences above highlight how the participants were able to use resistance capital to help them navigate and overcome their challenges and fuel their persistence and ultimately

complete their degree. The two participants above managed to complete their master's degrees while overcoming challenging institutional environments that were not always welcoming of their perspectives. They maneuvered their new-found resources into support structures that ultimately assisted them in securing a doctoral program placement.

Institutional Failures and Self-Advocacy

Underrepresented students, especially students of color, experience distinct barriers in the educational system, including discrimination, prejudicial views of academic merit, isolation, and racism. Though the participants faced institutional norms and microaggressions that challenged their ideas of success and self-worth, the majority of participants successfully resisted negative institutional expectations and practices. They developed support systems and actively challenged racist or elitist ideals. While the majority of the participants were able to complete their degree and move on, some are still working through the emotional impact of their experiences.

Through a Domains of Power framework (Hill-Collins, 2013), the participants' experiences were examined in subthemes (limited academic resources and programming/outreach for working students and elitist ideals/notions of achievement and low expectations from faculty) to reveal how power is manifested and how it impacts their access to opportunities. While institutions may profess a commitment to equity and inclusion, a close examination of current practices reveals structural forces promote unequal treatment and segregation of opportunity. Through structures such as the "hidden curriculum" - implicit rules of conduct privy only to the dominant group – institutional actors, unconsciously and sometimes consciously, may promote different roles for individuals based on race, in addition to advancing policies that benefit one group over another. When analyzing the participants' interviews, particular attention was paid to how the intersection of race, culture, and socioeconomic status influenced the experiences of the participants, and how institutional norms and policies

contributed to their educational trajectories. The participants' experiences revealed the following subthemes: challenges related to first-generation/working-class students, limited academic resources and programming/outreach for working students, elitist ideals/notions of achievement and low expectations from faculty, self-advocacy, and resistance (withdrawing not an option).

First-Generation/Working Class Students: It has been widely confirmed that there is a direct correlation between socioeconomic status and educational achievement (Gándara & Contreras, 2009). The majority of the participants indicated they worked full time before they returned to graduate school, whether in the non-profit or public sector, and they lamented that their academic institution failed to recognize and address their financial circumstances. The interviewees felt compelled to return to a graduate program to either expand their career options or pursue a teaching career. However, the participants indicated that their working-class status required them to continue to work during their master's program, and their financial circumstances created hurdles to overcome. Concerns over college costs, loans, access to financial aid, and the limitations imposed by working schedules were cited by participants as influencing their graduate school experience.

When Samotl (M.A. 2021) reflected on his graduate student experience, he lamented how his ability to engage on campus was limited due to his need to work full time. Samotl's time constraints were present from the beginning. In recalling his campus visit, he recalled his inability to sit in classes or meet with multiple administrators/faculty on campus:

> I work full time, so you know my time is kind of very compressed, so you know, it was a hit and run kind of thing [visit]. I would have definitely like to reach out to more people, but that didn't happen on that [initial] visit.

Additionally, in reflecting over his graduate career at CSUN, Samotl further lamented his inability to engage more fully with faculty and his inability to utilize campus resources:

> I didn't really get a chance to interact with the lectures that much. I think that's something that I would have definitely enjoyed more. But I think because again I'm not on campus all the time, like a regular student, it's just different for professional working persons to be on campus and so you miss a couple of those [student] experiences. It was challenging being a working student. It's super hard to get over; you can't create more time. That's my issue. I could have accessed 10,000 more opportunities on campus if I had more time on campus.

When Victoria (M.A. 2009/Ph.D. 2018) reflected on her challenges, she immediately brought up financing her graduate education. Victoria indicated that the financial aid process is not something that is discussed very much when students take up graduate programs and that it is confusing to figure out independently. Additionally, Victoria stated that having to take out loans and carry the debt required is a barrier. Interestingly, Victoria felt as though she had to justify her choice to finance her education via loans, she expressed that while some may point out that it was her choice to go to graduate school and take on the debt, she ultimately believed it was a good investment in herself:

> I took out loans, and I'm very much in debt, but I think that is in itself a challenge and one that I think a lot of us face. A lot of us are carrying that debt right, and I think that's probably the biggest challenge, but also one that you might call a stupid decision or you might say like you made a choice, but also, I don't regret it. I don't regret the experiences it's afforded me. I don't regret where I've been able to go, what I've been able to do with the investment. I invested in myself willfully right, and people in our communities, in our country, get into debt for stupid things all the time, and they can file for bankruptcy, and we can't, and that's really unfair. I think there are a lot of policies around financial aid that

have really affected us that we don't really talk enough about. Especially how much more expensive it's been and become to get an advanced degree.

These participants highlight significant issues affecting underrepresented students as they seek out graduate degrees. On the one hand, if students seek out loans, they must contend with debt and unforgiving debt policies. However, if they continue to work full time, they are limited by their work responsibilities and unable to fully participate in campus life – thus stunting their academic development and engagement. If institutions are genuinely committed to supporting unrepresented students, they must find ways to mediate these challenges. Failing to do so hinders financially disadvantaged students and limits their academic possibilities.

Limited Academic Resources and Programing/Outreach for Working Students: Academic institutions generally operate within strict norms that have long been established. As underrepresented students enter academia, they must contend with established norms that they may not be familiar with or able to navigate in order to succeed academically (the "hidden curriculum"). The majority of the participants of this study indicated that limited support programs further exacerbated their educational experiences. As a result, participants felt they were lagging behind, not knowing how to fulfill their program and academic expectations fully. When asked about their master's program requirements and expectations, only three of the participants expressed confidence in their department's training and communicated expectations. However, the majority of interviewees felt their master's programs were not providing them with adequate academic training, advisement, and guidance. A number of participants described their department's academic resources and training as weak.

Dan reflected that he would have appreciated more academic writing support – both in resources and training. He indicated that he expected more support from his graduate program

but was surprised that he did not receive it. He was equally surprised that his professors did not mention the issues they saw early on in his work. He stated:

> There were definitely sometimes that I felt like I needed more help with, for example, citations. I didn't know that I was doing my Chicago-style citations incorrectly. My professors never really bothered to correct me on some minor formatting things until I had to turn in the final paper. I felt like I needed more training in editing and formatting. I felt like there was a need for writing workshops because unless we're like in an English department, you know no one's going to tell us, break it down. If we have problems with passive voice, with punctuation, sentence structure, awkward phrasing, and all that stuff, which are some of the things that I still struggle with today. I wish that there was more of that sort of guidance in graduate school, and I was surprised that there wasn't that much of it. It was more like you're on your own.

Similarly, Pablo (M.A. 2021) also reflects that it has been difficult to navigate his academic requirements, and he wished that he could obtain more support. Stating:

> I wish that I could get more support when it comes down to small questions. Sometimes I hit roadblocks, and I don't know if I should go in certain directions or where to take my thesis or certain chapters. There's really nobody that I could book or just get a quick check-in, and that's very hard.

Additionally, Pablo highlighted how it often felt as though he was expected to navigate the program independently. He alluded to feeling stigmatized for needing so much help, but at the same time, he asserted that this was due to his first-generation status. It appears that institutions take for granted that students have learned to navigate academia by virtue of pursuing a graduate degree. However, the first-generation college status information gap continues on to graduate school. Pablo reflects:

> Like I said, being first-generation, all this is new terrain. It's new territory for me. A lot of times, students need advisors. What I'm talking about, when it comes down to poor training, it's because I feel like we don't get that in our program. It might come off as like I'm being babyish; this is a master's program, but put yourself in my shoes as a first-generation student who has never been a part of the master's program that didn't see themselves in the master's program. And you know to have me write a thesis, and like for me, it's like I don't know it just confuses me because I'm like all right, well, this is something that this program is prepping us for [the Ph.D.], but I guess it feels like it's something that we're going to have to do on our own. And it's not good for you; it doesn't feel good.

Ed (M.A. 2010/Ph.D. 2017) shared that he faced many similar hurdles as the students above. However, Ed and his peers attempted to overcome these hurdles by advocating and soliciting support from the department. However, given that his master's program was set within a traditionally undergraduate institution, he was met with pushback:

> We felt like we needed a new graduate advisor. We hoped/we want to build a master's program that really has a methods course with a strong theory course because if not that many people are finishing, then the department's taking their money. So, if they're not finishing the thesis, maybe we should do a comprehensive exam. Like all of us, we were just trying to focus on "let's put some attention to the graduate students," and that rubbed a lot of folks the wrong way. They were not receptive. The real concern is undergraduates.

Ed further stressed that his efforts to advocate for more resources were also met with hostility and reprimands. His actions were seen as trying to detract from the undergraduates who were seen as more in need. He recalled:

> "He has this privilege. He's already in a master's program. By doing this, by putting more resources there, what are we going to have to cut." It came out in some emails, so we got attacked [by faculty in the department] and everything.

In reflecting on their reception and allocated space on campus, most of the participants alluded to understanding that they did not hold priority on campus, as this was reserved for undergraduates. Even when discussing the Graduate Studies Office and graduate programming, the participants identified that these resources were designated for undergraduate students. In recollecting how resources are allocated, Rose (M.A. 2021) echoed many of the interviewees:

> I came in with the understanding that undergraduate students are always prioritized, which I completely understand, but sometimes I feel like a lot of the resources are undergrad, and then there's like a few that are raised towards graduate students. Advertising them [resources], I think that's a problem too. Advertisements sometimes get targeted at undergrads, and I'm like their master's students who want to go into PhDs too. So, when I think of the institution, I think of the fact that, like there could be a space where undergraduate and graduates can both have similar resources.

Ed (M.A. 2010/Ph.D. 2017) also expressed that it seemed the institution was undergraduate centered and that made it difficult to connect as a graduate student:

> You know there's it's hard to develop a connection here. I would say it's undergraduate centered, at least for me, being in the department. On the regular, yes, I would say, I do not remember too much graduate student-specific programming or even emails telling me about certain opportunities.

Not surprising, in terms of graduate academic training and resources, several participants were critical of their department and institution. Pablo (M.A. 2021) lamented that there was little in the way of academic career development offered in his department or campus in general for

graduate students. Pablo indicated that he would have appreciated more support in building up his CV and experience in order to become a competitive doctoral applicant. He states:

> As far as like walking away with published articles and building up my CV and my resume, that's definitely something that I feel like I wasn't able to do. There are definitely some areas of growth and stuff like that where I feel like I would have liked to know [more], and I guess it comes with the terrain of the master's program. We have to do a certain level of work on our own. I guess maybe that's part of the training. But it would have been a little bit cooler to get a little bit more support.

In terms of broad institutional support, none of the participants indicated they had significant contact or a sustained relationship with the university's Office of Graduate Studies outside of submitting applications for scholarship programs like the Sally Casanova or for their IRB. This lack of connection, coupled with their department's limited professional development offerings, left students feeling like there was a lack of institutional and departmental support for their professional and academic development, detrimental to their doctoral aspirations. They did not feel as though the next steps – the doctoral admission process – were demystified, and they also did not have relevant experience such as teaching or research experience under their belts. In particular, participants expressed a desire for their programs to offer resources around academic/ scholarly writing, publishing opportunities, and academic career development. When asked about whether the participants' programs offered any such opportunities, the majority indicated such opportunities were limited and not something often discussed.

Pablo (M.A. 2021) credits his thesis advisor for developing his academic writing and preparing him for doctoral-level work, but highlights that the department and institution had little to offer:

> My chair has done her best to push me to take my pieces to a point where I have dissertation type of potential, which I truly appreciate. Besides that, no, to be honest [no additional support or resources] …When we look at Ph.D. programs, from what I'm looking at published work matters, presentations matter, all that stuff matters right, and I don't have that under my belt. So, I'm going to be graduating without any published work. My cohort member pushed us to present in the university research symposium. That's going to be the closest thing that we have to a presentation. Thinking about it, we did have one professor push and support us to do a conference presentation, but it didn't work out because of Covid-19. That ruined my experience as far as like getting that under my belt, but it is what it is right now. I can't wait another semester or another year to postpone my graduation to build up my CV.

Victoria (M.A. 2009/Ph.D. 2018) reflected that she did not receive information from the institution. As a result, she and a group of graduate students formed their own group to resource themselves. She highlights how she and her peers had to learn to navigate as they went:

> I want to say that there was a reason why we formed a group because we weren't getting information from the institution. And in reflection, I would say, maybe there were things, but maybe I just didn't even know to pay attention to them. Most of us in the program we're very much, you know, coming into this sort of like learning on our way en route. I don't know if there was a centralized information source, or maybe there was, and I just wasn't tapped into it. I don't know, but I would say yeah, there wasn't much outreach to us.

While Victoria did feel as though she grew from her master's experience, she nonetheless lamented the lack of training infrastructure, especially around access and preparation to doctoral programs:

> There's no doubt that, for me, a lot of growth happened during my master's program, but I think that there could definitely have been a better infrastructure for giving me more knowledge around the Ph.D. process about applying. I only applied to three programs, you know, and I learned about fourth - don't even know how - but I think I learned about it pretty late. I don't know that I had enough support to do things like applying for fellowships or applying for other types of summer programing or funding. I think there were a lot more opportunities that I was just not aware of. Again, this is no fault to like the faculty within the I think it's more of a structural issue around graduates.

Similarly, Samotl (M.A. 2021) indicated that he would have appreciated the opportunity to participate in teaching assistantships in order to build his CV as he gears up to apply to doctoral programs. He highlights how the department is structured to serve traditional undergraduate and master's students, thus as a full-time working student, he was unable to assist in any classes offered by his department. He aptly suggested that this barrier could be overcome if the department scheduled a few evening classes or lower-division graduate classes and opened them up for graduate students to assist in. He stated:

> It would be nice to have more undergrad classes in the evening so that working professionals can assist as T.A.s and have that experience. I think that that would probably be like my one recommendation. But again, you know the majority of the school doesn't go to school during those hours that's more of the working population. So, I can definitely understand how that's, you know, difficult for the department to address, but in the same manner, you know they could schedule one or two and then put like T.A.s in from a master's cohort to work for those classes so that they can get the pedagogical experience. So that when they do graduate that they're not just being thrown to the wolves, you know, and they can really make an effect because that's the end all be all,

> we're out here, trying to make an effect on our communities. More teaching opportunities for working people[students] would be awesome.

As Samotl alluded to, programing times are a choice academic departments and institutions make. If academic institutions are committed to supporting non-traditional students, in this case, students who have no option but to be fully employed during their academic career, looking into alternative schedules for resources and opportunities would be an ideal step. In reflecting on programming times, Maria (M.A. 2021) expressed gratitude to her department because all of the graduate coursed were offered in the evening – after 6 pm – which allowed her to attend with minimal barriers. She additionally was able to gain teaching experience as a T.A. due to a number of undergraduate courses being offered in the evening and/or the instructor not requiring her presence during lecture, but still allowing her to participate in class prep and assist with grading assignments. She stated:

> Oh, that's like another pro of my department, all the classes are in the evening. Because they're like, some people work part-time, but it's mainly because the faculty have their undergrad classes in the morning and graduates in the evening. This lets me work full time because my classes are in the evening, and they all work to my advantage because I would make it [in time to class]. Classes were from 6 pm to 9:45 pm, so it worked out for me perfectly.

Institutionally, there seems to be a disconnect between working graduate student needs and programming schedules as well. For example, Pablo (M.A. 2021) indicated that while he has received information about some workshops he would have liked to attend, unfortunately, they were scheduled during working hours without any alternatives. He shared:

> I get informed through emails. There's a catch, like workshops are during times that are not convenient for me, I have to take a day off for half a day off to be able to attend, and

then, everything closes by 4 pm or 5 pm, so there is nothing really available in the evening for us to take advantage of.

In terms of scheduling, Samotl (M.A. 2021) reflected that as a working student, he had to find ways to engage academically around work, which sometimes meant reducing his work hours, which affected his family. However, he felt that sacrificing work was the only way to make opportunities for himself:

> I've created my own opportunities. I am being honest. I had to make changes to my hours at work to be on campus so that I could be there with my chair because, there again, classes are offered during the day. But it's again, the kind of the sacrifices you have to make if you want the graduate degree; sometimes you have to, it's hard to walk two roads.

A lack of resources and support for graduate students can result from an institution/program not having a clear mission for the students they serve. When participants were asked about what they perceived their program's aspirations were for them, most of the participants identified the departments and institution's goal of graduating them, but little else. Dan (M.A. 2014/Ph.D. 2019) reflected that he did not see a unified mission for students within his department and that student expectations differed depending on who you interacted with. He recalled:

> You know, the interesting thing was like I got a sense that different professors within the department had different goals for the department and students. For example, you know some professors were very about professional development and helping us get jobs after we finish. Some were pushing us to go to graduate schools, and some just wanted us to finish the master's program. So, I would say there were definitely select differences, like trajectories that people were pushing us to—definitely a lot of different directions.

While being a graduate student is demanding and requires a time commitment, institutions/programs interested in serving non-traditional and first-generation students should consider the impact program mission, resources, and scheduling have on student experiences. As Maria highlighted, and many other participants alluded to, programs that are conscientious about their student populations try to meet students where they are.

Elitist Ideals/Notions of Achievement and Low Expectations from Faculty: As seen in the section above, institutional policies and practices limited working-class and first-generation participants' access to resources and opportunities. Choices, such as scheduling of programs and delivery, were cited by participants as barriers. Interviewees, for example, indicated that in-person programs scheduled during the hours of 8 am-5 pm were difficult to attend due to work commitments. Along similar lines, the participants indicated that when they were able to identify resources or resources were provided, they encountered elitist ideas/notions about their potential and at times felt as though institutional actors had low expectations for them.

When discussing institutional supports and resources, Victoria (M.A. 2009/Ph.D. 2018) alluded to believing that the reason she and her peers did not receive information about resources and programming might have been because her graduate program was in ethnic studies and not a traditional academic program. It was because of this perceived exclusion that she and her peers formed their own student support group. Victoria states:

> I want to say that there was a reason why we formed a group because we weren't getting information from the institution. Because again, we weren't in a traditional program, I think we got overlooked in terms of a lot of the targeting and professionalization.

When recalling her experience attempting to apply to a graduate scholarship program, Maria (M.A. 2021) recalled that she was met with opposition from the program coordinator because she was employed full-time and initially had difficulty attending the required

introductory workshop. Maria expressed feeling frustrated and slightly discouraged that she was being singled out because of her need to work. Though ultimately, she resisted and was resolved to apply:

> I applied to the Sally Casanova program, and I had to coordinate with one of them [Graduate Studies Staff] to show me how to apply. You have to meet with them in order to be able to apply, so I did, but it was kind of a rude experience. To be honest, like I had told her [Graduate Studies Staff] that I was interested, she said like you have to meet at this time and I couldn't because I work full-time to like pay for my studies and pay for my food and other expenses. I told her I couldn't attend the workshop, but I was really interested and wanted to apply, and she said, "Okay, I can give you the information, but I don't know how you're going to do it. Because if you can't meet, this is a time commitment and I don't know how you will do when you're working full-time."

Ultimately, Maria resisted the institutional actors attempt to exclude her from this opportunity and was resolved that it was her choice to apply and that could not be taken away:

> And I was kind of like, okay, well it's my choice, not yours type of things, so I said okay sure I mean I got her signature. I ended up applying and ended up getting it, so it was really rewarding for me. So that was like a pretty rude interaction that I had at the Graduate Studies department.

Additionally, Maria reflected on how her department – while accessible in that courses are offered in the evening – still very much leaned on classist and dominant traditional notions of what makes a graduate student. She recalled how early on in her program she felt she had to prove herself, unlike some of her classmates, because she had to work and the department – through faculty – made it clear it expected its graduate students to at minimum only work part-time; otherwise students were not seen as serious. She shared:

> Oh, that's like another pro of my department, all the classes are in the evening. I thought let me get to work full time because my classes are in the evening; they all work to my advantage. So, at first, they[department] were like students should not be working like that's not a thing, like you, should not be working, it's really hard to prepare and build your CV. It made me feel like I needed to do more professional development, so I added that on top of my plate of full-time work. I don't know why I did that, but they said it looks good, so I was like sure.

She further expressed that when the faculty found out she worked full-time, she received a cold reception in class, especially because she arrived a few minutes late at times due to her commute and work schedule. She recalled:

> First, they were really like you shouldn't be doing that [working]. Sometimes I would rush to class, and I would make it like two minutes late or right on time, so they just kind of looked at me weird, but then I feel like, after a few weeks, they kind of got used to it. They noticed that I was actually paying attention in class, and I was taking notes, I was prepared, I had done my readings, I was ready to answer any questions, I was prepared for discussion. I was just prepared. Then after a while, they didn't ask me about it [work], and then at the end of the semester, they would grade my final papers and say, like, oh I can't believe you work full-time, you were amazing, your work ethic was amazing, I know you work, and you still did it.

Ryxi (M.A. 2021) faced similar challenges as Maria; however, his experiences were heightened as the institutional actors he faced were more vocal about disapproving of students working. They highlighted to him the financial cost of pursuing a degree. He stated:

> I work X number of hours. That was her biggest thing. At the end of the day, it was the numbers. X amount [cost] a year or whatever if I'm going to commit fully to a Ph.D.

> program. I get that's just the facts, but I don't know, I don't have assets, I don't have anything, I don't live with my parents, I'm on my own. She couldn't understand that. She would bring up stories like, when I was your age, you know I took off in my dad's car without asking had a nice road trip and trying to relate with the students. I cannot relate with that very privileged, extraordinarily privileged life.

As Ryxi's statement above shows, faculty, at times, discouraged students due to their own notions of what it takes to succeed in academia or a disconnect with the needs and conditions of working-class students. This, unfortunately, is not an isolated example, as Pablo and Maria highlight below. When recalling the first days of her graduate program, Maria discussed how she felt discouraged by the faculty's low expectations:

> It was not just discouraging like, you know, some comments, depending on how you feel that day. The Professor said, not all of you will make it, or like not a lot of you will be able to hang, or a lot of you will have to retake my course because it's challenging, and it's okay if you repeat that you just need extra practice. It was not to be discouraging, but well, I guess it was discouraging, right, so it was very discouraging, and then mid-semester students drop out, so that was very discouraging to see, like am I going to be next?

Pablo (M.A. 2021) expressed feeling deflated when a faculty member diminished his accomplishments by stating that he was simply working on a master's. Perhaps the faculty member intended to alleviate anxiety or put things in perspective, but for Pablo, it was a painful moment:

> Like I said, my cohort inspires me every day. Seeing my cohort members very determined to become professors and pursue that Ph.D. inspires me to make that dream a possibility, but to hear my professors say like it's just a master's. I never thought about it

that way. For me, like a master's degree, that's like the peak of the mountain, and hearing from professors, that is just a master's degree, like, for me, was like a slap in the face.

Rene (M.A. 2008/Ph.D. 2017) had a similarly discouraging moment as he navigated his ethnic studies program. For him, it felt even more egregious to face elitist attitudes and lowered student expectations in a Chicana/o Studies department known for bucking that status quo. Yet, this highlights how ingrained traditional notions of achievement are in academia. Rene reflects:

> There was another specific thing that happened that was particularly discouraging, that was a kind of elitism in a particular class. I think that was really discouraging because it's ethnic studies, so there's this sense that everybody is kind of down politically. You're there because you're trying to stay out of those other departments that can be elitist in their own ways, but then when you're in your own department, and those same kinds of things happen. You see institutional violence within that can be discouraging, right. That was part of it, but it was just the way that the faculty talked to us and addressed us, and that treatment was really framed within like this institutional mindset. It was condescending toward us. There was a kind of snobbery, and it was very strange.

Ed (M.A. 2010/Ph.D. 2017) also shared how hurtful it was to learn that a tenured faculty member in his department with a great deal of clout had negative thoughts and expectations for the graduate students. He relayed that through email exchanges, the faculty member described graduate students as uninterested and uncommitted to their work. Ed thought this faculty member did not consider the challenges he faced as a working, first-generation student:

> This was one of the hurtful things that came out, in particular, that they don't want to study, they don't want to write, and that's the reason why they don't finish this program. Some of us took it personally and wrote back, "you don't even know what I'm doing to be in this program. How dare you say that," like you know, and again it was highly

> emotional. It got personal. With that being said, we kind of knew at this point that our voice was not being received. Instead, they developed this writing class that everybody walked out of because it got so dehumanizing and targeted. It was ridiculous.

Ed continues to elaborate that his time as a student created excitement for academia, but it also ultimately began to cast a shadow over that excitement as well. He shares:

> I was so excited to even think about what it would mean to be a scholar, like wanting to kind of share my voice in the work—a lot of optimism. I guess what I know now is the spirit level was high and, unfortunately, through academia, the longer you're there, the more it really- you know a lot of educational scholars are playing with this concept called spirit murdering, yeah I think again, ultimately, the discouraging part was kind of coming into the field [ethnic studies] and just kind of recognizing that again some folks that might be in this building, the department, they're not guided by that [culturally relevant] pedagogy. The hardest thing was just hearing folks say that we are admitting these graduate students in our program, but the writing really isn't proficient, and their writing really needs development. Instead of saying our plan for the graduate school is proposing a graduate writing bridge program to coach them up, but nobody saw the graduate power.

Self-Advocacy and Resistance (Withdrawing Not an Option): As alluded to above, the participants encountered challenges though their aspirations to obtain their degrees did not diminish. This was in part because they found mechanisms to advocate for themselves and to resist detrimental environments. In doing so, the student built up resistance capital. Resistance capital "refers to those knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality" (Yosso, 2005, p. 80). While participants encountered situations that challenged their resolve or put them face to face with racial or class aggression, they found that those experiences catalyzed their resolve and fostered resistant strategies. The majority of

participants described finding their voice or space that allowed them to challenge problematic institutional behavior.

Rose (M.A. 2021) explained that while she encountered stressful situations in her program, she never felt like she would leave because she had learned to advocate for herself and solicit support from faculty. She maneuvered to gain access to resources and ultimately a doctoral program admission. She states:

> Even if I was stressed every day like, I could still do it. I learned how to advocate for myself more, and I think that was part of it, too, is that when I could learn how to advocate for myself, I could tell other people, here's how you're going to advocate for me and here's how I need you to support me.

Not only did Rose develop an internal self-advocacy mechanism, but she also found a way to externalize and challenge the deficiencies in her environment. On reflecting on how she envisioned herself at her institution, Rose commented that she did not always feel like she fit in but that there was a space for her nonetheless to be the critical voice in the room. She stated:

> I feel like there's a place for me, but sometimes I don't know if I fit in with others. I took a sociology class and, like, I think I brought a lot of like perspectives that were ethnic studies related, and I don't know if I felt like I belonged in that discipline, but I felt like there was a place for me to come in and critique the institution. For example, when I think of the sociology class, there were still people who made comments that I didn't think were appropriate, and I would speak up. I would say, like, "Oh, I actually think that perspective might not be relative to this conversation." So, I don't know if there's a place for me in this institution to blend in, but I think there's a place for me to definitely critique it and bring in my own perspectives.

Ed (M.A. 2010/Ph.D. 2017), similar to Rose, encountered challenging moments. While Rose took more individualistic stances, Ed leaned on a peer support network he helped establish. In describing a particularly turbulent time in his program, Ed notes that his peer network considered leaving the program together in solidarity. However, they ultimately decided that they would be better served by creating the change they wanted to see themselves. Consequently, they started to lean on each other for support and ultimately managed to push each other to complete the master's degree. Ed recalled his experience as follows:

> I think I did a little bit [consider leaving the program], but I had already come this far like I'm going to write this thesis; it's almost like I can't leave now. I've got too much vested, and that was only a little bit of a feeling. Many folks were talking about what if we all just stepped out and call a press conference and be like, the reason we're leaving, or the reason we're here is because of this [problematic institutional practices]. And, some of these folks that you all show mad respect to and honor had a moment where they were oppressive. But I'm glad in many ways that maybe we didn't do that. Some of us were inspired, like, hey, let's envision what it could be like. I think a lot of us pivoted, and we said, okay, well, we're going to show you all then, and we're going to finish. So what we did was indirectly developed our writing groups, and we just went at it, and everybody, little by little, started finishing. I think there was a small group with a purpose that got it, and I think it was just enough for us to be able to kind of find our voice in this thesis writing project and finish.

While the participants faced several demoralizing experiences, all of these students were able to utilize existing resources, or when necessary, create their own resources to help them succeed academically. It is noteworthy that the students do not only express dissatisfaction with their institutions or programs but that they also provide solutions from their perspectives. If

institutional actors interacted with these students and were open to hearing their experiences, solutions to barriers such as scheduling could be addressed.

Institutional Context: Challenges and Sources of Support

Education scholars often describe the “hidden curriculum” as the set of unspoken rules in a formal educational context that insiders/dominant groups consider to be shared and universal. Those with knowledge of those implicit rules are equipped to succeed because they know the rules. Those with little or no prior knowledge lack the experience to navigate these rules to their advantage, or at times may not realize they are deviating from the expected norm of conduct. According to Rachel Gable, in a recent interview with *Inside Higher Education,* every educational setting has its own hidden curriculum of implicit norms and rules that those in charge (faculty/administrators) and those with insider knowledge (students with similar educational backgrounds of the educational context) believe to be universal (how it’s done). At the same time, those with little prior exposure learn the “hidden curriculum” through a series of missteps, trial, and error, and encounters they may struggle to explain (Jaschik, 2021). The participant experiences allude to the impact of the “hidden curriculum,” and the subthemes detail how they navigated this barrier. The subthemes identified are hidden curriculum, sources of support, and the role of peers and faculty mentors.

Hidden Curriculum: As previously discussed, the "hidden curriculum" refers to unspoken rules understood by dominant/insider groups that disenfranchise students unfamiliar with dominant norms. The study participants alluded to the hidden curriculum on their campus and in their programs through their reflection on their successes and struggles; they highlighted moments when they were granted opportunities and when they were denied access or missed opportunities.

Many of the participants expressed feelings of "flying blind." The students indicated they had minimal knowledge of institutional resources/opportunities or how to truly locate them. Ryxi (M.A. 2021) expressed very candidly that as a first-generation student, he does not always know his academic needs:

> I never thought, oh, I need this, I need that. I always thought whatever I got, that's what I get. I'll make do with what I get. So, this idea of like are my needs being met; I wouldn't know how to answer that question. To this day, I don't know how to respond to like 'are my needs being met?'

Similarly, Dan (M.A. 2014/Ph.D. 2019) reflected on how he always felt that he had to figure things out independently. Additionally, he expressed that faculty were not always aware of his accomplishments since he worked on his own. His reflection highlights how underrepresented students find ways to advance in their institutions through their own navigation capital (Yosso, 2005). At the same time, it highlights a misunderstanding of the expectations of academia: to produce research and gain recognition as that is how more opportunities are garnered and especially relevant once attempting to enter the academic workforce. Dan reflected:

> You know I was the kind of person that every time I needed something, like funding or something, I always tried to figure it out on my own. I definitely encountered some professors that were surprised that I was doing things, you know, in the background. I was kind of like the quiet person that didn't really talk that often, but I would be doing all these other things in the background, I guess.

Maria (M.A. 2021) recounted how she ran across barriers when she attempted to apply for a graduate preparation program. Her "mistake" was mentioning that she worked full-time to the program coordinator, who promptly let her know she would not be successful if she could not commit fully to the program because of work. Luckily, that interaction did not discourage Maria

from applying, and she ended up being selected to participate in the program. Interestingly enough, after her selection into the graduate preparation program, the coordinator softened and kept her on the radar for other opportunities. This experience highlights traditional classist notions of what a student should be – for example, not working full time in order to be considered serious – and how students must navigate administrator perceptions of them to gain access to resources. In addition, it highlights how students that manage to make the right impression are then afforded more opportunities. In Maria's case, while she initially had difficulty, once she was validated by her selection into the Pre-Doctoral Program, she was able to tap into implicit social capital funds that made her a desirable participant for future opportunities. She reflects:

> I ended up applying and ended up getting it [Pre-Doctoral Program Admission]. It was really rewarding for me, but it was like a pretty rude interaction that I had at the graduate studies department. After I got it [Pre-Doctoral Program Admission], she actually reached out again and invited me to attend an event; it was for free. She was like, hey, you should come, and I was kind of like, oh, I thought at first you were rude, and now you're inviting me so sure. I was actually interested, so I went. But that was one of the interactions I had mixed feelings about it.

Maria's experience demonstrates how university actors impact student trajectories in both positive and detrimental ways. On a similar front, Rene (M.A. 2008/Ph.D. 2017) recounted how he and his cohort started a student association to support each other through the graduate experience. Still, he expressed how they struggled to navigate departmental politics.

> We started a graduate student association that operated while I was there. My cohort put that together, and that was a pretty cool organization. We did a lot of stuff. It was very supportive, but then there were also all these politics that came up in relation to different

> faculty, and we kind of got caught up in that sometimes, so that was also difficult. I think that we were in a lot of ways kind of naive to the nature of the political disagreements you know that people had and were naive to how that might affect us or impact our own efforts to depending on which side of things you found yourself on you know. It wasn't smart, right, when we think about institutional politics, and so I think in some ways that kind of messed us up a little bit, some of us more than others, you know in in the position that we've put ourselves in relation to the department.

Rene further explains that though the political turmoil he faced was difficult, it nonetheless taught him how to navigate those types of institutional realities. He states:

> One of the main things I've learned through all of my, you know, dealing with graduate programs is how to deal with institutional power and institutional politics and violence, how to navigate that, it's I think more important than the research that you do.

Rose (M.A. 2021) had similar uneasy experiences with faculty engagement, thought she nonetheless overcame her own feelings of anxiety and learned how to advocate for herself. She managed her feelings by overpreparing for all administrative and faculty encounters. Through these well-structured interactions, Rose eventually built the confidence to express her needs: She recounts:

> At first, I was very organized because I would come in with a folder, especially when I met with [Program Coordinator at] Graduate Studies. I was really nervous, so I found that I can remember why I am there if I write things down ahead of time. I get anxious when I meet with people, but I would go to the [departments] graduate coordinator's office every single Monday at 4 pm, and I was like, you're going to get used to me, and I'm going to get used to like having the ability to speak with you. Anyway, the graduate coordinator appreciated that. I think it was good that I was able to like get to the point, but also like

have a conversation with them when I knew that I was able to define what I was there for basically.

For the participants, the hidden curriculum required them to learn to decipher their needs (academic and professional), advocate for themselves, respond to hostile questions and environments, and engage with faculty.

Sources of Support: A number of factors contribute to the success of Latina/o students. For Latina/o graduate students, early access programs open pathways from college to graduate school (e.g., Summer Research Opportunity Program, Ronald E. McNair Scholars, etc.). In line with the research, a number of the participants (5 out of 9 – three Ph.D. level and two M.A. level participants) who expressed more familiarity and comfort with the master's experience and requirements with Ph.D. admission participated in either funded research or programs such as the Sally Casanova Pre-Doctoral program. The Sally Casanova program is a CSU systemwide fellowship designed to support the doctoral aspirations of California State University students, especially students from populations historically underrepresented in graduate programs. Nonetheless, few participants were familiar with support structures like the Graduate Studies Office. Out of the nine participants interviewed, four mentioned being in some contact with this office. Additionally, the majority of the students indicated their primary source of support and resources was the faculty they interacted with. They lamented that there were few established support structures or, as one participant put it, 'preemptive' supports.

Rose (M.A. 2021) highlights how her faculty mentors and instructors have provided varying types of support to prepare her for graduate school. She states:

> I think my professors prepared me for this; my chair has really been like, if you want to do a Ph.D. program, this is what you need to know. She's helped prepare me like right now we're working on my writing, and [giving me advice]. To go to a Ph.D., you have to

> learn how to write, so she's given me resources about writing. One of my instructors has a very tough critique on grammar, which has helped me a lot. I'm currently taking a class, and the instructor there connected me with one of his peers who works there [institution I was admitted to for my Ph.D.] to discuss housing on campus. So I think when I have been able to talk to professors in one-on-one settings and tell them directly like this is what I need support with, they've been able to help me a lot.

Similarly, Samotl (M.A 2021) indicated that faculty have nurtured his interest and commitment to community and research. While he reflects that the skills provided are not explicitly stated, nonetheless, the skills are there for students to develop through the coursework. He reflects:

> I think the strongest thing that they offer is the ability to really go out to the community and do research, which is almost the strongest thing the department could do. We went out and got to interview city council members who tried to contact indigenous elders. So, with that, it's kind of like you get to get those professional development skills. It's not said, like oh, we offer you professional development, skills, but the professors and the department care enough to teach you how to go out in the community and organize and get your research done at the same time.

For Victoria (M.A. 2009/Ph.D. 2018), it was the support of faculty in her department that led to opportunities to go to her first conference, which, coupled with hearing about their personal journeys through graduate school, gave her confidence that she would be able to succeed in her academic pursuits. She states:

> Key people in my development talked about also graduate school and PhDs, and I remember one professor, in particular, sharing her experiences of graduate school with us. She made it. She also made an effort to help us go to a conference out there, and that was one of my first experiences traveling to a conference outside of California. I think

once I was at Northridge like there was no doubt that I was going to find a way to finishing and succeed.

However, while faculty efforts to support participants were highly beneficial and appreciated, the participants also expressed that there seemed to be a lack of concerted effort to support students. For example, Ed (M.A. 2010/Ph.D. 2017) expressed that the manner in which support was offered was not consistent or widely available. He elaborates that he was only successful in gaining Ph.D. admission because he was fortunate enough to participate in the Sally Casanova program and because he found a committee that supported him. He reflects:

> I think some of my academic or development [needs] as a scholar per se, or for the graduate students were being addressed, but it happened just in little moments, it wasn't anything that was sustainable, or that I could even say that my other colleagues were able to experience. I was telling folks that I think I was blessed because I found a little space with my committee, and with Sally Casanova, I was able to then find a pathway.

Similarly, Rose, who expressed being able to access varied support from faculty, nonetheless, said that consistent support for master's students was lacking. She mentioned:

> I do feel, sometimes, like there's not a lot of preemptive support. It's more support like when you get stuck along the way, but there's not so far, like a ton of support to help guide you to get to where you want to be sometimes. But I know that I've been able to make connections with specific professors that I can reach out to for support, but from the department itself, sometimes I think it is a little lacking. I know there's a lot of talk about wanting us to graduate in two to three years, but if we're not being supported to graduate in two to three years, it's really hard. I'm the only one in my cohort who will graduate in two years, and it's been a struggle. We were told we would have a thesis workshop for this, and then, like, sometimes they fell through. Once it falls through, it is easy for

> students to fall through the cracks because I don't know how to do this, and I don't really know a lot of other people who have master's degrees. So, when I'm reaching out to ask, like how do I write this, sometimes my chair is the only one who's there to support me. Sometimes I think there's a disconnect of like they're telling us to write something, but I don't even know what it is.

Samotl, also expressed that while he received good motivational support by having previous graduate students come to speak to him and his cohort, he nonetheless could have used more substantive resources. He states:

> They had a lot of master's students' kind of come and bring us their stories, and tell us you know you got to do this and you got to do that. But I don't know for all of us, I don't know if it's sunk in or not, you know it was an attempt, there was a big attempt by our department to be like, "you got it," but I really feel there has to be programming around it like actual let's get this class going, let's look at a calendar, let's lock these days in [deadline]. They should also teach us how to function within the institution. They always tell us your professional students now; you should be doing all this stuff but, again as a first-generation student, nobody in my family has a master's that I know of, who's going to tell you all this stuff, where are we going to learn it all. They kind of show you the path, but it's always to the side. It's never, here, let me walk you down this full path and bring you to the end of that path, and then point you in the right direction. If I can put it in any other way, it's always like, okay, there's the path, let me know when you get to the other side, and we can chat, instead of really laying it down, like a curriculum and breaking it down week by week and I don't know how else to put it, but handing you the game. Really breaking it down like these are the next steps to take.

Samotl explains that he would have appreciated having resources or supports around completing the program and applying to Ph.D. programs. He indicated he would have liked to have seen C.V workshops, mock interviews, more focus on transitional supports to help students reach their academic goals. This sentiment was echoed by Rene (M.A. 2008/Ph.D. 2017) as well, though he would have also appreciated career development resources such as workshops on how to pursue academic careers and how to apply to work in the community college system with a master's degree. He stated:

> When I was there, I don't think there was much of a concerted focus; there wasn't a lot of support in terms of pathway guidance to doctoral programs or career pathway support. You just kind of had to figure it out on your own. In retrospect, I think that's the kind of thing that should be included. I think that would have been extremely helpful. To give us a sense of you know the real world and what will be involved after. The classes that you all take and you should have guest speakers who have gone through that and can explain how you do it.

Samotl further reflected that the few available opportunities are not offered widely. In order to tap into resources, he indicated that he had to apply and go through a competitive process. Additionally, he notes that once he was accepted into one program, he was made aware of other resources and was also able to access them. It appears that resources and opportunities are concentrated with the few students that manage to navigate to a privileged insider position. Samotl reflects:

> That's why I was able to create that critique [of the department] is because I have access to all those things [resources]. I can say that you know it's definitely competitive; this is another part of that. If you really want to be about this life, you have to really be hungry for those grades and really be putting yourself out there. You can't hide in the corner and

> expect your research and your dream to kind of create itself. It doesn't work like that; you have to apply for fellowships, you have to seek out monies, you have to have those relationships. I don't know how else to put it, but once you get on the graduate studies radar, then you know your research is also on their radar, so you're more likely to be funded.

While Samotl's experience highlights how the hidden curriculum works to both reward those with insider access and exclude those who are not familiar with the institutional process, it also alludes to the limited resources available to students. Pablo (M.A. 2021) alludes to institutional limitations in terms of resources and how this impacts the students and the faculty working hard to support them. He states:

> Professors are burnt out, and I'm sure that comes with the support [or lack of] the department is getting, right, on behalf of the university itself. That hierarchy trickles down; there are certain limitations on the resources that our department is getting on behalf of the university that puts pressure on our professors. So, the master's program and faculty members that are taking us on to be a part of our research committee or being our chairs do it out of compassion and the belief systems that they have, wanting to uplift and support us, but you could tell that they are tired, you could tell that they're overwhelmed. You could tell that they're limited in capacity. It's not because they don't want to support us; it's just that they're overwhelmed with work and the resources available to them as a department, so we're definitely impacted.

Providing student support with little institutional backing can become a challenge. While the participants interacted with faculty who did the best they could, the burnout of the faculty was apparent. If the institution is serious about supporting underrepresented graduate students, then looking at ways to create concrete, easily accessible academic and career resources would

be an impactful way to start. More recently, graduate institutions that are concerned about their student placements after graduation have begun to shift their activity offerings to focus on professional development, including teaching (pedagogical training, coursework), grant writing, publishing, career planning, management, communications, internships, and public speaking to support the development of professional identities. Providing support from initial enrollment through graduation has long been recognized as essential for increasing the retention and persistence of all students, but they also have a measurable impact on student preparedness for the academic and non-academic job market (Kamimura-Jimenez & Gonzalez, 2018).

Role of Peers and Faculty Mentors: In light of their experiences with inadequate and highly unequal support structures, the majority of the participants resorted to pursuing scholarly projects and support from fellow graduate students and/or faculty mentors. Peers and faculty served as agents of support for interviewees. It must also be noted that faculty played an important role in encouraging students to pursue graduate studies and attracting students to CSUN. Samotl (M.A. 2021), for example, decided to attend CSUN because a faculty member there was renowned in his area of scholarly interest. Pablo (M.A. 2021) attended because the faculty made him feel welcome when he participated in a campus tour. Others appreciated seeing a substantial number of Latina/o faculty on campus, and that was a deciding factor. Still, others had previously attended CSUN (as undergraduate students) and had familiar with faculty in their departments.

For Rose (M.A. 2021), it was because of her mentor's encouragement and academic support that she decided to pursue a master's. She reflects:

> I kept taking classes with one professor, and I thought she was really interesting. She told me," it might be a good idea for you to go into graduate school to get encouraged and see what you want to do." I know Humanities is not a field with a direct job pipeline to it, it

> doesn't look like you can do whatever you want, so I worked with her on research projects. I really liked what she was doing, so she wrote me a letter of recommendation for graduate school.

Similarly, Maria (M.A 2021) credits her mentor with encouraging her to pursue graduate coursework. She recounted:

> She was the one who encouraged me to go with the masters because she said, you know, just go ahead and check it out to see if that is something you want to do. We looked into the programs together, so she was really helpful in that, and then she told me just to try it out and see if it is for me, but she's like, I know it's going to be for you, but just double make sure, make sure, because it's so time-consuming.

Just as faculty members played an important role in guiding the participants to the master's degree, they also played a crucial role in helping them develop the skill and experience necessary to succeed academically. For example, Maria (M.A. 2021) worked with a faculty member to publish a scholarly article. Rose (M.A. 2021) received extensive academic training and support from her faculty mentor and thesis chair, with whom she met "on a weekly basis." Similarly, Samotl (M.A. 2021) met with his mentor and thesis chair frequently and felt he received constructive feedback on his writing.

The mentor relationship extended beyond the initial program enrollment and classroom setting as well. Several participants indicated that their faculty mentors stepped in and helped them navigate the doctoral admission process once they started receiving their admission offers. For example, Rose (M.A. 2021) indicated that her faculty mentors are helping her decipher financial award letters from Ph.D. programs and are providing advice on making her final decision. She recounts:

> I am currently hearing back from Ph.D. programs, so they've been pretty supportive and like helping me understand what a financial package looks like. How I can compare my financial packages and what schools would be a good fit for me, what I should be asking for, what I should be looking for, and what is really important at a school that maybe I don't have right now. So that was a lot of support to figure out.

Maria (M.A. 2021) similarly recounts how her mentor is a professor she only took one class with, and though she is not taking courses with her anymore, this professor still reaches out and keeps tabs on her. She additionally recounts how other faculty members she has established relationships with reached out in the Spring and inquired about her doctoral admissions since they knew Maria was applying:

> We still talk, even today. Even though I'm not taking any courses right now, the faculty actually send emails to check in with me. Other ones are like, did you hear back from Ph.D. programs? How's it going? So, they're very attentive, which is crazy because they have new students and I'm not in class anymore.

Ed (M.A. 2010/Ph.D. 2017) and Rene (M.A. 2008/Ph.D. 2017) both expressed how faculty were instrumental in their professional development as well. For Ed, a faculty mentor walked him over to the Office of Graduate Studies and introduced him to the graduate program coordinator in order to support him in applying for the Sally Casanova Program, which he eventually was admitted to. For Rene, the support and advice of a faculty mentor helped him determine he wanted to pursue teaching. He recounts:

> At one point, my mentor suggested that I consider teaching as a career. At first, I wasn't quite sure what that would mean exactly. But I got a part-time position as an instructional aide at a local community college in the English department. So that allowed me the opportunity to see what Community college was like and what it would be like to

> teach at that level, and so that's when I decided, and I really, I hadn't been too interested in teaching, you know K through 12. But that really helped me kind of solidify my choice.

One of the participants observed that most of those serving in the role of faculty mentors were female professors. Several other respondents agreed (7 of 9). Ed (M.A. 2010/Ph.D. 2017) noted that he saw the women of the department conducting the labor of mentoring. Victoria (M.A. 2009/Ph.D. 2018) confirmed the observation and stated:

> I think that that was also important that there was an added element, and I want you to know that all of my mentors were women. Right, and so that in and of itself speaks very much to the type of both gender expectations, nurturing right, that I sought out women for this nurturing element, but they were also the ones that offered. I think that there are all these layers around nurturing and care that go into a master's program that we don' usually talk about right, of caring for the entire person. So I think that, again, I landed in a space where that was important for these professors.

On another note, Ed (M.A. 2010/Ph.D. 2017) and Samotl (M.A. 2021) additionally identified fellow graduate students as a primary source of scholarly support. They indicated that they found out about resources and programs from their peers. Peers additionally played an essential role in encouraging each other to complete the program. As the participants have mentioned, when able to connect with faculty mentors, the experiences were invaluable. However, given the limited resources at the institution (including faculty time and availability), many participants also indicated that support from faculty mentors was not always available. Thus, the interviewees compensated for the deficiency in resources by seeking out strong peer networks and serving as informal mentors for each other. Victoria (M.A. 2009/Ph.D. 2018)

expresses the sentiment felt by the majority of the group when recounting why her cohort started their own student organization:

> When I came in, there were many of us that just wanted to feel a sense of community that was grounded in something like a graduate student group because we didn't really feel like there was anything else for us out there. I think that we all had community organizing backgrounds. As I said, I was part of the radio collective, so I think we already came with that mindset of 'this work needs to be part of the work happens at the level of the collective,' part of us being successful in the graduate program.

Faculty and peer networks play a key role in that they help graduate students integrate into the department, cultivate professional and social networks, articulate their research interests and acquire research skills, and aid in students' placement in graduate programs and the workforce upon program completion. As the participants indicate, the faculty advisor and the peer network have been central and influential pieces in the student experience.

Racial/Ethnic Impact in a Hispanic Serving Setting

The research indicates that when students feel represented in their institution, they perform better academically, and they are more likely to persist to graduation (Zambrana et al., 2017; Clark, 2011). In light of this, it can be inferred that Latina/o students that attend Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) are well-positioned to excel academically. However, as the literature shows, HSIs are still grappling with what it means to be Hispanic "serving" vs. Hispanic enrolling, especially since this designation was primarily conferred by geographic, demographic shifts and not institutional intent. In this study, the participants interviewed attend a large HSI. Yet, their accounts indicate that their institution's designation as Hispanic serving has not done away with ingrained racist notions or practices. The following subthemes were identified through the interviews regarding the impact of race/ethnicity at an HSI: appeal and challenges of

Hispanic serving institutions, racial/ethnic climate and microaggressions, racial/ethnic diversity, and its significance.

Appeal and Challenges of Hispanic Serving Institutions: In addition to race still being salient in a Hispanic Serving campus, the participants also identified various other ways the HSI institution impacted their experiences and trajectories. The majority of the participants, even those not undertaking a program in Chicana/o Studies, identified the existence of the Chicana/o Studies department as a draw to the institution; in addition, they perceived CSUN's HSI designation as indicating it was Latina/o student-centered. Samotl (M.A. 2021) recalls being drawn to CSUN by the history of Chicana/o Studies there and because the institution is more student-centered than an R1 setting. He had already experienced studying at an R1 institution, and he wanted a different experience. He stated:

> I decided to get into a master's program locally, and Northridge is historical. The 50 year [Chicana/o Studies Department] program was definitely a draw and reason. I definitely wanted to go to a teaching college versus an R1 school. After experiencing the R1 lifestyle, I didn't really know it at the time, but intuitively I knew that I didn't want to go through that [again] kind of manner of teaching [at R1s], where it's heavily on research and not so much on really delving into the students and their personal desires about their education. So that's kind of what drew me to a teaching college like Northridge [instead].

Similarly, Pablo (M.A. 2021) was drawn to his institution because of its perceived focus on students, in addition to its Chicana/o Studies Department. He related:

> That made me say, you know what, this program will probably meet me where I'm at, and it has, and then on top of that, it's the mecca of Chicana/o studies. It's the biggest Chicana/o studies department, so that's like a bonus, right.

Ryxi (M.A. 2021) and Dan (M.A. 2014/Ph.D. 2019) echoed similar sentiments. For Ryxi, the institution being the "mecca of Chicana/o Studies" led him to believe that the institution was committed to Latina/o students. Dan indicated that he found himself gravitating towards the Chicana/o Studies department regularly and ended up making that his "home" versus his actual department. These findings highlight how the institution's image can impact not only student enrollment but also academic trajectories and experiences. Students were drawn to CSUN because it houses the largest Chicana/o Studies department in the country; thus, students perceived the institution as friendly to Latina/os. However, as Rose (M.A. 2021) alluded to, perception is not always reality. She was initially drawn by the Chicana/o Studies department as well and its promise of a decolonial framework; however, as she prepares to depart the institution, she notes that she never felt like she entirely belonged and instead felt as though the institution was pushing her out at different stages. She states:

> I think it's hard to feel like you belong on the campus sometimes. Like I said, being an ethnic studies student, it's hard to feel like you belong on a campus that 'low-key' wants to push you out.

The experiences the participants shared accentuate one of the critiques that have been advanced about Hispanic Serving Institutions – that though they enroll large numbers of Latina/o students, their internal practices and environments are not necessarily geared towards Latina/o student interests. More importantly, the students' experiences highlight how institutions market themselves as Hispanic serving and signal support of Latina/o students, such as maintaining a Chicana/o Studies department, to serve the institution's interest of increasing their Latina/o population. Being Hispanic serving also signals a diverse environment, though the institution may still harbor racist ideals. Unfortunately, students do not become privy to the institution's true nature until long after they have enrolled and taken up their course of study.

Although the participants discussed the significance of Chicana/o Studies as a draw to CSUN, they were critical of the fact that the department seemed like the only place on campus where they could connect to Latina/os or have a "safe space." As a result, when participants were asked about how they saw themselves as graduate students and Latina/os represented in their institution, they shared stories of marginalization and isolation. As the literature indicates, racial/ethnic minority students experience distinct barriers in the educational process, including discrimination, prejudicial views about their academic merit, isolation, and racism.

Maria (M.A. 2021) expressed that she had difficulty navigating class discussions at the start of her graduate program, partly because she felt her white peers were not satisfied until she acknowledged and accepted their points, even when not appropriate. She recollected:

> It was very hard in the classrooms at first. I was like, I couldn't talk. There were some discussions going back and forth, and they just didn't know when to stop their discussion - like you already made your point, it's done, why are we still discussing. They would still go on and try to really justify, try to convince me that they're right.

She further elaborates that these interactions made her feel excluded but that she understood this resulted from her professors not being a person of color. She states:

> I know my faculty were not of color; they're not Latina/os, so sometimes they didn't really include some of the readings that they should have, like to kind of make me feel included, but it was more like it wasn't me battling with the faculty it was more battling with my peers. I think that's where I had the most bumping of heads. Some faculty just sat there and just kind of let it happen. It was very few classes because, again, you don't do that in your classical theory classes. I just kind of wish I saw more of Latina/o like readings on there, and I know they exist because I've done it on my own.

As a result of this environment, Maria concluded that she mostly ended up just sitting in her classes and not speaking much. Similarly, Ryxi (M.A. 2021) also indicated that he felt as though he was at the bottom of the "totem pole" in his department, though he noted that he had made his peace with it at this time. He sees himself as someone working to change the Eurocentric values of academia, and he will be able to do more once he is in a position to do so.

Ed (M.A. 2010/Ph.D. 2017) highlights similar experiences as he describes the struggles of navigating institutional politics and a department that is more undergraduate centered. For him, the politics took a toll and were very disenfranchising for someone that was first-generation attempting to envision themselves as a scholar. Additionally, the department's focus on undergraduates left him feeling as though there was no real space or representation of graduate student needs – a sentiment echoed by the majority of participants. However, he countered these experiences by building his own network outside the department and with his peers. He recollected:

> I mean, what can we do when you find a faculty [member] that's humanizing you that you actually start to say, hey maybe I could be a scholar, maybe I can do this, and they're giving you nothing but voice. Then you go into your home space, and then you feel like you're silenced, and you feel like you can't cut it. It definitely becomes just hurtful; it becomes like a mind game. It's kind of like what is going on? Like it should be the other way around, it should be that this department is embracing us. So yeah, we [graduate cohort] kind of adopted our own space. On Thursday nights, we would gather, and I would pull my car up and pop the trunk, and we would have music. We were trying to build a mentoring space and community with one another, so I think we found a home there a little bit. We didn't have an office space or anything to do this; that big room [in the department] was more like for undergrads and stuff.

The experiences recounted by the participants demonstrate how students of color encounter hostile environments that lead to marginalization and isolation in their graduate education, both culturally and academically. It also highlights how the students navigate these spaces and acquire the resiliency required to survive.

Racial/Ethnic Climate and Microaggressions: While most participants commented positively on their campus's racial/ethnic diversity, they still reported experiencing isolation and microaggressions. The majority of racial microaggressions occurred during interpersonal conversations with faculty or staff or in class discussions. The fact that most of the incidents happened in the classroom further speaks to an environment that has yet to fully grapple with institutionalized racism and still privileges the ideals of the White majority, allowing them to verbalize racist assumptions openly. Some participants downplayed their experiences with racial microaggressions and campus climate, asserting how they have become more vocal and resilient against racist encounters. Dan (M.A. 2014/Ph.D. 2019) explains that his initial reception into the department made him hesitant about speaking. Still, he eventually found sympathetic ears, and that helped him reconcile with his department:

> You know, I actually met professors who were sympathetic to what I was saying, so that kind of helped remedy that situation. Overall, I made new friends. Like I said, I was very shy at the beginning because of what had happened, but later learned that a lot of the people in my cohort were cool, so it was nice to reconcile with my department.

Similarly, Rose (M.A. 2021) indicated earlier that she did not see herself truly belonging on campus. However, she has found that she nonetheless has a place as a critical voice in the classroom and has grown comfortable speaking out after experiencing microaggressions throughout her graduate career. This finding is significant as it means that sometimes Latina/o

students may try to downplay racist incidents in order to "keep the peace" or attempt to belong, even if only in their own way.

However, not all of the participants indicated they found their own space of belonging. Rene (M.A. 2008/Ph.D. 2017) indicated that he never truly felt as though he belonged. He said that the entrenched racism in the institution was palpable to him. He indicated:

> CSUN has a long, long way to go regarding the histories of entrenched white supremacy and racism. It's everywhere, you feel it, at least I do, and so never, I don't know I would say I have never felt comfortable on the campus. It's something that you can see, perceive sometimes more explicitly in the things that people say, and it's to various degrees depending on where you are exactly, what classroom, what department, what field. So, sometimes it's more explicit, you know. Other times it's just kind of always there, just kind of low. I mean, that's like what it means to step into a framework of white supremacy; you're just always going to feel it, I'm always going to be aware of it. It's the way that it permeates every interaction, conversation, the way that you know you are automatically positioned within it, you know along these various vectors. That's what I mean that you are always in this state of being positioned within these institutional frameworks of white supremacy.

In a similar light, other participants disclosed similar experiences as they navigated a racialized campus climate. Interactions with faculty/staff and peers (other students) produced uneasy experiences for the participants that resulted in them feeling aggrieved. For example, Rose (M.A. 2021), who worked as a student assistant on campus, related how she felt she frequently had to address hostile questions about her field of study. This experience made her employment uncomfortable and contributed to her feelings of isolation and marginalization. She internalized

the comments as indicative of an overall campus climate that is hostile to ethnic studies. She stated:

> I worked on the college campus; it was okay. It wasn't the most comfortable environment being an ethnic studies person. There were some comments, just like how they viewed ethnic studies, and I felt like that was reflective of how the university views ethnic studies. It was basically that ethnic studies people complain, and what are we actually doing? It didn't make me feel like it was a safe space to be. I felt like they didn't think I was smart. I quit. I didn't want to always be in a space where I had to defend myself. Sometimes, it would be stuff that was even unrelated to ethnic studies, and they would like to find a way to bring ethnic studies into it, and I'm like that's, not even the topic at hand.

Similarly, Dan (M.A 2014/ Ph.D. 2019) recounts how he often encountered problematic faculty in his courses. He states:

> I don't know. I think I just had bad luck because other really good professors that people recommended; I never took them all, maybe I've taken one or two. But I always ended up taking classes somehow with like the very top professors that are typically considered problematic. So, it's happened a couple of times where conversations were happening in the classroom where students were making comments about immigrants, you know, and stuff like that. And you know, similar incidents happened in another class, someone was making comments about Latina/os in general, and I was just kind of angry that the professor didn't call it out.

Both Dan and Rose's experiences reinforce the notion that racial aggression is tolerated on campus. Students who encounter these types of aggressive experiences are bound to internalize them and have them impact their academic trajectories and their own self-perception.

Dan, for example, continued to elaborate that as a result of his problematic classroom encounters, his self-perception and confidence suffered. He recounted:

> I think definitely a lot of self-doubts. You know, I think we all deal with the imposter syndrome sometimes, but I think you know, for me, I was still very much conscious of the fact that even though I was in the master's program, I was still like one of the very few Chicanos in there. So, even though the master's program was here at CSUN [Hispanic Serving Institution], it was still very much majority white. Like almost every single time that I would have a class, I would be like the only person of color or one of two people of color. That was intimidating because it's like, whoa, I shouldn't have the pressure to "have to represent my ethnicity." At the same time, you're surrounded by a lot of these white men who are used to talking in the classroom or used to talking a lot in general, who dominate discussions and make you feel like you have nothing to contribute. So that was something that I had to overcome.

Dan further describes how he experienced many other microaggressions in the classroom; some were precipitated by the Eurocentric material assigned in the coursework. He states:

> We were reading a book once in a theory class, and it was this guy who was arguing that western civilization should be the standard. So, me and the only other student of color, an African American woman, you know we were both talking amongst each other about how we hated the book, but all the other white students in the class, you know which were like six of them, all-male, we're praising this book, and we just sat there quietly and just ended up walking out of the class halfway through because we just like were not having it.

Ryxi (M.A. 2021) also expressed how he has had to manage comments in the classroom from students and instructors that imply he is academically deficient. He states:

> It's been my experience, you know, like since high school, you know you carry that, so I always try to prove that wrong. You can always get the vibe, you don't really respect me, or you don't really think I'm capable.

In addition to being exposed to racial microaggressions, the participants have also experienced disparaging comments/interactions from institutional actors regarding their choice to pursue racial/ethnic-related research/programs. The interviewees revealed that an obstacle was the nature of the institution, which they perceived to be academically conservative in that it favored traditional Eurocentric curriculum and programs. The participants felt disappointed that their academic interests and programs were marginalized in an institution they had assumed would be open to the Latina/o student perspective because of its HSI designation. For example, Dan (M.A. 2014/Ph.D. 2019) explains he pursued his field of study because of his interest in the subject matter and because the department was located in a Hispanic Serving Institution. Thus, he thought it would be a good place to study. He acknowledged that the majority of the faculty was white, but by virtue of its setting, he thought this was a good place to bring in diversity. He states:

> But the reason that I entered the master's program was because I was frustrated that it was at a Hispanic Serving Institution quote-unquote right, but the department and the curriculum were still very much Eurocentric. I was annoyed that it was like this, really like this is your department? Most of your students are of Latinx, Chicanx descent, and your curriculum doesn't reflect that. I realized part of the problem by looking at the makeup of these traditional departments; they are still mostly white, mostly male, mostly straight. So, I figured, I think I want to be part of the solution to this. Even if I don't fit in, I want to try to become part of it to try to correct this problem. It definitely didn't feel good. I felt like I said in the beginning [isolating].

Similarly, Rose (M.A. 2021) expressed that she often found herself in hostile environments where she had to defend her program of study. She states:

> I feel like I have to sometimes defend the discipline. I think there's still a lot said that [Humanities] is not a discipline that people find jobs from or things like that. That kind of frames how people look at the discipline, and I don't always like having to go into a space and defend my right to study this, like nobody's defending studying European history. I've been to on-campus events where I have to define what it is for people. I was having a conversation with one of my peers earlier, and someone asked him if he had made up the words or if it was an actual thing. And he was saying no, it's real, and they're like, "oh, your discipline didn't just like come up with it?" Then I was like, doesn't every discipline just come up with things? Isn't that the point of academia?

While Rose and Dan have felt compelled to speak up and confront the racial/ethnic microaggressions and hostile environments, other students may be hesitant to speak up due to perceived repercussions or simply being shocked by the encounter. For Dan, speaking up came with consequences, he mentioned that because of his constant speaking up, he developed a particular "reputation" within his department that he had to work to reconcile. Samotl (M.A. 2021) also expressed that speaking out comes with risk – "it's a two-edged sword." He indicated that if a student is perceived as too radical, then opportunities are withheld, and it can even lead to students losing their spaces. He shared:

> Definitely outspoken ones, but that's a two-edged sword. If you're a little too outspoken, you're probably not going to get as many resources, but if you're outspoken just enough to where you're making positive change or positive contributions on campus, then I believe that the institution definitely recognizes you. But, I have seen at times where students try to organize around issues, and the response by the institution seemed very

> reactionary. They [students] were functioning within that space, issues came up, and all of a sudden, the space was closed and locked down, and that was that.

Rene (M.A. 2008/Ph.D. 2017) shares a similar sentiment around the consequences of being outspoken. He states:

> It was just the way that the faculty talked to us and addressed us. That treatment was really framed within this institutional mindset; it was condescending toward us, and that kind of caught us off guard. And then the whole thing got all really, very dramatic because we all got angry and we were all as an organization, we petitioned to file complaints and all this stuff, and then the faculty got angry. They did something weird where they just kind of shut down the class early, partway through the semester, and I think we all just got A's or something. The faculty just kind of said, "I don't want to deal with these people," and ended the class. The whole experience was really discouraging.

The participants highlight how Hispanic Serving Institutions still have a way to go to create the types of environments that are inclusive of the students they enroll. It is clear that when racist and problematic comments were not dealt with, or worse, proceeded with the instructor's approval; participants were left feeling conflicted about the risks or responsibilities of speaking up in a class that was sometimes majority white. As institutions attempt to draw more diverse student populations, they must evaluate their campus culture and identify ways to address institutionalized problematic behaviors and environments.

Racial/Ethnic Diversity and its Significance. Much of the research indicates the importance of representation in academic settings. The participants' accounts thus far allude to problematic environments made particularly egregious because of a lack of racial/ethnic diversity in influential visible positions such as the faculty. In order to cope, participants sought out the support of peers or faculty they identified with. Dan (M.A. 2014/Ph.D. 2019) discussed

how he felt isolated in his department, but he eventually found refuge in a mentorship relationship with a Latino faculty member. Dan felt secure enough to confide his frustrations with this mentor, and it helped him overcome the challenges he encountered. He shared:

> The professor was a faculty member at CSUN. I was able to relate to him because you know he also got his degree in my field, and I constantly told him about how I felt isolated, even though I was in a system that is considered a Hispanic Serving Institution. Our [Social Science] department was still very much Eurocentric, and I had some issues where I had to call out racial discrimination in the department.

Ryxi (M.A. 2021) also discovered that finding a faculty member he could relate to ethnically made all of the difference in his academic experience. After connecting with his Latina professor, he was inspired to persist through the semester and continued persisting through his undergraduate career and eventually through the master's program. Ryxi indicated he still keeps in touch weekly with this faculty mentor. He recounted:

> I thought that I would drop out or not really make it because I actually forgot to go to the first day of school. I missed my first class, which ended up being a good thing because the first class was with a professor who was a super-duper white guy, but I didn't see him. He wasn't my first "face" of the first class I ever took. I ended up taking the next class with a Latina professor. I'm indebted to her because I was late, but she was so welcoming, so nice. I tell her all the time; you know that you have all these people that kind of help you forward, and she was one of them [for me]. It really solidified it for me to at least make it through that semester. But honestly, I credit her for my staying. I still see her to this day.

The participants provided accounts of various levels of normalized isolation and marginalization. As a result of problematic ingrained racial ideals and institutional practices, the

students recounted feelings of apprehension, insecurity, and doubt. However, their stories also highlighted the importance of genuine ethnic/racial representation for students. Their accounts demonstrated how they identified with peers and faculty to build community, which contributed to their resilience. These accounts should serve to support the notion that diversity efforts need to move beyond simply increasing minority student numbers. Ensuring that diversity is integrated at all institutional levels, from the administration to the faculty, is crucial. In addition, institutions would be well served by inspecting institutional responses to microaggressions and addressing a campus culture that is hostile to diversity.

The overall findings of this study revealed themes centered on the reason's Latina/o students opted to attend a master's program, institutional failures and self-advocacy, institutional context around challenges and support structures, and the impact of race/ethnicity within a Hispanic Serving Institution. The student's experiences highlighted how circumstances like socioeconomic class and limited knowledge about institutional practices and expectations intersect with the "hidden curriculum" to create challenges and barriers that limit student opportunities. Simultaneously, the student experiences indicate that the institution often fails to recognize working-class/minority student struggles and, in many instances, upholds the status quo. By viewing the institutional responses through a Domains of Power framework (Hill-Collins, 2013), the participant experiences reveal how power structures are not actively working to serve Latina/o student populations. However, the interviewees found avenues to success, highlighting how Latina/os have alternative funds of capital (Yosso, 2005) that foster resilience and serve as a vehicle to achieve their aspirations.

Chapter 5 – Conclusion

"It is not inclusion if you are inviting people into a space you are unwilling to change." - Muna Abdi

The epigraph by Abdi captures the central theme of this thesis – admission at any level is not inclusion if the needs of Latina/o and minoritized students are not being recognized and met. Using qualitative data gathered from in-depth interviews, this study critically examined the experiences of Latina/o graduate students at a public broad access Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI). To address the potential of terminal master's degrees as pathways to the doctorate for Latina/o students and fill a gap in the literature, this study moved beyond deficit student perspectives by exploring the effect of race, cultural, structural, and institutional practices on Latina/o student experiences. Given our nation's shifting demographics and educational disparities among minoritized students, there is a need for research on Latina/o doctoral pathways. The findings of this study contribute to an understanding of the viability of terminal master's programs as a pathway to the doctorate.

Based on the findings, this study discusses implications and proposes research and program recommendations that may enhance the support structures for Latina/o master's students in order to increase diversity at the doctoral level. These findings are based on in-depth interviews with nine Latina/o students who completed a master's program, five of whom plan to pursue a doctorate in the near future, and four who have completed a doctorate in the last five years. Through an asset-based approach to understanding the participants' experiences, four broad themes were identified. The themes center on strategies (or lack thereof) for selecting graduate programs, institutional failures and self-advocacy, policies/practices that either exacerbate or mitigate existing inequalities, and the impact of race/ethnicity within a Hispanic Serving Institution.

The findings show that some of the participants feel positive about their master's program; that is, they thought they were receiving adequate academic training, constructive feedback and guidance from faculty mentors and thesis advisors, positive engagement with peers, and access to some professional development opportunities (e.g., research funding and presentation/publication opportunities). The majority of participants, however, were critical of their master's educational experiences. The interviewees expressed dissatisfaction with their academic and professional development centered on inadequate advisement, poor preparation for research and scholarly writing, little preparation for teaching, applying to doctoral programs, and professional positions. They also commented on hostile ethnic/racial/elitist environments and demoralizing classroom interactions.

Participants indicated that peer support played an essential role in the completion of their program. The majority of the participants mentioned that when they were able to connect with faculty mentors, the experience was invaluable. However, given the limited resources at the institution (including faculty time and availability), many participants indicated that support from faculty mentors was not always available. Thus, the interviewees compensated for the deficiency in resources (faculty time and mentorship) by seeking out strong peer networks and serving as informal mentors for each other. The participant responses are very much in line with the existing literature that highlights how Latina/o students navigate and contest systemic inequities by actively engaging with supportive peers (Cuellar, 2014). Cuellar found that students at HSIs that tutor each other and discuss course content are more likely to have higher levels of academic self-concept. Additional research has found that when students are active members of student groups, they feel more engaged and connected to the campus (Fosnacht & Nailos, 2016).

Fosnacht and Nailos (2016) emphasize that institutions should support peer groups. They advance that institutions have a primary role in creating the environment and opportunities

necessary to permit students to participate in educationally beneficial activities both in and outside of the classroom. They elaborate that this requires the institution to support a diverse student body, faculty, and staff that creates the potential for all students to find a sub-community they can identify with and receive support from. Furthermore, Yosso, Smith, Ceja, and Solórzano (2009) also found that interactions with co-ethnic peers in academic and social counter spaces are likely to enhance academic resilience. Lastly, and similarly, in a study of Chicano/Latina/o doctoral students' perceptions of and experiences with the scholarly socialization process Ramirez (2017) found that when students were confronted with inadequate socialization practices, they resorted to pursuing scholarly projects with fellow graduate students. Supportive peers served as key socializing agents and suppliers of key cultural capital needed to succeed in doctoral programs (funding, publication, and conference resources).

Overall, the findings are consistent with the literature on graduate student experiences, which reveals systemic racism and classism in graduate programs (Ramirez, 2014; Solorzano, 1998; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001) and the critique of Hispanic serving designation being tied to enrollment numbers alone (Garcia,2019; Mendez, 2015; Vargas & Villa-Palomino, 2019). The participants also revealed how the 'hidden curriculum' creates barriers well into a graduate program. In addition, viewing the student accounts through the Domains of Power framework (Hill-Collins, 2013) highlights how systems of power, such as racism and elitism, affect student experiences. For example, the participants encountered low faculty expectations, often informed by racist and classist prejudice toward working-class students of color, lack of access to professional and academic development opportunities, lack of Latina/o faculty, and/or unmitigated microaggressions in the classroom and campus. The interviewed were highly perceptive – and critical – of how social/racial/classist norms functioned in their master's education. Lastly, the findings revealed that Latina/o students navigate and challenge systemic

inequities in their educational process by actively forging community and networks with supportive peers and faculty mentors. In light of insufficient access to faculty, peers served as key institutional agents to demystify processes such as presenting at conferences, applying to funding, and preparing thesis and presentation materials, a finding consistent with existing literature (Ramirez, 2017). Supportive faculty mentors also served as critical institutional agents for interviewees.

Limitations

No matter how carefully constructed, all research faces limitations. This study asked four Ph.D. holders and five current terminal master's students to recall and reflect on past events-their overall terminal master's experience. Asking students to recall and reflect on past events can be problematic as individuals may not fully remember or confuse the details of their experience. However, the reflective nature of this study also adds value as it provides the students time to assess their experiences. An additional limitation in the use of interviews is that the sense of comfort and trust the participants feel throughout the interview can affect the extent to which participants reveal details about their experiences. I attempted to combat this limitation by building rapport with my participants; however, since this study was undertaken during a worldwide COVID-19 pandemic, interviews could not proceed in person. Interviews were conducted via a virtual meeting space which further limited my ability to connect with participants as meeting virtually can be impacted by outside factors like noise, technological limitations, and feelings of virtual fatigue (Zoom fatigue). Furthermore, while an emphasis was placed on the impact of a Hispanic serving setting, expanding to include the experiences of Latina/o students at a non-Hispanic serving institution may better allow for a comparative analysis of experiences. Lastly, an additional limitation to this study is the small sample size of

nine participants, all taken from the same institution. Though qualitative studies are not usually generalizable, the limited sample size and institutional setting further limit this possibility.

Implications

The purpose of this study was to explore the potential of terminal master's degrees as pathways to the doctorate for Latina/o students while examining the effect of race, cultural, structural, and institutional practices on Latina/o student experiences as they traversed the master's programs at a Hispanic Serving Institution. The study adds to the scant literature on Latina/o master's students and identifies the struggles encountered by these students. The demographic data and this study's findings suggest that if Latina/o students are pursuing terminal master's degrees en route to the doctorate, initiatives interested in increasing the number of Latina/o doctoral recipients should be compelled to reevaluate their current emphasis on recruiting from baccalaureate programs (Contreras & Gandara, 2011) and reconsider instead partnering or recruiting from broad access master's granting institutions. Additionally, institutions should reassess the value placed on the terminal master's education in terms of time and resources allocated to terminal master's students. These findings can be used to pinpoint current deficits in the master's to doctoral pathway and improve the path for Latina/o students seeking doctoral education.

The results of this study have important implications for institutional policy and practices. First, for doctoral degree-granting institutions seeking to increase the diversity of their graduate student body, it would be advisable to expand recruitment practices to include public broad access Hispanic Serving Institutions. Graduate admissions representatives could focus outreach and recruitment efforts at institutions that offer academic terminal master's degrees and serve large minority student populations. While a master's-doctoral pathway agreement would yield the most robust results in terms of increasing diversity in doctoral programs, a practical

first step in that direction would be for doctoral degree-granting institutions to reassess their course credit transfer policies from master's programs. Graduate students that earn a master's degree en route to a Ph.D. see longer times to graduation, with the gap varying by field; Master's degree students take around two years longer in graduate school than students that enter a doctoral program directly (Lund, Jacklin, & Ciardi, 2019). Notably, schools where the highest degree offered is a master's degree tend to serve lower-income student populations, and students more likely to be the first in their families to attend college. Ph.D. programs should be encouraged to be more accepting of transferred course credits from master's programs. Thus, accepting some coursework completed at the master's level may shorten the total time in a doctoral program, reducing not only the tuition costs but the perceived opportunity cost that comes with spending additional years in graduate school.

In order to ensure coursework is compatible, doctoral-granting institutions could partner with terminal master's degree-granting institutions to ensure that the master's degrees programs are providing students with comparable preparation to the first years of a doctoral program. In addition, doctoral-granting institutions could further assist by developing general master's degree programs that focus on developing the required skill set to successfully transition to a compatible -if not the same field – doctoral program that will save interdisciplinary scholars time and financial resources. Lastly, doctoral-granting institutions could also support programs with limited resources – much like the Bridge and Upward Bound programs provided to high schools at the undergraduate level. Assisting in preparing pools of qualified master's students will signal a genuine commitment to equity and diversity and ensure that doctoral ranks and the professoriate represent changing demographics. In the case of Hispanic Serving Institutions, it would also signal a genuine commitment to serving this student population.

Institutional Recommendations

This study has contributed to understanding Latina/o graduate student experiences as they navigate a master's to doctoral pathway. Based on the findings, the recommendations are as follows:

1. Restructure and Systematically Integrate Support: From an institutional standpoint, findings from this study highlight the need for restructuring master's programs to systematically integrate training in research and teaching, as well as provide equitable access to faculty mentorship, professional, and academic development opportunities for all students. The institution should work with and support departments to move beyond offering stand-alone support/developmental programs/resources and instead integrate/standardize these into the core structures of the master's curriculum and training. While each department has its own academic structure/requirements, there should be a baseline established in terms of the academic training and support offered to students.

2. Provide Comprehensive Advisement for Students: While programs and resources are often found at the fringes, this study revealed the need to develop a more comprehensive and centralized model for advising/resourcing students. Information regarding advisement, funding resources, workshops, conferences, and TA opportunities should be easily accessible to graduate students.

3. Consider Working Students in Scheduling Decisions: The institution, especially graduate departments, should assess their programming schedule and program delivery in order to create more inclusive and accessible resources. The majority of the participants worked full-time and cited institutional scheduling policies that limited programming to

the hours between 8 am-5 pm as a challenging barrier to accessing courses, resources, and developmental opportunities.

4. Utilize Virtual Platforms for Instruction, Programming, & Services: Many of the participants indicated that the move to virtual instruction due to the Covid-19 pandemic, while not academically ideal, was beneficial to their ability to engage with campus resources over the course of the academic year as the programming was now offered virtually instead of in person. Many of the interviewees expressed hope that programming would continue to be provided in more diverse mediums moving forward.

5. Diversify the Faculty: the participants expressed an appreciation of diverse faculty and a desire to see more Latina/o faculty in their programs. The institution would be well served by promoting intentional diversity hiring initiatives and highlighting programming focused on diversity and open dialogue around these subjects. These enhancements could help alleviate the deficient practices highlighted by the participants and help expand the pathway to the doctorate for Latina/os.

6. Facilitate and Support Graduate Student Groups: The majority of the participant indicated that peer groups were crucial to their success. However, they expressed a lack of "space" for graduate students in their departments and campus. The institution should support general graduate student groups and spaces across campus. Additionally, departments should be encouraged and financially supported to facilitate graduate student groups and spaces. A practical first step for the departments would be to create graduate meeting spaces, and computer labs accessible outside of the 8 am-5 pm window. In addition, tenure track faculty could be allotted university service credits for sponsoring and advising graduate student groups.

Future Research Recommendations

Additional areas of research are encouraged based on the findings presented. First, it is recommended that other Hispanic serving institutions are identified along with non-Hispanic serving institutions, and focus groups or qualitative interviews be conducted to examine the experiences of Latina/o master's students. This would allow for a comparative analysis of student experiences, their perceptions of the master's as preparation for a doctoral program, and more nuanced and informed recommendations. Additionally, examining the motivation for pursuing graduate studies, points of entry, and the academic experiences of Latina/o doctoral students who completed terminal master's degrees before partaking in doctoral education may enrich this study's findings. Conducting a more comprehensive study that examines their experiences through their undergraduate, master's, and doctoral journey would additionally be beneficial to determining why students were led to the master's- doctoral pathway and in what ways the master's – doctoral pathway impacted their doctoral experiences and professional trajectories.

All of the doctoral degree holders in this study cited increased confidence due to having first attained their master's degree and having completed a master's thesis. However, beyond increased confidence, did completing a master's program lead to better positioning in the academic job market and result in tenured track positions? The road to a doctorate can take more than one pathway, yet, in the United States, the most common route – and most studied- is the traditional undergraduate to doctorate route, generally with the option to get a master's in the process. Only the traditional path is well-defined, and difficulties faced during non-traditional paths are often unaddressed (Lund, Jacklin, & Ciardi, 2019). Yet another area of study would be to examine the distinction between campus climate, racial climate, and graduate/undergraduate climate. While I inquired about students' perceptions of the campus climate in relation to their

feelings of belonging and space, I did not specifically ask what their perceptions of the campus climate were or include the modifier 'racial' when referring to campus climate. Such a focus on campus climate, as it relates to issues of race specifically, may yield more nuanced results, especially when examining the climate within a Hispanic serving context. Lastly, these findings could be used to pursue a grant that can support a cohort of master's students pursuing doctoral admission. The students' progress and trajectories can be tracked and examined to determine effective support/resource structures to propel students to doctoral education.

Closing Thoughts

It is my hope that higher education institutions, especially Hispanic Serving Institutions, will take seriously the challenges faced by Latina/o master's students and address issues of isolation, microaggressions, and lack of adequate support structures. Hispanic Serving Institutions can begin by developing measures to address racial/ethnic/elitist challenges faced by Latina/o students and encourage faculty and staff to address problematic behavior. Institutions can also develop environments for Latina/o graduate students that encourage meaningful connections with peers and faculty and enhance their sense of community and belonging. Additionally, departments can integrate academic and professional development opportunities into their program curricula and facilitate interaction between faculty and master's students in order to assist in the development of mentorship relationships. Lastly, a campus effort to disseminate information to master's students concerning funding and resources and scheduling programming at accessible hours for working students would help address some of the participant's concerns. These institutional changes can help promote the master's to doctoral pathway and potentially increase the number of Latina/o students who pursue a doctoral degree.

As the participant experiences have detailed, organizational resistance may occur; however, administrators, faculty, and staff must commit to developing and supporting Latina/o

focused programs and policies – especially at Hispanic Serving Institutions – to improve student experiences and support the masters to doctoral pathway. The information produced from this study provides insight into the factors that both positively and negatively impact master's student experiences, which should help the institutional actors (administrators, faculty, and staff) understand how to better resource and support a master's to doctorate pathway and develop effective student support services and spaces. In addition, it is important to acknowledge that while the interviewees' experiences aligned themselves with much of the literature detailing graduate student challenges and barriers, the students also exemplified strength, resilience, and courage. The students were determined to succeed and eventually found the means to overcome challenging institutional norms and racist ideals. Most inspiring was the participants' willingness to pay it forward and serve as mentors to fellow cohort members.

While the rhetoric advanced by many higher education institutions claims to increase access to education for underrepresented students and enhance diversity in all of its forms, the reality is that institutions are slow to adjust to changing demographics and reluctant to shift away from normative notions and measures of achievement. At most campuses serving Latina/o student populations, the main driver of diversity has been changing demographics over the last several decades (Garcia, 2019). Though the findings of this study are based on a small sample, they are consistent with much of the literature on Latina/o graduate student experiences and congruent with the critique of Hispanic Serving Institutions. Overall, the findings from this study suggest that some Latina/o master's students are, whether deliberately or inadvertently, being haphazardly prepared for and perhaps diverted away from doctoral education. There is a need for additional research on Latina/o graduate student pathways, especially a focus on master's to doctoral pathways.

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Appendix A

Questions for the Study

Eligibility Questionnaire

1. First and Last Name: _____
2. Contact email: _____
3. Indicate your ethnic identification: _____
4. What master's degree program are you currently enrolled in? _____
5. What College does your Master's degree fall under? _____
6. What is the anticipated completion date of your master's degree program? If you have already completed your program, what is your completion date? _____
7. Are you planning on pursuing a doctorate degree? _____
    a. If so, in what field will you pursue the doctoral degree? _____
    b. List your 1st, 2nd, and 3rd choice institution for doctoral studies? _____

If you meet all of the required participation criteria, do you wish to participate in this study and consent to be contacted to schedule an interview time? _____

Demographic Questionnaire

1. What is your age, gender, and ethnicity? _____
2. Where were you born and raised? _____
3. Where did you complete your undergraduate degree? _____
4. Did you receive a Pell grant as an undergraduate? _____
5. Have you received Federal or State Financial Aid? (ex. Aid from FAFSA or California Dream Act Application): _____
6. What master's degree program are you currently enrolled in? _____
7. What College does your Master's degree fall under? _____
8. When did you enroll in your Master's program? _____

9. What is the anticipated completion date of your master's degree program? If you have already completed your program, what is your completion date? _____

10. As a student, how many hours per week did you work? _____

11. What is the highest level of education your parents completed? (ex. Elementary/ Middle/ High School, Some Community College, AA degree, Some College, Undergraduate Degree, Some Graduate School, Master's Degree, Ph.D):_____

12. What are your parents' occupations? _____

13. Have you ever experienced economic hardships (e.g. home instability, food shortages)? _____

14. Did your family ever receive government aid (e.g., food stamps, cash assistance)? _____

15. When do you aspire to enroll in a doctoral program? (ex. 2021-2022) _____

16. What are your career objectives? _____

In-Person Interview Questions: Master's Students

Choice of Institution:

1. When/how did you decide you would pursue a master's degree?
    a. Did you participate in any particular programs in order to prepare for graduate school?

2. How did you decide on your program/university?
    a. What in particular was appealing to you?

3. Tell me a story about any encouragement you received to pursue a master's program.

Institutional Support: Graduate students benefit from support—from various source peer support, faculty support and support from staff in financial aid or graduate studies

4. Describe your relationship with department staff.
    a. What kind of support have they provided if any?

5. What support has faculty in your department provided if any?

6. Are your academic needs being met? Explain?

7. What kind of interactions have you had with other university officials (administrators and faculty). Has this changed over time?

Satisfaction with Institution:

8. How would you describe your master's experience at CSUN so far?
    a. What has been the most rewarding part?
    b. What has been the most challenging?
    c. What has been the most discouraging? Did you seek out ways to address the problem? Were you successful?

9. Tell me about a peak experience in your master's program.
    a. What was it about your situation, program, or yourself that enabled this to occur?

10. Is there a space for graduate students on campus physically and metaphorically?

11. Do you think the needs of graduate students are being met in your department or across campus?

12. Have you ever thought of leaving your master's program? If so, why?
    a. What made you decide to continue in the program?

13. When you first were accepted to your master's program, did you feel like you belonged on your campus? Did this change over time?
    a. Did you feel you belonged in your program/department?

Doctoral Aspirations:

14. When/how did you decide to pursue a doctoral program?

13. Do you think your master's program prepared you for doctoral studies? How so?
    a. Have you received support from your department or the university to help you in your pursuit? How so?

14. Tell me a story about any encouragement you received to pursue a doctoral degree.

Academic Confidence/Self-Perception:

15. What do you perceive your greatest personal strengths are?

16. What do you perceive your greatest academic strengths are?

17. How would you describe your confidence level as you entered your master's program? How would you describe your current academic confidence?

18. Have you made any personal sacrifices in order to pursue a master's degree? If so, please tell me about these.

Academic Beliefs:

19. What does it mean to be academically successful? Where did you learn that? How do you see yourself as academically successful?
    a. Do you think your campus shares your beliefs on academic success
    b. What do you think the campus considers academic success

c. What do you think the campus considers a successful Grad student
d. What kind of grad student do you think is recognized and or rewarded on campus
e. What do you think those campus values are

20. What does earning a doctoral degree mean to you?

Closing Thoughts/Recommendations:

21. What resources have been most helpful as you complete the MA?
    a. What resources should be made available?

22. Suppose I was a student in your Master's program aspiring to pursue a doctoral degree. What would you advise me in order to make myself a competitive candidate and also help me find resources to pursue that aspiration?

23. Is there anything else you would like to share or add?

In-Person Interview Questions: Doctoral Degree Holders

Choice of Institution:

1. When/how did you decide you would pursue a master's degree?
a. Did you participate in any particular programs in order to prepare for graduate school?

2. What attracted you to CSUN? How did you decide on your program/university?
a. What in particular was appealing to you?

3. Tell me a story about any encouragement you received to pursue a master's program.

Institutional Support During Master's Program:

4. Describe your relationships with department staff.
a. What kind of support have they provided if any?

5. What support has faculty in your department provided if any?

6. In retrospect, were your academic needs met? Explain?

7. What kind of interactions did you have with other university officials (administrators and faculty). Did this change over time?

Satisfaction with Master's Program:

8. How would you describe your master's experience?
a. What was the most rewarding part?
b. What was the most challenging?

c. What was the most discouraging part/experience? Did you seek out ways to address the problem? Were you successful?

9. Did you ever think of leaving your master's program? If so, why?
    a. What made you decide to continue in the program?

10. Tell me about a peak experience in your master's program.
    a. What was it about your situation, program, or yourself that enabled this to occur?

11. When you first were accepted to your master's program, did you feel like you belonged/fit in on your campus and program department? Did this change over time?

Doctoral Aspirations:

12. When/how did you decide to pursue a doctoral degree?

13. Tell me a story about any encouragement you received to pursue a doctoral degree.

14. How did your master's program prepare you for a doctoral program?
    a. What support did you receive from your department or the university to help you in your pursuit?

Doctoral Program Experience:

15. Was any of your Master's degree coursework accepted by your doctoral program?

16. How would you describe your doctoral experience?
    a. What was the most rewarding part?
    b. What was the most challenging?

17. Did you ever think of leaving your doctoral program? If so, why?
    a. What made you decide to continue in the program?

18. Describe your relationship with department staff.
    a. What kind of support have they provided if any?

19. What support has faculty in your department provided if any?

20. In retrospect, would you say your academic needs met? How so?

21. What kind of interactions did you have with other university officials (administrators and faculty). Did this change over time?

22. When you first were accepted to your Doctoral program, did you feel like you belonged/fit-in on your campus and program department? Did this change over time?

23. Did you notice any differences between yourself and students that started their program right after their undergraduate program?

24. With everything that you know now, would you follow the same academic path again? First obtain a terminal master's degree then pursue a doctoral degree. Why or why not?

Academic Confidence/Self-Perception:

25. What do you perceive your greatest personal strengths are?

26. What do you perceive your greatest academic strengths are?

27. How would you describe your confidence level as you entered/exited your master's program?

a. What about when you entered/exited your doctoral program?

28. Did you make any personal sacrifices in order to pursue a master's degree? A doctoral degree? If so, please tell me about these.

Academic Beliefs:

29. What does it mean to be academically successful? Where did you learn that? How does that apply to you?

a. Do you think your campus shares your beliefs on academic success?
b. What do you think the campus considers academic success?
c. What do you think the campus considers a successful Grad student?
d. What kind of grad student do you think is recognized and or rewarded on campus
e. What do you think those campus values are?

30. What does earning a doctoral degree mean to you?

Closing Thoughts/Recommendations:

31. In retrospect, is there anything you wished you had known about the master-doctoral path before you embarked on it? Something you did not know then but know now.

32. In your opinion, what types of resources should be available to assist master's students through their programs, either by their department and/or the campus.

33. Suppose I were a Master's student aspiring to pursue a doctoral degree. What would you advise me in order to make myself a competitive candidate and help me find resources to pursue that aspiration?

34. What words of advice do you have for navigating through a doctoral program?

35. Is there anything else you would like to share or add?

Appendix B

Consent Form

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

Expanding the Pathway to the Ph.D: Exploring the role of terminal master's degrees on Latina/o doctoral student production

You are being asked to participate in a research study. Expanding the Pathway to the Ph.D.: Exploring the role of terminal master's degrees on Latina/o doctoral student production, a study conducted by Alejandra Fregozo as part of the requirements for the M.A. degree in Chicana/o Studies. Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Please read the information below and ask questions about anything you do not understand before deciding to participate. A researcher listed below will be available to answer your questions.

RESEARCH TEAM

Researcher:
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Dr. Mary Pardo
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PURPOSE OF STUDY

The purpose of this research study is to unpack the potential of terminal master's degrees as pathways to the doctorate for Latina/o students as well as fill a gap in the literature. The aim of this study focuses on exploring how participants aspirations to pursue masters, and doctoral degrees in the humanities and social sciences developed, to what extent their attendance at a broad access Hispanic Serving Institution assisted in developing and reaching their ambitions, what barriers or challenges they experienced, and how they persist despite these barriers or challenges.

SUBJECTS

Inclusion Requirements

You are eligible to participate in this study if you meet the criterion in one of the two following sets. Criterion set (1) are as follows: (a) identify as Latina/o (b) currently enrolled in a College of Social Science or College of Humanities terminal Master's degree at a broad access Hispanic Serving Institution (CSUN) in the last year of master's study or have completed the terminal master's degree within the last two academic years (c) aspiring doctoral candidate. Criterion set (2) are as follows: (a) identify as Latina/o (b) have completed a terminal Social Science or Humanities master's degree at a broad access Hispanic Serving Institution (CSUN) (c) have preferably completed a doctorate degree within the last five academic years.

Time Commitment

This study will involve approximately 60-90 minutes of your time over the course of one day.

PROCEDURES

You will be scheduled for a one-to-one interview that will take approximately 60-90 minutes. The interview will take place over the Zoom meeting platform as it provides a secure and password protected meeting space. The primary researcher will conduct the interview in a private room. You are highly encouraged to participate in this study in a secure, private location.

During the interview, you will be asked to answer questions that:

- Inquire about your academic background.
- Inquire about the criteria you used in selecting a master's and Ph.D. program.
- Inquire about the challenges and barriers you overcame through these processes.

There is no time limit per question asked. With your consent, the interview will be audiotaped/video recorded and transcribed.

RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

The possible risks and discomforts associated with the procedures described in this study include mild emotional discomfort. Participants will be able to pause the interview at any time to collect themselves and will not be pressed to answer further if discomfort persists. This study involves no more than minimal risk. There are no known harms or discomforts associated with this study beyond those encountered in everyday life.

BENEFITS

Subject Benefits

You may not directly benefit from participation in this study.

Benefits to Others or Society

Findings from this research will provide insight into what experiences, values, and strengths might result in students deciding to pursue master's degrees at broad access Hispanic serving institutions, enabling these types of institutions to serve this student population better and propel them to doctoral degrees. This qualitative study's research results contribute to the formation of more inclusive and diverse environments for Latina/o students and support efforts to diversify the professoriate.

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

COMPENSATION, COSTS AND REIMBURSEMENT
Compensation for Participation
You will not be paid for your participation in this research study.

WITHDRAWAL OR TERMINATION FROM THE STUDY AND CONSEQUENCES
You are free to withdraw from this study at any time. **If you decide to withdraw from this study, you should notify the research team immediately**. The research team may also end your participation in this study if you do not follow instructions, miss the scheduled interview, or if your safety and welfare are at risk.

CONFIDENTIALITY
Subject Identifiable Data
The data collected will be kept confidential. Participants will be asked to select pseudonyms to mask identity. Linking list will be stored in a locked box at the primary researcher's home.

Data Storage
The electronic consent forms will be saved on an external thumb drive. The interviews will be downloaded and saved on a password protected external hard-drive. Audio transcriptions will be stored electronically on a secure computer with password protection. The computer containing the transcriptions, the external hard-drive containing the interview data, and the external thumb drive will be stored in separate secure locations in the primary researcher's home.

Data Access
The researcher and faculty advisor named on the first page of this form will have access to your study records. Any information derived from this research project that personally identifies you will not be voluntarily released or disclosed without your separate consent, except as expressly required by law. You will be asked to select a pseudonym to mask your identity. The linking list will be stored in a locked box at the primary researcher's home. Publications and/or presentations that result from this study will not include identifiable information about you.

Data Retention
The video/audio will be transcribed and coded within a month of data collection. The video/audio will be destroyed 30 days after transcription. The transcription data and consent forms will be retained for 7 years after the conclusion of the study in order to ensure I can revisit/re-analyze data for publication purposes and for their use in my doctoral research. After 7 years, all data will be destroyed. If the transcript data is not required for my doctoral studies research, it will be destroyed within 3 years.

Mandated Reporting
Under California law, the researcher is required to report known or reasonably suspected incidents of abuse or neglect of a child, dependent adult or elder, including, but not limited to, physical, sexual, emotional, and financial abuse or neglect. If any researcher has or is given such

information in the course of conducting this study, she may be required to report it to the authorities.

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

If you have concerns or complaints about the research study, research team, or questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Research and Sponsored Programs office, 18111 Nordhoff Street, California State University, Northridge, Northridge, CA 91330-8232, by phone at (818) 677-2901 or email at irb@csun.edu.

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

I agree to participate in the study.
___ I agree to be audio recorded
___ I do not wish to be audio recorded
___ I agree to be video recorded
___ I do not wish to be video recorded

_____ _____
Participant Signature Date

_____
Printed Name of Participant

_____ _____
Researcher Signature Date

_____
Printed Name of Researcher