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A NEED FOR SUPPORT SERVICES AMONG HISPANIC FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS

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A NEED FOR SUPPORT SERVICES AMONG HISPANIC FIRST-GENERATION
COLLEGE STUDENTS

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Social Work

by
Evelyn Arellano
Jessica Armenta

May 2022

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ABSTRACT

Hispanics are the largest minority group in the United States, yet the retention and graduation rates among Hispanics continue to remain low. This study examined some of the barriers and social challenges that Hispanic First-Generation College Students experience. The main objectives addressed low retention rates, low graduation rates, discussed unique cultural issues, and looked at the most prevalent challenges that this population endures while trying to successfully achieve higher education.

A qualitative approach was utilized to gather data. A total of ten participants were recruited and placed in two focus groups. These focus groups were conducted virtually due to national COVID-19 restrictions.

The findings revealed that First Generation Hispanic College Students face multiple barriers when navigating college and university. There is a need for supportive services such as bilingual parent workshops, college readiness courses, financial aid workshops, mental health services, and more Hispanic representation in colleges.

Recommendations for mitigating these disparities going forward can include improved understanding and identification of the barriers that First Generation Hispanic college students encounter, and how implementation of supportive services at the middle school and high school levels can increase retention and graduation rates among First Generation Hispanic College Students.

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DEDICATION

Evelyn: This project is dedicated to my grandmother and my parents. Thank you for making me who I am and teaching me the importance of helping and serving others. To my partner John who has supported me through my educational journey and loved me throughout the process. To my children David and Jonathan for giving me the gift of motherhood. To my research partner Jessica, this educational journey was destined for us, and I could not have done it without you.

Jessica: This project is dedicated to my siblings, husband, and mother. Thank you, Abraham and Ariana, for your constant love and always being by my side. To my husband, Samuel, thank you for your love, patience, and understanding for the past three years, I could have not done this without you. To my mother, thank you for instilling hope in me, for teaching me to never give up on my dreams, and for shaping who I am today. To my friends, thank you for being understanding during these last three years and for providing me with words of affirmation when I needed it the most. To my coworkers, thank you for the encouragement and for the reassurance you have all provided me with throughout this journey. To my research partner, Evelyn, thank you for keeping me sane and for all your support throughout our MSW journey.

We dedicate this project to the Hispanic First-Generation Students who continue to persevere and beat the odds despite the many challenges they encounter when navigating college.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Problem Formulation

In recent years there has been an increase in higher education enrollment among Hispanic first-generation college students (FGCS). Tello and Lonn (2017) define FGCS as those students whose parents did not attend college or a postsecondary institution. Despite the increase in enrollment, there continues to be low retention and graduation rates among Hispanic FGCS. Vega (2016) explains that although Hispanics are the largest minority group in the United States, they continue to perform lower than other racial/ethnic groups in academics often resulting in, unemployment, low wages, increased poverty, and lack of contribution to the economy and global competitiveness. It is necessary to understand what challenges FGCS face, to increase retention and graduation rates among Hispanic FGCS.

Hispanic FGCS may face the same problems if not more problems as opposed to non-first-generation students. Vega (2016) says that Hispanic FGCS are most likely to drop out of college within their first four semesters oftentimes due to working full-time and not being academically or socially integrated into the college community. Another factor contributing to high dropout rates among Hispanic FGCS is family obligations. Although non-FGCS also have family obligations, in Hispanic culture family is an important value and it is known as

familismo. Familismo means family interdependence, cohesiveness, loyalty, and prioritizing group needs over individual needs (Tello & Lonn, 2017). Having a strong support system can be beneficial, but prioritizing group needs over individual needs leads FGCS to struggle between completing schoolwork and being present for family activities. Aside from facing stressors in the home, FGCS also face stressors in the academic setting.

Corona et al. (2017) state that Hispanic college students face several stressors and challenges such as discrimination, cultural isolation, lack of same ethnicity role models, and low educational expectations that can increase mental health issues. It is noted that among Hispanic FGCS, acculturative stress and facing discrimination can increase mental health symptoms such as depression and anxiety (Corona et al., 2017). This is a great concern due to increasing mental health symptoms possibly leading Hispanic FGCS to be at greater risk of academic underachievement (Corona et al., 2017).

Purpose of the Study

Colleges throughout the United States have experienced an increase in undergraduate enrollment, but first-generation college students and racial/ethnic minorities enroll in college with mixed success and experience below-average graduation rates (Latino et al., 2018). The purpose of this study is to identify the support systems and services needed in higher education to increase retention and graduation rates among Hispanic FGCS.

This study will first identify the significant barriers and challenges that Hispanic FGCS encounter when attending college. After identifying the barriers and challenges, the study will analyze what gaps in supportive services currently exist that impact retention and graduation rates. Finally, the study will explore potential programs and policies that can be implemented in higher education institutions to increase retention and graduation rates among Hispanic FGCS.

Significance of the Project for Social Work Practice

Vega (2016) expressed that having limited access to college enrollment and completion represents a social injustice and increasing college access and graduation for the Hispanic community should be a national priority. The NASW Code of Ethics (2017) calls for social workers to challenge social justice. As previously mentioned, one of the challenges that Hispanic FGCS face is feeling unprepared for college coursework, indicating that support systems need to be put in place during high school. FGCS reported having scarce opportunities to enroll in challenging courses and staff at their high school did not support students in enrolling in such courses (Vega, 2016). By not having access to rigorous courses, school staff set up FGCS to fail once they begin college coursework. Vega (2016) also found that college freshmen who reported receiving support from teachers and counselors, along with being exposed to rigorous coursework, were better prepared for college.

Latino et. al (2018) explain that low retention and graduation rates can lead Hispanic FGCS to be more likely to default on student loans and make them less marketable in the changing labor market. The authors also discuss how the American labor market is becoming specialized to favor those with a college degree, and it is estimated that in 2020 at least 65% of the jobs in the United States will require some form of higher education. With jobs favoring those with higher education, it is important to identify how higher education institutions can support Hispanic FGCS to remain enrolled and complete their degrees.

This indicates that social workers need to work both at the macro and mezzo levels to ensure that students are being provided with college-ready education and support while attending high school. Support systems can include counseling, crisis intervention, and case management services to support and empower students. Implementation of student support services in high school and college campuses is crucial and tailoring them to the needs of specific minority groups can increase college retention and graduation rates. With that said, the research question for this project is as follows: What support can social workers offer Hispanic FGCS to increase college retention and graduation rates?

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter consists of an examination of the research related to the topic of Barriers to Retention of Hispanic First-Generation College Students. This study will include the unique challenges and barriers that negatively impact academic performance and the completion of a college degree among this population. The subsections will include Mental Health Needs of Hispanic First-Generation College Students, Racial and Gender disparities, Cultural Barriers, and Psychological Barriers among Hispanic First-Generation College Students (FGCS). The final subsection will examine the Mattering Theory and Narrative Therapy approach, which is relevant to this population.

Mental Health Needs of First-Generation Hispanic College Students

In comparison to White Non-First-Generation College Students (NFGCS), Hispanic FGCS face challenges consistent with being the first in the family to pursue a college degree. Many of the challenges are related to family obligations, cultural and social values, transitioning to higher levels of education (Stebbleton, Soria, Huesman, 2014). Lippincott and German (2007) noted that the counseling needs of Hispanic FGCS are unique and tend to relate to the family of origin, academic functioning, and adjusting to college life. In a national college survey, students reported that their academic performance was impaired due to

increased stress, higher levels of anxiety, sleep difficulties, and feelings associated with depression (American College Health Association-National College Health Assessment II, 2014). There is a need for more research regarding the psychological barriers that prevent Latino/a students to be successful academically.

Racial and Gender Disparities

Hispanic college students are the lowest minority group in obtaining a four-year college degree as opposed to Asians, African Americans, and Whites. Only fifteen percent of Hispanics ages twenty-five through twenty-nine have a bachelor's degree or higher. Comparing it to the same age group of Whites at forty-one percent, African Americans at twenty-two percent, and Asians at sixty-three percent (Krogstad, 2014). Currently, there are more Hispanic females attending universities as opposed to their male counterparts (Gonzalez, Jovel, Stoner, 2004; Riegel-Crumb 2010). There is an evident imbalance when comparing racial groups and their level of educational achievement. Even though Hispanics make up more than half (54%), they continue to be the largest underrepresented group when it comes to higher education (United States Census Bureau, 2016).

Cultural Barriers

The United States Census Bureau (2011) defines persons of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish origins regardless of race as Hispanic. Currently, the largest Hispanic origin group in the

United States, making up about sixty-four percent of the Hispanic population, is those of Mexican Heritage (Pew Hispanic Center, 2014).

It is important to recognize that although similarities might be shared, not all Hispanics are the same. However, they do share many of the same beliefs and cultural norms (Allison & Bencomo, 2015). The Hispanic culture emphasizes group activities meaning that responsibilities are shared, and values are focused on family. Family dynamics in Hispanic culture involve a focus on family structure, gender roles, and patriarchal structure (Leeder, 2004). Additionally, it should be noted that Hispanic culture values the importance of family.

Tello and Lonn (2017) discuss how familismo, family interdependence, cohesiveness, loyalty, and placing family needs before personal ones, are often the center of Hispanic family values. The authors also explain how familismo is viewed as having an obligation to provide emotional support for family members, as well as relying on family and friends for help and support. Familismo can leave students feeling like their family obligations must come before academics. However, as Tello and Lonn (2017) explain, the value of familismo is not an indicator that education is not valued in Hispanic households.

Hispanic parents value education and have high expectations for their children because they believe that having an education will create better opportunities for career options in the future and overall success in life (Allison; Bencomo, 2015). Even though Hispanic parents hold a high value on the education they are apprehensive about the involvement in their children's

education, especially non-English speaking parents (Ramirez, 2008; Salinas, 2013). This does not mean that there is a lack of concern or disinterest in the children's education process it means they show it through nurturing and support through the home (Salinas, 2013). Factors that prevent parents from being involved in their children's educational process include parents' immigrant and socioeconomic status, lack of understanding about the U.S. educational system.

Hispanic FGCS are at a disadvantage due to their parents not understanding what the education system is like in the United States. Tello and Lonn (2017) explain that unlike Non-First-Generation College Students (NFGCS), Hispanic FGCS lack cultural capital. Cultural capital means having knowledge and understanding of what it means to be in college, and NFGCS can gain this insight from their parents who attended college (Tello & Lonn, 2017). Clayton, Medina, and Wiseman (2014) reported that although Hispanic FGCS had the emotional support from their parents to earn a college degree, their parents were unable to assist throughout the college experience or relate to the experiences that Hispanic FGCS endured.

Aside from navigating the college process on their own, once they begin their college education, Hispanic FGCS are challenged by the responsibilities of having to balance home life and college life. Arbelo Marrero (2016) explained that many Hispanic students have reported postponing their educational aspirations to financially support their family members. Financially supporting family members is only one example, but some Hispanic FGCS are responsible

for caring for their younger siblings or older family members. Besides having family responsibilities, Hispanic FGCS also must endure being minority students. Rodriguez, Garbee, and Martinez-Podolsky (2019) explained how Hispanic students experience more psychological stress than other students of different races/ethnicity when attending predominantly White institutions. They explain that this is caused by Hispanic FGCS experiencing campus climates where there is racial disparity and they do not identify with the culture of the campus.

Psychological Barriers/Stressors

As a result of these unique social challenges and barriers, when compared to NFGCS, Hispanic FGCS may feel less connected and lack a sense of belonging on campus (Tovar, Simon, & Lee, 2009). Many students express feeling out of place when arriving at a university. This is due to their home communities not resembling their university in terms of racial/ethnic composition or being far away from home with no close family support (Nunez, 2011). Sense of belonging correlates with positive mental health especially when it provides integration into a community and allows individuals to feel valued and encourages them to contribute to the community (Stebleton, Soria, Huesman, 2014). Feeling isolated and like they do not belong has led many Hispanic students to feel stressed. Lardier et al. (2020) explained that stress among Hispanic FGCS can be attributed to acculturation issues, racism, and minimal interactions with peers and faculty. The authors also reported that stress is greater among Hispanic students because of their willingness to stay in college

despite enduring emotional or mental strain. A couple of reasons why Hispanic students are determined to continue their college education is because of the belief in the "American Dream" and the economic advantages that a college degree is thought to carry (Lardier et al., 2020). It is also known that in Hispanic communities there is a stigma surrounding mental health, which can decrease the likelihood that Hispanic students will seek treatment for stress or other mental health concerns.

By not addressing mental health concerns, Hispanic students encounter psychological problems that place them at higher risk of developing depression and limit academic retention and school satisfaction (Lardier et al., 2020). Because of the stigma surrounding mental health among the Hispanic community, Cano et al., (2014) reported that the prevalence of depression among U.S college students of Hispanic heritage is unknown. However, they did report that a study found that when compared to White students, Hispanic college students reported high levels of symptoms related to depression. The mental health needs of Hispanic FGCS are important to increase retention rates. Many students leave college before completing their degree due to the onset of psychiatric disorders, primarily anxiety and depression (Stebbleton et.al 2014). Even though there are counseling services available on most campuses, Hispanic FGCS seek these services at lower rates because they perceive that mental health services are unrelated to their needs (Cano et al., 2014).

Although studies are increasing in mental health and first-generation college students, they are related to the use of campus counseling services only and focused on differences in usage among other groups (Stebbleton et al., 2014). The findings have shown an underutilization of mental health and support services amongst students of color which include first-generation Hispanic college students (Stebbleton et al., 2014).

Theories Guiding Conceptualization

Theories used to conceptualize the ideas of this study are the Mattering Concept and Narrative Therapy approach. The Marginality and Mattering Theory as outlined by Schlosberg (1989) provides a framework to better understand the transitional stages that one experiences when a significant change occurs in a person's life. Marginality is set to create contradictions and false self-perceptions in one's mind such as love/hate, pride/shame, and ultimately leading to hypersensitivity, self-consciousness, and inferiority. There are five aspects to Mattering which include 1) Attention 2) Importance 3) Ego-extension 4) Dependence 5) Appreciation (Schlosberg, 1989). Mattering correlates with the sense of belonging and is used interchangeably in the context of higher education (McCullough, 1981). The construct of mattering has been applied to mental health and counseling agendas, including career growth and academic services (Corbiere & Amundson, 2007). Although mattering is still emerging in the mental health field, there is evidence suggesting that there is a relationship

between mattering, depression, and college stress. The implementation of one of the mattering scale tools can be used by universities to gain insight into student perception of belonging and to gauge how students perceive their university experience.

The Narrative model can be used when dealing with HFGCS due to its culturally sensitive context. This approach allows a student/client to express his life experiences through their own story, de-constructing their story and re-envisioning it to create change (Epston & White, 1992).

Summary

This study explores the experiences of Hispanic First-Generation college students who are attending college and how those experiences can impact retention and graduation rates. Hispanics are the fastest-growing ethnicity in the United States, but when compared to other races/ethnicities, Hispanic college students obtain college degrees at significantly lower rates. Various barriers influence the retention of Hispanic college students as found in the literature, and there is still research required to understand the psychological problems that put Hispanic students in jeopardy of developing depression, anxiety, and other psychiatric disorders.

Mattering concept and Narrative approach can help college counselors in assisting Hispanic FGCS to cope with the barriers and stressors they face to increase retention and graduation rates. This study seeks to include the social

work perspective in the literature and explore interventions to increase support among Hispanic FGCS.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

This study describes the barriers that contribute to low retention and college graduation rates among Hispanic First-Generation College students. Additionally, this study looked to identify support systems and gaps in services that can assist in increasing retention and graduation rates among Hispanic First-Generation College students. This chapter outlines the details of how the study was carried out and includes the following sections: study design, sampling data collection and instruments, procedures, protection of human subjects, and data analysis. The purpose of this study was to identify the support systems and services needed in higher education to increase retention and graduation rates among Hispanic First-Generation College Students.

Study Design

This was an exploratory research project that address the topic from the perspective of the social work field. Due to the limited literature and research from the perspective of the social work field, this study was qualitative and utilized interviews and open-ended questions as the tool to collect data.

One strength in the exploratory, qualitative approach is that participants' answers were not limited. This allowed for participants to speak freely about their

experiences in college, and the researchers were able to ask clarifying questions as needed throughout the interview. Because the social worker perspective has not been utilized in past research regarding this topic, interviewing participants allowed for researchers to identify new barriers not previously discussed leading to the development of new interventions that can be implemented to assist Hispanic First-Generation college students in succeeding in their academics.

There are several drawbacks to take note of with the use of focus groups. One drawback can be that focus groups tend to be time-consuming, finding participants that are willing to offer their time for free can pose a challenge.

Additionally, there is a risk of participants not being honest about their true opinion or thoughts on the questions due to feeling pressured to answer questions to what they perceive the interviewer or other participants want to hear.

Sampling

This study utilized a combination of non-random purposive sampling and snowball sampling of Hispanic First-Generation College Students who are either enrolled in university-level courses at a public university in Southern California or have ever been enrolled in university-level courses in other public universities. Approval from university faculty was obtained as well as consent from each student. A recruitment guideline was examined and established. There was a total of ten participants in two focus groups with six participants in one group and four participants in the other group.

Data Collection and Instruments

Qualitative data was collected live using specific interview questions. Each focus group was provided an introduction, along with the description and purpose of study being explained. Demographic information was gathered from the participants before joining the study to ensure that participants identify as Hispanic First-Generation College Students. Other demographic information that was collected included age, gender, college major, and whether the participant was the first in their family to attend college.

The researchers worked to create an environment that was non-threatening to allow participants to feel free to give their honest opinions. The focus group included guidelines developed to assist the participants in discussing the barriers they faced while attending college, and how these barriers impacted opportunities for academic success. The researchers developed a tool that allowed for the barriers to be discussed and evaluated from the social work point of view.

The focus group guidelines discussed three subsections that included cultural barriers that Hispanic First-Generation College students encountered, how these barriers impacted the mental health of Hispanic First-Generation College students, and what interventions can be beneficial to increase retention and graduation rates among Hispanic First-Generation College Students. Participants were asked about their experience in applying to college and what challenges they faced their first semester in college. As common themes

surfaced during the discussion, researchers asked participants what services or support they felt would have made a difference for them as they faced these barriers.

The researchers asked clarifying questions and probing questions when additional answers were needed throughout the process. To allow all participants to participate in the study, the researchers granted participants a certain amount of time to speak without interruption. After all participants spoke, the researchers opened the discussion to all participants to assist with avoiding dominant personalities from skewing results. To ensure that questions were valid and reliable, the researchers drafted a set of questions that explored the participants' college experiences. The researchers met with the research advisor and discussed the questions to ensure that they were appropriate, valid, and reliable.

Procedures

The recruitment process included an outline of the specific criteria describing the goals of the study as well as asking for the need for participants. This outline included two proposed dates and times and was conducted during the school year. This outline was reviewed by an assigned research advisor and approval was granted. This outline was properly formatted and emailed to adjunct faculty staff and asked for distribution. Participants who were interested in participating in the focus groups were asked their preferred dates and times and focus groups were scheduled at those preferred times.

The researchers reached out to interested participants, through email, a week before the meeting to remind them of the upcoming focus group meeting and included the consent, demographic survey, and interview guide to allow participants to look over the questions before the interview. A secure Zoom link with a password was sent out to participants the day before the focus group was scheduled to meet. Both focus groups were conducted in the evening time to work with the participants' work or school schedule. Each focus group was timed for one and a half hours to allow participants enough time to answer the questions asked.

Participants were greeted and asked to sign in on the Zoom chat, reminded to have their video off throughout the interview, and prompted to change their name on their screen to the assigned number they were given. Researcher assigned a number to track each participant, for use of data collection, and to keep participants names confidential. Facilitators provided a brief introduction, reviewed informed consent and confidentiality. Group participants were given a five-dollar gift card for their time and contribution to this study at the close of this focus group.

Protection of Human Subjects

The identity of each focus group participant was kept confidential from other students and individuals outside of the research team. To follow national COVID-19 safety protocols focus groups took place through the Zoom platform

and the meeting required participants to enter a password to access the meeting. The researchers set up a virtual waiting room to allow for participants' identities to be verified before the participants were able to join the meeting. Informed consent was sent out to participants before the group meeting, electronically signed the day before the focus group, and reviewed and explained before the beginning of the interview.

Consents included 1) the purpose of research 2) what is expected of a research participant 3) time likely to be required 4) expected risks and benefits 5) explanation that participation is voluntary, and participants can withdraw at any time with no repercussions 6) how confidentiality will be protected.

Documentation with participant information will be kept secured through electronic encryption. Group participants were given a debriefing statement at the end of the focus group and participants were asked if they had any questions or concerns at this time.

Data Analysis

Due to the qualitative nature of this study, data was gathered and analyzed with thematic analysis. The first step was to transcribe the video recordings into written form. Each participant was assigned a distinct numerical code and a group code to be used during transcribing to sort out the comments/responses of the participants. All responses were organized by sections based on similarity in content. The researchers discussed the

similarities in content and identified what the responses implied for the research project. The researchers read and reread all transcripts to ensure accuracy in the responses. Both researchers organized the data using excel spreadsheets using the assigned numerical codes. Chapter four will include findings that discuss common barriers, support systems, and suggestions for change.

Summary

This study examined barriers that impact low retention and graduation rates among Hispanic First-Generation College students. The use of focus groups allowed participants to share their personal experiences, the barriers they encountered as first-generation college students, and explore possible interventions and support systems that social workers can apply to support future Hispanic First-Generation College Students. Qualitative methods were utilized to best facilitate this process.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to present the findings of the study which were analyzed using qualitative data analysis procedures. Two focus groups were conducted, and interviews were recorded for researchers to gather data. The participants' experiences and responses contributed to the research question posed in this study and added insight to the barriers that Hispanic First-Generation College Students encounter, and the need for supportive services. Demographics and responses from interviewees will be presented in this chapter along with themes and subthemes that were derived from the responses.

Demographics

Both researchers interviewed ten participants, in two focus groups, that self-identified as First-generation Latino or Hispanic who had attended college or university. For the first focus group, eighty-three percent of participants identified as female, and seventeen percent as male. Eighty-three percent of participants identified as being between the ages of 18-35, and seventeen percent were between the ages of 36-55. Sixty-six percent of participants identified as Mexican American, seventeen percent as Mexican, and seventeen percent as Salvadoran. Eighty-three percent of participants reported that they were in their

third year of the MSW part-time program and seventeen percent identified as other for their educational program. Eighty-three percent of participants reported being the first in their immediate family to attend college, and seventeen percent reported that they were not the first in their immediate family to attend college, but the first to graduate with a degree.

For the second focus group, fifty percent of the participants identified as female and fifty percent as male. Fifty percent of participants reported that they were between the ages of 18-35, and fifty percent stated that they were between the ages of 36-55. Fifty percent of the participants identified as Mexican American, twenty-five percent as Chicano/a, and twenty-five percent as Mexican-Puerto Rican. Twenty-five percent of participants reported having graduated with a college degree, twenty-five percent reported being in their first year of the MSW program, twenty-five percent reported being in their third year of college, and twenty-five percent reported being in their second year of college. In terms of area of study, twenty-five percent of participants reported that they were earning an MSW, twenty-five percent reported earning a BSW, and twenty-five percent reported other areas of study.

Presentation of the Findings

The data will be presented based on the interview guide and the responses provided by the participants of both focus groups. The study used open-ended interview questions to identify common barriers, cultural

components, support systems, and suggestions for change. This section will include: (1) Employment versus Education, (2) Emotional Family Support, (3) School counselors, (4) Changes to Family Dynamics, (5) Mental Health Challenges. Quotes from the focus groups are used to highlight the themes and subthemes that were found throughout the study.

Employment versus Education

The first interview question presented in both groups was, "When and why did you decide to go to college". One prevalent theme found in the data was the motivation to have a career versus a job. Participant 6 recalls, "I remember mentioning to my parents that I wanted to go to college. They didn't seem super enthused about me going to college not because they weren't supportive but because getting a job would be more worthwhile." Other participants agreed that although their family did not discourage pursuing a higher education, they expressed that working might be more beneficial to helping the family make ends meet.

Participants in both focus groups discussed "physical labor versus mental labor". Participant 7 shared, "I was tired of working a dead-end job and wanted more of a career, so I figured I'd go back to school to get the process going." Participant 4 shared about her parents coming from another country and working doing physical labor, she recalls her father telling her "You either pick up a shovel or you pick up a pencil."

Researchers found that most participants discussed that working a dead-end job was their greatest motivator to attain academic achievement. It was also found that most participants were employed full time while attending college. Participants disclosed that working while attending college contributed to higher levels of stress due to having limited time to focus on schoolwork.

Emotional Family Support

Throughout both focus groups, all participants discussed the type of support they received from their family members. One participant expressed the support received as being "different." Participant 10 reported, "Family was helpful in cooking, listening to me, sometimes that would make me think of how much they were really helping me or adding stress but that's part of the culture."

Participant 4 explained that her family offered to help by providing childcare and shared, "My family was super supportive in the sense that they were there for me especially when I had to leave my child, they would always watch him."

Participants discussed the contrast between being a first-generation Hispanic student to their school peers who were second generation or non-Hispanic students. Participants shared that they felt at a disadvantage being first-generation college students due to their families not understanding the college experience. Findings indicated that although financial support may not have been provided to participants, emotional support was expressed in culturally

appropriate ways that align with Hispanic family culture such as words of encouragement, childcare, and housing.

School Counselors

One major theme that was discussed by all participants was the challenges that they faced when applying and enrolling in college. Challenges faced included enrolling in classes, applying for financial aid, and being unaware of school resources. Participants shared that the process of enrollment was "confusing, challenging, it was a nightmare." Participant 8 reported, "I've always said that even in community college, I had to navigate this education process and system on my own and I realized that there was a lack of support for Latino students, but I felt like I had to figure it out."

Participant 2 stated, "My parents didn't have any idea what I was doing until I was already enrolled in classes, but pretty much it was through a friend, and you know the awesome counselors from a junior college they kept encouraging me to further my education." Participant 4 stated "I would like to give a shout out to my counselors and junior college. During my time there with the junior college counselors, I was there every semester, just making sure that things were going smoothly and that I was passing my classes and if I was doing the right thing."

Participant 9 discussed how confusing and challenging the college application process was by stating, "My own experience with applying to college was very traumatic so to speak. Like everything was so stressful there was so

much going on around that time...My teachers at the time asked them for their assistance and they literally walked me through the whole process."

Only one participant from both focus groups identified her college application experience as a positive one. Participant 1 stated, "Fortunately my experience was positive because I attended a high school that had a college readiness class which guided students through the entire application process, scholarship applications and local and federal student aid applications."

Results found that most participants made positive connections with their high school teachers, guidance counselors, and junior college counselors and acknowledged the positive impact that counselors played throughout their academic journey.

Changes in Family Dynamic

All participants expressed a shift in their family dynamics, and attributed this to being a culturally related issue because their parents did not understand the college culture. One participant described the changes in her family dynamic as negative and said, "I wasn't being supported by my family and until now I don't feel supported because they resent the fact that I go to school and have a full-time job, plus my internship, plus the Master's program... they resent the fact that I'm not spending time with them."

However, not all participants felt that their family dynamics had changed negatively. Some participants discussed how being the first in their family to attend college allowed for family members to view them as role models.

Participant 8 stated "It has impacted me in a positive way because I am paving the way for [my children] and I am an additional resource for them, my siblings and parents. Participant 9 shared, "With me being the first in my family to go to college, it has encouraged some of my cousins to go to college as well. My sisters are very happy and are contemplating whether to go back to college. Participant 10 stated, "My relationships have changed for the better, there is another level of respect and admiration"

Participant 7 shared how he has noticed a change in his own family dynamic. He stated that he now realizes the importance of talking about education at a young age and said, "A lot of people don't get asked that question...I am going to continue asking my kids eventually they are going to figure out what they really like and what they really want to do."

Researchers revealed that changes in family dynamics occurred as participants embraced their role as a college student. Participants discussed that the changes were perceived as negative, however participants also reported positive changes such as influencing other family members to explore the opportunities that higher education can provide. Participants agreed that that this change in family dynamics was attributed to their parent's cultural identity and upbringing and how it differed from their own. Participants shared how they were able to create equilibrium in their family system and allow for next generations to have a more positive outlook on pursuing higher education.

Mental Health Challenges

The final common theme that was discussed was how mental health was impacted by attending college/university. Most participants agreed that they experienced anxiety, depression, and poor self-worth while attending college. Participant 10 spoke about their personal experience, "Definitely a lot of mental health issues bubbled up during the process, anxiety, and depression and that was interesting of how I was showing it and understanding that I was going through was depression, I got to the point where I needed medication, it was a lot of realization." Participant 9 responded, "When I first started college my mental health wasn't the greatest thing because we were still in a pandemic, it was very stressful, and I was experiencing a lot of anxiety and I felt lost, and I didn't know what I was doing."

For participants in group one, they discussed the changes in their approach to handling their mental health based on their experiences from undergraduate. Participant 3 stated, "With entering this Master's program, honestly it forced me to put my mental health at the forefront." Participant 4 replied, "I actually started receiving mental health services myself, and it was the best choice ever because it really does take a toll..."

Participants openly discussed some of their own mental health challenges that they endured while on their academic journey. Results suggested that anxiety was the most prevalent amongst participants. Depression was also discussed between participants and the symptoms associated with depression

such as poor self-worth, loss of interest and poor concentration. Researchers found that these symptoms were intensified with the COVID-19 pandemic. Lastly researchers found that mental health issues continue to be a barrier encountered by Hispanic First-Generation College Students.

Summary

This chapter consisted of researchers presenting data on results of the study such as demographic information, common themes, and subthemes that were gathered and identified while conducting data analysis. Researchers found that all ten participants demonstrated a strong desire to succeed despite social and emotional barriers. Findings include a strong cultural bond or togetherness that showed the power of storytelling and dialogue amongst the first-generation Hispanic students.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

Introduction

Chapter five will review the results yielded by the interviews, discuss if the research question was supported, explain how existing literature supports or does not support the research question, address unanticipated results, and explore limitations and implications for future research.

Discussion

The responses and main themes found in the focus group discussions support answering the research question. Participant responses highlighted the challenges encountered by HFGCS, and many of the responses shared by participants confirm that there is a need for supportive services at the college level. Emotional family support continues to be the main motivator to encourage HFGCS to apply and attend college. School counselors have proven to be encouraging and the primary source of guidance for assisting HFGCS in navigating the college application process.

Participants openly discussed what supportive services they would have found helpful during their college application process and their college experience. Several participants expressed that they would have benefited from supportive services before attending college. One participant shared that if

information sessions had been offered in English and Spanish, they would have been valuable for them and their parents when first learning about the college application process. Another participant discussed how learning about the opportunities for financial assistance and workshops tailored to financial aid would have been beneficial.

Aside from workshops and information sessions, participants voiced that there is a need for representation at college campuses. Participant 8 expressed the need for representation on college campuses and stated, "Being able to relate to an instructor just support staff that speaks Spanish that look like me...I mean there was no one who looked like me." Another participant also expressed that representation was important and would have liked to have received peer support from other Hispanic students that whom they could share experiences. Participant 9 shared, "Not seeing anyone who was Latino definitely kind of lowered my own competence...when I started attending classes, I didn't see any professors who either had a similar story to myself or was of Latino origin or background and it just made me think can I actually do this." Respondents expressed that representation mattered to them, and they would have felt more empowered during the college application process if they had heard stories from Hispanic graduates.

This research study demonstrates that there is a need for supportive services for Hispanic First-Generation College Students to increase retention and graduation rates.

Limitations of Study

This study contains several limitations. First, most participants recruited were MSW students at the same university. Perhaps the results of this study would have been different if participants were from different universities, or participants were currently enrolled in a bachelor's program. Research participants attended public universities which offer limited resources when compared to private universities, and this could have impacted their overall college experience

A second limitation of this study was the sample size of participants. Only ten participants were interviewed, thus the opinions and statements relate to a small group of Hispanic First-Generation College Students. The participants interviewed also attended a university in Southern California. This is another limitation since the geographical location can influence the experience of participants due to the culture of the setting, they are in.

An additional limitation of this study is that interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom. This made it difficult for researchers to observe facial expressions and body language to measure the emotions, feelings, and level of comfortableness of participants when answering questions. Aside from this, the conversation was unable to flow naturally due to participants needing to be muted to avoid unnecessary interruptions.

One final limitation from this study is the need to focus more on what supportive services participants would have found beneficial when applying to

college and while attending their first year of college. This will help social workers understand what gaps in supportive services currently exist in schools, and how increasing these services can grow retention and graduation rates among Hispanic First-Generation College Students.

Suggestions for Social Work Practice

Overall, there are limited qualitative studies that focus on social work practice related to first-generation Hispanic college students. One suggestion is that future research continues to be conducted specifically with first-generation Hispanic youth in underserved areas. Since it is noted that familismo plays an important role in student success, one suggestion is to increase school-based programs facilitated by social workers in middle school and high school. These programs will provide college readiness supportive services for Hispanic First-Generation students and their families. Services can include workshops for SAT/ACT preparation, college application workshops, financial aid workshops, peer support groups, and providing students with a mentor whom they can reach out to during the college application process and throughout the students' first year in college.

Another suggestion would be to further explore what mental health services can be beneficial to students as they apply to college, and throughout their first year in college. Social workers can work to advocate for school districts to incorporate wellness programs as part of the student's curriculum. Wellness programs can assist students in identifying symptoms of depression/anxiety,

developing healthy coping skills, and increasing self-care and mindfulness among students. Further research on the impact of mental health among Hispanic First-Generation Students can be valuable in increasing supportive services and supporting students throughout their educational process.

A final suggestion that social workers can focus on is the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on Hispanic First-Generation College Students. As previously mentioned, one participant expressed that her mental health was affected due to the pandemic. Another participant shared that transitioning back to campus after doing school online had been challenging for him. Research is needed to find if students struggled academically while participating in online learning, how students' mental health was impacted, and if students benefitted from online learning.

Summary

The number of Hispanic First-Generation College Students continues to increase, however, there is a lack of supportive services that impact the retention and graduation rates among this population. Social workers can aid in increasing the retention and graduation rates of this population by implementing more supportive services and expanding mental health services in middle and high schools of underserved areas. The social work profession entails a commitment to advocate for vulnerable and oppressed populations as stated by the NASW

Code of Ethics. Therefore, social workers must strive to address the issue of low educational attainment among Hispanic First-Generation College Students.

APPENDIX A
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL LETTER



February 9, 2021

CSUSB INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

Administrative/Exempt Review Determination

Status: Determined Exempt

IRB-FY2021-141

Herbert Shon Jessica Armenta, Evelyn Arellano
CSBS - Social Work
California State University, San Bernardino
5500 University Parkway
San Bernardino, California 92407

Dear Herbert Shon Jessica Armenta, Evelyn Arellano:

Your application to use human subjects, titled "A Need For Support Services Among Hispanic First Generation College Students" has been reviewed and determined exempt by the Chair of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of CSU, San Bernardino. An exempt determination means your study had met the federal requirements for exempt status under 45 CFR 46.104. The CSUSB IRB has not evaluated your proposal for scientific merit, except to weigh the risk and benefits of the study to ensure the protection of human participants. Important Note: This approval notice does not replace any departmental or additional campus approvals which may be required including access to CSUSB campus facilities and affiliate campuses due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Visit the Office of Academic Research website for more information at <https://www.csusb.edu/academic-research>.

You are required to notify the IRB of the following as mandated by the Office of Human Research Protections (OHRP) federal regulations 45 CFR 46 and CSUSB IRB policy. The forms (modification, renewal, unanticipated/adverse event, study closure) are located in the Cayuse IRB System with instructions provided on the IRB Applications, Forms, and Submission webpage. Failure to notify the IRB of the following requirements may result in disciplinary action. The Cayuse IRB system will notify you when your protocol is due for renewal. Ensure you file your protocol renewal and continuing review form through the Cayuse IRB system to keep your protocol current and active unless you have completed your study.

- Ensure your CITI Human Subjects Training is kept up-to-date and current throughout the study.
- Submit a protocol modification (change) if any changes (no matter how minor) are proposed in your study for review and approval by the IRB before being implemented in your study.
- Notify the IRB within 5 days of any unanticipated or adverse events are experienced by subjects during your research.
- Submit a study closure through the Cayuse IRB submission system once your study has ended.

If you have any questions regarding the IRB decision, please contact Michael Gillespie, the Research Compliance Officer. Mr. Michael Gillespie can be reached by phone at (909) 537-7588, by fax at (909) 537-7028, or by email at mgillesp@csusb.edu. Please include your application approval number IRB-FY2021-141 in all correspondence. Any complaints you receive from participants and/or others related to your research may be directed to Mr. Gillespie.

Best of luck with your research.

Sincerely,

Nicole Dabbs

Nicole Dabbs, Ph.D., IRB Chair
CSUSB Institutional Review Board

ND/MG

APPENDIX B

DEMOGRAPHICS

Developed by
Evelyn Arellano and Jessica Armenta

Demographic Survey for Group 1

1. What is your gender?
2. What is your age?
 - a. 18-35
 - b. 36-55
 - c. 56+
3. What is your ethnicity? (e.g., Mexican American)
4. What year are you in your MSW education?
 - a. 1st year
 - b. 2nd year
 - c. 3rd year
5. Were you the first in your family to attend college?

Demographic Survey for Group 2

1. What is your gender?
2. What is your age?
 - a. 18-35
 - b. 36-55
 - c. 56+
3. What is your ethnicity? (e.g., Mexican American)
4. What year are you currently in? (e.g., Freshman, 2nd year MSW, graduated)
5. What is your area of study?
 - a. BSW
 - b. MSW
 - c. Other:
 - d. Were you the first in your family to attend college?

APPENDIX C
QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW GUIDE
DEVELOPED BY
EVELYN ARELLANO AND JESSICA ARMENTA

Interview Guide

1. When and why did you decide to go to college?
2. Can you describe what your experience was like when applying to college?
3. In what way was your family involved in your college application or decision-making process around college?
4. Are there any responsibilities outside of school that limit your time to do schoolwork?
5. What are some of the challenges that you have encountered as Hispanic First-Generation College student?
6. In your view, are there differences between the experiences of first-generation college students compared to students whose parents have earned a college degree? Why or why not?
7. Who do you identify as a support system to help you overcome challenges faced in school?
8. Do you feel that being the first in your family to attend college has changed your relationship with your family? If so, in what ways?
9. How has attending college impacted your mental health?
10. What services do you think the school can offer to help support you in your academics?
11. If you were giving advice to other Hispanic First-Generation Students who are now in high school, what would you say?

APPENDIX D
INFORMED CONSENT

INFORMED CONSENT

The study in which you are asked to participate is designed to identify the support systems and services needed in higher education to increase retention and graduation rates among Hispanic First-Generation College Students. The study is being conducted by Evelyn Arellano and Jessica Armenta, graduate students, under the supervision of Dr. Herbert Shon, Assistant Professor in the School of Social Work at California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB). The study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at CSUSB.

PURPOSE: The purpose of this study is to identify the support systems and services needed in higher education to increase retention and graduation rates among Hispanic First-Generation College Students

DESCRIPTION: Participants will be asked of a few questions on their current college status, challenges encountered while attending college, support systems, and some demographics.

PARTICIPATION: Your participation in the study is totally voluntary. You can refuse to participate in the study or discontinue your participation at any time without any consequences.

CONFIDENTIALITY: Your responses will remain confidential and data will be reported in group form only.

DURATION: It will take 5 to 10 minutes to complete the demographic survey and approximately an hour and a half for the interview.

RISKS: Although not anticipated, there may be some discomfort in answering some of the questions. You are not required to answer and can skip the question or end your participation.

BENEFITS: There will not be any direct benefits to the participants. However, findings from the study will contribute to our knowledge in this area of research.

CONTACT: If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Dr. Shon at (909) 537-5532.

RESULTS: Results of the study can be obtained from the Pfau Library ScholarWorks database (<http://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/>) at California State University, San Bernardino after July 20XX.

I agree to have this interview be audio recorded: ____ YES ____ NO

I understand that I must be 18 years of age or older to participate in your study, have read and understand the consent document and agree to participate in your study.

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ASSIGNED RESPONSIBILITIES

The project was a two-person collaborative effort. Evelyn Arellano and Jessica Armenta collaborated on the following sections:

- Introduction
- Literature Review
- Methods
- Results
- Conclusion

Both researchers were responsible for reaching out to interested participants and conducted the interviews together. Evelyn gathered and distributed the gift cards to participants in group one as compensation for their participation. Jessica gathered and distributed the gift cards to participants in group two as a compensation for their participation. Evelyn and Jessica collaborated to format, edit, and revise this paper to prepare this project for submission