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**FINDING COMMUNITY AS FIRST-GENERATION LATINA COLLEGE  
STUDENTS IN A PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTION**

by  
Alondra Martinez

A Thesis

Submitted to the  
Department of Educational Services and Leadership  
College of Education  
In partial fulfillment of the requirement  
For the degree of  
Masters of Arts in Higher Education  
at  
Rowan University  
March 29, 2022

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## **Dedications**

Dedicated to all first-generation Latina college students who are continuously working hard to break through generational barriers.

Dedicated to all women of color that are continuously striving to advocate for their needs to reach this complicating ladder of success.

To all the padres inmigrantes that left everything back in their home country and have gone through years of sacrifice to put their children through college.

To all my Latinx folks in college doing their best to be the best daughter/son, student, sibling, friend, and partner.

To all my Latinas struggling through the demands they have at home and in the classroom.

This is dedicated to all those that resonate with the content of this study, I hope you feel seen, heard, and understood.

## **Acknowledgements**

Quisiera tomar este momento para reconocer el esfuerzo de mis padres, Araceli Delgado y Ernesto Martínez mis dos grandes inspiraciones en seguir adelante sin olvidar de donde vengo. Desde muy chiquita me enseñaron el valor del esfuerzo para seguir adelante siempre. Siempre he tenido todos los sacrificios que mis padres han hecho para llegar hasta donde están en este día. Si mis padres de 17 y 18 años pudieron cruzar una frontera sin tener ninguna idea de las fronteras que se iban a confrontar en este país, entonces yo también puedo cruzar las fronteras difíciles de los que es estudiar una maestría. Sin duda en cada palabra de mi tesis está dedicada a ese esfuerzo que mis padres tomaron en aquel entonces. Esta oportunidad de poder llegar a completar mi maestría no hubiera sido posible sin ellos, sin esta experiencia única de ser hija de padres inmigrantes y navegar por el mundo universitario.

## **Abstract**

Alondra Martínez  
FINDING COMMUNITY AS FIRST-GENERATION LATINA COLLEGE  
STUDENTS IN A PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTION  
2021-2022

Stephanie Lezotte, Ph.D.  
Master of Arts in Higher Education

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to examine the perception of first-generation Latina college students' sense of belonging at a predominately White institution, specifically at Rowan University. Based on the research questions this study identified the experiences of six first-generation Latina college students and their perception of community and belonging at Rowan University. Semi-structured interviews were conducted on all six participants and data was collected using an interview protocol that consisted of nine questions. The following themes were found in the study (1) first-generation Latinas and family, (2) campus involvement, (3) inclusivity and cultural competence and, (4) faculty and staff representation. These findings are followed by recommendations of practice that consist of (1) increasing the representation of first-generation Latina faculty and staff across the university, (2) increasing cultural competency through intentional educative workshops and practices, (3) increase scholarships and financial assistance for this student population, (4) and develop and fortify support systems for the families of first-generation Latinas.

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## **Chapter I**

### **Introduction**

Latinas were not typically seen in higher-education institutions not that long ago from today. Typically, Latina women were seen as obeying daughters or attentive mothers and wives. Even still today working towards a postsecondary education can result to be a challenging experience for some Latinas that face strenuous circumstances. First-generation Latina college students generally do not have the same kind of parental support and expertise to lean on at home, since many times they are the first of their kind to navigate the academia world past K-12 (Grant, 2020). Therefore, fostering a sense of belonging for this student population is critical to their retention in college (Aponte, 2018). Most importantly, first-generation Latina college students are navigating not only being the first in their family to attend college, but also being a woman in college with a cultural background very different from their White counterparts.

### **Statement of the Problem**

As the number of first-generation Latina college students enrolling into postsecondary institutions increases, there is still a significantly low graduation rate and a lack of persisting post-graduate degrees for this student population (Sy & Romero, 2008; Wheeler, 2021). First-generation Latina college students offer a great variety of skills to succeed yet student persistence continues to be a problem. This student population is more prone to take longer to graduate or not graduate at all (Sy & Romero, 2008). Additionally, this population has conflicting cultural values deeply engraved within them that does not allow them to fully integrate themselves into an individualistic college environment (Vasquez-Salgado et al., 2018). While they have the drive to want to

succeed and many times have a family supporting them to get a college education, staying in college can become very challenging while in their first year. This is as a result of many contributing factors that at times can seem very limiting for first-generation Latina college students (Kiyama, 2018). The environment set in place many times will determine student persistence amongst this student population. Therefore, it is important to examine the sense of belonging for first-generation Latina students at their respective college campuses.

### **Significance of the Problem**

First-gen Latina college students face multiple barriers when they first start college (Capik & Shupp 2021). The first-generation college student experience, their cultural values, sense of belonging, the support and resources for Latina college students, and their mental health are all relevant to determining their advancement in a postsecondary degree (Storlie et al., 2016). The research that will be discussed in the literature review goes more in depth to the unique variables simultaneously working together as barriers for first-generation Latina college students pursuing a postsecondary education. In order to increase student persistence for first-generation Latina college students, Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) must have a clear understanding of how this population perceives a sense of belonging on campus. This research will be able to help determine the direction that PWIs should take in order to help first-generation Latina college students navigate the various barriers they face when pursuing a higher education degree in order to increase retention of this student population.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine the sense of belonging of first-generation Latina college students at a PWI. The study investigated ways in which first-generation Latinas find a sense of community within a college environment where they are the minority. The purpose of doing this research at a PWI was to further see if there are programs and spaces already in place where this population can fully integrate themselves. At the conclusion of the study, recommendations were made on how to properly support first generation Latina students at a PWI.

## **Assumptions and Limitations**

This study was only limited to first-generation Latina college students at Rowan University, which is considered a PWI. Additionally, participants of study had completed at least one year of college in order to partake in the study. The study included five undergraduate students and one graduate student. The graduate student that participated completed their undergraduate degree at Rowan University and therefore could meet the criteria. The study attempted to capture how well this population perceives a sense of belonging at this particular PWI. Students that completed their undergraduate degree in another institution may have had a different experience. Additionally, including graduate and doctoral students' experience from another institution as part of their undergraduate experience may affect their perception and cause the student to compare their undergraduate institution to their graduate or doctoral institution. This study was also not reflective of the Latino male college student population as well as Latina students that are second or third generation college students, therefore experiences may or may not vary as it pertains to a sense of belonging in PWI.

## **Operational Definitions**

1. First-Generation College Student: the first in their family to attend college; parents did not attend a college or university; siblings can also be considered first-generation.
2. Latina: a woman or girl of Latin American origin or descent
3. Predominantly White Institution (PWI): institutions of higher learning in which White individuals account for 50% or greater of the student enrollment.
4. Sense of Belonging: “contrasting with sense of alienation, is an important protective factor involved in socioemotional well-being, playing a uniquely important role in the healthy development of individuals from non-majority ethnic/racial or cultural groups” (Sims et al., 2020)

## **Research Questions**

This study addresses the following questions:

1. What is the student experience of a first-generation Latina college student at a Predominantly White college campus like Rowan University?
2. How do first-generation Latina college students perceive their sense of belonging in their campus environment?
3. In what ways are first-generation Latina college students getting involved in a PWI college campus?
4. What programs are already built in place to support first generation Latina college students in persisting their college education?

## **Overview of the Study**

Chapter II provides a review of the literature that gives insight to the negative effects that a lack of sense of belonging can bring up among Latina college students as it relates to their mental health. It also discusses the challenges faced as a first-generation college student, conflicting culture values that pose an additional barrier, as well as support and resources for first-gen Latinas.

Chapter III clarifies the process and approach to the study. Included in this chapter is also what the ideal population this study is looking for, as well as an explanation of the data collection instrument, how it is being collected, and analyzed.

Chapter IV discusses the findings of the study by going over themes that were formulated from the interviews. The themes contain all the data gathered that help to answer the research questions.

Chapter V summarizes the entire study and discusses the findings that are compared to the literature from Chapter II. Recommendations for further practice and research are also included in this chapter.

## **Chapter II**

### **Review of the Literature**

#### **First-Generation College Students**

First-generation college students face a number of challenges while pursuing a postsecondary education; one of those is navigating the college system for the first time (Roksa et al., 2020). First-generation college students are defined as the first in their family to attend college. The parents of a first-generation college student did not further their education past a high school diploma (Moreno, 2021). These students usually do not have anyone in their family to go to about the college application process and once admitted are faced with navigating a system they are unfamiliar with (Roksa et al., 2020). Academically, first-generation college students are continuously underprepared for the rigorous workload that a college education demands (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012). Therefore, they are more prone to dropping out or taking a semester off which ultimately sets their graduation back, making them a population in need of institutional support services. From the start of being admitted into college it takes marginalized students about six years to finish a bachelor's degree and this is often due to their economic disadvantage to their White peers (Museus & Ravello, 2010). This signifies that racial and ethnic identity also play a factor in student persistence amongst this population of students.

Postsecondary institutions sometimes fail to recognize the unique challenges that first-generation college students face (Williams, 2017). There is a lack of understanding of how to adequately support these students in continuing their postsecondary education (Espino, 2020). However, despite the disadvantages first-generation college students

face, this population often persists through adversity. There is no room for failure and often the resiliency they demonstrate stems from a motivating drive to advance their families economically (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012). Gloria & Castellanos (2012) referenced this population as academically hardworking in comparison to their fellow second-generation college peers.

Along with being the first in their family to attend college, the unique financial barriers first-generation college students face sometimes prohibit them from being able to attend a four-year university, forcing them to enroll into two-year community colleges. This population of students frequently feels obligated to monetarily contribute to their families as many times they come from working-class family backgrounds (Sy & Romero, 2008). The expectation to contribute financially to their families may suggest the family already struggles to make ends meet, therefore these students may fear accumulating more debt by going to a four-year institution (Sy & Romero, 2008). They are more likely to not stay on campus and choose to commute to school in order to save money (Espino, 2020). Consequently, this can lead to them possibly enrolling in school part-time in order to financially contribute to their household forcing them to take longer to graduate (Museus & Ravello, 2010). This creates further tension between fulfilling the financial obligation they feel they have with their families and their college education (Sims et al., 2020).

## **Cultural Values for Latina Women**

Culture, values, and life roles play a significant role in first-generation Latinas making important decisions related to pursuing a career and education (Storlie et al., 2016). Latina college students are typically born in the United States to immigrant parents or are immigrants themselves (Liang et al., 2017). For Latina college students completing their degrees is a way of accomplishing this sense of fulfillment as typically college education is incredibly valued by their immigrant parents (Matos, 2015). Often identified as a misfit within higher education, first-generation Latina college students face more than the challenge of being the first in their family to attend college (Ballard, 2021; Gloria & Castellanos, 2012). The multiple intersecting identities that Latina college students carry puts them at a greater disadvantage than their male and White counterparts (Liang et al., 2017). There is an ongoing theme of having to choose between putting their family first or their education first (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012). There is a big commitment to maintaining familial relationships either by spending time together or living in close proximity in the Latinx population compared to White families (Covarrubias et al., 2014). Family obligations can affect the experiences of Latina college students in postsecondary education. Sibling caretaking, contributing financially, and language/cultural brokering are identified as just some of the family obligations Latina women have to fulfill (Sy & Romero, 2008). Consequently, there are both positive and negative effects to cultural values in Latina college students' postsecondary experience (Corona et al., 2017).

Gloria & Castellanos (2012) discuss the experiences of seven Latina students and the perception of both a mental health provider and student services professionals on the



needs they had identified with this specific student population. In this study, stress and the pressure of family obligations were examined as well as the demands of academia on first-generation Latinas pursuing a postsecondary degree. Those who identified as second-generation Latina college students were never questioned by family on whether or not they would be attending college and felt that nothing got in the way of them getting into college (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012). The participants that identified as first-generation described college as a privilege and mentioned the stressful component that family played when the desire to attend a college far from home came up. This study provides a deeper understanding of the experiences and differences between first- and second-generation Latina college students. It also emphasizes that family plays a complex role in academic persistence among first-generation Latina college students.

Matos (2015) discusses the influence of familial engagement on academic success of Latino/a college students. In this study Matos (2015) uses Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth framework that declares six forms of cultural capital: aspirational, familial, linguistic, navigational, resistant, and social. However aspirational and familial capital were the main focus in the findings. The study was conducted on 24 Latino/a college students (21 of them being women), at three institutions that were predominately White institutions in the Northeast region. The study stated the importance of these two cultural capitals in formulating a new cultural capital known as 'finishing' (Matos, 2015). Matos (2015) explained that despite adversities this population of students face they were determined to finish and complete their college education. Participants shared the importance of repaying their parent(s) for all their sacrifices by reaching the finish line (graduating with a college degree).

## **Sense of Belonging and Latina Women**

In order to foster a sense of belonging for Latina women on college campuses intentional programs designed to help them navigate their unique experience within postsecondary education are necessary. Programs that are specifically built to target underrepresented minorities like Latina women can increase their academic skills and help them gain social capital (Ovink & Veazey, 2011). The goal is to engage students and have them fully immersed into the campus culture. However, achieving a sense of belonging in an academic setting is more challenging for this group of students (Storlie et al., 2016). Therefore, faculty must also take part in establishing a sense of belonging for students and have a better understanding on how to foster a more welcoming classroom environment.

Furthermore Gloria & Castellanos (2012) discussed in their research that it was extremely important for first-generation Latina college students to have a space where they can freely express themselves without scolding; this heightened their confidence and promoted a sense of belonging. At predominately White institutions however, first-generation Latina college students perceive their environment as unwelcoming specifically as it relates to their ethnic identity (Ponciano et al., 2020). It is not unusual to experience racial and ethnic discrimination on these particular college campuses, therefore making it more challenging for this population to feel safe and create belonging on campus. Ponciano et al. (2020), discussed in their research that a strong sense of belonging within Latina college students' ethnic group positively impacts their mental health academic achievements (Ponciano et al., 2020). Additionally, the researchers discussed the importance of having peer support, specifically students who are also of

different ethnic and racial backgrounds, because of their similarities in higher education struggles.

### **Support and Resources for First-Generation Latina College Students**

Building a supportive network is critical for the success of first-generation Latina college students. When this student population decides to enroll into college, the first step in helping them to persist through continuing their education is establishing a community at their college campus. The supportive network that first-generation Latina college students build has to comprise a series of individuals. Staff, faculty, and peers all play an integral part in the success of first-generation Latina college students (Espino, 2020). Similarly, Ovink & Veazey (2011) identified three main factors, two of which included the impact of peer group culture and the involvement of advisors in the success of underrepresented minority students. More specifically, it is important for first-generation Latina college students to connect with peers that have similar experiences to them. This helps them to not feel so alone in the process of pursuing a college degree while simultaneously creating a support group amongst individuals that can relate to the first-generation college student experience. Ovink & Veazey (2011) focused on underrepresented minorities in scientific majors. The study was conducted on alumni from the Biology Undergraduate Scholars Program (BUSP) geared towards minority students in biological science majors at a university on the West Coast. The study examined how successful the program was for alumni in helping them navigate their academic experience in preparation for their professional career (Ovink & Veazey, 2011). The results of the study found that academic advisors were instrumental in the students' success, especially in helping students find the right balance of course load (Ovink &

Veazey, 2011). This study additionally amplified the importance of creating spaces where students of color do not feel the pressure of having to fit in, therefore validating the importance of peer support groups (Ovink & Veazey, 2011).

Uniquely enough for Latina college students they are less likely to receive the support they need due to being perceived as students who are incapable of accomplishing their academic goals. In order to help them achieve college success, academic advisors in particular hold a great deal of responsibility in fostering a connection with first-generation Latina college students. Museus & Ravello (2010) discuss the importance of academic advising in ensuring the retention and success of students of color at PWIs. Their study took a semi-structured approach in order to grasp an in-depth description of students' experiences at both a research and state university as well as one community college. The study was done on 14 academic advisors and 31 students of color (9 Asian American, 9 Black, 13 Latino/a) ranging from 18-32 years old and 21 being female and the other 10 males. The study captured interviews that ranged from 1.0-1.5 hours long (Museus & Ravello, 2010). The findings stated that in order to create an effective relationship with students' academic advisors must be welcoming, accessible, supportive, maintain constant communication with the student, and be well organized (Museus & Ravello, 2010). Proactive academic advising helps to ensure constant communication and maintains academic advisors aware of any barriers that first-generation college students may be facing. Additionally, humanizing academic advising is just as important and ultimately academic advisors have to be committed to the success of their students, specifically for racially and ethnically marginalized students.

## **Latina Women and Mental Health**

Corona, et al. (2017) discussed the significance of positive family connection and cultural values in Latino/a student's lives in order to promote mental health. The study examined whether cultural values affect the relationship between cultural stressors and mental health symptoms (anxiety, depression, and psychological stress) (Corona et al., 2017; Umaña-Taylor, 2010). The literature stated that there are both negative and positive impacts to cultural values. Ultimately cultural stressors can have a negative impact on the academic performance of Latino/a students and can heighten mental health symptoms (Corona et al., 2017; Umaña-Taylor, 2010). Familism support is noted as one of the most influential cultural factors and should be a lead in cultivating programming initiatives geared in alleviating psychological stress amongst Latino/a student's (Corona et al., 2017). Familism or *familismo* is described as a cultural value that amplifies the importance of family connection further promoting the collectivist mindset (Sy & Romero, 2008). The high level of importance placed on family can consequently affect Latina women as they persist through postsecondary education (Rodriguez et al., 2021). A known common feeling that first-generation Latinas face is survivor guilt which leans into this idea of achieving success that the family of the student could not (Moreno, 2021). Additionally, acculturative stress has posed a great deal of weight that Latina college students have to carry when they are not receiving adequate support by their institution (Corona et al., 2017). Acculturative stress can come in different forms from not being proficient in the English language, to feeling pressure to adapt to the dominant culture, and at the same time feeling disconnected from their ethnic identity (Ponciano et al., 2020).

Furthermore, Sims et al., (2020) discussed the impact of financial barriers and exposure to violence in first-generation Latina college students on their mental health. The findings stated that exposure to violence and a lack of sense of belonging heightened psychological distress among Latina college students which included depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress (Sims et al., 2020). Additionally, the research stated that in order for Latina college students to persist through college a sense of belonging needs to be established to support their well-being in higher education (Sims et al., 2020).

### **Summary**

The literature review discussed various important topics including the first-generation college student experience, cultural values in Latina women, sense of belonging, support and resources for Latina college students, and mental health as it relates to Latina women. Based on the research discussed there are unique variables simultaneously working together as barriers in the advancement of first-generation Latina college students pursuing a postsecondary education. In order to increase student persistence for first-generation Latina college students, PWIs must have a clear understanding of how this population perceives a sense of belonging on campus (Wheeler, 2021). This research study explores the perception of community and belonging for first-generation Latina college students at a PWI such as Rowan University.

## **Chapter III**

### **Methodology**

#### **Context of the Study**

This study was conducted at Rowan University's main campus in Glassboro, New Jersey. Rowan University is a public research institution, with a total population of 19,678 students, both undergraduate and graduate students (Rowan University, 2021). Of the 19,678 students only 33% of those students come from underrepresented backgrounds. In fall 2020, about 12.96% (1,253) of students enrolled were Hispanic/Latina whereas in fall 2021 that number decreased to 12.90% (1,223) (DEI KPI Enrollment, 2021). The other two campuses remain in Camden and Stratford, New Jersey. Rowan University offers 90 bachelor degrees, 48 masters degrees, 2 professional degrees, and 8 doctoral degrees. The average class size is 20 students and the student-faculty ratio are 17:1. They also have 1,714 faculty members throughout their three campuses (Rowan University, 2021).

Moreover, Rowan University has a few programs in place designated for first-generation college students. The first program is the Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) program, which is a state-funded program that provides financial assistance and academic support services for low-income first generation and academically promising students. Another program offered is RISE, which is a scholarship program designed for highly motivated first-generation students, different from EOF, as there are no financial criteria (Rowan University, 2021). Additionally, Rowan University has in place a first-generation task force called Flying First. This program aims to provide opportunities that

will enhance first-generation college students' personal, professional, academic, and social life at the Rowan college campus (Rowan University, 2021).

Overall about 27% of Rowan's undergraduate student population is first-generation, 1,611 first-generation college students form a part of the College of Science and Mathematics, 894 are a part of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, 670 are a part of the Rohrer College of Business, 599 are a part of the Edelman College of Communication and Creative Arts, 411 in the College of Education, 335 in the Henry M. Rowan College of Engineering, 327 in the School of Health Professions, 155 in the College of Performing Arts, and 69 in the School of Earth & Environment (Rowan University, 2021). In March 2021 the Flying First program was given a recognition award by the Center for First-Generation Student Success.

This study addressed the following questions:

1. What is the student experience of first-generation Latina college students at a Predominantly White college campus like Rowan University?
2. How do first-generation Latina college students perceive their sense of belonging in their campus environment?
3. In what ways are first-generation Latina college students getting involved in a Predominantly White college campus?
4. What programs are already built in place to support first generation Latina college students in persisting their college education?



## **Population and Sampling**

A snowball sampling method was used to gather participants for this study. Snowball sampling was used through a means of networking and recommendations from participants already in the study (McMillan, 2016). The population for this study was specifically first-generation Latina college students that have completed at least one academic year at Rowan University. The target population is within the Educational Opportunity Fund program, which is geared towards serving first-generation college students. Another existing program serving underrepresented groups on campus is the Dr. Harley E. Flack Student Mentoring Program. Since I work within the Office of Social Justice, Inclusion, and Conflict Resolution it was easier to contact students that were potentially able to participate in this study. For the purpose of this study, the goal was to have 15 participants that identify as a Latina woman and are first-generation college students. The selection of participants was purposeful as the study was intended to capture the rich experiences of students with these two specific identities (Storlie et al., 2016).

## **Research Design**

Qualitative research uses natural settings in order to capture behaviors and perceptions that take place naturally, and therefore this method is usually also described as field research (McMillan, 2016). Qualitative research captures multiple perspectives of participants. Doing so requires a great amount of time to acquire information from the participants and no information is unimportant (McMillan, 2016). The end result of qualitative research helps to inform practice by bringing awareness to the background of the issue (Lester et al., 2020). This study utilized a phenomenological qualitative research

design. Context is an important component in understanding the phenomenon being studied, because qualitative research focuses on the natural experience of participants via verbal reports (McMillan, 2016). The thoughts, emotions, and behaviors of participants in qualitative research are the most vital part in understanding the phenomenon. To that point, participants' perceptions are their own reality and interpretation, making it socially constructed (McMillan, 2016).

For the purpose of this study a phenomenological approach was used in order to capture the lived experiences of first-generation Latina college students at a PWI. The root of understanding phenomenology is what and how participants experience something, in this study sense of belonging was the phenomenon being studied. The point of studying participants' lived experiences is to get to a deeper understanding of a common meaning (McMillan, 2016).

### **Data Collection Procedures**

In this qualitative research study my data collection strategy utilized semi-structured interviews, which also allowed room for follow-up questions (McMillan, 2016). The interviews started off with simple questions that allowed me to build trust with the participants. This was done with the purpose of building rapport with the participants before going into the interview (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012). After IRB approval, participants were asked questions regarding sense of belonging, therefore a proper definition of that was provided in order to help participants understand what they were being asked. This helped to eliminate any confusion (Sy & Romero, 2008). Moreover, participants were contacted via email and invited to participate in this study.

Participants were given the option to either do an interview via Zoom or face to face. Students were given a pseudonym to keep their identity private and confidential.

### **Data Analysis**

The semi-structured interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed verbatim. Coding was used as a means to identify themes through common phrases or words mentioned during the interview (McMillan, 2016). Developing patterns through the participant responses helped to develop main themes that informed findings for the study (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012). The study followed an inductive data analysis approach unique to qualitative research. After all the data was gathered through the semi-structured interviews, the transcripts were read and analyzed closely, coded, and then sent and verified by the participants. These steps were taken to enhance the trustworthiness of the study and to ensure that participants were being portrayed accurately. Categories were then created, and redundant categories were eliminated (McMillan, 2016). This process led to help formulate the findings.

## **Chapter IV**

### **Findings**

#### **Profile of the Population/Sample**

The participants in these interviews were students that are first generation Latinas that attend Rowan University and had completed at least one academic year at the institution. A snowball sampling method was used which is also known as network sampling and it involves participants recommending or nominating people who can fit the criteria of the study (McMillan, 2016). I posted the recruitment flyer on social media, specifically Instagram which included the purpose, criteria, my contact information, context of the study, and how the study would be conducted. The recruitment flyer was shared by 45 people and saved by four. The Instagram accounts reached were 1,001, content interactions were 96. Out of the 45 Instagram accounts that shared the recruitment flyer, two accounts tagged me and were student organizations of Rowan University. In total there were six participants in the study. Two students contacted me via email, but only one fit the criteria. The other student who did not fit the criteria had not yet completed an academic year at Rowan University. Two other students directly messaged me on Instagram and I proceeded to get their emails to coordinate an interview, both fit the criteria. Two of the other participants were recommended by a university administrator, and the last participant is a student I directly messaged as a recommendation from one of the other participants. Five out of the six participants were undergraduate students, and one was a graduate student that attended Rowan University as an undergraduate. To protect the identity of the participants I created pseudonyms which are fake names used in research (McMillan, 2016).

The data was collected and analyzed using an inductive data analysis approach (McMillan, 2016). All six participants were interviewed via zoom and transcriptions from the interview were generated by the actual platform. The interviews were recorded to ensure transcripts could be analyzed accurately. The transcripts were used to pull out quotes that had keywords, phrases, or topics. Quotes from the interviews were put in potential categories and then revised to eliminate redundancy (McMillan, 2016). As I created the categories from analyzing the interview transcripts I went back to the interview protocol, my research questions, and key issues that came up across some or all participants.

## **Results**

### ***First-Generation Latinas and Family***

Each of the participants discussed community and family, what that meant to them, and how it affects them as a first-generation Latina college student. Two of the participants, Brenda and Araceli, described the financial obligation they have to their families. Whether it is contributing financially at times to house and medical bills or simply helping to pay bills electronically, there is an evident sense of obligation to help their family. Araceli after being asked how she balances life between home and school stated “I need to figure that out myself.” During the interview Brenda mentioned, “I’m very, like, worried about, like, if he’s going to be okay because of his age and cause of not having a job so I’ve been stressed out.” She speaks about her father and some health issues he has experienced and the emotional distress of not having enough money at times to enjoy college like some of her other peers.

In addition, it can be very challenging for first-generation Latinas to maintain familial relationships while in college, and they are even made to feel bad about it. Araceli mentions, “My mom tends to guilt trip me,” and that her father tells her comments like “You’re so far away, you never want to be here or be at home.” Even though it is challenging to keep in contact with their families they are still a big motivation for this population to reach success. For multiple participants their family comes before their education. Brenda stated, “I’m trying to do good in school for the sake of my family,” and another participant, Mercedes, when mentioning how she balances life between home and school, states “I feel like I’m not that good at that. Family to me is very important, so I feel like if my family were to need me I would definitely drop school.” The same goes for another participant Celia who says “Sometimes you have to pick your family over your education.” Therefore, it is evident that a weight is placed more heavily on the families of first-generation Latinas. Family is a core motivational piece to the academic and professional success of this population. Araceli explained “I feel like whatever opportunity I grab, like, is something beneficial to not only me but like my younger role models like my younger brother, my, my younger cousins.” First-generation Latinas carry a commitment to advancing their families on their back, but if their family needs them they will drop their commitment to their college education and be there for their families however that looks like for them.

### *Campus Involvement*

All participants expressed the ways in which they are involved on campus. Some participants mentioned being a part of cultural student organizations and greek organizations. Other participants said they had student worker positions and internships within the university and one participant stated they do volunteer work. While all participants are involved on their campus, Celia states “Oftentimes too it feels like there's not enough representation and yeah, so that's why I started that,” referring to her role as a success coach at the university and continued to express the lack of representation and the need for student leaders with her shared identities as a first-generation Latina. While some feel the need to step in and show representation, Brenda shares her thoughts on low-attendance of Latina students at campus events:

I feel like a lot of Latinas are scared to come out, like, and I feel like a lot of students don't come out to events that are, like, made for everyone... a lot of these ethnic groups, a lot of people from all these backgrounds don't really show up to things because they're, like, oh they don't see other people that actually look like them.

Brenda continues to share “If I don't see a lot of people who look like me I wouldn't feel comfortable really going to events like that” therefore there is no desire to attend events that are not catered towards her as a first-generation Latina. It is important for this population to find affinity spaces and safe havens where they can create a familial space, and it was apparent when participants were asked about where they feel a sense of community and belonging. Mercedes shared “Definitely with my family just because I mean, we laugh, we joke, we also can have difficult times but then at the end of the day I

know they have my back no matter what. They're always very supportive.” In order to create that sense of community and belonging, establishing a home away from home has proved to be important.

### ***Inclusivity and Cultural Competence***

As a predominantly White institution, participants are very aware of the demographics of Rowan University and expressed their thoughts surrounding inclusion and cultural competence. Brenda stated “Here it’s predominantly White but at the same time it’s like... like I don’t know they fake the funk in a sense that ‘yeah we’re diverse’ but at the same time they’re not really.” Another participant, Mercedes, expressed “The options that they have I feel, like, it’s very limited” referring to food options provided by the university and programming.

An emphasis was put on the lack of cultural competence by the university, Brenda stated, “They don’t really know what they’re talking about when they bring up cultural things” and Mercedes also added in her interview:

There’s more to it than just rice and beans. I think for diversity for them they need to be more educated... while it makes it seem like they’re doing something nice for us, it can also come off as very offensive.

For participants, programming and services that show off as culturally inclusive come off as performative. Mercedes expressed wanting “More celebrations of events that’s important to Hispanic cultures” noting a need to celebrate Hispanic cultures beyond what is popular in the media. Celia also stated “Motivational speakers that come in don’t look like me, and they don’t represent my community,” expressing a concern regarding inclusive programming for students of color at Rowan University.



### *Faculty and Staff Representation*

When participants were asked what would make them feel more connected to their campus faculty and staff representation came up as the most prevalent in their answers. For Mercedes:

I don't see a lot of Hispanic teachers there. I feel like all my, yeah, all my teachers have been White. I mean like no disrespect to them but it's just, I don't know I feel like as a child when you see like someone be in this specific platform it kind of just gives you like 'Ok I could get there'

There is a sense of motivation through faculty representation that helps first-generation Latinas envision themselves to be successful. Celia stated "One of my biggest things is always seeing people who look like me and I know this sounds weird." From this quote it is evident that the student is struggling between the desire for great representation and the feeling of seeming like she is "asking for too much," given that she doesn't see much happening for first-generation Latinas within her campus community. Celia also expressed "I feel like Rowan is either Black or White, there's no in between, and it's not like anybody talks about the in-between," which alludes to first-generation Latinas feeling invisible on their campus. As Celia continued to state her thoughts she added, "I can't think of one professor I've had who is Latinx," which was a similar response to Araceli who stated "I have yet to meet a Latina professor other than the Spanish department," suggesting that there is no hypervisibility of first-generation Latina across faculty. Students notice a lack of commitment from the university to hire more faculty representative of this population.

Representation within administrators and staff is just as important to first-generation Latinas and Anahi, the only graduate student participant, expressed “I think if I had, like, supervisors and, like, mentors that I could see myself reflected in,” and continues to go into the importance of finding administrators and staff that can serve as mentors but that also share identities with her. This goes back to what Mercedes stated earlier, that representation helps first-generation Latinas envision their success in the career goals they have set out for themselves.

## **Chapter V**

### **Summary, Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations**

#### **Summary of the Study**

As previously mentioned for first-generation Latina college students their progress to complete their college education can look different from other student populations. They are greatly affected by multiple factors like their experience as first-generation college students and conflicting cultural values that can have a great effect on their mental health. Particularly at times this population can undergo survivor guilt which refers to the unaccompanied experience of surpassing family accomplishments (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015). Other significant variables previously discussed include their sense of community and belonging as well as the support resources offered at their campus. A better grasp of how first-generation Latinas perceive their sense of belonging can allow for a greater experience and insight on support services needed to help this student group succeed beyond their academic degree.

This study aimed to have a better understanding of how first-generation Latinas perceived their sense of belonging at a predominantly White institution. There were six participants that were interviewed and all completed at least one academic year at Rowan University. Participants were asked a series of questions about community, in what ways were they involved as a student at their university, factors that could keep them from being involved, balancing life between home and school, and what would make them feel more connected to their campus.

## **Discussion of the Findings**

A few things to note in the findings in accordance with previous literature is first the role family plays in the advancement and success of first-generation Latinas. First-generation Latinas feel more of an achievement from attaining a college education because for many their motivation to complete their degrees is their family. As mentioned in the findings some participants stated they would abandon their education if their family needed them. One way in which this population is needed by their families is sibling caretaking. One participant stated their role as an older sibling to their younger siblings can lead to something more on their plate. Another observation taken from previous literature in comparison to the findings is intentional programming. Participants noted the value in inclusive programming and the lack of cultural competence in Rowan University's programming that is meant and advertised as inclusive. Lastly, faculty and staff support were described as integral for the success of first-generation Latinas in previous literature and reigns to be true in the findings as participants wish they could see more representation of first-generation Latinas within faculty and administrators.

There were no significant differences in the responses between the graduate student that participated and the undergraduate students. The graduate student emphasized the importance of having representation within faculty and staff that can also serve as mentors for this student population. Specifically, for the graduate student, mentors that have a similar background to the student was noted as important in fostering their development as a professional. The overall responses from all of the participants were consistent with previous literature on the first-generation college student experience and as Latina women at a PWI.

## **Recommendations for Practice**

Participants in this study disclosed ways in which Rowan University could help to increase the sense of belonging of first-generation Latinas therefore I recommended the following:

1. Increase representation across faculty and staff. Rowan University would benefit from increasing the number of first-generation Latina professors and administrators in the different academic departments and offices in order to help first-generation Latinas increase their ability to see themselves in the professions they aspire to be. I believe that current hiring practices should be examined to see if they are considering the population of first-generation Latinas at the institution.
2. Increase cultural competency through training, workshops, and practices. There needs to be a commitment to increasing the academic confidence of first-generation Latinas through cultural competence. Intentional education and programming that can help faculty and staff have a better understanding of this population. Policies and practices need revision as currently this population does not feel visible or represented on campus through programming and overall at the university.
3. Increase the number of scholarships and financial assistance for first-generation Latinas. I suggest scholarships specifically for this student population. A resource section with internal and external scholarships that this population could explore and apply for will help a lot in minimizing financial stressors. Additionally, exploring housing grants through university funds.

4. Develop and fortify support systems for the families of first-generation Latinas.

One participant mentioned their parents not understanding the time demand of being in college as well as the expectations set upon them as first-generation college students. Even more challenging is the language barrier for some parents to understand the culture of college and how their child has to navigate it.

Therefore, I suggest parent informationals in Spanish that go in depth about everything college related specifically focusing on how navigating college looks like for first-generation Latinas. In addition, another student mentioned medical check-ups for students' families, this evidently states the need for healthcare resources because socio-economically some families cannot afford healthcare. My recommendation is to continue to look into different ways to support this population and their families.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

My recommendations for future research are to further investigate the effects of socio-economic status on first-generation Latinas as it relates to their college experience. Particularly focusing on how their socio-economic status affects their involvement on campus. Some students, because of their financial obligation to their families, may not be able to afford joining student organizations. In addition, comparing the sense of belonging for first-generation Latinas at predominantly white institutions vs. a Hispanic serving institution (HSIs) can potentially allow future researchers to look at the campus resources already offered at HSIs for this population.

## **Conclusions**

Based on the findings, perception of community and belonging at a predominantly White institution like Rowan University can bring up a few issues that are worth looking more into for the university. The resources for first-generation Latinas to succeed are evidently low in helping them achieve a higher sense of belonging. Not having parents that went to college forces first-generation Latinas to create their own road map to success. In addition, not having faculty and administrators to lean on for support that look like them makes it difficult to envision success. It is almost like a boost of confidence for this population to see people like them succeed and it makes their goals seem more attainable.

First-generation Latinas hold multiple jobs, internships, student leadership positions, and more as mentioned by several of the participants. This student population does not have resources or connections as opposed to their other peers and therefore rely on opportunities offered by their campus in order to foster connections that can help them to build a network. This can explain the need for faculty and administrator representation but also the need for inclusive programming. First-generation Latinas need campus resources that will help to minimize barriers that retain them from achieving success.

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**Appendix A**  
**IRB Approval Letter**



**DHHS Federal Wide Assurance Identifier:** FWA00007111  
**IRB Chair Person:** Dr. Ane Johnson  
**IRB Director:** Eric Gregory  
**Effective Date:** February 2, 2022

**Notice of Approval - Initial**

**Study ID:** PRO-2021-588  
**Title:** Finding Community as First-Generation Latina College Students in a Predominantly White Institution  
**Principal Investigator:** Stephanie Lezotte  
**Study Coordinator:** Alondra Martinez  
**Sponsor:** Department Funded

**Submission Type:** Initial  
**Submission Status:** Approved

**Approval Date:** February 2, 2022  
**Expiration Date:** February 1, 2023  
**Approval Cycle:** 12 months  
**Continuation Review Required:** Yes  
**Closure Required:** Yes

**Review Type:** Expedited  
**Expedited Category:** 6. Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.  
7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

**Pregnant Women, Human Fetus, and Neonates Code:** N/A  
**Pediatric/Children Code:** N/A  
**Prisoner(s) – Biomedical or Behavioral:** N/A

**ALL APPROVED INVESTIGATOR(S) MUST COMPLY WITH THE FOLLOWING:**

1. Conduct the research in accordance with the protocol, applicable laws and regulations, and the principles of research ethics as set forth in the Belmont Report.
- 2a. Continuing Review: Approval is valid until the protocol expiration date shown above. To avoid lapses in approval, submit a continuation application at least eight weeks before the study expiration date.
- 2b. Progress Report: Approval is valid until the protocol expiration date shown above. To avoid lapses, an annual progress report is required at least 21 days prior to the expiration date.
- 3a. Expiration of IRB Approval: If IRB approval expires, effective the date of expiration and until the continuing review approval is issued: All research activities must stop unless the IRB finds that it is in the best interest of individual subjects to continue. (This determination shall be based on a separate written request from the PI to the IRB.) No new subjects may be enrolled and no samples/charts/surveys may be collected, reviewed, and/or analyzed.
- 3b. Human Subjects Research Training: Proper training in the conduct of human subjects research must be current and not expired. It is the responsibility of the Principal Investigator and the investigator to complete training when expired. Any modifications and renewals will not be approved until training is not expired and current.
4. Amendments/Modifications/Revisions: If you wish to change any aspect of this study after the approval date mentioned in this letter, including but not limited to, study procedures, consent form(s), investigators, advertisements, the protocol document, investigator drug brochure, or accrual goals, you are required to obtain IRB review and approval prior to implementation of these changes unless necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to subjects. This policy is also applicable to progress reports.
5. Unanticipated Problems: Unanticipated problems involving risk to subjects or others must be reported to the IRB Office (45 CFR 46, 21 CFR 312, 812) as required, in the appropriate time as specified in the attachment online at: <https://research.rowan.edu/officeofresearch/compliance/irb/index.html>
6. Protocol Deviations and Violations: Deviations from/violations of the approved study protocol must be reported to the IRB Office (45 CFR 46, 21 CFR 312, 812) as required, in the appropriate time as specified in the attachment online at: <https://research.rowan.edu/officeofresearch/compliance/irb/index.html>
7. Consent/Assent: The IRB has reviewed and approved the consent and/or assent process, waiver and/or alteration described in this protocol as required by 45 CFR 46 and 21 CFR 50, 56, (if FDA regulated research). Only the versions of the documents included in the approved process may be used to document informed consent and/or assent of study subjects; each subject must receive a copy of the approved form(s); and a copy of each signed form must be filed in a secure place in the subject's medical/patient/research record.
8. Completion of Study: Notify the IRB when your study has been completed or stopped for any reason. Neither study closure by the sponsor nor the investigator removes the obligation for submission of timely continuing review application, progress report or final report.
9. The Investigator(s) did not participate in the review, discussion, or vote of this protocol.
10. Research protocol and study documentation and instruments is approved as of the Approval Date on this letter. All final approved versions of the study documentation, including but not limited to the protocol, advertisements and recruitment instruments, pre-screening instruments, surveys, interviews, scripts, data collection documents, all manner of consent forms, and all other documentation attached to this submission are approved for final use by the investigators up to the expiration date listed above (Expiration Date) in this letter.
11. Letter Comments: There are no additional comments.

**CONFIDENTIALITY NOTICE:** This email communication may contain private, confidential, or legally privileged information intended for the sole use of the designated and/or duly authorized recipients(s). If you are not the intended recipient or have received this email in error, please notify the sender immediately by email and permanently delete all copies of this email including all attachments without reading them. If you are the intended recipient, secure the contents in a manner that conforms to all applicable state and/or federal requirements related to privacy and confidentiality of such information.

# Appendix B

## Interview Protocol



### Interview Protocol

#### Introduction:

Hello, my name is Alondra Martinez, and I am a Master's student at Rowan University. First, I would like to thank you for taking time to participate in this interview. I would like to talk with you about sense of belonging for first-generation Latina college students at a predominantly because

This interview will be recorded for the purposes of ensuring accuracy in reporting. Your identity will remain confidential and will not be shared. Following the interview, all data will be transcribed. Recordings will be maintained until completion of the thesis, at which time they will be destroyed. In the transcripts you can be referred to by a pseudonym, ensuring that information shared during this interview is not associated with you. With this information, I want to remind you that this is strictly a volunteer activity so you may decline to participate at any time. If you are okay with moving forward, I would first like to get your consent and then ask you some questions.

1. What's your definition of community?
2. What does community look like to you?
3. Where do you feel a sense of community and belonging?
4. In what ways are you involved as a student at Rowan University?
5. What would make you feel more connected to campus?
6. How has your sense of belonging developed since your first year at Rowan University?
7. What external factors could keep you from being involved at school?
8. Describe how you balance life between home and school?
9. According to research many latina students struggle with familial obligations and school involvement, if this statement feels true to you describe what you wish could change in order for there to be a balance between both.

I've come to the end of my questions. I want to thank you for your honest opinions – I appreciate your participation. I will send you a transcribed version of this interview so you have the opportunity to ensure accuracy or clarify statements as necessary – May I reach out to you again if I have any additional questions or need clarifications?

Version Date: 12/05/2021

RESERVED FOR IRB APPROVAL STAMP
DO NOT REMOVE
Rowan University PRO-2021-588 Approved on 2-2-2022 Expires on 2-1-2023