THE EXPERIENCES OF LATINA STUDENTS AT A PREDOMINANTLY WHITE UNIVERSITY

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A Dissertation

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This qualitative study used focus groups to explore and understand the experiences of 13 self-identified Latina students who were attending a predominantly White university in the Midwest. The use of Chicana feminist theory and academic and social integration theory helped frame the study. Similarities and differences among Latinas, as well as an exploration of the intersections of gender, race, ethnicity, and culture in relation to the experiences of Latinas while attending college at a predominantly White university in the Midwest were highlighted. Through the exploration of their lived experiences, participants identified the factors and conditions affecting their experiences in college, how family and culture shaped their experiences, and how their perceptions of the campus environment shaped their experiences while in college. The results of this study suggest that maintaining close ties to family members, having a space on campus to practice and enjoy Latino culture, being resilient, and finding their niche in the campus environment through programs focused on underrepresented students were the keys to their persistence in college. Another major finding of this study, that requires further study, is the undesirable change in the relationship between Latina mothers and daughters as the daughter furthers her education. Many participants’ close relationships with their mothers were instrumental to their enrolling in college yet tension arose between mother and daughter as the daughter progressed toward graduation.
This work is dedicated to my mom and dad, Revenna and Earl Charles Begley, Jr. who have always supported my educational and personal dreams, and my maternal and paternal grandparents Cody and Allie Jacobs and Frona and Earl Charles Begley, Sr. who instilled a love of learning in all their children and grandchildren.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The term “Latino” in the United States takes on a primarily racial, economic, and political connotation, a distinction that typically does not exist outside of the United States. It is used within the United States to describe persons who were born in or whose family comes from countries in Central and Latin America as well as many of the Caribbean islands (Torres, Howard-Hamilton, & Cooper, 2003, p. 53). The use of the word Latino to describe such a culturally diverse group of people is widely criticized and debated. As a result of the diversity in culture, language, and customs, it is difficult to adequately characterize the values and characteristics of the Latino population. In fact, the only common factors among Latinos are typically language or cultural underpinnings, such as strong familial ties and religion. What can be agreed upon is that the Latino population in the United States is a very diverse group and is now the largest minority group in the United States (Torres, Howard-Hamilton, & Cooper, 2003).

Calculations in the late 1990s predicted that the Latino population in the United States would outnumber all ethnic and racial groups by 2010, with the exception of Whites (Aponte, 1999; Pachon, 1998; Robinson, 1998). However, in 2003 a study published by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) fast-tracked that prediction, stating that the Latino population in the United States would become the largest minority group by 2005 (Llagas & Snyder, 2003). Based on recent census figures, that prediction was correct. The Hispanic population accounted for 43% of the population growth in the United States between the years of 2000 and 2010, and officially became the largest minority group in the United States in 2006, with an estimated population of 50.5 million (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011a). The overall population in the 2010 census was 308.7 million (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011a). Thirty-four
percent of the Hispanic population is made up of Hispanic youth (5-24 years of age), and they account for more than 18 percent of the total U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). It is estimated that by the year 2020 this group will make up 23% of all U.S. youth (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006).

A study by Marotta and Garcia (2003) found that 27% of Latinos fall below the poverty line in the United States. The average household in Latino families in the United States has four members (U. S. Census Bureau, 2011b), and the poverty line for a family of four in 2011 is $22,350 (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011). In a comparison of median family incomes, Marotta and Garcia found that most Latino families brought home approximately $23,000 less annually than the average White family. Many view education as the key to increasing the socioeconomic status of Latinos (Maggs, 1999). As a means of closing the socioeconomic, cultural, and status gap, many young Latinos are beginning to enroll in higher education, half to three-quarters being the first in their family to go to college (Reisberg, 1999).

The NCES study *Status and Trends in the Education of Hispanics* (Llagas & Snyder, 2003) concluded that two out of every five Latinos over the age of 17 participate in some form of adult education; almost two-thirds of Latinos go on to college right after high school graduation. Latino college enrollment in four-year colleges increased 29% from 1996 to 2001 and overall college enrollment for this group was up to 24% (Fry, 2004).

**Statement of the Problem**

Like other non-majority groups, matters of race, ethnicity, and class can impede a Latino student’s progress toward degree attainment, particularly at predominantly White institutions. Examining higher education from a sociohistorical context reveals a past of exclusionary policies
and overt discrimination toward non-majority students that is hard to overcome. Great emphasis has been placed in recent decades to diversify college campuses; however, perceptions of an institution’s environment can often discourage non-majority students from attending, or if they do attend they do not always feel welcome in a predominantly White environment, especially if their prior educational experience has been in an environment where Latinos are in the majority. “More than three-quarters of all Latina/os in the country attend schools where the student population is over 50 percent people of color” (Orfield, Bachmeier, James, & Eitle, 1997, p. 6). Attending a high school where often one is in the majority and then transitioning to a higher education environment where one becomes a minority could create a great deal of distress for Latino students and could possibly have an adverse effect on his or her academic success and social integration at college.

Research has shown that minority students, defined as non-White students, have more than just the common difficulties, such as effectively managing their time and dealing with homesickness, in adjusting to college (Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996). This is principally true for Latino students; however, for the purposes of this study, Latina students will be the focus. Latinas in particular face many overt and covert barriers to their participation and success in higher education, including stressors related to socioeconomic status, cultural expectations, and under-preparation for college level work (Rodriguez, Guido-DiBrito, Torres, & Talbot, 2000). Furthermore, Latinas come into an educational environment that has for centuries embraced a White male, middle-class paradigm (Aguirre & Martinez, 1993; Canabal, 1993; Erickson & Rodriguez, 1999). Latinas navigating this environment often experience conflict between expectations dictated by the dominant culture and those of their culture of origin. The intersection between two distinct backgrounds is not always clear. “Students from many ethnic
backgrounds often find themselves in the middle of a process that embodies their own psychological development and the pull and push of two or more environments (home and college)” (Ortiz, 1997, p. 3). The sociocultural and contextual stresses that Latina students experience while attempting to acclimatize to a predominantly White higher education environment can produce many challenges to their development as students (Smedley, Myers, & Harrell, 1993).

While we are beginning to learn some important information about our Latino students in higher education, the research performed to date has been about Latino men or Latinos as a collective ethnic group. Therefore, we know very little about women who self-identify as Latina. Furthermore, when we take into consideration the overt and covert barriers that could limit a Latina student’s participation and success in higher education, it becomes clear that we know very little about how to meet their academic and social needs, particularly in a predominantly White setting.

Given the steady rise in the number of Latinas entering higher education, it is vital that we begin discussion and development of theory related to Latina student success while in college. The discussion is necessary because of our ever growing diversity on campus, Latina students’ connection with their “homeland,” which is most often expressed through racial and ethnic identity, and the demographic shifts that are occurring nationally (Torres, Howard-Hamilton, & Cooper, 2003).

**Research Questions**

I conducted a qualitative study that examined the social and academic integration experiences of Latinas as well as the impact of racial/ethnic and gendered experiences on Latina students who chose to attend a predominantly White, four-year public institution located in the
Midwest. While a study conducted in this environment is not necessarily representative of current enrollment demographics in the country, as Latino students predominantly attend Hispanic Serving Institutions or 2-year colleges (Brodie, Steffenson, Valdez, Levin, & Suro, 2002), it provides valuable information about Latina students who chose to attend a four-year public institution in an environment that might be unfavorable to their academic success and social development. Exploration of the challenges and successes of Latina students in this environment was achieved through a constructivist research design. The primary purpose of this study was to add to the knowledge base regarding the experiences of Latina women attending a four-year public higher education institution in the Midwest, namely Bowling Green State University (BGSU).

The research question and sub-questions were as follows:

How do Latinas, attending a predominantly White university in the Midwest, make sense of their experiences while attending college?

a. What factors and conditions do they identify as influencing their experience in college?

b. How do they see their familial and cultural background shaping their collegiate experience?

c. How do they see their perceptions of the campus environment influencing their collegiate experience?

**Definitions**

*Academic experience.* Student participation in degree-seeking activities such as enrolling in courses, attending classes, studying, doing homework, interacting with peers and professors, and learning (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).
**Academic integration.** “The development of a strong affiliation with the college environment both in the classroom and outside of class. Includes interactions with faculty, academic staff, and peers but of an academic nature (e.g., peer tutoring, study groups)” (Nora, 1993, p. 235).

**Acculturation.** A construct defined as “the process of adapting oneself to the broader social surroundings” (Knight, Bernal, Garza, & Cota, 1993, p. 222).

**Culture.** Provides individuals with an identity and value orientation that represents a society (such as a country) and subsidiary culture that focuses on customs, values, traditions, and histories from different broad cultures (Helms, 1994).

**Ethnicity.** Distinguishing differences of a group based on national or cultural characteristics (Atkinson, Morten, & Sue, 1998).

**Ethnic identity.** “A construct based on information from family and community that provides the foundation of one’s understanding of his or her shared culture, religion, geography, and language” (Knight, Bernal, Garza, & Cota, 1993, p. 222).

**Familialism.** A “cultural value that includes a strong identification and attachment of individuals with their nuclear and extended families, and strong feelings of loyalty, reciprocity, and solidarity among members of the same family” (Marin, 1993, p. 184).

**Gender.** “Gender is cultural and is the term to use when referring to men and women as social groups” (American Psychological Association, 2001, p. 63).

**Hispanic.** Coined by the United States government for census purposes, the term Hispanic is defined as being a person of Latin American descent living in the United States, especially one of Central or South American, Cuban, Mexican, or Puerto Rican origin and is independent of race (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011a).
Latina/o. “A term used mainly in the United States to represent those who were born in or whose family originates from Central or Latin American and certain Caribbean countries” (Torres, Howard-Hamilton, & Cooper, 2003, p. 53). Because the term Hispanic was originally coined by the United States government for census purposes and was not considered inclusive of all Latin-American origins, many people of Latin-American heritage choose Latino/a as it gives recognition to Indian and Spanish roots (Flores, 1999). Latina is the feminine noun and Latino is the masculine.

Race. “How humankind socially categorizes the hereditary traits of different groups of people, thus creating socially defined differences. These traits are biologically visible and deal mainly with skin color and physical differences” (Torres, Howard-Hamilton, & Cooper, 2003, p. 6).

Social integration. “The development of a strong affiliation with the college social environment both in the classroom and outside of class. Includes interactions with faculty, academic staff, and peers but of a social nature (e.g., peer group interactions, informal contact with faculty, involvement in organizations)” (Nora, 1993, p. 237).

Social group. “Membership in a socially defined segment of the population that is not the majority, including membership groups according to gender, social class, or sexual orientation” (Torres, Howard-Hamilton, & Cooper, 2003, p. 7).

Organization of the Dissertation

In chapter one, I have identified the problem, addressed the significance of the study to higher education, and specified the primary research question and sub-questions. In chapter two, the review of literature, I provide a broad overview of the theoretical frameworks that support this study and highlight what is known, through research, about Latino college students and
women college students. In chapter three, the methodology section, I discuss the research paradigm I used for this study. Within that context, I address both the assumptions of the constructivist research paradigm as well as my own assumptions as the researcher. I revisit the theoretical frameworks that augment this study, Chicana feminist theory and Tinto’s theory of student departure, and explain the processes I used to select participants, collect the data through focus groups, and analyze the data. I also describe the measures of quality used to ensure the integrity of the study and its findings. In chapter four, I present the findings of the study as derived from analysis of the data. In chapter five, I discuss the findings in relation to the relevant literature discussed in chapter two and discuss the implications and limitations of the research.
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The literature on Latino college students is fairly extensive (e.g., Attinasi, 1989; Ceja, 2006; Fry, 2004; González, Stoner, & Jovel, 2003; Laden, 2004; London, 1989; Nevarez, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980; Rendón, 1992; Rodriguez, Guido-DiBrito, Torres, & Talbot, 2000; Swail, Cabrera, & Lee, 2004; Torres, 1999, 2003, 2004); however, few studies focus specifically on Latina college students (Rodriguez et al., 2000). As a result, Chapter II reviews the literature on Latino college students and women college students, particularly in the areas of race and ethnicity, class, gender, academic and social integration, and bicultural orientation. I begin with the theoretical frameworks that guide this study: Chicana Feminism and academic and social integration.

Theoretical Frameworks

Two theoretical frameworks guide this study: Chicana Feminism and academic and social integration. The first theoretical framework that guides this study is Chicana Feminism. The following paragraphs highlight how the intersection of gender with race or ethnicity and class, influences lived experiences. The concept of biculturalism, defined by Anzaldúa (1987) as Chicanas existing between two cultures, is also examined in the context of this study.

Chicana Feminism

One of the theoretical frameworks which framed this study was Chicana feminism, and within this context, the issue of biculturalism conceptualized by Anzaldúa (1987). A Chicana feminist was defined by Nieto-Gomez (1997) as a Chicana who comes from a distinct community, has been subject to racism, and has been the recipient of exploitation for centuries. Chicana feminists over the past few decades have devoted their time and efforts in bringing to light the issues that affect Chicanas but do not affect the dominant group, White women.
“Chicanas believed that feminism involved more than an analysis of gender because, as women of color, they were affected by both race and class in their everyday lives” (Garcia, 1990, p. 220). Vera and Santos (2005) also spoke to the “triple lenses of oppression” (p. 559): race and ethnicity, class, and gender as central factors in the lives of Chicanas. Because of these additional factors, the Chicana feminist movement concentrated on and attempted to improve the status of Chicanas in American society (Garcia, 1990) as the intersection of race and ethnicity and class with gender was largely overlooked by White feminist scholars. Expanding the definition of the Chicana feminist movement, Nieto-Gomez (1997) stated that the movement supported the betterment of Chicanas’ position in society by also focusing on social, economic, and political issues.

Anzaldúa (1987) spoke to the fact that Chicanas exist between two cultures, meaning that they must learn to how to maintain their own ethnic and cultural identity while navigating and fitting into the dominant culture. Anzaldúa spent much of her career examining the “hybrid identity” (p. 77) that is created by having to negotiate between two different cultures or as she defined it the “new mestiza consciousness” (p. 77). Anzaldúa (1987) referred to it as the border culture, the region that is present whenever two or more cultures sit side-by-side. Having experienced this phenomenon herself she wrote about growing up between cultures and how it is a “place of contradictions” (p. iii). According to Anzaldúa (1987), because of the incongruities experienced in everyday life, Chicanas tend to develop a tolerance for ambiguity. She wrote:

The new mestiza copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. She learns to be an Indian in Mexican culture, to be Mexican from an Anglo point of view. She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic node – nothing is thrust out, the good, the bad and the
ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she sustain the contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else. (p. 79)

Anzaldúa’s work highlights the struggle that exists when trying to live in two cultures. The term *mestiza* has come to signify a Chicana consciousness that has been characterized by other Chicana feminists (Bernal, 2001; Moraga, 1986; Sandoval, 2000) as a political consciousness that occurs as a result of racial, ethnic, and gender oppression. Mestiza consciousness “straddles cultures, races, languages, nations, sexualities and spiritualties” (Bernal, 1998, p. 561). Thus, Chicanas are living in the crossroads and in the process, creating a new culture – a new story. Anzaldúa stated:

> I am cultureless because as a feminist, I challenge the collective cultural/religious male-derived beliefs of Indo-Hispanics and Anglos; yet I am cultured because I am participating in the creation of yet another culture, a new story to explain the world and our participation in it, a new value system with images and symbols that connect us to each other and to the planet. (p. 81)

In this study I hope to have captured the essence of this spirit, the creation of culture, through the stories of the participants.

**Integration**

Academic and social integration is the second theoretical framework that guides this study. The work of Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993) is used as the foundation; however, Tierney’s (1999) study focusing on cultural capital is the theoretical model that better describes the experiences of the participants of this study.
Tinto.

Tinto’s (1975, 1987, 1993) Theory of Student Departure provided a framework of factors that typically affect students’ decisions to remain in college. Tinto’s model was based on an a combination of Durkheim’s (1951) and Van Gennep’s (1960) sociological and anthropological models that focused on establishing membership within a society and Spady’s (1970, 1971) work on college dropouts. Using these theories to develop his model, Tinto “theorized that the more individuals are integrated into the university setting, the more committed they will be to the institution and to completing their goals” (Bordes & Arredondo, 2005, p. 117).

The model focused on interactions that occur in academic and social realms of a college environment coupled with pre-college characteristics (e.g., ability, family background). Nora (1993) defined academic and social integration as follows:

*Academic integration:* The development of a strong affiliation with the college environment both in the classroom and outside of class. Includes interactions with faculty, academic staff, and peers but of an academic nature (e.g., peer tutoring, study groups). (p. 235)

*Social integration:* The development of a strong affiliation with the college social environment both in the classroom and outside of class. Includes interactions with faculty, academic staff, and peers but of a social nature (e.g., peer group interactions, informal contact with faculty, involvement in organizations). (p. 237)

Tinto asserted that successful integration (positive interactions) of the three areas determined how successful a student would be, culminating in his or her persistence in college. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) summarized integration, based on Tinto’s model, this way:
Integration (emphasis in original) is the extent to which the individual shares the normative attitudes and values of peers and faculty in the institution and abides by the formal and informal structural requirements for membership in that community or in subgroups of it. (p. 54)

Thus the more worthwhile the experiences of students within these systems, the more integrated they become. In contrast, Tinto postulated that negative interactions would weaken one’s commitment and thus one’s full integration into the environment. This most often resulted in non-persistence. This model has served as the framework for numerous studies (e.g., Bean, 1980; Bean & Eaton, 2000; Bers & Smith, 1991; Munro, 1981; Nora, 1987; Pascarella & Chapman, 1983; Stage, 1989a; Stage, 1989b; Terenzini & Pascarella, 1980; Vorhees, 1987) on persistence and attrition and has informed theories on organizational and structural development, campus environment, and learning communities.

Despite the empirical research that has been conducted over the years using the theories mentioned above, all of the models have received extensive criticism due to the fact that contradictory results are often found when factors such as type of institution, gender, and ethnicity are considered (Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnston, 1997; Cabrera, Castaneda, Nora, & Hengstler, 1992). As Hurtado and Carter (1997) stated, Tinto was successful at distinguishing students’ interactions in the academic and social realms of the university, but not at identifying the “psychological sense of identification and affiliation with the campus community…” (p. 326). In other words, one may participate in the academic and social systems of the university, but not necessarily integrate (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Tinto’s model in particular has been criticized for overlooking the history of discrimination and complete oversight of racial and ethnic differences (Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnson, 1997; Nora, Cabrera, Hagedorn, & Pascarella, 1996;
Tierney, 1992, 1999). In particular, Tierney (1992, 1999) disagreed with Tinto’s assumption that students must disassociate themselves from their past in order to fit in to the academy. “Tinto’s notion is that college initiates must undergo a form of cultural suicide, whereby they make a clean break from the communities and cultures in which they were raised and integrate and assimilate into the dominant culture of the colleges they attend” (Tierney, 1999, p. 82).

However, Hurtado and Carter (1997) found that in order for Latino students to be comfortable in the university setting it was necessary for them to maintain interactions at home as well as with peers at the university. This finding is in direct conflict with Tinto’s assumption. Furthermore, Tierney (1999) asserted that Tinto’s model implies that if the minority student fails at discarding his or her cultural background that it is solely the fault of the student, not the institution. In response, Tierney (1999), borrowing from the work of Bourdieu (1986) proposed an alternate theoretical model of minority college-going and retention based on cultural capital.

**Cultural capital.**

Bourdieu defined the term “cultural capital” as a “set of linguistic and cultural competencies individuals usually inherit and sometimes learn” (as cited in Tierney, 1999, p. 83). Bourdieu hypothesized that in affluent families and environs one would learn from a very early age that college was a foregone conclusion. Tierney (1999) found Bourdieu’s ideas to be helpful in demonstrating what most minority students need to gain access to college and to be retained on predominantly White campuses. “Minority students often need financial aid to pursue their educational goals after high school, but they also need to acquire the cultural capital that majority students typically inherit” (Tierney, 1999, p. 84). Examples of cultural capital include knowledge about availability of financial aid, grants, and scholarships; admissions requirements; typical campus resources; and the intrinsic knowledge of what day-to-day college life is like,
most likely acquired from conversations with parents or siblings who attended college. As Gloria, Castellanos, and Orozco (2005) and Rendón (1994) found, many Latino families are unaware of educational requirements in higher education because they have not attended college. Therefore, Latino students have to play catch up. This lack of intrinsic knowledge about college is a barrier to persistence for Latino students.

**Latino College Students**

Research has consistently shown that Latino college students experience the academy in a very different way from their White peers. The following paragraphs focus on the differences for Latino students in relation to campus experiences, social support, acculturation versus assimilation, and ethnic identity.

**Campus Experiences**

A study conducted by Gloria et al. (2005) found that after social support, the strongest predictors of non-persistence decisions of Latino undergraduates are related to university comfort. The school environment has a direct impact on a student’s identity and self-concept (Bryk & Driscoll, 1988; Coleman & Hoffer, 1987) and minority students often encounter situations at the academy that are in conflict with their values and beliefs (Jones, Castellanos, & Cole, 2002). Rosenthal, Whittle, and Bell (1989) suggested that everyday encounters affect the significance and value of one’s ethnic identity. Studies of the campus environment for students of color (e.g., Chacon, Cohen, & Strover, 1986; Sue, 1981) consistently show that racial and ethnic minority students encounter both overt and covert racism and discrimination by other students and faculty. As a result, these students often feel alienated and isolated from the dominant culture. Many studies have shown that this sense of isolation, lack of support on campus, and the poor quality of life for these students on-campus are serious contributors to
attrition (Allen, 1998; Crosson, 1998). Garza and Nelson (1973) compared the perceptions of the university environment between Mexican American and Anglo American students. They found differences between these two populations and their perceptions of such things as politeness, assertiveness, and risk taking. The Mexican American students had far more negative perceptions of the environment in those areas than Anglo American students. That brings to forefront the question of how Latinas as women and as students of color might perceive and experience the campus environment, and how that impacts their progress toward degree attainment.

A study by Lavin and Cook (1990) explored long-term educational attainment and ethnic identity. They found that minority students had less academic success throughout their educational career and were more likely than White students to leave college without earning a degree. Several studies have shown that on predominantly White campuses, Latinos have felt isolated and alienated (Fiske, 1988; Gloria, 1997; Ponterotto, Martinez, & Hayden, 1986). Hurtado (1994) found that 15% of Latino/a student’s encountered insults or threats based on their ethnic background and that over two-thirds of those surveyed felt that their peers knew little about their culture. Factors such as a positive view of one’s culture, rejection of stereotypes, and a positive feeling about one’s social group identity, race, ethnicity, language, and acculturation have all been linked to student success in the college environment (Tatum, 1997); however, the finding above highlights the struggle that many Latino/a students have in higher education.

Studies by Hurtado (1994), Nora and Cabrera (1996), and Constantine, Robinson, Wilton, and Caldwell (2002) all draw attention to how perceptions of one’s culture by the individual or by peers can lead to racial and ethnic tension, discrimination, and discomfort in the university environment. Ethier and Deaux (1990) conducted a study with 45 first-year Latino students
attending a predominantly White university and found that participants who had a stronger ethnic identity perceived less threat to their identity while attending school in a predominantly White environment; however it is likely that these students experienced some kind of challenge to their identity all the same. Chavez (1986) found that covert messages of the environment, and the values within, force one to choose between past values and the dominant values. Chavez found that this caused conflict with one’s self-perception and created ethnic identity confusion.

“Latina/o students experience considerable stress as a result of perceptions of an unwelcoming environment, cultural incongruence, or discrimination within their education context” (Gloria, Castellanos, Lopez, & Rosales, 2005, p. 204). This discomfort might result in a Latino students decision to leave the environment altogether.

Social Support

Like Marcia (1966), and Chickering and Reisser (1993), Tinto included social support as a factor influencing academic persistence. In addition, pre-college characteristics such as standardized test scores, gender, race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status have continually proven to be relevant factors in determining academic success and program completion (Grosset, 1991; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980). Psychological factors (i.e., motivation, self-concept) can also indirectly affect academic integration (Munro, 1981; Smart & Pascarella, 1986; Stage, 1989). For example, Valencia and Black (2002) found that the beliefs (i.e., self-confidence) that Latinas/os have about themselves are often a reason for low enrollment and graduation rates within this student population. Gloria, Castellanos, Lopez, and Rosales (2005) and Torres and Solberg (2001) found that parental influence plays a big role in a student’s self-perception and his or her perception of the university environment. Both studies found that Latino/a families, although they may not have been to college themselves, have an indirect effect on their student’s
persistence in college. Gloria, Castellanos, Lopez, and Rosales (2005), Gloria and Segura-Herrera (2004), and Rendón (1994) found that the support that Latino/a families give to their student positively affects their confidence that they can succeed in the academy. Similarly, Arellano and Padilla (1996) and Hernandez (2000) found that Latino/a students were more likely to succeed in school when they had a positive self-concept and were resilient in their pursuits. Bordes, Sand, Arredondo, Robinson Kurpius, and Dixon Rayle (2006) stated that forming friendships on campus and social support from family has been linked to successfully navigating the transition to college. In addition, Gloria (1993, 1997) found that mentoring and social support from peers and family had an indirect positive effect on Latino/a perceptions of the university environment and an indirect positive effect on persistence in relationship with the perceptions of the university environment.

Several studies have demonstrated that social support is related to academic persistence decisions of students from the non-dominant culture (Cardoza, 1991; Constantine et al., 2002; Gloria, 1993, 1997; Gloria & Robinson Kurpius, 2001; Gloria et al., 1999; Hernandez, 2000). However, even with all the familial support many Latino/a students still find it difficult, within the academic environment, to have a positive outlook on themselves and maintain the aspiration to attain a degree because they face almost daily acts of discrimination and alienation which undermines their self-worth and desire to persist (Hackett & Byars, 1996).

Acculturation and Assimilation

According to Rodriguez et al. (2000), acculturation is the main issue facing Latino college students today. Acculturation is defined as “the process of adapting oneself to the broader social surroundings” (Knight, Bernal, Garza, & Cota, 1993, p. 222). However, this phenomenon is challenged by the concept of assimilation. For decades, the United States was
considered, and still is considered by some, a “melting pot” of cultures, meaning that several cultures mix and are absorbed into the dominant (White) identity of the country. Much like the argument over the term Latino, there has been much criticism of the melting pot theory. According to Phinney, Romero, Nava, and Huang (2001), before attending college, many first-generation American students, defined as students who are the first in their family born in the United States, come from a home environment where parents attempt to preserve the customs, language, and values from their country of origin. This finding would suggest that the melting pot concept is juxtaposed to the experiences of many first-generation students from the non-dominant culture. We know from the studies of Santiago and Cunningham (2005) and Swail, Cabrera, and Lee (2004) that Latino students are more likely to be first-generation college students, but they may not be first-generation Americans. What impact this has on Latinas, if any, and their experiences while attending a predominantly White university in the Midwest is unknown.

According to Torres (1999), higher education professionals need to focus on two critical education issues facing Hispanics: first, Hispanics have the highest high school dropout rate of any ethnic group and second, the lowest college graduation rates. Garwood (1993) reported that only 9% of Hispanic Americans over the age of 25 had graduated from college in 1990. Fourteen years later, that percentage increased to 11% according to a recent U.S. Census Bureau report (Ramirez, 2004). While there was a gain, one can easily see that it was a slow one at best. Torres (1999), in her work on validating a bicultural orientation model for Hispanic college students, stated that higher education professionals need to have a better understanding of Hispanic students who do not attend college in order to retain the Hispanic students who do attend. By having a better understanding of the “aspects of culture, within-group differences,
and the effects of self-identification on students’ adaptation to educational and social environments” (Bernal, Knight, Ocampo, Garza, & Cota, 1993, p. 42), higher education professionals should be better equipped to assist these students with their matriculation to college and persistence to graduation.

One of the means developed to address this need was the Bicultural Orientation Model (BOM). Torres (1999) developed the BOM as a “tool to understand the choices individual students make about their host culture as well as their culture of origin” (p. 286). Using the BOM, Torres examined the association between acculturation and ethnic identity among Hispanic college students, especially as it related to the individual differences among students.

The model is composed of four quadrants: A high level of acculturation and high level of ethnic identity would place a student in the Bicultural Orientation; a high level of acculturation and a low level of ethnic identity would place a student in the Anglo Orientation; a low level of acculturation and a high level of ethnic identity would place a student in the Hispanic Orientation; and a low level of acculturation and low level of ethnic identity would place a student in the Marginal Orientation category. The model is intended to provide practitioners with a method to explore the needs of individual Hispanic students on campus and to understand how the choices they make are a perception of the environment.

In many cases, factors such as identity development, self-esteem, and gender play a large part in whether one assimilates to the dominant culture or accepts both cultures (Lango, 1995; Phinney, Chavira & Williamson, 1992; Rendón, 1992). Rendón (1992) spoke to the fact that assimilation, especially for women, involves rejecting traditional family expectations such as getting married and raising a family. This often leads to rejection by family and friends and isolation within the community of origin. Acculturation, on the other hand, often leads to
feelings of marginalization, particularly as it relates to culture, gender, and college adjustment (Lara, 1992). Given these findings, one can postulate that pressure either to assimilate to the dominant culture or to acculturate may have a negative impact on how Latino students experience the college environment. However, do the factors mentioned above influence the participants of this study? Having participants identify the factors and conditions that influence their experience in college was one of the main foci of this study.

Latina college students face many pressures while attending college. Due to strong gender roles within a highly patriarchal Latino culture, Latinas are generally expected to take on a large role in the home (Lango, 1995). This role may include child care and day-to-day household chores. According to Lopez (1995), young women in Latino homes are often a source of emotional support, particularly for their mothers. Collectively, these expectations can often prove overwhelming to Latina college students, as they are trying to balance their home life with the traditional college culture. Studies by London (1989) and Young (1992) highlight the difficulty of managing these expectations. They found that Latina college students, in comparison to White students, were most likely to miss class or leave class early in order to meet expectations set for them at home. Young (1992) also found that many Latina students try to work a job in addition to taking classes and managing affairs at home. Inevitably, many students drop out of college because they cannot maintain work and home responsibilities in addition to school, and if one thing has to go, school is often the only option. For those Latina college students who are able to juggle multiple, and complex responsibilities, adjusting to college can be a challenge.

Adjustment to the collegiate environment for Latinas is impacted by many factors. For example, Zambrana and Zoppi (2002) reported that Latinas are disproportionately
underrepresented in higher education and several studies have found that Latinas are most often “invisible” on college campuses (Casas & Ponterotto, 1984; Rodriguez et al., 2000). In comparison to Latinos, Latinas also encounter a variety of additional obstacles and stressors related to their educational attainment (Gandara & Osugi, 1994). These include financial constraints; limited social support; difficulty balancing home, school, and work demands; limited time to study; and cultural and gender-role stereotypes (Gloria & Segura-Herrera, 2004; Hernandez, 2000; Rodriguez et al., 2000; Smedley, Myers, & Harrell, 1993; Young, 1992). Adding to the stressors is a general lack of access to information about college (Gloria & Segura-Herrera, 2004), the push to assimilate to institutional values (Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000), and managing cultural incongruity with the university environment (Gloria & Robinson Kurpius, 1996). Studies that have been conducted regarding educational challenges and the coping mechanisms of Latina college students reveal that having a strong support system (i.e., faculty, peers, and family) predicted success in college adjustment (Garcia-Vasquez, Vasquez, & Huang, 1998; Gloria, Castellanos, Lopez, & Rosales, 2005; Mena, Padilla, & Maldonado, 1987; Olivas, 1988; Vasquez & Garcia-Vasquez, 1995; & Zea, Jarama, & Bianchi, 1995).

In addition, the concept of resiliency can be applied to Latina students in relation to academic and social success in college. How resilient, defined as “the ability to cope with adversity and overcome the most challenging circumstances” (Hassinger & Plourde, 2005, p. 19) a Latina student is often determines her success in the academy. McMillan and Reed (1994) asserted that having positive interpersonal relationships and individual factors such as intrinsic motivation and an internal locus of control play a role in developing resiliency. Given the barriers that Latina students encounter in the academy, being resilient in pursuit of a degree appears to be a major factor in her success.
Research has also shown that Latinas report higher levels of stress than Latinos (Garcia-Vasquez et al., 1998). Researchers suggested that this is attributed to gender, as Latinas typically have to navigate additional educational obstacles, such as convincing their family that leaving home to attend the university is a positive move. Was this true for the participants of this study? An exploration of how they see their familial and cultural backgrounds shaping their collegiate experience was a focus of this study.

**Ethnic Identity**

Bernal, Saenz, and Knight (1991) postulated that a positive ethnic identity may promote academic achievement. They hypothesized that having a positive ethnic identity would likely serve as a barrier to psychological stresses (e.g., finances, lack of cultural capital, college preparation courses in high school) that many minority students experience in school. “When academic success is embedded within the minority student’s ethnic identity, that behavior that promotes success is likely even in instances in which cultural disparities exist between home and school” (Davalos, Chavez, & Guardiola, 1999). Bernal et al. (1991) stated that if academic success is not valued in the minority student’s ethnicity that inversion could occur, meaning that the student would not consider the behaviors of the dominant culture as relevant.

Although studies on ethnic identity had been occurring since the 1940s, few theories of ethnic identity development emerged until the 1970s (Ortiz, 1997). Several researchers (Atkinson, Morten, & Sue, 1979; Cross, 1971, 1991; Helms, 1985; Keefe & Padilla, 1987; Phinney, 1992; Sue & Sue, 1990; Torres, 1999, 2003, 2004) have published a variety of models of racial and ethnic identity development. Most models have been specific to a particular race or ethnic group. For example, Cross’s Model of Nigrescence (1971, 1991) focused on Black identity development, Helms developed a Majority Group Identity Model (1985) that focused on
White identity development, and Phinney (1993) developed the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure that focused on the achievement of ethnic identity. Bernal, Knight, Ocampo, Garza, and Cota (1993) posited that ethnic identity is formed as an individual considers his or her self-image as part of an ethnic group. For Latinos, this self-identification is often difficult as it means making choices of identity between the culture of origin and the culture of the majority (Garza & Gallegos, 1995; Torres, 1999). Until recently, few studies focused on ethnic identity development of Latinos; however, within the last five years, several articles have been published related to the ethnic identity of Latinos. Those articles have focused on ethnic identity development within the first two years of college (Torres, 2003), ethnic identity as it relates to familial influences (Torres, 2004), the relationship between ethnic identity and cognitive development (Torres & Baxter Magolda, 2004), and ethnic identity development leading to self-authorship (Torres & Hernandez, 2007). The following paragraphs will provide a brief overview of those works.

In a study published in 2003, Torres explored the ethnic identity development of Latino college students in their first two years of college. Using Phinney’s (1993) model of ethnic identity development as a framework and Torres’ own (1999) bicultural orientation model, Torres explored the choices that Latino students make between their culture of origin and the majority culture (2003). She found that conditions such as the environment where they grew up, family influence, generational status, and self-perception of status in society and influences on change (i.e., psychosocial and cognitive development) were influences in the first two years of college that determined the level of success, both academic and social, they experience in college (Torres, 2003).
Torres found that the existence, or lack thereof, of diversity in one’s environment was a major influence on how a Latino student self-identified. “Students who came from diverse environments tended to have a strong sense of ethnicity and were more likely to enjoy the diversity around them” (Torres, 2003, p. 537). Torres found that students from diverse areas did not perceive themselves as a minority in those environments and were very open to other cultural ideas and opportunities. However, that changed when these same students stepped onto a predominantly White campus. In fact, the change prompted a stronger link to their ethnicity (Torres, 2003). In contrast, Torres (2003) found that students who came from less diverse (predominantly White) environments tended to identify more with the majority culture and used geographical terms (i.e., Northern Texas) to describe where they were from. In college, they felt somewhat marginalized in the environment because they tended to identify with the majority culture yet they were interacting with other Latino students who identified with Latino culture and ethnicity. As a result, they tended to feel like outsiders in both the majority culture and the Latino culture on campus.

Torres (2003) also found that familial influences play a large part in how a Latino student chooses to identify him or herself. She found that the terms commonly used in the family environment were the same terms that students used to self-identify. For example, Torres found that students who described themselves using terms related to their culture of origin (i.e. Mexican American) spoke about how their family, and especially their parents, talked a great deal about their culture of origin. “All of the students credited their parents for their views on ethnicity and its role in their life” (Torres, 2003, p. 538). In contrast, Torres found that this tie to one’s ethnic culture and identity was not as strong in students who were from families where one parent was Latino and the other was not. These students did not express an immediate interest in
learning more about one half of their culture of origin. This finding demonstrates how powerful the familial influence is in ethnic identity development, as it clearly demonstrates that students from families with strong ties and practices within their culture of origin tend to have a stronger tie to their ethnic identity even within another culture. What we can take away from this study is that family is very important in the development of ethnic identity, and we know from previous studies (e.g., Arellano & Padilla, 1996; Gándara, 1995; Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000; Hernandez, 2000; Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996) that the educational and personal support provided by Latino families has an effect on academic persistence.

For example, Cota and Knight (1991) found that parents’ teaching about the Mexican culture appeared to be related to their children’s ethnic identities and that was related to their child’s preference of learning style (cooperative or competitive). Knight, Cota, and Bernal (1993) described the cooperative learning style as one in which resources are distributed among the group. In contrast, they describe the competitive learning style as one in which one maximizes resources without thought of others. The American educational system is known for being a competitive system, where emphasis is placed on the individual rather than the group (Watson, Bell, & Chavez, 1994). Cota and Knight (1991) found that Mexican American children who had stronger ethnic identities developed more cooperative styles of learning. This is in direct conflict with the American system of education and likely has an effect on the achievement of Latina college students; however, many studies (e.g., Arellano & Padilla, 1996; Gándara, 1995; Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000; Hernandez, 2000; Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996) have shown that educational and personal support from Latino families is vital to the success of Latina college students.
Torres (2003) found that generational status in the United States also has a significant impact on a Latino student’s integration into the collegiate environment. She found that students who were the first generation in the United States struggled with the unknowns (lack of intrinsic knowledge) of college and with parental expectations, especially as it related to differing cultural values. This balancing act between participation in college life and parental expectations lead to feelings of alienation from peers and withholding information from parents out of respect for their values and so as not to hurt or disappoint them. Torres (2003) also found that students who are first generation in the United States often feel caught between two cultures. “These students are caught between the expectations, traditions, and knowledge from the majority culture and their culture of origin” (Torres, 2003, p. 539). These students often feel alienated both at home and at school as a result. In contrast, Torres found that students who are second or third generation in the United States “assume the mingling of two cultures” (Torres, 2003, p. 539). Torres (2003) found that students who are second or third generation in the United States tend to have less conflict with their parents, yet values, especially those perceived to be a part of the dominant culture, still created some conflict between students and their parents. Thus these students still struggled in respect to their acculturation to the majority culture.

Torres (2003) also found that a student’s perception of his or her social status was a contributing factor to how he or she self-identified. For example, Torres found that Latino students who came from economically privileged backgrounds tended to buy into the negative stereotypes that exist in the dominant culture about Latinos, but did not consider that stereotype applying to them due to where and how they grew up. On the other hand, Latino students who “did not perceive any privilege or advantage over others” (Torres, 2003, p. 540) tended to recognize the differences between their culture of origin and American culture, and appeared to
be more accepting and knowledgeable of other cultures and ideas. Overall, “this condition was focused more on how the participants reacted to others and their ability to recognize racism when it is occurring to them or around them” (Torres, 2003, p. 540). Students who came from privileged backgrounds tended not to see racism or recognize it when it was happening to them, whereas students who were less economically advantaged tended to be able to recognize racism and when it was experienced personally (Torres, 2003).

Torres (2003) found cultural dissonance and change in relationships within the environment influenced change in ethnic identity. Cultural dissonance, defined as “conflict between one’s own sense of culture and what others expect,” (Torres, 2003, p. 540) can have a big impact on a Latino student’s ethnic identity. Torres found a link between a student’s generation in the United States and how the student made sense of his or her identity. She found that students who were first generation in the United States had a greater desire to associate with the majority culture when there were conflicts with parents over cultural expectations. The cultural dissonance can cause a student to question or even change his or her ethnic identity as a result. In this case, students who were first generation in the United States tended to move more toward an Anglo orientation as a result of the conflict they were experiencing with their parents’ expectations and those of the majority culture (Torres, 2003). However, cultural dissonance can also lead to a greater exploration of the culture of origin. Torres (2003) found that Latino students who feel alienated from their culture of origin may experience an event (i.e., being unable to communicate in Spanish) that causes them to want to learn more about their ethnicity. This event then prompts them to go learn more about their culture of origin, thus leading to a change in their ethnic identity.
Following up on the 2003 study on the ethnic identity development of Latino college students in their first two years of college, Torres (2004) attempted to gain a better understanding of how Latino students made meaning of the roles they assume and their identity development in the academy by examining the influence of familialism (as defined in Chapter One) on Latino college students. In this study, Torres attempted to define the dimensions of familialism and “potential consequences” this influence could have on the educational experiences of Latino college students (Torres, 2004, p. 457). Previous research conducted by Marin (1993) found that Latino families, in comparison to White families, tend to participate more actively in the daily lives of family members and depend on one another more for assistance. Keefe and Padilla (1987) found that one major difference between Anglo families and Latino families was the concept of the extended family. They found that in many Latino families, godparents or close family friends played a large role in the daily life of the family. Torres (2004) revealed three issues that emerged from her study on the influence of familialism: understanding why a student may say he or she is from the United States although he or she identifies as Latino; students who appeared acculturated to the majority culture but experienced cultural conflicts within the academy; and the possibility of delayed cultural conflicts for students who come from mixed backgrounds (i.e., one parent is Latino and the other is not). It is clear from Torres’ study that one’s cultural background can have a direct impact on his or her institutional experience, especially if the student self-identifies with a non-majority culture or ethnic identity. We also know from previous studies (e.g., Arellano & Padilla, 1996; Gándara, 1995; Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000; Hernandez, 2000; Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 2006) that the education and personal support provided by Latino families has an effect on academic persistence.
Within the generational status context, Torres (2004) revealed some conflicts related to gender roles. Parental or family concerns over the traditional roles that women are supposed to assume in Latino culture and the understanding of the need for education are often in direct conflict with one another; therefore, Latinas often get caught up in the middle of this conflict. “Almost all of the students stated that their parents were supportive of them being in college, yet the majority also expressed that their parents did not understand what it was like for them to be in [sic] college” (Torres, 2004, p. 463-464). This lack of understanding inevitably created a great deal of conflict between one’s family and the desire to receive a college degree, and it appeared to be an even greater conflict for women than men in the Latino culture. The conflict that occurs between family members and their college student can most likely be attributed to lack of cultural capital. Tierney’s (1999) model of minority college-going and retention, based on Bourdieu’s (1986) work on cultural capital, provides a framework in which to examine the effect of generational status on a student’s persistence in college. One could assume that lack of knowledge about college among family members and his or her college student would likely change as the student progresses through his or her academic career. Acquisition of cultural capital by the student, but lack of cultural capital of family members, likely impacts the student’s relationship with family members and could, in turn, impact academic decisions of Latino students.

Taking a holistic approach, Torres and Baxter Magolda (2004) examined the reconstruction of Latino identity through the influence of cognitive development. In this longitudinal study, Torres and Baxter Magolda interviewed Latino college students who, over time, reconstructed negative messages about their identity into positive images. They examined the relationship between the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and cognitive development domains
(Torres & Baxter Magolda, 2004). As expressed by Baxter Magolda (2001), Kegan (1982), King and Baxter Magolda (2005), Pizzolato (2003), and now Torres and Baxter Magolda (2004), the integration between these domains promotes self-authorship. Torres and Baxter Magolda (2004) found that the participants of their study began their college experience following “external formulas” (Baxter Magolda, 2001), meaning that they relied on external sources or authorities to define their world view. However, at varying times, the participants experienced cognitive dissonance, defined as “a common movement point that prompted participants to abandon external formulas” (Torres & Baxter Magolda, 2004, p. 343). Torres and Baxter Magolda found that as participants experienced cognitive dissonance, it led the way to decreased negative messages about their identity, replacing those with positive images of ethnicity. In summary, Torres and Baxter Magolda found that as Latinos experienced an event that caused cognitive dissonance they shed the opinions and voices of external authorities and began to develop their own way of making meaning relative to their ethnic identity. Within the framework of cognitive development, this process allowed them to move forward toward what Baxter Magolda defined as self-authorship (2001).

Furthering the conversation on self-authorship, Torres and Hernandez (2007) conducted a longitudinal study on Latino college students and the influence of ethnic identity on self-authorship. This study is significant as previous studies have not explored how ethnic identity influences the process. Using a holistic framework, Torres and Hernandez studied the experiences of Latino college students and how ethnicity influenced their process of achieving self-authorship. What they found is that Latino students displayed many of the same developmental characteristics as White students in the Baxter Magolda (2001) study; however,
there were some additional “developmental tasks” (Torres & Hernandez, 2007, p. 561) related to the issue of racism.

Torres and Hernandez (2007) found that students in the External Formulas phase “avoided anything outside of their comfort zone and tended to view culture in a dichotomous manner (either Latino or Anglo)” (p. 571). Those who entered the Crossroads phase were able to recognize or experience a racist incident that advanced their development. In this phase, they were able to make choices about how negative stereotypes influenced their self-perception, often resulting in an increase in positive images about their ethnicity. In this phase, students also began to balance the influence of their family with other diverse experiences. The few students in the study who reached the Becoming the Author of One’s Life phase were able to maintain their cultural values while also valuing other diverse environments (i.e., the college campus). They developed what Torres and Hernandez (2007) described as an “informed Latino/a identity” (p. 571). “This informed identity acknowledges the choices made between the cultures and the need to renegotiate relationships that are consistent with an informed Latino/a perspective” (Torres & Hernandez, 2007, p. 571).

Again, Tierney’s (1999) model of minority college-going and retention is useful in examining the retention of Latino students. Tierney (1992, 1999) believed that if minority students were able to affirm who they were, meaning they fully accepted their cultural and ethnic identity and had a sense of belonging within the university community, their chances for graduation increased. Tierney (1999) stated:

…if postsecondary institutions make concerted and meaningful efforts to affirm these students’ cultural identities, they stand to gain increased possibilities for ensuring the latter’s success in college – if the structure of the education these students received also
involved a commitment to high academic and social goals and active learning. (p. 84-85).

Torres and Baxter Magolda (2004) and Torres and Hernandez (2007) have shown that the integration between intrapersonal, interpersonal, and cognitive development domains promotes self-authorship and self-authorship advances an “informed Latino identity” (Torres & Hernandez, 2007, p. 571). Tierney (1992, 1999) maintained that minority students who accept their cultural and ethnic identity, and find a place in which they belong within the academy have a better chance of persisting in college and graduating. Taking both of those concepts into consideration, one can assert that increasing positive messages of Latino ethnic identity development (cognitive development) promotes persistence and graduation.

While the studies mentioned above have certainly begun the examination of the influence of ethnic identity for Latino students in college, it is apparent that there are no current studies specific to Latina college students and their ethnic identity development in college. It is clear that ethnic identity is directly linked to one’s self-concept. Valencia and Black (2002) found that one of the reasons for low enrollment and college graduation rates for Latina/os was not having a positive sense of self. This sense of self is most often developed and maintained through familial support and a positive outlook of one’s culture (Gloria, Castellanos, & Orozco, 2005; Gloria & Segura-Herrera, 2004; Rendón, 1994; Torres, 2003, Torres & Baxter Magolda, 2004; Torres & Hernandez, 2007; Torres & Solberg, 2001); however, the discrimination and oppression of the academy can be and often is a barrier to persistence in college (Hackett & Byars, 1996). Considering that, this study explored how the familial and cultural backgrounds of the participants of this study shaped their collegiate experiences, and how these students situated their ethnic identity within a predominantly White university setting.
Women College Students

“The study of classroom climates is an important factor of educational quality, not only for women but also for other historically disadvantaged groups” (Allan & Madden, 2006, p. 685). In 1982, Hall and Sandler published a report on the chilly climate for women in college classrooms and several follow-up studies have been conducted since this time (Allan & Madden, 2006; Brady & Eisler, 1995, 1999; Canada & Pringle, 1995; Crawford & MacLeod, 1990; Sadker & Sadker, 1994; Serex & Townsend, 1999; Whitt, Edison, Pascarella, Nora, & Terenzini, 1999), many with different results than those found in the 1982 study by Hall and Sandler.

Chilly climate is defined as “a psychological climate in which students of one sex are valued differently and therefore treated differently than are students of the opposite sex” (Serex & Townsend, 1999, p. 528). Hall and Sandler (1982) postulated that college classrooms tend to mirror the society in which they are located, meaning that the strengths, weaknesses, and biases that exist in greater society will also exist in the college classroom. “It is from this vantage point that numerous faculty behaviors, largely unconscious, came to be understood as contributing to classroom environments that disadvantage women” (Allan & Madden, 2006, p. 685-686).

Specifically, the report cited the following examples: calling on men more often than women, asking follow-up questions of men but not of women, focusing on a woman’s appearance rather than her accomplishments, paying more attention to men when they speak, viewing marriage and parental status differently for men than for women, and attributing the accomplishments of women to something other than their abilities (Hall & Sandler, 1982; Sandler, Silverberg, & Hall, 1996). For Latina college students, these disadvantages, or simply the perception of them, could lead to a negative sense of belonging in the campus environment, may cause cultural incongruity given familial expectations and values that may be incongruent with the collegiate
environment, and may reinforce negative images or thoughts they may have about their ethnic identity. (Torres & Hernandez, 2007). Any one of those experiences, real or perceived, would likely have a negative impact on their collegiate career and may result in non-persistence.

While some of the studies (e.g., Constantinople, Cornelius, & Gray, 1988; Crawford & MacLeod, 1990; Drew & Work, 1998), largely quantitative in nature, have contradicted the claims of Hall and Sandler’s (1982) study, most have found similar results. In fact, Whit et al. (1999) found that undergraduate women experience a climate that “has a negative impact by the end of the first year of college which continues and broadens” (p. 175). Furthermore, Brady and Eisler (1999) suggested that methodology may be a factor in the lack of consistent findings relative to classroom climate. They suggested that students might be “more aware of quantitative differences in classroom interaction patterns but less aware of qualitative differences” (Brady & Eisler, 1999, p. 138). Those qualitative differences, such as tone of voice, may make all the difference in the world to the person experiencing the climate. Because of those often subtle differences, Allan and Maddow (1996) suggested that quantitative studies be followed-up with focus groups so behaviors experienced in the classroom can be explored in depth.

Identity development is another area where theorists have attempted to understand the development of women college students. Based on Marcia’s work (1963, 1980), Josselson (1987) developed an identity theory for women that included the following styles: foreclosure, moratorium, identity diffusion, and identity achievement. In relation to academic and social integration for female college students, identity development can often be one of the most challenging tasks that one faces during college. One can assume that this could be particularly true for non-majority female students given that integration into the academic and social realms
of the university may be more difficult for minorities (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Tierney, 1992, 1999).

**Summary**

The factors that contribute to lack of academic success for racial and ethnic minority students are often lack of pre-college preparation (Allen, Bonous-Hammarth, & Suh, 2004; Rochlin, 1997), lack of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Nora, 2003; Tierney, 1999), in college experiences, especially the impact of the university environment on minority students (Bynum & Thompson, 1983; Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pederson, & Allen, 1998; Myers, 2003; Smedley, Myers, & Harrell, 1993), and socioeconomic status (Berger, 2000; Carter, 1999; Hanson, 1994; Hearn 1984, St. John, 1994). In order for minority students to persist, it is important to address the academic preparation of minority students, provide adequate financial aid, and provide strong support networks for minority students within the university environment (Carter, 2006).
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to add to the knowledge base regarding the experiences of Latina women attending a four-year public higher education institution in the Midwest. The research question and sub-questions were:

How do Latinas, attending a predominantly White university in the Midwest, make sense of their experiences while attending college?

a. What factors and conditions do they identify as influencing their experience in college?

b. How do they see their familial and cultural background shaping their collegiate experience?

c. How do they see their perceptions of the campus environment influencing their collegiate experience?

In this chapter I address the method of inquiry and related assumptions used in this study as well as information regarding participant selection, data collection and analysis, indicators of quality, and participant safeguards. The intent of this research project was to contribute to the knowledge base for the sake of knowledge and to inform action among policymakers and others who determine what services are beneficial to the Latino/a population on a predominantly White campus, thus guiding the practices of the institution (Patton, 2002).

The key assumptions of basic research, delineated by Patton (2002), include answering questions deemed important by one’s discipline or one’s own personal intellectual interest; contributing to theory and knowledge bases; generalizing findings across time and space; addressing the nature of reality; publishing in scholarly journals or books; and last, testing the rigor of the research through universality and verifiability of the theories employed or created.
By using a naturalistic paradigm, I honed in on the “…direct concern with experience as it is ‘lived’ or ‘felt’ or ‘undergone’…” (Sherman & Webb, 1988, p. 7). It is through this framework that I attempted to expand upon the body of knowledge to further develop the shared constructions of this particular phenomenon.

**Researcher’s Background and Research Framework**

Ely, Anzul, Friedman, and Garner (1991) asserted that “qualitative study is forged in the transaction among what is done and learned and felt by the researcher” (p. 1). They believe that the relationship between “affect and cognition” (p. 1) is an essential ingredient of good research as it allows the researcher to operate from the assumptions that “realities are multiple and shifting,” (p. 2) that there is a “simultaneous mutual shaping of knower and known,” (p. 2) and that inquiry is “inevitably value-bound.” (p. 2). Similarly, Patton (2002) stated that the researcher is essential to the study framework and design. It is important to note however, that knowledge emerges within the interaction between the participants and the researcher. Given that, it was imperative that I outline my own professional and educational background as well as my assumptions as they related to this study.

**Assumptions of the Researcher**

I identify as a White, middle class woman who is leading a very privileged life. From first grade to the present, I have been able to pursue my studies without financial concerns or hardships. In my formative years, I attended a private school where I was one of twelve students; thus we all received a great deal of individualized attention. The same was true at home, as I could always ask for assistance from my grandmother, mother, and aunt, all of whom were teachers. Education has been a cornerstone of my life from a very early age, a privilege that is not equally accessible among marginalized populations.
In addition, I lead a privileged life because of my race and class. Being White and raised in a family that is financially secure has, without question, opened doors for me that have been closed to many others, particularly people of the non-dominant (non-White) race and ethnicities. I grew up in an environment that was predominantly White and oppressive to anyone non-White. I recognized this difference at a very early age and was always puzzled as to why there was a differentiation. I believe this is one of the reasons why I have always been interested in learning more about race, ethnicity, and class issues.

I bring all of this to the forefront for one reason: to disclose the assumptions that I bring to this study. One of my primary assumptions was that my life experiences would vary, sometimes drastically, from those of the participants of my study. Because of this, I use a privileged White lens to make meaning of experiences. The challenge to me as a researcher was to capture what Ely et al. (1991) called the “interplay between affect and cognition,” (p. 1) meaning the learning and feeling that took place between me as the researcher and the participants of the study.

Another assumption that came into play is my Anglo cultural orientation which could have been a detractor. Both sides of my family are of European descent and have been in the United States since the early 19th century. It was possible that some of the participants were first or second generation Americans. It was likely that our cultural orientations would differ considerably. While I hoped that my interest in learning for learning’s sake would be perceived positively, my interest in studying this population could have been considered suspect and could have deterred students from participating in the study.

Finally, another assumption of this research involved my political and theoretical stance. I identify as a feminist. I believe that due to higher education’s history and development, the
academy favors Anglo culture and Anglo men. Although some progress has been made over the years, the academy is still Anglo male dominant, especially at the upper levels of administration and in the faculty ranks. I believe this dominance creates a barrier to the success of women in the academy and that this barrier is likely to be even more prevalent for women of color than for White women.

**Professional Background**

I have worked in higher education administration for 15 years, predominantly in residence life. However, I have also had the opportunity to work as an academic advisor, an instructor in Child and Family Studies and First-Year Experience courses, a specialist in student financial management, and as an advisor to numerous student organizations. It was through each of these experiences that I gained an interest in studying the experiences of college students who are women, of different ethnicities and cultures, and from lower socio-economic classes. This particular study allowed me to combine all three of my interests into one.

I earned my Bachelor of Arts degree in 1994, double majoring in French and Secondary Education. While obtaining my undergraduate degree, I became conscious of my passion for language and cultural studies. In addition to becoming proficient in the French language, I also took courses in Spanish, German, Russian, and Latin American culture, as well as Spanish language courses. During that period of time, I also came to realize the passion I had for working with college students. That led me to enroll in a Master of Arts program in College Student Personnel. I completed that degree in 1997, and have since worked at three large state, doctoral granting, public institutions in three different states, one in the South, one in the Midwest, and one on the West coast. I am currently a doctoral student in the Higher Education Administration program at Bowling Green State University. I began pursuing the doctoral
degree in 2001 as a means to further my knowledge base of higher education, and as a way to enable me to fulfill my aspiration of entering into a life-long career working with college students.

**Interest in Studying the Experiences of Latina Women While in College**

As mentioned above, over the years I developed interests in researching college students who are women, students who are ethnically and culturally diverse, and students who come from lower socio-economic classes. My interest in these three research areas stems from my love of language and culture studies and from my interest in how one’s socio-economic status in the United States impacts one’s educational experiences. While it is rarely talked about, I do believe that the United States is a very classist society, one in which people from the lower classes are often forgotten, overlooked, or explained away. As the United States becomes more ethnically and culturally diverse, as women continue to dominate the work force, and as the middle class continues to decrease while the lower class expands exponentially, it is imperative that we begin serious discussions about the direction the United States is going and the impact all of this will have on access to and attainment of higher education.

Another goal I had for this study was to empower the participants. Opie (1992) argued that there are at least three ways that participants may be empowered through a research project: 1) through their contribution to making a social issue visible; 2) through the therapeutic effect of being able to reflect on and reevaluate their experience as part of the research process and; 3) through the outcomes that the first two factors may engender (p. 64). It was my sincere hope that by participating in this study that the participants walked away with a sense of pride and deeper understanding of their cultural heritage and gender and how that interplays with their college experience. Secondly, I hoped that the participants felt empowered to serve as change
agents at the institution by expressing their opinions to faculty and administrators, serving as advocates to those who felt voiceless or powerless, and taking that revived or new found sense of empowerment into the classroom and into their college and off campus communities.

**Research Background**

My educational grounding prepared me to study this issue. I successfully completed my coursework for a doctorate in higher education administration in 2003. My coursework included several courses on research methodology, including quantitative and qualitative approaches, as well as statistics, applied inquiry, and program review. In addition, I was fortunate to take a class in comparative higher education, where I completed a report comparing the educational paths of the indigenous Maori tribe of New Zealand to Native Americans, and a course in social justice where I conducted a needs assessment and developed a training program for Greek Affairs on using inclusive language and traditions in recruitment practices.

While the majority of my qualitative research experience occurred in the classroom, I have through my professional endeavors had the opportunity to employ some qualitative techniques in the assessment and evaluation plan for Residence Life. I have also written case studies for a qualitative research class during my doctoral studies. One project in particular allowed me to study the experiences of an African American woman who was a member of a predominantly White sorority. This study was significant to me because it focused on two of my research interests and was the first opportunity for me to apply the qualitative approach in research.

**Perspective on the Nature of Inquiry**

The research paradigm that I used to conduct this study was inherently constructivist in nature. The constructivist paradigm is defined, by a number of researchers, as a way of examining reality and making meaning of experiences (Kuhn, 1970; Lincoln & Guba, 1985;
Lofland & Lofland, 1984; Spradley, 1980). Sherman and Webb (1988) identified six characteristics of qualitative (constructivist) research. They are as follows:

1. Events can be understood adequately only if they are seen in context. Therefore, a qualitative researcher immerses her/himself in the setting.

2. The contexts of inquiry are not contrived; they are natural. Nothing is predefined or taken for granted.

3. Qualitative researchers want those who are studied to speak for themselves, to provide their perspectives in words or other actions. Therefore, qualitative research is an interactive process in which the persons studied teach the researcher about their lives.

4. Qualitative researchers attend to the experience as a whole, not as separate variables. The aim of qualitative research is to understand experience as unified.

5. Qualitative methods are appropriate to the above statements. There is no one general method.

6. For many qualitative researchers, the process entails appraisal about what was studied. (p. 5-8).

As the nature of the research questions likely suggest, I, as the researcher, sought to understand the experiences (social, cultural, academic, etc.) of Latinas while attending a predominantly White university located in the Midwest. Because I was interested in learning more about the experiences of these women, my underlying belief about the nature of knowing was revealed. Due to this subjectivist belief, a qualitative study was most appropriate.
Methodology and Methods

According to Sherman and Webb (1988) qualitative study “…implies a direct concern for experience as it is ‘lived’ or ‘felt’ or ‘undergone’…” . For this particular study, I used a phenomenological approach, as it allowed me, as the researcher, to gain a deeper understanding of the everyday experiences of Latinas attending a predominantly White university in the Midwest. “From a phenomenological point of view, to do research is always to question the way we experience the world, to want to know the world in which we live as human beings” (van Manen, 1990, p. 5). Given that the Latino population is the fastest growing minority group in the United States, and that enrollment trends are reflecting population trends in the United States, I felt it was imperative to conduct research that not only promoted my own understanding as an administrator in higher education and as a human being, but that might serve as a guide for institutions similar to Bowling Green State University.

Focusing this study specifically on Latinas highlighted that gender is one of the primary components of this research study. As a result, I used a feminist research framework from which to examine this phenomenon. Feminist research as a theoretical framework “acknowledges the pervasive influence of gender divisions on social life” (Maynard, 2000, p. 92). The questions the researchers asks, the way the researcher positions herself or himself within the questions being asked, and the purpose of the work is what distinguishes feminist research from other forms of research (Kelly, 1988, p. 6). In this particular research study, I aspired to highlight the relationship of gender to race/ethnicity within the academy in the hopes of bringing about awareness and change for the fastest growing minority population within the United States and higher education. A theoretical framework relying heavily on Chicana feminist theory guided this study.
Historically, feminist theory has evolved from asking the question of whether women can and should be educated at the academy to one of whether “this male-created, male-dominated structure is really capable of serving the humanism and freedom it professes” (Rich, 1993, p. 124). Since the inception of higher education in the United States, women have taken the backseat to their White, male counterparts, first by not being allowed to participate and then later, when permitted to enter the academy, by largely being ignored. Women, in essence, have struggled to have a voice within the academy; a struggle that continues even in the 21st century.

The lack of voice within the academy appears to be more acutely felt for women of color, as most feminist research has largely focused on White, middle-class women (Valdés, McCristal Culp, & Harris, 2002). During the second wave of the feminist movement, the 1970s, feminists of color in the United States stated that the feminist movement was a White women’s movement that largely overlooked the issues of women of color. Frances Beale (1975) was one of the first to note that the White women’s movement was based only on the gender divide. Because of this dichotomous outlook, the movement did not address issues of race, class, or culture, among other issues that women of color faced on a daily basis, thus giving them no voice. “U.S. women of color have long understood, however, that especially race, but also one’s culture, sex, or class, can deny comfortable or easy access to any legitimized gender category, that the interactions between such social classifications produce other, unnamed gender forms within the social hierarchy” (Sandoval, 2000, p. 44).

Chicana feminists, such as Anzaldúa (1987) and Moraga (1986), argued that mainstream feminism (meaning feminist work that reflected only that of the White, middle-class woman) failed to address the intersection of gender, race/ethnicity, culture, class, and sexuality for all women. This lack of recognition created what many feminists of color call the third gender
(Anzaldúa, 1990; Kingston, 1977, & Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981), meaning that “feminists of color existed in the interstices between normalized social categories (Sandoval, 2000, p. 45). In short, the lived experiences of women of color were very different of those of White women, yet this was not being openly acknowledged within the feminist movement. Historically, this lack of recognition of the differences in lived experience and worldview resulted in women of color being largely overlooked, unheard, and misunderstood.

In this study, I highlighted the similarities and differences among Latinas as well as the intersection of gender, race, ethnicity, and culture in relation to the experiences of Latinas while attending college at a predominantly White university in the Midwest. This intersection is important because it provides us with a truer sense of the experiences of these women and how they make sense of their worldview. Through the exploration of their experiences I learned more about the factors and conditions they identified as affecting their experiences in college, how family and culture shape their experiences, and how their perceptions of the college campus shape their experiences while in college. This framework also took into consideration the idea of Latina bicultural orientation, an area of study being explored by both Anzaldúa (1987) and Torres (1999). Chicana feminist theory assisted me in developing the questions asked during the focus groups and in the interpretation of the data.

**Phenomenology**

“The aim of phenomenology is the description of phenomena, and not the explanation” (Ehrich, 2003, p. 45). As van Manen (1990) asserted, phenomenology does not problem solve, rather it is a philosophy or “theory of the unique” (p. 7, emphasis in original) that provides us the opportunity to uncover true meanings of experiences as they are lived. “Phenomenology means describing things as one experiences them, and this means a turning away from science and
scientific knowledge and returning to the “things themselves”” (Husserl, 1970a, p. 252 as cited in Ehrich, 2003).

This study utilized the phenomenological research methods espoused by Moustakas (1994). Although there is some debate over what phenomenology means, I adopted the definition given by Husserl (as cited in van Manen, 1990). Husserl contended that phenomenology is the study of the “lifeworld” as we immediately experience it. It is “pre-reflective,” meaning that phenomenology happens in real time, within the consciousness, not after one had the chance to reflect upon it. There are multiple approaches to phenomenology which has also raised some speculation about its validity as a research philosophy. However, Patton (2002) found all of the various forms and definitions ascribed to phenomenology share a common focus on exploring how human beings make sense of experience and transform experience into consciousness, individually and as shared meanings. Moustakas (1994) and van Manen (1990) supported this assertion as they spoke to phenomenology having a common focus on the essence of experiences. The term essence is defined here as “the core meaning of an individual’s experience of any given phenomenon that makes it what it is” (Ehrich, 2003, p. 46). The study of essence is described by Moustakas (1994) and van Manen (1990) as shared meanings of a phenomenon. “The essence of a phenomenon is a universal which can be described through a study of the structure that governs the instances or particular manifestations of the essence of that phenomenon” (van Manen, 1990, p. 10) As it relates to this study, I sought to understand the essence of the experiences of Latinas while attending a pre-dominantly White university.

A second assumption of phenomenology is intentionality. “Intentionality refers to consciousness, to the internal experience of being conscious of something; thus the act of
consciousness and the object of consciousness are intentionally related” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 28, emphasis in original). Making sense or meaning out of something requires deliberate reflection occurring after the occurrence of the phenomenon. This “inseparable connection to the world” is the principle of “intentionality” (van Manen, 1990, p. 7).

The third assumption, based on Moustakas’ (1994) work in phenomenology, is intuition. This is described as “the beginning place in deriving knowledge of human experience, free of everyday sense impressions and the natural attitude” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 32). Intuition then is the immediate knowing of some phenomenon without having to think about other experiences (phenomenon). Having a context from which to work is not necessary as one can make meaning of the phenomenon without having other experiences to process.

**Methods of phenomenology.**

Polkinghorne (1989) stated:

Research methods are plans used in the pursuit of knowledge. They are outlines of investigative journeys, laying out previously developed paths, which, if followed by researchers, are supposed to lead to valid knowledge. These paths are drawn on maps based on assumptions about the nature of reality and the processes of human understanding. (p. 41)

There are multiple approaches to phenomenology, but all share a common focus on searching for the essence of experience (van Manen; 1990; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002). For this particular study, however, I used the work of Moustakas (1994) as the contextual structure. Phenomenological research intends to create knowledge through Epoche, Reduction, and Imaginative Variation. Epoche, as the first process, allowed me to become aware of and attempt to remove prejudices, viewpoints, or biases that I held regarding the phenomenon under
investigation. During Reduction, I removed superfluous information from the experience, and isolated the phenomenon in its singular state. In Imaginative Variation, which flows naturally from Reduction, I considered and described the possibilities, meaning, and essences of the experiences under study. Synthesis of Meanings and Essences concluded the phenomenological research process.

Epoche is the first step in a phenomenological study, a process that is internal to the researcher. Moustakas (1994) described Epoche as a “process of setting aside predilections, prejudices, and predispositions, and allowing [experiences] to enter anew into consciousness, and to look and see them again, as if for the first time” (p. 85). This development allowed me to see the experience as itself, devoid, as much as possible, of my own personal philosophies. During Epoche, I was challenged to create new ideas, understandings, and feelings.

Reduction began once the phenomenon was bracketed. “Bracketing requires that we work to become aware of our own assumptions, feelings, and preconceptions, and then, that we strive to put them aside – to bracket them – in order to be open and receptive to what we are attempting to understand” (Ely et al., 1991, p. 50). Once the focus of the research was bracketed, I put aside all other foci so that “the entire research process is rooted solely on the topic and question” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 97). Moustakas wrote that the researcher should look multiple times at the phenomenon, treat every statement and experience on an equal par with all others, and describe the different distinctive or identifying characteristics. In Reduction, I identified and removed repetitive and/or irrelevant statements, leaving only the textural meanings consistent throughout the entire phenomenon. The resulting themes were then clustered into rational and appropriate textural descriptions. Moustakas (1994) titled the reduction of experiences into themes as horizontalizing, and described this process as permitting clusters of themes to fall
naturally into categories. The final step in Reduction is to construct a complete description of
the phenomenon under study.

Imaginative Variation allowed me to work within the theme clusters and categories,
utilizing my thoughts to approach the phenomenon from different perspectives. Moustakas
(1994) described Imaginative Variation as a creative process, during which the researcher
identifies and creates new possibilities, perspectives, and frames of reference, arising from the
clusters and categories developed during Reduction. As part of this process, I identified essential
essences, and structures through the notation of the consistent, unchanging structural themes that
remained.

Moustakas described the final step in phenomenology as “the intuitive integration of the
fundamental textural and structural descriptions into a unified statement of the essences of the
experience of the phenomenon as a whole” (1994, p. 100). Here, I found and described the
common elements and qualities of the phenomenon. Moustakas wrote that the possibilities for
determining essences of phenomena are never completely exhausted. This allowed for the same
phenomena to be studied time and time again, each analysis reflecting new, never before
discovered essences.

Moustakas (1994) wrote that phenomenological methods move the researcher toward a
state of pure consciousness. Simply put, a phenomenological study is one in which a researcher
describes both what people experience, as well as how they experience it. Utilizing the
processes of phenomenological research, I attempted to clarify, illustrate, and create deeper
understandings of the experiences of the participants.

In addition to phenomenological methods mentioned above, I also employed a
combination of phenomenology and ethnography. Phenomenological ethnography tries “to get
close to its subjects in order to capitalize upon their familiarity with the topic of study (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997, p. 42). In particular, I used photo ethnography as a means to get closer to the participants with the overall goal of becoming familiar with how they experienced and saw campus. Photo ethnography is often used in applied research where participants are given a camera to document needs of the community (Wang, 1995, as cited in Farough, 2006). After the participants take the pictures, the researcher has a follow-up meeting to have the participant(s) describe what the pictures mean to them. “The goal of this technique is to work for social change; it is a methodology rooted in a Frierian-based, consciousness-raising practice and is used in marginalized communities” (Farough, 2006, p. 53).

**Profile of the institution.**

Bowling Green State University (BGSU) is a doctoral granting state-assisted university in the State of Ohio. The university, originally founded as a teacher’s college, was established in 1910. The main campus is located in Bowling Green, Ohio, a small city of 29,636 residents located in Northwest Ohio (The City of Bowling Green, Ohio, 2011). The profile of BGSU includes a student body of approximately 20,000 students, 3,000 of whom are graduate students, who represent all 50 states and 70 international nations. There are fewer than 3,000 students who identify as “African-American, Native-American, Hispanic, and Asian-Pacific Islander” (Bowling Green State University, 2011). The campus student body is predominantly White (77.4%). Students who self-identified as “Black” make up the highest non-majority student population at 9.7%. Students who identified as “Hispanic” made up 3.3% of the student population in Fall 2010. The data regarding full-time faculty reveals a similar percentage of majority “White/Caucasian” personnel (80.2%), but numbers for “African American/Black” faculty (3.2%) and “Hispanic American” faculty (2.7%) drop significantly in comparison to
student enrollment numbers. Enrollment data by gender indicated that women are the majority within the student body (56.4%). In contrast, the data show that men make up the majority (53.7%) of the faculty (Bowling Green State University Office of Institutional Research, 2011b). Data received from the Office of Admissions at BGSU indicates that in academic year 2009-2010, 369 undergraduates self-identified as Hispanic or Latina.

**Participant selection.**

As the researcher, I needed to make a variety of decisions as to how the data would be collected in order to determine the best way to select participants, how structured the groups would be, and my level of involvement during data collection (Morgan, 1997). According to Morgan (1997), as a rule, focus groups most often use homogenous strangers as participants, rely on a relatively structured interview with high involvement from the researcher, have 6 - 10 participants per group, and have 3 – 5 groups per project. However, these rules are not set in stone; rather they serve as a jumping off point for the research design and the planning process.

How much a participant has to contribute to the group, how invested she is in the topic, and how much detail the researcher needs to hear from each participant are all factors that determine focus group size (Morgan, 1997). While small and large groups both have positive aspects and challenges, larger groups tend to be less efficient and difficult for the researcher to manage (Morgan, 1997). In contrast smaller groups of 6 – 10 participants are more manageable and useful when the researcher wants to have a better sense of each participant’s reactions (Morgan, 1997). In determining the number of groups, the researcher must consider the structure of the study and the size of the research team with the ultimate goal being to reach “saturation” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967 as cited in Morgan, 1997).
Morgan (1997) suggested that when selecting participants for focus groups that it is most often best to think in terms of minimizing sample bias versus achieving generalizability. Because focus groups participants are often selected through only one source (i.e., a campus office), bias can enter into the study (Morgan, 1997). However, if the researcher is diligent and uses a variety of sources to recruit participants and uses other measures, such as telephone screening interviews, the level of bias is likely reduced (Morgan, 1997).

Moran (1997) also suggested that using strangers versus acquaintances in the study would likely allow for richer conversations to occur. Agar and McDonald (1995) supported this assertion postulating that acquaintances may converse easily, but that they may do so based on assumptions that are presupposed between the acquaintances. Those presuppositions are often the very thing the researcher is trying to discover (Agar & McDonald, 1995). However, given the size of the community I studied (less than 200 Latinas on campus), I did not exclude participants who were friends as it would have eliminated many possible participants.

**Recruitment.**

All participants were students at Bowling Green State University or had recently graduated from Bowling Green State University. Referrals from the faculty advisor of the Latino Student Union, staff from the Office of Multicultural Affairs, and Latino/a faculty and staff on campus began the participant identification process. Selection criteria were that students self-identify as Latina and were full-time undergraduate students or recent undergraduate graduates at Bowling Green State University. E-mail was utilized to contact the students to gauge their general interest, availability, and willingness to participate in this study. Those who expressed an interest and willingness to participate were sent an e-mail invitation to participate. I followed-up on these contacts via e-mail to develop personal relationships with the participants. This step
was important so that the participants and I could begin to establish a rapport prior to the first focus group. In an effort to encourage participation, I provided food at all focus group sessions. Additionally, I provided the opportunity to each participant to enter a drawing for one $200 book scholarship.

Ethical guidelines established by the Human Subjects Review Board at Bowling Green State University guided this study. Clear agreements were initiated with the participants, establishing confidentiality, informed consent, and the full disclosure of the nature and purpose of, and requirements to participate in this study (see Appendix A). I removed information I deemed to be personally identifiable, damaging, or private to protect the confidentiality of all participants. There was minimal risk to the health and wellbeing of the participants who participated in this study. However, referrals for therapeutic support and counseling were discussed with the participants. Participants were notified that they were free to drop out of the study at any time, with no loss to them.

Data collection.

I used focus group interviews as the primary data collection method. Morgan (1988) claimed that focus groups contain rudiments of both observation and individual interview techniques. Morgan (1996) defined focus groups as a research technique that allows the researcher to collect data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher. This technique then, allowed for what Ely et al. (1991) referred to as the “simultaneous mutual shaping of knower and known” (p. 2) to be realized. “The object is to get high-quality data in a social context where people can consider their own views in the context of the views of others” (Patton, 2002, p. 386).
Because focus groups allow for the data to be collected through group interaction, they have emerged as an empowering approach in feminist research (Madriz, 2003, p. 836). Madriz (2003) stated that the voices of women of color have been silenced for years and argued that focus groups “can be an important element in the advancement of and agenda of social justice for women…” (p. 836). As a White researcher, I recognized that I would be moderating focus groups with participants from a cultural and social background that differs from my own; conducting focus groups instead of individual interviews likely allowed participants to feel more comfortable in sharing experiences, as they did so as a group and with each other. Using a feminist framework, “focus groups may facilitate women of color ‘writing culture together’ by exposing not only the layers of oppression that have suppressed these women’s expressions, but the forms of resistance that they use every day to deal with such oppressions” (Madriz, 2003, p. 835). Many feminist theorists (Benmayor, 1991; Garcia, 1989; hooks, 1990; Madriz, 1997) asserted that women of color experience a triple subjugation rooted in class, race, and gender oppression and therefore remind feminist researchers to take that into account when selecting research methods. “Not all methods are suitable for interviewing women and much less women of color, who, understandably, may feel apprehensive about talking with an interviewer about their lives” (Madriz, 2003, p. 837). As a self-identified White woman conducting this research, I believed using focus groups as a means of gathering data would provide richer, unreserved data than one-on-one interviews or observation would produce.

The social interaction that the researcher is able to observe during focus groups is widely noted by social scientists (Denzin, 1989; Holstein & Gubrium, 1995) as one of the most important research processes. The active dialogue, the sharing of opinions, ideas, and experiences bolsters the groups “social construction of meaning” (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995).
Madriz (2003) asserted that group interactions are important because they contribute to “tearing down the walls of silence that have hidden women of color’s triple and overlapping marginality: being female, being of color, and, usually, being poor” (p. 836). However, Madriz (2003) was also careful to warn that “focus groups are not a solution to the reproductions of the Other” (p. 837). Fine (1994) spoke to the use of focus groups in furthering the researchers’ ability to hear the plural voices of the participants. Madriz (2003) supported the use of focus groups for Latinas in particular because “multivocal conversations” are commonplace in Latina culture among mothers, sisters, and other women (p. 837).

Focus groups consisted of open-ended, non-confirmatory questions (see Appendices B and C) and consisted of 3-5 participants per focus group (Morgan, 1997; Patton, 2002). Focus group sessions ran for a minimum of 90 minutes. Six focus groups were conducted. For consistency, participants were invited back to partake in all focus groups; however, they had the option to decline participation at any time without penalty. A total of 13 participants were interviewed, of which 11 were interviewed twice and two were interviewed once. I scheduled focus group sessions by asking participants for their schedules and found a time that worked for the majority of participants.

For the second focus group sessions, I employed the photo ethnography methods. At the conclusion of the first focus group, I gave each participant a disposable camera and asked her to take pictures of the campus as she experienced it within a prescribed (e.g., one week) period of time. I then collected the cameras from the participants, had the pictures developed, and gave them back to the participants during the second focus group to gather data relative to how the pictures they took reflected their experiences within the college environment. Specific questions for the second focus group are included in Appendix C.
Focus group interviews were conducted in an on-campus facility (e.g., reserved meeting room) that balanced the needs of the participants and the researcher (Morgan, 1997). The room was arranged “conference style” meaning that the table(s) or chairs were arranged in a U or circular shape. Because all participants were able to see one another, it can be assumed that this design allowed for an easier flow of conversation. All focus group interviews were tape-recorded and video-taped, with the permission of the participants, to ensure that crucial data, including voice inflection and body language, were captured. The setup of the room, mentioned above, also served as an advantageous set up for videotaping the sessions. The focus group sessions were transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were utilized as the primary data analysis source. As mentioned above, all focus group interviews were videotaped; however, they were not used in data analysis.

“In a given study, a series of different focus groups will be conducted to get a variety of perspectives and increase confidence in whatever patterns emerge” (Patton, 2002, p. 385). This approach allowed for the creation of an informal and interactive environment where participants felt encouraged to share openly and honestly (Moustakas, 1994). I employed this technique by giving the participants copies of the transcripts to review for accuracy. Each participant was sent a copy of the focus group transcript and an overall description of the phenomenon, including key quotes, to ensure accuracy. Each participant was offered the opportunity to strike material in the transcripts at any time in the data gathering process as part of the agreement with the researcher. Corrections, clarifications, and additions to the data were noted at this time by the participants. This gave them the chance to expound upon a topic or to strike any part of the transcript text that they deemed as less important or inaccurate. All of these steps allowed me to make notes about
what topics generated more energy, which I used to create questions for the next focus group. I concluded focus group interviews once data saturation occurred.

**Data analysis.**

“Thinking about the nature of the report that the research should produce is an essential element in making decisions about how to analyze the data” (Morgan, 1997, p. 58). Use of focus groups allows for different approaches to analysis and reporting (Morgan, 1997); therefore, I, as the researcher, thought well in advance about how the data would be used. The overall goal of this particular research project was to contribute to the current knowledge base about Latinas in higher education and to produce a set of recommendations for the institution being studied that will affect positive change in institutional polices and services offered to this population. This research had an applied purpose (Krueger, 1994). Morgan (1997) asserted that applied research projects typically use a structured approach to gathering data and a structured approach to analyze the data and report the findings.

The work of Moustakas (1994) was utilized as the primary source for data analysis techniques in this study. I first studied the interview transcripts according to phenomenological data analysis procedures. Next, I horizontalized the data, picking out all passages relevant to the phenomenon under study and treating each instance of equal significance. Following this step, I created meaning units, which I put into common themes and removed any overlapping or repetitive statements. The clustered themes and meanings were then used to develop “textural descriptions of the experience” (pp. 118-119). From the textural descriptions, structural descriptions of the phenomenon were created and integrated into meanings and essences of the experience. A detailed, step-by-step outline of data analysis procedures follows in the next paragraphs.
Immediately following each focus group, I had the transcript typed up and I reviewed it for accuracy by listening to the tape a minimum of two times. Review of the audio allowed me to capture vocal tones, where individuals placed more emotion on a topic, and made note of any nonverbal behaviors among the focus group participants, especially as they related to a specific question or topic. All of these observations were detailed in the researcher log that I kept.

Transcripts were typed up using paragraph numbers. Paragraph numbering allowed me to easily cross reference one line of dialogue with another within the same transcript and allowed for easier cross referencing between transcripts. Once a transcript was typed and reviewed by me for accuracy, I spent time reflecting on the transcript and making observational notes in the margins of the transcripts. This process aided me in the next step of data analysis: horizontalizing the data, also known as creating categories.

“Making categories means reading, thinking, trying out tentative categories, changing them when others do a better job, checking them until the very last piece of meaningful information is categorized and, even at that point, being open to revising the categories” (Ely et al., 1997, p. 145). To do this, I printed out two copies of the transcript, one which served as the sample and one that I used different color highlighters to horizontalize the data into categories. After this step, I began writing notes in the margin. These notes were written in free form, meaning that they were the initial thoughts and ideas that I generated from reading the data. As mentioned above, this process occurred continually throughout the data collection and analysis phases because I found over time that some categories worked very well, while others needed tweaking or needed to be reworked all together. Because of this, I dated all of my margin notes so that I was easily able to observe my progress throughout data analysis about a particular
category, thought, or insight. Horizontalizing the data helped me in the next step of data analysis: developing themes or meaning units.

“A theme can be defined as a statement of meaning that (1) runs through all or most of the pertinent data, or (2) one in the minority that carries heavy emotional or factual impact” (Ely, 1984, as cited in Ely et al., 1997, p. 150). Horizontalizing the data helps the researcher to tease out the meaning of the findings and determine how one category may be linked to another. This process lead to the development of emerging themes in the data. Themes will likely highlight “explicit or implied attitudes toward life, behavior, or understandings of a person, persons, or culture” (Ely et al., 1997, p. 150).

Once themes were established (e.g., familial support), I assigned them a code and then assigned those codes to the electronic version of the transcript. Flick (1998) referred to this as axial coding. Once the codes were entered into the electronic transcript, I sorted the data by code. That provided me with a visual representation of the emerging themes and allowed me to identify patterns among the participants as well as any major differences.

“Phenomenological reduction (analysis) is complete when themes or patterns have been distilled from the data and when the essence of a phenomenon is fully disclosed through textural and structural descriptions” (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985, p. 43). In creating textural descriptions of the experience, I used the data to determine what the experience meant to an individual, or in this case, what the experience meant to the group in order to create comprehensive, rich, “textural” descriptions of the phenomena. From these general descriptions and analysis I then synthesized the insights into a description of the structure of learning that took place. In order to achieve this, I read and scrutinized the data to reveal their structure and meaning.
Measures of Quality

Phenomenological research employs standards of quality comparable to those used in other qualitative methodologies (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002). Moustakas stated that the rigor of phenomenology comes from trying “to eliminate everything that represents a prejudgment, setting aside presuppositions, and reaching a transcendental state of freshness and openness, a readiness to see in an unfettered way” (p. 41). As a result, credibility criteria were utilized throughout this study to ensure the trustworthiness of the analysis.

During each focus group interview, I verbally checked in with the participants to ensure the integrity of the group’s meanings. I asked clarifying questions throughout the interview to make sure I understood the meaning behind a particular statement or a topic and periodically summarized a key point in order to ensure that I was “on the same page” as the participants regarding the shared meaning and construction of experiences.

Having the participants of the study approve and confirm the findings of the study through a process known as member checking is another example of how credibility can be demonstrated within the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002). “Interpreting the data from focus groups requires distinguishing between what participants find interesting and what they find important” (Morgan, 1997, p. 61). One method in finding out what participants found interesting versus what they found important was by asking them directly. “Regardless of the specific technique, the fundamental message here is that learning what the participants think is important should be built into the data collection itself – not left to the analyst’s post hoc speculation” (Morgan, 1997, p. 61). In these cases, I looked to establish “group-to-group
validation,” meaning that if a topic consistently generated a great deal of discussion and energy around the topic for the majority of members, validation was achieved (Morgan, 1997, p. 62).

I also employed a technique known as peer debriefing to ensure trustworthiness. Lincoln and Guba (1985) described peer debriefing as a process in which the biases of the researcher are uncovered and researcher interpretation is clarified by a peer who is not involved in the study. I used two peer debriefers during data analysis. One was a participant in the pilot study for this research and is pursuing a Ph.D. in Writing and Rhetoric; the other is a recent graduate from the BGSU Higher Education Administration program with an expertise in race and college students. I chose these colleagues based on their interest in the topic and their own personal research backgrounds. Both had a knowledge base of the literature in this area and work with diverse populations on campus. As a result, I felt they would have valuable insight into the study. To assist me in the research process, I asked my peer debriefers to review transcripts of the interviews independently. I then held a follow-up meeting with both of them to discuss what I was seeing in the data and comparing that to what they were seeing. This process allowed me to frame and reframe initial thought I had about the data and assisted me in developing questions for the second focus group interviews. Furthermore, each peer debriefer talked with me at length about the overall project. We discussed literature that may be relevant to the findings and they helped me process thoughts and ideas I had about the study.

I also developed and maintained a research log, which served as part of an audit trail. This log was kept throughout this study to ensure quality (Ely, 1991; Erlandson et al., 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Documents and related materials collected during the study were included in the research log. The research log served as my diary of sorts throughout the research process and helped me in making decisions throughout the research process as well as
helped me become aware of the moments when I found myself “beginning to ask questions, to observe, to share with a support network, to take time, to try something out, to err, to study that again, and to become increasingly courageous and reflective” (Ely, 1991, p. 105). By repeatedly reviewing the research log and consistently adding observations, thoughts, and ideas to the log, I had a better comprehension of my own understanding of the experiences of the participants. The audit trail served as the overall collection point of all researcher notes, interview tapes, transcripts, and interview notes.

**Summary**

The purpose of this study was to contribute to the current knowledge base on the experiences of Latinas while attending a predominantly White university in the Midwest. I hoped to gain an understanding of how the participants constructed and made meaning of these experiences. I employed a phenomenological approach in this study with the intent of conceptualizing the shared meanings, themes, and constructions of these experiences as revealed in the data analysis.
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

In this chapter, I provide an overview of the lived experiences of the 13 participants of this study. This overview includes an exploration of the participants’ ethnic identity, the participants’ experiences and perceptions of the campus environment, and how they continue to academically persist despite many barriers. The data analysis is presented through narratives capturing the participants’ own reflection on their experiences as a student at a predominantly White university. The narratives highlighted in this chapter are in direct response to the primary research question and sub-questions: (a) what factors and conditions do the participants identify as influencing their experience in college; (b) how do the participants see their familial and cultural background shaping their college experience; and (c) how do the participants perceive the campus environment and how that influences their collegiate experience.

Profiles of Participants

To recruit participants, two staff members, one of whom was the advisor to Latino Student Union and the other who worked in the Office of Multicultural Affairs, were asked to send out emails on the researcher’s behalf about the study. The email introduced the study and asked for volunteers who self-identified as Latina to email the researcher if they had an interest in participating. Thirteen women were interviewed over the course of this study. Eleven participants were current undergraduate students at Bowling Green State University (BGSU), one participant was a current graduate student at BGSU, and one participant was a current graduate student at a higher education institution located in the same region as BGSU, but recently received an undergraduate degree from BGSU. Twelve of the 13 participants were between the ages of 19-22. One participant was in her 50s.
All participants identified as Latina and represented a broad range of countries of origin. Seven participants indicated that their family’s country of origin was Mexico, four designated Puerto Rico, and two specified that their countries of origin were located in South America. Three participants were born outside of the United States. Two of the three are American citizens and one had residency status.

Of the 13 participants, one was a freshman, five were sophomores, one was a junior, four were seniors, and two were graduate students. Areas of study were varied and included education, psychology, graphic and digital design, healthcare administration, neuroscience, criminal justice, public relations, and international relations. Most of the participants shared that they intended to continue their studies by pursuing master’s and/or doctoral degrees in the future. Seven of the participants indicated that they were serving as role models for younger siblings and extended family members regarding enrolling in and persisting in college.

The educational levels of the participants’ parents varied widely. Two of the participants’ mothers’ completed college as non-traditional aged students, two had attended college but did not graduate, six graduated from high school but did not pursue a college education, one completed all but her senior year of high school, one dropped out after middle school, and one mother did not attend school at all. The participants’ fathers’ educational attainment also varied widely. Three of the participants’ fathers completed a master’s degree, two completed some college but did not graduate, two completed degrees at technical schools, two completed high school, one completed all but his senior year of high school, one dropped out after middle school, and one dropped out after elementary school.
Influence of Ethnic Identity

All 13 students interviewed self-identified as Latina and while the degree of connection to their ethnic identity varied, it became clear that *familia* was the common thread to the participants’ ethnic identity. The concept of *familia* was frequently mentioned by the participants of this study as the foundation for the morals and values that guide their lives, and the cornerstone for practicing their culture. In other words, it was the sense of home away from home. Learning about Latino culture and history was not something that happened in school; it generally happened at home. All but one participant grew up in a predominantly White environment and 11 participants attended predominantly White schools prior to their enrollment at BGSU. What they knew of their ethnic identity and culture they learned from family members. However, for many of the participants, attending a predominantly White university allowed for further self-exploration not only of ethnic identity but Latino history as well. Alicia best illustrated this by saying:

…I feel a lot of us don’t know our history because we had to learn about White people in grade school and nobody talked to me about Cesar Chavez…I’ve honestly tried to go out of my way to educate myself [in college] because I think it’s embarrassing that I don’t know about certain people and the exact story behind it.

This comment helps demonstrate the lack of exposure the participants had to their ethnic culture and history outside of their own homes.

While family was important to understanding one’s ethnic identity, this relationship was somewhat tenuous. As a result, the participants’ experience of ethnic identity and dominant culture were in conflict. Growing up within predominantly White communities had a strong influence on how the participants interacted with peers in school and that influence was not
always viewed positively. Three of the participants in particular expressed that they experienced times when they felt they were not Latino enough to fit in with other Latino peers and were not White enough to fit in with White peers. In a shared dialogue, Alex, Alicia, and Jennifer spoke to this phenomenon. Alex began by saying:

I, like I said I grew up in a White community...that really shaped my experience in high school. And when I got to college I wasn’t like Latina enough to hang out with the Latina crowd. But then I wasn’t White enough to hang out with the White kids...But that was something I really struggled with. And it’s like I didn’t have the experience that like some of the women from like – that like grew up in Puerto Rico had. Like my experience was different. And because I didn’t dress like them or look like them or X, Y, or Z like them, then I like wasn’t Latina enough.

Jennifer added:

And that’s what it’s like in the movie Selena. You’re not Mexican enough for Mexicans. You’re not white enough for the Americans. It’s a constant issue.

At times, the participants even struggle with the “not being Latino enough” concept within their own families. Alicia stated:

I definitely struggle with that. Even within my own family I struggle with that, because my cousins grew up in Orlando, Florida, Miami, Florida, and like the Bronx. Well, -- Like I always get like stereotypes from like the one side that I’m like basically gringa, White, you know.

Alex also had a similar experience at home. She stated:

Yeah. I mean I’ve always been the gringa because all of my brothers grew up in Venezuela and I was the only one who grew up here. And so that was like always been a
part of my experience. But we’re [her family] very open about that. We talk about that regularly. How like I don’t dance as well as my brothers do when we dance like salsa or merengue. Not because I don’t have rhythm but just ‘cause I didn’t grow up doing it at parties like they did.

These women struggle to live between two cultures. On one hand, they feel pressure from their family members to maintain the Latino culture and history; however, within predominantly White environments, they find that difficult to do. On the other hand, these women are viewed as different, and sometimes exotic, within the dominant culture. The challenge then is figuring out where these women fit in, both at home and in college.

Labels and Sense of Belonging

While all of the participants indicated that they felt a sense of belonging at BGSU, at times they faced challenges where White students on campus made comments that highlighted the participants’ “Otherness.” While Laury initially stated that she didn’t feel any different than any other student on campus, she did remember an occurrence where her ethnicity was highlighted in a less than positive experience. Laury relayed the following experience:

I was walking behind [two classmates] and she – they’re both White…and they were talking about – she was like, “Did you know that they say that White people might be the new minority?” And they both looked at each other…and they’re like, “That’d be weird. That’d be really bad.” And then they’re like [to me], “No offense.” I’m like, “None taken.” But you know what? I didn’t think it would bother me, but it did in a way because, you know, it’s like it’s weird to think about that, and for them, you know, they’ve always been a certain way and they’re… they know that if you’re a minority, some minorities have problems, they were like, “Wow, what people would think of us.”
And, you know, it’s like – “Well, you might actually have to be in somebody else’s shoes.” And I think that scares them, so in a way I was in shock you know, disturbed, but in a way I was glad that they might get to see – to get out of their little – get out of their little space and actually start seeing stuff, so I guess that was like the only like disturbing thing I had, but other than that it was – it was eye-opening.

This experience did cause Laury to think twice about her ethnicity and how she was viewed by her White peers. In addition, this example demonstrates that while Laury stated that she felt as if she was like any other student on campus, she was aware that she was being labeled by her peers based solely on her ethnicity. Furthermore, it appears that she was aware of the changing demographics within the United States and recognizes that as those demographics continue to change that her White peers will be challenged with the notion of being a minority.

Other participants have had other experiences that have caused them to question where they fit in on campus. For example, the majority of participants agreed that if you work hard, you will succeed academically at BGSU. However, the hard work that is put in academically before arriving on-campus is often overlooked when White peers learn that a scholarship has been awarded. According to many of the participants’ statements, White peers often assume that a scholarship was awarded solely on the color of one’s skin rather than academic aptitude. This was a shared experience among many of the participants. Alicia related an experience that was negative for her:

I was in an honors class and the peer facilitator, so he is an honor student like second or third year…basically like a TA type of person. We’re having a discussion, cause, you know honors program it’s like small classes, little round table discussion. It’s a great atmosphere to learn. Right, okay. So I don’t know what we were talking about but it was
like – like with minorities getting scholarships and affirmative action, blah, blah, blah. I
don’t know what it was. Basically the conversation got to him and he was like, “I look at
Alicia. I look at Alicia and think that she is only here because the color of her skin.” I
was like, “Wait a second.” Like I literally like sat in my chair. Like paused for a second.
And like looked around. Like – he was like, “I feel like – the gist of his comment was
that I’m not really smart enough to be a college student. I’m definitely not smart enough
to be in the honors program, but they need to show that they have minorities so they just
took me. So I just got my scholarship because they needed to say they gave a brown
person some money to go to college. You know. And I’m just like, “Um, okay, well for
your information, I was an honors student in high school. For your information, I
graduated with a 4.2. For your information, there were requirements outside of the color
of my skin to be in this program of all White people as you can see.” You know so it was
like I just – so many times I’ve had this experience where like I just feel like people look
at me and think, “I don’t really belong at college. I don’t belong as a student. And that’s
really, really irritating.”

For all of the participants, being at college is considered a privilege and something they
intentionally worked hard for. However, they find that White peers make assumptions about
how they arrived at the university; that assumption being that they got into college solely based
on the color of their skin. This perception is deeply hurtful to these participants as they know
that their hard work and persistence, rather than their ethnicity, is what got them here.

**Campus Environment**

Within the context of the campus environment, there were many factors that affected
these participants’ experiences in college. These included the perceptions of institutional efforts
around the topics of diversity and social justice, their own involvement in campus programs intended to promote diversity, have a space to comfortably express and live their

**Perceptions of Institutional Efforts**

BGSU, not unlike other institutions in the nation, speaks to the importance of diversity in its mission statement. The specific statement is as follows:

Bowling Green State University (BGSU) provides educational experiences inside and outside the classroom that enhance the lives of students, faculty and staff. Students are prepared for lifelong career growth, lives of engaged citizenship and leadership in a global society. Within our learning community, we build a welcoming, safe and diverse environment where the creative ideas and achievements of all can benefit others throughout Ohio, the nation and the world (Bowling Green State University, 2011c)

This institutional mission is reflected in other departmental mission statements throughout the university. Deliberately broad, how it is carried out throughout the university varies. Our participants, had mixed feelings as to how ethnically diverse BGSU is. While the mission statement asserts that the university strives to build a learning community that is welcoming, safe, and diverse, the demographics for the university are somewhat in conflict with that concept. The total student make up is 77.4% White, 9.7% Black, 3.3% Hispanic, 0.9% Asian, 0.6% Native American, and 8.1% listed as Other/Unknown (Bowling Green State University, 2011b). It is conceivable therefore that non-majority students feel isolated and overlooked. However, BGSU does provide an opportunity for these participants to explore their heritage further. The catalyst for this appears to be one student organization, the Latino Student Union, and a few campus jobs that focus on recruiting new students from ethnically and racially diverse backgrounds. All of the participants, however, experienced feelings of isolation and loneliness at
BGSU. They recognized that they were often the sole Latino and often the sole person of color in their classroom. This does not go unnoticed by the participants. For eight of the participants, the University’s espoused commitment to building a diverse environment is nothing more than lip service. Alex, a current BGSU graduate student who attended a different undergraduate institution stated:

And so at my undergrad was also predominately White, but there was like so much excitement around being [inclusive term used by undergraduate university], which is like the terminology, that it was like cool. Like I felt so cool to be like, “I speak Spanish and like I get to go to Venezuela.” Where as like BG I feel like there’s not like positive reinforcement and like positive conversations about diversity. I feel like it’s just – It’s like to fill the requirement is I think the sense that I get. I just don’t feel like there’s really an appreciation for it.

There is a sense among other participants that some of the programs aimed at building a diverse environment are only segregating students further. Alicia stated:

Which is funny cause they try to have so many like diversity programs. It made me think, like I feel like the different like groups in BG, like I feel like the groups do to like try to get that sense of like I belong and this is my group, just reinforces segregation I feel. Like I’m just thinking right now how we have Black homecoming. Like in my mind that just makes me think like I’m back decades ago and it’s like Black people, you got to go to this ballroom and white people. Like that’s what I think of when, you know we have stuff like that. Like people like have made comments, like, “BG has Black homecoming or Black graduation?” Something like that. And it's like, I don’t know.
Like you said, we understand like why certain things are happening, but I think it’s not gonna get the results that we probably want.

Alex agreed with Alicia and added:

And with those type of events it’s tough because like a Black student has a different experience than a White student does and you want to like (a) support them around that. And like encourage that community. But you are segregating them, so how do you make homecoming more inclusive? I feel like the diversity program coming from the institution isn’t genuine. Like I feel like when the Latina Student Union or is it Black Student Union? Right? Like when they do events, not that I’ve been to them, but like I feel like it’s coming from a different place. Whereas I feel like the diversity programs for like the first year success series is so staged and like empty. I don’t feel like it’s like really about inclusiveness.

Alicia finished the conversation by saying:

It’s kind of like we’re doing this because we are not racist. Like, look, I’m a White old guy telling you to be accepting of diversity. Like that’s exactly what I felt like.

While not as vocal about these concerns, Sara and Jennifer also stated that they agreed with Alicia and Alex and went on to say that the only time diversity is ever talked about is during an ethnic studies class that all undergraduates at BGSU are required to take. Outside of that, they state that little is done in the classroom to encourage an ethnically diverse perspective even when it is right in front of the professor’s face. Alex shared the following experience:

I’m in a program that’s supposed to focus and really support those conversations. And I had like a panic attack a month ago being like, “Oh, my god, I am in the wrong place and I need to leave and go to a city.” I was in a class. They were like various comments
made that were really ridiculous. But I’m the only non-White student in all my classes. But in this one class, and the student was like, “We, as White people.” And I was like, I just like was looking at her and I was like, “Really? Like we. Everybody in this room is White?” And like I know it’s my responsibility to like speak up, but at the same time, I was like nobody else has like any sense that like not everybody here is White. And the professor didn’t say anything. And so for being in a course and a program that’s supposed to focus on diversity and really challenge the stereotypes, I don’t think we’re doing that so well.

Alex chose not to say anything to her peers or the professor that day, but undoubtedly that experience will be one that she remembers throughout her educational career. It was a time she can point to when she felt very isolated and alone within an environment that is intended to be welcoming and promotes diversity. Alex’s experience brought up a conversation about diversity training for professors. None of the participants’ believed that there was any extensive training around this topic, and what they knew of they perceived as inadequate. Alicia also had a bad experience in the classroom where she felt singled out for her ethnicity. She stated:

I just feel like as much as they talk about diversity and how much we support that like if they’re doing diversity training for these professors I don’t think they’re taking it seriously or I don’t think they’re doing a good enough job because I honestly don’t think she has like any intention to disrespect us. I don’t think she’s like racist or anything. I just feel like they don’t teach ‘em how to handle these situations where we’re gonna be talking about these things in class. How you approach the class with allowing everybody explain themselves or say the things they want to say, without feeling uncomfortable. I
guess I just keep trying to have faith that they’ll keep pushing for all that diversity training and actually like approach it in a realistic way. Not be like fake about it.

**Other Campus Programs**

Four of the participants found ways to assist in recruiting ethnically diverse students to come to BGSU and once there, ways to educate the student body around issues of diversity, inclusion, and social justice. Those positions were often tied to a scholarship, an incentive to participate and to stay. Sara, Audrey, Anabell, and Ilianah all participated in those types of activities. Sara and Ilianah were part of the Admissions student recruitment team. Ilianah stated:

I’m also part of the student recruitment team, which is primarily African-American students and then there’s some Latinas and I think – yeah, it’s just all Latinas, but we’re trying to recruit more and more of the cultural students here, but the big thing that I see when we tell the students like why we’re here, I would imagine 90 percent of us say it’s because of the financial aid and I know I looked at [name of another regional university]. That’s close. I live like right down the street from it, but they didn’t – they didn’t wanna give anything, so I think that the funding is a big reason why a lot of us are here and the number of Latinos or Hispanics here might be a lot lower had we not been able to get those scholarship funds.

Audrey and Anabell participated in the diversity educators program, offered through the Office of Multicultural Affairs. There is a scholarship that is attached to this position, but they both found it rewarding financially and personally. They appreciated the fact that they could serve as change agents. Audrey stated:

Yeah, the diversity educator scholarship because it’s going into dorm rooms and places on campus and trying to facilitate activities that are gonna maybe not completely change
someone’s mind. It might have just a little effect on them, but that’s something that will open their eyes maybe or maybe next time they think that thought that they said to you, like they – maybe that will –

Anabell continued:

That’s what our scholarship [promotes]. Our scholarship funds are room and board and then we do programs within the residence halls that promote diversity, and we actually have a class – well, it’s not actually a class. It’s a session that’s incorporated into our schedule that we have to leave free in order to communicate with people, our advisers and such within the Office of Multicultural Affairs. We’re a big section of it now and we’re expanding…

For Audrey and Anabell, the diversity educators scholarship not only allowed them to educate others around the topics of diversity, inclusion, and social justice, it also provided them with financial aid to support their college pursuits. For all participants, scholarships were necessary in order to continue their studies and availability of financial aid was one of the primary reasons they chose to attend BGSU.

**Comfortable Space for Expressing and Living the Culture**

Not unlike many college freshmen, the participants of this study all felt a bit overwhelmed by the size and scope of BGSU when they first arrived. For all but two participants, BGSU was not their first choice of school. They all chose to come to BGSU because of the attractive financial aid packages that were offered. Once here, it was tough for the majority of them to find their niche, and six of them thought of transferring. For a variety of reasons, most of them financial, they chose to stay. However, when asked to describe a space on campus where they felt they could express and live their culture, the resounding answer was
laughter and comments that there was no such place. Alex shared:

I don’t feel like here there are any spaces on campus where I feel like physically I connect to as like a Latino woman. And at my undergrad we had a house. It was like for people of color and I think like the Black Student Union took over one of the academic buildings like in the ‘70s to get like reform on classes and so they were like all these – not like physical markers but like symbolic markers around campus of like spaces that were just like really cool to be connected to. And I just don’t know – granted I don’t know many places on campus but I don’t feel that way about any of them. And so that’s really weird.

According to the participants, conversations had been occurring on-campus the past few years about providing an ethnic student center, but the sentiment among the group was that other projects, especially those related to Athletics, took precedence over the center. This caused the participants some frustration. Alicia and Sara stated:

_Alicia:_ I think that’s one of the main arguments with why they’re trying to get the ethnic students center. And I get so frustrated when they say, “Oh, but you have the multicultural office.” Multicultural Affairs is one floor in Conklin.

_Sara:_ And it’s not welcoming at all.

_Alicia:_ Yeah. And it’s just advising. It’s not where we go to feel connected. There’s not – like I feel like you can go any every campus and probably see some type of cultural center in some aspect.

At present the Student Union is the only place on campus where the majority of participants felt somewhat at home. The participants described the rest of the buildings on campus as cold and institutional. The Student Union, however, is bright and open, very different from any other
building on campus. It also houses student organization offices and workspace such as the Latino Student Union. As a result, many of the participants spent a great deal of time in the Union. However, that had its problems as well. Alicia and Sara related the following experience:

*Alicia:* We have to I feel force upon the campus like our area of comfort because there’s like that one section of the org [organization] suites right in front of the LSU office where when a bunch of us has been there there’s like Spanish music playing, we’re all talking, we’re all mingling and stuff. And you feel comfortable there. But at the same time you don’t because the people two desks down are staring at you. You feel like your Spanish music is bothering people. Like if they hear me speak Spanish with some of the members you don’t know if they’re offended or…

*Sara:* They tell us it’s [the music] too loud.

*Alicia:* Yeah. They always complain that we’re too loud. We’ve had things written down where we can’t use certain computers because they’re for certain organizations even though the organizations never come to their desks. They label the desk for an organization and they’re never there so we’re gonna use it because the LSU office might be having an exec member on the computer but if I’m not on exec like I was last year I still feel like connected to that area. That little area of the org suite and I feel like we make up our space because that’s all we’re left to do is make up the space where we feel comfortable. But at the same time we don’t feel comfortable. We have to like just make the best of it and deal with the looks from down the org suite pathway of like other people who might be bothered by us.
Anabell and Michelle had similar experiences in their on-campus living environment. Anabell related:

I feel like I’ve had a mixed experience with it because when going to LSU it’s kind of like empowering to be a Latina in LSU. Like you can make a difference here on campus. But last year as a freshman I lived on a completely Caucasian floor so whenever I wanted to listen to my music I’d put it a little lower, the Spanish music, because I didn’t want that blasting everywhere and people being like, “What are you listening to?” Whereas at LSU you’d hear the whole room vibrating with the music. So it definitely has an impact. Like sometimes I feel like I can’t listen to what I want to listen to or watch the shows I want to watch on my TV just because people are gonna walk in and be like, “What are you watching?”

Michelle, who by her own admission was used to “blending in” with the dominant culture chose to get involved in a predominantly White campus sorority and had a similar experience.

Michelle stated to Anabell:

That’s so funny you say that because last year I was sitting at my desk and I had my earphones in and I was listening to Mexican music and somehow I was doing something and I yanked it out on accident and it was blaring on the laptop and my roommate goes, “Is that what you listen to?” And I said, “At home, yeah, it’s a big thing. While my dad’s making dinner or something he’s got the Mexican music playing in the background. All of our get-togethers there’s something Hispanic going on in the background. Or something.” And she’s like, “Oh, I would never have guessed you would listen to that.” And I was just like listening to different things and she’s just like, and I don’t know if it’s because my mom’s like half white and my dad’s full Mexican that she didn’t think that I
would take to the – That I would take maybe more of the White dominant side like that.

Or I don’t know what her perspective was on that but she was very shocked that I was
listening to that.

Finding a place where they could express their culture openly was a challenge for the
participants of this study. This particular topic of conversation resulted in a lot of dialogue and
expressed frustration among the group. While the university does have a multicultural lounge in
the Student Union, the participants shared that they rarely, if ever, go in there because the
artwork displayed is not representative of their cultures. They would love to have a space on
campus that feels welcoming and open to practicing *familia*, where traditional food and dance is
celebrated, and a place that represents them culturally and symbolically. All of the participants
felt that the university falls short in providing a welcoming space where diverse ideas and
achievements are truly embraced. This does not happen in their on-campus living environment,
and short of an LSU meeting, it does not happen at all.

**Negative Interactions within the Institution**

Interactions with faculty, staff and peers shaped the experiences and perceptions of these
participants. Many found themselves at odds with faculty and peers, and while their staff
interactions tended to be more positive, there were still concerns. The next few paragraphs will
illustrate some of the negative and positive interactions that have had a big impact on the way the
participants view their total college experience.

While many of the participants stated that working hard would allow one to persist in the
classroom at BGSU, three of the participants, Alex, Alicia, and Sara, had a negative interaction
with a professor that left them wondering if BGSU was the right place for them. As related
previously in this chapter, Alex felt that way when a peer included her in a general statement
about White people and the professor made no attempt to correct that individual. This left Alex feeling as if she were in the wrong academic program and that she needed to move back to a city where there was a demonstrated appreciation for diversity. Alicia talked about a classroom experience where she felt singled out by the professor because of her ethnicity. She stated:

   We’re in my sociology theory course and we were reading about Du Bois and his essays, “The Souls of Black Folks.” So the way she teaches class is by going off of people’s questions. She’s like, “Oh, some people ask, you know, do black people still feel this way? Blah, blah, blah. And this way?” And there’s only three minorities in this class. It’s one Black young man, one Black young woman and me. So she’s like asking these questions but I can just sense the whole time she’s staring at us ‘cause we all like pretty much sit like in the same two rows on like one side of the row. And I can just like feel like she’s just saying stuff and kind of like looking like counting on us to participate because all of a sudden we’re talking about black people and stuff. And then she stops and she’s like basically saying are we not participating because we’re afraid of – she’s like, “Here. The case could be say you forgot what you read, or you’re not wanting to participate because we have Black people in the classroom.” And then she looks at me and then repeats basically the same thing saying, “And we have other minority groups in the class.” Yeah. Singling us out. And I mean maybe she did feel it’d be beneficial if she made sure we participated because the whole class is like White.

Sara’s experience also made her feel as if she was being singled out by the professor. She related:

   We had an assignment in that class where we had to wear name tags and there’s only like about 13 people in the class so we went around and throwing around each other’s names
and the [phonetic] category that it belonged in. And she [the professor] claimed that my name belongs where the syllables are separated between the two consonants... And I said, “Well technically my name wouldn’t go in this number in this category because it’s split between [consonant]-[vowel] and [rest of name].” She was like, “But aren’t you saying it the Spanish way?” And that’s when I was just like, “What do you mean?” Like I just got so irritated just because it was at one point where I was like I’m arguing about how to pronounce my name and now it’s like you’re taking it to my culture? Like what does that have to do? Like first of all, lady, the name is French. And just because my last name is [participant’s last name] and just ‘cause there are plenty of other Hispanic women that have the name [participant’s last name] doesn’t mean that I’m saying it the Spanish way.

When asked if these participants followed-up with their professors to let them know that they had viewed the interaction negatively, none of them had. When asked if that had anything to do with the power differential between professor and student, Alicia said:

A lot because this person’s controlling my grade and I have to sit through class with them if they end up getting pissed off at me for the rest of the semester. And just feeling like I shouldn’t participate. Like basically an outcast to the class. Or like I’m being still looked down upon even more because I could easily see how somebody could approach a professor with an issue and they get mad that you question them because a lot of them are on their high horse about being the professor and if you question them. Like some teachers I feel like encourage, like always question. You know? But there’s some that if they get questioned they’re gonna do whatever they can to make you feel stupid and at that point you’re a student with one more year. And dude, are you gonna keep fighting them? No. Because that’s just gonna make the situation worse.
As part of the data collection, the researcher asked the participants to take pictures of things that were meaningful to them about their college experience. Sara related that she wanted to take a picture of the classroom where the incident with her phonetics professor occurred to show that she was alone in that situation. When asked why she wanted to take that picture, she stated:

Why is because I felt more of a want to do that especially after the whole name thing. Because I felt like that was a way of her [the professor] singling me out ‘cause there was no one else in there to back me up. I mean yeah, there were still people who there like, “Oh my God. Like what’s wrong with her.” But no one to like speak on it coming from my perspective or anything like that. And I just wanted to have like a visual of me in there. Everyone else is White including the teacher.

Sara ended up not taking that picture out of fear of negative repercussions from the professor, but clearly that memory lives on vividly as part of her overall college experience at BGSU.

Several of the participants also talked about how they did not feel their advisors had been very supportive of their academic goals. This particularly affected Alicia and Jennifer who both planned to attend graduate school immediately after graduating from BGSU. Alicia had her sights set on a Ph.D. in Psychology and Jennifer had already been accepted to medical school at the time of these interviews. Alicia stated:

And it’s really frustrating cause that’s been my only goal [getting a Ph.D. in psychology], because I was like I knew I couldn’t do anything with a bachelor’s in psychology. So my mentality was if I can go all the way, I’m gonna go all the way. And, you know having that as my plan A, having that as my only plan, and it’s one I’m busting my butt at and I have people [academic advisors] telling me, “Why don’t you consider Psych D programs. It’s like a different type of like degree, but it’s not the Ph.D. Or why don’t you apply to
some master’s – maybe they’re coming from a place where they want me to have a backup plan. But in my heart I feel like they’re just not believing in me that I can get into a Ph.D. program. But I’m doing it cause I want it to look good for a Ph.D. program. Why have you set me up to do all this and at the end of the day you want to tell me to apply to a master’s program? I just, like I said, I’m pushing through cause I’m hoping come spring I get an acceptance letter to one of these schools I applied to. But if not, like it’s gonna be so heartbreaking. Cause to me it’s gonna be like these people who doubted me, I guess had their reasons like to doubt me. But I’m set in my ways that I’m gonna get into a school and look at them and be like, “I didn’t have to apply to your stupid master’s programs. And it’s almost like – I don’t know if it’s just like it’s hard for people to believe that a Latina woman can like make it and like be at that competitive level of a Ph.D. degree and like I’m not gonna make it through grad school. Cause all they keep telling me is like, “It’s so hard. It’s so hard. It’s gonna be so much of this and that.”

Jennifer added:

When you go to an advisor and like you’re telling them, “I would like to end up here.” And they’re like, “Why didn’t you try for here?” Where as I walked into [name of McNair program advisor] office and I’m like, “I’m trying for here.” She’s like, “No, you’re going to here.” You know what I mean? Like there’s a major difference right there. And like she encourages me to do so much more, even when you think you’re doing like amazing stuff and you’re at the top of your game, she’s like, “You can do this.”

Alicia continued:

Yes. Every time I walk into her office I walk out with like something else I have to do to
get further. I know her pushing me is like great for me. But it’s like it’s such a difference. Cause you go to all these other advisors and it’s almost like they’re shocked. Like I’ve basically been my own advisor because when I followed other peoples’ advice it doesn’t get me anywhere. They waste my time. I get in the wrong classes. Too many of my friends are here more than they need to be because of bad advising. I feel like there are students [other Latinos] who could be where I’m at, but they’re not because they thought they could utilize the resources of BG and it’s led them in the wrong direction. And you don’t realize that most of us are here on scholarship, so when our scholarship is up we don’t have time to be here extra years taking extra courses cause you didn’t advise us right. So those are all our friends who are BG alum that never graduated. They’re just gone, you know. And it’s like, “Did he even graduate?” Nobody even knows. They just had to leave cause, you know they couldn’t afford to keep going here for extra amount of time past their scholarship. I guess I’m just lucky that I have something in me to, you know to find out everything on my own.

For all of the women in this study, finding out how to persist in college was something that they achieved on their own or they were fortunate enough to find some campus staff and faculty who have helped them find the way. The McNair program advisor played a key role in that with Jennifer and Alicia by pushing them to attain their dreams and not to give up. Other participants also had faculty or staff in their corner when navigating the academic hurdles that they faced. For Rose Marie, her biggest champions on campus were a Latino faculty member and two Latina staff members. Rose Marie related her experience working with them this way:

I came back as an adult learner in 2006, and I’d had five years here. I’d just never graduated. My brothers and sisters all graduated in the ’70s and, you know, between
[names of faculty and staff members], I mean – that’s why I’m where I’m at today because of them.

Rose Marie is now a graduate student as a local regional university and she credits a particular Latino faculty member for helping her get where she is today: She stated:

And because his determination to help me [get into graduate school] I actually got accepted, so me and this other guy who got accepted took a nine-hour trip together, and we went down and saw the school. I did not get offered an assistantship, so you have to get offered an assistantship to get accepted into the school, so then he [the faculty member] said, “Well, let’s work around in this area.” And really ’cause my dad is older I didn’t wanna move anywhere, so I picked [name of local university]…So between [name of faculty member] encouragement, we got the personal statement done and he was pushing, pushing, pushing me, and I really appreciate what he did for me ’cause I tell everybody. Whenever we have a class and the people come in and talk to us, I said, “The only reason I’m here is because of [name of faculty member],” you know, so everybody at [name of local university] knows him. He’s a good guy and he really helped me a lot, you know, and that’s [attending graduate school] what I’m doing now.

**College Choice**

For eleven of the 13 participants, BGSU was not their first choice of universities. Many wanted to go to schools out of state, but found that money was a deterrent. For most, the financial aid package, especially the scholarships, that BGSU offered was the reason why they chose BGSU. Alicia stated:

I mean it did help the scholarship. I mean that’s why I initially came. Cause it’s like you apply. Oh, full tuition and fees. It’s like, you know coming from like the family I come
from, I had to take it. Like that’s still where my mentality is. Like I can’t go anywhere unless people are paying for me cause like we can’t afford it. That’s like why academics has been such a major thing that I stress over. Cause I could tell – like cause my parents pushed it a lot. Like I was always naturally inclined to do good in academics. But I had that added pressure from them, cause it’s like they put so much money into trying to basically fix my brother that there was no money left to put me through college. So it was kind of the pressure like, do this and this and you can get scholarships. And then like I got injured, so I couldn’t count on sports to go to college at the end of high school. So I really had to make sure through my academics that I could get scholarships and stuff so. That was that. And luckily it all worked out.

When asked, Anabell also indicated that BGSU was not her first choice, but financial aid and campus work opportunities were draws for her. She stated:

For me [choosing BG was based on] a lot of scholarships. I’m not paying much to be here. I also have a job at the library which is one of the best jobs you can get on campus as a student. I know I wouldn’t be able to get that anywhere else. It’d be lucky. Those are really the only reasons I stay though.

Anabell had her sights set on attending a prestigious private university in Ohio, but in the end found the expense to be too great. She lamented not being able to attend that university however. She said:

I applied to [institution name] because at the time I was gonna go into nursing. I got accepted and got some scholarships and then I chose not to go there. Only because I decided I wasn’t sure on my major. And it was too much of an expensive school to decide that I wasn’t sure. I wanted to really go there just because I know there’s a lot of
diversity on that campus. The amount of diversity on that campus is huge. There are people of every race, ethnicity, culture, whatever you want to call it, they’re there. And I found that to be wonderful. I do like BG’s campus. I like that it’s smaller. [institution name] is very big. But I definitely miss not having those experiences. That I know I would have had there. That’s the only thing that makes me sad about coming to BG.

Audrey also stated that she chose to attend BGSU because of money reasons. BGSU wasn’t her first choice. In fact, as she put it, money was the deciding factor. She added:

Me personally, I almost went to [institution name] and that [money] was the deciding factor. Money was the deciding factor because BG replied to me so quickly, so I probably wouldn’t have been here like had it not been for – that [BGSU] wouldn’t have been my first choice honestly…had money not been an option or a matter, I would have gone to [institution name] probably, like I saw [institution name’s] campus. It was beautiful.

However, Audrey settled in nicely at BGSU and although it wasn’t her first choice, she appeared to be happy and couldn’t imagine being anywhere else. She stated: “I mean now that I’m at BG, I couldn’t imagine it any other way, but, yeah, that’s what it was.”

Parents also had a say in college choice. Cali’s choice of school came down to affordability and proximity despite her desire to go out of state to school. Cali expressed:

BG definitely was not my first choice. I didn’t even wanna go here. It’s too close to home. I always wanted to go to [institution name]. I tried to look for the best school in my field. I just wanted to go to the best school or somewhere far away and my mom said, “Why you wanna go far away?” I was like, “I just do. I just like being on my own and stuff.” And – but then I mean I had the lady work with me from [institution name]
and then we got like the money and mom was like, “Well, it’s way too expensive.” And she was like, “You should look at something smaller.”

Monica also had dreams of going out of state, but ended up choosing BGSU because of her family’s wishes that she stay closer to home. She stated:

I forgot to mention that BG was not my first choice. I wanted to go to like California, Florida. The closest I wanted to be here was maybe [institution name in Ohio] or [institution name in Ohio], but I wanted to be far away from home and that also made me think, “Why am I so close to home?” My parents didn’t want me to leave so far. Like they wanted me to stay home. Like they wanted me to stick around. They – I don’t know if I could speak for every other Hispanic family, but like what I’ve noticed from my friends back home, like their parents were afraid to let go, like just stick around. And if they’re – at the time, my family wasn’t hurting financially. We are now because I’m in school, but like my friends that were hurting financially, they stayed home. They went to [institution name] or they went to [community college name] for their family like so they could stay and work and help provide for the family. And I thought that was pretty sad because my friends that stayed home, they had the potential to go to [institution name]. They had that potential to go far and make something of themselves so I thought that was interesting. But I essentially came here because I got a better scholarship through the GEAR UP program and they offered me the most money over [institution name], over [institution name], so I chose here even though I got accepted [at other schools], so that’s pretty cool.

For Rose Marie and Alaska however, BGSU was their first choice. They were drawn to the school because of others’ past experiences at the institution. For Rose Marie, choosing BGSU
was influenced by her sibling’s experience as well as her own the first time she enrolled and for Alaska, a recommendation of BGSU by a respected teacher and her interaction with a BGSU admissions counselor convinced her to enroll. Alaska stated:

It was one of my first choices. I didn’t want to like – ‘cause I lived in Ohio so I was considering schools in Ohio and I really liked the school, what my friends had told me about it, what my teacher told me about it. I didn’t want to go to [institution name] because it’s like big and it’s in [city name]. And I really like the school. Like you guys [the other participants] said, it’s really friendly. When I came here to visit my mom liked it. Everyone was friendly and [name of Admissions staff member] in Admissions was awesome. He told me about LSU. He told me about La Comunidad. He told me about a lot of things and it was just really interesting and I loved it.

Connecting with the Institution

For all of the participants, finding their niche at BGSU was difficult. Many thought of transferring after a few weeks in their first semester, but for a variety of reasons, they stuck it out, were successful in finding their niche, and enjoyed their overall experience at BGSU. However, there were many adjustments and sacrifices that had to be made in order to get to that point. When asked if it was easy to find their niche at BGSU, the answer was a resounding “no” from all of the participants. Sara stated:

My first year was horrifying because I actually didn’t do well academically at all because of a really bad roommate situation. I was homesick. So I went home like every weekend I could get. I didn’t know how to take care of myself. I think the big thing is coming from high school where, you know you’re 18 years old. You’re so used to your mom getting you up in the morning and make sure you eat right and stuff like that. When you
were on your own you don’t really know like, I mean you start to learn how to take care of yourself when you’re just by yourself. So in terms of time managing I had to learn that the hard way.

This experience is not unlike other first-year student experiences; nonetheless, as a Latina on a predominantly White campus, that experience may have been intensified due to the feeling of isolation from other peers. Monica shared:

It’s [college] totally different from high school to me. Like at high school it was easy. Like I came from an urban high school. It was so much more diverse than BG. There was, I believe, like 25 percent Latino and that made up for the other half, like the other half was like African-American and then another half was Caucasian, and there’s like a little – like maybe 10 percent other, so it was pretty diverse and coming here not seeing as many like Latinos, like it was a little bit intimidating that, you know, I was the only Latino in my classes. And I found that just a little bit difficult to relate to my classmates, but I still found a way to relate to my classmates either way and coming to BG, like it opened my eyes. Like education-wise, it has really opened my eyes, and I feel less naïve than I was in high school. Socially – like I’ve only been here for like a year and a half, so I didn’t make the best out of my first year. It was just go to class and then to go to my room, like I wasn’t very social last year, probably ’cause I was homesick, and it’s difficult making that adjustment, leaving home. And now that I’m used to it, like I feel like I’ve stepped out of my box and socially I feel like I’m making changes also.

Laury stated:

And so like my freshman year I was kind of like – after you get through like the first two weeks of school where all the fun stuff [happens] and you’re getting to know people, and
then they actually start going out to like groups that they actually feel more comfortable
with. You know what I mean? So you kind of got lost. So I didn’t know what kind of
group I wanted to be in. You know what I mean? So I kind of was kind of like alone.
So like I found her [family friend] and – no, I didn’t find her. My mom told her mom and
her mom told her. You know how that goes. And she talked to me. And she’s like,
yeah, she told me to come one day [to Latino Student Union]. And I did go one day. But
then but after that like she got me more like aware of my situation. You know what I
mean? Like I’m not gonna die. You know. I’m a little down right now but sooner or
later I’m gonna find my group of friends. You know like later on I did find my friends.

Michelle found her niche by joining a sorority, one that historically has been predominantly
White. She related:

And it was kind of weird because I guess like coming from [name of hometown] like
joining a sorority was not like the typical thing to do and I don’t know how many
Hispanics are in sororities either at the same time which I mean that has nothing to do
with a lot of stuff but just the thought of being like –

*Anabell:* The only ones that are really in sororities are Sigma Lambda Gamma which is a
Latina sorority.

*Michelle:* Yeah. And I didn’t know that. I went through the Pan-Hellenic Council and
that’s totally different through them. It was kind of interesting like my background I
guess going into that so the other girls I had met they were – well, my mom was in this
one; my grandma was in this one and I couldn’t like relate to that and I mean that’s fine.
So I guess what I was looking for in going Greek was that my close families that I have at
home and I really did find that so that was like really comforting ‘cause it is scary. I
mean you come here and I only knew one other person here. Had no idea like who I was gonna live with, whatever. And then joining that it was like a Hispanic family. Like you’re always together. You’re always doing something. You’re always communicating. And I don’t know if that’s the same for you guys but that’s how my family is. I mean we get annoyed at each other, we fight. So it was really comforting to know that I could find something like that here where it’s so big to actually kind of make that connection…

Learning communities have also been a draw for many of the participants, particularly for their family like atmosphere. Alaska got involved in the Global Village community and related:

I didn’t really know a lot of people there so this semester I moved to Global Village which relates to my major which is international studies and it’s great. It’s like you said. It’s like a family. Like everyone knows each other. It’s amazing to get to know people from Japan and South Korea and all these like other students that are also international studies. It’s great. You learn something new every day. You get to taste like different cuisines. I’m so excited. I love Global Village. I love it. The activities, like you said, it’s what you make them to be. You can either get really involved or you can just do your own thing. You can meet a lot of people.

Anabell followed up Alaska’s and Michelle’s sentiments about the need to feel a connection similar to that with one’s family. She said:

And people just come out. Amazing. People from the community come. It’s wonderful. I guess being from a Hispanic family really instills the need for family here. If you don’t find that it’s very, very difficult to be here.
Most of the participants found that connection to the institution and to “family” through student organizations that had a Latino focus. For example, all but one of the participants had been involved to some degree with the Latino Student Union. One participant was a member of Sigma Lambda Gamma, a traditionally Latina sorority; one was a member of Global Village, a learning community geared toward global and civic education; and three participants were involved with the McNair program, a program geared toward underrepresented students who aspire to attain terminal degrees. And many participants were part of the diversity educators or student recruitment teams which focused on recruiting underrepresented students to BGSU.

It was largely through involvement in these organizations that the participants found their place at BGSU. For many of the participants involvement in the activities and programs mentioned above was how they remembered their experience at BGSU. Jennifer stated:

Just for me like just looking through it, all of my pictures are either with LSU or McNair. And then I had a couple at the research conference. And that’s kind of how I view my college experience. My classes have been really great and a lot of my classes are really awesome but at the same time like all of my social experiences, all of what have shaped me and like changed me besides intellectually like in neuroscience have been like McNair and LSU and so that’s kind of how I view BG and my experience here is those two organizations. And I’m an Alumni Laureate Scholar too and I didn’t take any pictures of that. And I tutor. I do a lot of things, but for me this is really what has shaped my experience here. And I think LSU has always been like the most accepting because I was so shy when I first came here. I didn’t talk to anyone. Like it was awful but I remember when I was in Laureate Scholars which is like we always meet in this building here [Alumni Building] and like I mean there’s two kids that I get along with and one is
Black and then another one spends like every summer in Nicaragua. He’s White but he has Latino family as you might guess. But I just adore both of them but other than that I remember like my freshman year when I commuted like we had a meeting [for the Alumni Laureate Scholars program] and like I just realized how much I don’t get along with these people and I’m like I just don’t like these people because they were so fake and so affronted and so I’m better than everyone else here and like I don’t know.

For Monica, LSU was the outlet for her to meet friends and people from other cultures. Monica said:

Because of LSU I met Rose Marie. Rose Marie was actually my first friend last year at LSU. And you [Rose Marie] really got me out of my comfort zone. Like as in like meeting new people. And like leading to diversity at this school, like now that I really think about it, yeah there was more Latinos at my high school. But here there’s not as much. And then there still is plenty diversity because like there’s people from all over the world coming here. Like I have friends that are from Saudi Arabia. I have friends that are from Africa.

Monica went on to say:

And if it wasn’t for Latino Student Union I probably wouldn’t have had that feeling that I got in that [feeling of] wanting to be involved and getting to know more people. And I think that’s vital like for new students especially and recruiting students, making them feel like they’re welcome here, like they have somebody to look out for them and making them feel like they’re involved and they have a part of their [cultural] experience in their hands.
For Audrey, Latino Student Union provided that feeling of family that she longed for and it encouraged her to persist at BGSU. She said:

The thing about LSU is they always say it’s family. It’s *familia*. And that’s important. In my life family is first and that’s how our culture is so that really attracts a lot of people and is one of the things that keeps people staying here. So after that I just kept on growing with LSU, got more and more involved and now I’m the cabinet and it’s the end of the year so I’ve had a good year with LSU and I’ll always be an active member.

For the majority of participants, being involved on campus was a way to find their place on campus, a way to find a place to fit in. While most of the participants chose activities that would allow them to explore their own culture as well as others, the ultimate goal was finding that sense of *familia* as it was something known and comforting to them. For these participants feeling a sense of *familia*, or a home away from home, was critical to their continued persistence as they often felt isolated and unwelcome within their classrooms, within common organization areas, and in most cases even in the halls in which they lived. Involvement in LSU or other groups that supported underrepresented students was their way of finding that sense of home.

This became very clear during the second focus group interviews when the participants discussed the pictures that took reflecting a week in the life at a predominantly White university. The majority of the pictures taken by the participants were of family and friends. It was clear from the discussion that these women were close to their families and their families were an essential part of their college experience. The same was true for friendships the participants had developed while at BGSU. With the exception of one participant, who formed her primary friendships within her sorority, these friendships were developed primarily through participation in Latino Student Union.
It was also clear during data collection that these women were part of a tight-knit community as there was no need to introduce study participants to each other at the start of the focus groups; they knew each other already. All of the women expressed that they placed a great deal of value in their friendships and this was demonstrated in the pictures they took.

Pictures of research conferences and graphic art projects were also prevalent among the participants’ pictures. These women were proud of their academic accomplishments. Collectively, they were a very motivated group of women who had their sights set on attaining a degree. Despite barriers that got in their way, they were determined to complete their degrees. This determination would prove to be an advantageous characteristic given their overall experiences on campus.

A “Safe” Space on Campus

In general, the participants did not feel that there was a physical space for them on campus in which to practice their culture. Rather, they often felt as if their White peers were judgmental about their desire to express their cultural background. Outside of LSU, most felt ostracized by the dominant culture. Audrey expressed that sentiment by saying:

I don’t feel like in general the campus is like, “Hey, express your feelings about where you’re from and where you’re at.” And I don’t feel like there’s a place for that besides like in an organization like LSU and stuff, so if we ever had that, like if we ever had something like that, I think student center where people can feel free like not only like being Latino but from any different origin, from any different place in the world, like just being welcomed into a place like that, an actual physical place on campus like to express themselves and so forth in that regard then I think that can be huge for people…like my culture is really big like on familia, like my family is most important in my eyes and just
having maybe like a kitchen in someplace where I can like cook the food that I’m used to being served and have the music where I’m listening – or used to hearing and feeling like I’m at home, I feel like that makes me feel – personally that makes me feel like that much better and makes me feel comfortable and when people feel comfortable, that’s a really content feeling, so that’s what I would say.

Ilianah agreed with Audrey and said:

Yeah, I know that, but like here on campus, like she said, there’s really no physical place to actually practice your culture, like I mean I guess we – if we have really close cultural ties like just coming from home, you will bring that with you. If I spoke fluent Spanish, I wouldn’t be scared to speak it around people.

That lead into a discussion however about whether or not others were comfortable speaking Spanish when walking around campus. The feelings on that were mixed, but Alaska had this to say when asked by another participant if people looked at her funny when she spoke Spanish on campus:

No, especially where I live at school [Global Village], but you have people from like South Korea, Japan. We used to have some from Saudi Arabia, but it’s more of they’re interested in what you like, like especially with my roommate. She’s like so interested and she always like asks me questions like, “What’s it like in Mexico? How do you do this? How do you do that? How do you say this?” And so I learn Japanese from her and she learns like Spanish from me and just like music and everything, and she’s learning a lot about my country and my culture. She asks, “What do you guys do in LSU?” And I’m like, “Well, I like it because it’s familía. It’s ’cause you have friends, because you get to enjoy each other’s company, talk about issues.” Like it’s just – it fits…it’s
definitely a good feeling, like people are interested in where you come from and who you are and what makes you from your culture.

While the Global Village has been successful, other learning communities have not fared as well. La Comunidad, a learning community that promotes Spanish culture and language has struggled to find its place at BGSU. Audrey stated:

La Comunidad does that for Spanish, but La Comunidad has been so lacking the last couple of years. [La Comunidad] is not what it used to be at all. My freshman year the RAs didn’t speak Spanish at all and there was actually like only a couple of people that had signed up for there for the actual reason of like living La Comunidad and having that learning community environment where you’re surrounded by the language and you have Spanish magazines and so forth. But I feel like that – those kinda things keep students attached and keep them feeling welcomed and that they can share experiences even if they are like of different origins and so forth. In my own dorm, we [Anabell and Audrey] were just listening to different kinds of Spanish music, and we had the door open, which is like normal for me. I am the kinda person that likes to keep my door open and say hi to people as they pass by, so forth, and we got some bad looks from people like walking down the hall, like, “Why are they playing this music?” Like and it was predominantly Caucasian females, but just that negativity and lack of like understanding and lack of open-mindedness like to something different, that was like difficult. Like it’s no different than you playing like KISS-FM on your radio in your room. This is just what I’m used to.” And it was not a very accepting environment for that and I just feel like if we want students of color and different origins and nationalities to feel comfortable we have to
have open environments like Global Village and so forth to let them feel comfortable in their own skin and with their own culture and to express that.

There was some expressed concern that the university did not support such communities. This perception was created by the La Comunidad community being removed from its location in a small group living environment to a regular residence hall. Global Village was next. Alaska said:

We were kind of upset that it was taken over by Greek Life because it does feel like a community. You have your own living room. You have your own conference room. It’s just like a lot of international studies classes were there. We had them there and a lot of like – other groups that go there to have meetings and it was just – it’s sad to see it go because [name of professor] worked so hard for it, and I guess they had it in the contract that whenever Greek Life needed it, you have to give it back and so now we have to move.

Audrey’s perception about this was particularly notable as she related that whatever the university wants the university gets. She stated:

It’s like – it’s a great space, too, like I don’t know if you’ve ever been in Global Village [said to the Moderator], but it’s awesome, like the atmosphere, like the core, like everything in there is really cool and like that’s like a shame, but that’s – it’s basically what the university wants, the university gets and that’s like Greek Life has seen that because they’re – the units by [name of residence hall] and stuff has been taken down. People have been relocated to [name of residence hall] and to [name of residence hall] and all over the place and now they’re like trying to have – find homes for people that like need homes, and the university has their master plans and they wanna make a Greek
village where everyone has a space where it’s more conducive and more concise, but like in the process it’s like there’s gonna be things moved around and people aren’t gonna be happy, but it’s like I said, what the university wants, the university gets, so it’s like unfortunate but like it might be like five years down the line like we might all be settled in where we feel comfortable and be fine, but ’til that point it’s gonna be like a lot of running around and stuff.

Considering these participants already felt as if there was not a space they connected with as a Latina on campus, these perceptions of the university, and specifically its administrators created a negative experience for these participants. They created the space on their own, but wished the university would work with them to create other spaces on campus that would be conducive to *familia* and open to diverse languages, cultures, food, dance, and other traditions. These participants did not feel that a true space existed where they could celebrate who they are and what does exist, they saw being taken away and given to other student organizations that are predominantly White (i.e., Greek groups).

**Persistence**

For the majority of participants in this study, Bowling Green State University was not their first choice. Despite that, and the many challenges they faced, they have persisted. While none of them have gone about it the same way, many of them share a quality that has allowed them to persist: sheer determination. Reflecting on her experience, Sara said:

It gets old. I would say my overall experience is good some days, bad some days because, you know you’re trying to work towards not having to work at McDonalds for the rest of your life or as a waitress somewhere. You have to go through all this hard
work in order to get to where you want to be in the future. So that’s what keeps me motivated…

Alicia echoed that sentiment and said:

[Showing a picture she took to the group]…This was at the BGSU research conference and I’m standing next to my poster. I just like the picture because to me it represents like all the hard work I put into the research project. That’s something I feel like I’m really proud of ‘cause I do recognize that at this level in my major I’m excelling and doing research and like going places and I feel like – I don’t know. I’m just really proud of it. I feel like if it wasn’t for my hard work I wouldn’t have – I don’t think I would have been supported or pushed to do that. I felt like it was on me to push myself and to make sure that I was surrounding myself with the tools and the resources necessary to go far.

Ilianah shared her story as well:

I got pregnant when I was a senior in high school. I felt like people [in college] were looking at me like, “How can she go to school?” Like I felt I didn’t wanna be like the typical young Hispanic, pregnant, living on welfare the rest of my life. My parents were really disappointed in me. I was supposed to come here, be involved, live on campus and all that kinda stuff and study abroad and so I always knew that I needed – I was gonna come to college. And now I’m here. I’m involved and I still – I take care of my daughter and everything, but it’s just been – I felt like I needed to prove everybody else wrong, but then after a while it was like, “Why am I doing it for them? Like I need to do it for myself.” I think it’s gonna be self-fulfilling, and I think everybody else is gonna maybe feel bad about the way they looked at me…

Audrey shared her thoughts with Ilianah on being persistent by stating:
I was gonna say like I feel like you have to be, like just because there’s stuff that – like what you’ve gone through and like things that happen in your life that are out of your control and you can sit there and you can choose to be a victim or you can move forward and be a survivor. It’s just you have to keep on going and pushing forth and stay positive because you never know what will happen, you know.

To which Ilianah replied:

Right. Yeah, that’s a big thing, staying positive – yeah, there can be times that I’m just like, “Oh, my God. I just wanna quit so bad, like this is just too hard for me.” But then I think about it and I’m like, “No, I don’t want to quit. Like I’m already – I’m already almost there, just like keep going.”

Reflecting on Justice Sotomayor’s confirmation hearing, Rose Marie shared that Latinas are persistent because they fight to get what they want. She said:

I think because Latinas are like that, we will fight, and I know my mom was ill and she fought like ten years to stay alive, and that’s the way we Latinas are. We just fight, fight, fight until we get what we want. That’s the way Sotomayor was. She knew that she wanted it so bad she was willing to go through anything.

Laury and Monica agreed with that sentiment and stated:

Laury: I would say I agree that most Latino women are fighters. They are motivated you know, I mean they don’t show that because…

Monica: They show a tough skin –

Laury: Yeah. And, you know, me like even though I struggle, like I said, I’m not a straight A student. I struggle a lot with my studies ’cause I’m not really that like book smart, if you wanna say, but I’m motivated here. I’m so motivated to do what I wanna do
and that’s what keeps me here. I think that’s what she [Justice Sotomayor] kinda went through. She was like, “You know what? I want this job. I don’t care if these guys are gonna badger me all day ’cause in the end I’m gonna win,” you know? And…that’s my motto.

Audrey brought the conversation back around to their experiences on a predominantly White campus. She stated:

It’s just not like Latino students. Like the African-American students, I know like it’s hard…just being a student of color and trying to have – like we’re extremely motivated individuals, like we’re pushing ourselves forward, but for a lot of students they don’t have that. They don’t have that motivation to be here at this predominantly White institution. Like no one really wants to…just get through the day. They don’t have that motivation that some of us have and that’s where I see, too, like they want it. You have to like make people excited to be here, like they have to have something that’s holding them here and – that’s why I’m thankful for LSU…because there’s a lotta people that wouldn’t have been here if not for LSU.

The combination of sheer determination and an entity within the institution that helps non-majority students find their niche appear to be very important factors in assisting the participants of this study to persist. These Latinas achieve, and often overachieve, in order to meet their academic goals. While some of the participants speak of faculty and staff members who have been of assistance to them in navigating their future, the majority of the work and pressure has fallen to these women and they are determined to be successful.
Being a Role Model for Future Generations

Ten of the participants of this study were the first in their family to go to college. They expressed a sincere desire to serve as a role model for their siblings and cousins who they hoped would follow in their footsteps by doing well in school and pursuing a college degree. In this sense, they considered themselves as trailblazers in their families. While that produced some stress for these participants, it was a stress that they willingly assumed. Alicia stated:

I definitely want to bring all of them up with me. That’s the only thing I talk to my cousins about. How are you doing in school? Like why is that grade like that? My cousins in Florida get lectures from me. My little cousins who are like six just learning to read and I’m like, “Make sure you always get As,” because I don’t know if the rest of the family is telling them those things because moms, aunts, grandmas didn’t go to college. Most of the family is just continually reproducing so it’s like, “Yes, there’s more children in the family but who’s telling them make sure you’re doing good.” Who’s like truly instilling that? And that’s just what I feel I’m doing. I’m even doing it with my brother who’s four years older than me. I’m telling him, “I’m glad you got into this program. Make sure you’re graduating.”…I’ll help in that way. So that’s what I’m hoping happens with the family. That’s why I feel pressure but it’s okay. It’s good pressure. It keeps me going.

Jennifer echoed that sentiment:

I think it will be easier say for our kids because we’ve been through it but right now like being the first in the family it’s tough. It’s a totally different experience than what my parents had when they were my age. It makes me want to work harder, I know that.
Because my family they’re just so happy that I’ve gotten as far as I’ve gotten and it makes me want to work harder knowing that I’m making it better for the next generation.

Many of the participants expressed similar experiences as Alicia and Jennifer. For example, Laury spoke of her younger sister and how she hopes to be a positive role model for her in life, and how she plans to help her with college applications and the like when it is her sister’s turn to apply. Other participants talked about being the first in their family to attend college and how they plan to instill the importance of getting a college degree to their immediate and extended family members. They speak of higher education as a medium through which non-majority students can become better off socially and economically. In other words, obtaining a college degree is viewed by these participants as an opportunity to level the “playing field.” This viewpoint is one of the primary motivators for the participants of this study.

**Family Influence**

All of the participants in this study talked about the importance of family in their lives, in their college choice, and their families have had a major influence on their student’s persistence in college. They know their families support them and their pursuit of a degree; in fact it was often their family members they turned to for support when academic work or social situations became difficult. Anabell and Michelle talked about the importance of communicating with family on a daily basis and how other peers find that odd. Anabell stated:

> I always talk to family. I wake up. I get ready for my day. As I’m walking to class I call my mom and then right after I call my dad. Every single morning and occasionally I’ll call them through the day. If I need help with something they’re the first people I turn to for advice for anything and everyone’s like, “Why do you talk to your parents every day?” One of my roommates was like, “I haven’t talked to my dad in like a month.”
And I’m like, “That’s not how it goes in my family.” If I didn’t call my parents one day I think they’d drive out here and see if I was okay.

Audrey stated: In my life family is first in my life and that’s how our culture is...

Jennifer, Monica, and Alicia agreed with Audrey’s statement and expanded on it by saying that family comes before anything else in life, including school. Jennifer stated:

And I remember having a conversation in LSU and along with that family is so vital to the culture…I think even in my program a lot of people wouldn’t stop going to class if something happened with their families but when my brother got really sick I didn’t go to classes. I didn’t do anything. It was a really bad semester. But it was like family comes first and I didn’t care what was being sacrificed. It was like I’m gonna be there for my family. And I think that’s tough in our culture because we know in a heartbeat as much as we want to get to where we’re going if anything happens to our family that’s where we’d be. And like even minor things. Like not even like life/death situation.

Alicia added:

I feel like I went through a lot of guilt at the beginning of the semester because at the very beginning my grandpa got put in the hospital and I actually did drop everything and drive to [name of hometown]…It was like we don’t know if grandpa is gonna make it type thing. But after being there a couple days and like they were just keeping him in intensive care I had to come back. I was already behind with a couple days of visiting back home and I just felt so much guilt because I couldn’t call as much. I couldn’t visit as much. I just felt like what do I do? You’re always there for family. We don’t want it to hold us back but we know that they come first.
Without question, the rest of the participants agreed with that sentiment. For example, Alaska took a couple of years off before pursuing her degree in order to get a job and help her mother out financially. Ilianah talked a great deal about how her daughter was the center of her life and her pursuit in getting a college degree was to better their lives. Rose Marie spoke to the fact that she is now the primary caretaker for her father while also pursuing a master’s degree. To all the participants, it was clear they wanted to attain a degree, but would drop everything if their families needed them.

While family members, especially the participant’s parents, were incredibly supportive of their daughters’ pursuit of higher education, many of the participants spoke to the fact that they were really on their own when it came to applying for college. Alex related:

So my dad went to college but he went to college in Venezuela which is like a very different like system. Like the way that you apply and like the way the college is, is very different. And so I think I was having a conversation in one of my classes and like I realized that my parents – like they were really supportive throughout my undergrad and grad application process but they were completely not a part of it at all. Whereas like people’s parents were like looking at their admissions essays and revising and like making sure that they were doing the right thing in high school to be accepted to college. I like always just happened to either ask the right people like what I needed to be doing or I just did the right things.

Jennifer added:

And like it’s just so different because my parents didn’t give me any college advice. Like they didn’t even say you have to go to college. They wanted me to but they were never gonna force it on me and they never had any advice to give because they didn’t know. So
it’s a really different experience. I think it will be easier say for our kids because we’ve been through it but right now like being the first in the family it’s tough. It’s not exactly, you know, it’s a totally different experience than what my parents had when they were my age.

Alicia also experienced the same struggles in applying to college, but has noticed some other differences that also caused her some additional stress. She said:

That’s another big aspect that I don’t know how other people from our culture feel about it but it’s like when at my family gatherings they ask me what I’m doing I don’t know how to really modify what I – how to stay stuff to not...

Jennifer added:

Offend them.

Alicia continued:

Yes. Because like how much do I go into my research because one, I feel like with some family they have no idea what I’m talking about. And with other ones I don’t want them to feel like I’m coming off as like well, I’m better. Especially when I’m talking to like my older cousins who probably should have – because of their age should have already graduated college had them gone to college. Or could have had a career had they gone or finished college and stuff. And then I’m younger and like, you know, I’m clearly following the steps and moving right along in my education. So it’s like you don’t want to offend them, nobody understands you. I think our position is a very like isolating experience. I just feel completely like alienated from the rest of my family and I think that’s a really hard thing for us to deal with because I think familia is such main part of our life. Like it’s all I’ve ever had.
Alex then shared that she too has struggled with that. She added:

I graduated in May [with a bachelor’s degree] and they [her family] were like all up for my graduation. I can’t remember why I got in an argument with my parents. My entire family is there and so it’s getting really stressful and my mom said to me that just because I was the one with a bachelor’s degree that I didn’t need to be arrogant. And I like was just baffled by what she was saying and I have no idea where it came from. I think it was something that she had been like sitting on for a while and she just like happened to say that at that moment. And like it completely like shocked me. And so I think I struggle a lot of times like do I act differently or something or is it that I know that I’m very stubborn and when I think I’m right I think I’m right and that’s irrelevant of whether or not I had a college education. And so I don’t know if it’s like those kinds of things that make my parents feel upset but that’s like something that has been very present for me as the one person [in my family] who has been to college. And I think that my mom also feels that I sometimes am like that with my brothers. So that’s very present and I don’t know what to do about that.

Alicia went on to talk about how important her relationship was with her mother and how she struggled with that family relationship in particular. Alex stated to Alicia that it will get better and Alicia said:

I hope it goes like that because my mom’s my best friend like and that’s the only person like I really had because I don’t feel like I have a real best friend. I’ve just always had my mom and I don’t want me accomplishing what I am to like create a wall between us. I just want to find a balance with being able to turn to her but at the same time not frustrating her as a mother who can’t fix all my problems like she used to be able to.
Jennifer added:

I think that’s an issue with a lot of us who may be are the first ones in our family to go to college. Like it’s tough explaining to parents what you have to do because no matter how much you explain they still don’t understand what you’re going through. They’ve never done it so they don’t know. They don’t understand. And even as much as you try to explain you just don’t reach them if they haven’t been through it. Like most of my family they graduate high school and then that’s the big celebration and then they get a job in a factory. That’s what they do. And then for me explaining to my sister who’s been married for like 14 years, she’s like 32 and she works in a factory and she’s like, “You don’t know what hard work is,” and I’m like, “Well, I’m working different but I’m still working hard.” You know what I mean? And it’s tough explaining that to them.

During the focus groups, it was clear that this was an emotional issue for many of the participants. They struggled between bettering their education, but not appearing to be “better than” other family members who have not gone to college. This concern created a stress for these participants that White students, for the most part, do not experience.

**Summary**

The information provided by these participants highlighted the challenges that these students face every day in seeking a degree at BGSU. While the overall tenor of the group was positive about the institution as a whole, there were clearly areas of significant concern expressed during the interviews. First, these participants did not feel that there was an appropriate or safe space for them to practice *familia*. Rather, they found that they were confined to small spaces, such as the organization suite, where they could meet other Latinos or they had to attend LSU meetings in order to interact with others who were interested in the
Latino culture and history. The majority of participants spoke to the fact that they felt as if they had to carve out their own space where their culture could be recognized and at times that created an adversarial relationship with their peers, particularly their White peers. This created an environment where the participants did not feel free to express themselves culturally for fear of censure.

Second, the participants largely did not feel that the university’s efforts around diversity education were sincere. Rather, many felt that the university was approaching diversity in a very narrow way. Many felt that a lack of faculty training in particular was detrimental to non-White students in the classroom.

These participants chose BGSU primarily for financial reasons. BGSU provided the best financial aid packages. For 11 of the 13 participants, BGSU was not their school of choice. Had these participants had the financial means and the support of family to move further away, they would not have considered BGSU at all.

The participants found their place at the institution by joining organizations and working in campus jobs that permitted them to interact with other non-majority students. While all of these participants had friends who were White, their predominant peer support system could be found in the membership of LSU, the Office of Multicultural Affairs, and through the student recruitment team managed by the Office of Admissions. Only one participant got involved in a predominantly White organization.

Family was a great influence on the college experience for all of the participants. Every participant reflected on how supportive her family was in her pursuit of a bachelor’s or master’s degree. However, the majority of the participants were the first in their families to go to college, so while their family supported them in numerous ways they lacked the intrinsic knowledge
related to college. While being the first in the family was a challenge for many of the participants, they did reflect positively on their ability to help future generations navigate college. However, being the first did create additional stress for the participants as they entered college not knowing what to expect. Some of the participants spoke of how their relationships with family members had changed throughout their college career. This was a new struggle for some of the participants and it was a very emotional topic. While they knew they had their families’ unending support, they also knew that their college experiences had broadened their world view. That provided some challenges in the way the participants interacted with their family.

At the end of the day, what made these Latina women so successful in college was their internal motivation and desire to succeed. Despite the barriers that these women faced, they did so with a fighting spirit and a determination to make it through whatever challenges they would face. Collectively, these women were incredibly motivated to succeed not only in college, but beyond.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

In this study I explored the experiences of Latina students at a predominantly White university in the Midwest through discussions of ethnic identity and culture, educational and social experiences, factors that negatively impacted the participants’ overall experience and factors that positively contributed to their persistence in college. The results suggest that maintaining close ties to family members, having a space on campus to practice and enjoy Latino culture, and finding their niche in the campus environment through programs focused on underrepresented students were the keys to their persistence in college. In this chapter, I consider the findings in relation to existing literature on Latino college students while examining the results through the theoretical frameworks of Chicana Feminism and academic and social integration. In this chapter I also discuss implications of the study for practice and future research.

Discussion of Findings in Relation to Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to examine the social and academic integration experiences of Latina students as well as the impact of racial/ethnic and gendered experiences on Latina students who chose to attend a predominantly White, four-year public institution located in the Midwest. The research question and sub-questions that guided this study are as follows:

How do Latinas, attending a predominantly White university in the Midwest, make sense of their experiences while attending college?

a. What factors and conditions do they identify as influencing their experience in college?

b. How do they see their familial and cultural background shaping their collegiate experience?
c. How do they see their perceptions of the campus environment influencing their collegiate experience?

**Ethnic Identity**

All 13 participants self-identified as Latina. For 11 of the 13 participants there was a strong link to their self-identification as a Latina and as a result to their culture, which they viewed as different from the dominant culture. Only two participants, Laury and Michelle, indicated that they did not view themselves as different from the dominant culture, yet both still had a strong link back to their culture and provided narratives throughout the study of experiences on campus where they were made to feel different or singled out by their White peers. If we were to consider this using Torres’ (1999) Bicultural Orientation Model, it is likely that Laury and Michelle would fall into the Anglo Orientation where the participant demonstrates a high level of acculturation, defined as “the process of adapting oneself to the broader social surroundings” (Knight, Bernal, Garza, & Cota, 1993, p. 222), and a low level of ethnic identification. One could also speculate that the other 11 participants would fall into the Bicultural Orientation, exhibiting a high level of acculturation and high level of ethnic identification meaning that they have successfully figured out how to live between two cultures, the dominant culture and their culture of origin.

Taking into consideration one of the primary theoretical frameworks of this study, Chicana Feminism, and more specifically Anzaldúa’s (1987) work on biculturalism, these participants have for the most part taken on a “hybrid identity” (p. 77). According to Anzaldúa, the hybrid identity is created by having to negotiate between two cultures that sit side-by-side. She describes this phenomenon as a “place of contradictions” (p. iii), a place where the conflict between cultures causes a Latina to develop a tolerance for contradictions and ambiguity. The
participants of this study speak to those contradictions when they talk about experiences when they have not felt Latino enough to fit in with other Latino peers and have not felt White enough to fit in with their White peers. While the degree of severity differed among participants, each one of them spoke to this phenomenon of not quite fitting in or being singled out based on her ethnicity. While these women have persisted despite these experiences, according to the participants, there are just as many who have not.

Torres (2003) found that the environment in which a Latino grew up, family influence, generational status, and self-perception of status in society influenced the first two years of college and the level of academic and social success that a Latino experiences in college. Torres also found that the existence of or lack of diversity in one’s environment was an influence in how a Latino self-identified. Torres found that Latino students who grew up in diverse environments had a higher level of ethnic identity than those who grew up in predominantly White environments. The findings of this study support Torres’ assertions.

The participants of this study came from a variety of backgrounds. The majority of the participants in this study grew up in urban areas in Ohio where they interacted on a daily basis with other Latino family and friends while two participants grew up in small, predominantly White towns. The two participants who grew up in predominantly White hometowns were very aware of their ethnic identity before coming to college. They realized this largely by being ostracized for being ethnically different. For example, Jennifer grew up in a small town not far from Bowling Green and talked about her experience of being referred to as a “tomato picker” throughout her elementary and secondary school years. She carried this experience to college with her.
Twelve of 13 participants gravitated toward the Latino Student Union (LSU) student organization as a way to experience their culture on campus. Of those 12 participants, 10 grew up in urban environments and specifically in Latino dominant neighborhoods. By participating in LSU, many of the participants spoke to the fact that they felt they had developed a greater understanding of their culture and their history, and therefore had developed a stronger link to their ethnicity. This finding supports Torres’ (2003) work where she found that Latinos who come from diverse environments and enter a predominantly White higher education institution would develop a stronger tie to their ethnicity.

Additionally, there were two participants, Alex and Jennifer, both of whom attended predominantly White elementary and secondary schools, who talked about the experience of not being White enough to fit in with their White peers and not being Latino enough to fit in with Latino peers. This occurrence also supports Torres’ (2003) study where she found that students who came from less diverse environments, in this case predominantly White elementary and secondary schools, felt marginalized and tended to feel like an outsider in both the majority culture and the Latino culture on campus.

Family also played a big part in the development of ethnic identity among the participants. All but one participant came from families where both parents identified as Latino. One participant, while she self-identified as Latina, had a Latino father and a White mother. Similar to Torres’ (2003) findings, the majority of the participants talked about their family being the center of their identity development. While many of the participants, as mentioned above, developed a stronger connection to their culture and history when they got involved in LSU, it was clear their families were largely responsible for passing on knowledge regarding their cultural practices and their worldview. The tie to family was very strong among all of the
participants. The one variation on this, Michelle, supports Torres’ (2003) finding that the tie to one’s ethnic culture and identity is not as strong for those students with one parent who was Latino and the other was not. Michelle identified her father as Latino and her mother as White. This participant did not express as strong of a tie to her ethnicity as the other participants; however, she did express a strong tie to her family. This distinction appeared to play itself out while in college. For example, she was the only participant who did not actively participate in LSU, but she indicated that she was looking for a place in which she could find a sense of \emph{familia}. Instead of finding that through LSU or a Latina sorority, she found that sense of \emph{familia} though joining a predominantly White sorority.

### Access to Higher Education

The findings of this study somewhat support the findings of Torres’ (2003) study on generational status in the United States and the impact that has on a Latino student’s integration into the collegiate environment. While Torres found that Latino students who were first generation in the United States struggled with the unknowns of college, the same can be said for many of the participants of this study who were either the first member of their family to attend college, or in the first generation of family members to attend college. Eight of the 13 participants were the first in their family to attend college and nine of the 13 participants were among the first generation of family members to attend college. Similar to Torres’ (2003) findings, these students struggled with unspoken expectations of family members to maintain their cultural values and also with the lack of intrinsic knowledge about college. For example, Alex, Jennifer, and Alicia spoke a great deal about the fact that no one from their families was knowledgeable enough about the college entrance process to help them fill out college applications or apply for scholarships. Alex summarized her experience this way:
I was having a conversation in one of my [graduate] classes and I realized that my parents – like they were really supportive throughout my undergrad and grad application process but they were completely not a part of it at all. Whereas like other people’s [White peers in the class] parents were looking at their admissions essays and revising and like making sure that they were doing the right thing in high school to be accepted to college. I like always just happened to either ask the right people what I needed to be doing or I just did the right things.

This was a shared experience among many of the participants. Although they knew they had their parents’ support, they would ask others or figure out the application process on their own in making the first steps toward becoming a college student. Four of the participants also expressed that they were feeling the same uncertainty regarding the application process for graduate school. Jennifer spoke to the fact that her parents were incredibly supportive of her college ambitions, but found it “tough explaining to parents what you have to do because no matter how much you explain they still don’t understand what you’re going through. They’ve never done it so they don’t know. They don’t understand.”

Tierney (1999), borrowing from the work of Bourdieu (1986), addressed the idea of cultural capital in relation to non-majority students. Bourdieu defined the term cultural capital as a “set of linguistic and cultural competencies individuals usually inherit and sometimes learn” (as cited in Tierney, 1999, p. 83). Bourdieu asserted that in affluent families and environs one would learn that college was a foregone conclusion. Tierney then explored that notion from the perspective of non-majority students. He postulated that non-majority students most often do not acquire the cultural capital needed in order to gain access to college nor to be successful in a collegiate environment that is predominantly White. The findings of this study support this
notion as many of the participants talked about having to figure out the application process, financial aid forms, and day-to-day life on a predominantly White college campus all on their own. In this case the participants of this study had to work harder than many of their White peers in order to gain admission, afford college, and find their niche within the college environment.

The Intersection of Ethnic Identity, Familialism, Cultural Capital, and Gender Roles

The participants also spoke to the fact that they were beginning to see their relationships with family members changing as a result of their college experience. Alex, Laury, Sara, and Alicia in particular spoke to this experience. They both indicated that their family relationships, particularly with their mothers, had changed since attending college. Alicia stated:

I feel it’s [college] affecting my relationships [with family] and I’ve noticed lately like my mom is so supportive, and I turn to her for everything, but I feel like lately it’s been really hard for her to understand [all I have to do]. I’m afraid that my being at the level I am and going on [to graduate school] like I’m afraid I’m gonna struggle with my relationship with my mom. The things I talk to her about now like we argue because she just doesn’t get that I have to be up like all night doing stuff. I can’t like really turn to them [her parents] because I feel like I’m already letting them down with not being able to give my parents money every month. And it hurts me because I think I’m hurting her. I really feel like I’m just so alone and isolated in this situation.

The experiences of the other participants listed above mirrored Alicia’s struggle. The influence of familialism, defined as a “cultural value that includes a strong identification and attachment of individuals with their nuclear and extended families, and strong feeling of loyalty, reciprocity, and solidarity among members of the same family” (Marin, 1993, p. 184), lack of cultural capital
on the part of the parents, (Tierney, 1999, Torres, 2003), and traditional gender roles (Lopez, 1995; Torres, 2004) all come into play when considering this phenomena.

In Alicia’s case, she was experiencing cultural dissonance, defined as “conflict between one’s own sense of culture and what others expect” (Torres, 2003, p. 540), between the requirements placed upon her by the academy and her need to remain connected to her family. In this particular case, her academic pursuits were causing her to choose between being successful in school and maintaining the family relationships that contributed to her self-worth. Lopez (1995) found that young women in Latino homes are often a source of emotional support for their mothers and thus a strong bond between mother and daughter is created. Six of the participants of this study talked about the positive, supportive relationship they had with their mothers. Many of them referred to their mothers as their best friends. Such was the case for Alicia and her changing relationship with her mother was of particular concern to her.

As Torres (2004) found in her study on generational status, parental concerns often arise during college for many Latinas because of the traditional gender roles associated with the culture. Torres found that Latino parental or family concerns about traditional roles for women often are in direct conflict with their understanding of the need for education. As a result, their daughters get caught in the middle of these incompatible values despite the parents’ high level of support for their education.

Tierney’s (1999) work around cultural capital also comes to the forefront of this situation. Alicia described herself as feeling isolated and at times intentionally isolating herself from her family in regards to her educational pursuits. In her words, she did not want to “offend them.” Based on the experiences of these participants, as Latina students gain intrinsic knowledge about the college experience, they feel as if they are leaving their family members behind and find that
communicating with them about their experience borders on being disrespectful to the family members who raised them. Many of the participants in this study spoke to the fact that they have intentionally left out key information about their successes in college so that they do not come across as elitist among their family members. Further research should be conducted in order to learn more about the change in relationship between Latina students and their families, with a particular focus on the relationship between mother and daughter.

**Campus Environment**

According to Gloria, Castellanos, Lopez, and Rosales (2005), behind social support, level of comfort within the university is one of the strongest predictors of persistence for Latino undergraduates. All of the participants in this study had persisted at Bowling Green State University (BGSU) at least into the second year; however, with the exception of two participants, BGSU was not their university of choice. Nine of the participants had planned to attend other universities within the state and two had planned to attend college outside of the state. What drew them to BGSU was the amount of financial aid they were offered and proximity to home. While many of the women spoke to the fact that they could not imagine being in college anywhere else, many shared that, especially in their first year, they struggled in finding their way within the university, and particularly in finding a place where they felt at home.

This sense of home, or *familia*, was perhaps the most important finding of this study. All of the women shared throughout the study the importance of their family, their culture, and having a place where they could experience and practice *familia* in the college environment. Unfortunately, there was no dedicated physical place on the BGSU campus for this to happen. As a result, the participants produced the sense of *familia* for themselves and created spaces for the practice of *familia*. For example, 12 of the 13 participants became actively involved in the
Latino Student Union (LSU). Through LSU, they were able to develop relationships with other Latinos on campus and other peers who had an interest in Latino culture. Through this student organization many of them created their sense of *familia* and to a degree, their sense of belonging to the institution.

The participants also created their sense of belonging to the institution through support programs offered through the offices of Admissions and Multicultural Affairs. In these roles, the participants helped recruit non-majority students to attend BGSU. They would work with prospective non-majority students to provide guidance regarding the application process (cultural capital) and to provide diversity training within the residence halls. The Latinas who participated in these support programs felt good about the contribution they were making toward the improvement of non-majority student success at the university. They themselves had struggled with the college transition and felt compelled to find a way of giving back to the non-majority students who would follow them.

While the overall feeling for the campus environment was positive, many of the participants related experiences, especially within the classroom, that were negative. This finding supports the studies of Chacon, Cohen, and Strover (1986) and Sue (1981) who found that racial and ethnic minority students encounter both overt and covert racism and discrimination by other students and faculty. For the participants of this study, this was reflected by faculty and peers who singled them out. For example, Alicia was told by a peer that the only reason she was at BGSU was due to scholarship that was “given to her” based on the color of her skin, Sara was told by a faculty member that she was pronouncing her name the “Spanish way,” Laury was told by two peers “no offense” when they were discussing the possibility of Whites becoming the minority in a few short years and how horrible that would be, and Rose Marie,
when participating in a leadership opportunity with four White women felt her opinions and voice were unheard.

These experiences demonstrate that despite the access to college, these Latina students are still being singled out and isolated by the majority. Isolation and a sense of lack of support from members of the institution often contribute to non-persistence among non-majority students. The women of this particular study have persisted despite the barriers they have encountered; however, they talked about the fact that there were many of their peers who just disappeared.

The participants speculated that poor advising, leading to a longer college career, meant that many of their Latino peers did not finish due to lack of financial means. While there is certainly more to learn about Latinos who persist and why they persist, this finding suggests that there is more to learn about Latinos who do not persist in a predominantly White institution and the factors that contribute to that non-persistence.

The participants of this study also called into question the institution’s efforts at promoting diversity. The majority of the participants felt that the university’s efforts regarding diversity education were lip service at best. They did not see any efforts on the part of the administration to require faculty and staff members to attend meaningful diversity education sessions. Additionally, they felt the First-Year Success Series requirement for new students was simply a means to fill a diversity requirement rather than an intentional way to begin and develop conversations around building an appreciation for diversity and social justice. This finding demonstrates the need for an administrative review of the current programs geared toward diversity education and a concerted effort, among all members of the community, to embed appreciation for diversity and social justice within the university environment.
Overall, the participants of this study had a favorable perception of the university environment despite concerns they expressed about the diversity initiatives promoted by campus administration, negative classroom experiences, and a general perception that White peers lacked information about their culture and furthermore did not care to learn about their culture. The positive perception of the university was experienced by the participants through their interactions in LSU and their experiences in other support programs including Admissions, Multicultural Affairs, and the McNair scholars program. It was through these avenues that they met other students, staff, and faculty who had similar values and interests.

Persistence

The literature on persistence, largely based on Tinto’s (1975, 1987, 1993) Theory of Student Departure, identifies factors that typically affect students’ decision to remain in college. In particular, Tierney’s (1992, 1999) studies focused on how factors of persistence related to non-majority students. Tierney found that a lack of cultural capital (i.e., knowledge of financial aid, admission requirements, etc.) often contributed to non-persistence among non-majority students. Castellanos and Orozco (2005) and Rendón (1994) found that many Latino families lack this intrinsic knowledge because they have not attended college. This was true for many of the participants of this study. As mentioned previously, many of the participants took on the college application process and financial aid paperwork on their own because they did not have someone within their family who had gone through the experience. Despite that, the findings of this study support that idea that social support from peers and family is a positive contributor to Latina students’ persistence (Arellano & Padilla, 1996; Gándara, 1995; Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000; Hernandez, 2000; Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996).
Family Support

Hurtado and Carter (1997) found that in order for Latino students to be comfortable in the university setting it was necessary for them to maintain interactions at home as well as with peers at the university. The findings of this study support the findings of Hurtado and Carter as the participants talked extensively about the importance of family in their day-to-day lives and how the support of their parents was critical to their success in college. It was often parents and family members who the participants went to when they were stressed out or needed a word of encouragement. Although parents may not have had the intrinsic knowledge about the college experience, they were able to provide psychological and emotional support that was needed.

Social Support

One of the primary ways that the participants created a sense of familia, home away from home, was through social interactions. Gloria Castellanos, Lopez, and Rosales. (2005) found that strong social support was the number one factor predicting persistence for Latino students. Marcia (1966), Chickering and Reisser (1993), and Tinto (1993) agreed that social support is a factor that influences academic persistence. For the participants of this study, finding other peers on campus who shared similar family backgrounds and customs was important to their perception of their experience at BGSU. Most found these peers through LSU. Bordes et al. (2006) and Gloria (1993,1997) both asserted that for Latinos, forming friendships on campus and having social support from peers and family has indirect positive effects on persistence and the student’s perception of the university environment. The participants of this study, despite barriers, were ultimately able to find a place to fit in at BGSU. For most, this did not occur during the first year. Many of the participants spoke to the fact that they struggled academically and socially their first year and many thought of transferring given homesickness, academic
struggles, and a lack of connection to the university. It was only in their second year that these participants began feeling a sense of belonging and connection to the institution; however, this connection was largely created by the participants in a space where they felt comfortable expressing their culture and practicing *familia*. Given past research on the importance of social support in relation to academic persistence (Cardoza, 1991; Constantine et al., 2002; Gloria, 1993, 1997; Gloria & Robinson Kurpius, 2001; Hernandez, 2000), it would behoove university administrators at BGSU to examine the first-year experiences of Latina students at BGSU to ensure that all faculty and staff who work with Latina students are aware of and address the social and academic needs of these students. While the participants of this study have persisted, undoubtedly many other Latino students have not.

**Implications for Practice**

The results of this study suggest several implications for practice for administrators in higher education. While patterns emerged across the collective narratives, each Latina student had her own unique experiences to share. The participants were thankful to have the opportunity to share their stories and to do so in a focus group setting. Many of the participants indicated that the focus group sessions allowed them to realize the experiences that they shared. There was a sense of “writing culture together” (Madriz, 2000). The students indicated that they were appreciative of the opportunity to participate in this study because they have never been asked their opinion regarding their collegiate experience, and the students were ready to talk. The first implication therefore is to provide an outlet for Latina students to continue talking about their experiences so that changes can be made to better meet the academic and social needs of these students. This could take the form of additional focus groups with key administrators who
directly influence policy or it could be captured through a needs assessment study at the university that is then examined and implemented.

Understanding the importance of *familia*, or sense of home away from home, for the persistence of these students, BGSU administrators should create a physical space where Latino students can meet and practice their culture. It would also allow for an exchange with Latino faculty and staff as well as those interested in Latino culture. A space in which these students feel comfortable would contribute to creating a positive perception of the campus environment, one where diversity is celebrated and appreciated.

Assessing current diversity education initiatives at the university is another implication for practice that arose from this study. The participants were clear that they felt the university was not really committed to diversity; they saw a lack of in-depth programs on diversity and social justice for faculty, staff, and students. These perceptions were developed by participating in first-year success series programming, by in-class experiences, and by lack of support from the administration for learning communities such as La Comunidad and Global Village.

Administrators also need to gain a better understanding of the factors that motivate Latina students academically. The data reveal that these participants relied on their own internal drive and motivation, especially when the advice they were receiving from college advisors was inaccurate. Overwhelmingly, the participants of this study did not rely on an academic advisor to help them navigate their academic path because of the negative experiences they had with an advisor within the first year of college. An academic advising needs assessment should be conducted in order to gain understanding as to the academic advising needs of Latina students.
Implications for Future Research

As mentioned above, this study begins to identify factors of persistence for Latina students at BGSU; however, it does not focus on factors of non-persistence among Latino students or non-majority students as a whole. A study that specifically focuses on factors of non-persistence among non-majority students would assist the university in designing programs and services that are needed in order to retain these students.

This study also focused on undergraduates and recent graduates from BGSU. A pilot study, using Latina graduate students, was conducted prior to this study. During that study, it became clear that Latina graduate students also have some unique needs that need to be addressed in order to ensure their success in a graduate program at a predominantly White university. For example, the participants of the pilot study spoke of philosophical challenges that they were having with professors and thesis/dissertation advisors that had to do with taking a socially just approach to their field of study. This particular phenomenon deserves additional study.

The participants of this study perceived that their White peers did not really know much about cultures other than their own. A study at BGSU about the attitudes and perceptions of White students toward race, ethnicity, and culture would begin to shed light on how those students need to be educated to be successful in a global and diverse world. The results from this kind of study could then be used to develop new diversity and social justice programs for the university community.

The absence of gender conflicts in this study was very surprising. With the exception of some conversation around their fathers’ influence regarding college choice and over his daughter’s activities while in high school, gender issues were largely absent in this study. At
least in this case, the fathers’ influence did not carry over into the college experience. However, what was most notable was the change in the relationship between mother and daughter. Often described as a best friend relationship, it became clear that as the daughter was pursuing her education in college the relationship between mother and daughter changed and became more distant or strained.

The participants, especially those in their senior year, found it hard to talk with their mothers’ about the struggles they were facing academically, socially, and financially. Where they used to turn to their mothers to fix their problems and console them, mothers’ could no longer fix their problems or provide the level of comfort they used to because they no longer understood what their daughters were experiencing. This caused a great deal of conflict for the participants of this study. Getting an education was viewed as a way to better one’s life, yet the participants felt it pulling them away from their families, especially their mothers, in ways that they had not anticipated. Further exploration of this phenomenon is warranted.

**Conclusion**

The thirteen participants of this study persisted at a predominantly White institution due to their sheer determination and the social support from non-majority peers and family members. They were able to point to a handful of faculty and staff, all of whom were non-majority members of the community, who also helped them find their way in an environment that was perceived as cold, unwelcoming, and isolating. Considering that BGSU was only the first choice for two of the 13 participants, these perceptions are of particular concern.

The social environment of the university did little to support the needs of these students. It was clear that being able to practice *familia* was essential to the well-being and happiness of these students, yet no physical space was dedicated for that purpose. As a result, the participants
found ways to create that space on their own. They did this largely by joining the Latino Student Union or participating in other groups that focused on non-majority students. Through those organizations they met other Latinos and other peers who were interested in Latino culture.

The academic environment was also largely perceived as being unwelcome. The participants noted that they were often the only non-majority student in the class and even if they were not, they were the only Latino in the class. They discussed how this caused them to feel a sense of isolation within the classroom. At other times, they felt singled out when faculty members would call on them to speak for their ethnicity or their culture of origin. This left the participants feeling exposed and at times ostracized.

Institutional efforts around diversity education were thought to be insincere by the majority of the participants. Many of the participants spoke of the first-year success series programs for students and the lack of diversity education for faculty as being contributors to that perception. The participants noted that outside of a required general education course, there was little discussion in the academic environment about diversity or social justice. It is simply absent.

Family support and guidance were essential to the success and persistence of these participants. All of the participants talked about their families and how family members supported them financially and emotionally. They also spoke of the sense of pride that their family had in them for persisting in college. Many of the participants were either the first family member or part of the first generation of family members to go to college. While this caused some stress for the participants, they did not mind, because they knew how proud their families were of them and they knew that their success would lead to future generations attending college
and also being successful. At the end of the day, family is what mattered and family was the primary factor that kept the participants focused and determined to graduate.

There is no question that the United States population is becoming increasingly diverse. As the greater population becomes diverse, so do our institutions of higher education. Given the projected increase in the Latino population within the United States, it is imperative that we begin to address current issues that our Latino students face and be proactive in our program and policy design of the future. We cannot continue to ask these students to ignore their developmental progress by asking them to conform to a majority driven environment when the reality is that we are living in a multicultural world. We need to build a community where all students feel a sense of belonging, not a sense of isolation.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A
Informed Consent

June 17, 2009

TO: Mary Ann Begley
HESA

FROM: Hillary Harms, Ph.D.
HSRB Administrator

RE: HSRB Project No.: H09D281GE7

TITLE: The Experiences of Latinas at at Predominantly White University

You have met the conditions for approval for your project involving human subjects. As of June 16, 2009, your project has been granted final approval by the Human Subjects Review Board (HSRB). This approval expires on May 7, 2010. You may proceed with subject recruitment and data collection.

The final approved version of the consent document(s) is attached. Consistent with federal OHRP guidance to IRBs, the consent document(s) bearing the HSRB approval/expiration date stamp is the only valid version and you must use copies of the date-stamped document(s) in obtaining consent from research subjects.

You are responsible to conduct the study as approved by the HSRB and to use only approved forms. If you seek to make any changes in your project activities or procedures (including increases in the number of participants), please send a request for modifications immediately to the HSRB via this office. Please notify me, in writing (fax: 372-6916 or email: hsr@bgwu.edu) upon completion of your project.

Good luck with your work. Let me know if this office or the HSRB can be of assistance as your project proceeds.

Comments/Modifications:
Stumped original of consent form is coming to you via US mail.

c: Dr. Ellen Brodno

Research Category: EXPEDITED #7
APPENDIX C

Participant Consent Form

You are invited to participate in a study on Latina college students. This study is being conducted as a culminating project for the completion of my doctorate in the Higher Education Administration program at Bowling Green State University (BGSU). I am conducting a research study on the experiences of Latinas while attending a predominantly White university in the Midwest.

Purpose
The study will focus on answering the following questions:

- How do Latinas, attending a predominantly White university in the Midwest, make sense of their experiences while attending college?
  - What factors and conditions do they identify as influencing their experience in college?
  - How do they see their familial and cultural background shaping their collegiate experience?
  - How do they see their perceptions of the campus environment influencing their collegiate experience?

Procedure
Approximately 30 women will be asked to participate in focus group discussions. In order to be in this study you must be a current full-time undergraduate student or recent graduate (within the last nine months) of BGSU, self-identify as Latina, and not be an international student. Involvement in this study will include two tape-recorded and video-recorded focus groups that will be approximately 60 to 90 minutes in length. The audio tapes will be transcribed verbatim and video will be used to analyze non-verbal responses. At the conclusion of the first focus group, you will be given a disposable camera and asked to spend the next seven days taking pictures of campus as you experience it. I will then collect the cameras, have the film developed, and return the pictures to you prior to the second focus group. I will then ask you to choose up to three of those pictures and write a few sentences about the meaning those pictures have to you. At the conclusion of the second focus group, you will be given the pictures you took to do with as you so choose. You will be provided with opportunities to read and revise your responses. Transcripts of the focus group sessions will be sent to you prior to the next focus group for your review and again after I have analyzed the data. If necessary, the above conditions may be negotiated with me. The total amount of time you will spend on this research study would be no more than six hours.

Risks
The anticipated risks to you are not greater than those normally encountered in daily life. Referrals for therapeutic support and counseling will be discussed with the participants as necessary and participants will be informed that they may drop out of the study at any time or decline to answer any question(s) without penalty to them.
Confidentiality
Because email is not a confidential means of communication, I will only use email to gauge your interest in participating in the study and to request schedules to set up focus group sessions. If I email you about the study, I will remind you that email communication is not confidential.

All transcripts, forms, and other documents will be coded and altered (i.e., through the use of pseudonyms) to safeguard participants’ names and identities to the greatest extent possible. I plan to use quotations from the focus group discussions, but will use only your pseudonym. Members of the focus groups will be asked to keep all content in the focus group discussions confidential; however, it is possible that participants might not abide by that agreement.

All tapes, audio and video, will be stored and locked in a portable lock box when not in use by me. I will destroy all tapes and videos at the conclusion of the research study.

Your participation in this study is voluntary and may be discontinued at any time without penalty or prejudice. Your decision to participate or not to participate will in no way impact your relationship with BGSU. Should you choose to participate, you are free to refuse to answer any questions without explanation, and you may withdraw from the focus group at any time.

Benefits
This study will potentially benefit the institution as it may help the members of its community to recognize how the campus climate and services provided for Latina students is perceived, and its impact on the students’ and community’s development. It can also help the various departments and programs identify their major strengths and weaknesses, so as to provide better targeted support for Latina students.

Additionally, as a way of thanking you for your participation, I will provide food and beverages at all focus groups and for each focus group session that you attend, your name will be submitted for a chance to win a $200 book scholarship from the BGSU bookstore. Your chance of winning is roughly one in thirty, dependent upon the total number of participants.

Contact Information
Should you have any questions about the study or need clarification, please contact me at (419) 494-4905 or mbegley@bsu.edu, or contact the chair of my dissertation committee, Dr. Ellen Brodicko at (419) 372-9391 or ebrodicko@bsu.edu. If you have questions about the conduct of this study or your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Chair of BGSU’s Human Subjects Review Board at (419) 372-7716 or hrsb@bsu.edu. By signing this consent form, you agree to participate in this study having read and agreed to the above terms and you have had all of your questions about the study answered. You will receive a copy of this informed consent document:

Participant’s Signature/Date

I agree to conduct and report this research according to the above terms.

Investigator’s Signature/Date
May 6, 2010

TO: Mary Ann Begley  
   HESA

FROM: Hillary Harms, Ph.D.  
      HSRB Administrator

RE: Continuing HSRB Review for Project H09D281GE7

TITLE: The Experiences of Latinas at at Predominantly White University

This is to inform you that your research study indicated above has received continuing Human Subjects Review Board (HSRB) review and approval. This approval is effective May 7, 2010 for a period of 12 months and will expire on May 6, 2011. You may continue with the project.

Please communicate any proposed changes in your project procedures or activities involving human subjects, including consent form changes or increases in the number of participants, to the HSRB via this office. Please notify me, at 372-7716 or hsrb@bgsu.edu, upon completion of your project.

Good luck with your work. Let me know if this office or the HSRB can be of assistance as your project proceeds.

Comments:

C: Dr. Ellen Broido
APPENDIX B
Pre-Interview Questions

1. Personal and Family Information
   a. Self-Identification
      i. How would you describe yourself from the context of your familial and cultural background?
   b. Structure of Family
      i. How would you describe your family in terms of your cultural background? Perhaps useful for describing population

Focus Group Questions

Focus Group I

1. Factors and Conditions Influencing Their Experience in College
   a. Tell me about your experiences in college. What has been a defining moment?
   b. What has influenced your experience in college? Why is this significant?

2. Perceptions of the Campus Environment
   a. What is it like to be a student here?
      i. Physical space
      ii. Human aggregate
      iii. Culture and climate
   b. What is it like to be a woman on this campus?
   c. What is it like to be a Latina on this campus?

3. Familial and Cultural Backgrounds
   a. Does your family background influence your experience in college? If so, describe how.
   b. Does your cultural background shape your collegiate experience? If so, describe how.
APPENDIX C

Focus Group II Questions

1. Perceptions of the Campus Environment

   a. What about this photograph is meaningful to you? Please describe.

   b. What was this exercise like for you? Did it generate any thoughts about how you experience campus either during the exercise or after?