Rise Up: Exploring the First Year Experiences of Latina Doctoral Students at Predominantly White Institutions

Dissertation

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

Veronica Flores Pecero, M.Ed.

Graduate Program in Educational Studies

The Ohio State University

2016

Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Marc Johnston-Guerrero, Advisor

Dr. Susan R. Jones

Dr. Sarah Gallo
Abstract

As the demographics of the United States continue to change, Latinas are estimated to account for a third of all women in the United States by the year 2060 (Gándara, 2015). Despite increases in enrollment, they still hold one of the lowest rates of doctoral degree attainment compared to other racial and ethnic groups. Doctoral education provides an avenue for innovative ideas and breakthroughs in a variety of fields as the core purpose of doctoral education is to generate, produce, and disseminate new knowledge (Council of Graduate Schools, 2005). Therefore, if the United States seeks to remain a world leader in education and innovation, it is essential to pay close attention to the experiences of Latinas in doctoral programs, as they provide the training grounds for needed innovation in our society.

The purpose of this study was to explore the first year experiences of Latina doctoral students at predominantly White institutions. Through the use of Latino Critical Theory (LatCrit), Chicana Feminist Epistemology, and testimonios, the research explored how a) the intersection of race, ethnicity, and gender, as well as other salient identities, shaped Latinas’ experiences during the first year of doctoral study, b) how Latina doctoral students utilized support networks during the first year, and c) how the first year shaped subsequent years in their doctoral program. The findings illustrated how a lack of
diversity in programs and institutions resulted in various challenges, including racism, microaggressions, and other forms of biases. However, through various support networks, such as family and faculty mentors, the participants were able to use the lessons of the first year to strengthen their voice in and out of the classroom and persist through their program. Ultimately, the aim of this study was to showcase the experiences of Latina doctoral students from their own perspectives to inform future research and practice.
Dedication

This is dedicated to those who fight every day to rise up despite all the obstacles, challenges, biases, and injustices in this world. You got this.
Acknowledgments

This is probably harder than writing the other 200+ pages of this document. I do not think I can ever truly encapsulate how much the following people have helped me along this journey, but here it goes. Oh, and this was severely edited down, otherwise it would’ve been as long as my other chapters…

First and foremost, I must thank all the women who participated in this study. You inspire me, and I am so honored that you allowed me to hear and share your story. Keep rising up!

I want to extend my deepest gratitude to my committee members, Dr. Marc Johnston-Guerrero, Dr. Susan Jones, Dr. Sarah Gallo, and Dr. Jamie Cano. Thank you for your support and feedback throughout this process. I am forever grateful to you for pushing me in my thinking as I completed my dissertation.

To my advisor, Dr. Marc Johnston-Guerrero: Thank you for being my advisor for the past 3 ½ years. I will never forget how supportive you were during my first year and beyond. I still remember during the first semester emailing you that I was on the verge of quitting and you calling me within minutes to make sure I was okay. Thank you for your encouragement and for always letting me be my own person as I went through this journey.

I want to give a huge thanks to the wonderful people at the Student Advocacy Center at The Ohio State University, especially to Karen Kyle, Israel Martin, Ellen Grudowski, Jennifer Irwin, Kim Pachell, Matt Eveland, and Amy Dierker. Thank you for being such great colleagues during my assistantship. Thank you for your guidance on cases, for all the laughter, and for being so supportive as I went through all the milestones of this degree.

I want to say a special thank you to the people and faculty in the PHEL program at The University of Texas at Austin, especially my master’s advisor Dr. Victor Sáenz. If you had not invited me to become a part of Project MALES during my master’s program, I know that I would not be finishing a PhD right now. Thank you for always being a wonderful mentor. I also want to thank my former colleagues at the Longhorn Center for Academic Excellence at UT. In particular, I want to thank Dr. Ge Chen and Dr. Darren Kelly for being wonderful supervisors and mentors. Thank you both for always trusting me and pushing me in my professional development. To Dr. Aileen Bumphus, Dr. James Brown, Dr. Charles Lu, Dallawrence Dean, Katelyn Martinez, and all the other people who support so many students through LCAE, thank you for being wonderful colleagues and for being great role models. You all inspired me to continue with my education so I could also keep on helping students like you do every day.

My friends are more than just friends – they’re family. Some I have known since high school, others I have met in recent years but it has felt like I’ve known them all my life. To my fellow Latina doctoral buddy, Molly Morin: I am so grateful for your
friendship. Thank you for your feedback and support during this process. I’m so excited to call you Doctora Morin very soon. Panda hugs!

Getting through the program would not have been possible without two of the best cohort mates I could have ever hoped for, Blossom Barrett and Kari Taylor. To Blossom Barrett: You already know we both aren’t big on emotions, so let me go ahead and make you uncomfortable. THANK YOU. Thank you for always being there, for always understanding, for showing me Columbus outside of campus, for being my study/writing buddy, for forcing me out of my room, and for understanding the struggle. I could go on and on, but I’m sure I have a page limit on this. I’m just so happy that we were in the same cohort together. I look forward to a lifetime of inappropriate texts, memes, and recounting our awkward moments in life. Can you move to Texas? To Kari Taylor: I remember meeting you at admitted students’ day before we even started the program and hoping you would choose OSU. You were so nice and inviting, and I knew we would be friends. I am forever grateful for your constant encouragement and support and for always listening to all my rants and problems. My favorite memories were of us gasping for breath during our gym classes and indulging at the Cheesecake Factory (to balance things out). I am so, so, so lucky to have met a friend like you, and you inspire me to be a better person. I will ask you the same question I asked Blossom above, can you move to Texas? Please?

To my longest friend, Brittney Rodriguez: Thank you for always being there for me and understanding what most people don’t. You have been there for me at the lowest of times, and I can never repay you for that. I am so proud of everything you’ve accomplished so far. I love you and miss you so much! I’ll see you soon. To Jessica Agyemang, my BFFL: Who knew that SoHE would bring us together. Thank you for your encouraging texts and your sarcastic comments. I’m so, so, so proud of your accomplishments, although I can’t wait until you move back to Austin. I love you tons!

To future Dr. Dallawrence Dean: You were my advisor, then my co-worker, and now my friend. Thank you for always being such a great listener and being there for me always. You always keep it real, and I need that in my life. I am excited to call you Dr. Dean soon, because that’s such a cool name. Thank you, D. I love you, brother! To Dr. Carmen de las Mercédez: Thank you for being supportive and always giving me advice about life. I’m proud to say I’m the only one who can deal with your perfectionist tendencies (because I have them, too!), and I’m also proud I’m your favorite “kid.” I admire your resiliency through everything you’ve been through, and I’m grateful for your friendship and mentorship. I love you! To Diane Landeros: Thank you for always making me laugh, even when I totally don’t want to. Thank you for opening your home to Dom and I and for always being supportive. I still remember how you supported me through my anxiety when I was in Columbus and I am forever grateful. I am excited for future adventures with you. I love you, Lady Di!

To future Dr. Anthony Heaven: Thank you for always listening to me and for being my writing buddy the last few months. I know I can always count on you for
anything because you are a wonderful person and friend. I am so excited to call you Dr. Heaven within the next few months. I love you, Ant! To Katelyn Martinez: Thank you for being my friend, for listening to me, for understanding me, and for always being there. I’m so, so, so proud of you and everything you’ve done and will do. I love you, K-Mart! And a special thank you to Guillermo Navarro for always putting up with all of us. Thank you for loving Katelyn like you do and for making her happy. To Alvaro Ferrara: You are the nicest person ever, and you have the patience of a saint. I mean, who else could put up with Charles like you do. Thank you for always opening up your home to us and for being a truly wonderful person. Much love to you, Andy, and Kitty!

To Charles Lu: As I’ve mentioned before, I probably wouldn’t be doing this if it weren’t for your guidance and because I admire you and totally want to be you when I grow up. You bring such joy and happiness to my life. Every time I was sad, getting a text from you always made me happier. Thank you for giving me guidance and feedback as I wrote this dissertation. You’re brilliant, and it pains me to say it because I know it’ll just inflate your ego, but it’s true. And thank you for visiting me, always texting and calling, and always making me feel like I was a part of your life even from so far away. It made the past 3 ½ years much easier. I know sometimes we’ve had our disagreements, but I’ve learned to be more open and honest because your friendship means a lot to me, and I don’t ever want to not have you in my life. I love you, and you will always be the man of honor in my life (sorry, Dom!).

To Milly Lopez, my other half: The best part of being a graduate student was meeting you 5 years ago in our master’s program. From the beginning we clicked, and you’ve been stuck with me ever since. Thank you for always listening to me and making me feel better when I’m down. You get me like no one else does and you bring so much joy to my life. Whenever we talk, or text, or I just spend time with you, I am truly happy. I could go on and on, but you already know how much you mean to me. I love you more than I could ever express in words. Also, thank you to Abel Lopez and Cameron Lopez. Thank you for letting me steal Milly away every now and then. I’m so happy that she has such a wonderful family and that you all have opened your home to Dom and I many times.

I am the woman that I am today because of the two strongest women in my life: my mom, Mireya Servin, and my grandmother, Eva Perales. Mommy, thank you for always believing in me. Thank you for letting me talk your ear off when I was little (and now), for being at every choir recital and awards ceremony when I was little, and for always working so hard to provide for me. Thank you for letting me call you at any time of the day, for all the food you would stuff me with when I would come home, and for being my role model. I can never say in words how much you mean to me and how much you have inspired me. I do this all for you so that one day I can repay you in the way you deserve. I love you, mommy! To my grandmother: Mom, gracias por todo lo que me has dado en mi vida. Lo más importante para mí es que pudiste verme terminar
mi doctorado. Te quiero muchísimo. Gracias por ser mi inspiración. I love you both more than words could express.

I also want to thank Mr. and Mrs. Daniel and Dora Flores for accepting me into their family. Thank you for your support and for raising such a wonderful son.

To my husband, partner, and best friend - Dominick Phillip Flores: I could write a thousand pages and it could never capture what you mean to me. This achievement is as much yours as it is mine, as this would never have been completed without your love and support. You have been there since I was 16, with my crazy hopes, dreams, and ambitions. You were there at every graduation I’ve had. You were there when you dropped me off in a new state to begin this journey. You were there for the many evenings I cried because I did not believe I could do this anymore. You were there by my side at every coffee shop you dragged me to so I could do some writing. You were there when I listened to Hamilton on repeat and you then decided to buy us plane tickets to New York just so I could get a chance to see Lin-Manuel Miranda (shout-out to Lin-Manuel!) at his last Ham4Ham. And you did all that because you knew it would make me happy. You always think of my happiness. Your support from the very beginning of our relationship has been what has pushed me through to get to this point in life. I hope that these sacrifices we have made will help us create a better life not only for ourselves, but also for our families, both current and future. I love you more than you could ever know. You are the best of husbands and the best of men.

To my furbaby, Bella Pecero Flores: I know you can’t read this, obvi, but you deserve a shout out because you’re my baby. Thank you for always lying next to me when I would write late at night, and for giving me kisses when I would get upset. I wish all people were as loving as you are. I love you, my little Bellita.

And lastly, to my future child/children:

If we lay a strong enough foundation
We’ll pass it on to you, we’ll give the world to you
And you’ll blow us all away
Someday, someday

(“Dear Theodosia” by Lin-Manuel Miranda)
Vita

May 2011………………………………………………………………B.A., Government
B.S., Communication Studies
The University of Texas at Austin

September 2011-August 2013……………………………………………Graduate Assistant
Longhorn Link Program and The McNair Scholars Program
The University of Texas at Austin

May 2013………………..M.Ed., College and University Student Personnel Administration
The University of Texas at Austin

August 2014-May 2016………………………Graduate Administrative Associate
The Student Advocacy Center

Publications

identities of mixed heritage students. Journal of Student Affairs Research and
Practice, 53(3), 281-293.

Black students’ decision to study in China. Journal of Student Affairs Research
and Practice, 52(4), 440-451.

Fields of Study

Major Field: Educational Studies

Specialization: Higher Education & Student Affairs
Table of Contents

Abstract ......................................................................................................................................................... ii
Dedication ................................................................................................................................................... iv
Acknowledgments ........................................................................................................................................ v
Vita ................................................................................................................................................................. ix
List of Tables ............................................................................................................................................... xiii
List of Figures ............................................................................................................................................... xiv

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.......................................................................................................................... 1
Statement of the Problem ............................................................................................................................. 3
  Latinx Growth in the United States ........................................................................................................... 3
  A Case for Latina Women ............................................................................................................................ 6
  A Case for the First Year of Doctoral Study ............................................................................................... 9
  Key Terms Defined ..................................................................................................................................... 11
Rationale for the Study ................................................................................................................................. 14
Purpose and Design of the Study .................................................................................................................. 15
  Research Questions .................................................................................................................................... 15
  Design of the Study .................................................................................................................................... 16
  Significance of the Study ............................................................................................................................ 17
Summary ....................................................................................................................................................... 20

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW ................................................................................................................ 22
Latinx Secondary Education ....................................................................................................................... 22
  Subtractive Schooling and Discrimination ................................................................................................. 24
  Parental and Family Involvement ............................................................................................................. 27
  Summary of Secondary Education Literature .......................................................................................... 30
Latinx Post-Secondary Education .............................................................................................................. 30
  Latinx Educational Trends ........................................................................................................................ 31
  Discrimination and Microaggressions in Post-Secondary Education ....................................................... 33
  Familismo and Parental Involvement ......................................................................................................... 36
  Summary of Post-Secondary Education ..................................................................................................... 37
The PhD Experience ....................................................................................................................................... 38
  Graduate Socialization ............................................................................................................................... 38
  Golde ......................................................................................................................................................... 39
  Lovitts ....................................................................................................................................................... 40
  Weidman, Twale, and Stein ....................................................................................................................... 41
  Diversifying socialization ......................................................................................................................... 43
  First Year Doctoral Experience ................................................................................................................ 43
Latinx Doctoral Experiences ..................................................................................................................... 46
  Latina doctoral students ............................................................................................................................ 50
  Latina faculty ............................................................................................................................................ 52
Summary of the PhD Experience .................................................................................................................. 53
Latina Identity and Gendered Educational Experiences .......................................................... 53
  Gendered Pathways Towards Higher Education ................................................................. 55
  Summary of Latina Identity and Gendered Educational Experiences .................................. 58
Theoretical Framework ........................................................................................................... 58
  Critical Race Theory ............................................................................................................. 59
  Latino Critical Theory (LatCrit) .......................................................................................... 61
  LatCrit in Educational Research ......................................................................................... 62
  Summary of Latino Critical Theory ....................................................................................... 65
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY .................................................................................................. 66
Research Questions .................................................................................................................. 66
Paradigm and Epistemological Assumptions .......................................................................... 68
  Critical Race Epistemology ................................................................................................. 68
  Chicana Feminist Epistemology .......................................................................................... 72
Positionality .................................................................................................................................. 76
Research Study Design ............................................................................................................ 80
  LatCrit .................................................................................................................................. 81
  Narrative Inquiry .................................................................................................................... 82
  Critical Race Methods .......................................................................................................... 87
  Testimonios .......................................................................................................................... 89
Sites ............................................................................................................................................. 92
Sampling ..................................................................................................................................... 95
Data Collection ....................................................................................................................... 98
Data Analysis .......................................................................................................................... 101
Trustworthiness ....................................................................................................................... 104
Summary .................................................................................................................................. 105
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS ............................................................................................................. 108
Latina Doctoral Student Backgrounds .................................................................................... 108
  Alexis ...................................................................................................................................... 109
  Ana ....................................................................................................................................... 110
  Cassandra ............................................................................................................................... 111
  Courtney ................................................................................................................................. 112
  Denise ..................................................................................................................................... 112
  Juliana .................................................................................................................................... 113
  Karina ..................................................................................................................................... 114
  La Blue ................................................................................................................................... 115
  Lilliana .................................................................................................................................... 115
  Patty ........................................................................................................................................ 116
RQ1: Salient Identities that Shaped the First Year ................................................................. 118
  Theme I: One of the Few, If Not The Only One: Lack of Diversity in Programs, Institutions, and Communities ........................................................................................................ 119
  Summary ............................................................................................................................... 127
  Theme II: Predominantly White Spaces and the Consequences for Latina Women: Racism, Biases, and Microaggressions ................................................................................... 127
  Summary ............................................................................................................................... 132
  Theme III: The Self-Doubt Game and the Manifestation of Imposter Syndrome for Latinas ............................................................................................................................................... 132
  Summary ............................................................................................................................... 138
  Theme IV: Straddling the Border: Tension between Academia and their Culture and/or Home ............................................................................................................................................. 139
  Summary ............................................................................................................................... 142
RQ2: Support Systems for Latina Doctoral Students During the First Year

Theme I: Explaining the PhD Process and Gaining Support from Family

Summary

Theme II: Peer Support Through the First Year

Summary

Theme III: Faculty Advisors and the Importance of Mentorship

Summary

Theme IV: Department and Institutional Resources Building Community and Providing Opportunities (for some)

Summary

RQ3: How the First Year Shapes the Rest of the Doctoral Journey

Theme I: Latinas Creating Their Own Spaces Now and for the Future

Summary

Theme II: Latinas Finding Their Voice

Summary

Theme III: Latinas Identifying Persistent Obstacles

Summary

A Composite Story of the First Year Experience for Latina Doctoral Students

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Discussion of the Study Related to Latino Critical Theory

The Centrality of Race, Racism, and Intersectionality

The Challenge to Dominant Ideology

The Commitment to Social Justice

The Centrality of Experiential Knowledge

The Interdisciplinary Perspective

Discussion of Findings Related to the Literature

The Impact of Being “The Only One” for Latina Doctoral Students

Racism, biases, and microaggressions

Imposter syndrome

Latina Doctoral Students and Multiple Systems of Support During the First Year

Familial support

Faculty advising and mentorship

The First Year is Powerful but Not Protective

Recommendations for Practice and Policy

Limitations and Areas for Future Research

Concluding Thoughts

References

Appendix A: Recruitment Message

Appendix B: Recruitment Flyer

Appendix C: Email for Selected Participants

Appendix D: Demographic Survey

Appendix E: Testimonio Instructions and Sample Testimonios

Appendix F: Follow-Up Interview Protocol Questions

Appendix G: Email for Follow-Up Interview Scheduling
List of Tables

Table 3.1 Participants’ Institution Background...........................................95
Table 4.1 Participants’ Background Information..........................................117
List of Figures

Figure 1.1. Percentage of bachelor degrees conferred during 2011-2012 by race/ethnicity ................................................................. 5

Figure 1.2. Percentage of doctoral degrees conferred during 2011-2012 by race/ethnicity ................................................................. 6

Figure 1.3. Doctoral degrees conferred between 2000-2012 for Women of Color ............................................................. 8

Figure 1.4. Doctoral degrees conferred between 2000-2012 by gender and race/ethnicity ................................................................. 8

Figure 3.1. Graphic illustrating epistemology, methodology, framework, and methods working in unison ........................................ 68
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) serves as the highest academic degree people can obtain in their specific field or discipline in the United States, requiring years of education culminating in original research. Doctoral education provides an avenue for innovative ideas and breakthroughs in a variety of fields as the core purpose of doctoral education is to generate, produce, and disseminate new knowledge (Council of Graduate Schools [CGS], 2005). Graduate education, and doctoral education in particular, does much more that just prepare future faculty members. Through the extension and creation of these new forms of knowledge, a doctorate degree is not just a private good but also serves as a public good (CGS, 2008). A report by the Council of Graduate Schools (2008) argues that doctoral education can serve to better society in the following ways: a) Creating the workforce for the new global economy; b) conducting groundbreaking research; c) facilitating technology transfer, d) developing entrepreneurs and innovators; e) preparing future college and university faculty; f) developing leaders for business, nonprofit, and government sectors; g) preparing the K-12 teacher workforce; h) establishing new start ups that create jobs; i) strengthening communities through social action; j) promoting public health initiatives; and k) enhancing society through arts, humanities, and social sciences (p. 2). However, in order for doctoral education to continue to serve the needs of society, it must first meet the needs of its increasingly diverse student population.
For Latinxs\(^1\) in the United States, there has been a history of marginalization and oppression within the educational system (e.g., Pérez Huber, 2010; Solórzano & Solórzano, 1995; Yosso, 2006; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, Solórzano, 2009). Despite laws that have banned segregation based on race/ethnicity in schools, *de facto* inequalities still exist throughout the educational pipeline. Inequalities within education can cause Latinx students to be inadequately served by educational institutions, which can result in discontinuing their educational journey (e.g., Barajas & Pierce, 2001; Gardner, 2008; González 2006, 2007; Valenzuela, 1999). These inequities are most represented at the highest levels of education – doctoral programs. In comparison to other racial and ethnic populations, Latinxs have one of the lowest rates of graduate degree attainment in the United States (Santiago, Galdeano, & Taylor, 2015). These statistics are alarming as Latinxs are predicted to make up a little over one-fourth of the United States population by the year 2060 (Colby & Ortman, 2015). Therefore, if the United States seeks to remain a world leader in education and innovation, it is essential to pay close attention to Latinxs in graduate education, and in particular doctoral programs, as they provide the training grounds for the needed innovation in our society. For Latina women specifically, their continuing advances in educational attainment and graduation rates make them a compelling case to study.

As Latina women continue to make gains at all levels of education in both enrollment and completion rates (Santiago et al., 2015), and are projected to make up a third of all women in the United States by 2060, their experiences should be of particular

\(^1\) Unless noted otherwise by the literature or a participant, Latinx will be used throughout this dissertation to be inclusive of those who do not identify within the gender binary.
interest as “…the future of the nation is very much tied to the future of these women and girls” (Gándara, 2015, p. 5). Therefore, this critical narrative inquiry focused on the first year experiences of Latina doctoral students to showcase their testimonios, or narratives, on their doctoral experience. As will be discussed below, the first year is a vital time where graduate socialization occurs (Gardner, 2008; Golde, 1998; González, 2006; Lovitts, 2001; Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001), doctoral students are more likely to depart (CGS, 2008; Golde, 1998), and their career plans may shift (Golde & Dore, 2001).

Accordingly, the following sections present a case for the need to understand this unique topic, including the importance of studying Latinxxs, specifically, Latina women and doctoral education, and specifically in the first year. Additionally, the purpose, rationale, and significance are examined, as well as a brief overview of the subsequent chapters.

**Statement of the Problem**

The following subsections provide context to the topic under investigation, including a case for study Latina women, and a case for studying the first year of doctoral study. Ultimately, the problem that influenced the selection of this topic is the disparity in attainment rates of doctoral degrees for Latina students in comparison to their White counterparts. Therefore, examining the experiences of Latina doctoral students can better illuminate reasons why this may be occurring.

**Latinx Growth in the United States**

The demographics of the United States have significantly changed in recent years due in part to the growth of the Latinx population. The Pew Hispanic Center estimates that since 1960 the Latinx population has grown from 6.3 million to approximately 54 million in 2013, which comprises about 17.1 percent of the total U.S. population (Stepler
& Brown, 2015). The same report states that the Latinx population will continue to grow at a rapid pace with an estimated 119 million by the year 2060, or almost 28 percent of the U.S. population. For certain states, Latinxs are quickly becoming the majority, such as in California and New Mexico (Krogstad & Lopez, 2015). As the Latinx population continues to increase, it is imperative to understand their experiences, especially in regards to their educational attainment.

Large strides are being made by Latinxs in the educational sector. The 2015 Excelencia in Education Factbook on Latinos in education identified several achievements by Latinxs during the past few years. For instance, Latinx enrollment in K-12 schooling has jumped 5 percentage points, from 19 percent to 24 percent, since 2005. Additionally, their high school completion rates are now at 65 percent, resulting in the college-going rate rising from 54 to 70 percent. The increase of Latinxs attending college resulted in a rise of institutions, currently 370, gaining the designation of a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI), where the Latinx student population is composed of 25 percent or more (Santiago et al., 2015, p. 5).

In spite of their growing enrollment in education, Latinx students are still struggling in post-secondary educational attainment. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2013) data indicates that Latinx students accounted for 15.2 percent of the total undergraduate enrollment for 2011 and received approximately 9.8 percent of undergraduate degrees conferred for 2011-2012. In contrast, 60.2 percent of White students enrolled in 2011 and received 70 percent of undergraduate degrees conferred during the 2011-2012 year [see figure 1.1]. Despite the fact that Latinxs’ college
enrollment rates have increased over the years, there are still large disparities in their attainment of undergraduate degrees compared to their White counterparts.

When examining graduate education enrollment and degrees conferred, the data are even bleaker. Latinxs only constituted 7.8 percent of total post-baccalaureate enrollment for 2011 and received 6.1 percent of doctoral degrees conferred between 2011-2012 (NCES, 2013). This is a significant contrast to the enrollment and conferral for their White counterparts, who accounted for 68.2 percent of post-baccalaureate enrollment and 72.6 percent of doctoral degrees conferred during the same years (see Figure 1.2).
The purpose of including these statistics is to acknowledge the increase of Latinxs presence in the educational pipeline, but also display the continued disparities in their doctoral degree attainment in comparison to other populations, especially their White counterparts. Indeed, there is a clear need for further exploration of the doctoral experiences for Latinx students to gain further insight on these statistics.

A Case for Latina Women

One reason for the increased presence of Latinxs in education is in part due to Latinas. Compared to their Latino male counterparts, they are enrolling and obtaining degrees at higher rates (NCES, 2013). As such, recent scholarship has focused exclusively on the low rates of educational attainment among Men of Color (Harper & Harris, 2012; Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009). In order to help close the gap, various programs
and initiatives have been created to respond to this crisis among Men of Color, including President Obama’s My Brother’s Keeper White House Initiative (Jarrett & Johnson, 2014). There is no doubt that trying to address the gender gap is necessary, however, it is also important to continue investigating and understanding the experiences of Women of Color across all of higher educations, especially as Women of Color in the United States face unique struggles and experiences due to the multiple marginalized identities they hold (Crenshaw, 1991). Not only must they face challenges associated with being a Person of Color, but also with being a woman in our society. Furthermore, the discrimination and marginalization that occurs cannot simply be reduced to just one of these identities, but to the intersection that occurs amongst them.

Despite the fact that they may be outpacing their male counterparts, Latina women are still not achieving the level of achievement of other racial and ethnic groups, especially in regards to doctoral education (Santiago et al., 2015). Amongst all Women of Color, Latinas have one of the lowest rates of doctoral degrees conferred (see figure 1.3). More staggering is their rate of doctoral degree attainment compared to their White male and female counterparts (NCES, 2013) (see figure 1.4). Discussed in the previous section, these large disparities in degree attainment indicate a need to further understand what occurs during the doctoral process that contributes to these rates.
Figure 1.3. Doctoral degrees conferred between 2000-2012 for Women of Color
Source: U.S. Department of Education, NCES Digest of Education Statistics (2013), Table 324.20

Figure 1.4. Doctoral degrees conferred between 2000-2012 by gender and race/ethnicity
Source: U.S. Department of Education, NCES Digest of Education Statistics (2013), Table 324.20
The statistics above are staggering when taking into consideration the changing demographics of the United States. In states with high Latinx populations, such as California and Texas, Latinas "are now more than 50 percent of the total female school-age population" (Santiago et al., 2015, p. 7). Therefore, Latinas will continue to enter the educational system at high rates, which makes it crucial to understand their unique journeys as they enter secondary, college, and graduate school.

When examining the plight of Latinas in graduate school, scholars have documented the hardships they face in their programs and institutions, including instances of racism and discrimination, which may lead to an early departure from their program (Aryan & Guzman, 2010; Gardner, 2008). More alarming is the fact that women and Students of Color are more likely to leave an institution when compared to a White male student (Gardner, 2008). For Latinas who hold both marginalized identities, the rate of attrition may be even higher. Thus, analyzing the narratives of these women provides additional information as to what leads Latinas to enter doctoral education and what influences their decision to persist.

**A Case for the First Year of Doctoral Study**

The preceding sections have emphasized the important role that doctoral education plays in society and why closer attention should be paid to Latina students in this phase of education. While the entire experience is worth exploring, this study looks specifically at the first year as this is a critical time period where doctoral students are socialized into graduate school (Gardner, 2008; Golde, 1998; González, 2006; Lovitts, 2001; Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001), are most at risk to depart from their program (CGS, 2008; Golde, 1998), and are more likely to shift their future career plans (Golde & Dore, 2001).
For students who enter a doctoral program, many will experience a graduate socialization process where they begin to understand their roles as doctoral students through verbal and non-verbal cues from faculty and peers (Golde, 1998; Lovitts, 2001; Weidman et al., 2001). Much of this socialization begins as soon as students enter their graduate program. Throughout this first year the various cues and information students gather from this socialization process can be a determinant of whether the program/department or graduate lifestyle is a good fit for their needs and whether they choose to depart or persist (Golde, 1998). For populations, such as Latina students, “traditional” forms of socialization may not fit their specific needs and can contribute to marginalization experienced during their first year and beyond (Gardner, 2008; González, 2006).

All the factors described above may contribute to departure from a doctoral program. The Council of Graduate School’s (2008) report on completion and attrition found that most attrition occurs very early on in the doctoral program (Sowell, Zhang, Redd, & King, 2008). Golde’s (1998) study on first year attrition of doctoral students finds that the first year “is an important window in how things can go wrong for students” (p. 55). Amongst some of the reasons for first year doctoral attrition were factors such as a lack of departmental fit and issues with their faculty advisor.

Aside from issues of attrition, studying the first year can provide insight on the career goals of doctoral students and how that may or may not shift after their first year. Golde and Dore (2001) posited that the majority of doctoral students in their study envisioned a faculty career. However, they observed in some of their participants that an interest in faculty positions declined after their first year. Of particular interest for this
study, is their finding that Women of Color had the least desire to continue on to be faculty members. Golde and Dore (2001) stated that their "data suggest that the professoriate, particularly at research universities, where they are least well represented, is unappealing to women and students of color" (p. 14). Although the data are 15 years old, this finding is telling when considering the current composition of faculty members in the United States.

*The Chronicle of Higher Education* (Myers, 2016) recently released a comprehensive list of faculty across the nation broken down by gender, race/ethnicity, and institutional type from the 2013-2014 year. Of the over 400,000 faculty, approximately 163,000 were women. Of those women, 75 percent self-identified as White, while Latinas only made up 4 percent. Additionally, Latinas are more likely to hold lower-ranked faculty positions compared to their White counterparts. Although lecturers were not included in this data set, Santiago et al. (2015) noted that Latinas are more likely to hold the role of lecturer compared to their male counterparts. Golde and Dore (2001) contended that interest in faculty positions seems to decline during the beginning of the program. As this dissertation explored the first year experience, the findings assist in understanding how the experiences Latinas have in their doctoral education may influence their career choices, especially regarding their desire to become a faculty member.

**Key Terms Defined**

The following are frequently used terms within this dissertation. I have chosen to utilize the following definitions for the purpose of this study.
**Chicana/o:** This term refers to “a self-identification label that describes the cultural, political, and geographic identities of individuals of Mexican descent who were partially or primarily raised in the United States” (González, 2002, p. 216).

**Doctoral education:** The level of education where a doctoral degree is earned such as a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) or Doctor of Education (EdD). It is a terminal degree at the highest level. Typically, independent research must be conducted by the student in order to be conferred a doctoral degree.

**Ethnicity:** Despite the various definitions of ethnicity by various scholars, I used the following terms for the purposes of this study including (a) this term refers to “an identity based on a person’s nationality or tribal group. Each racial group consists of many different ethnicities” (Museus, Palmer, Davis, & Maramba, 2011, p. 7); and (b) ethnicity can be seen as “more internally claimed” versus race which is “more externally dictated” (Johnston-Guerrero, 2016, p. 45).

**Hispanic:** According to the US Census Bureau (2015) Hispanics are “those people who classified themselves in one of the specific Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino categories listed…as well as those who indicate that they are another Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin” (p. 1). Those who identify as Chicano/a, and/or Latinx can also fall into this categorization depending on preference.

**Imposter syndrome or phenomenon:** First introduced by Clance and Imes (1978) in their work with high achieving women, they originally described this phenomenon as having an “…internal experience of intellectual phonies” (p. 1). However, the definition can be further expanded to include those individuals who, despite their talents and/or
achievements feel as if they are frauds or undeserving of their talents and will be “found” out by others.

**Intersectionality:** Although there is a growing body of literature on the theoretical components of intersectionality, this dissertation conceptualizes intersectionality as the ways in which varying identities of a person, such as race, ethnicity, and gender, and the systems of oppression connected to those identities are interrelated and simultaneously interact together within a person’s experience (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991).

**Latina/o/x:** This term refers to “a person from a country whose official language derives from Latin...‘Latino’ is perceived as connoting racial difference, where ‘Hispanic’ is seen as race neutral” (González & Gándara, 2005, p. 393). The use of this term is dependent on the preference of how one prefers to be identified. Additionally, Latinx is used to be inclusive of those who do not identify within the gender binary.

**Predominantly White Institution (PWI):** I use Gusa’s (2010) interpretation of a PWI, where institutions have “…historically situated White cultural ideology embedded in the language, cultural practices, traditions, and perceptions of knowledge allow these institutions to remain racialized” (p. 465). Additionally, PWIs typically have a large percentage of White students on campus, often making up a majority of the entire student population. Due to the changing demographics of the United States, more non-White students are enrolling in higher education institutions thus changing the makeup of campuses. However, even if White students may no longer make up the majority of the student population, the White ideology remains on campus, as Gusa explains.

**Race:** Despite the various conceptualizations that exist for defining race, I use the two following definitions for the purposes of this study including: (a) race as “categorizations
that are created by humankind based on the hereditary traits of different groups of people, thereby creating socially constructed distinctions…racial identification is complicated and racial categories overlap, meaning that one person can fit into two or more of the racial categories delineated…” (Museus et al., 2011, p. 7); and (b) race as “more externally dictated” wherein people place others into categories, which can lead to discrimination (Johnston-Guerrero, 2016 p. 45).

**Women of Color (WOC):** This term refers to women who identify as American Indian or Native American, Asian or Asian American, Black or African American, Latina or Hispanic, or Biracial, Multiracial or Mixed Heritage (Turner, 2002).

**Rationale for the Study**

Although others have studied portions of this topic, such as Latina doctoral students (González, 2006; 2007) or the first year doctoral experience (Golde, 1998), the combination of these subjects needs further exploration. Latinas will constitute a large portion of the United States, but are not obtaining degrees at the same rates (NCES, 2013; Santiago et al., 2015). Additionally, the preceding sections emphasize the importance of doctoral education for the continued advancement of society. Further investigation into why Latinas may not be earning doctoral degrees at higher rates can be examined through the first year and how those experiences shape the rest of the doctoral journey or cause early departure from the program of study.

Ultimately, I seek to understand the beginning experiences of future scholars, educators, and knowledge builders. Latina women will become faculty members, businesswomen, and government leaders, amongst other critical roles in society, and will hold the influence to shape the knowledge that is currently in place. Understanding their
initial first year experience and how that affects their outlook on the doctoral process is necessary to support future Latinas coming up the pipeline.

**Purpose and Design of the Study**

The purpose of this critical narrative inquiry was to explore the first year experiences of Latina doctoral students at predominantly White institutions. Through the use of Latino Critical Theory (LatCrit) and Chicana Feminist Epistemology, I seek to understand how the intersection of race, ethnicity, and gender, as well as other salient identities, shape the experiences of Latina doctoral students during the first year. As Latinas make up such a small part of the doctoral student population, this study aimed to identify the barriers or struggles they face that can be indicative of why some may choose to not continue to this level or to depart early, as well as the support systems they have to help them be successful. Ultimately, this study showcased the experiences of Latina doctoral students from their perspectives to inform future research and practice.

**Research Questions**

To guide the study, the following research questions were examined to better understand Latina doctoral student experiences:

1) In what ways do the intersections of race, ethnicity, and gender, amongst other identities, shape Latina women’s first year doctoral experience?

2) How do Latina doctoral students navigate barriers to success, including forms of support utilized in their navigation, during the first year in a doctoral program?

3) How does the first year experience influence Latina doctoral students’ outlook and/or experiences in subsequent years?
The use of Latino Critical Theory (LatCrit) and Chicana Feminist Epistemology is most appropriate for this study as it provided a lens to examine the complexities of Latina doctoral student identities and how those varying identities challenge the status quo of graduate school and academia as a whole. “Mainstream” scholarship has showcased Latinx experiences through deficit perspectives; therefore using critical race methodologies and epistemologies restores the power of these stories back to the original holders of these experiences (Yosso, 2005). A counterstory is then born that challenges the master narratives promoted in society and honors the knowledge that People of Color hold (Delgado Bernal, 1998).

**Design of the Study**

Using a narrative inquiry approach within a Latino critical theory paradigm, I examined the first year lived experiences, or *testimonios*, of current Latina doctoral students at predominantly White institutions in the United States. The criteria for the participants were that they must (a) self-identity as Latina; (b) have finished the first year of doctoral study; (c) be no more than four years removed from their first year experience, and (d) attend a predominantly White institution. The data collected for this study included (a) a demographic survey, (b) their oral or written narratives, or *testimonios*, and (c) follow-up interviews with each participant. Each participant was asked to provide a *testimonio*, either in written or oral form, of their first year experience in their doctoral program. They were provided with prompting questions, but how much and the way they choose to showcase their narrative was ultimately up to them in order to keep the authenticity of their story.
After each testimonio was collected and reviewed, I conducted individual interviews with each participant to follow up on their written or oral testimonios and fill in any gaps that may be missing. These interviews were semi-structured in nature, where I had set questions related to their testimonio, but where the rest of the conversation was dependent on the participant (Wengraf, 2001). All oral testimonios and follow-up interviews were transcribed verbatim. The transcription of the interviews and the written testimonios were then analyzed and coded.

The data analysis process was a three-phase process, including a preliminary, collaborative, and final data analysis stage (Pérez Huber, 2012). Through simultaneous data analysis in each data collection phase, the purpose was to engage the participants in the data analysis where they discussed emerging themes during their follow-up interviews, and which also served as a member-checking strategy (Creswell & Miller, 2013). Thematic narrative analysis was used to analyze the data. A more detailed explanation of the methodology, methods, and analysis used can be found in Chapter 3.

**Significance of the Study**

This dissertation adds to the literature surrounding Latinas in higher education, the use of critical race epistemologies and methods in higher education research, and to the literature surrounding students in graduate study, specifically the first year experience. The use of Latino Critical Theory and a critical race epistemology, Chicana Feminist Epistemology, provided an avenue to explore how race, ethnicity, gender, and other marginalized identities of Latina doctoral students impacted their first year of doctoral study at predominantly White institutions where there may be a small amount of Latinx students, staff, and faculty.
Aside from understanding the specific experiences of Latina students, this study begins a needed discussion on the first year experience of doctoral students. The amount of research on the first year experience for undergraduate students is extensive (Hernandez, 2002; Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 1993; Tinto & Goodsell, 1994; Torres, 2004), all of which has resulted in the creation of various programs and initiatives for the first year experience at college and universities. This same type of urgency is not available for graduate students. As such, this study adds to the literature surrounding Women of Color/Latinas in doctoral studies, and most specifically, their first year experience.

In addition to contributing to the literature, the study informs various stakeholders on the first year experiences of Latina doctoral students. The findings of this study supply key information when thinking of innovative initiatives and programs to help recruit and retain Latina graduate students. In addition, it provides context to the needs and barriers these women face regarding the climate of graduate school and ways to make environments more inclusive. Administrators can use these findings to create programs, initiatives, and workshop that generate discussion about the needs of Students of Color, and Latina women in particular, to provide support, inclusion, and unity across campus. Ultimately, this study presents an argument for the need of first year initiatives for graduate students on campus.

For faculty, the results of this study can provide insight into the unique experiences of these women and how they can best interact, through advising, teaching, and mentoring. As Davidson and Foster-Johnson (2001) argued, Students of Color who do not have faculty who are adequate advisors and mentors and who understand their
distinctive experiences and needs "are likely at greater risk of (a) not receiving sufficient training in research and specialized content areas, (b) not completing their degree programs, and (c) not being well positioned to readily succeed in their postdoctoral careers" (p. 550). The importance of mentoring for Students of Colors in graduate school can be a determinant on the type of experience these students have in their graduate program. In order to be a good mentor or faculty advisor, knowing the issues that their students face, especially for marginalized populations, can provide for a better experience. Thomas, Willis, and Davis (2007) posited that due to lack of Faculty of Color, most minority graduate students most likely will have faculty of different racial, ethnic, and cultural identities than themselves. Regardless of the mentor or advisor, whether they be White or another Person of Color, they should be sensitive to historically underrepresented student issues, as well as being supportive and not promoting an assimilation approach to their advising and/or mentoring.

Lastly, this study is significant in that the success of Latina women is imperative for the good of society. As mentioned previously, Latina women will make about one-third of all women in the United States by the year 2060 (Santiago et al., 2015). As such, making sure that Latinas are obtaining the education they need is critical so they are able to successfully enter the workforce. For Latinas in doctoral programs, their potential to enter into high status jobs, especially in the education sector, can be the necessary change needed to make education more accessible and inclusive for other Latinx students and marginalized populations. Research has shown that having more Latinx faculty and staff can be beneficial for Latinx students and help them to persist, and many studies on Latinx students have put forth recommendations for hiring a more diverse faculty and staff.
By having more Latinxs in education there can be the potential to break the constant perpetuation of dominant knowledge and culture that reinforces the inequitable structures within the system of academia. Therefore, creating change first begins with understanding the experiences of these women as students, which helps provide a lens into why some choose to continue into academia or why some may leave the field, as evidenced by the small number of Latinas in faculty positions (Myers, 2016).

**Summary**

As the demographics of the United States continue to change and more Latinas enter higher education and the workforce, it is imperative to understand the type of knowledge they are gaining, their types of experiences, ranging from barriers to successes, and how that affects their life outcomes. Furthermore, by understanding the experiences of these women, it can assist in creating program and initiatives that encourages more Latinas to continue their education, thus creating a more educated workforce in society. By not paying attention to the educational experiences of one of the fastest-growing population in the United States and not attempting to make the educational environment a more inclusive place where more Latinxs want to participate, we are putting the country at a serious disservice.

In order to more fully explore this research, this dissertation is divided into the following five chapters, including appendices and references. Chapter 1 provided an overview of the problem, the purpose and significance of the study, a brief overview of the methodology and research design, and organization of the study. Chapter 2 examines the literature related to the first year experience of Latina doctoral students at
predominantly White institutions and the theoretical framework of Latino Critical Theory (LatCrit). Chapter 3 provides an in-depth examination of the methodology used for this study, including the research questions, paradigm and epistemological assumptions, research design, positionality statement, participants, data collection, and data analysis, as well as the study’s delimitations and limitations. Chapter 4 introduces short summaries of each of the participants and then presents the findings as related to the research questions. Finally, Chapter 5 provides a discussion connecting the findings to the framework and past literature, implications and future research, as well as concluding remarks.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this chapter is to present an overview of the related literature surrounding the topic of Latina doctoral students and their first year experience at predominantly White institutions. In order to provide context to this topic, it is essential to engage in the literature that explores the educational pathways of not just Latinas, but Latinx students as a whole. From there, it is also necessary to understand the gendered differences that exist within the Latinx population and how that may affect their educational journeys.

The following literature review consists of four main sections and their corresponding subsections: (a) an overview of pre-graduate educational experiences of Latinx students, including secondary and undergraduate education; (b) research that highlights the PhD experience, including graduate socialization and the first year experience; (c) an overview of the literature on Latina identity and their gendered educational experiences and lastly; (d) an overview of Latinx Critical Race Theory (LatCrit), the theoretical framework that will be used to guide this study.

Latinx Secondary Education

Although this study focused on Latina doctoral students, much of the literature on the pathways through higher education has focused broadly on Latinx students as whole. Therefore, beginning with the secondary school literature for Latinx students provides needed context as to why Latinx students may or may not choose to continue on
to a doctoral program. Furthermore, this broader literature on Latinx secondary education also illustrates the systemic barriers that Latina doctoral students may have already faced and overcome (e.g., subtractive schooling and discrimination) and the possible coping mechanisms utilized (e.g., familial and parental support) through their educational trajectory.

Many of the barriers that Latinx students face at the beginning of their educational journey can be traced back to a history of segregation for non-White populations. Just like their African American counterparts, Latinxs were subjected to the “separate-but-equal” policy of attending schools that were of inferior quality as opposed to White schools. Aside from race/ethnic-based separation, any student who had a Spanish-surname was placed in separate classrooms and facilities regardless of their English language ability (Contreras & Valverde, 1994; Valencia, 2005). With these policies in high prominence within the Southwest region of the United States, legal cases were filed to oppose the segregation that was taking place. One of the first legal cases of segregation occurred with Alvarez v. the Board of Trustees of the Lemon Grove School District in 1931. Aside from segregation, the school wanted to create “Americanization” schools for Mexican and Mexican American children. Essentially, these “Americanization” schools would be a way to strip the Mexican heritage and culture of the children and essentially force them to assimilate. Despite the district’s attempts, the judge ruled in favor of the plaintiffs and the Lemon Grove Case became the first successful desegregation case in the United States (Alvarez, 1986).

In 1946, an additional case, Mendez v. Westminster School District, addressed further issues of segregation in California (Valencia, 2005). Seen as one of the first
federal cases to successfully challenge segregation, the US District Court found that the rights of Mexican American students were violated under the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment (Valencia). This victory has been viewed as a catalyst and precedent for the *Brown v. Board of Education* US Supreme Court Case in 1954, which ruled segregation in public schools unconstitutional and overturned the *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling (Aguirre, 2005; Contreras & Valverde, 1994; Valencia, 2005). Despite the legal victories surrounding desegregation, issues of inequality still exist for Latinx students in secondary schools, where underrepresented students make up the majority of the school population (Santiago et al., 2015).

**Subtractive Schooling and Discrimination**

Instead of a pipeline that can smoothly carry these students through the different educational milestones, Latinx students are trapped in a “broken educational pipeline” that “devalue their cultural knowledge” from the very beginning (Maes, 2010, p. 1). Valenzuela (1999) elaborated on this notion by introducing the concept of *subtractive schooling*. She argued that this “…first involves a process of ‘de-Mexicanization,’ or subtracting students’ culture and language, which is consequential to their achievement and orientations toward school” (p. 83). This type of subtraction was witnessed at her research site, a Texas high school, in various forms, including the ways in which ESL programs were named through a deficit lens (“limited English proficient” versus “Spanish dominant”), in how students’ names were Americanized for the benefit of teachers and administrators, and the ways in which “cultural tracking” (p. 89) took form between an English only track and an ESL track. Valenzuela further argued that schools need to stop subtracting the cultural values and resources from Latinx students, which
reinforces assimilation to the dominant majority, and instead engage in authentic caring and in additive practices that help to value the cultural assets that these students bring to their schooling.

Aside from subtractive schooling, other forms of discrimination occur where Latinx students are often pigeonholed into certain tracks based on low expectations that teachers may hold of them. For instance, Latinx students are often placed into vocational tracks early in their schooling versus an advanced course track (Fernandez, 2002). This form of tracking is perilous as it demonstrates a discriminatory mindset that places Latinx students as only being able to secure certain forms of employment instead of being able to attend a post-secondary institution. Unfortunately, this form of tracking in schools has a long history stemming from the 1954 Brown ruling that desegregated schools. Since legal segregation was deemed unconstitutional, other methods, such as tracking, were created, which Mickelson (2001) termed second-generation segregation. Therefore, tracking holds a history of racism and marginalization where Students of Color were deemed less intelligent than their White counterparts, and ultimately was a tactic to cater to White parents who were leaving public schools for private education (Ferri & Connor, 2005). These experiences may explain why Latinx students may not continue with their post-secondary or post-baccalaureate education, especially if they are subjected to tracking practices where they do not receive proper support in their educational endeavors.

Further instances of discrimination for Latinxs and other Students of Color have been documented with their overrepresentation in special education courses, another offset from the Brown ruling (Ferri & Connor, 2005). Latinx students may be more
vulnerable towards being assigned to special education courses in part due to schools’ lack of knowledge on the “cultural and language differences” (Guiberson, 2009, p. 169) that Latinx students carry. Therefore, Latinx students are being diagnosed with disabilities and placed into special education courses at high rates (Artiles, Harry, Reschly, & Chinn, 2002; Ferri & Connor, 2005; Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009). For Latinx students who also are undocumented, mislabeling of their abilities is just one barrier they face in education (Gallo, Link, Allard, Wortham, & Mortimer, 2014; Valdes, 2001).

The educational system can severely fail Latinx immigrant youth in secondary education by viewing their Spanish language dominance as a deficit. Valdes’ (2001) ethnographic study illustrates these failures. Through her observations of an ESL classroom, she noticed the ways in which an ESL teacher was quick to label students as disabled or lazy, when in fact they were simply not challenged enough in the classroom or given the opportunity to fully learn the English language. Similar biases against immigrant students were seen in Gallo et al.’s (2014) ethnographic study on the types of language ideologies held by an elementary and high school located in a New Latino Diaspora, a geographic location where Latino immigrants are increasingly residing but have not traditionally had a large Latino presence. The schools, and in particular the high school, held a deficit view of bilingual students. Many of the teachers viewed English as the language that was valued or that counted, held lower expectations for bilingual students, and essentially engaged in subtractive schooling that put these students at a disadvantage and failed to use the students’ cultural knowledge as an asset in their educational journey. These types of interactions within a school setting not only hurt the students’ academic potential, but also served to further marginalize them.
Reviewing these secondary educational experiences for Latinx students helps to capture the types of obstacles and barriers Latinx students may have had to overcome prior to enrolling in higher education. However, the support systems that Latinx students have and use are essential to understand when exploring why some students reach higher levels of education versus others.

**Parental and Family Involvement**

While the experiences described in the preceding section can prove to be distressing for Latinx students, parental and familial involvement can be a key component in reducing the impact of these barriers. Unfortunately, there are still deficit perspectives held about Latinx families. For instance, one is in the assumption that non-dominant families, such as Latinx families, do not care about education (Yosso, 2005). Latinx students’ shortcomings are then blamed on cultural and familial influences instead of larger systemic issues (Baquedano López, Alexander & Hernandez, 2013; Doucet, 2011; Yosso, 2005). Despite these misguided assumptions, the importance of education becomes evident with the concept of *educación*. The Spanish word for education, *educación* is a "core cultural value among Latinos of all national origins...education is more comprehensive than its English cognate "education;" in *educación*, moral, interpersonal, and academic goals are not separated, but ultimately linked" (Durand & Perez, 2013, p. 16). Durand and Perez’s qualitative study on Latino parents of kindergarten students found that almost all of the parents emphasized the importance of their children being successful beyond academics; they aspired for their students to be successful in all aspects of their life through their child’s "good behavior," "fairness," and "compassion" (p. 61). Moreover, the Latino parents in the study were engaged in helping
their children with their schooling in more tangible ways, such as helping with homework or engaging in activities that taught their children lessons in subjects like math and reading. These results held true even for parents who had not been able to complete any type of formal education.

Parental involvement is not solely evident in earlier school grades. As Latinx students begin to think about college, parental influence becomes a significant aspect in their decision making process. Ceballo’s (2004) study on low-income Latino students attending Ivy League universities observed that Latino parents highly value education and encourage students to continue their educational pursuits from a very young age. Many of these sentiments came from the parents' inability to finish their own education. The desire for their children to do well is also seen in the way they encouraged their children’s academic pursuits. For instance, Early (2010) explored Latinx college freshmen's perceived parental influence on their writing skills and development during their pre-college years. Although many of their parents could not provide them with more technical guidance, such as grammatical feedback or essay composition, students saw their parents providing support through offering praise on written work and ensuring they had needed materials to write, such as books. Additionally, the parents also made sure to keep their children focused on their studies by keeping them away from potential bad influences. The students made it clear that they credited their parents’ support and guidance as motivation to do well in their writing as they reached their collegiate years.

However, despite the importance of encouragement and praise, many parents still do not possess all the resources to adequately help their students in their educational pursuits. Background characteristics such as parents’ English-speaking ability and social
economic status are important factors in determining the amount of direct support they can provide for their children’s education (Ceballo, 2004). Ceja’s (2006) qualitative study of 20 Chicana students also found that parents were encouraging in their children’s desire to attend college, but many were unable to directly help their children with college choices and applications due to similar limitations, such as language barriers, which prevented them from effectively gaining the information needed to help their children apply to college. Therefore, these studies indicate that Latinx parents have good intentions, but may sometimes be limited by the amount of resources at their disposal. As will be discussed in later sections, these types of limitations magnify as their children reach the highest levels of education.

Despite these barriers and challenges, Latinx students and their families have a deep desire to obtain quality education and seek out resources to help their children make it through the educational system. Parents who are not able to provide direct college information to their children find ways to connect them with others who have knowledge of or are currently attending a college or university. Perez and McDonough (2008) regarded this phenomenon as chain migration contacts, where Latinx students are more likely to apply and/or attend a college if they know someone has or is currently attending the institution. In their study, Perez and McDonough posited that parents can connect their children with extended family members or friends who are more knowledgeable on the college-going process. Comparably, Hossler, Schmit, and Vesper (1999) found that although parents are very encouraging of their children’s desire to attend college, they are less likely to participate in their child’s selection and narrowing down of college choices.
Instead, these children tend to rely on other people, such as teachers and peers, for sources of information.

**Summary of Secondary Education Literature**

The findings from the studies reviewed illustrate the inequalities that arise for Latinx students from the beginning of their schooling due to larger systemic issues that stem from a long history of racism and marginalization for People of Color. As evidenced by the literature, the false rhetoric of education being unimportant for Latinx families can lead to harmful consequences for Latinx students, such as blaming students and families for any academic failures instead of taking into account the systemic barriers that continue to exist (Yosso, 2005). Schools who do not take the cultural knowledge of students into consideration and instead view it as a deficit only leads to further marginalization for Latinx students. Understanding these types of early schooling experiences for Latinx students is critical as these occurrences may persist throughout undergraduate and graduate school. When connected to the current topic of this study, the ways in which Latina students learn how to navigate these various experiences may impact whether they enter a doctoral program and how they manage during their first year and beyond.

**Latinx Post-Secondary Education**

Reviewing the literature surrounding Latinxs and their undergraduate experience provides insight into some of the similar challenges and obstacles doctoral students may continue to face, as well as the support mechanisms they use to overcome such barriers. Understanding educational trends, discrimination in higher education, and how family continues to play a role at this level are essential topics of discussion when understanding
not only the Latinx undergraduate experience, but also how these may all continue to play a role as they continue into post-baccalaureate education.

**Latinx Educational Trends**

When looking at postsecondary education, Latinxs have increased their college enrollment from 54 to 70 percent, which is expected to continue growing based on projections towards the year 2022. Furthermore, a 71% increase occurred between the years 2004 and 2014 on the amount of Latinos who held an associate degree (Santiago et al., 2015). Despite these increases, they still have lower levels of educational attainment compared to their Asian, White, and African American counterparts (Santiago et al., 2015). Within the Latinx population, it is evident that Latina women have increased their presence at colleges and universities. Looking at college enrollment data from 2011-2012, approximately 169,000 bachelor degrees were conferred upon students self-identifying as Latinx or Hispanic, where 60 percent of those went to women (NCES, 2013). This trend is expected to continue as Latinas are 1.7 times more likely to attend a four-year college in comparison to their Latino male counterparts (Riegle-Crumb, 2010).

Various studies have attempted to gauge why Latinas are posting these type of higher rates compared to Latinos. In Riegle-Crumb’s (2010) study on White and Hispanic high school girls, she gathered some interesting distinctions on what may be propelling Latinas to obtain these higher rates of educational attainment. For instance, the author found that Hispanic females were more likely to not only have “academically-focused friends” (p. 584) but also engage more often with school counselors on college-going matters. Ultimately, Riegle-Crumb posited that social capital, or the various relationships and social networks built, as compared to their male counterparts, is higher
and can be one predictor to why Latinas have higher rates of college going and completion rates.

Similar to Riegle-Crumb’s (2010) study, Barajas and Pierce (2001) studied a mentorship program between Latino/o college students and Latinx high schools students further illustrating the gendered differences in college experiences. The authors noted the importance of Latina relationships with other Latinas in their ability to combat obstacles, such as negative stereotypes. Latinas used their relationships as a safe space and as such had a more positive outlook on their ethnic identity. As compared to the women in the study, Latino men were more likely to use groups, such as sport teams, to help them cope with barriers, which often led to conformity and made them less attached to their ethnic identity. In sum, Latinas focused more on building relationships that served as a useful strategy to protecting their ethnic identity and coping against racial injustices in their schooling.

Higher degree aspirations by Latinas may also be a factor in the widening gap between Latina and Latino degree attainment. When looking at the Latinx student population as a whole, Griffith, Cohen, and Ehrenberg’s (2015) study on first year college student’s graduate school aspirations, using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Freshmen, found that Latinx students were 9.2 percent more likely to state they wanted to attend graduate school compared to the White students in the study. Additionally, Latinx students were more likely to persist with their graduate degree aspirations, as well as gain an interest in a graduate degree if they had not previously held an interest during their first year. This trend continued into their later collegiate years, and during their senior year, Latinx students indicated they were likely to seek a graduate
degree within the next five years at higher rates than their White counterparts. When looking at differences between gender, Saenz and Ponjuan’s (2009) review of the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) freshman survey data found that Latinas report higher degree aspirations in graduate degrees compared to Latino males. They argued that “strong self-efficacy can indeed manifest itself in positive academic outcomes when such initial predispositions are nurtured correctly and consistently” (p. 72). Continuing to hold these degree aspirations may be a source of strength as Latinas enter a doctoral program. These aspirations are especially important as Latinx students often face challenges in education in the form of racism and other types of biases.

**Discrimination and Microaggressions in Post-Secondary Education**

The statistics on Latinx educational attainment at the collegiate level only showcases one part of the picture. Studies on undergraduate students have found that Latinx students face isolation and stress and “tend to have more negative perceptions of the campus climate than white students” (Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996, p. 138). In Ortiz and Santos’ (2009) study, the authors examined the experiences of students of color, with an emphasis on race and ethnic identity, during their undergraduate years at two diverse California public institutions. The students discussed receiving racially insensitive comments and negative stereotypes from not only peers but professors as well. Barajas and Pierce (2001) found similar issues in their study on race and gender among Latinx undergraduates. Latinx students were subject to discrimination and negative stereotypes both in and outside of the classroom. While some of the Latino males in the study had difficulty expressing their feelings when faced with discrimination, the females in the study sought out other Latinas with whom they could
connect with to help overcome these obstacles, once again emphasizing the importance Latinas place on building relationships (Riegle-Crumb, 2010).

Despite rhetoric that we have entered into a post-racial society, instances of racism and other forms of discrimination continue to occur, especially within the higher education sphere (Garcia & Johnston-Guerrero, 2015; McCabe, 2009; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009). More covert forms of racism and marginalization occur, such as microaggressions, which Pierce (1995) best described as “…subtle, innocuous, preconscious or unconscious degradations, and putdowns, often kinetic but capable of being verbal and/or kinetic” (as cited in Yosso, Smith, Ceja, and Solórzano, 2009, p. 660). Examples of microaggressions for Latinx students can include compliments for speaking proper English, expecting a Latinx student to speak on all Latinx related issues in the classroom, or a professor acting surprised when a Latinx student does well academically. Yosso et al. (2009) further categorized microaggressions into three main types: interpersonal microaggressions, racial jokes, and institutional microaggressions. The interpersonal microaggressions, both verbal and non-verbal, experienced by the students in their study came from not only other students, but also faculty and staff, and often left them feeling as if they did not belong or as if they were not as intelligent as their peers. Racial jokes were also common forms of microaggressions that Latinx students endured, which often left them struggling between speaking up and educating their peers or by simply not responding (Yosso et al., 2009).

Unfortunately, what an institution does or does not do further contributes to the marginalization of Latinx students. Yosso et al.’s (2009) description of institutional microaggressions includes anything that an institution does that further “endorse a
campus racial climate hostile to People of Color” (p. 673). For instance, one student described the lack of staff dedicated to Latinx students, compared to other institutions, as one way of indicating the institution did not care for their unique needs. Regardless of the type of microaggressions endured, the Latinx students in the study felt a lesser sense of belonging and held a more negative view of the campus climate.

Microaggressions or other forms of discrimination can severely impact Latinx students’ success. Latinx students experience alienation, isolation, and high levels of stress when having to constantly endure these forms of discriminatory incidents (Minikel-Lacocque, 2013; Yosso et al., 2009). Some examples of current discriminatory practices pervasive on college campuses include racially themed parties, racial and biased social media posts, and other forms of discriminatory speech and actions on campus (Garcia & Johnston-Guerrero, 2015; Garcia, Johnston, Garibay, Herrera, Giraldo, 2011; Museus, Ledesma, & Parker, 2015). As important is when and how (if at all) institutions respond to these racial and bias incidents on campus. These constant forms of discrimination can lead to racial battle fatigue (RBF), or "...how racial microaggressions impact the psychological, physiological, and behavioral stress responses of people of color" (Franklin, Smith, and Hung, 2014, p. 304). Franklin et al.’s (2014) quantitative study on RBF in Latinx students indicated that racial microaggressions negatively impact Latinx students’ health when it came to psychological and behavioral stress. Some of the students reported health problems such as eating less, body pains, and sleeping less, all of which negatively affects Latinx students’ academic performance and can contribute to a student not persisting on to higher levels of education, such as a doctorate.
The preceding section on microaggressions illustrates just one type of discrimination that occurs at the undergraduate level, which may be further amplified at the doctoral level where the amount of Latinx students are fewer and where interaction with students and faculty increases. However, for students who reach the doctoral level overcoming these types of discrimination in their previous educational experiences may have resulted in establishing coping mechanisms that may also be used in their doctoral programs.

**Familismo and Parental Involvement**

Seeking out support from peers with similar backgrounds is imbedded in the need to develop meaningful relationships and create a familial-like atmosphere. Ortiz and Santos’ (2009) study on college ethnic identity development for African American, Asian American, Latinx, and White students, identified the importance of culture and heritage for Latinx students as many of the participants spoke of the significance that their family played in providing strength and support during their undergraduate journey. This cultural value of family, defined as *familismo*, 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). Rudolph, Chavez, Quintana, and Salinas’ (2011) quantitative study on Mexican American undergraduates found that Mexican American undergraduates supported the notion of filial responsibility, especially Mexican American females. Filial responsibility “refers to the sense of personal obligation of adult children to assist with the maintenance of aging parents’ well-being” (p. 169). For those students who want to fulfill their
familial expectation, choosing a college or university near home allows the opportunity to not only decrease costs, but also be near the family (Desmond & Turley, 2009).

For students who may attend an institution away from home, they may experience conflicting feelings of having to choose between their academics or their family, which can lead to stress, grief, guilt, and other emotional and mental wellness issues (Del Pilar, 2008; Russell & Doucette, 2012). However, for Latinx students family can also provide the motivation and force behind their higher education aspirations, or what is described as *ganas*. Easley, Bianco, and Leech (2012) posited that first-generation and immigrant Mexican American college students’ main motivation for success in higher education is *ganas* or "a deeply held desire to achieve academically fueled by parental struggle and sacrifice" (p. 169). Through the participants' autobiographies and follow-up interviews, they detailed their parents' struggles, the respect they had for their parents, and their aspirations to do well so they could give back to their families, as just some of the reasons why they were motivated to do well in school. The findings of this study indicate the importance of familial influence on Latinx student's motivations for higher education and the important role they play as a support system.

**Summary of Post-Secondary Education**

This section provided a brief overview of the experiences of Latinxs in post-secondary education. As Latinxs continue to enter post-secondary education at higher rates, it is essential to understand how issues, such as discrimination, can significantly affect their college experience and can be a determinant in whether they persist and graduate, and whether they choose to continue on to a graduate education. Furthermore, how Latinxs utilize support systems, such as family, can help to understand what works
for Latinx students. As will be discussed in the next sections, many of the issues that arise in undergraduate education continue to persist at the graduate level.

**The PhD Experience**

As described in Chapter 1, the importance of doctoral education extends beyond a private good and constitutes a public good where the creation of new and innovative knowledge can affect a variety of sectors in society including, but not limited to, the economy, preparing future teachers and faculty, and the creation of new technologies (Council of Graduate Schools, 2008). Although the number of Latinx students obtaining doctoral degrees has increased within the past ten years, they still hold one of the lowest attainment rates of all racial/ethnic groups with only 5% doctoral degrees earned in 2011-2012 (Santiago et al., 2015). Certain aspects of doctoral education, such as graduate socialization, may explain why Latinx students are not obtaining doctoral degrees at the rates of their White counterparts. Therefore, prior to delving into the literature specifically surrounding Latina students in doctoral education, it is of value to review these important aspects of graduate education that can impact students, such as graduate socialization and the first year of doctoral education.

**Graduate Socialization**

Golde (1998) described graduate socialization as the process “in which a newcomer is made a member of a community – in the case of graduate students, the community of an academic department in a particular discipline” (p. 56). Similarly, but aligning the process more towards introducing students to the profession, Weidman, Twale, and Stein (2001) described graduate socialization as:
...the processes through which individuals gain the knowledge, skills, and values necessary for successful entry into a professional career requiring an advanced level of specialized knowledge and skills. (p. 5)

Despite the differences in definitions, where Golde focuses more on the socialization for academia and Weidman et al. illustrate the socialization for the profession, it is clear that graduate student socialization consists of a process that shapes and molds graduate students to not only become part of their graduate program, but also to their discipline/field and the academy as a whole. As such, those who currently are a part of those spaces are the ones who ultimately shape newcomers through their discourse and actions. Although there are many, the following three models/frameworks are largely utilized in research on graduate students: Golde (1998), Weidman et al. (2001), and Lovitts (2001).

**Golde.** Through Golde’s (1998) qualitative study on doctoral student attrition from four different departments (2 departments in the sciences and 2 departments in the humanities), she found a unique “double socialization” (p. 56) that takes place with not only socializing a graduate student to the graduate school program or lifestyle, but also socializing the student into their future profession. She presented four different “tasks” in her graduate socialization framework including: (a) intellectual mastery; b) learning the graduate student life; c) learning the profession; and d) integration to the department. With intellectual mastery, graduate students gain the knowledge they need through coursework and other academic endeavors, such as research or lab work. The goal for this task is to gain the competence needed to be academically successful.
For the second task, learning the realities of the graduate student lifestyle, Golde (1998) argued that this is a pivotal moment when graduate students begin to question whether being a graduate student is worth it and whether they want to persist. The third task, learning about the profession, is the process of learning about their future career and what it entails. Golde stated that task 2 and task 3, when combined together, determine whether students will continue as a graduate student or choose to depart. If they do not enjoy the graduate student life and/or their profession then it can be difficult to continue in the program and be successful. Lastly, the fourth task consists of integrating into the department. The key here is how well they get along with other faculty and students, and whether the discipline/department they chose is the ideal place for them.

Although simple and straightforward, this framework of “tasks” illustrates the key components of socialization including the importance of faculty, peers, the academic workload, and the professional sphere. The following two models examined, although similar, provide more detail on the exact experiences that shape the socialization process, including the importance of faculty and peers.

Lovitts. Lovitts’ (2001) four stage model begins with stage zero, or the anticipatory stage, occurring prior to entering a doctoral program. Stage one, or the entry and adjustment stage, which is chronicled as the “first year of graduate education, the period in which the student is making the transition between outsider and insider” (p. 52). Lovitt stated that participation in events, such as orientation, can help ease the transition process by introducing students to the culture of the department and/or institution. Stage two, or the development of competence stage, is the period from the beginning of the second year until the student reaches candidacy. This stage may
encompass several years until the student is finished with coursework and officially becomes a doctoral candidate. The participants in Lovitts’ study addressed issues of picking the right advisor and planning their program pathway as important parts of this stage. Additionally, they found that completing all the requirements of the program, such as comprehensive exams, could prove to be difficult to navigate, especially if the only information they obtain comes from a graduate handbook. Finally, stage three, or the research stage, is the final step in obtaining a doctoral degree, which includes selecting, writing, and defending a dissertation. Lovitts found that the faculty participants in her study did not provide much guidance on the dissertation process to their students. As generating new knowledge in the form of independent research is the central purpose of doctoral education, not having the guidance of a faculty advisor or mentor can be detrimental to a student’s ability to get through this final step of the doctorate, as well as in the quality of the research produced.

Compared to Golde (1998), Lovitts’ (2001) model is depicted in a linear fashion and addresses each year or milestone in a doctoral student’s graduate life. However, similar to Golde, it again illustrates the importance of faculty and departmental culture in the socialization of doctoral students.

**Weidman, Twale, and Stein.** This framework by Weidman et al (2001) breaks down the socialization process into four distinct stages: anticipatory, formal, informal, and personal. The anticipatory state refers to the time before a student enters graduate education. Students may obtain most of their information about graduate school from what they have seen in the media or from their initial interactions with other students, faculty and staff. Formal, or the second stage, is the time when a student finally enters
the program and is formally introduced and socialized by faculty and other students on their new role as graduate students. Most of these interactions will be through classroom experiences and other formal structures.

The third stage, or informal stage, consists of the information students receive about the informal roles they also hold. This type of information will often come from their peer group, such as cohorts, and graduate students must learn to decipher how these informal roles fit with their formal roles. The final stage, personal, is the stage where graduate students begin forming a more professional role and receive more freedom from faculty/staff. Ideally, this would culminate in gaining recognition as a professional and a scholar.

The importance of socialization in order to keep the status quo of a discipline is best described by what Weidman et al. (2001) label as control commitment. They argued that this requires graduate students to fully commit to a new professional identity in order to keep "professional social order" (p. 20) and not deviate from the normal socialization processes that take place. Furthermore, the authors posited that sometimes faculty may be more willing to choose a similar pool of applicants in order to "maximize the intensity of socialization processes and the uniformity of graduates" (p. 20). Not only can this ideology limit the types of students that gain entrance into doctoral education, as they may be less likely to offer acceptances to “non-similar” students (Posselt, 2016), but for current students who do not fit into this model of uniformity, either due to their identities or beliefs, they may be seen as a problem for programs and/or departments who expect all students to conform. Students who choose to deviate or reject the normal socialization processes may be further marginalized or isolated.
**Diversifying socialization.** Various scholars have noted the lack of attention paid to race, ethnicity, and gender, as well as other identities, in the socialization frameworks and socialization literature (Felder, Stevenson, & Gasman, 2014; Lovitts, 2001; González, 2006). As Felder et al., (2014) stated in their case study on African American education students, most research on doctoral socialization has not adequately focused on the impact of race/ethnicity on socialization. Understanding race and ethnicity in the doctoral socialization process is critical as it can present challenges to a successful experience in a space where there is a history of marginalization for Students or Color.

It becomes clear then that the traditional form of socialization that occurs in many graduate programs/departments does not always positively influence historically underrepresented students— in fact, it may even contribute to negative side effects such as marginalization, isolation, and even departure from the program (Gardner, 2008; González, 2006). For Latina doctoral students, how they experience the socialization process may be a good indicator of how they experience their doctoral journey as whole. Additionally, much of the socialization that students experience occurs during the first year when they are introduced to the formal and informal expectations, as well as meet and interact with those who influence this socialization (Golde, 1998; Lovitts, 2001; Weidman et al., 2001). Therefore, the first year in a doctoral program can set the stage for their doctoral experience.

**First Year Doctoral Experience**

Research on the first year experience of college undergraduates is widely available, and established the importance of the first year and ways faculty and administrators can improve their campus to better retain first year students, such as with
freshmen interest groups and freshmen seminars (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 1993; Tinto & Goodsell, 1994). Additionally, various studies on the first year experience have centered on underrepresented students, including Latinx students (Hernandez, 2002; Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996; Torres, 2004). The impact of this research is seen on colleges and universities across the nation where first year programming is extensive to make sure that first year undergraduates are able to have a successful transition from high school to college. Various institutions even have offices and departments dedicated solely to first year initiatives.

The first year of a graduate program, and in particular a doctoral program, can be just as much of a difficult transition as going from high school to college, yet has not received the same amount of empirical attention. Schlossberg’s (1981) transition theory validates the importance of transitions in people’s lives. She illustrates how one’s situation, self, support, and strategies (the 4 S’s) can determine how a person will cope through the transition depending on the amount of resources in each of these areas (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2009). Therefore, a transition such as entering a doctoral program can be a tumultuous time for some students depending on what resources they have in their possession. There are various blogs and student posts that talk about and give advice for first year doctoral students, including one published in The Chronicle of Higher Education (Vick & Furlong, 2013). Despite the clear need for discussion on this topic, few studies have looked specifically at the first year experience of doctoral students. Various scholars have, however, examined the ways in which students adjust to their graduate school environment, specifically in the graduate socialization process, which was discussed earlier. The framework and literature
surrounding graduate socialization captures some of the key issues that doctoral students experience during their doctoral journey, and in particular, how these impact the first year.

The importance of examining the first year of graduate study can be linked to retention and attrition. Golde’s (1998) study on doctoral student attrition found a variety of reasons for why doctoral students leave their programs, including not wanting to live the graduate lifestyle, not getting along with their advisor, and realizing the department was not a good fit for them. Golde argues that the first year “is an important window into how things can go wrong for students” (p. 55). In a follow-up study by Golde (2005) that looked more specifically at the departmental role in attrition, she found that much of the attrition that occurred was due to a mismatch between the student and the discipline chosen, a mismatch between the student and the specific program at the institution, or a mismatch in future career and professional goals. Many of these realizations occurred early on in the doctoral program. Despite the important results from both of these studies, neither provides backgrounds of the participants aside from gender. Therefore, it is unknown how their personal backgrounds and identities, such as sex and/or race/ethnicity, may have also contributed to their decision to leave their doctoral program.

A study by Hughes and Kleist (2005) examined the first-semester experiences of counselor education doctoral students. The first semester doctoral students in their study went through three major phases, which included vicissitude, integration, and confirmation. In the first phase, the participants felt a lot of ambiguity, uncertainty, and self-doubt with their new status as a doctoral student. As they progressed throughout the
semester, they began to integrate within their program and connect with other doctoral students and faculty. Through these interactions and experiences, they ultimately began to feel confirmation near the end of the semester through feedback from their classes and through their own self-assurance. The results from this study indicate the variety of emotions that can occur during the first year, and in this case first semester, of doctoral study. Although informative, the study only looked at doctoral students from one specific program. Furthermore, the backgrounds and identities of the students were not listed. Those with historically marginalized identities, such as Latina students, may not have the same ease in making connections with other students and faculty in order to gain that sense of integration and confirmation to stay in their doctoral program.

**Latinx Doctoral Experiences**

Literature surrounding Latinas in graduate education has found that issues with school/life balance, self-doubt, and racism persist (Espino, Munoz, & Kiyama, 2010; Espino, 2014; Gonzalez, 2006; Gonzalez, 2007). Oftentimes this stems from the way that departmental culture may only see certain types of capital as "legitimate," which only marginalizes Latinx doctoral students and their experiences. Therefore, utilizing certain frameworks such as funds of knowledge, (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) and community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) provide a more asset-based lens to understanding the forms of capital that Latinx students bring to their higher education experiences. Funds of knowledge focuses on the types of knowledge that students learn in their household and how these experiences can positively influence their academic development (Moll et al., 1992). Yosso’s (2005) community cultural wealth model recognizes the unique capitals that People of Color bring and includes six forms:
aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant. These forms of capital can help Latinx succeed in navigating through the structural and systemic barriers that are present in higher education at all levels of education.

The academy can be a difficult landscape for graduate students to maneuver. Unfortunately, the culture of academia is often laden with White, male, heteronormative standards that may clash with different racial and ethnic cultures or for those who hold multiple marginalized identities, such as Latina graduate students (Gardner, 2008). This may lead to instances of racial and other forms of biases for Students of Color (Truong & Museus, 2012). Sometimes, this bias may not always affect them directly, but what they witness in their environments. Aside from experienced racism and discrimination first-hand, doctoral Student of Color can also feel the effects of vicarious racism, or second-hand racism, where "...a person's indirect experiences with racism, resulting from racism targeted directly at one or more other persons in their environment" (Truong, Museus, McGuire, 2015 p. 225). Truong et al.'s study explored the experiences of 22 doctoral Students of Color and found the participants experienced two types of second hand racism - observed and trickledown- and coped in two ways --normalization of racism and racial resistance. The observed racism that the participants saw or heard occurring with their peers or faculty caused negative reactions. Trickledown racism often resulted in negative outcomes where some of the participant’s Faculty of Color would leave the program and thus leave the student alone. The ways some of the participants understood and coped with vicarious racism was by understanding that their experiences were not just singular, but part of a bigger and pervasive problem in graduate programs, or what the authors term as normalization of racism. Other participants unified with other People
of Color to fight back against the actions that were occurring, or what was termed as racial resistance. Unfortunately, the authors found that those who used support groups to cope with these types of biases were often targets of direct racism as a consequence.

This type of environment may be unwelcoming for Students of Color and may result in self-doubt and questioning of their abilities, as they may often be one of the few Students of Color in the classroom or in a whole graduate program. First introduced by Clance and Imes (1978), when conducting a study on high achieving women, imposter syndrome is a phenomenon where students feel they are undeserving of their achievements. Internalizing these feelings may cause them to draw a conclusion that they do not belong in the academy or in their program.

For instance, in González, Marin, Figueroa, Moreno, and Navia’s (2002) autoethnographic study, the authors reflected on their own Latinx doctoral experiences. Similar to Clance’s and Imes (1978) concept of the imposter syndrome phenomenon, the authors also spoke of the doubts and apprehension of being in a doctoral program. Most of these feelings were due to isolation and tokenization, as they were often one of the few or only Latinx students in their program. They coined the term cultural ambassador to illustrate the ways in which Latinx students deal with oppression in the classroom, where faculty and peers may call upon them to speak for their race/ethnicity, as well as constantly be called upon to fulfill duties related to multicultural issues, such as recruitment and mentoring.

A key study by Espino (2014) on Mexican-American PhD holders utilizing a community cultural wealth framework found that these students experienced microaggressions from faculty and other students in the program, oftentimes because they
did not truly value the unique forms of capital they brought to the program. Instead the department just focused on the "privileged" and valued cultural capital, or the forms of knowledge and other symbolic elements that reproduce the status quo in society (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). It is important to note that often times marginalized people are more cognizant of the types of knowledge, capital, or actions that are valued as opposed to their White peers. Espino stated that her "...participants had to be observant of what was valued, which is not necessarily experienced by white and affluent graduate students, who are most likely to unconsciously be rewarded with privileged knowledge" (p. 569).

As evidenced by some of the participants, Latinx students sometimes carried the negative experiences and feelings from prior educational experiences, such as secondary and undergraduate education, to their PhD programs which contributed to additional self-doubt (Espino, 2014). However, many of the students were able to cope and navigate their doctoral program by finding resources, whether it be funding or peer/faculty support, outside of their departments and/or institutions. They used different forms of capital, such as aspirational and navigational, to assist them in completing their doctoral program despite the various obstacles and barriers faced (Yosso, 2005).

Ramirez (2016) further presented data on the experiences of Chicano/Latinos doctoral socialization. In her qualitative study, the findings indicated that many Latinx students felt differences in treatment based on race, ethnicity, and/or class, compared to their White counterparts, especially when it came to opportunities available, such as in fellowships or professional development. Furthermore, Ramirez's findings also indicated the importance of peer support as a form of social capital, where they could receive
advice throughout various doctoral milestones. When examining other types of support, those who were unable to find faculty mentors at their institutions engaged in “network shuffling” (Zambrana, Ray, Espino, Castro, Cohen, & Eliason, 2015), or finding faculty at other institutions to fill these positions.

The literature on Latinx students in doctoral programs illustrates just some of the experiences that occur within academia. However, gender differences are necessary to address in order to best understand how Latinas experience their doctoral programs.

**Latina doctoral students.** When looking specifically at Latinas in graduate education, some express the challenge between juggling family and academic expectations (Espinoza, 2010). However, familial responsibilities and dissonance between their ethnic culture and the culture of academia is just one challenge that Latina graduate students face. González’s (2006) qualitative study examined the experiences of Latina doctoral students who had been in their graduate programs for three or more years and the ways in which their graduate socialization into the academy was perceived. Through the use of production theory, González (2006) found that Latina doctoral students had positive experiences with socialization when their departments and institutions supported them in professional and financial ways, such as providing them with assistantships or with professional development. Unfortunately, negative socialization experiences occurred when Latina students felt culturally isolated, lacked mentorship in their department, felt discriminated against, and did not obtain institutional support. The women in the study resisted academic socialization, which González saw as leading to either finding or losing their voice. For those who
…found their voice, the intellectual rejuvenation made them want to remain in academia past their doctorates to make change and serve their people...Latinas who lost their voice mentioned not having avenues to express their concerns, and this led to marginalization and isolation. (pp. 360-361)

González’s study demonstrates the ways in which Latinas can be motivated or disillusioned by the culture of academia and the effect it has on their personal and academic well-being.

Despite these negative challenges, Latina graduate students remain resilient in the face of adversity. González’s (2007) qualitative study explored twelve current Latina faculty members’ reflection on their doctoral experiences. As previous studies have demonstrated, these women also dealt with isolation and oppressive behavior from faculty and peers. However, they found ways to cope and succeed in the face of this adversity through finding supportive mentors outside of their own fields, finding solace in their sense of purpose, and ultimately using their experiences to help future doctoral students in their current roles. The importance of finding supportive peers, mentors, and building an informal social network has been found as a key in helping students of color persist through graduate school (Aryan & Guzman, 2010; Patton & Harper, 2003).

Finding supportive faculty advisors and/or mentors can play a significant role in Latinas’ doctoral journey. For instance, in Garcia and Henderson's (2015) study on the mentoring experiences of Latina graduate students, the authors found that some of the participants were unable to find mentors in their graduate programs like they had in previous educational experiences. A lack of mentorship left them feeling isolated and stressed for not having that support during their graduate program. When discussing
what they hoped for in a mentor, they desired a Latina/o mentor because they would be a "cultural insider," (p. 99) or someone who could guide them while keeping in mind their cultural background. However, some of the participants did indicate previous mentoring relationships that were cross-cultural and the significance of those relationships. Most important to them was someone who was culturally competent.

Although faculty who share similar identities to their students, such as Latina faculty, can serve in being helpful advisors and mentors, they themselves also experience various obstacles when they reach the professoriate.

**Latina faculty.** Latinas navigating their intersectional identities in higher education is not exclusive to secondary and postsecondary education. For Latinas who move into faculty positions, they also express instances of bias and discrimination, and similar to their Latina doctoral student counterparts, also convey feelings of self-doubt despite their academic positions (Saldana, Castro-Villarreal, & Sosa, 2013). Witnessing the types of barriers that continue to persist even for Latina faculty members may compel current Latina doctoral students to not pursue a faculty position. Thus, reviewing the experiences of Latina faculty is useful for understanding how they cope through these moments.

In reflecting on their educational journey now as faculty members, Espino et al.’s (2010) autoethnographic study chronicled the challenges she and other Latina faculty members experienced in academia as assistant professors from juggling their academic and personal responsibilities. These challenges are further exacerbated with their own fears and trepidations of feeling as if they do not belong in the academy. For other faculty members, the intersectionality of their identities makes them a target for
discrimination in the workplace. Garcia's (2005) study on Latina professors explored the microaggressions that many Latina faculty members experienced, which not only took a toll on their psychological well-being, but which also turned into physical problems as well. As evidenced by the literature, Latinas undergo a variety of challenges and oppression through the different sectors of the educational pipeline from students to faculty members. However, González’s (2007) study, referenced in the previous section, indicates that Latinas use a variety of coping mechanisms to help them not only traverse through the doctoral experience, but ultimately continue on in the academy.

Summary of the PhD Experience

The previous section explored the different facets of the doctoral experience ranging from the socialization process that occurs in graduate education, and how that affects different aspects, including the first year experience. Additionally, prior studies indicate the ways that Latinxs navigate the doctoral experience, which is often laden with injustices by not only faculty and peers, but by the nature of academia as a whole. Continuing to learn about Latina students’ experience, through the use of their own testimonio, can better equip educators and departments on how to best support these women. In addition, however, further exploring the unique gendered experiences of Latinas is also essential when examining how this may affect their doctoral program.

Latina Identity and Gendered Educational Experiences

Chicana feminist thinkers, such as Gloria Anzaldúa (1987), have explored the complexity of Latinas’ lived experiences. Anzaldúa best explains the conflicts that arise for Latinas in her seminal book, Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza. She described the borderlands as the constant straddling between two cultures, one which is
their ethnic home culture and the other, the American or White culture, which is permeated within the walls of higher education and academia. This constant straddling between cultures creates tension and dissonance that elicits feelings of not fully belonging to either side. The intersectional aspect of Latinas’ identities creates further strain when it relates to gendered experiences. Anzaldúa posits that the expectation for Latinas to uphold certain rules or roles may lead to inner turmoil and a sense of guilt when they do not uphold these expectations associated with their culture.

In order to cope with this borderlands state of mind, Anzaldúa (1987) introduced the new mestiza identity or consciousness, which she identified as

…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 mode… Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else. (p. 101)

Through this new mestiza identity, Latinas decipher the borderlands battle that takes place subconsciously and are cognizant of “…breaking down of paradigms, [which] depends on the straddling of two or more cultures” (p. 102). Through this mechanism, Latinas can traverse through difficult spaces, such as the educational system.

When connecting how these identities and ideals emerge in the educational experiences of Latinas, Anzaldúa (1987) argued that selfishness is often condemned as not in line with the values of the culture. Taking into consideration various points of dissonance, such as being away from family in order to pursue a degree for one’s own
personal gain, it is clear how some of the cultural values can be contradicted when entering higher education, especially at the graduate level.

Often overlooked, Anzaldúa’s (1987) work also included other theoretical perspectives, such as nepantla, or a state of in-betweenness (Keating, 2006). The concept of nepantla or to be nepantleras, is described as:

Nepantleras are threshold people: they move within and among multiple, often conflicting, worlds and refuse to align themselves exclusively with any single individual, group, or belief system. This refusal is not easy: nepantleras must be willing to open themselves to personal risks and potential woundings which include, but are not limited to, self-division, isolation, misunderstanding, rejection, and accusation of disloyalty. (Keating, 2006, p. 6)

Through this painful process, nepantla can lead to self-awareness, growth, and even liberation, where nepantleras can break free from restrictive roles placed upon them (Keating, 2005). For Latinas in doctoral programs, nepantla can occur as they move within the world of academia and their own cultural or home background, thus being placed in this in-between pace. As described above, entering this space can be painful, but can lead to greater empowerment, which, for Latina doctoral students, can be a push to persistence in their doctoral journeys.

**Gendered Pathways Towards Higher Education**

*Familismo* is not a one-size-fits-all model for all Latinxs. As Ovink (2014) posited, familismo can best be explained as gendered familismo, where familial role expectations and beliefs may differ between men and women. Scholars have posited how gendered familismo impacts the college pathways of Latinas and Latinos. For instance,
Ovink stated that "...though Latino respondents expressed a sense of automatic autonomy, Latinas saw a college degree as necessary for earned independence" (p. 5). Additionally, Saenz and Ponjuan (2009) found that Latino males' often have the expectation of earning money in order to provide for the family. For Latinas, however, they feel pressure to take on a caretaker role and look after younger and elderly relatives (Ovink, 2014). Rudolph et al. (2011) argued that these varied outlooks may be attributed to concept of marianismo where Latinas are placed in a “good daughter” role and “…may be especially prone to interrupt or terminate their higher education when an elder parent needs care” (p. 178) as marianismo calls for “selfless devotion to family” (Espinoza, 2010). This can prove to be difficult when obtaining higher education. These gendered differences also emerge in how Latinx students view familismo with Latinos looking towards their future family versus Latinas taking care of their present family (Ovink, 2014).

The balance between obtaining a higher education and fulfilling the expectations set by the family can vary among Latinas. Santamaria Graff, McCain, Gomez-Vilchis’ (2013) qualitative study on undergraduate Latinas with seasonal farm work backgrounds found that choosing a different path compared to their families oftentimes was met with resistance as some of their family members did not see the long-term value of having a college education versus the short-term value of obtaining a job and earning income. Overall, the participants faced dissonance with not only being a good student, but also living up to the expectations of a Latina woman set forth by their family. Understanding the unique gendered experiences of Latinas is essential when exploring how these identity influences continue on to higher levels of education.
As explored in an earlier section on the experiences of Latinas in doctoral education, they often face a myriad of challenges due to the culture of academia and processes, such as socialization. Beyond that, however, Latinas also deal with non-academic influences that can affect the way they approach and navigate their doctoral journey. Espinoza’s (2010) study on 15 Latina doctoral students illustrated this importance with what they term "the good daughter dilemma," whereas Latinas may feel conflict between cultural expectations and values and pursuing a higher education. As described in earlier sections, the concept of familismo instills strong familial ties and loyalty within the community. For women, in particular, marianismo promotes certain expectations of taking care of the family above all else, including sacrificing one’s own needs. Espinoza found that the women in her study fit into two different groups in regards to how they navigated academics and family during their doctoral program.

The first group, which she entitled the integrators, purposely attempted to include their families into their academic world by letting them know what graduate school entailed and their responsibilities, and being clear that it sometimes meant having to prioritize academics over family during stressful times, such as candidacy or finals. By being open and honest about their responsibilities, the families were better able to understand why they sometimes could not fulfill their familial obligations. Additionally, their families also provided them with support during tough academic times. For the other group of women, entitled the separators, they differed by intentionally separating academics and family. Espinoza (2010) posited that separation was used to "minimize tension and conflict" and "protect their relationships with family members" (p. 323). Through this method, the women made sure to keep their "good daughter" and "good
student” (p. 327) identities separate. Similar to Anzaldúa’s (1987) argument, the Latina doctoral students in the study constantly juggled between two cultures and a *mestiza* identity served as a coping mechanism for them when trying to balance school, family, and negotiating between two different cultures.

Despite the importance of Espinoza’s (2010) study highlighted above, she notes that all of the women in the study identified themselves as having "strong *familismo* orientation" (p. 322). The various narratives in Castellanos, Gloria, and Kamimura’s book (2006) illustrate the vast array of experiences for Latinx doctoral students, as well as varying levels of *familismo* orientation they may hold. Therefore, *familismo* should not be considered a defining characteristic for all Latina graduate students as some may not feel these same type of tensions.

**Summary of Latina Identity and Gendered Educational Experiences**

The prior section has reviewed how Latina gender identity plays a role in the educational experiences, particular at the graduate level, of these women. Anzaldúa (1987) provides an overview of the complexity of Latina women and the multiple roles within their culture and in society as whole. Constant juggling between two cultures becomes more pronounced for some Latinas as they enter the educational pipeline, which leads some to enter *nepantla* during their doctoral experience.

**Theoretical Perspective**

The purpose of this study was to examine the first year experiences of Latina doctoral students at predominantly White institutions. In order to truly capture these experiences and to take into consideration the various identities that shape these women’s lives, I incorporated a Latino Critical Perspective (LatCrit) with a Chicana Feminist
Epistemology (further explained in Chapter 3). Utilizing this perspective allowed for the recognition of the participants’ multiple identities and how that affects their doctoral experience. Before explaining in Chapter 3 how LatCrit influenced by research design, it is necessary to understand the historical background of LatCrit and how it has been used in educational research.

The importance of critical race theories (CRT) is in not only recognizing the inequalities that People of Color are subjected to in society, but also as a tool to promote social justice and activism towards the elimination of these injustices (Tate, 1997). In particular, utilizing these frameworks in education provides a lens to examine the inequalities and marginalization that students of oppressed identities face during their educational journey from K-12 until graduate and professional school. Villalpando (2004) stated that “while legally sanctioned racial discrimination may no longer exist overtly in American higher education, CRT and LatCrit helps us recognize patterns, practices, and policies of racial inequality that continue to exist in more insidious and covert ways” (p. 42). Understanding that racism and other forms of inequalities are often hidden and systemic in nature is important when analyzing the educational experiences of marginalized populations.

Before discussing Latino Critical Theory, the theoretical perspective used for this study, I provide necessary discussion of its foundation in Critical Race Theory.

Critical Race Theory

With its origins based in law, legal scholars such as Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman, and Richard Delgado, among others, helped to create a new theoretical perspective, Critical Race Theory (CRT), in order to explore how various policies and laws contribute
to the continued marginalization and oppression of People of Color. Specifically, they included the ways in which race and racism contributed to these oppressive structures, as well as placing an emphasis on the voices of marginalized populations and their lived experiences, something that Critical Legal Scholarship (CLS) failed to include (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Delgado Bernal, 2002).

Solórzano and Yosso (2002) described critical race theory as a framework that “advances strategy to foreground and account for the role of race and racism…and works toward the elimination of racism as part of a larger goal of opposing or eliminating other forms of subordination…” (p. 119). In order to disrupt these forms of oppression and subordination and move towards the elimination of the oppressive forces in society, CRT consists of five central tenets. As McCoy and Rodricks (2015) explain, the tenets are often presented differently depending on the scholar, however, the authors present them as following: “(a) the permanence of racism; (b) experiential knowledge (and counterstorytelling); (c) interest convergence theory; (d) intersectionality; (e) Whiteness as property; (f) critique of liberalism; and (g) commitment to social justice” (p. 6). These tenets are then used as guiding lenses when conducting research, especially within education.

Utilizing CRT in educational research is necessary, as inequities remain in the educational system, especially when it comes to issues of race, racism, and the continuation of White dominant ideologies of knowledge (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Patton, 2015, Solózano & Yosso, 2001). The work of Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) provided the catalyst to use CRT as a theoretical perspective when engaging in scholarship related to education with their work entitled *Toward a Critical Race Theory*.
of Education. As such, other forms of critical race theories that look specifically at the unique issues of various marginalized populations have emerged.

**Latino Critical Theory (LatCrit)**

Latino Critical Theory, which began in the 1990s and a descendent of Critical Race Theory, speaks more directly to the experiences of Latinxs in the United States. While CRT looks specifically at race and racism, LatCrit also addresses other issues such as, but not limited to gender, sexuality, and ethnicity, all relevant to the Latinx community (Delgado Bernal, 2002). Furthermore, LatCrit also includes cultural elements, such as language, and important political issues, such as immigration into this perspective (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014; McCoy & Rodricks, 2015). The emphasis on these Latinx specific factors is still essential when discussing issues of racism as many of these identities and factors, such as “…questions of language, culture, and nation are inextricably intertwined with questions of race” (Espinoza & Harris, 1997 as cited by Museus, Ledesma, & Park, 2015, p. 20). LatCrit therefore provides an intersectional approach to the lived experiences of Latinxs and moves beyond the White/Black binary that is prevalent in the United States – something that further marginalizes Latinx individuals and their unique experiences (Museus et al., 2015).

As other scholars (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001) have noted, LatCrit and other critical race theories are not to be seen as competition to CRT. LatCrit simply provides a supplement to CRT by delving deeper into the types of cultural issues that Latinxs face. For women, in particular, LatCrit provides a method of analysis for the unique experiences of Latinas by understanding the gendered differences that occur in relation to all the other identities (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001).
Moreover, when Latinxs students experience forms of marginalization, it is usually not based on just their racial and ethnic identity, but through a combination of the various identities that they hold, which LatCrit takes into account (Solórzano & Villalpando, 1998; Villapando, 2004).

**LatCrit in Educational Research**

The use of LatCrit in educational research has been used in a variety of ways. Solórzano (1998) presented five themes for utilizing a CRT and LatCrit framework in education in order to “…form the basic perspectives, research methods, and pedagogy of a critical race theory in education” (p. 122). These include: (a) the centrality and intersectionality of race and racism; (b) the challenge to dominant ideology; (c) the commitment to social justice; (d) the centrality of experiential knowledge; and (e) the interdisciplinary perspective (pp. 122-123). Solórzano further argued that although these themes are not new, they do challenge the “traditional” forms of scholarship in the field.

LatCrit has been utilized as a framework in studies ranging in topics from Latinx undergraduates at predominantly White institutions (Robertson, Bravo, & Chaney, 2014), undocumented students (Pérez Huber, 2010), Chicana/o graduate students (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001), as well as Latinx faculty and staff experiences (Flores & Garcia, 2009; Oliva, Rodriguez, Alanis, Quijada Cerecer, 2013). The variety of topics illustrate how LatCrit can serve as a useful tool in analyzing the experiences of Latinxs with differing identities and at various points in time in their educational journey.

For example, Von Robertson et al.’s (2016) study on Latinx undergraduate experiences with racism at a PWI employed a LatCrit framework. The authors sought to understand the ways in which the Latinx students in their study coped with racism and
microaggressions on their campus. Through the use of LatCrit, Robertson et al. found that the students did experience various forms of racism and microaggressions, but they were also able to use various counterspaces, such as student organizations and/or relationships with faculty, to successfully traverse their undergraduate institution. Overall, the LatCrit framework provided a method of uncovering the marginalization that occurred, but also the resilience they held despite the hostile environment.

Exploring the experiences of undocumented students can also be best analyzed through a LatCrit framework, as it not only focuses on race and ethnicity, but also the intersectionality of other identities unique to undocumented students, such as language and immigration status. Pérez Huber’s (2010) on undocumented Chicana students not only combined a racist nativism framework with LatCrit, but also employed testimonios for the ten women in the study. She found that many of these women experienced racist incidents, which Pérez Huber argued were due to the racist nativist perspective of undocumented citizens being perceived as a threat to the United States. Because of the intersectionality of LatCrit, the author argued that many of the discriminatory instances described by the participants were due to more than just racial and ethnic bias, but also due to their immigration status. Therefore, LatCrit can often provide a more accurate analysis of Latinx student experiences on account of its emphasis on the intersections of various identities and statuses.

LatCrit has also been beneficial when examining the experiences of graduate students. Solórzano and Yosso (2001) used a LatCrit framework for their study on Chicana/o graduate students. Through the use of counterstorytelling, the authors provided a story of two composite characters – one being a Latina graduate student, and
the other a Latina professor. The authors utilized their “cultural intuition” (Delgado Bernal, 1998) as a tool for creating their composite characters by using the data complied from interviews from the research, the literature on the topic, and their own professional and personal experience. Through the composite characters, a counterstory emerged that chronicled the various issues present in Chicana/o graduate students’ life, including self-doubt and imposter syndrome. The use of a composite story enables researchers to use a myriad of data to create these composite characters “…who can discuss these concepts and ideas within the context of their own experiences” (p. 476). Solórzano and Yosso argued that a LatCrit framework and its methodologies validate the experiential knowledge of People of Color, and in this case, the Chicano/a graduate students that informed the composite story.

Exploring the experiences of faculty and staff also lends well to using a LatCrit framework. Scholars such as Oliva et al. (2013) have utilized both CRT and LatCrit perspectives to examine their identities as Latina faculty members in a historically White space – the academy. They utilized various aspects of LatCrit, such as experiential knowledge, in order to share and create a dialogue on their experiences. In a similar fashion, Flores and Garcia (2009) drew inspiration from LatCrit and other critical frameworks to develop a safe space for Latinas at their predominantly White campus. Through the use of testimonios, Latina students, faculty, staff, and people from the community were able to discuss the various issues that affect their lives while highlighting the importance of experiential knowledge. Using LatCrit frameworks in this manner gives legitimacy to the knowledge of Latinxs, while also gaining ownership of how their stories and experiences are presented.
Summary of Latino Critical Theory

This section showcases how a Latinx critical theory (LatCrit) framework in education can take shape in a variety of ways. However, the commonality is in how Latinxs students’ experiences are viewed and analyzed. LatCrit employs the many unique qualities and identities of the Latinx experience to share stories that are often not told. This study contributes to the LatCrit literature by not only addressing the experiences of graduate students and their first year, but also by looking specifically at Latina students through this framework. Furthermore, the study does not just aim to stop at uncovering the forms of oppression that Latinas may undergo in their doctoral first year experience. As CRT and LatCrit work towards the eradication of inequalities in society, the collaborative data analysis process with the participants (further discussed in Chapter 3) not only presented an opportunity to discuss similar experiences that arise among Latina doctoral students, but also to brainstorm solutions and ideas to create a better system of support for these students so they can continue to be successful. Ultimately, the use of a LatCrit framework for this study assisted in the examination of the Latina doctoral student experience and serves to validate and legitimize the participants’ truths and perceptions of their doctoral journey.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This chapter provides an overview of the design of this study and the methodology utilized to better understand the first year experience of Latina doctoral students at predominantly White institutions. I first begin by introducing the research questions and the epistemological lens that guided this study. I then provide my own positionality statement and how that influenced my selection and work with this topic. Next, I describe the overall research design of the project, including a description of the sites, participants, data collection procedures, and data analysis. Lastly, I provide an overview of the trustworthiness of the study and its limitations.

Research Questions

The following study examined the first year experiences of Latina doctoral students at predominantly White institutions. Through the use of a Chicana Feminist epistemology (Delgado Bernal, 1998) and a Latino Critical Theory perspective (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Solórzano, 1998), I attempt to understand how the intersections of Latina women’s identities affect their first year experience in doctoral programs, and how those first year experiences then affect their outlook and/or actions in subsequent years.

My research questions are framed from a critical perspective in order to fit the focus of the study. As such, I want to understand not only how Latina doctoral students navigate their first year, but also how their intersecting identities affects this experience, and ultimately how that first year affects subsequent years in their doctoral program. Lastly, as LatCrit emphasizes the importance of experiential knowledge in order to
disrupt oppressive structures, such as the educational system, I explored how testimonios counter the master narratives of Latina women. As will be described in greater detail in future sections, master narratives are narratives created and perpetuated by dominant populations, which often portray People of Color’s experiences in a negative light (Yosso, 2005). Even those narratives seen as “positive” can still serve as a marginalization technique to deem one population more worthy or deserving than another, or even be used as a strategy to indicate racism is no longer an issue in education, such as with the model minority myth for Asian American students (Museus & Kiang, 2009). The importance of countering these master narratives is so that the experiences of People of Color can be adequately represented through their own testimonios (Solórzano & Yosso, 2000; Yosso, 2005). The following research questions were used in this study:

1) In what ways do the intersections of race, ethnicity, and gender, amongst other identities, shape Latina women’s first year doctoral experience?

2) How do Latina doctoral students navigate barriers to success, including forms of support utilized in their navigation, during the first year in a doctoral program?

3) How does the first year experience influence Latina doctoral students’ outlook and/or experiences in subsequent years?

As an introduction to the rest of the chapter, the figure below provides a graphic representation of how the chosen paradigm, theoretical perspective, methodology, and methods all work in unison with the examination of this topic. Each of these concepts will be explored in-depth in the following sections.
Paradigm and Epistemological Assumptions

As researchers, our beliefs, worldview, and what we constitute as knowledge shape what we research, how we research, and how we interpret our research. Jones, Torres, and Arminio (2014) argued, “Researchers often err in deciding upon a research question prematurely. Researchers must simultaneously consider their view about how knowledge is generated and the nature of reality” (p.11). Therefore, it was important that I explored my own worldview and beliefs when thinking about this study. When situating my research questions and research design, connecting my research paradigm and understanding my epistemological assumptions was of utmost importance.

Critical Race Epistemology

Despite its many definitions, epistemology essentially focuses on how one views knowledge and what is considered “legitimate” knowledge (Creswell, 2013; Jones et al., 2014; Yosso et al., 2006). However, many of these epistemologies that are “traditional”
in education research have been created from a dominant ideology that determines what
counts as knowledge and whose knowledge counts. Delgado Bernal (1998) further
argued that these epistemologies arose from a White, male, heterosexual, middle-to upper
class perspective – a perspective that continues to permeate academic spaces. As such,
epistemological racism (Scheurich & Young, 1997) "…arises out of the social history and
culture of the dominant race and is present in the current range of traditional research
epistemologies - positivism to postmodernism and poststructuralism" (p. 563). Many of
these epistemologies often question the legitimate knowledge of People of Color and
question the validity that their knowledge brings to research, including when People of
Color and other marginalized people choose to research experiences that closely mirror
their own.

In this regard, “mainstream” epistemologies often use a deficit perspective when
studying People of Color– especially in regards to educational attainment (Pérez Huber
2010; Yosso, 2005). For instance, Yosso argued that some who study Latinx and
educational attainment may place blame on the students and/or their collective culture
instead of looking at the systemic and structural issues barriers they face. Due to the
value of “objectivity” and positivism in research, looking only at numbers and statistics
instead of looking at the root cause of issues contributes to deficit perspectives for
marginalized communities, such as Latinx.

Delgado Bernal and Villalpando (2002) argued that

Higher education in the United States is founded on a Eurocentric epistemological
perspective based on white privilege and “American democratic” ideals of
meritocracy, objectivity, and individuality…[it] presumes that there is only one
way of knowing and understanding the world, and it is the natural way of interpreting truth, knowledge, and reality. (p. 171)

The authors further stated that an apartheid of knowledge occurs when “mainstream” scholarship or scholars use these “traditional” epistemologies and leave out the work of other scholars and faculty (often from marginalized communities), who use epistemologies that differ from what is considered the “norm.” This is then not just an exclusion of the scholarship, but also an exclusion of these scholars’ background, culture, knowledge, and experience. For graduate students who begin to learn about the research process, which includes understanding their own epistemological stance, dissonance can occur between what they know and feel about knowledge, and what is often placed in front of them as the "model" or “traditional” epistemologies in research.

Martinez (1996) described this dissonance perfectly when reflecting on her own experience during graduate school:

My academic training taught me to place their way of knowing the social world in a sphere above my own, and this effectively silenced my version of the story when it differed from theirs. When I didn't understand the theories of these eminent men, I assumed that there was something wrong with my side of the story. (p. 108)

Not only do these epistemologies cause dissonance, but as seen by Martinez, can also cause Students and Faculty of Color to feel as if their own experiences and stories are inaccurate or not valuable since it often does not match what they read in books, learn in the classroom, or hear at conferences.
Delgado Bernal and Villalpando (2002) posited that the use and value of these “mainstream” epistemologies is not just society’s value of the more positivist disciplines - such as science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM), versus social sciences and humanities, but it illustrates academia’s disregard for the value and importance of experiential knowledge and “cultural resources,” (p. 172) or the ways in which researchers dig deep into their backgrounds and cultures in order to shape, frame, and disseminate their research and knowledge. Consequently, those that stray from these forms of “mainstream” epistemologies are not valued or are not seen as legitimate (Yosso et al., 2006). Fortunately, qualitative research allows for the use of epistemologies and frameworks that push back on these “mainstream” values and knowledge, and provide a more nuanced understanding when studying marginalized communities.

In comparison to more Eurocentric epistemologies discussed above, critical race epistemologies “reflect a raced history and focus on the intersectionality of racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of subordination in recognizing the multiple knowledges of People of Color” (Yosso, Villalpando, Delgado Bernal, & Solórzano, 2001, p. 96). Critical race epistemologies allow for a different understanding of what knowledge can be and gives power to the knowledge of marginalized populations – something that is often missing from research. Indeed, these critical race epistemologies allow researchers to use a variety of sources, including one’s own life experience(s), in order to advance knowledge – all of which is legitimate. One such critical race epistemology that speaks to the experiences of Latinas and Chicanas is Chicana Feminist Epistemology.
**Chicana Feminist Epistemology**

The use of a Chicana Feminist Epistemology in educational research has provided an avenue to begin shifting the ways in which knowledge is viewed and accepted, as well as providing an epistemological stance that may be better suited for historically underserved populations, particularly for Latinas. Influenced by the writings of Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) and other Chicana Feminist thinkers and writers, Delgado Bernal (1998) put forth the use of a Chicana Feminist Epistemology that privileged the experiences and knowledge of Chicanas in education.

In Delgado Bernal’s (1998) groundbreaking article examining the use of Chicana Feminist Epistemology within educational research, she described this epistemology as being “concerned with the knowledge about Chicanas-about who generates an understanding of their experiences, and how this knowledge is legitimized or not legitimized” (p. 560). A Chicana Feminist Epistemology therefore allows researchers to use all of their ways of knowing and knowledge to engage in the research process and give justice to the experiences of People of Color. Delgado Bernal further argued that the opportunities and experiences of Chicana women are notably different than those of other women and, of course, men. Although there are critical feminist epistemologies that do address the experiences of women, as well as critical race feminist theory that address the experiences of Women of Color, these still do not adequately address the unique experiences of Chicana and Latina women (Wing, 1997). These important and unique experiences and characteristics include addressing aspects such as ethnicity, family dynamics, sexuality, geographic location, language, and immigration status (Delgado Bernal, 1998; Yosso et al., 2001).
When looking specifically at education, Chicana Feminist Epistemology allows for the unique experiences of Latinx to be shared, as well as explore how those experiences ultimately influence their educational journey. Bilingualism and immigration, for instance, are two experiences that can profoundly affect how a Latina can experience her schooling (Delgado Bernal, 1998). Only looking at one aspect for Women of Color, such as gender, completely erases the marginalization and discrimination that is experienced due to the intersection of all their other identities. It limits the knowledge we gain about these persons. Further, it limits our understanding of why and how discrimination occurs when we just put one part of their identity at the forefront.

Situated within Chicana Feminist Epistemology, and an important aspect of the epistemology, is what Delgado Bernal (1998) described as a Chicana researcher's cultural intuition. She explains how it is similar to theoretical sensitivity (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), which they defined as “…a personal quality of the researchers. It indicates an awareness of the subtleties of meaning of data” (Strauss & Corbin, p. 41). In other words, theoretical sensitivity in research is how researchers bring their ways of knowing to the research based on their previous experiences, either from personal experience or through previous research. Strauss and Corbin (1990) suggested that theoretical sensitivity comes from the following sources: (a) one's own personal experience; (b) the existing literature; (c) one's professional experience, and (d) the analytical research process. Delgado Bernal takes theoretical sensitivity one step further and posited that "these four sources contribute to Chicana researchers' cultural intuition and are the foundation of a Chicana feminist epistemology in educational research" (p. 563).
However, she claims that the main difference is that "it extends one's personal experience to include collective experience and community memory, and points to the importance of participants' engaging in the analysis of data" (pp. 564-564).

The four major sources described above contribute to cultural intuition in a variety of ways. The first source, personal experience, is where researchers can pull from their own life experiences to help situate the research and context. This can include knowing the types of interview questions to ask as well as also how to interpret and analyze the data. It can assist the researcher in understanding the ways in which a participant may explain something or even in noticing what they do not say. Furthermore, Delgado Bernal (1998) argued that these personal experiences do not have to be experienced directly by the researcher but can also be a culmination of the collective experience, such as those seen from family, and also from their own cultural heritage, and history. Historical and cultural elements, such as legends and traditions, can help to shape a person’s identity and values – all of which can be brought to the research process. The cultural intuition within research therefore can help to explain these nuances and better analyze the data by picking up on those details that may be missed by someone who does not have that specific cultural intuition.

The second source, existing literature, or the literature that already surrounds the topic that is under investigation, allows the researcher to have an idea coming into the research of the best ways to approach (or not approach) the data. Some state that knowing the existing literature may bias the analysis; however, this critique comes from the traditional positivistic notions that research be objective and neutral, and that researchers should remain distant from their participant subjects (Krefting, 1991).
Chicana Feminist Epistemology counters this notion and emphasizes the usefulness and power of cultural intuition as a positive asset (Calderón, Delgado Bernal, Pérez Huber, Malagón, & Vélez, 2012; Delgado Bernal, 1998). Similar to using existing literature, the third source, professional experience, allows researchers to pull from what they have seen in the field or workplace first hand. As an example, for educators this source can include what they see in the classroom, or for graduate students, what they encounter in their assistantships. For those who work with the populations they are researching, their professional experience can assist in knowing the types of issues participants may face better than someone who has not interacted with participants before in that capacity.

The most important component for cultural intuition is using one’s own experiences and knowledge in the fourth source, the analytical research process. Using all of a researcher’s ways of knowing can create for a more nuanced interpretation of the data. Aside from just the researcher, however, is Delgado Bernal's (1998) argument of including the participants in the research process. One aspect of Chicana Feminist Epistemology is also allowing for the cultural intuition of the participants, and not just the researcher, to become a part of the research process. Participants can get involved in the research process aside from being the “subject” by engaging in the development of research questions and even the analysis of the data. Above all, this involvement can create a space of shared vulnerability.

In Calderón et al. (2012), Pérez Huber argued that a shared vulnerability can also be a form of cultural intuition as it “…allows us to enter each other's lives in the research process and become motivated to overcome pain, trauma, or grief; it engenders a solidarity that moves toward a collective effort of healing, empowerment, and resistance”
Research is supposed to advance knowledge and should, ideally, serve as a tool to enact change, provide resources for others, and make a difference in the lives of the population researched. Unfortunately, research can be used just as a method of obtaining publications, grants, and other forms of self-gratification, especially as faculty are constantly under pressure to produce in order to obtain tenure (De Luca & Escoto, 2012). Pérez Huber’s argument above illustrates how cultural intuition can be a powerful tool for connecting with the participants and not just for the sake of building rapport, but to genuinely provide relief and support in that instance. Hence, cultural intuition as a part of Chicana Feminist Epistemology has the ability to yield change. Furthermore, the researcher is able to share their vulnerabilities, their story, and contribute to that collective healing and empowerment.

Positionality

In terms of researcher positionality, Jones et al. (2014) discussed how:

There often is, and should be, a relationship between the researcher and the researched. This reflects the passion that later becomes the research question. Critics of qualitative research often refer to this relationship as bias; however, this is a strength of qualitative inquiry. (p. 11)

Furthermore, a narrative inquiry approach also acknowledges the strength of the relationship between the researcher and the participant when engaging in story-telling (Clandidin, 2007). Utilizing a Chicana Feminist Epistemology, alongside a LatCrit perspective, opened up a variety of ways for me to make the process more meaningful for both researcher and participant.
As described earlier, Delgado Bernal’s (1998) concept of cultural intuition allows for researchers to pull from a myriad of places, including their own personal experience, to inform the research. As such, I pulled from all of these places in respect to selecting this topic, especially from my own experience as a Latina doctoral student. It is therefore important to understand my positionality, my experiences, and how those affected how I collected stories and how I interpreted them. Ultimately, this serves as my own testimonio.

This dissertation topic stems from my own identity as a Latina/Mexican-American doctoral student. Researching and reading about Latina doctoral students was a form of therapy during my first year of doctoral study. As a native Texan, I grew up in Houston with my mother, grandmother, and aunt. I moved to Austin to attend The University of Texas in Fall of 2007 where I completed my undergraduate and then master’s degrees. Although UT-Austin was a predominantly White institution, with White students making up 55.1% and Latinxs 15.6% of the student population during the Fall 2007 semester, I was able to feel connected to my roots and culture by joining Latinx organizations (Fisher, 2008).

Beginning my master’s program was an eye-opening experience. Although I stayed on the UT-Austin campus, I began experiencing the fear and doubt of my abilities as I began graduate school, something that is prevalent among historically underrepresented students (Clance & Imes, 1978). I remember how much fear I had when I began classes and how it continued during that first month. It felt as if everyone else seemed so sure of themselves and had experiences and knowledge that I did not. During a departmental gathering, I opened up to some of my classmates who also
identified as Latina and realized they felt the same way. With their support, and the support of my advisor, I found a place in my program and was able to successfully finish. The friends I made were a supportive group that made me think that I too could pursue a doctoral degree.

Choosing to pursue a PhD at another institution in a different state was a huge decision. I thought that my experiences during the master’s program would make my transition into a PhD easy. However, those feelings of inadequacy and fear I had felt during the first month of my master’s program came back in full force. Much of it was due to moving to a different state and attending another predominantly White university where the Latinx population was less than 4%. At the time I began my program, I was the only Latina doctoral student in the program and felt pressure to do well so I would not be seen as less adequate than everyone else.

Aside from making a significant transition into a doctoral program, I also had to make a huge transition in moving to a different state where I knew nobody. Although I had been able to quickly get through the transition of entering a graduate program during my master’s, it was much different now. I began suffering from anxiety so severe to the point that I almost left my program mid-way through the first semester. I also felt a lot of guilt for not being near my family or supporting them when I knew they were going through tough times. I missed my family, fiancé, and friends, as well as lots of elements from my culture that I could not find in Columbus, OH.

Furthermore, I felt that some of the messages I received during my first semester went against what I wanted for my own life and career. For instance, during my Proseminar class, we were visited by various faculty from the department. During one
class session, a professor within the department revealed that what made them successful was cutting off family and friends during the dissertation phase. I do not believe the professor was aware of the message they were sending to a group of first year doctoral students. Looking back, I knew that was an informal doctoral socialization message (Wiedman et al., 2001) that, luckily, I chose to ignore. It instead fueled me to move through this program on my own terms without ever feeling pressured to give up some aspect of myself just to fit in to the culture of the department, discipline, and academia.

I was fortunate that I had a supportive advisor who helped me get through that first semester and a support system in my family and friends that encouraged me and motivated me to continue. Additionally, I was blessed with a great cohort who understood and shared their own doubts and fears of being new doctoral students. As a way of coping through the stress of the first year, I decided to do my final research paper in one course on Latina doctoral students where I found many articles written specifically about this population. Like myself, many participants spoke of the fear, inadequacy, and doubt – everything I was experiencing. During my first year, I sought out support groups for Latina graduate students and was able to find one on Facebook. This social media group was amazing as hundreds of Latina graduate students from across the country would post their stories, their struggles, and their triumphs. I realized that although Latina doctoral students were a small group, relative to the dominant groups in graduate school, these women were persevering against all odds – sometimes self-doubt, racism and sexism within departments, amongst much more. There were often stories shared of biased language in the classroom, not receiving adequate support from their advisor, or feeling as if they were the only ones going through these struggles. The number of posts
seeking out advice and resources from other Latinas was inspiring, and illustrated the need for more discussion and research on this population.

The preceding testimonio provides a small glimpse into my experience and my motivation for pursuing this topic. In line with cultural intuition (Delgado Bernal, 1998) I have pulled a lot from my own experience, from others’ experiences (based on conversations with Latina students), and from the literature surrounding this topic. I believe that all of this was a helpful tool in not only connecting with the participants, but also in the way that I approached the testimonios during the analysis phase. One additional aspect of using cultural intuition within the research is to build relationships with the participants, or what Pérez Huber describes as a shared vulnerability (Calderon et al., 2012, p. 529). I believe that this is just one more aspect that was important and needed within the study in order to further break down the barriers that Latina students face.

My personal experience and listening to those of other Latina doctoral students made me realize how little we hear about the stories of Latina students. Therefore, this research is deeply tied to my own journey, and my goal is to share the stories of these women to better understand their experiences in academia, particularly during their first year.

**Research Study Design**

As the purpose of the study was to examine the first year experiences of Latina doctoral students at PWIs, the following research questions were examined:

1) In what ways do the intersections of race, ethnicity, and gender, amongst other identities, shape Latina women’s first year doctoral experience?
2) How do Latina doctoral students navigate barriers to success, including forms of support utilized in their navigation, during the first year in a doctoral program?

3) How does the first year experience influence Latina doctoral students’ outlook and/or experiences in subsequent years?

The following section will provide an overview of the research study design, including the methodology, participant eligibility, data collection procedures, data analysis, trustworthiness, and limitations. The purpose of this section is to illustrate how my assumptions, epistemological stance, and framework helped shape the design of the study.

**LatCrit**

As discussed in the previous chapter, LatCrit was used as the theoretical perspective for this study. The use of Chicana Feminist Epistemology, coupled with narrative inquiry, pairs nicely with LatCrit, as it emphasizes promoting change and erasing the barriers that exist for Latinx. One key of LatCrit is focusing on the unique experiences of Latinx that goes beyond race and ethnicity, but also looks at other identities and cultural aspects of the Latinx experience. This therefore influenced my first research question, which explores how Latina doctoral students’ various identities shape their first year experience.

As LatCrit also focuses on the ways in which Latinx overcome barriers, this also influenced my second research question, which addresses the forms of support utilized by the Latina doctoral students in the study. Lastly, LatCrit emphasizes the need for counterstories to eradicate the master narratives of marginalized populations. Therefore, understanding the knowledge they share about the first year is important as it influences
the rest of their doctoral experience, which is the focus of the third research question. Additionally, as will be discussed in further detail in a later section, LatCrit also influenced the type of methods, in this case critical race methods in the form of testimonio, that I would use for this study.

LatCrit works in unison with the chosen paradigm, methodology, and methods for this study as they all, in some form or another, advocate the importance of stories and of enacting change for the betterment of society.

**Narrative Inquiry**

This study utilized a narrative inquiry approach. Although other types of qualitative methodology could have been used, I ultimately chose narrative inquiry due to the emphasis on storytelling. This methodology would pair well with the theoretical perspective (LatCrit) and epistemology (Chicana Feminist Epistemology) I have chosen to employ, all of which focus on how sharing one’s story can enact change. The basis of narrative inquiry rests on storytelling, as stories and narratives are a staple of society. Stories preserve cultures, histories, promote learning, and uncover the complexities of the human experience (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Narrative inquiry can take the form of a life history, biography, or autoethnography (Jones et al., 2014). Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) highlighted the power of narrative inquiry by stating that it is:

An exploration of the social, cultural and institutional narratives within which individual's experiences are constituted, shaped, expressed and enacted - but in a way that begins and ends that inquiry in the storied lives of the people involved.

Narrative inquirers study an individual's experience in the world and, through the
study, seek ways of enriching and transforming that experience for themselves and others. (p. 42)

This description by Clandinin and Rosiek illustrates how researchers can use narrative inquiry to promote change and awareness by uncovering and sharing these stories. As such, narrative inquiry is a good pairing with a theoretical perspective such as LatCrit, which has an overarching principle of pushing forward the stories of people who have been silenced or marginalized in society (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

There are three key aspects of narrative inquiry that are important to address: temporality, sociality, and place (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Jones et al., 2014). Temporality acknowledges that experiences are “situated in time” (Jones et al., 2014, p. 82) and experiences in the past and present can affect future experiences. Sociality, focuses on the relationship not only between the participant and society, but also between the participant and the researcher. Lastly, place focuses on the actual location where the events and inquiry take place (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007; Jones et al., 2014). These three aspects should be acknowledged when analyzing narratives in order to get a more complete understanding of the individual’s experience.

Mertova and Webster (2007) also described the importance of critical events for narrative inquiry. They describe these critical events as moments in stories that are at the forefront of the human experience and stay in one’s memory despite the passing of time. These critical events usually have been sources of challenge and can change “…the storyteller’s understanding or worldview” (p. 74). For researchers engaging in narrative inquiry, taking a critical events approach to the analysis can be one way of further
understanding the human experience and how these critical events shape the participants’ lives.

Due to the versatility of this research, there are other approaches to narrative inquiry depending on the purpose of the study or the preference of the researcher. For instance, researchers can take a more experienced-centered approach, where researchers focus more on the content of the story, such as the sequence of events that took place, while other researchers may be more interested in what participants choose not to disclose in comparison to other participants (Jones et al., 2014). Finally, some may choose to look at the ways people share or narrate their stories, or the “how” of the narrative process (Jones et al., 2014). These are just but a few ways that narrative researchers can approach the narratives they are told or observe. The approach one takes will be based on the purpose of the study, as well as the theoretical perspective they are utilizing. For this research, I was most interested in the experienced-centered approach, as I wanted to understand different events that took place during the participants’ first year of doctoral study.

Another aspect of narrative inquiry that is well suited for this study is the ability for the researcher to engage in the narrative process with the participants. Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) highlighted how it is important for the researcher, or narrative inquirer, to not only question their own experience but also the experiences that occur between themselves and their participants. As seen earlier in my positionality section, I am close to this topic based on my own experiences. Choosing a methodology that allowed me to embrace my positionality and use it in the research process instead of trying to completely disconnect from it was important. A relationship between a participant and
A researcher can lead to the creation of a shared space of vulnerability (Pérez Huber, 2012) where collective healing and emancipation can take place. Therefore, this component of narrative inquiry fit well within the critical race paradigm utilized for the study, including Chicana Feminist epistemology, Latino critical theory, and the method of testimonio. As will be discussed in further sections, using testimonios (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, & Carmona, 2012) is a way of sharing the stories or narratives of historically oppressed individuals, in this case Latina women.

However, narrative inquiry is not without criticism. The ethics surrounding the methodology a researcher chooses to use for their research is important and warrants discussion. For narrative inquiry, Clandinin (2006) stated, "for those of us wanting to learn to engage in narrative inquiry, we need to imagine ethics as being about negotiation, respect, mutuality and openness to multiple voices" (p. 52). It is important that researchers present the participants' stories ethically, truthfully, and authentically (described in fuller detail in later sections). As with all research, there is the possibility of misinterpreting a story and therefore misrepresenting a participant. Knowing these risks, I chose to engage in multiple steps with the data by not only having my participants first present their own narrative, or testimonio (discussed in the next section), but then engaging in a follow-up interview to make sure I accurately represented their stories by asking clarifying questions and allowing them to elaborate. This would allow me to make sure their stories are presented as authentically as possible. Further details on these methods can be found later in the data analysis and trustworthiness section. Ultimately, I wanted my participants to not just feel as if they were participants in a study, but co-constructors of knowledge as we engaged in this narrative inquiry process together.
Additionally, there is also the question of subjectivity and whether a narrative is a trustworthy enough piece of data to be used in research, especially due to the relationship between the researcher and the participant (Webster & Mertova, 2007). This criticism, however, comes from a positivistic perspective where the idea is that research should be as objective as possible in order for the data to be seen as valid or reliable. Pinnegar and Daynes (2007) described this type of approach as "bounded" where the researcher and participant maintain separation, so that the researcher's findings can be "systematic, reliable, and unbiased" (p. 10). Pinnegar and Daynes posited that the researcher must also be aware that the interaction between the two is part of the research process and both the researcher and participant will gain knowledge from the research. Despite these shifts in views, Pinnegar and Daynes acknowledged that researchers are tempted to still follow positivistic norms in order to attempt to generalize findings and be as objective as possible. However, narrative researchers must remember that instead of scientific inquiry that seeks to generalize results, narrative inquiry focuses on the human experience and the truth of that individual – it is not meant to be generalizable (Webster & Mertova, 2007).

Despite the positive aspects of this methodology, choosing narrative inquiry for this study was not enough. In order to effectively capture the narratives of my participants, I selected to analyze them through a LatCrit perspective as will be seen in the following two chapters. Before the analyzing portion took place, however, using critical race methods was also a key component in the research design of this study.
Critical Race Methods

Delgado Bernal (2002) stated that "none of the three - epistemology, methodology, and pedagogy - can be isolated from one another, as they are closely interdependent and directly influence the research process" (p. 115). Therefore in order to stay true to the epistemological and theoretical perspectives, the study employed the use of critical race methods alongside a narrative inquiry guided by a critical lens, as it can “…challenge and disrupt the master narratives or majoritarian story by relying on participants’ and their own lived experiences” (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015, p. 37).

One important feature of CRT and LatCrit is counterstories or counternarratives. The use of these methods is a way to challenge the dominant narrative and give power to the experiences of People of Color. Counterstories are “…a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 32). The need for these counterstories is in the way society views People of Color and other subordinated groups through a deficit-based lens and often rely on stock stereotypes to understand an entire community – or also known as a master narratives or majoritarian story (Yosso, 2005).

Solórzano and Yosso (2002), in describing master narratives, asserted that "the ideology of racism creates, maintains, and justifies the use of a master narratives in storytelling" (p. 27). Furthermore, these master narratives further perpetuate the myth of what should be considered “normal” and “normative” in society, which typically is the experience of White, middle-class, able-bodied, heterosexual men (Love, 2004; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).
In education in particular, many of these master narratives are used to negatively portray marginalized groups of students and blame their cultures, families, and/or backgrounds for issues such as low educational attainment (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Yosso, 2005). While Solórzano and Yosso posited that those with dominant identities promote many of these master narratives, they also acknowledge that People of Color and other marginalized populations can also perpetuate these myths. Even the term master narratives is problematic as it, in essence, continues to perpetuate the “master” in the narrative. However, for the purposes of this study, I use the term in order to help explain the importance of counterstories.

Counterstories can take shape in a variety of forms including personal narratives, narratives of others, and composite stories (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015; Museus et al., 2012; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Personal narratives can be autobiographical in nature and describe instances of oppression and marginalization. With the narratives of others, the individual shares the story of someone else who has experienced racism or oppression. Finally, a composite story can pull from a variety of sources, such as from personal and other’s stories, and literature on the topic, to present the experiences of People of Color (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015).

The importance of counterstories is that it places the experiences of People of Color as an asset, which can help break down stereotypes and fallacies of a given population. It therefore counters the deficit perspective that may be used to categorize or explain their experiences. Furthermore, it provides agency to marginalized people that are often silenced by dominant entities in society.
Solórzano and Bernal (2001) examined the ways in which agency and resistance fit within the LatCrit framework. In particular, they defined human agency as “the confidence and skills to act on one’s behalf” (p. 316), which is one aspect of resistance. Although many types of resistance theories exist, Solórzano and Bernal described transformational resistance as one where a “…a student holds some level of awareness and critique of her or his oppressive conditions and structures of domination and must be at least somewhat motivated by a sense of social justice” (p. 319). The authors argued that students who have this type of resistance have a higher likelihood for social change. As cited in Solórzano and Bernal (2001), Yosso’s (2000) work on Chicana/o students found that students with this type of transformational resistance seek to “prove others wrong” (p. 319). These students use the negativity of stereotypes towards their culture to propel them to further themselves and help other Chicana/os. Therefore, counterstories can be seen as one method of resistance for historically marginalized populations.

**Testimonios**

Situated within LatCrit is testimonio, which is one method of presenting a counterstory. With its roots in Latina American studies, testimonio has been used in the academic sphere in a variety of disciplines, including literature and education (Pérez Huber, 2012). Testimonio ultimately serves to tell the lived stories and experiences of People of Color. Although there is no one particular definition to describe testimonio, Pérez Huber (2009) argued that scholars have utilized testimonio as a way to “…document and/or theorize their own experiences of struggle, survival, and resistance, as well as that of others” (p. 644). Similarly, Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, and Carmona (2012) described testimonio as something that
…challenges objectivity by situating the individual in communion with a collective experience marked by marginalization, oppression, or resistance…[and] have resulted in new understandings about how marginalized communities build solidarity and respond to dominant culture, law, and policies that perpetuate inequity. (p. 363)

For Latinas in particular, testimonios "...avoid essentializing a Latina experience and instead, honor the various subjectivities that correspond with sexual identities, immigration status, language, and phenotype, to name a few" (Espino, Vega, Rendon, Ranero, & Muniz, 2012, p. 445). Testimonio does more that just share stories; it allows for a counterstory, as well as a way to privilege the voices of those who have historically been marginalized - such as Latinas in education (Espino et al., 2012). Furthermore, Delgado Bernal et al. (2012) posited that testimonio is a “…critical reflection of their personal experience within particular sociopolitical realities” (p. 364).

In order to demonstrate the ways that testimonio aligns within a LatCrit framework, Pérez Huber (2012) outlined the following five areas: “1) revealing injustices caused by oppression; 2) challenging dominant Eurocentric ideologies; 3) validating experiential knowledge; 4) acknowledging the power of human collectivity, and 5) commitment to racial and social justice” (pp. 380-381). Pérez Huber illustrated how testimonios can help to address each of these areas. First, individuals can describe their truth and experiences dealing with injustices and oppression, which therefore illuminates the need for social justice (addressing area 1 and 5). Furthermore, this method acknowledges the importance of using the experiential knowledge of individuals and of their communities to uncover their oppression (addressing areas 3 and 4). Finally, the use of testimonios and LatCrit
actively challenges the dominant Eurocentric ideologies by focusing on the stories and experiences of People of Color through an asset-based (rather than historically deficit-based) perspective, where and by countering the master narratives (addressing area 2).

The use of testimonios in research can take form in a variety of ways. In Pérez Huber’s (2012) study on undocumented and U.S. born Chicana students, she obtained oral testimonios from forty different women and then engaged in a collaborative data analysis process, through the use of focus groups, where the participants contributed to the final data analysis of the project. The author not only interacted with the participants when obtaining their testimonio, but the participants also engaged with each other. Therefore, the participants were involved in almost all aspects of the research project challenging dominant Eurocentric ideologies of what research should look like.

Through a different approach, Espino et al.’s (2012) study of eight emerging and senior Latina scholars in the academy shared their testimonios and engaged in a process of reflexion (reflection). This process entailed the emerging scholars sharing their testimonio with their dialogue partner, a senior scholar. The dialogue partner would then comment back with one’s own shared testimonio as well as words of wisdom and encouragement. The authors posited that reflexion occurs by (a) choosing a moment in life that has "been critical to the development of her intersectional identities" (p. 455), and (b) creating their testimonio without a guiding question alongside a dialogue partner. This way of utilizing testimonio showcases the power of sharing your most guarded thoughts and personal experiences to create solidarity amongst a given population, in this case Latina scholars.
As seen by the previous two examples, *testimonio* is one form of action that can bring forth change and break down the master narratives that are pervasive in society. It allows for marginalized populations to present their story in their own words and through the platform of their choice. *Testimonios* not only bring awareness to issues that may be typically dismissed or misrepresented, but also can bring solidarity amongst those who are facing similar situations.

Delgado Bernal et al. (2012) argued that "*testimonio* is pragmatic in that it engages the reader to understand and establish a sense of solidarity as a first step toward social change" (p. 364). For many, understanding that there are unique needs and challenges for certain populations, such as Latina doctoral students, is something they may never have considered. In order to even begin to create the social change that is necessary, the stories or *testimonios* of these women must be heard or read first to create awareness. Therefore, *testimonio* can be seen as a form of transformational resistance (Solórzano & Bernal, 2001), as a challenge to the dominant forms of methodology present in academia, and as a way to bring together those that have been subjected to the inequities of dominant power structures.

The use of *testimonios* contributes to the previous concepts that help to guide this study, including Chicana Feminist epistemology, narrative inquiry, and LatCrit. As was seen in figure 3.1, the use of these four concepts helped to provide a foundation to explore and analyze the first year experiences of Latina doctoral students at PWIs.

**Sites**

The dissertation study focused specifically on Latina doctoral students at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). Although it may be tempting to simply define
PWIs as institutions where White students make up the majority of the student population, it goes beyond this distinction. I utilized Gusa's (2010) definition of White institutional presence (WIP) when speaking of PWIs. Although many PWIs are slowly losing their White majority in some locations, it does not mean that the White privilege and ideology that permeates the academic structure dissipates. As Gusa stated, “…today's PWIs do not have to be explicitly racist to create a hostile environment. Instead, unexamined historically situated White cultural ideology embedded in the language, cultural practices, traditions, and perceptions of knowledge allow these institutions to remain racialized" (p. 465). Even those historically White institutions that have gained the distinction of a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI), or at least 25% Latinx enrollment, may still have a White institutional presence that may not fully accommodate the needs of Latinas/os (Santiago, 2006; 2013). Additionally, even if an institution has a good percentage of Latinx students at the undergraduate level, the same may not hold true at the graduate/professional level where doctoral students spend most of their time. Therefore, because the definition of a PWI can be complex, it was ultimately up to the participants as to whether they felt that their institution fit this concept of a PWI historically or at the graduate level.

A report by the National Science Foundation (2015) finds that many of the top twenty doctorate granting institutions for Latinx students between 2010-2014 were PWIs, such as The University of Florida, The University of Michigan-Ann Arbor, and Harvard University. With this in mind, I chose to delimit the scope of my study to PWIs for a few reasons. First, since the majority of doctoral granting institutions can be classified as PWIs or have been historically White, it is useful to closely look at these types of
institutions when studying students at the doctoral level. Second, previous research has
found that PWIs can be the site of a “chilly climate” for underrepresented students
(Hurtado, Carter, & Kardia, 2008). I sought to examine how this type of context affects
Latina doctoral students. Lastly, PWIs may not only lack diversity in the student
population, but in faculty and staff as well. As such, I wanted to see how a lack in
diversity with faculty and staff might impact Latina doctoral students as faculty
interaction and engagement is a critical component of a doctoral program.

I chose not to limit my recruitment site to one institution in order to learn how
different institutions may or may not impact Latina doctoral students’ experience.
Additionally, I felt that by not limiting recruitment to certain institutions, I would be able
to recruit a more diverse sample and a better understanding of the commonalities and
differences among different Latina doctoral student experience. The ten Latina doctoral
students who participated in this study came from eight unique institutions. In order to
protect the identities of the participants, as many were the only one or one of the few
Latinas in their program/department, all institutions will be given a pseudonym. Below is
a brief description of each of the institutions represented with more detailed information
on the demographics of the institution, as well as the surrounding community.
Table 3.1 Participants’ Institution Background

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Participant(s)</th>
<th>% of Latinx in City</th>
<th>% of Latinx Students on Campus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>East Coast University</td>
<td>Patty</td>
<td>11.9%</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midwestern University</td>
<td>Lilliana</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
<td>5.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northeast University</td>
<td>Courtney</td>
<td>12.3%</td>
<td>11.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northwest University</td>
<td>Karina</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
<td>11.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern University</td>
<td>Ana, La Blue,</td>
<td>35.1%</td>
<td>19.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Juliana</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southeastern University</td>
<td>Alexis</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
<td>16.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southwestern University</td>
<td>Cassandra</td>
<td>29.5%</td>
<td>21.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Coast University</td>
<td>Denise</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
<td>16.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sampling

After this study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at The Ohio State University, I recruited women, through purposeful sampling, who self-identified as Latina, finished the first year of doctoral study, and who were no more than four years removed from their first year experience from a doctoral program at a PWI in the United States. The four years removed from their first year experience requirement included those students who were still in their program, graduated, or those who chose to leave their program prior to completion. I chose to put a time frame stipulation in place for memory recollection purposes, as I wanted to obtain as much information as possible about their experience. Jones et al. (2014) explained that purposeful sampling is guided by the research design, and that this type of sampling leads to “information-rich” cases (p. 107).
Therefore, the final criteria for my participants were that they must (a) have completed the first year of doctoral study in any discipline, (b) they self-identify as Latina, (c) attend/attended a graduate institution that is predominantly White, and (d) be no more than four years removed from their first year experience. There was no criterion set for age, sexuality, religion, or any other identifier, as I want to hear the testimonios of diverse Latina doctoral students. Additionally, LatCrit acknowledges how all the intersections of our various identities matter when speaking about marginalization.

The participants were recruited through online methods including organizational and departmental listservs that I was affiliated with and through social media - specifically Facebook groups devoted to Latina graduate students [see Appendix A]. The majority of the participants found out about the study through one particular Facebook group for Latinas completing doctoral degrees. The other participants were recruited from the emails that went out to listservs at various institutions. Although the diversity of the participants is important, I did not engage in maximum variation sampling, where researchers purposefully try to recruit participants that meet certain criteria, such as a specific ethnic identity, or from a particular field of study, who have not already agreed to be in the study (Glesne, 2011). Initially, there were eleven participants, however, by the end of the study, only ten Latina doctoral students completed all three parts of the research study.

The final ten participants are all current doctoral students at different points in their program. As of the 2015-2016 academic school year, four completed their first year, four had completed their second year, one completed their third year, and one had completed their fifth year. The ages of the participants ranged from 25 through 41 years.
old. They each completed programs at eight different institutions from all parts of the country (more information on the types of institution are discussed in the previous section).

The ethnic backgrounds of the participants also varied. Two participants identified as Latina/Mexican, one as Latina/Puerto Rican, one as Latina/Hispanic, one as AfroLatina/Dominican, one as White/Latina, one as White/Hispanic, one as Mixed/Latina, one and Black/Mexican, and one as Multiracial Latina/Latin-American.

While I hoped to recruit participants who had varied backgrounds in their disciplines/field, all of the participants in this study are in the social sciences. Half of the participants are in the field of higher education, two are in counseling education, one is in ethnic studies, one in educational psychology, and one in social work. There are a few reasons why this breakdown may have occurred. According to the National Center for Educational Studies (2015), of the approximately 5,900 doctoral degrees conferred to Hispanic/Latina women in 2013-214, the top four fields/disciplines with the most degrees conferred were in the health professions and related fields (34.5 percent), legal professions and studies (34.7 percent), education (9.7 percent), and psychology (6.9 percent). In comparison, science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields comprised only 5.6 percent of all degrees conferred. Based on my recruitment materials, that may have eliminated Latinas in doctorate programs that were not PhDs, such as the legal fields or even some health professions. Therefore, the high number of education and other social science students in this study is representative of the types of programs that a majority of Latinas enroll in for their doctoral degrees.
Data Collection

The data collection for this study consisted of a demographic survey, participants’ oral or written testimonios, and a follow-up interview to discuss their testimonios and the emerging themes thus far. The participants were given a detailed description of the study including eligibility, time commitment, and information that would be gathered. When the participants expressed interest in the study, they were sent an email with further information and the link to the demographic survey, which included an online consent form that had to be signed and reviewed prior to beginning the survey [Appendix C]

The demographic survey consisted of information on their background characteristics, including but not limited to, ethnicity, age, type of graduate program, parental education, and languages spoken [Appendix D]. Additionally, I included an open-ended question so they could disclose other aspects of their identity that are of importance to them or influenced their doctoral experience. The participants were asked to complete this portion within a week after receiving the link. The purpose of the demographic survey was to learn more about the backgrounds of the participants and the unique identities they would bring to the study.

After the survey was completed, the participants were asked to testimoniar, or "to give testimony" of their papelitos guardados (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012). Delgado Bernal et al. described papelitos guardados as "previous experiences otherwise silenced or untold" (p. 364). I wanted the participants to reflect on their first year doctoral journey, which they may never have had the chance to do or have never been asked about. My hope was that that their testimonios would uncover their hidden and/or
silenced stories, including any instances of inequality or marginalization during their first year. However, I understood that not all of my participants may have instances of inequality or marginalization they experienced during the first year. Therefore, I tried to be cognizant of not portraying testimonio as simply a narrative of hardship, but also of positive moments in their life, including those that have played key roles in their success, which is the purpose of the second research question addressing systems of support. These types of positive moments helped guide me into understanding what types of strategies and support is most helpful for Latina doctoral students. As will be seen, this allowed me to address the types of recommendations that would be most useful in Chapter 5.

After the participants submitted the demographic survey, I gave the participants an approximately two-week period to complete their testimonios. I provided each participant with various testimonios as examples to illustrate the variety in form [Appendix E] including my own testimonio, which allowed them to not only have an additional example, but also to get to know me better and build rapport (Glesne, 2011; Jones et al., 2014). Aside from the above, and to provide additional guidance and information on what to write or speak about during their testimonio, I prompted them to reflect on their experiences prior to beginning their doctoral program, their perceptions and feelings about what being a doctoral student would entail before beginning the program, and their experiences during the first year – in particular highlighting any challenges or successes during this time. The prompts and questions can be found in the appendix section [Appendix E]. I emphasized that the prompts were only there to help them get started and were not required to address each question or even any at all.
The participants chose the medium of the data that they wanted to share their testimonio, whether that was written or oral. For the six participants who chose to do a written version, they sent their testimonio through email. For the four participants who chose to do an oral version, we set up a time to conduct the testimonio over the phone where it was recorded. I then transcribed verbatim these oral testimonios myself.

After the participants completed their testimonio, I scheduled a follow-up interview that would occur over the phone to discuss their testimonios [Appendix G]. These follow-up interviews took place approximately three weeks after completing their testimonios. All the follow-up interviews took between 30 – 60 minutes and were recorded and then transcribed verbatim. I chose to conduct follow-up interviews for a few reasons. First, it provided the participants an additional opportunity to add or edit their testimonio and/or address any other aspects of their story they did not share. Additionally, it gave me the opportunity to clarify any aspects of the testimonio that I did not understand in order to be as accurate as possible. The interviews were semi-structured in nature, where I prepared a list of possible topics or questions to address but I was not limited to that list in order to allow the participants to guide the conversation (Wengraf, 2001). Therefore, each participant had a set of unique questions/topics that specifically related to their testimonio [Appendix E]. Lastly, as will be discussed in the data analysis section below, these interviews were also a place where collaboration could take place in regards to the analysis of the data. Ultimately, the goal was to maintain the integrity of their shared stories. As such, these interviews were also a form of member checking (Creswell & Miller, 2013) to make sure that they were comfortable with how their story would be shared.
Data Analysis

The data analysis for this study utilized Pérez Huber’s (2012) three-phases data analysis process for *testimonios*. The data analysis consisted of preliminary, collaborative, and final data analysis stages, where data analysis occurred simultaneously through each phase of data collection. Although Pérez Huber used a critical race grounded theory approach, there are components of the analysis that were useful for my study. The overall approach to analyzing the data centered on a narrative analysis process. One model of narrative analysis is the thematic analysis, which focuses on the content of the text for purposes of finding common themes or patterns across various participants (Riessman, 2005). As I chose to examine different Latina doctoral students at various institutions, I employed a thematic analysis of the data.

In the preliminary data analysis, Pérez Huber (2012) took the oral *testimonios* of her participants and, through the lens of LatCrit, began to create themes and categories from the data that centered on issues such as race and immigration. She then pulled examples from the data for each theme to use in a “critical reflection exercise” (p. 383) in the second stage.

For this study, I also sought to analyze the data simultaneously throughout the data collection process. Glesne (2011) highlighted that analyzing data throughout the data collection process can be “more relevant and possibly more profound” (p. 188) as you will be constantly reflecting on the process and organizing the data as it comes. Therefore, as I began to receive the *testimonios* from participants, I engaged in preliminary thematic analysis process. The narratives were the *testimonios* that the participants shared with me, whether it was in written or oral form. If the participants
choose to provide an oral testimonio, it was transcribed verbatim for analysis and coding purposes. Gibbs (2007), as cited in Glesne (2011), pointed to the importance of “mak[ing] note of the events included in each story, the feelings and reactions expressed; the meanings each woman made of her story, and any explanations” (p. 186). By examining any similar patterns and themes in the types of testimonios that the participants submitted, these commonalities provided additional insight into the shared experiences of these women across a variety of institutions.

The second stage involved collaborative data analysis. During this phase Pérez Huber (2012) conducted two focus groups where the participants were asked to reflect on her preliminary analysis, which included the themes that emerged from the data. During these focus groups, the participants discussed what themes they would use and how those fit with their own experiences. The author stresses that the point was not to come to a consensus on the data, but instead have the opportunity for all involved to “see” the data from different lenses (p. 383).

For this study, I did not conduct focus groups, as the participants were located in various parts of the United States. Instead I engaged in follow-up interviews with each individual participant. Like Pérez Huber (2012), I presented each participant with some preliminary findings from the testimonios of the collective group to also engage in a critical reflection exercise. After readings a few of the emerging themes, I asked the participants to reflect on what I had read and to discuss anything that stood out to them, or if there was anything else they felt was important to speak about in regards to the topic of the study. This approach not only served as a member-checking (Creswell & Miller, 2013) device, but also as way to understand how they made meaning of the data. The
member-checking allows for the researcher to make sure that the testimonios have been accurately understood and whether the participant agrees with their portrayal. For the purposes of this dissertation, I took it a step further by also involving the participants in making meaning of the preliminary findings thus far and whether there were any additional connections, themes, or patterns they observed.

The last stage was the final data analysis. Pérez Huber (2012) used the preliminary and collaborative phase data to inform her final analysis. The critical reflection exercises she conducted during the focus group were also part of the data. She ultimately used themes to develop a final coding scheme for the entire data corpus. Finally, she used analytic codes to identify, as she describes, “...larger theoretical connections, advancing the utility of LatCrit to help make sense of these experiences” (p. 384).

This study also followed a similar pattern. First, I included the collaborative portion of the follow-up interview as part of the overall data corpus. With this and the preliminary analysis data, I, like Pérez Huber (2012), created a final coding scheme that explored similar patterns, structures, and themes in the testimonios through the use of thematic narrative analysis. Since Pérez Huber was utilizing a grounded theory approach, her analysis centered more on identifying larger theoretical connections. As discussed earlier, the purpose of the thematic analysis for this study was to find common patterns and themes among participants from varying institutions, but not attempt to propose a new theory. Through the use of Dedoose, an online qualitative software, I took the preliminary coding from the round of testimonios, and then after reviewing the follow-up interviews, conducted a second and third reading of all of the data corpus to find the
themes that reoccurred across many of the participants. This then led to the final themes that will be shared in Chapter 4.

This three-phase data analysis process was well-suited for this study as it encompassed all the aspects I wanted to include in the study from the epistemology to the theoretical perspective. Pérez Huber (2012) presented a diagram that illustrates how Chicana Feminist epistemology, LatCrit, testimonio, and the three-phase data analysis all inform each other. She states, “the figure shows how a Chicana feminist epistemological framework, and in particular cultural intuition, guides a continuous and cyclical process of bridging and building theory (LatCrit), method (testimonio), and data analysis” (p. 385). Through this process, I was able to keep the epistemological stance and theoretical perspective in all aspects of the research design and data analysis process.

**Trustworthiness**

Staying true to the research process includes putting in systems to make sure the study remains true, ethical, and valid. For this study, I wanted to ensure that my own experiences as Latina doctoral student did not entrench on the analysis of the testimonios of these women to the point where my voice or experience becomes central. That only further marginalizes the participants’ experiences. As mentioned earlier, I engaged in a form of member checking with my participants (Creswell & Miller, 2000) in the follow-up interviews that were conducted. The choices in epistemology, theoretical perspective, and methodology also encouraged me as the researcher to be in collaboration with the participants in the preliminary analysis of the research (Delgado Bernal, 1998; Pérez Huber, 2012). This type of collaboration is also seen as an additional trustworthiness
measure, which Creswell & Miller (2000) described as “…add[ing] further credibility to their narrative accounts” (p. 128).

The follow-up interview I conducted allowed the participants to add to and clarify their testimonios to make sure that their story was presented accurately. Furthermore, I provided the participants with the preliminary analysis of the research to obtain feedback, talk about the findings, and begin engaging in the final data analysis. During the discussion of preliminary themes, the participants often expanded on their experiences, or shared new experiences they had not previously stated prior. I stayed mindful of not just using the member checking as a form of validation, but also including the feedback and discussion as additional data within the research (Lather, 2003 as cited in Jones et al., 2014).

Aside from just collaborating with the participants, I also enlisted the help of my advisor to engage in peer debriefing. Creswell and Miller (2000) described a peer reviewer as someone who “…provides support, plays devil’s advocate, challenges the researchers’ assumptions, pushes the researchers to the next step methodologically, and asks hard questions about methods and interpretations” (p. 129). Through this process, I will be able to get critical feedback to help move this study forward.

Summary

In sum, the current research study sought to explore the first year experiences of Latina doctoral students at predominantly White institutions. The research questions primarily focused on how the intersection of their various identities influences their first year experience, as well as the support systems used during this time. Furthermore, I utilized testimonios in order to allow the participants the opportunity to tell their story.
Based on the focus of the study, the chosen methodology of narrative inquiry, and theoretical perspective of Latino Critical Theory, and my Chicana Feminist epistemological stance in combination was well-suited for this dissertation study. As Chicana Feminist epistemology promotes all of a researcher’s ways of knowing, it pushes for the concepts of cultural intuition (Delgado Bernal, 1998) and for “alternative” methods of scholarship that challenge the dominant knowledge of academia. A narrative inquiry approach with a critical lens is one of these methods.

Utilizing a critical framework, such as LatCrit, can assist in the uncovering of the inequalities that still exist through the educational pipeline with special attention to unique issues related to the Latinx community, such as an emphasis on ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. Through a narrative inquiry methodology with a critical lens, the usage of testimonio to elicit the narratives of these women does a number of things. Firstly, it showcased the experiences of a population that may be silenced in academia (Gonzalez, 2006, 2007). Delgado Bernal et al. (2012) posited that as the first step of social change, testimonio has the ability of "raising critical consciousness" or "conscientizacao" (p. 369). Secondly, it provided a space where a collective process can take place between the researcher and participant that privileges the participant’s voice through all facets of the study. Lastly, a narrative inquiry with a critical lens approach did more than just share testimonios. It serves as a step towards showcasing the importance of experiential knowledge and a commitment to social justice (Solórzano & Delgado, 2002). Espino et al. (2012) state that during their own sharing of testimonios they “…were not completely aware that [they] were engaging in an act of resistance by exposing [their] lived experiences in an academic space” (p. 446). Indeed, a LatCrit narrative inquiry approach
can therefore be seen as a form of resistance for these women that pushes back on the status quo of academia, which was built on Eurocentric ideologies and models.

The use of Latino Critical Theory, a critical race epistemology, Chicana Feminist epistemology, and narrative inquiry provides an avenue to explore how race, ethnicity, gender, and other marginalized identities of Latina doctoral students impact their first year of doctoral study at PWIs. With these combined efforts, I hope that this study will not just contribute to the literature, but also contribute to the needed discourse surrounding the unique experiences of these women, their challenges and struggles within a historically unequal educational system, and the steps that institutions can all take to make historically White spaces more inclusive for all students.
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The following chapter will present the findings from the participants’ testimonios and follow-up interviews to answer the three research questions that guided this study. To recap, these three questions are: (a) In what ways do the intersections of race, ethnicity, and gender, amongst other identities, shape Latina women’s first-year doctoral experience?; (b) How do Latina doctoral students navigate barriers to success, including forms of support utilized in their navigation, during the first year in a doctoral program?; and (c) How does the first year experience influence Latina doctoral students’ outlook and/or experiences in subsequent years? In order to organize the presentation of these findings, Chapter 4 will be divided into four sections beginning with: (a) a background summary of each participant (see Table 4.1), (b) findings presented that focus on the first research question, (c) findings presented focus on the second research question, and (d) findings presented that focus on the third and final research question. The few participants highlighted in each section were chosen due to the substantial impact that particular experience had on their first year and beyond, as well as its relevance to the theme.

Latina Doctoral Student Backgrounds

As indicated, this chapter begins by introducing each of the ten Latina doctoral students who participated in the study. I chose to start by providing their background information to provide a better understanding of their pre-doctoral experiences and the reasons they chose to pursue a doctoral degree. As will be seen in
their testimonios, many of their pre-doctoral experiences shaped or influenced the way they approached their doctoral experience. In order to add a layer of protection to the identities of the participants, especially as many of the participants were one of a few, if not the only Latina in their doctoral program, certain demographic information has been adjusted, redacted, or changed. For example, the institutions will be given a pseudonym, although some of these institutions’ demographic information will be shared to further understand these spaces. Similarly, their specific doctoral degree program will not be named, but instead I will use the general discipline in which each participant is enrolled. Additionally, the participants’ names in this study are all pseudonyms selected by the participants. Any other names addressed in the findings section have also been changed to protect the identity of the person. Lastly, for any situations that list specific details that may identify a participant, a slight changing of those details may have been necessary for further protection, yet the integrity of the experience remained intact.

Alexis

Alexis is a 29-year-old first-generation, first year doctoral student in the field of education. Originally from a large, diverse city in the Midwest, she self-identifies as Latina/Puerto Rican and pursued her undergraduate education at a private institution in her home city. After receiving her degree, she received a master’s degree in an educational field at a large and predominantly White institution (PWI) in the southeast. She worked full-time in higher education for five years before deciding to pursue her doctoral degree. Since she wanted to stay in the same state as her current employment, she applied to two programs and decided to attend her current institution, pseudonym
Southeastern University, a large PWI, due to the research interests of the faculty member she spoke to (now her advisor), assistantship opportunities, and the location.

Alexis began her first year of doctoral study during the 2015-2016 academic school year where she obtained an assistantship teaching an undergraduate leadership course. She experienced difficulties her first year with imposter syndrome in both her academics and her job, and also had a difficult time shifting from being a full-time employee to a full-time student. Additionally, she was one of only a handful of Latinx students in the program. However, she was able to find a support system in her program and also utilized outside support systems, such as her family and other peers, to help guide her through the first year. Based on her experiences and the lack of Latinx representation at her institution, she has set out to design a course focusing on Latinx identity development at her institution. After her PhD, she hopes to work in administration, in a director position, in some type of area where she can work and help college students. At the time of the interviews, she was transitioning from her first year into her second year of doctoral study.

Ana

Ana is a 32-year-old first-generation, third year doctoral student in the field of education. She was raised in a mid-sized city in a southern state and identifies as Latina/Mexican. After graduating from her undergraduate university, she worked for two years prior to pursuing a master’s degree in a large city in the same state she grew up in. Once she received her master’s, she worked for another year and decided to pursue a doctoral degree, since she knew she wanted to continue working in her field to make a big impact and change in the landscape of higher education institutions. Ana decided to
pursue her PhD at a PWI in a large city in the same southern state she was working in, pseudonym Southern University.

During her first year, Ana continued to work her full-time job as a college advisor and commuted from a different city one and a half hours away, two to three times a week. Aside from this challenging schedule, she also had difficulties with isolation, as she was a commuter student and did not have the opportunities to socialize with her peers. After receiving positive feedback and advice from a professor in a different program, she began to feel more confidence in her abilities. Aside from the unconditional support she received from her husband, she eventually was able to connect with peers in her program after a department sponsored conference trip. During the time of these interviews, she was transitioning into her fourth and final year of doctoral study.

Cassandra

Cassandra is a 29-year-old first-generation, fifth year doctoral candidate in the field of ethnic studies. Originally from a large city in a southwestern state, she pursued her bachelor’s and master’s degree at a large university in the same state, and decided to pursue her PhD right after her master’s program as she deeply enjoyed the graduate experience. As her husband was applying for residency programs at the time, she also wanted the opportunity to pursue her doctoral degree out-of-state. Luckily, they both were able to get accepted in the same area and moved to a nearby state.

Cassandra began her doctoral degree in an ethnic studies program at a large PWI in a southwestern state, pseudonym Southwestern University. She had a lot of excitement to begin a PhD program, but within the first few weeks she contemplated quitting the program due to some experiences during the teaching assistantship
orientation. Cassandra began to suffer from imposter syndrome during those first few months, but with the support of her family, church, and a faculty member with whom she connected with, decided to stick through her first year. During the time of these interviews, she was transitioning into her final fall semester of doctoral study.

**Courtney**

Courtney is a 40-year-old first-generation, second year doctoral student in the field of social work. Originally from the northeast, she identifies as AfroLatina/Dominican. At the age of 16, she had her son and promised herself that she would “not fall into that negative statistic.” After receiving her bachelor’s degree, she went on and received a master’s degree in social work at a private mid-sized university in her home state. Courtney worked full-time as a mental health therapist and decided to go back to receive her PhD seven years later. After receiving information from a co-worker about her current program, she decided to attend an information session and apply. Even during the application process, Courtney had doubts about her ability to be accepted due to the fact it was an Ivy League institution.

Despite Courtney’s doubts, she applied and was accepted into her program at a predominantly White Ivy League institution in the northeast, pseudonym Northeast University, where she was the only Latina in the program. During her first year, she commuted two and a half hours from home in order to attend her PhD program, in addition to working full-time as a therapist. Despite some challenges, she had support from her family and peers and, at the time of these interviews, Courtney was currently entering her last and final year in the program.

**Denise**
Denise is a 25-year-old, first-generation, second year doctoral student in the field of educational psychology. She is from a city on the West Coast, identifies as Latina/Mexican, and has continuously pursued her education without any breaks in between. She obtained her bachelor’s from a large and public institution in her home state. Due to her love of learning, she knew that she wanted to be a professor one day and decided to pursue a PhD. After undergrad, she applied to PhD programs but was not accepted. However, she was accepted into a master’s program and went on to complete that degree at a large institution in the East Coast.

Denise applied again to PhD programs at the end of her master’s program and was accepted into a predominantly White university in the West Coast, pseudonym West Coast University, in an educational psychology program. During her first year, she experienced some issues related to microaggressions and other biases, as well as being one of the few Latinas in the program. However, she received a great deal of institutional support, as well as familial, and departmental support from her advisor, and will be entering her third year in her doctoral program.

Juliana

Juliana is a 27-year-old first year doctoral student in the field of counseling education. She was raised in a country in Latin America, identifies as Latina, and moved to a country in Europe during high school. Although she would visit her mother’s family in the United States during the summer, she officially moved to the United States for her undergraduate degree on the east coast. Juliana initially enrolled in a master’s program in her field and experienced a great deal of difficulty with imposter syndrome during that
time. With the encouragement of her master’s advisor and her family, she decided to apply to a PhD program because of her love of research.

Juliana ended up attending a predominantly White university in a southern state, pseudonym, Southern University, after initially falling in love with the program during admitted students weekend. Juliana experienced some challenges when she arrived as she realized the department was not as culturally aware, like her previous program, as she initially expected. With the help of her peers and advisor, she has begun to create a diversity program in her department and will be entering her second year of doctoral study.

Karina

Karina is a 33-year-old second year doctoral student in the field of counseling education. She identifies as Hispanic and is originally from a predominantly White small city in a southern state. After receiving her bachelor’s degree in her home state, she worked full-time for seven years before going back to school and receiving her master’s degree in counseling education out-of-state. Immediately after her master’s degree, she decided to apply for a PhD program and ended up attending a PWI in a northwestern state, pseudonym Northwest University.

Karina used the word isolation to describe her first year experience, based on the predominantly White environment of not only the institution, but also the surrounding community. During her first year, she experienced and witnessed many instances of racial bias and experienced severe imposter syndrome. Despite these difficult challenges, she used her support systems and found her voice to speak up against the biases that were
occurring. At the time of these interviews, Karina was entering the third and final year in her doctoral program.

**La Blue**

La Blue is a 41-year-old, second year doctoral student in the field of education. Originally from a city in a southern state, she identifies as Mixed/Latinx, and attended her bachelor’s and master’s degree on the East Coast. After working full-time, she realized that in order to continue to further her career she would need to obtain a PhD. She decided to enroll at the institution where she currently works, which is a PWI in her home state, pseudonym, Southern University.

During La Blue’s first year, she worked full-time and attended her PhD program part-time. Although she discovered in class discussions that some of her classmates were not as culturally competent as she would have hoped, she did admire that the faculty of the program were highly aware and competent of the issues Students of Color face, and thus made sure to make the program as inclusive as possible. At the time of the interview, La Blue was entering her third year of doctoral study.

**Lilliana**

Lilliana is a 28-year-old, first-generation, first year doctoral student in the field of education. She is originally from a state on the West Coast, where she attended college and received a bachelor’s degree. She identifies as Black/Mexican. After receiving her bachelor’s degree, she immediately went into a master’s degree for business. Afterwards, Lilliana worked for 3 years in the field of student affairs where she realized she wanted to go back to get a PhD in that same field. With the help of her friend who was in a PhD
program at the time, Lilliana took a couple of classes at the institution where she was employed.

Lilliana eventually ended up attending a PhD program at a PWI in the Midwest, pseudonym Midwestern University. Because of her friend and other peers who had undergone the PhD process, she came in with a good understanding of what was to be expected. However, she still experienced challenges with the lack of diversity in the program, with her being the only Latina in her cohort and one of only six or seven Latinx students within the whole program. This led to issues in classroom discussions where there was a lack of cultural competency. During the time of these interviews, Lilliana was transitioning into her second year of doctoral study.

**Patty**

Patty is a 33-year-old first-generation, immigrant, and first year doctoral student in the field of education. She is originally from a country in Latin America, identifies as a Multiracial Latina, and was a non-traditional student during her undergraduate degree. As a formerly undocumented student, she spoke about the struggles she had accessing her education. However, from the beginning, she knew she wanted to work in education and would eventually go on to get a PhD in order to have the credentials to continue working in the field.

Patty took time between her programs to work full-time, but eventually began attending a predominantly White, research one institution on the east coast, pseudonym East Coast University. During her first year, she experienced a lot of isolation and imposter syndrome as she had worries about having English as a second language and not being prepared for the intensive writing that would occur. Additionally, she felt a lack of
diversity within her cohort, which further reinforced these feelings of isolation. In her first year she also experienced challenges with her advisor, which she did not expect. After finding a support system with other Women of Color in her program, as well as support from family, she will be entering her second year of the doctoral program in the upcoming school year.

Table 4.1: Participant Background Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Current Age</th>
<th>Self-Identified Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Years in Grad School (as of 2015-2016)</th>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Discipline</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alexis</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Latina/Puerto Rican</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Southeastern University</td>
<td>Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ana</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Latina/Mexican</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Southern University</td>
<td>Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cassandra</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Latina/Hispanic</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Southwestern University</td>
<td>Ethnic Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courtney</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>AfroLatina/Dominican</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Northeast University</td>
<td>Social Work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denise</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Latina/Mexican</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>West Coast University</td>
<td>Educational Psychology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juliana</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>White/Latina</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Southern University</td>
<td>Counseling Psychology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karina</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>White/Hispanic</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Northwest University</td>
<td>Counseling Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La Blue</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Mixed/Latina</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Southern University</td>
<td>Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lilliana</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Black/Mexican</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Midwestern University</td>
<td>Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patty</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Multiracial Latina/Latin-American</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>East Coast University</td>
<td>Education</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
RQ1: Salient Identities that Shaped the First Year

The following section will seek to address the first research question for this study, which is: In what ways do the intersections of race, ethnicity, and gender, amongst other identities, shape Latina doctoral students’ first year experience? For the ten Latina doctoral students in the study, they each spoke about their experiences during the first year. The themes that arose showcased how the intersection of their identities, in particular their gender and racial/ethnic background, profoundly affected how they experienced certain events. The intersection of their identities often led to various tensions when they finally began their doctoral program, especially due to the lack of diversity and cultural competency within the program, department, institution, and even surrounding community. Furthermore, many of the participants had experienced similar situations with lack of diversity in previous educational endeavors, such as in their undergraduate or master’s degrees. These types of experiences often led many of the participants to have selected their program and/or their research interests in order to help other marginalized populations. Finally, for some participants, entrance into this rigorous academic culture had some feeling isolated from their own cultural background, and thus experienced dissonance when they felt compelled to strike a balance between the two. Overall, the findings for this question seemed to center on the phenomenon of often being the only Latina or one of the few in their programs, institutions, or communities. Therefore, the intersection between being a woman and being Latina directly coincided with the themes that emerged.

The section arrives at four major themes that emerged from the participants’ testimonios and follow-up interviews, which will be presented in order of relevance. The
main themes are: (a) lack of diversity in programs, institutions, and communities; (b) racism, microaggressions, and other biases; (c) the manifestation of imposter syndrome; and (d) tension between academia and their culture and/or home

Theme I: One of the Few, If Not The Only One: Lack of Diversity in Programs, Institutions, and Communities

One of the most prevalent topics that emerged in the testimonios of the Latina doctoral students, and also in the follow-up interviews, was the lack of diversity many of the participants experienced in their programs, institutions, and even surrounding communities. All ten participants mentioned or spoke about their experience of either being one of the few Latinas, if not the only one, in their programs, and/or the lack of cultural competency and diversity in their classroom discussions, indicating the saliency of the intersection between their gender and racial/ethnic identity. Although most of them noticed it during their first semester in the program, some were aware of the lack of diversity before arriving, but perhaps did not know the extent that it would affect them. The following section highlights six of the participants who shared how the lack of diversity affected their first year experience. These six participants were chosen due to the depth and critical role that a lack of diversity had on their first year of doctoral study.

For participants such as Lilliana, a first year doctoral student in education, she deeply cared about the diversity of the doctoral programs she applied to, especially of the faculty. She stated, “So I looked at a lot of faculty that I really liked their work. And I looked also at the critical mass of, like, Faculty of Color—at least enough faculty that either were doing critical work or had a couple of Faculty of Color.” Lilliana had researched a variety of schools, but did not have her current institution in mind until a
friend advised her to look into it. She knew of a high profile scholar who worked at the institution and the type of critical work they produced. Lilliana ended up applying, and after receiving a generous funding package, decided to attend Midwestern University. Because she had already been living and working in the Midwest in another nearby state, she thought she would be prepared for the lack of diversity that she assumed would occur in the program and institution. However, she spoke in her oral testimonio of the culture shock she experienced when she arrived:

So when I came to [current Midwestern state] I think that that was a lot different. I knew it was going to be different, but I figured, like, I’ve already been in the Midwest. It can’t be that bad. I think that - first of all, there’s just not a lot of Students of Color in the cohort and so being able to connect with Students of Color has been really challenging, specifically with like Latino students. Like I think in [current Midwestern state], more so than in [previous Midwestern state], like Students of Color mean Black students. And then there’s just like a sprinkling of Latinos. Like in my program, in the cohort out of 17 that started I was the only Latina. Like I think out of like 60 or 70 PhD students, like kind of throughout all stages of the program, there’s only like 6 or 7 Latinos… And so that’s been really challenging being able to find a critical mass of Latinos.

This lack of Latinx representation was especially difficult for her because she felt that she had been “sheltered a little bit of…the Midwest experience” based on her previous employment at a Latino cultural center where many of her colleagues were People of Color and her students were all Students of Color. Based on these experiences at her previous Midwestern University, the cultural shock she experienced in her new state was much more intense than when she first moved to the Midwest from the West Coast three years prior. Furthermore, she touched upon the Black/White binary that may occur when thinking about racial diversity. This simplistic definition of what diversity is or looks like can end up leaving out certain populations, in this case Latinx students. The
The lack of diversity that Lilliana speaks was therefore evident at multiple levels, from her new state, to her new institution, to her new doctoral program, and cohort.

Similar to Lilliana, Courtney, a second year in social work, is another doctoral student who already had some idea of the atmosphere that she would come into. Born and raised in a very diverse city in the East Coast, she attended a four-year public college in her home state, and received her master’s degree at a different institution in her home state that she felt was a “little more diverse in terms of, like, the student population and faculty” as compared to her current institution. When she interviewed with the dean of her program, she specifically asked about diversity in the classroom. The dean then connected her with a Latina student who had completed the program a year before.

Courtney wrote in her *testimonio*:

> She gave me her information and I immediately emailed her…and she and I, the student, we were on the phone for about an hour. And she told me, she was like, “Well,” she was like, “I was the only Latina in the classroom.” So she said, “I wouldn’t be surprised if you were the only one going in. So she was like, “You know, I’m looking forward to hearing from you on the first day of class to see what your experience is.”

Despite the warning from the student, Courtney was still surprised during her first day in the classroom. As will be read in the excerpt from Courtney’s written *testimonio*, it brought on conflicting feelings. She shared:

> We are a cohort of 19, with only 5 students of color. I am the only Latina in the classroom. This reminds me to share with you the feeling that I felt on the first day of class. I worried about diversity in the classroom and wondered how many would look like me. I mean, this was [Northeast Institution], Ivy League and all. I looked around the classroom and realized that I was IT, The ONLY Latina in the classroom. I felt a sense of pride initially, however, after a few minutes, that negative, self-defeating “voice” was back, telling me that I had just gained acceptance because they probably needed to fill their quota of Latino students for the program. Or that maybe I had earned admission based on some affirmative action instance.
As can be seen by Courtney’s *testimonio*, the lack of diversity in her program, and the fact that she was the only Latina in the classroom, not only produced negative feelings, but also resulted in making her question her own abilities and talents. Although she was initially proud of her accomplishment of getting into her doctoral program, it quickly turned into self-doubt and negative self-talk. As will be discussed in further sections, this negative self-talk that began prior to applying to the program intensified after finding out she was the only Latina in the program, which continued to affect her experience during the rest of her time in the program.

For other participants, such as Karina, a second year doctoral student in counseling education, the lack of diversity experienced was not confined just to her program, but also to the surrounding community that housed her institution. Karina, who had grown up in a small town that was predominantly White, was used to this type of environment; however, it really affected her during her first year in the doctoral program. She shared in her written *testimonio* that she had initially looked at other institutions in the southeast because they were intentional about recruiting minority students, which was significant for her. However, she “fell in love with the culture of the program” when she visited during the interview weekend and ended up choosing her current institution, Northwest University. Karina shared that:

> I remember a few other minority students in the program warning me of the lack of diversity in the community I was joining. I did not realize that I was a student with an all white, heterosexual faculty. There were only 2 ethnic minorities out of 17 doctoral students before I entered the program.

When asked in the follow-up interview about noticing this lack of diversity during her interview weekend prior to beginning the program, she spoke again about feeling as if the two students mentioned in her *testimonio* had tried to warn her, but it did not hit her until
she actually began the program. Aside from just being the only Latina in the cohort, the surrounding community was a main factor in why she used the word “isolation,” in her written *testimonio*, to describe her first year in the doctoral program.

…So it’s a really predominantly White university. There’s a high percentage of [specific religion] people in this community and that’s, I think, what a lot of the university draws from…But yeah, it’s not very diverse at all. We actually had a really large Middle Eastern student body because they would receive scholarships, I believe, from their countries to come here. But the community recently was a lot of - I don’t even know what I would say, there was a lot of oppression going on, racism, and community members actually pushed them out. So there’s going to be a lot less diversity now.

For Karina, the lack of diversity led to oppression and biases she saw in the community which ended up directly affecting her, as will be discussed in later sections. She witnessed how others who were not part of the dominant population of her institution and community were treated, and therefore was conscious of how being a Latina woman in this space might impact her. Not only did she have to endure being one of the only Latinas in her program, but also one of the few Latinas at her institution, and one of the few Latinas in the surrounding community. She was constantly an “other” which further contributed to her feelings of isolation during the first year.

Being the only, or one of a few Latinas in a program, was a reoccurring theme with the Latina doctoral students in this study. Alexis, another first year doctoral student in higher education, decided to continue her educational journey after working full-time for almost five and a half years. She made an interesting remark regarding the lack of diversity that occurs as you get higher in the educational pipeline. When describing her institution, Southeast University, she acknowledged there were a good percentage of Latinos at the institution, but not as many at the graduate level.
In terms of population, I feel that as a Latina here like, I know there’s a large amount of Latino students… but as a graduate student I don’t really feel that sometimes, especially as a graduate student…I’m one of 2 Latinas in the program right now. Um, and we have about…probably 2 or 3 Latinos…And so like, that was a struggle in itself, being a Latina and having to feel like I’m the voice of my people. And that like I, I had to struggle with that, especially living in [institution city], like coming from [previous city] to [current city] and like not seeing my food, or not hearing my music, and that was a little bit of a struggle. But like [Southeastern University], again, is, it is definitely, it is a PWI. There are issues, as any college university, issues of racism, diversity, like inclusion.

Although Alexis spoke about her institution having a good percentage of Latinx students on campus, she illustrated how that does not necessarily mean the same will happen at the graduate level. As most graduate students typically spend much of their time within their graduate departments, this feeling of isolation from other Latinx people can be magnified. Furthermore, she also had to deal with moving from a diverse city to a smaller, less diverse city where she did not feel represented throughout. For Alexis, cultural elements, like food and music, were important, but yet she could not find them within the community.

The surrounding community of an institution can play a large role, as seen with Alexis and Karina. For them, it proved to intensify the isolation they felt of being one of the only Latinas in their program. Similarly, Denise, a second year doctoral student in educational psychology, also arrived at her institution, West Coast University, and immediately, even from the admitted students weekend, was well aware of the predominantly White atmosphere of her institution and her program. Out of a cohort of about thirty students, she was one of the five or six Latinx students accepted. Interestingly, she mentioned her cohort was one of the “lucky ones” because the previous year only one Chicana was accepted. However, as she continued to describe the demographic background of the different sections of her department, and in particular the
psychology school and educational psychology department, she noticed she would be the only Latina in those spaces. When asked about whether she was expecting this, Denise responded with the following in her oral *testimonio*:

I was expecting it just because, especially through the admit, we had an admit weekend where they had us go visit the school and just on the breakdown I knew, kind of from the outside, I knew there were going to be - the way I saw it there’s just going to be a lot of White rich people because it’s [West Coast University] and that’s just how it is here. So I kind of knew that coming in that there was going to be a lot of it. But because I had never really experienced spaces where there were a lot of rich White people, actually being in it was the surprising thing. Because then you start kind of noticing cultural values and practices and traditions that are way different than what you’re used to. So that was kind of the surprising part, actually going through it.

So despite the fact that Denise was well aware of the demographics and atmosphere she would encounter at West Coast University, it was a different experience actually living through it once she began her program. As will be seen later on in her *testimonio*, this type of atmosphere led to conflict and tension between balancing this new culture of West Coast University versus her own cultural background.

Juliana, a first year doctoral student in counseling education, had a different experience when it came to expectations of what she would encounter at her PhD institution. She previously attended her master’s degree in a very diverse city in the Northeast and had been in a master’s program that was heavily invested in social justice issues. When she arrived at Southern University, she realized how salient certain identities were now that she was in a less diverse city, in particular her identity as a Latina and being Atheist. In her *testimonio* she wrote:

Some of the more challenging issues included entering a school that did not have a social justice and activist climate. Additionally, moving from a metropolitan city that was incredibly diverse to a school and a city that had a lot less diversity, less international individuals, and was majority White was difficult. I also imagined there to be a lot more Latinx’s in my program than there actually were.
When further discussing this in her follow-up interview, Juliana acknowledged that the program was diverse in terms of having Faculty of Color. During her first visit, she had fallen in love with the culture of the program, in terms of how welcoming they were, especially compared to the intense atmosphere of her previous city and institution. However, when she arrived to begin her first year, Juliana felt as if the program was not as multiculturally aware and social justice oriented as it was presented initially. This ended up being a significant issue during her first year, which she elaborated in her follow-up interview:

But when I came here, you know, within the program there’s not a big enough push to create – I mean, okay. What they do, they are hiring a lot of faculty that are People of Color, which I think is a huge demonstration of your commitment to multicultural issues of diversity and moving the program towards that, that way. But it’s lacking in other, in other ways, like talking about it in our classes, right? It’s making known that what you’re talking about, this culture, a certain culture, it’s White US American culture, as opposed to just talking about that as if it were the norm and not having to say it. So I - yeah I mean I think I had a really hard time adjusting to that aspect of it. But I’m at the point now, I think it was a whole process. It was like first I was really angry and upset about it, and I was like, “Oh my God. Should I have picked that school in [the north east]? Should I have gone there?” And then I was sad, and then it was like a whole process of grief or something. But now I’m at that point where I am doing something about it and kind of bringing up that change myself and finding allies within my program to make that change.

Despite the initial warm feelings she felt about the program prior to beginning, it quickly changed when she arrived. The importance of having a multiculturally aware department even made her reconsider whether she had made the right choice at all. Her previous institution has provided her with such a social justice-oriented culture, and not receiving that in her new institution made her feel the lack of diversity even more. As discussed further in later sections, Juliana channeled the hurt and anger she felt into a new project to make sure that other students would not feel the same way.
**Summary.** As mentioned previously, all the participants spoke at some point in their testimonia or follow-up interviews about a lack of diversity in their programs, institutions, and communities. However, the preceding section only showcased the reactions that Lilliana, Courtney, Karina, Alexis, Denise, and Juliana had when they arrived to their PhD programs. While some were aware of the lack of diversity they would encounter when they moved to their new institution and city, others were not prepared for what that meant when they actually had to experience it on a daily basis. This led to feelings of sadness, anger, and questioning whether they had made the right decision. Furthermore, this lack of diversity made their identity as a Latina salient in these spaces. Addressing a lack of diversity in a program, institution, or surrounding community is critical, as this can lead to instances of racism, biases, and microaggressions, as will be seen in the following section.

**Theme II: Predominantly White Spaces and the Consequences for Latina Women: Racism, Biases, and Microaggressions**

The previous theme captured an important similarity for all the women in the study. As they all were attending PWIs, they all noticed and experienced a lack of diversity at different levels. For some, they experienced it within their specific programs, for others they felt it more at the institutional level, and for the rest they noticed it within the surrounding community. Unfortunately, the three women highlighted here shared detailed experiences dealing with these types of biases, which deeply affected their first year experience.

Karina, who earlier spoke about the imposter syndrome she felt, especially related to being an “outlier” in her program and institution, saw racism affect friends and herself
during the first year of doctoral study. When talking in her follow-up interview about her institution, she described the racist incidents that occurred on campus to the Middle Eastern student population, many of whom had become her friends. She felt these incidents occurred in order to push Middle Eastern students out of the institution/community. Karina wrote:

It’s like a really big thing on campus because people were like attacking these students, you know, and like saying racist things to them. I think a couple of them got stabbed, like it was ridiculous. And I think it was just people in the community trying to push them out and it was an unsafe place for them. And so now we’ve lost a lot of that population. Those were a lot of my friends because it’s not very diverse here, and I had met them through little things here in the community because it’s very obvious when I go out in the community that I’m not a White person.

Although this first type of racist incident she described was not directly aimed at her, Karina still felt the effects as she realized the way the community treated those who were non-White. Her description of having “darker skin than everyone else” illustrates her instant understanding of how she fit in with that community. Seeing that other students who had similar dark skin were being profiled and, in this case, assaulted, was a huge recognition of the type of community that she was now living in during her first year.

The racism Karina witnessed would, unfortunately, personally target and affect her as well. For example, she shared a specific incident in her written testimonio:

I also had extremely negative experiences within the community that left me feeling empty, lonely, and like an outsider. For example, I went out to dinner one night with my peers and a white woman from the community, whom I was introduced to that night, made a blatant racist comment about Mexicans as I sat across from her at the dinner table. I felt my body temperature rise as I stared in disbelief of what had just happened. Unfortunately, this was only the beginning of the struggles I would face in a predominantly white community and campus.

Although Karina described earlier in her testimonio on the similarities between this town and the town she grew up in, which was also predominantly White, being in a
PhD program escalated the ways in which she processed these events. The racism and biases she experienced during her first year were not limited to her community. She also experienced it in the classroom with her own students in her teaching assistantship.

Karina wrote in her testimonio about how these experiences taught her that she can “…live anywhere and teach any group of students after teaching predominantly White students who constantly challenge my intelligence and presume I am incompetent.” She further elaborated on her statement in her follow-up interview when reflecting on her feelings of the lack of diversity when she arrived.

And then we teach courses and our students are oh, my gosh, I think like 95% White…and so a lot of times I find they question me on a lot of things. They questioned my intellect, they are very disrespectful. A lot of times they don’t even like get to know me... So a lot of times it’s kind of, I think my fear is, “Okay they’re looking at me thinking that I have an agenda, you know, when I teach on White privilege, but that’s what we’re supposed to be teaching.” And I think I’m an easy target for them, you know, because of the biases they come in with.

The biases Karina experienced seemed to engulf her ranging from not just the surrounding community, but also in her TA position. Unfortunately, the disrespect shown by her students is not unique, as literature has shown that Women of Color in teaching positions are oftentimes challenged or presumed less competent by White students, especially in classes that center around race or diversity topics (e.g. Garcia, 2005; Gutiérrez y Muhs, Neimann, González, & Harris, 2012; Pittman, 2010).

Another participant, Cassandra, also experienced similar hostilities in her teaching assistantship during the first year. Teaching at her new university was a completely different experience from her previous institution, which was a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI). Cassandra discussed the frustration she had teaching introductory
classes that no one wanted to teach, but also having to deal with some of the students in her classes. She shared in her written *testimonio*:

This university where I studied my MA is a Hispanic-serving institution, and so while the intro courses had students that did not speak much or any Spanish, they tended to be Hispanic and had some connection to the language. At the university where I did my doctorate, most, if not all, of my students were White. Therefore, their attitudes towards the subject matter ranged from apathy to anger due to the minimum language requirement in the curriculum core for all bachelor’s programs. In intro Spanish courses, participation is weighted quite heavily since you have to practice speaking the language during class time. The most difficult thing was getting students to participate, and then dealing with angry emails whenever I posted low participation grades. There was indeed a sense of entitlement that some students had: If they showed up to class, they felt that was enough to get participation points. While I did have problems like these with my Hispanic students at my previous institution, it was nowhere near as bad as at the institution where I did my doctorate.

Due to her previous teaching experience at an HSI, moving to a PWI was a new challenge in having to deal with these instances. In her follow-up interview, Cassandra described the ways in which she had to handle her classroom during the first semester in order to combat these types of behaviors. She mentioned that she did not like having to be so stern, as it was not her personality and she enjoyed student interaction, but it was necessary. Despite the entitlement she received from some of the students, she put her foot down to make sure they received the grades they deserved.

Dealing with these forms of biases can take place in a variety of ways. Although some participants, such as Karina, dealt with racism in extremely overt ways, others, such as Denise, experienced biases in more covert ways (e.g., microaggressions) during her first year, which still proved to be unsettling and a significant challenge. She described these situations in her oral *testimonio* when discussing challenging moments during her first year:
Um, also having conversations around social class. After awhile, during my first year, I noticed that I was kind of an outsider. Like these PhD students were very educated, they came from Ivy League schools, I didn’t come from Ivy League schools, and so it was surprising to them when I would say stories about my background or where I came from or the schools that I came from because they – I could kind of feel the tension or shock in their, in them because they were like, “Oh man. This girl is actually from the places we study.” So it kind of made me, it was like, it was very kind of having to kind of tip toe and see when and where to say these things.

During her testimonio, Denise spoke on how she thought about these social class issues, even when considering what attire to wear in comparison to her peers. Additionally, she noticed other ways in which microaggressions took place, such as in conversations that spoke about people with similar backgrounds as her. In her interview she elaborated on these microaggressions:

And then just microaggressions, like people from those communities don’t really understand a lot of things from my culture and from my community. So they’ll make comments here and there, what’s one example? So there’s a community next to [West Coast University] where it’s pretty low-income. It used to be, there used to be a lot of crime there and [West Coast] does a lot of research there. And so a lot of people say, “Oh, this community is like [West Coast’s] little guinea pig because they do a lot of interventions there and they do a ton of research studies there.” And so one person was going to leave grad housing and she was going to move into the surrounding [city] area and she was saying how it was really expensive and she might have to end up in east [city], which is that low-income community. And the group, the group that I was in kind of like chuckled and they were like, “Oh no, like you better not, you know?” And I kind of, at that point I just like kind of voiced my opinion and I was like, “That’s the exact neighborhood I grew up in southern [state], so I don’t understand what’s so bad about it.” And they kind of, you know, it was an awkward moment. But those kind of things here and there where they’ll make comments and I’m like, “Oh, that’s where I’m from.”

The excerpt above illustrates an example of how microaggressions can take form in the academic environment, this case, with academic peers. Although some may argue that this is not racism or that it is not as damaging as the overt situations that Karina experienced at her institution, the demeaning conversations about places and
communities where Denise grew up still affected her. Denise felt like an outsider in the PWI she attended, which was further enhanced hearing her peers speak about the communities that she came from. Furthermore, she explained how this community near West Coast University was often used for research studies. It is interesting that these same peers, who are presumably also conducting research in these communities, are negatively talking about the people and communities they use for their own benefit.

Summary. This section provided three different accounts of how PWI’s can breed an intolerant environment where racism, microaggressions and other forms of biases can take shape. For some, like Karina, these instances may be extremely overt and include direct racist remarks. For others, like Cassandra and Denise, they can take shape in the form of microaggressions where students and/or peers will make biased comments or presume the incompetence of Women of Color. Regardless of how these biases are presented, as seen with the three participants, it ends up making their educational pursuit more challenging. Furthermore, consistent microaggressions, racism, and bias due to their identities as Latina women can lead to negative self-talk and a questioning of their own abilities and talents, as will be discussed in the following section.

Theme III: The Self-Doubt Game and the Manifestation of Imposter Syndrome for Latinas

The imposter syndrome phenomenon is not new, especially for high achieving women as described by Clance (1978). For the participants in this study, the intersection of their identities as a woman and Latina led to instances of self-doubt that was prevalent during the first year. Almost all the participants mentioned feeling like an imposter during their first year in either their testimonios or made mention of it when discussing
the emerging themes during the follow-up interviews. For the following four participants in this section, continuous feelings of imposter syndrome were a significant part of their first year.

One participant that most resonated with this finding was Courtney. She shared at the beginning of her testimonio that giving birth to her son at age sixteen was motivation to continue pursuing her education at the highest levels. Even though Courtney acknowledged that she did not necessarily need to get a PhD, as she was already a successful therapist and had all the credentials she needed to continue in her career, she still decided to go back to school to earn her doctorate. Despite all the successes she had achieved personally and professionally, even prior to applying she already had self-doubts about her abilities of being in a doctoral program. She wrote in her testimonio:

> From the beginning of the application process all the way until the day that I received the acceptance call, I experienced feelings of insecurity, the infamous “imposter syndrome”, unworthiness, feelings of not belonging as well as thinking to myself “[Courtney], what are you thinking?!?!? This is an Ivy [L]eague institution and you are Latina! There’s just no way.” But, mixed with these negative and self-defeating thoughts were also feelings of pride for having the courage to take the leap and apply. I really had no idea what perils and obstacles I would face down the road, but having overcome such adversity and beating statistical odds, I knew I had it in me to make it work. There was nothing that I could not overcome. Entering a doctoral program is not something that you can prepare for, once you are in there, it just comes at you and you have to make way for the changes that will inevitably come about.

While she acknowledges the phenomenon of imposter syndrome, what stands out the most in this excerpt is the connection between her self-doubt of not being able to get into an Ivy League institution and her identity as a Latina. Despite the negative voice in her head, she did apply and ultimately got accepted. However, achieving the success of being accepted into an Ivy League institution still did not stop the negative self-talk and self-doubt. In her follow-up interview Courtney shared:
So, and even then, even when I got in and when I got the acceptance call, you know, the happiness lasted about a day or two, but then a few days later I was like well, “You probably just got in because they needed to, they needed to fill some kind of quota for People of Color and like, you can’t be that good.” [laughs]. I mean, I laugh at it, but it was happening, it was not funny. I laugh at it now because like, oh my goodness, but it was, yeah it was an interesting experience.

Once again, Courtney downplays her achievements by assuming the program just needed to fill a “quota” and that is why she was accepted. Even though Courtney laughed while recalling this moment, it is clear that her identity as a Woman of Color influenced her beliefs that she would not be accepted and/or succeed at an institution of this caliber.

These feelings of inadequacy did not just affect Courtney during the admissions process. Unfortunately, they continued on when she began her classes. When asked about how she got past these initial feelings of self-doubt, Courtney mentioned her support systems (which will be discussed later), but also admitted that it continued to affect her in the classroom.

…in the classroom, I’m very, I’m very quiet. I don’t participate much. I feel very, very intimidated by my other, my classmates who – I mean, there’s 19 of us in the classroom. There’s one Latina, which is me, and 3 African American students…then everybody else is White. So, I might - like there’s times I’m sitting there and I have ideas and I’m like, I want to say something, but I don’t because I’m like, “Okay, I don’t want to sound stupid. I don’t want to sound like you don’t know what the hell you’re talking about”. And then one of my, one of my classmates, one of the White classmates will say something exactly like what I was try to say and it sounds all articulate and all fancy, and it was like, “Oh, that’s a great point, so and so”, and I’m like, “Damn, [Courtney]. You could’ve, you could’ve said it.” But that’s when my own insecurities come into play in the classroom. Like I’m very, I’m one of the most, I’m one of the quieter ones in the classroom and it’s noticeable, because I feel afraid to sound stupid or like, too dumb, or I don’t know what I’m talking about, or whatever I’m going to say is not a huge contribution to the discussion. So, yeah.

While it has been noted in the literature that many graduate students experience these feelings of inadequacy or feeling as an imposter (e.g., Craddock et al., 2011; Gardner & Holley, 2011), the previous three excerpts from Courtney’s testimonio and follow up
interview consistently mention her identity as a Latina women when discussing her feelings of not being able to attend an Ivy League institution, of only being selected to meet a “quota”, and of feeling as if she’ll say something “dumb.” In sharing her experiences with classroom discussions, she described her White counterparts as contributing ideas that sound “articulate and fancy.” Yet, she admitted that she would have the same ideas in her head. Courtney’s experiences illustrate how her identities as a Latina woman, coupled with the intensity of a PhD program, left her questioning her own abilities and talents, which affected her first year experience, especially in the classroom.

Having doubts even before applying to a doctoral program was not unique to Courtney. Patty, an immigrant student in education, always knew she wanted to continue her educational journey to help students like herself. As a formerly undocumented student, she had a non-traditional student experience in her bachelor and master’s programs. However, some of her worries and doubts centered on her identity as an immigrant student. In her oral testimonio, Patty described the feelings she had prior to beginning her doctoral program:

I did not feel prepared because of my language skills, to be honest. So I – English is a second language to me so I felt very, very anxious and nervous to go into a program where I had to write and speak English all the time with terms I never ever used. And I – so my program, my master’s program was not necessarily a critical program or very, it was more preparing students to go be practitioners, not necessarily go and get PhDs or write at a different level that was required for a PhD program. So I knew that my master’s program - I had talked to one of my faculty members from my masters and even though he said, “No, yes you can write and you can do it,” I didn't, I didn’t feel prepared. But I - even through the application process I stopped myself a couple of times from submitting the application to [Northeastern] because I didn’t know if I could do it.

Patty later discussed the support she received from her husband to just apply, which she did and ultimately ended up being accepted. As will be seen in later sections, Patty
continued to have doubts about her abilities to be a PhD student, which even affected her thoughts on future career plans. Although it can be argued that many graduate students may feel similar feelings on their writing abilities, she specifically connects these fears and doubts to her identity as an immigrant student and having English as a second language which is inherently tied to her ethnic identity.

Another participant, Lilliana, reflecting on her first year in her oral testimonio, shared one of her most challenging experiences, which occurred in the classroom. Through her testimonio, it is seen how these types of interactions can affect the ways in which Latinas approach these spaces and environments:

I think maybe the most challenging has been just the classroom experience...So I think that a lot of times I’ve been left feeling like I put out comments, or I put out specific stuff in class discussions and then people just kind of bypassing it or not acknowledging it or just the sense of not, like, being validated in the classroom. Because I may bring in a perspective that’s different from what we’re reading, like if we’re reading all scholars, like White scholars, then I bring in this, like this perspective of like my experience as a Latina and how that would be reflected in what we’re reading, and then I kind of just get the nod, “Okay, like let’s move on”, that type of thing. So I feel like that’s been the most challenging thing for me.

This experience is significant, as Courtney’s earlier statement echoed not speaking out in class in fear of saying something that people will think, “what is she talking about?” Lilliana spoke in her testimonio about wanting to be a critical scholar and therefore pushing herself in order to achieve this goal. However, being shot down in classroom discussions was a significant challenge she experienced during her first year.

During the follow-up interview, when discussing the emerging themes from everyone’s testimonio, we discussed the theme of imposter syndrome. Lilliana had the following to say regarding this topic:
And then just also like the fact that almost everybody talked about the imposter syndrome, which is - I find funny because as you were talking about it I was just reflecting. I have a close friend who, when I would – he’s a Male of Color – when I would talk to him about having moments right, not all the time, but having these moments of feeling like an imposter, imposter syndrome, and him just being like, “I don’t get it, like you’re doing all that you need to be doing. Like it doesn’t make sense to me that you have this imposter syndrome.” And not sort of, not downplaying, but I really felt like it was like invalidating my experience of – even though I know I’m doing what I need to be doing, and I know that I’m a hard worker, but like you, like I still have these feelings that I don’t know what, you know? I can’t get rid of it, and I don’t know what triggers them and, you know, it’s sort of just something that we like deal with all the time and for whatever reason.

This reflection on a conversation with a friend illustrates the way that imposter syndrome can take place. Although Lilliana knew she was doing everything she should be doing and was being a hard worker, these feelings of doubts continued to emerge, which she could not explain or understand why. Additionally, this conversation with her friend made her ponder on how his identity as a male, even though he is also a Person of Color, may be a reason why he could not relate to her experience. Lilliana further shared:

Like the other piece of me feels like, it interests me like I wonder if Latino males are feeling this like, you know? Like how does their privilege of [being] a male in this space like, change the way in which they’re feeling these feelings? ‘Cause that was always my thinking like, you know, he’s a Male of Color, like how do you not understand? Is it because you’re a male? And so like, do you experience imposter syndrome different or view it differently? Like what is it? Or are they just playing it off, like playing it cool? I don’t know.

Lilliana’s excerpt illustrates the importance of the intersection of identities, in this case of gender and race/ethnicity. After speaking to a Male of Color, who did not seem to understand, or at least did not reveal his own experience with imposter syndrome, she began to wonder what it was like for men in these situations. Therefore, it was not just about being Latinx, but also of being a woman.
The juxtaposition of race, ethnicity, gender, and imposter syndrome was also prevalent with Karina. As will be described in greater detail in the following section, her experience at a PWI had serious effects on her during the first year. One excerpt from her written *testimonio* read:

I grew up in west Texas, a small town named [redacted], which was predominantly White and my experiences there were very negative in the educational and personal realm. I did not, however, realize the importance this had on me until I began processing more of it in my doctoral program. I became very angry and felt that I was cheated or forced to assimilate. I felt very misunderstood by my peers and faculty. I was spiraling downward and felt very sad and depressed for most of my first year as a doctoral student. I felt very different than everyone else and was very aware of the fact that I had darker skin compared to everyone else in my classes. Anytime that I gained a little bit of confidence I would be quickly reminded that I was an outlier by other students, or people in the community. I was constantly battling my own abilities due to “imposter syndrome.”

Karina vividly elaborates the negativity that surrounded her during the first year in regards to her race/ethnicity and feeling like an “other.” Further, she described how her confidence would fade when she was reminded of being an “outlier,” something that was a result of her skin color. Once again, her imposter syndrome and feelings of inadequacy stemmed from her ethnic identity and the predominantly White space that she was now a part of.  

**Summary.** This section highlighted a major similarity amongst the participants, which included feelings of doubt or feeling like an imposter. Although all the participants at some point spoke about imposter syndrome, the highlighted four, Courtney, Patty, Lilliana, and Karina, illustrate how their various identities, being Latina, a woman, and an immigrant, were a major root in the manifestation of those feelings. Although imposter syndrome is not a new phenomenon, these findings illustrate how
intersecting marginalized identities can cause a higher likelihood of experiencing these thoughts, especially during an intense experience such as undergoing a doctoral program.

**Theme IV: Straddling the Border: Tension between Academia and their Culture and/or Home**

The final theme in this section that looks at how Latina doctoral students’ identities shaped their first year, speaks on the tension that occurs between entering the culture of academia and still managing your home life and/or cultural background. Anzaldúa (1987) most famously wrote about this phenomena with the concept of borderlands and, more recently, the notion of *nepantla*, or the “in-between-ness” of being between various spaces. For three of the participants, they mentioned instances where they felt they had to balance these two different environments. Denise was one participant who spoke at length about this tension and how she tried to negotiate it during her first year. She shared in her oral *testimonio*:

> I think one important thing that I’ve noticed myself going through, but also other Latinos that are at [West Coast], is this constant kind of negotiation between your culture and the culture you grew up in and the new one you’re coming to. So, I do recognize that I am extremely blessed. I know a lot of PhD programs don’t fund as well as [West Coast] does…And so I feel so, so blessed to be in that space, but I also recognize that being in that space I’m losing touch with the culture that I did grow up with and kind of the struggles and the, a lot, just a lot of things. And it’s, it’s kind of a struggle kind of being between those two and finding how to strike the balance between keeping to what you were before and what you are, but also having to let this other world in that’s going to help you move upward in life, but at the cost of having to leave some stuff behind. So, I think the whole year it was kind of that, kind of negotiation because I do have, I have friends in [city of institution] that are not in academia. And I always ask myself like, why was it so important for me to make those friends first before I networked with the ones at [West Coast]? And I think it was because of that, so that I could still have like the back home feel without, and not losing it, you know, and still being able to succeed at [West Coast].
Denise’s explanation gets across the tension of what can occur when entering a doctoral program. As documented by the literature, the culture of academia can often cause students to be socialized in such a way that may differ from their own culture background and values (e.g., Gonzalez, 2006). For her, it was important to first find a community outside of West Coast in order to keep a part of herself from back home. However, she still understands that in order to move forward in her career, she will have to continue to engage in the culture of academia, which may fall in contrast to her background.

For Ana, she also experienced this tension, specifically in regards to her family and how it affected her doctoral journey. She elaborated in her follow-up interview:

And like the cultural clash it’s – sometimes I would see like when I was, when my family was going through stuff, because like I said I have, there’s 10 of us in total, so there’s always something going on; always some personal conflict or some family drama. So when I had stuff with that going on, like it really weighed on me. I’d be really stressed and I’d be like, like “Does everybody else go through this? Does everybody else care about their family as much as I do, or am I the only person who gets really distracted by their family issues?” Because I would see people like they wouldn’t really, at least to my knowledge, no one really responded to family issues the way that I did.

Ana’s experience with balancing school and family is evident in her excerpt.

Specifically, she questioned whether her peers were affected as deeply as she was when family issues emerged. This cultural clash also emerged as Ana stated that her family did not really understand what she was doing. Therefore, she not only had to deal with an environment that perhaps did not understand why she reacted so strongly to family issues, but also a family that did not understand the doctoral degree process.

Family not understanding the process was especially present in Courtney’s life.

In her written testimonio she wrote:

The biggest challenge has been in missing out on Sunday dinners at my parents’ home. Or explaining that I have reading and writing to do. They are simply not
able to understand how rigorous this process is or what it means...I know they are proud of me because they talk to family members about it all the time. But they are not as supportive as I would like them to be when needed. There is always a lingering sense of guilt when talking to my parents.

The fact that Courtney described this as her biggest challenge highlights the importance that this has played in her first year and beyond. Although she knows her parents are proud of her, she still felt the guilt of not always being there for family functions. Courtney elaborated more on the tension that arose between her and her family due to her academics. In her follow-up interview she shared:

But my mom doesn’t get it. So I’m always getting the guilt trip from her. It’s like on weekends she’ll call me and she’s like, “You know, I want to go over, or can you come over? We’re going to have, the family’s coming over for dinner.” And I’m just like, “Mom, I cannot. I can’t go today”…You know, it’s just like the guilt trip. “I’m going to be gone one day, but your books will be here.” And I’m just like, “Really? With the drama right now.” Like it’s so – and sometimes I do feel guilty, you know? I feel bad. And I’m just like well it’s, you know, I tell myself it’s only going to be for a few more years, a few more years, a few more years. But then the other part of me is like, damn, but she’s right. What if she’s not here, you know, in a few more years and then I dedicated all this time to the damn books…But it’s s hard. They don’t get it. They just don’t understand.

Even though Courtney hears from family members that her parents are extremely proud and supportive of her, having to constantly explain why she cannot be at certain family events is a difficult challenge. Further than that, the guilt is exacerbated when she realizes that this process will take a few years, and time with people you love is never guaranteed. Later on in the interview, Courtney advises future Latina doctoral students to always keep the lines of communication open with family members so they can understand the process and the time it will take to get through this doctoral degree.

Balancing academics and family commitments was also an important aspect in the following excerpt from La Blue’s follow-up interview. She described in her follow-up
interview how being in a doctoral program can sometimes affect family relationships and the roles that may be placed upon a Latina woman.

And, you know, just also some of the family stuff that’s going on is just also - like I feel like as Latina women in our families we’re many times put in the roles of being the caregiver, or the ringleader for that caregiving, you know? And um, I’m in this experience right now where I’m just needing to push back on that and resetting some of that dynamic that’s just been set up over the course of my life. And that is, I’m getting resistance from my brother and I’m probably going to continue to get it ‘cause that’s part of the, it’s not dealing specifically with the program, but it’s definitely, I think, something that’s happening to me as a result of being in it. It’s like I need to pick and prioritize and also just stand up for what I see that is not, not fair to me, you know?

For La Blue, being in her doctoral program has caused her to make difficult decisions when it comes to her family. She spoke in both her testimonio and interview about the importance of setting limits and taking care of herself as she goes through this process. Having to push back on the familial role that had been placed on her was one tension La Blue had to endure as a result of being in this new cultural of academia, which also has its own way of placing certain roles on students.

**Summary.** This section featured one aspect of the doctoral journey for Latina students, which was the tension that often came from entering the culture of academia and balancing their own cultural background and/or home. For Denise, she went out of her way to ensure that she still could feel connected to her community by finding friends outside of her institution. For others, such as Ana and La Blue, they dealt with family issues and attempting to balance that with their doctoral study. This sometimes required opening the lines of communication and pushing back on familial roles placed on them. Regardless of their approach, this tension was just one additional challenge that was felt during the first year of doctoral study.
RQ2: Support Systems for Latina Doctoral Students During the First Year

The findings from the first research question described some of the obstacles and challenges that Latina doctoral students face during the first year. For many, this included instances of racism and biases, as well as feelings of inadequacy. Despite these obstacles, however, all of these women remained in their programs and were able to successfully complete their first year. Alongside their own resiliency, these women had support systems that ranged from family, to peers, to departments and institutional resources.

The following section seeks to address the second research question of this dissertation: How do Latina doctoral students navigate barriers to success, including forms of support utilized in their navigation, during the first year in a doctoral program? As will follow, the Latina doctoral students in this program discussed at length their families, their advisors and other faculty, as well as institutional and departmental resources that helped them to persist. Although this often did not automatically relinquish them of the obstacles they were facing, it did allow them the opportunity to decompress, gain advice and mentorship, and provide them the extra push they needed to continue. The following themes will be discussed in this section: (a) familial ties; (b) peer support; (c) faculty advisors; (d) institutional and departmental resources.

Theme I: Explaining the PhD Process and Gaining Support from Family

Although no blanket statement should be made about the significance of family to all Latinx students, all of the women in this study held their families in high regard and illustrated the various ways their family supported them prior to applying and during the first year of the doctoral degree. Many of the participants in this study are first-
generation college students. This often meant they had to explain the doctoral process to their families who sometimes did not understand perhaps why their daughter had to be far away. Although this often led to some tension, for the majority of the participants their families ultimately came around and were a support system during their first year.

Cassandra, was one participant who had a difficult conversation with her family when she began to think about pursuing a doctoral degree. As her husband was figuring out places to begin his medical residency, she decided it was her opportunity to do a PhD in a different state. She explained in her follow-up interview the difficulty of this conversation:

That conversation was hard. I’m the first to go to college, but I’m also the first born of my parents…And so, when my husband was finishing up med school I started considering the possibility of going on to the doctoral program, so I started to talk to my parents about the possibility of leaving. I think the, what made it easier for them to understand was that um, I emphasized to my parents, I kind of introduced them to the concept of academic inbreeding, you know? I tried to explain to them if I go I can come back, so to them that was the most important thing, that I was coming back…because they asked my husband, you know, doing his residency and me doing a PhD my parents asked, “Why do you have to go if there’s a university here?” That was always their thing. “Hay una universidad aquí, por qué te vas?” You know what I mean? And so I had to explain to them, I have to go so I can come back, so I can get a job here when I finish, which ended up being the case thanks to God…But I think that was, it was hard but I think that was what made it easier for them to understand. I have to go so I can come back. And even I didn’t know if that was going to be the case, you know how the market is right now. That was like a promise I was hoping to keep, you know? But I think that’s what made it easier for them to understand and to be supportive of.

For Cassandra’s family, she had to explain to them why it was important for her to get a new experience and get her PhD at another institution in a different state, especially as her goal was to ultimately move back home once she was finished and obtain a job there. When her parents asked the question in Spanish, “There’s a university here, why do you have to leave?” Cassandra was able to comfort them, at least momentarily, by explaining
the process of pursuing a PhD and what sometimes has to happen to better one’s chances for a faculty position. Fortunately, by telling them she would be able to come back, it allowed them to better understand what she was doing and for them to be supportive of her decision.

One other important person in Cassandra’s family who was also a big support was her husband. During her first month she seriously contemplated quitting the program. She spoke at length how she was very unhappy with her choice and had even begun to look for full-time jobs in her new state. However, she shared in her testimonio:

“However, the first few weeks of my doctoral program were trying, and I don’t think I would have continued in the program had it not been for the encouragement of my husband.” Her husband continued to encourage her after she kept losing hope in her program. Cassandra described in her testimonio how she became disillusioned with her program, especially after meeting with an aloof professor who did not seem interested in her or her research interests. She wrote in her testimonio:

And so by the middle of the semester, I was quite ready to quit the PhD program. I still had my teaching license from my home state, and so I started searching for jobs for high school teaching positions. My husband kept encouraging me to not give up, and told me to meet with another professor in order to meet the whole faculty and eventually find support.

Despite coming very close to quitting, her husband’s encouragement was a big part of her decision to continue. Furthermore, his advice about meeting with another professor ended up being a turning point, as she eventually met with a faculty member that was supportive and who ultimately became her advisor.

A similar conversation to Cassandra’s and her family occurred with Lilliana and her mom. When she decided she wanted to pursue her doctoral degree, she began having
conversations with her mom almost a year in advance, especially because she knew that schools in her home state did not offer as much funding as schools in the Midwest. Therefore, she would need to relocate in order to pursue her PhD. She shared in her oral testimonio the conversation that occurred with her mom:

And so I kind of had to prep, it was mostly my mom, it’s who I talk to more regularly, but I had to really prep my mom for like a year of “I think I’m going to, I’m starting to think about going back to school” and trying to explain to her like what I have to do, I need the GRE, and this is kind of what it looks like. And trying to break down what it means to be get funding versus not funding and kind of like, what does that look like, and explain to her it’s usually the schools in the middle of nowhere that give more funding because they don’t have Students of Color so they want Students of Color. So I think it was just a lot of like, I had to have that conversation with my mom over and over and over again, so by the time that I was actually applying and getting accepted to certain schools I would tell her about it and she sort of would have a better understanding of like, “Oh yeah, this other school is giving you x amount of money and this school is giving you y amount of money, then okay then it makes more sense for you to go to [Midwestern University] versus somewhere else.” Um, and so I think that right now they’re okay. They’re still like waiting for me to finish and like go back home...so I think for them it’s like a lot of explaining it, and explaining it, and explaining it ‘cause a lot of times they just don’t understand. “Well there’s a lot of schools in [home state] so why can’t you just come back to [home state]?” It doesn’t make sense to them. But now they’re supportive, they’re really good about like being understanding and trying to make it work...

As Lilliana described in the excerpt above, it was almost a yearlong process trying to prep her mom for the inevitable move she would have to make in order to pursue her PhD. She was able to break it down to make her mom understand why it was more beneficial for her to leave, instead of staying in her home state where funding opportunities were limited. Through those continuous conversations, Lilliana was able to gain the support of her family as she began her first year.

For some participants, the support of family was necessary when they began to apply to doctoral programs and they needed the extra push to go through with it. When Juliana began to think about applying for PhD programs, she had doubts because she
thought she “didn’t have it in [her]” and that she would not get accepted anywhere.

However, she described the importance that her mom and aunt played in that decision.

And my family was a huge, huge, played a huge role. My, my mom and my aunt, specifically, who were – they just really pushed me to just go ahead and do it ‘cause I remember calling them at the beginning of November and saying, “You guys, I don’t, I don’t know if I should do this. I don’t know if I should apply.” And they just, “[Juliana], what better time than now? You know, if you don’t get in that’s fine and you try again another year.” But they, they were very supportive in that way for me. And education has always been very valued, I guess, in my family. So I think that I was always kind of encourage to pursue that in whatever that I wanted to.

Juliana’s initial trepidation about pursuing a doctoral degree almost caused her not to apply. However, the familial support she received from her mom and aunt gave her the push she needed to apply. They made her realize that the worst that could happen would be she would not be accepted initially, but she could always try again in subsequent years. The support received from her family gave her the courage and strength to move forward, which resulted in another Latina student pursuing a doctoral degree.

The fear of applying to a doctoral program was also seen with Patty. However, she specifically named her husband as giving her the motivation and confidence to apply. As described in earlier sections, Patty’s main concerns were her language skills and fearing she would not be prepared to write at the doctoral level. Even so, her husband made her realize that she had nothing to lose by applying. She spoke about him in her oral testimonio:

Um, but then my partner, so I’m married, my husband he told me – I mean he was, he was really a great support for me because he was just saying, “What’s the worst? The worst that can happen is they can say no. And what are you, are you – what’s going to happen from there?” Being that realistic person to me, because I am so, I was very afraid of failing, and just even not getting in. But he would bring reality to me and say, “You can try again, or you can prepare, or you can go to another program” or things like that I, for me, were like “No, that’s not an option I need to get in or I don’t know if I’m going to get in.”
Despite her lingering concerns with the admissions process, the encouragement she received from her husband and the “reality check” she received pushed her to apply and eventually receive acceptance into her current institution.

For La Blue, her husband also provided her with support when they began to discuss La Blue’s interest in pursuing a doctoral degree. As this was a big decision for them which could potentially elevate her career further and help break the glass ceiling she was quickly approaching, as she stated, he understood the importance of what this would mean for their family. After deciding they wanted to stay in the current city where La Blue was working, they decided it would be the best decision for La Blue to continue on to a doctoral program. She described the conversation they had in her oral testimonio:

So we just had a conversation about, really about that – where we saw ourselves financially and he just felt like, you know, the career that I have is one, and he and I were in agreement, that can bring in the most money to our household and help us reach our financial goals. And so he understood that this was going to be a means to an end. He was with me when I finished my master’s so he knew, he knows first hand how much time it takes. And he just said to me, “Okay, well this is something that we need to do as a couple, and my part in it is going to be just doing what you say basically.” [laughs] Which isn’t true at all. We talk about things, and so he was very supportive and has been extremely supportive every semester, every class. I’m very blessed in that regard. I know that’s not the case for everybody.

One of La Blue’s biggest concerns, which she described in her oral testimonio, was how a doctoral degree would affect her marriage, as she had heard previous students talk about the strain it can take in relationships. However, through their conversations, her husband provided support by not only agreeing that pursuing a doctoral degree was the best option, but also ensuring that they would go through this journey as a couple.

Ana also specifically mentioned her husband in her written testimonio when describing her support system. She wrote:
My family offered little support, mostly because they really didn't understand what I was doing, but my husband was my loyal companion always ready to offer the next cup of coffee or just lend an ear. He heard me through every crisis and encouraged me to keep going even in the moments when I didn’t believe in my capacity to succeed.

Although other family members were not able to provide explicit support during her first year due to a lack of understanding on what she was doing, Ana was able to rely on her husband. Her earlier description of being a commuter student and feeling isolated weighed heavily on her during the first year, so having a constant support in her life, such as her husband, was a large part in her ability to continue forward during that trying first year.

**Summary.** The six women in this section highlighted the various ways that families can offer support and encouragement before and during the first year. Although some, like Cassandra and Lilliana, had to explain to their families the doctoral process at first, they ultimately were supportive of their daughters’ choices. Others, like Juliana’s family, were the ones who pushed for their daughter to apply to PhD programs. For a few of the participants, like Patty, La Blue, and Ana, they spoke specifically about their spouses and the strong support they provided during the first year. Regardless of the family member(s) mentioned, the participants showcased the importance that family can play in laying the foundation of support during the first year.

**Theme II: Peer Support Through the First Year**

Although family was a big support for the Latina doctoral students in this study, another group of people also became important components of their first year journey. Many spoke about the friendships and support they received from peers in and outside of their program. More often than not, as will be described further below, they were other
Students of Color who were also experiencing similar challenges as themselves. Lilliana was one participant who relied on peers in her cohort who had similar experiences or also had marginalized identities.

Well, that’s interesting. So I do have one cohort member who’s a White woman, she’s a queer woman from [northeastern state]. Surprisingly, she’s been the most critical person like, in our cohort group that I’ve been able to find. And so because we’ve taken a lot of the similar classes this year like it’s been nice to have her because a lot of time when we’re like, processing things after class like, I sit next to her and just recap some of, you know, just whatever had happened in that class session. And so that’s been really nice and really helpful knowing it’s not just me getting frustrated for no reason. Something really did happen there, and I’m not just making it up in my head.

Being able to find another student who she could process certain situations with was valuable for Lilliana. This friendship not only provided her with a new support system, but also served as a form of validation when she recapped some of the events that would occur in the classroom.

Peer support did not just occur within programs and/or institutions. Oftentimes, the participants had to find other support systems outside of the institutions, especially in finding otherLatinas who were pursuing doctoral degrees. As Lilliana’s program was not very diverse, and she was the only Latina in the program, she had created her own network of Latina doctoral students around the country. She described this support in her oral testimonio:

Another thing that I know has been really helpful is that I have a handful of Latinas like one who’s working in student affairs in [West Coast state], another Latina who is, who also just started a PhD program at [East Coast state], and one who just started a PhD program at [south east state]. And so we try to like, we’ve been connecting either at conferences or kind of checking in throughout the year. We have a couple of projects that we’re doing together. And so having those kind of networks outside of this school has been really helpful to kind of just kind of get an outside perspective on things that I'm struggling with. So that’s been really helpful.
This group of other Latina doctoral students was a big assistance to Lilliana. Earlier in her testimonio she discussed how she knew many of them from before the doctoral journey and they ended up doing many of the same things during the same time period, such as taking the GRE and applying. One major struggle for Lilliana was feeling disconnected from other Latinx people during her first year in her program, therefore, having an outside group of Latinas who she could rely on became a useful support system. This group of other Latina students not only provided her with emotional support, but was also useful in pushing her forward academically as they began to work on different projects together.

This theme of finding peers with similar backgrounds was not unique to Lilliana. For Patty, finding other Women of Color was essential during her first year. When she first arrived in her program, she described her cohort as not being the most diverse. Further, she felt it was competitive amongst them, which was not something that she enjoyed. However, she realized that the cohort above her had two Women of Color. After connecting with them, she described it as an “empowering moment”:

And then I would say really um, like an empowering moment was when the cohort above me - so the cohort above me is two Women of Color…And just connecting with them I remember feeling so validated when I was speaking about not knowing, like, what was happening or when someone was mentioning a theory. So we were taking a class together, it was [class name], or [class name], and they were talking about these frameworks, and I just remember going to them, “I don’t know anything about what you’re talking about. Can you please help me?” So they just sit down with me to really break down these theories that I had never heard in my life, when they could have said “Google them, or go read, here’s a couple of articles.” But they took the time to explain to me what they meant when they noticed that I was panicking because I didn’t know. They - that was a significant moment in that aspect because I felt like I could be vulnerable with them and say “I don’t know what I don’t know” or “I have no idea what you’re talking about” to them which was really good for me to have.
Patty later elaborated upon, in her follow up interview, the importance of having these women in her life, especially looking forward to the rest of her doctoral journey.

So, I think this first year with building the community with the students will definitely help me move through the different steps. Because I have someone that I can go and ask about comprehensive exams, or about the proposal, more openly and informally without necessarily feeling like I am being judged by them. So definitely Community of Color, I’m going to say specifically, the Students of Color, who have gone through those years and are now in different stages of this process, that is certainty. Without them I wasn’t expecting that to happen, but without them I don’t think I, I will be in the same position where I am right now. Maybe I’d be a little bit more unmotivated, to be honest, because I'm, I am right now, I am still eager to continue my program and do my research…I have been impacted by the students, definitely.

As seen through Patty’s oral testimonio and reiterating in her follow-up interview, connecting with these two Women of Color in her program was a pivotal moment in her first year. As she had earlier addressed not enjoying the competitive nature that she felt within her own cohort, being able to find other doctoral students who were not competitive, and were even willing to help her with concepts she did not understand, gave her the validation that she needed. Additionally, she also could relate to them due to their similar identities in being Women of Color and first-generation. As will be seen in later sections, being able to have these peers who were further along in the program and who she could speak to about upcoming milestones in her PhD was essential as she described having a difficult relationship with her advisor. Her constant repetition of feeling “not judged” and the ability to be “vulnerable” highlighted the type of environment she needed to succeed. Patty’s excerpt demonstrated the influence that having peer support, and especially having other Students of Color can play in Latina’s first year doctoral experience in reducing the anxiety and isolation that can occur.
Building relationships with other Students of Color in the classroom or program was a recurring theme for other participants as well. For instance, Juliana, who was one of two Latinas in her program, spoke to this theme when describing peer support within her program. Although she mentioned in her written *testimonio* the support she received from her entire cohort and the closeness they had, she discussed in her follow-up interview the other Students of Color within that cohort:

> It made me think also about how there are two other, there are two African-American students in my cohort who I felt - I mean I really allied with them. We got really close because of that. There were no other Spanish speakers or Latinas in the – well okay there was one, but there - overall in my classes it was pretty much me, but the other Latina wasn’t really in the same classes. So it felt that, like I really felt kind of close to them because of the minority experience.

For Juliana, having other Students of Color in her cohort lessened the fact that she was usually the only Latina in the classroom. Additionally, she was able to have allies and bond with them over their unique experiences as minorities in the program. Similar to Juliana, Courtney also spoke of the immediate understanding that her and the other Students of Color in her cohort had when they began their program.

> So funny enough, it’s just, it’s funny how it always happens that way, I mean I’ve seen it happen at the workplace, in class settings. The People of Color always tend to, always tend to gravitate towards each other. It’s, you know, I’ve read books about it, but it’s just interesting how it happens. So, although the first day of class we were all scattered, obviously we didn't know each other, but I promise you, Veronica, that by the end of maybe the first month, we were all clustered in our – so it was like the People of Color on the left, – it was just weird. So we all sat together, so we began to talk, we began to talk about our experiences and how we felt about being the only People of Color. It was just kind of like a stick together mentality, like, “We got to get through this together. We gotta stick through this and we’ll be all right.” Um, so that’s kind of how that happened. We just became like really cool. Like we, I can say that these people are my friends. They’re not just classmates, we’re friends. And we support each other throughout the process, and we talk on the phone when we’re not in class, and it’s just become, it just kind of happened that way.
Hearing Courtney explain her friendship with these students in her cohort highlights the powerful impact that having other Students of Color in the classroom/program can be. They not only bonded by speaking of their experiences as one of the few Students of Color, but it also brought about camaraderie and an instinct to “get through this together” so they can be “all right.” This type of support allowed Courtney to get through her first year and not feel as alone as she originally felt being the only Latina in the program.

Finding a support system within the program made up of your peers was valuable and essential for the participants above. Ana did not realize how important it was until the end of her first year. In her written testimonio, she described herself as an introvert and a “lone wolf” and talked about the isolation she felt during that first year, mostly due to the fact that she was commuting from a different city and was often not on campus. However, after receiving funding to go to a conference with her cohort, she began to socialize and realized the effects it had.

She reflected on this experience in her written testimonio:

Another turning point was later in the [second] semester when the department arranged for our cohort to attend a conference in DC. Being able to socialize with my peers outside of class was important because I got to learn about them beyond their research interests and vitas.

Attending this conference was a significant event for Ana as she not only began to break the isolation she felt, but it also helped with some of the imposter syndrome that she had previously mentioned in her testimonio. She elaborated further on the significance of this trip in her follow-up interview:

I roomed with one of my cohort members. I think we kind of meshed over some of the conflicts that were happening in the program, and just some of like the inconsistencies that we were hearing. Um, so that was really nice. And, of course,
you know, being that it’s a conference you go out for some drinks and, you know, you kind of, at least I do, I loosed my guard a little, or I let my guard down a little bit more. So that was really helpful in kind of getting to know people and just getting to know the fact that they were having the same struggles that I was having. I thought that was really important to me, knowing that I wasn’t the only one, you know, because as you know, during that first year like it can be really isolating. You feel like, “Wow everyone else is blowing up. They’re doing big things and here I am just kind of fading into the background.”

Ana attending this conference provided her with the opportunity to “let her guard” down and get to interact with some of the peers in her cohort. One of the most important things that happened was speaking to people about the doctoral experience and realizing they were going through similar issues as she was. Her biggest thing, as said at the end of the excerpt, was feeling as if she was not the only one. Therefore, peer support can be helpful in not only having a support system, but also feeling validated that the fears associated with a PhD program, especially during that first year, is a normal occurrence.

**Summary.** The preceding section highlights the importance that the role of peers can play during the first year doctoral experience of Latina students. The transition of beginning a doctoral program can be an anxiety inducing experience, especially if you are one of a few Students of Color in the program or in the classroom. However, as illustrated by the testimonios of some of the participants, having peer support, where these fears and anxiety can be discussed, proved to be a validating and reassuring moment for the Latina doctoral students in the study. They were able to discuss issues that arose in the classroom, were able to receive support when they did not understand certain concepts, or simply were able to bond and agree to stick together in order to make it through the program.
Theme III: Faculty Advisors and the Importance of Mentorship

Almost all literature on the graduate school experience addresses the pivotal role that faculty, and specifically advisors, plays in the lives of doctoral students. For the women in this study, this common theme was no different. However, how these advisors assisted and/or supported these women was unique. For two participants, they were able to see first hand the type of obstacles that even faculty face, especially for those that identified as Women of Color. For one participant, her advisor not only advised but also served as mentor, which were viewed as two completely different forms of support. However, one participant unfortunately did not receive the type of support she expected, but still received information that would help her in the future. Specifically, the experience with her advisor helped her understand the type of advisor she would want to become in the future for Latina doctoral students.

Amongst the discussion of faculty and advisors, one similarity that emerged was amongst participants who had Women of Color as advisors. Denise and Juliana, in particular, both discussed the importance of having these advisors, as they were able to understand their unique experiences and the challenges that it often brought. Denise shared in her oral testimonio:

Also, my advisor is first-gen, is a first-generation college student and a woman, and she’s a minority. She’s Native-American. So that was also very helpful too, because I felt like she understood kind of the struggles of being a woman, of being a minority, and of begin first-generation at [West Coast]. So that was really helpful as well.

Denise had earlier described how her new institution and program left her feeling like an outsider due to the predominantly White student population. Moreover, she also referenced other differences between her and her peers, especially in regards to social
class and their educational backgrounds. Therefore, having an advisor that shared similar identities to Denise and could relate to what she was experiencing was valuable during her first year.

Having a Woman of Color advisor was also influential for Juliana. Reflecting back on her advisor during the first year, she acknowledged the significance of being a Woman of Color in academia:

Yeah, so she has been amazing, I think, in terms of the support that she’s offered us. She’s, you know, she’s not tenured yet so she has a lot going on, but we’re publishing a lot, which I’m really excited about, because I really want to focus on research mostly. Um, but seeing her, I think, within this position and going through these hurdles that, first of all, I think Women of Color, in general, as faculty and not being tenured yet, go through has been really – I don’t know. It’s been a really interesting process to be able to see that, but also really motivating to, you know, see role models where you can see yourself in the future. So seeing her as a role model and feeling her support, as well, in terms of my own endeavors and my own push for that multicultural development within our program has been really, really great as well.

Juliana’s advisor has not only been able to provide her with the support of an advisor in the academic sense, such as with publishing articles, but it is evident she has also supported her in other ways, such as being a role model for Juliana. The ability for Juliana to see her advisor go through the tenure-track faculty process as a Woman of Color seemed to be a motivation for Juliana. Her advisor also reached out to support her in other ways. As will be read in later sections, Juliana’s first year experience prompted her to create a multicultural diversity group for her program, which was backed and supported by her advisor. By going out of her way to help Juliana during the first year, her advisor illustrates the importance of moving beyond just being an academic advisor, but also serving as a mentor and role model.
As described earlier when discussing family and support systems, Cassandra was very unhappy during her first semester. One contributing experience was when she began to connect with faculty members during her first year to get a head start on thinking about potential dissertation advisors. After meeting with one faculty member who seemed disinterested, at the encouragement of her husband, she met with another professor who was a graduate student representative at faculty meetings. She wrote in her testimonio:

I found out that a certain professor was the graduate student representative at faculty meetings, and so I thought it would be a good idea to talk to him about my semester so far. While the semester didn’t seem to get better, meeting this particular professor was the best thing that had happened. He was kind, listened to my story, had wise counsel, and checked up on me regularly. And he was Mexican American like me, therefore he understood certain cultural dynamics as well.

Not only was Cassandra able to find a faculty member that actually listened and showed interest, unlike her previous faculty interaction, she also valued the fact that he held a similar cultural background as herself. He was therefore able to understand some of the unique challenges she faced due to her identity as a Latinx person. Cassandra was further encouraged and impressed after taking a class with him. She continued in her testimonio that by “…taking the course with the Mexican American professor, I learned he was an excellent educator as well, which meant for me that I had found my dissertation advisor!”

At the end of Cassandra’s written testimonio, she reiterated the importance of having a support system and encouragement during a difficult first year. She ended her written testimonio by writing about her now advisor.

Finally, the Mexican American professor who I reached out to in that first semester had been instrumental in my success throughout my entire program, both academically and emotionally. He was attuned to my experience since he too was
a first generation doctoral student, he gave me constructive feedback to be better, and pushed me to be an excellent scholar.

Being able to connect with this professor, who ultimately became her advisor, during her first year gave Cassandra the encouragement and support to continue, especially after a tumultuous first few months where she almost quit her program. The fact that he also had a similar ethnic background as her was important, as he was not only able to advise her in academics, but also mentor her through her personal experiences.

For other participants, like Karina, who had an extremely rough first year dealing with racism and other biases, it took a bit longer to build trust with her advisor. She elaborated in her follow-up interview how she initially did not trust any of the faculty in the program to understand what she was going through, especially because they were not Faculty of Color. However, she eventually was able to find support with what would become her dissertation advisor. In Karina’s follow-up interview she shared:

So I got, let’s see, our second semester of our first year is whenever we choose our chair, so she and I really hit it off. And she actually, I think she’s the one, maybe – I can’t remember if I brought it up first or if she did, but she grew up in East [home state], and I grew up in West [home state], and East [home state] is a lot more racist. And so she acknowledged that and she talked to me about that in our first few meetings. And so that was really cool for me because then I was like, “Okay, I have somebody on my team now; someone who’s going to advocate for me because she recognizes this and she’s not afraid to talk about it.

Although the traditional role of an advisor is to provide academic support, for Karina, her new advisor also became an advocate she could rely on. Her advisor was attuned to the specific challenges that Karina was facing and, by sharing a bit more about where she came from, was able to let Karina know that she recognized the lack of diversity in the program and institution and the biases that came along with that. By caring enough to
acknowledge these issues, she gained Karina’s trust and was able to be the support system that Karina needed.

Unfortunately, not all the participants were able to find mentorship alongside the academic advising from their advisors. Although almost all the participants spoke positively about the relationships with their advisor, Patty had conflicting views on her advisor. As someone that Patty had known prior to beginning the doctoral program, she thought she would have a great relationship with her advisor, especially because they were also a Person of Color. However, when Patty encountered some academic issues during her first semester and received a low grade, she experienced a lot of self-doubt and felt as if she were failing. As Patty had mentioned earlier, one of her main concerns prior to beginning a doctoral program was her concern of having English as a Second Language and not being prepared to write. Receiving a low grade was therefore a significant challenge for her. When she spoke to her advisor about this concern, Patty did not receive the support she expected and instead was told to “focus on surviving.” Hearing these words made a significant shift in the way she viewed her advisor.

…and when they mentioned the word surviving, I felt like, very upset because – so it was a combination. So that challenging moment was a combination of getting the bad grade and then hearing my advisor say that I need to survive. I mean I do, but I think we need to get to a place of living and moving. And since I had advised students before, I, I remember reading something about surviving and how we should say that to Students of Color, “you need to survive,” because that doesn’t mean they’re going to be well and that they’re going to be living and enjoying their lives. So, for me, that triggered me and upset me. Because I didn’t enroll into a PhD program to survive. I enrolled in it to work on it and to live my life as a PhD student. So, it was a very challenging moment, for me. I didn’t know at that moment if I could go back to my advisor to talk about these things, which are important for me to cover.

Aside from hearing from her advisor to just focus on surviving, Patty also realized that she could not talk to her advisor about personal things that would affect her during this
doctoral journey. For example, when she had to take on another job due to financial problems, her advisor did not seem to understand. Therefore, Patty did not feel as if her advisor supported her outside of being a student:

Because they, they’ve been very supportive with my research and with my ideas, and with my career, but I don’t know if they, they’ve been supportive of me as a person. And what I mean by that, because I haven’t been able – I was dealing with a lot of family issues, and I haven’t been able to share that with them. When I share that I was afraid about the money and all those things, they didn’t seem to support my decision of like, you know, but not necessarily they’re concern of academics, but financially they couldn’t understand necessarily why I was thinking of taking a second job or thinking of that possibility because – I don’t know…Um, my relationship I would say is very professional, or very impersonal, too. Or what I would consider impersonal because I cannot talk to them about personal stuff. I just talk to them about academics and research and just, you know, what happens in school, not necessarily what happens outside of school. Yeah, but I know they will support my research. And I want to work with them because my advisor has done work on [research topic and I’m interested in working on [research topic]. So they’re experienced in that area, they’re [a Person of Color]. And, you know, again that’s why I was expecting maybe a lot more from them. But we all have different lived experiences, so yeah.

During Patty’s follow-up interview, she shared that she had eventually told her advisor a little bit about her family issues, because she could not hide it anymore, but that her advisor seemed aloof and never bothered to follow-up to see how she was doing. That solidified Patty’s decision to not share any more personal information with her advisor because she could not trust them fully. Despite these challenges, Patty acknowledged the support her advisor gave her in terms of academics, such as with research and career information. However, because of her advisor’s identity as a Person of Color, Patty expected her advisor to be more supportive of her outside of being a student. Patty does mention that this was an unfair expectation of her advisor. Overall, Patty’s experience illustrates how some Latina doctoral students may need or even expect additional support, aside from just academic, to help them get through the doctoral
journey. Luckily, Patty was able to find a supportive peer support group where she could share and receive support with some of the more personal situations she was going through.

**Summary.** For the participants in this study, many were able to gain positive support from their advisors. As seen by the excerpts from five of the participants, the most successful relationships were those where the advisor was able to provide support beyond just the academics; they were willing to listen and acknowledge the personal challenges that the students were facing. This important distinction between advising and mentorship was most clear with Patty’s *testimonio*. Although she had an advisor who was supportive of her academics, she did not receive the personal support she expected. Therefore, it proved to be a rocky relationship where Patty did not feel full trust with her advisor. Overall, however, the preceding section has highlighted the pivotal role that advisors play in the first year experience of Latina doctoral students. They are able to help guide them academically, but they can also serve as role models for Latinas who want to continue in academia after they receive their doctoral degree.

**Theme IV: Department and Institutional Resources Building Community and Providing Opportunities (for some)**

One of the final types of support systems that emerged from the findings was unique to some participants. For the four women in this section, they ended up receiving significant support and resources from their institutions and/or programs and departments. This type of support often was financial, but also included departments/programs who were cognizant of the needs of Students of Color and creating a more inclusive atmosphere.
Denise was one participant who felt that she received a great deal of support at the institutional level. Her *testimonio* was unique as she was the only one who spoke at length about her institution’s extensive efforts to make sure that students, especially Students of Color, are receiving the resources that they need.

So when I got into [West Coast] I got the [redacted] fellowship and that’s for first-generation, low-income grad students. They offer a lot of financial support, so they paid for all my moving expenses to move to [West Coast]. They gave me a stipend my first summer because for a lot of first-gen students we don’t have that capital to be able to find internships and fellowships for summer, so they gave us money to cover that summer. They have a lot of events during the year where they have events for all the [redacted] fellows and we get together and we have lunches with faculty. We’re each assigned a mentor who was also part of the program, but is further on the PhD program, that has lunch with us a couple times a month or more. So that was a big supportive thing on, at [West Coast] on campus. I also got really lucky because my cohort had a lot of Latinos in it, and so we would go to a lot of events. [West Coast] also has ethnic centers um, so we have the [Name of Latinx Center], which is this just very nice kind of safe space that anyone can go to, but a lot of Latinos go to and there’s events there and parties there. And it’s on campus so that’s where you kind of go and you can kind of feel at home there

Denise shared through her *testimonio* and her follow-up interview the impact that this fellowship and the resources given by West Coast did for her first year and beyond.

Although West Coast is not unique in providing fellowships or funding for Students of Color, it goes beyond that by providing a mentorship component. Furthermore, West Coast also has ethnic centers on campus to make the atmosphere more inclusive, despite it’s predominantly White population. Despite the lack of diversity that Denise shared in her own program/department, she was able to meet other Latinx and Students of Color because of the institutional support that she received.

Other students received more support at the departmental/program level. For some participants, such as Patty, the program/department was a safe space within a PWI and was intentional about making sure that a community is built. She shared:
Now the Faculty of Color at [East Coast], they do some events in the beginning of the year to create community. So, for example they will have a barbecue in a couple of weeks for the incoming students at one of the professor’s house. So, for me that shows that I’m opening my home, which is a very intimate space for someone, to build community for incoming students and returning students in the program. So, that’s something that I will go to, for example, because I trust my professor and I’m thankful and grateful for her for opening that space for us. And then for preview days, which is the interviewing days with incoming/perspective incoming students come to visit campus, something similar happens. At orientation, or one of the welcome events, happens at a house of the other professors, so I would say those, those are really key demonstration of how open they are like to also share their spaces with us.

Patty described earlier in her follow up interview how most of the spaces on campus were predominantly White, so for her, the safe space she had on campus was her own department program due to the Faculty of Color and other Students of Color there. The faculty provided their support by opening up their homes to make them feel more welcomed. For Patty, this was important in gaining the ability to fully trust her faculty and feel as if she can share information about herself.

Alexis also mentioned a supportive departmental culture in her follow-up interview. Despite the imposter syndrome and other challenges she faced that first year, she mentioned the familial feeling she had when interacting with people in her department. When asked further about how that familial feeling is created, she shared:

Um, maybe the department? Because, I think, what I see now going into my second year, I see how each cohort like, when we welcome a new one we make sure we build hat. Like, that’s something we carry. So I wonder like, I think it’s the department, like the way, like our professors are really cool, and laid back, and will ask you how you’re doing. They will challenge you, they’re not afraid to do that, but at the end of the day they’re support you, as well. And I think that just part of the department. I don’t know how that was built, but that’s the mentality, like our culture that we carry on.

As Alexis explained, this culture of support in the department has been around even from before she was there and it has been carried on to each new cohort. She later went on to
explain how various students help each other even if they are in different years or levels in the program. Alexis appreciated that there was no division between students and everyone was supportive. Based on her description, it seems that the faculty of the department have instilled that supportive nature by looking out for their students, which has then been reinforced by the students each new academic year.

For participants, such as La Blue, departmental support came in the composition of the department and the intentional steps that the program took to make sure the environment was inclusive and culturally competent. La Blue spoke about her department in her oral testimonio:

My undergrad there was professors that were teaching me that were really clueless about Latinos, right? And so I had some negative experiences in my undergrad. I didn’t have any of those experiences in this program my first year because most of the professors were People of Color. And it’s because this program has chosen in the years previous, just like a few years previous to me coming in to the program, they have chosen to hire - the director of the program is Latino, the director of the doctoral program. The director of the master’s program is African American. And they have chosen to recruit faculty that are culturally competent. So I didn’t face what a lot of other Latina doctoral students I know of face that first year of like half teaching your professors how to teach to you, you know? That wasn’t my experience my first year coming in because of the two directors of the program.

As evidenced by her statement, the department’s mission to ensure culturally competent faculty are a part of the program has resulted in La Blue not having these negative experiences as in her previous institutions. Her statement of not having to “teach” professors how to teach Latinx students illustrates some of the frustrations that other Latinx students may have to undergo in their doctoral journey, which she acknowledges. Therefore, the departmental environment intentionally created by the faculty has helped to alleviate at least some of the more common obstacles that a Latina doctoral student may face.
Summary. The excerpts from Denise, Patty, Alexis, and La Blue showcase how institutional and departmental support can take place. At the institutional level, providing resources for Latinx students, in the forms of fellowships and mentorship, can be critical in not only recruiting, but also retaining Latina doctoral students. At the departmental level, faculty who are willing to be open and share their experiences, create a supportive environment, or be purposeful in the type of faculty that are hired, can make a significant difference in the first year experience for Latina doctoral students.

RQ3: How the First Year Shapes the Rest of the Doctoral Journey

As seen in the previous sections, many of the participants shared instances of isolation, imposter syndrome, and feeling marginalized due to the intersection of their various identities. For many, they spoke extensively about how being one of the few, if not the only, Latina in their programs was a salient experience for them during the first year. However, they were able to utilize various support systems to help guide them through this time. During their follow-up interviews, I asked questions to the participants that focused on how their first year would or did influence and/or shape subsequent years in their program.

Therefore, the following section will focus on the final research question of this study, which is: How does the first year experience influence Latina doctoral students’ outlook and/or experiences in subsequent years? As will follow, three major themes will be highlighted including: (a) creating their own spaces; (b) finding their voice; and (c) overcoming persistent obstacles.
Theme I: Latinas Creating Their Own Spaces Now and for the Future

One significant finding from three participant responses was that they chose to use their experiences as a catalyst to create, lead, or vocalize their need for spaces to help themselves and others who were facing similar situations. One participant, Cassandra, was shocked at the fact that, despite the large size of her institution, there were not already organizations or initiatives for Latinx graduate students. She acknowledged that there were a few organizations for Latinx undergraduate, but none at the graduate level. Therefore, she got together with other students in her program and they created their own organization. She shared:

But I, I didn’t have access to a graduate student support group for Latinos. We had to create one ourselves. Yeah, and it was actually the faculty sponsor for that group was actually my advisor, just to show you how dedicated this professor was or is to us, to Students of Color. And so we ended up in our department creating a group called [redacted] and basically we would meet once a week or maybe twice a month and we would just either, if we had a conference coming up, we would like read our presentations to each other and we’d give each other feedback, or we would watch films and critique the films together. We did a couple of field trips…and it was all- but we had to it ourselves, you know what I mean?

Later on in her response, she mentioned this group being a sort of safe space for her and the other students. Although it was discouraging that there was nothing already established within the institution or department, Cassandra and her peers took it upon themselves to create a space so that future Latinx graduate students could have an established support system within their program. They not only created a social atmosphere, but also an academic one where they could receive feedback on their work and, as she later shared, take field trips to different institutions where they could meet with other students and faculty members, thus expanding the networks of these student members. It is also of interest that she mentions her advisor agreeing to be a faculty
sponsor for the group, showcasing the importance of faculty involvement for Latinx students, and in this case, for Cassandra.

Cassandra’s creation of a safe space was similar to Juliana’s creation of a diversity group within her program. As described in early parts of this chapter, Juliana was disillusioned by the lack of diversity issues discussed in her program when she arrived. Coming from a master’s program that heavily promoted social justice issues, it was a significant challenge for her during the first year. As she wrote in her testimonio, she channeled this frustration into a new idea for her program during the end of her first year:

I also recently decided to turn my frustration with the lack of attention to diversity and multicultural issues at my school and department into action and I decided to start a diversity group. My last school had all of the diversity and multicultural support systems I could have ever wanted, so there was no need to be active and change my environment. I am in the process of planning how to go about it with the support of my advisor and some other colleagues.

When discussing this new initiative further in the follow-up interview, Juliana describes the vision of her new diversity group as being “…a space for everybody to come and just process things,” such as events that have happened in the country that could be triggering for Students of Color. Although it is in the beginning stages, Juliana illustrated how she took action to create a space that she wish she had during her first year. Not only will it provide future Students of Color with this established space to go, but it also demonstrates to her program and department that these types of initiatives are needed. As she later mentioned in her follow-up interview, the department has begun to step up in addressing her concerns, including having a meeting where everyone could talk about a current event that had occurred. Like Cassandra, Juliana also received support from her advisor in helping to establish this new group.
Creating spaces was not limited to establishing support groups. For Alexis, she mentioned that she did not feel represented at her institution. In particular, she was disappointed at the fact that there was not a Latinx Studies department at the institution, even though she felt there was a large amount of Latinxs in the state of the institution. When discussing what her future in the program would look like, she spoke about an opportunity she was granted that would help in filling that gap of a lack of Latinx classes at the institution. She spoke in the interview: “I’m in the process of developing a Latinx leadership identity development class. I know I’m so excited…So I hope to pilot that in the fall.” She mentions later, when discussing her future career plans, on how this new course fits into the type of work she wants to do. She elaborated:

I actually want to go into administration again…any, any part of the university where I'm able to support students. I think that’s really what I’m looking for, especially as I delve deeper into this Latinx leadership identity development thing that I'm working on, which is also a dissertation topic of mine. I’m kind of looking into helping students who are underrepresented and helping them get through college and helping them get, find those support systems that they need to get through.

The opportunity to develop a class that centers on Latinx students not only is important as it centers on her research interests and the type of work she wants to do in the future, but she is also acknowledging the gap of Latinx courses at her institution. Instead of just letting it continue to happen, Alexis took matters into her own hands and will be creating this new space/class for others.

**Summary.** This section spotlights three participants, Cassandra, Juliana, and Alexis, who developed spaces for themselves and other Latinx and Students of Color. They turned negative experiences with a lack of diversity and established their own groups or courses in order to create a more inclusive spaces for Latinx and other Students.
of Color. These women illustrate how Latina doctoral students not only choose to find support systems to help them through their first year and beyond, but also intentionally seek to help others with their initiatives and ideas. Through the creation of these spaces, they are beginning to fill the gaps that have been left by institutions and departments.

**Theme II: Latinas Finding Their Voice**

When addressing the research question of how Latinas’ first year shapes or influences future years in their program, one prevalent theme that emerged is how that first year enhanced their voice within their program and institution. The definition of voice in this section is described as Latinas being more vocal about their identity, their experiences, and the types of support that they need. For the following four Latinas in this section, they discussed how their first year experience was a catalyst to the strengthening of their voice.

Alexis, who will be developing her own course on Latinx students, best described how her voice strengthened after her first year experience. Alexis shared in her follow-up interview:

> And I feel that I now, I’m becoming like an angry Latina lady, but not in a bad way. I just want to make sure that we’re represented and that we’re heard, and so my awareness has been heightened. And so I’m coming into my second year with that. And now that I’m mad about it - ‘cause I’m, I want to learn more about this experience, but I just feel like I’m going through an awakening now, and I’m finally understanding what people are talking about it or fighting about. And there’s a part of me that’s upset that it took me this long, but there’s another part that’s like, “Whatever. It took you this long, but you’re in it now, so what are you going to do?” And I think with this, creating this course is really what’s going to help me get there.

Throughout the excerpt she spoke about being more vocal about “we,” or Latinx people, and their experiences. As she described, the first year was an “awakening” that helped her not only understand the various challenges that Latinx and other Students of
Color face, but also in awakening her voice and her mission in what she wants to do and contribute in her subsequent years. The strengthening of her voice as a Latina doctoral student was a major component in beginning to create the Latinx course, which will be another space that will continue to develop her voice and teach others about the Latinx experience.

The strengthening of one’s voice was also intertwined in the strengthening of one’s identity as a Latina woman. For Lilliana, her first year at Midwestern Institution, where there are few Latinx students, made her more unapologetic in how she voiced her opinions and comments in the classroom. Additionally, she also spoke about how the first year shaped the type of research she wants to conduct, specifically on Latinx students, as she developed this awareness that the Latinx population is often forgotten.

When speaking specifically about the influence of her first year she shared:

…I think that being in this program and being the only one in my classroom most of the time, like I think I’ve been a lot more vocal about how I identify. And being very unapologetic about how I identify and the fact that when I’m, when I make comments it’s always connected to my identity as a Latina woman…and just kind of not caring if it’s going to bother people or make people feel uncomfortable or whatever. Like I tell my cohort mates all the time, I’m like, we have struggled so much to even like gain the space in this classroom, and even then the only space that I have in this classroom is my little chair and so if that’s all I have then I’m going to make the most of it.

Lilliana’s excerpt highlights how she took the experience of usually being the only Latina in many spaces and turned it into a strength builder. Instead of sinking into the background, she used it as an opportunity to be extremely vocal about her experience as a Latina woman, and understood that her chair in the classroom was her space and therefore she would speak her truth, regardless of what others might think. While being the only one of your identity in a space can be a lonely and isolating experience, as other
participants have stated, she chose to channel that into an opportunity to be unafraid and unapologetic of her voice, her identity, and her experiences.

As evidenced in earlier sections, for some participants, like Karina, they experienced a multitude of challenges that centered around racism and other biases that could break even the strongest of people. Despite the negativity that surrounded her first year, when asked about how her outlook changed after her first year she spoke on how she became comfortable with bringing her various identities into the classroom, something she had been afraid to do before.

I think I – through processing in classes and bringing more of my Latina identity into the classroom and that being welcomed and supported by faculty and by other students, that really helped me to find my voice. And I gained a lot more confidence, and so that imposter syndrome slowly started going away because something clicked and I found out like, “Oh wow, these people really need to hear from my because they haven’t had a lot of diversity here. So they do need to hear my experiences”…And having that support and having that safe place to do that is what really helped me to find my voice and build my confidence.

Although Karina initially began her first year having mistrust for her program due to the lack of diversity, obtaining support from her advisor (as described in earlier sections) and now the support of her peers helped her not be afraid to bring her voice in the classroom. Later in the interview, when providing advice for future Latina doctoral students, her first piece of advice was to “to be brave” and to “find their voice to speak out when they notice injustices…to advocate for their needs as students.” Karina emphasized that stereotypes in society have made it seem as if Latinx people do not have anything to contribute, but they do and therefore Latinx people need to embrace it. When comparing how she spoke about her first year and the isolation, loneliness, and mistrust she felt, versus her current experience as she was about to enter her final year at the time
of the interview, it becomes apparent that those initial negative experiences shaped and strengthened her voice and helped her in reaching this point in her doctoral journey.

La Blue is one final participant who directly spoke about the need for Latina doctoral students to find and strengthen their voice in their programs and institutions. Although La Blue described entering her program without having some of the common anxieties and fears that other participants had, she still experienced growth in the way she addressed instances of injustice, as well as how she interacted in the classroom. In her follow-up interview, she described an incident that occurred in a recent class. During class conversations, she noticed that the women, some of whom were Women of Color, were often cut off or not given the same opportunities to discuss as the men in the classroom. La Blue reflected:

I mean, I think what I was cognizant of this summer is – I was in a classroom, a summer class…and probably because there was, some of the 2-3, 3 of those women were Women of Color, and because of the dynamics of the class where the women were silenced or being just not given the opportunity to really explore their answers to questions like the men were, I think I felt as kind of like the eldest in the room, which I was, I felt this responsibility to really push up against that. And I think that previous to the two years, like if it had been my first summer I might not have done that, you know? But because I’ve been in the program now for 2 years…and I’ve seen different strategies that the professors use and styles that they have that I just know, I know I needed to challenge this professor’s style and challenge the gender dynamics that was almost like unconsciously set up by the environment that the professor was creating.

La Blue’s experience highlights not only a gender bias that occurred in this class, but also the strength it took for her to say something about what she was witnessing. During previous parts of her testimonio and interview, La Blue spoke about how her job had prepared her to deal with instances of bias. She came into her program confident about her abilities and what she could bring to classroom discussions. Even with all of this, she still experienced growth from that first-year, as La Blue mentioned she was not sure if
she would have had the same response to this instance two years prior. These different interactions that she had witnessed and/or experienced, also shaped the type of advice she would tell future and current Latina doctoral students. In her oral testimonio, she spoke passionately about this very topic of finding voice and stated:

> I think the second thing I would say is to, you know, *hablar sin pelos en la lengua.* It’s so important for us to just be bold. And the reason why it’s important is that if we are going to be in these spaces where we have not historically been, I just don’t feel that we should shuffle in through the back row or come in the dark…And by making that presence, in these initial opportunities that we’re having to be present in these spaces, it will create these other spaces behind us so that other generations aren’t going to really need perhaps to be as bold. They’re going to be able to come in like some of these White people and just come in and sit there and do well, you know, and be respected.

Here La Blue states that Latina doctoral students should “*hablar sin pelos en la lengua.*” Although this directly translates to “speak without hair on one’s tongue,” the deeper meaning is for one to speak boldly, be straight forward, and speak without fear. As was seen with some of the participants, entering new spaces and communities often led to an initial stifling of their voices due to fear of being an outsider. However, La Blue’s advice above illustrates how many of the participants in this section were able to *hablar sin pelos en la lengua* as they progressed in their doctoral journey. After having often difficult times during the first-year, they used those experiences, obstacles, and challenges to strengthen their voice and push back on the injustices they saw in the classroom and beyond, as well as share their stories to others around them.

**Summary.** Despite instances that could break down or silence any person, some of the Latinas in this study were able to channel the negative experiences during their first year to strengthen how they viewed themselves and how they continued on with their doctoral journey. As seen in the excerpts by Alexis, Lilliana, Karina, and La Blue, they
all found ways to be vocal, be bold, and not be silenced. They had the courage and confidence to speak out and be unapologetic, as said by Lilliana, in their views, experiences, and identities as Latina women. Through these actions, these women are helping to continue to pave the pathway for future Latina doctoral students.

**Theme III: Latinas Identifying Persistent Obstacles**

While many of the participants were able to find their own space within their programs after the first year, finding their voice and/or support system did not mean they were clear from facing additional challenges in subsequent years. During the follow-up interviews, three of the participants discussed these persistent obstacles that were similar to those faced during the first year. Unfortunately, many were centered on biases related to their identities as Latina women.

One particular instance for Denise occurred during a research project with other colleagues. While working with another professor who was not her advisor, she was a part of a team with two other White women. During that time, Denise felt that her emails and other forms of communication were ignored and she was, overall, getting a “weird vibe” from her research teammates. When she confronted the women about these issues, she specifically asked whether this was occurring due to her identity as a Latina woman. Although the women denied this was the reason, one mentioned it had more to do with her age (25). The women were nervous that she would speak to the main faculty member about the incident, due to the faculty member’s reputation with being harsh with students, which was concerning to Denise. She shared:

There are kind of microaggressions that happen. [Faculty member’s] lab is all White, mostly male, and the minority students that have come in the lab don’t last very long. They kind of just leave after awhile. So that was, you know, that was my summer dealing with this lab. And it just kind of microaggression, after
microaggression, and some outward macroaggression, and kind of dealing with
that this summer.

Aside from dealing with these biases during her lab, an additional concerning
element was Denise seeking advice or talking to anyone about the incident. When I
asked whether she had been able to talk to anyone about what occurred, she spoke about
the repercussions that could be associated with her speaking out. She shared:

Um, that’s the thing, too about – I think a lot of institutions, especially this one, I
feel like I have to be very careful about who I talk to, and what the repercussions
of that is...I think I’ll definitely tell [advisor] just the whole story, but in terms of
other grad students, or the faculty I probably won’t based on her advice. I do
want to speak to, to the [faculty member] directly first, but I realize that to kind of
prepare that beforehand, and I don’t want [faculty member] to kind of hurt my
progress in any way...But yeah, there’s a sense of there might be negative
repercussions like kind of, there might be gossip that’s spread around. And it’s a
very kind of tense environment when people, you know, think that you’re going
to stir up too many things or something. So definitely careful on that.

For Denise, it was not only the fact that she had to deal with direct biases and
micro/macroaggressions, but she also had to think about the repercussions that could
occur if she were to speak out about these instances. Another participant, Karina, had
earlier spoken about being afraid of being the person to “yell discrimination,” which is a
similar feeling that Denise had when she mentioned “stirring up too many things.” Not
only did this affect her in the current moment, but later on Denise mentioned how she has
been on the lookout for these types of microaggressions, such as of being too young, or
being a Latina women, and people thinking that she may be incompetent or less
experienced. Despite Denise finding support from her advisor and other peers, as well as
also being confident in her abilities as a doctoral student in her first year, this still did not
prevent her from fearing this disrespect as she got further into her program.
The thoughts and feelings that are experienced when Students of Color face constant microaggressions and other forms of biases can lead to actual health problems. Ana is one participant who spoke about how these type of interactions can lead to actual physical ailments. When we spoke about the emerging themes of the testimonios of all the participants and came upon the theme of biases and racist incidents, she shared the following:

No, you know I was going to talk on that also like, the whole physiological reactions to the PhD program. I think that’s very real. I think that I read it in Yosso, where she actually mentions racial battle fatigue, and when I read it I was like, you know, I was so happy that I had found a term that described what I was feeling, like really exhausted. Even just thinking about it is exhausting, like having to always, or feeling like you always have to say something really profound or really like, make your mark because you’re so lucky to be there, you know, you’re like the one Latina in the classroom or in a group. And so just the stress of that is really overwhelming, it’s just exhausting, like at times where it manifested into actual tensions headaches and just exhaustion, like physical exhaustion.

Ana’s description of racial battle fatigue (Smith, 2004), which has been documented by various scholars (e.g., Pérez Huber & Cueva, 2012; Franklin, Smith, Hung, 2014), illustrates how the biases and racism that have been described at length in this chapter not only affect the psyche, but can also turn physical. She had earlier described the isolation she felt from her peers during the first year, and yet even after finally finding her place within her program was now once again facing similar feelings as she began to enter her final year. Unfortunately, these are realizations that many of the participants not only currently deal with, but for some, including Ana, have to think about when they begin to figure out the next steps in their careers.

Foreshadowing the negative instances that can arise as they continue on in their careers as faculty or practitioners was also something that Karina mentioned when
discussing the emerging themes from everyone’s testimonios. Although she acknowledged how far she has come in terms of being more vocal and finding her voice, there was also a source of worry as mentioned in the following excerpt:

And also I think the fear of just having read a lot of literature on Women of Color in higher ed, having that fear as well of like, “Well, I found my voice in this program, and I'm pretty rowdy now and I'm okay with that. But is that going to be accepted everywhere else? Well, probably not.” And so also having that fear of again probably being rejected because I am so loud when it comes to social justice issues.

Even though Karina was able to use her first year to help strengthen her voice and not be afraid to be bold about issues and injustices, it still concerned her on how that will be accepted when she moves on to a different institution as a future faculty member. Karina and Ana’s concerns are daunting but, unfortunately, obtaining a doctoral degree does not end these instances of biases. As has been recorded in the literature (e.g., Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002; Turner, 2002), the experiences shared often continue in both faculty and administrative roles for Latina women. It is troubling that as these two participants enter their final year of doctoral study, they now are thinking about many of the similar issues they did during their first year as, in essence, they will once again face a new “first year” in their new career position. Even though they were able to successfully navigate their first year of doctoral study, having to relive it again in an employment position with even higher stakes may create doubt of whether they will be able to once again get past that first year.

Summary. This section highlighted the continuing obstacles faced by Latina doctoral students past the first year, as described by four of the participants. They often were similar to what many experienced during the first year of doctoral study, and despite the confidence and support they found within that first year, it still did not shield them
from facing these new and often continuing obstacles. This theme therefore illustrates that there are certain experiences, such as biases and racism, that continue regardless of year in a doctoral program. Much more than that, it also illustrates the continuous challenges that persist regardless of credentials, as many explained the fears they had when thinking about transitioning into a faculty or administrative role.

### A Composite Story of the First Year Experience for Latina Doctoral Students

Composite stories are another method of counter storytelling. Solórzano and Yosso (2002) described composite stories as offering “…both biographical and autobiographical analyses because the authors create composite characters and place them in social, historical, and political situations to discuss racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of subordination” (p. 33). Although this chapter presented the findings in relation to each research question, presenting them in a composite story illustrates how some of the themes interconnect and, oftentimes facilitate, the existence of other themes. The composite story provides a clearer picture of how these themes can play out in the lives of Latina doctoral students. The composite story will draw primarily from the findings, but also will draw from the existing literature, and professional and personal experience, also known as a researcher’s cultural intuition (Delgado Bernal, 1998; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). The following composite will consist of two Latina doctoral students, one in her first year and one in her last year of doctoral study, as they engage in a peer mentoring program at an interdisciplinary conference dedicated for Latina researchers in academia.

### Not the Only One

*Mila is a first year doctoral student attending an interdisciplinary conference for Latina researchers. She decided to participate in a peer mentoring program to get*
connected with other Latinas and is waiting to meet her mentor, Clarissa, a fourth year doctoral student. They meet and begin to talk about some of their shared experiences as Latina doctoral students.

Mila: Clarissa, thank you so much for meeting with me! I’m really excited to be a part of this conference and this network. It’s so great to see so many Latinas in one space – something I definitely don’t experience in my own program. It been difficult finding that mentorship at my own institution so I’ve had to go outside to find it (Zambrana, Ray, Espino, Castro, Cohen, & Eliason, 2015). It’s been a difficult first year.

Clarissa: Oh, Mila. I’m sorry to hear that, but believe me you’re not the only. I definitely remember my first year and how much of a shock that was. Like you, my institution wasn’t very diverse. I actually was the only Latina in my program when I came in. I figured there wouldn’t be a lot of Latinx students in the program, but being the only one in my classes took me by surprise. It was a really isolating experience at first (Aryan & Guzman, 2010; González, 2006; 2007).

Mila: Yes! I am currently one of two Latinas in the whole program. However, the other Latina student is finishing up her dissertation, so I’m always the only Latina in my core courses. Like, I expected it because I remember not seeing many Latinx students or other Students of Color during admitted students’ weekend, but actually experiencing it was something else. I definitely wasn’t prepared for how it would affect me.

Clarissa: You know, that’s so true. I remember when I first visited the campus and when I did my own research on the program and institution I saw there weren’t many Latinx. I mean, I remember Googling good Mexican restaurants and the top search was Taco Bell! [laughs] But like you, it did not hit me until I started classes. It was like, I was suddenly very aware that I was the only Latina in the classroom. I could even feel it just walking around the campus or even going out into the community when I had to run errands.

Mila: Yeah, unfortunately I’ve had experiences where people make it very well known that I’m different. The annoying remarks in class or in other settings are really frustrating.

Clarissa: Wait, what comments do people make?

Mila: Well, for instance one time we were having a class discussion on family influences on student’s aspirations for college. One of the other students in the class then made a comment about how the reason Latinx students don’t do well in school is because their parents don’t let them. It was just a very deficit way of thinking about Latinx students and their families (Yosso, 2005)

Clarissa: Are you serious?!

Mila: Yeah, and the worst part is nobody really said anything. Like, the professor kind of just went on and didn’t correct the student. And to be honest, I didn’t say anything either. I was just afraid that if I brought it up that I’d be labeled “that person,” you know what I
mean? (Davis & Livingstone, 2016). I just remember spending the rest of the class feeling bad that I didn’t say anything, upset that no one else said anything, and it made me feel sick. I know it probably sounds weird, but I guess I was just anxious that someone else would say something racist like that.

Clarissa: Yeah, I completely understand. You know, I’ve experienced some of those microaggressions before (Pierce, 1995; Yosso et al., 2009). Honestly, they really get to me. It’s like, it’s hard to really point them out and make people understand the racism and bias that’s attached to them. They think that it’s not racist because it’s not some overt racist action, but those microaggressions, those comments in the classroom or the looks you get can take a toll. I read an article about racial battle fatigue (Smith, 2004) and how that can actually affect you physically. So that sick feeling you were feeling may be that, especially if you’ve had to deal with it a lot.

Mila: I need to read more about this! Like, I feel like all of this has culminated into just not feeling confident anymore. Being the only Latina in the classroom, plus having to deal with those microaggressions from others, have made me feel like I don’t belong. I’m not as confident in my abilities anymore, and it’s really caused me to shut down. Like in class discussions I hardly say anything because I don’t want to sound dumb and give people more reason to think that I don’t belong in the program. I sometimes feel like maybe they only let me in because I’m Latina and they just needed a Latinx person in the program to make them look good.

Clarissa: Mila, it looks like you’re definitely going through some imposter syndrome (Clance & Imes, 1978) right now, just like I did my first year.

Mila: I’ve heard of imposter syndrome, but I don’t really know much about it.

Clarissa: Imposter syndrome is basically when you feel like a fraud or like you don’t deserve what you accomplish. It can really affect the way you see yourself and the self-doubt can make you question your abilities. I think it really is enhanced when you’re in a situation like you are now, where you’re the only Latina, when you have to deal with constant microaggressions, and when you feel that isolation from your own cultural background (Espino et al., 2010; Truong & Museus, 2012). I know I felt it my first year and it even still pops up every now and then. I also know of others who have felt it, too. So let me be the first to tell you - you’re not alone! I think as time goes on, you’ll realize that you were accepted because you are talented. You have lots to offer the program and don’t let those negative thoughts impact your participation. I know it’s easier said than done, but honestly as I got further along in my program I realized that I needed to push it aside and say what I felt in class. I almost felt this pride in being the only Latina and I didn’t feel so afraid to say what’s on my mind (González, 2006). This is my program and I wanted to do it my way.

Mila: I really hope I can feel like that soon. You sound so confident I don’t know how you do it!
Clarissa: [laughs] Trust me, it took awhile. I got lucky because I was able to find a good support system with some of my peers and especially my advisor. She’s also a Women of Color so hearing her experiences and having her be so supportive was a big help (Figueroa and Rodriguez 2015; Fries-Britt & Snyder, 2015). How is your support system?

Mila: My faculty advisor isn’t that helpful. I mean, they help me academically, but I don’t feel comfortable sharing some of this stuff that I’m telling you. However, there are two other Students of Color in my cohort and we have really bonded. We all talk about some of these issues often and that’s been great. We’re getting through this together. Also, my family has been great. They don’t really get what I’m doing, but I know I can always depend on them (Espinoza, 2010).

Clarissa: That’s so good to hear! You know, sometimes you have to go out and find other faculty members outside of your department or institution if you’re not getting the support you need in your own program. It’s annoying because it’s like you have to put more effort because sadly there’s not many Faculty of Color, but finding others can be really useful (Zambrana et al., 2015.).

Mila: That’s true. I think I’ll definitely try to network more and find mentors in other places. It’s one of the big reasons why I signed up for this conference.

Clarissa: Yeah. I mean, I can definitely introduce you to my advisor and some other faculty members that have been great supporters.

Mila: Thank you so much! That would be awesome.

Clarissa: You know going back to what you said about family, that’s so great they’re supportive. I know I couldn’t do it without having their support, even though they also get confused about what I do [laughs] They’re always asking me if I’m done with my “homework.” I’m like, my homework never ends! [laughs]

Mila: [laughs] Yeah, same here! But honestly, I’ve felt a lot of guilt this year (Espinoza, 2010). Sometimes I feel bad that I’m here and they’re at home going through some things. I remember having to talk to my family before I even applied just to get them prepared that I wouldn’t be able to be home as often because I’d be far away and dealing with this whole PhD.

Clarissa: Ah yes. That’s difficult. I know I felt bad as well because I felt like I wasn’t there for them and helping them like I should. Plus, I felt like being in a PhD program was almost taking me away from what I knew. Being in this world of academia made me feeling like I don’t belong here, but I also don’t belong there anymore.

Mila: Yes! I was reading Anzaldúa’s (1987) work about this very thing. It’s the feeling of *nepantla* where you’re in this weird in-between place. You’re almost being pulled in
two different directions. But the good thing is that she describes how it can often create new things and help strengthen you. I think I just need to get to that point. [sighs]

Clarissa: Mila, it takes awhile. It’s not easy, I mean I still am struggling with it, but like I said earlier, as time went on I began to get more comfortable with that weird tension. Also, I just got more confident with myself and felt like I found my voice (González 2006; Hinojosa & Carney, 2016). But even now as I start thinking of finishing up this last year, I’m starting to have some of those same feelings as my first year. I want to be a faculty member, but I know that means I’ll probably face some of the similar things we went through our first year, like being the only Latina again, or having to face more microaggressions or other types of biases. I mean, I’ve read articles about how Women of Color faculty members have it rough with getting tenure, or dealing with students in the classroom who don’t think we should be there (e.g., Comer, Medina, Negroni, & Thomas, 2016; Pittman, 2010). But I think that first year taught me that yeah, it’s tough, but I know I have the skills and the support to make it through. I’m scared of what will come up next, but I know I can make it. Also, that’s really one of the reason I wanted to be a mentor for this conference, because I want to make sure that other Latinas don’t have a rough first year, and I want to help guide them on all the other obstacles that sometimes happen in subsequent years. Unfortunately, that first year can be scary and determine whether someone stays or goes (Golde, 1998). I want other Latinas to persist with their doctoral programs. One thing I created at my school was a group where Students of Color can come together and just discuss different issues we’re going through and support each other with writing time. We’ve even begun to think of some publications on this experience. It’s been a good experience.

Mila: Wow, that sounds great! Hmm, maybe I should think of doing something like that in my program.

Clarissa: Yeah, I’d be happy to share how we got started. I’ll email you some of our organization forms and stuff.

Mila: Great! Clarissa, you’ve been such a great help. Thank you for taking the time to talk to me about all of this. It’s great to be able to share some of this with someone that understands.

Clarissa: Of course! Like I said, I want to make sure that other Latinas are able to make it through the program. We need more Latinas in academia so we can break the cycle!

In sum, the composite story above presents the findings of this study, alongside previous literature, and personal and professional experience, to demonstrate the complexity of the Latina doctoral experience during the first year. Most importantly, the composite story revealed how many of the themes that emerged from the participants’
testimonios and follow-up interviews are not stand alone, but intersect at various points.

While the following section will look more in-depth at some of the themes independently, it is important to keep in mind how, as seen in the composite story, they interrelate and can act as a catalyst for the emergence of other experiences.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the first year doctoral experiences of Latina women at predominantly White institutions with the following three research questions: (a) In what ways do the intersections of race, ethnicity, and gender, amongst other identities, shape Latina women’s first year doctoral experience?; (b) How do Latina doctoral students navigate barriers to success, including forms of support utilized in their navigation, during the first year in a doctoral program?; and (c) How does the first year experience influence Latina doctoral students’ outlook and/or experiences in subsequent years? The previous chapter detailed the complexities of being a Latina in predominantly White spaces in higher education; complexities that are compounded by the demands of doctoral education. The participants shared their experiences with doubt, isolation, guilt, anger, strength, success, creativity, resiliency, and much more through their first year and beyond.

The intersection of the participants’ identities was most prevalent when they began to process the lack of diversity around them, which often led to instances of discrimination. Additionally, they also dealt with imposter syndrome, as well as having to navigate new roles in academia in conjunction with roles in their cultural background and/or home. However, the participants were able to find guidance and support from family, peers, faculty advisors, and, for some, institutional and departmental resources. For some of the participants this first year experience shaped their actions and outlooks in subsequent years. This included some of the Latina doctoral students being
more vocal in and outside of the classroom, and others creating and establishing spaces for themselves and other Students of Color within their programs and institutions. Unfortunately, some of the participants still endured similar obstacles in subsequent years. Regardless of the obstacles that were experienced, ranging from academic to personal, all the participants successfully finished their first year and, at the time of the interviews, were all persisting on to the next academic year.

This final chapter addresses the findings in line with the theoretical perspective used, LatCrit, and then lead into a discussion of these findings in relation to the existing literature. The chapter will conclude with implications for practice and future research, as the findings display that there is much more that can be discussed and examined when exploring the experiences of Latina doctoral students. Lastly, I will address the limitations of the study and end with some final remarks.

**Discussion of the Study Related to Latino Critical Theory**

The use of Latino Critical Theory was integral to the research design of this study. As summarized in Chapter 2 and 3, LatCrit emphasizes the need to take other identities and aspects of Latinx people into consideration when exploring their lived experiences. Solórzano’s and Delgado Bernal (2001) five themes for utilizing a LatCrit framework in education were implemented in this study and will each be discussed below, as well as how this study contributes to LatCrit scholarship.

**The Centrality of Race, Racism, and Intersectionality**

In order to best understand the first year doctoral experiences of Latinas, the first research question of this study focused on the various identities of Latinas and how that shaped their first year. Keeping in mind that LatCrit goes beyond just looking at race, I
wanted to explore how the participants spoke about their experiences in relation to their race, ethnicity, gender, amongst other identities. Through the analysis of the women’s testimonios and follow-up interview, there were many instances of how the intersections of their identities affected the first year, whether the participant recognized it or not. By analyzing the data through the lens of LatCrit, I was able to not only focus on their race, but also their ethnicity, gender, class, and immigration status (for one participant) to make sense of their experiences. This study contributes to the LatCrit scholarship by reinforcing the importance of looking at the intersection of identities to get a better sense of the participants’ interpretation of events, their actions, and their reactions.

The Challenge to Dominant Ideology

An important aspect of this research was to highlight how the educational system is not equal for all students who enter, despite the best intentions of institutions of higher learning. One of these dominant ideologies is that of meritocracy which states that everyone has equal opportunity to gain a higher education if they simply work hard (Patton, 2015; Villalpando, 2004). However this notion of meritocracy fails to take into account the systemic structures in place that make it difficult for Students of Color and other historically marginalized populations to gain equal access, regardless of how hard they may work. As seen with the study, there were certain aspects of the first year experience for Latinas that showcased some of those systemic barriers in place.

For instance, although many of the institutions that were attended by the participants claimed their value for diversity, some of the participants’ experiences said otherwise. The institutional resources they received and/or witnessed often did not reflect a value for diversity, such as there being little to no Faculty of Color or having no
Latinx studies courses or programs. Additionally, the overwhelming consensus among the participants of being the only Latina, or one of a handful of Latinx students in the doctoral program, was another structural barrier.

The present study also challenges the dominant ideology and narratives that surround Latinx students and Latinas in society. As scholars such as Yosso (2005) and Matos (2015) have described in their work, Latinx students are often subjected to master narratives surrounding their abilities and educational attainment, and faulting their cultural background, including their family. As showcased by Matos (2015) these types of master narratives begin at the earliest levels of education. They then continue as Latinx students move through the educational pipeline. For instance, Karina was one participant who, in describing the importance of finding one’s voice, stated that society’s stereotypes have made it seem as if Latinx people have nothing to contribute, but they do and should therefore challenge those notions. The findings indicate that Latina doctoral students contribute to society not only in their quest to seek advanced degrees, but also in sharing their experiences in classrooms and beyond, and even by creating spaces to help others in their programs and institutions.

Specifically for Latina women, master narratives have often only focused on them as caregivers and leaders in their family. As La Blue stated in her follow-up interview, she felt the need to push back and “reset some of that dynamic that’s just been set up over the course of [her] life.” The findings counter this master narrative by emphasizing the participants’ roles beyond the family and showcasing their other roles as students, professionals, researchers, and educators.
Overall, this study provides a counterstory and illustrates that Latina students’ cultural background and familial support are huge factors in their success, resilience, and persistence to enter and continue in a doctoral program, and that their identities as Latina women extend far beyond familial roles.

The Commitment to Social Justice

Solórzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) stated that they “envision a social justice research agenda that leads toward (a) the elimination of racism, sexism, and poverty and (b) the empowering of underrepresented minority groups” (p. 313). As such, this study focuses on a population that has not been as frequently researched. Furthermore, the research design used critical race methods, testimonios, in order to empower the Latina doctoral students in the study and provide them the avenue to speak about their own experiences, which they may have never had the opportunity to share before. Therefore, the present study contributes to the literature by bringing further awareness on the experiences of Latina doctoral students, an important step in the quest for social justice.

The Centrality of Experiential Knowledge

LatCrit emphasizes the importance of experiential knowledge by Latinx people. Various scholars have advocated for the need of more research that acknowledges and validates the knowledge of People of Color through the use of various methods, including testimonios (e.g., Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Pérez Huber, 2009). The experiential knowledge in this study was two-fold. First, I used my own cultural intuition (Delgado Bernal, 1998), through the use of my and other’s personal experience as well as reading the literature surrounding this topic, and incorporated that into the creation and analysis of the study. Therefore, this study adds to the literature by illustrating how a
researcher’s cultural intuition can facilitate researching topics and populations that may not receive as much attention, as well as providing a more nuanced examination of the data.

The second way that experiential knowledge was present in this study was through the *testimonios* of the participants. This study adds to the growing body of literature that has used critical race methods, such as *testimonios* and other forms of counterstories. Many of the participants had never done a *testimonio* before and some mentioned it was a time of reflection and healing as they recounted their first year experience. Therefore, this study illustrates the need to use critical race methods, such as *testimonios*, to gain greater insight on the experiences of marginalized communities, and also provide them the avenue to reflect and heal.

**The Interdisciplinary Perspective**

Using interdisciplinary methods can better help inform research on Students of Color and in this case, Latinx students. Solórzano (1998) posited the importance of placing research analysis on Students of Color “…in both a historical and contemporary context” (p. 123). The beginning literature in Chapter 2 focused on the historical context of Latinxs in the educational system in order to build a foundation to some of the experiences that occurred and which, unfortunately, still continue today. Given this study’s grounding in the historical context of Latinxs in the educational system (as outlined in Chapter 2), the findings illustrate how past experiences shape the way they may or may not approach their current educational endeavors. Additionally, the study’s findings also showcased how the participants shared very similar experiences across different fields in the social sciences. Moreover, through the collaborative portion of the
data analysis in the follow-up interviews, the participants were able to draw on the knowledge they gained in their individual fields to discuss the emerging themes and provide new ways of viewing the data. Therefore, the study acknowledges the value of an interdisciplinary approach to research.

In summary, the present study contributes to the LatCrit scholarship available by reinforcing the importance of the five tenets listed above. In particular, the findings demonstrate that the use of experiential knowledge, in the form of testimonios, was especially important when researching Latina doctoral students. Further, through the use of a three-phase data analysis model (Pérez Huber, 2012) where the second step included a collaborative process, it reinforces the need for creative ways of designing research that further includes the participants voice and knowledge.

**Discussion of Findings Related to the Literature**

As seen in Chapter 4 and with the composite story above, there were many themes that emerged when trying to address the three research questions of the study. The theoretical perspective that was used to guide this study, LatCrit, not only helped to shape the type of design that this study would take, but it also informed some of the nuances in the findings to highlight the importance of discussing race, gender, amongst other identities when examining their lived experiences. Furthermore, the literature review in Chapter 2 focused on the plight of Latinas educational journey beginning from K-12, as it was essential to form a foundation to the experiences that Latinx students and other Students of Color face in the educational system, and how that may or may not shape their willingness to continue in their higher education pursuits.
When looking specifically at the literature on graduate studies for Latinas, there are many findings in this study that are in line with previous work on this topic, as well as new themes and ideas that emerged. This section will focus specifically on the following areas of the literature that were more prominent to the findings and explore a little deeper how they were or were not consistent to previous research. These sections of the literature will include: biases in academia and imposter syndrome for research question one, familial support and faculty mentorship for research question two, and finding voice for research question three.

**The Impact of Being “the Only One” for Latina Doctoral Students**

The first research question focused on the different identities that Latina doctoral students bring with them and how that may or may not shape their first year experience. Through their *testimonios* and follow-up interviews, the participants spoke how their identities were most felt with the lack of diversity in their programs and institutions, through experiences with racism and other biases, imposter syndrome, and with the tension between academia and their cultural background/home. The following section focuses specifically on the findings as it relates to the literature that surrounds racism and biases for Latina students and imposter syndrome. Of particular importance for this section is addressing how the prevalence of “being the only one” can result in microaggressions and other biases that then manifest into feelings of imposter syndrome.

**Racism, biases, and microaggressions.** The lack of diversity that all of the participants experienced in their programs, institutions, and/or communities often resulted in the participants being the only one or one of the few Latinas in their respective doctoral programs. As described in the composite story above, being one of the only
Latinas in the program or the classroom was a root cause of not only feelings of isolation, but also of experiencing racism, biases, and microaggressions. Additionally, the composite story highlighted how incidents of racial biases not only led to mental and emotional reactions, but physical ones as well. In light of recent national events and the negative rhetoric surrounding certain marginalized populations, addressing and understanding these types of instances on college campuses is of utmost importance. Ana was one participant in the present study who best summarized how constantly experiencing all these forms of biases can lead to racial battle fatigue for Latinx students (Franklin, Smith, & Hung, 2014). Enduring racial battle fatigue can result in psychological, physiological, and behavioral responses to racism (Smith, 2004). For Ana, she described feeling tension headaches from these types of interactions, especially as she always felt she had to say something “profound” due to being the only Latina in the classroom – once again echoing the importance of a lack of diversity within the findings. Similar findings were found in Truong and Museus’ (2012) work on racism in doctoral study where they found that, students who underwent racial trauma also experienced physical pain.

Despite the emotional and even physical ailments that dealing with racism and bias can produce, speaking out against these injustices is sometimes a difficult situation as portrayed in the composite story. One of the participants, Denise spoke candidly about an incident that occurred while working on a research project, yet she hesitated in speaking about it to other faculty/students in fear of retaliation, gossip, or being the person that “stirs things up.” Other studies that look at Students of Color in doctoral programs also highlight a similar sentiment when dealing with racism and bias. They
often do not want to bring up issues dealing with race in fear of being known as “that person” (Davis & Livingstone, 2016).

While some of the participants did share how they were able to find opportunities to educate others and speak out on injustices later on in their programs, the Latina doctoral students who were close to finishing their doctoral programs were worried about experiencing the same type of biases when they began their careers either as faculty or administrators. This theme was also illustrated in the composite story, along with the fears associated with having to endure another difficult first year. This important takeaway reflects the same anxiousness that many of the participants felt before beginning a doctoral program, where they were concerned about once again being one of the few, if not the only, Latina in their respective employment positions.

The concerns brought up by the participants are valid, as research has shown that Women of Color faculty also face a lack of representation/diversity, isolation, microaggressions and biases from students in their classroom, and their research not being taken seriously if it focuses on race and/or ethnic studies (Comer, Medina, Negroni, & Thomas, 2016; Ortega-Liston & Rodriguez, 2014; Turner, González, & Wong, 2011). These concerns underline why a lack of diversity is such an important issue to consider when researching Latina doctoral students. The findings indicate a cyclical process for Latinas in higher education and academia as whole. Due to the prominence of a White institutional presence (Gusa, 2010) at many PWI’s across the United States, regardless of the accomplishments or level of education that Latinas achieve, there is a reoccurrence of always feeling like an outsider. The anxiousness of beginning a new program, a new position, or entering a new institution continues to be present because Latinas have
witnessed and often experienced the White dominance in higher education and the consequences of being a Latina student or Latina professional in these spaces.

**Imposter syndrome.** As a result of the lack of diversity, as described in Chapter 4 and in the composite story, it not only led to instances of biases, but also to feelings of imposter syndrome. Described in Chapter 2, imposter syndrome happens when students experience feeling like a “fraud” and/or that they do not deserve the achievements they receive (Clance & Imes, 1978). Imposter syndrome has been well documented in historically marginalized populations, such as Students of Color and women (Craddock, Birnbaum, Rodriguez, Cobb, & Zeeh, 2011; Gardner & Holley, 2011; Peteet, Montgomery, & Weekes, 2015). All the participants mentioned this phenomenon at some point in their testimonios or follow-up interviews relating to their position as a doctoral student. A few of the participants directly tied the imposter syndrome to their identities as Latinas. Courtney was one participant who consistently used “But I’m Latina” when discussing her fear of applying to an Ivy League school, questioning whether she was admitted because they needed to meet a Latinx quota, or being afraid to speak up in class at the risk of “sounding dumb.” Other studies focused on Latinx doctoral students have also reported comparable findings citing similar feelings of doubts, often due to isolation and being one of the few Latinx student in the program (Espino, 2014; González et al., 2002).

Unfortunately, this type of thought pattern can be attributed to what Yosso (2002) describes as deficit thinking and master narratives that have been perpetuated by society and throughout the educational system. For Students of Color, society, and educators, often place blame on their cultural background for lack of educational attainment or
performance. This can lead to Students of Color believing these deficit-thinking patterns they may have heard or experienced in previous educational endeavors, which can ultimately shape the way they think about their own abilities and achievements. Espino’s (2014) study exploring Mexican-American PhD holders also observed similar findings with her participants, indicating that previous negative experiences in their secondary and undergraduate education sometimes fueled the self-doubt they felt in their doctoral programs. Although many of the participants, such as Courtney, had accumulated success throughout their life and overcomes various obstacles and challenges, they still felt the effects of imposter syndrome.

Similar to the participants in Espino’s (2014) study, the Latina doctoral students in this study used a variety of strategies to help them cope with the lack of diversity, biases and microaggressions, and imposter syndrome phenomenon during the first year. They often relied on their support systems, such as family and encouraging faculty advisors, to speak and receive advice on what they were enduring during their first year.

**Latina Doctoral Students and Multiple Systems of Support During the First Year**

The second research question focused on the forms of support that Latina doctoral students utilized during their first year of doctoral study. In the composite story, the two characters described the various support networks they had or desired which assisted them during the first year. Similarly, all of the participants in the study were able to find support at some point in their first year, and beyond, mostly in the form of family, fellow peers, and faculty advisors. While the amount and type of support varied amongst participants, all of the participants had at least one person that was a constant presence in
their first year experience. The following subsections focus on the literature surrounding two of the most prominent support sources, family and faculty advising/mentorship.

**Familial support.** Literature on family and Latinx students has often focused on the familial support at the secondary and undergraduate level. Studies conducted on Latinx students at these educational levels have found that families provide support in various ways, from providing motivation, or *ganas*, (Easley et al., 2012) to simply providing advice, or *consejos*, to their children (Martinez, 2013; Matos, 2015). This type of support also emerged in the findings of this study, thus illustrating that this type of familial support continues at the doctoral level. The participants described how their families encouraged them to apply to their doctoral programs or were there to listen even if they did not necessarily understand what the participants were going through in a doctoral program.

For Latina doctoral students specifically, the role of balancing family and academia is a prominent theme in the literature (Espinoza, 2010; Rudolph et al., 2011). Espinoza (2010) and Rudolph et al., (2011) described the concept of *marianismo*, or the type of familial expectations placed on women, where familial responsibilities, such as caretaking, are often placed on Latina women in the family. Espinoza (2010) has described this as being placed in the “good daughter” role where Latina daughters are sometimes expected to put family obligations before all else. The composite story illustrated the guilt that can sometimes occur when being away from the family. For some of the participants, like La Blue and Courtney, they had to negotiate their familial responsibilities in relation their roles as doctoral student. Furthermore, the findings also illustrated the importance of spouses for the participants in this study. Despite the master
narrative still prevalent in society of men being the wage earner with the expectation of the woman taking care of the home, the participants provided a counterstory by sharing how their husbands encouraged and supported the decision to continue their education for their professional development.

Espinoza’s (2010) study on doctoral students found that the Latinas in her study fit into either the integrators, those who kept their families in the loop in regards to their academics, or the separators, who intentionally separated family and academics. The findings from Espinoza’s study are aligned with what occurred with some of the participants in this current study. Participants such as Lilliana and Cassandra were more aligned with the integrators by both having long conversations with their families about the doctoral process long before they even began applying. They both felt this would make it easier for their families to understand once they actually began the program and had to move to the institution. For Ana and Courtney, they fit more into the separator roles during the first year. Ana stated she kept her family, consisting of her parents, out of the loop during the first year and only spoke to her husband about the doctoral process. Although Courtney spoke to her family about needing to read and study, which sometimes conflicted with spending time with family, she suffered from guilt. She sometimes hesitated speaking about the doctoral process to her family, especially due to her mom’s reaction.

Regardless of how the participants engaged their families in the doctoral journey during the first year and beyond, they each acknowledged that their families were proud and supportive, despite any issues that would arise. The findings not only reinforce findings from previous studies on the importance of family (Espinoza, 2010; Rudolph et
al., 2011) but also pushes back on master narratives that portray Latinx families as not caring or being supportive in the education of their children (Yosso, 2005).

**Faculty advising and mentorship.** A main finding under the second research question focused on the importance of faculty advisors. One surprising commonality was that many of the participants spoke about having advisors who were either women, Women of Color, or Men of Color. This was significant as these advising relationships not only provided academic advising but also mentorship, which was often needed for the Latina women in the study who experienced difficult first years.

Literature on graduate socialization has found that advisors are one of the biggest influences of socialization when they arrive into their doctoral programs (Golde, 1998; Lovitts 2001, Weidmann et al., 2011). While some literature has found that Latina doctoral students sometimes experienced negative socialization experiences (González, 2006), including lack of mentorship, a majority of the participants spoke highly of their advisors and the support they provided them.

For those who had advisors who were Faculty of Color, and especially Women of Color, the participants described them as role models, and were able to see how their advisors navigated academia as Faculty of Color. Fries-Britt and Snider (2015) discussed the importance of “role modeling” for underrepresented students. As was seen in this study many of the participants expressed how their advisors talked about or let them witness some of the challenges they faced as faculty members due to their identities. Additionally, many of these advisors went beyond their duties as just academic advisors, but also as mentors and advocates. Participants like Juliana and Cassandra discussed how their advisors, both Faculty of Color, supported their decision to create new groups for
fellow Students of Color. Both of their advisors took it upon themselves to help them set up and create these groups alongside their advisees.

As Figueroa and Rodriguez (2015) state in their article regarding mentorship for Latino/Chicano students, they highlight that "lived experience matters" (p. 31) and therefore it is important to not only take that into account of the students, but also to see how the mentor's own lived experience matters. When Cassandra met a Mexican-American faculty member, who ultimately became her advisor, she was happy that he had a similar background as herself, as she felt he would best understand her cultural background. In contrast, Patty was disappointed that her advisor was unable to share their own lived experience as a Person of Color when advising her, which made Patty hesitant to share her own story. Because of some of their shared identities, Patty came in with the expectation of not just getting an advisor, but also a mentor. This ended in disappointment when that did not occur.

The importance of having mentors does not necessarily mean they must be of the students' same cultural or ethnic background. Although Garcia and Henderson’s (2015) research on the mentoring experiences of Latina graduate students found that the participants did desire a mentor who was a “cultural insider” (p. 99), they ultimately just wanted a mentor who was culturally competent. Karina, who had no Faculty of Color in her program, ended up connecting with a White woman faculty member who ultimately became her advisor. Despite her initial hesitation about trusting any of her faculty, her advisor acknowledged the lack of diversity at her institution and the struggles Karina was facing. By being the one to acknowledge this, Karina felt that she not only had an advisor, but also an advocate on her side. This exemplar showcases the importance of
faculty advisors and mentors being open and willing to understand the experiences of Latina/os or Students of Color (Cavazos, 2015).

**The First Year is Powerful but Not Protective**

The purpose of the third research question was to explore how the first year shaped, for those who were further along in the program, or how the participants thought it may shape, for those who had just finished the first year, subsequent years in their program. This section focuses on the literature associated with one of the themes, Latinas finding and/or strengthening their own voice during their doctoral program.

A significant theme that emerged when speaking to the participants about their current experiences was the confidence that they built in speaking out and finding their place in their respective programs. The initial discomfort that many of the participants felt when they first began their doctoral programs led some of the participants to feel isolated and not feel comfortable embracing themselves in their new academic homes, as it often was in deep contrast to what they had experienced before.

Anzaldúa (1990, 2000) has written about the struggle of “in-betweenness” that can occur for Latina women when they feel they do not belong in various spaces, or feel as if they are living in a “third space.” For Latina doctoral students, entering into the world of academia can facilitate these feelings, especially as many leave their homes to pursue a doctoral degree. However, Anzaldúa argues that nepantla can lead to growth and greater awareness of the world. For one participant, Karina, nepantla occurred when she arrived at her institution and encountered various racist and biases events. Although it was painful and she felt as if she did not belong anywhere, these experiences allowed her to grow and become more comfortable in her voice and identity as a Latina woman.
As seen in González (2006) and Hinojosa and Carney (2016), the Latina doctoral students in their research either strengthened their voice or used silence in order to get through their programs or "to protect self" (Hinojosa & Carney, 2016, p. 210). Similar findings were found in this study. For many of the participants, they spoke about the need to strengthen their voice, such as Lilliana, who stated she had become more unapologetic about speaking out in class and acknowledging her identity as a Latina woman in the comments she made. Alexis was another student who passionately spoke about being more aware of her identity as a Latina woman, as well as also confirming the type of work she wanted to do in the future; helping other Latinx students. On the other hand, Denise was one participant who used both voice and silence in her program. In a recent experience working with two women on a research project, she used her voice by confronting the women who were intentionally excluding her, but also used silence (at least at the time of the interview) in talking to anyone else about what happened in order to protect herself from possible retaliation.

Overall, many of the participants spoke about the growth they experienced after the first year and how that shaped the way they would approach or had approached subsequent years in their program. This often led to feeling more secure in their identities as Latina women, as well as not being afraid to share their perspectives with other people. This, in part, also led some of the participants to create spaces for other Latinx students and other Students of Color (as seen in Chapter 4). Although they all struggled at various points, the findings of this study support previous research on how Latina doctoral students use their voice to continue their journeys in academia.
However, it is necessary to reiterate that despite the confidence that many of the participants experienced past the first year, some of them were concerned how their newfound voice and confidence would be appreciated at other institutions when they began the job search. Therefore, overcoming the first year did not protect them from having similar anxieties about what would happen next in their future. They were aware that because of a lack of diversity in academia as a whole they would most likely once again be one of the few Latinas in their department or area of employment.

**Recommendations for Practice and Policy**

Based on the findings and through the reflections with the Latina doctoral students in this study, a few recommendations for institutions, graduate programs, faculty, staff, and students emerged. First and foremost, all of the participants spoke about the lack of diversity in their respective institutions and programs. During recruitment or admitted students weekend, some participants felt as if the faculty were not as upfront about the lack of diversity and the challenges associated with it. As Lilliana stated in her follow-up interview, it is not enough to simply recruit and bring Latina doctoral students to institutions and program, institutions and programs must also be upfront about what this lack of diversity could mean. Although not all Latina doctoral students or other Students of Color will have similar experiences, it is still essential to talk to prospective students about the type of issues and concerns that may arise when they arrive during recruitment or admitted student weekends. For many of the participants, they uprooted their lives and moved hundreds, if not thousands, of miles away in order to pursue a doctoral degree. As more doctoral programs aim to diversify in accordance with national calls for diversity by various stakeholders, (AASCU, n.d.),
faculty have a responsibility to prospective Latina doctoral students to be honest about the culture and environment they will be walking into. This first requires faculty to take time to individually ask and encourage current students to share their experiences in the program, as faculty may not be aware or recognize issues within the institution or department due to their own identities. Taking time to speak honestly to each prospective student, either in interviews or in separate meetings, about the institutional and departmental culture, as well as the resources in place, is a proactive approach in letting Latina doctoral students know that the department acknowledges possible challenges and cares about their experiences.

Another recommendation revolves around advising and mentoring of Latina doctoral students. Most research will advocate the need for mentorship programs for Students of Color, and in this case, for Latina doctoral students (e.g. Davidson & Foster-Johnson, 2001; Fries-Britt & Snider, 2016; Garcia & Henderson, 2015. While the importance of mentorship was evident for the participants in this study, the key point was that the mentors in this study were attuned to the unique experiences of Latina doctoral students. Although research has found that Students of Color often gravitate to other People of Color, and Faculty of Color in particular for mentorship (Garcia & Henderson, 2015), the low percentage of Faculty of Color at PWI’s (Myers, 2016) indicates that not all Latina doctoral students will have the opportunity to have other Latinx or other Faculty of Color in their programs. Therefore, all faculty should be attuned to the needs of Students of Color and make a conscious effort to understand the backgrounds of the students they are teaching. For example, Karina was able to find a mentor and advocate even though her advisor identified as a White woman. Her advisor first and foremost
acknowledged the difficulties that Karina had and was able to gain Karina’s trust. If programs and departments actively recruit and want a diverse student population, they must first be willing to learn about the backgrounds of these students and understand the type of mentoring that they may need, either through their own personal will or through more formalized training sessions. By not taking cultural background and values, it can turn into a mentorship of assimilation.

For instance, a large body of literature has focused on culturally relevant pedagogy (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 1995). Ladson-Billings (1995) identified three criteria of culturally relevant pedagogy, “(a) Students must experience academic success; (b) students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence; and (c) students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order” (p. 160). Although this is focused directly on classroom teaching, advising and mentorship is a form of teaching and these strategies can be used in mentor-mentee and/or advisor-advisee relationships. Culturally relevant advising and mentorship should acknowledge and “…utilize students’ culture as a vehicle for learning” (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Fortunately, all of the participants in the study persisted past the first-year, which may be in large part due to having advisors who were either Faculty of Color or culturally competent of their unique needs. For other Latinas and Students of Color who may not have culturally relevant mentoring and/or advising, it may contribute to their departure during and/or after their first year.

Aside from mentorship, peer support was also a highly valuable asset for the participants in this study. However, finding that peer support may not always occur within a student’s own graduate program or even institution. As one of the participants
shared, she had to connect with other Latina doctoral students across the country. Although there are ways for Latinas to connect with each other, such as through social media platforms (Hernández, 2015), more structured and/or formalized methods of connecting with Latina doctoral students could be beneficial. One avenue for making and encouraging these connections could best be filled by national and regional professional organizations in various fields of study. Some professional organizations may already have graduate student subgroups or offer mentorship opportunities with other faculty members; however, emphasizing peer-to-peer mentorship would be an opportunity for Latina doctoral students to connect with others to build community, receive social support, and even academic support, for those who would like to work together on publications and/or presentations. Graduate programs should support and encourage Latina doctoral students to attend professional organization events, such as national conferences, to build and sustain these networks and connections.

The next two recommendations are connected to the finding of racism and biases that some of the Latina doctoral students faced. First and foremost, institutions should be proactive in addressing issues of biases for all students. While some institutions have classes or trainings on diversity for faculty and staff, classes centered on issues of diversity should be a requirement for all students at both the undergraduate and graduate level. The recent harmful rhetoric used by people at the highest levels of power in the United States has been a catalyst for some, including students, to not only repeat this rhetoric, but also even engage in biased actions (Jaschik, 2016). Therefore, classes with a focus on diversity can be integrated according to various majors/disciplines to provide spaces for intellectual discourse on the nature of diversity in society and, most
specifically, in their communities and institution. Institutions have a responsibility to create productive members of society, which include students not only being knowledgeable about their own major and discipline, but also about social and human rights issues.

Unfortunately, bias incidents will occur and therefore preparation is key for institutions and programs. One participant in the study spoke about her fear of retaliation if she spoke up about a bias incident that occurred. Latinas in doctoral programs may be hesitant to speak out about these injustices because their institutions/programs do not acknowledge the issues, or because they feel there is no safe space to speak about these issues. Institutions and programs/departments should have established initiatives where students, faculty, and staff can report biases instances without fear of retaliation. While some universities may already have established programs or responses in lieu of racially motivated incidents on campuses, such as bias reporting and response teams, some programs and departments may not be effectively letting students know about these resources. Further yet, these types of discussions should also take place during orientation and make clear (a) how bias remarks and incidents can not only be hurtful, but also damaging, which can result in a toxic and non-inclusive environment and (b) that there are initiatives and/or people available to talk should something occur. All faculty and administrators should be clear about these policies and step in if they see or hear something occur in their classroom or in other locations.

The final recommendation is for Latina doctoral students. As one of the participants in this study stated, “be bold.” While this can take on different meanings for different people, it is important for Latina doctoral students to not be afraid to share their
experiences, their knowledge, and to be their own advocates. Although the participants in this study were, for the most part, happy with their advisor relationships, that may not always be the case. Latina doctoral students should not be afraid to seek out other mentors or advisors to assist them through their doctoral journey, and especially during the critical first year. Joining graduate student support groups on campus, if available, or attending networking events through professional organizations are good avenues to finding mentors and support. For a few of the participants, they decided to create their own spaces to provide themselves and others with certain opportunities, such as support networks. Current and future Latina doctoral students should not feel limited or restricted to the spaces and opportunities in place within their programs and/or institutions. They can build on their own experiences and needs to create their own spaces or initiatives. While this may not be an easy feat, the importance of utilizing allies, either through advisors, mentors, or other peers, can assist in the creation of these new spaces. Most important, Latina doctoral students should always remember their talents, achievements, and accomplishments as they undergo this journey. As seen in the findings, imposter syndrome was a prevalent occurrence during the first year. Therefore, Latina doctoral students should reach out to trusted resources to discuss these feelings and thoughts so that it does not negatively affect their personal well-being and/or their academic engagement.

**Limitations and Areas for Future Research**

As with all research, there were limitations that arose. The main limitation was the breakdown of the fields of study for the participants. Despite my attempt to recruit from various disciplines, all of the participants were students in the social sciences.
Furthermore, half were enrolled in the field of education. As discussed in chapter 3, this breakdown is comparable to the breakdown of Latina doctoral students within the United States. However, it was unfortunate that I was unable to speak to Latina doctoral students who were enrolled in these STEM fields, as I was interested in understanding the experiences of Latina doctoral students in fields where there are lower amount of women enrolled. Therefore, future research should focus on Latinas in STEM doctoral programs and how their experiences may or may not be similar to those in the humanities and social sciences. Research, such as by Hoffman et al. (2015), found that Latina doctoral students in STEM may have more difficulties with isolation or having to "prove themselves" (p. 59) to their male counterparts. Due to the lower amount of women in some STEM fields, their gender identity may also be more salient in certain spaces. Furthermore, coupled with their racial/ethnic identity, they may have different experiences as compared to the women in this study.

Another limitation was that all the participants were currently enrolled doctoral students. During the recruitment phase, I indicated that Latina doctoral students who had finished their first year but were no longer enrolled in a doctoral program were also eligible for the study. It would have been informative to have a participant or two who had departed their programs to gain a better understanding of why this may have happened. This could have provided a clearer picture of what may be the breaking point for some Latina students to leave their doctoral programs. Future research should also focus on the entire doctoral journey and how it continues to change throughout the years. Special focus should be paid as to how various milestones may or may not shift Latina doctoral students’ experiences, such as finishing coursework, candidacy exams, and the
dissertation process. Furthermore, there should also be a focus on those who are in the final year of their doctoral programs and how their experiences in a doctoral program influences their future career plans.

One limitation that arose was in not asking about the racial and ethnic backgrounds of participants’ spouses, as many of them spoke about the critical support their partners provided during the first year and beyond. Knowing their racial and ethnic background could have provided an opportunity to discuss and counter the Latino male *machismo* stereotype, if the participants’ spouses identified as Hispanic/Latino. Future research should explore the importance of spouses for Latina doctoral students and the types of support, if any, they provide during the first year and beyond.

Lastly, another limitation was that certain social identities were not represented in the study, such as students that identified as LGB or trans*, or students who were currently undocumented. As these identities could profoundly alter the first year experience, future research should attempt to gather narratives and/or *testimonios* of Latina students with these identities to better understand their doctoral journey.

Another area of future research may want to focus on Latina doctoral students and identity development. The findings suggest that many of the participants spoke about the strengthening of their voice and agency during the first year, as well as a growth and/or stronger pride in their Latina identity. Future research should look more deeply at how doctoral study may or may not develop Latina identity and how this can positively influence the persistence of Latina doctoral students.

Lastly, many of the participants also spoke about the positive relationships with their advisors, especially those who had advisors who identified as Women of Color. The
findings indicated the importance of having these advisors as role models during the first year. Future research should focus on these unique advisor/advisee partnerships and how Latina doctoral students make meaning of these relationships not only during their doctoral journey, but also beyond, including in their decisions to pursue or not pursue a faculty career.

**Concluding Thoughts**

Choosing to study the first year of Latina doctoral students was in large part due to my own experiences. Not only did I have similar experiences as many of the participants, I also was very aware of the fact that there was not a large amount of research on Latinas, and much less, at the doctoral level. Unfortunately, for all the participants, the lack of diversity in their programs, institutions, and communities was prominent in their first year. This often resulted in isolation, as they were usually one of the few or the only Latina in their classrooms and/or programs. The biases that the participants experienced due to their identities as Latina women often led some of them to doubt their own abilities or to feel the phenomenon of imposter syndrome. Despite these instances, however, every single one of the participants displayed resiliency and used these difficult moments to strengthen their own stances and voice as they continued past their first year.

As I wrote in the first chapter, doctoral education results in the dissemination of new knowledge that can affect various sectors in society, including the form of education that begins at the earliest levels. It is of value to understand how doctoral students experience their programs, as that can be an indication of how they themselves will shape the future of education. Many of the participants in this study spoke about their desire to
help others, especially other Latinx and Students of Color, and a few even created their own groups and courses in order to achieve this goal. Furthermore, many shared their future career and research goals, which often involved speaking about the experiences of those who have been marginalized in society. These women are and will continue to be assets to society and to academia. Although many institutions are quick to recruit Students of Color, and in this case Latina students, some are less apt to provide the continued resources to make sure these students have positive, inclusive, and non-damaging experiences in their doctoral education. As evidenced by the participants in this study, these women are able to overcome regardless of what is thrown at them. However, they should not have to endure these various challenges. In order to continue to recruit and retain Latina women in doctoral programs, who will continue to contribute to the advancement of knowledge, institutions and programs need to increase their awareness of this population and not settle for keeping the status quo.
References


students and the imposter phenomenon: Am I smart enough to be here? *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice, 48*(4), 429-442.


Saenz, V., & Ponjuan, L. (2009). The vanishing Latino male in higher education. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education, 8*(1), 54–89. doi:10.3200/CHNG.41.5.16-21


doi:10.1177/0042085901363002


Appendix A: Recruitment Message

SUBJECT LINE: Latina Doctoral Student Research Study Recruitment

Social Media and Email Recruitment Message

Hello everyone,

My name is Veronica Pecero and I am a current doctoral candidate at The Ohio State University. I am currently seeking participants for my dissertation that explores the first-year experiences of Latina doctoral students at predominantly White institutions (IRB Study # 2016B0183). The study will consist of a short demographic survey, a written or oral testimonio of your first-year experience, and a 30-60 minute follow-up interview. Please forward to any student who matches the following criteria:

1. Self-identifies as female
2. Self-identifies as Latina/Hispanic
3. Have finished the first year of doctoral study
4. Is no more than 4 years removed from their first-year doctoral experience
5. Attends a predominantly White institution in the United States.*
   For the purposes of this study, a predominantly White institution is defined as an institution which has historically had a majority White student population. Although some of these institutions may no longer have a White student majority, they still hold a strong White cultural ideology that can be felt/seen through various structures, traditions, and practices still in place on the campus (Gusa, 2010)

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to email me at Pecero.1@osu.edu. Thank you for your time!

Sincerely,

Veronica Pecero
Doctoral Candidate, Higher Education & Student Affairs
The Ohio State University

Email to Potential Participants

SUBJECT LINE: Latina Doctoral Student Research Study Recruitment

Dear colleagues,

My name is Veronica Pecero and I am a current doctoral candidate at The Ohio State University. I am currently seeking participants for my dissertation that explores the first-year experiences of Latina doctoral students at predominantly White institutions ((IRB Study # 2016B0183). In order
to participate you must

1. **Self-identify as female**  
2. **Self-identify as Latina/Hispanic**  
3. **Have finished the first year of doctoral study**  
4. **Are no more than 4 years removed from your first-year doctoral experience**  
5. **Attend a predominantly White institution in the United States**  

*For the purposes of this study, a predominantly White institution is defined as an institution which has historically had a majority White student population. Although some of these institutions may no longer have a White student majority, they still hold a strong White cultural ideology that can be felt/seen through various structures, traditions, and practices still in place on the campus (Gusa, 2010)*

Participation in this study involves:

1) **Filling out a short demographic survey**  
2) **Submitting a written or oral testimonio regarding your first-year doctoral experience**  
3) **A 30-60 minutes follow up interview regarding your testimonio.**

If you meet the above requirements and are interested in participating in my study, please email me to confirm eligibility. If you choose to participate, please know that your participation is completely voluntary and you are free to leave the study at any time. Your identity will be kept confidential and pseudonyms will be used in order to protect your privacy. I will send a confirmation email with further information if you are selected to participate in the study.

If you would like further information, please email me at [Pecero.1@osu.edu](mailto:Pecero.1@osu.edu). Thank you in advance!

Sincerely,

Veronica Pecero  
Doctoral Candidate, Higher Education & Student Affairs  
The Ohio State University
Appendix B: Recruitment Flyer

The Ohio State University
IRB Approved: June 15th, 2016
Study # 201680183

Research Participants Needed
Exploring the First-Year Experiences of Latina Doctoral Students at Predominantly White Institutions

Purpose of Dissertation: To understand the first-year experiences of Latina women at predominantly White institutions through a Latino Critical (LatCrit) Theory Framework.

Eligibility:
• Self-identify as Latina/Hispanic
• Have finished the first year of doctoral study
• Is no more than 4 years removed from the first year doctoral experience
• Attend a predominantly White institution

Participation: The study will consist of a short demographic survey, a written or oral testimonio or narrative of your first-year experience, and a 30-60 minute follow-up interview.

Further Information: For further information or to participate in this study, please contact the researcher at Pecero.1@osu.edu.

IMPORTANT NOTE:
If you choose to participate, please know that your participation is completely voluntary and you are free to leave the study at any time. Your identity will be kept confidential and pseudonyms will be used in order to protect your privacy.

237
Appendix C: Email for Selected Participants

SUBJECT LINE: First Year Latina Doctoral Research Study Information

Dear (Participant’s Name),

Thank you for your interest in participating in my study. I am writing to notify you that you have been selected as a participant. As a reminder, the purpose of my study is to explore the first-year experience of Latina doctoral students at predominantly White institutions.

Below you will find a couple attachments/items for your review before beginning participation in the study.

1. The first item is the link to the demographic questionnaire, which can be found here [link]. Prior to beginning the survey, you will review the consent form on the first page. After reviewing the consent information, please make sure to indicate whether you consent to continuing in the study by typing your name, which will serve as your signature. If you have any questions regarding the consent form, please do not hesitate to ask.

2. After you have digitally signed the consent form, you can proceed to the demographic questionnaire. You do not have to answer any questions you are not comfortable with. If you have any trouble accessing the questionnaire, let me know. Please finish the questionnaire by [Date].

3. The final attachment is instructions on the testimonio portion of the study. It will include sample testimonios and some prompting questions to help get you started. Please let me know what format of testimonio you will do, either oral or written, by answering the final question on the survey. If you choose the oral testimonio format, send me a 2-3 dates/times that you are available in order to conduct the testimonio. I would like to receive all testimonios by [Date].

Once I have collected your testimonios, you will receive two items: 1) an email during the [Date] to schedule your follow-up interview, and 2) a document with emerging themes from all testimonios collected that will be discussed with you during your follow-up interview. These interviews will last approximately 30-60 minutes and will be an opportunity to not only share additional information, but also engage in a collaborative process to discuss those emerging themes.
Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns regarding my study or the attached documents. Thank you again for your willingness to share your unique experiences!
Appendix D: Demographic Survey

(Will be conducted through Qualtrics)

Please fill out each question. You are free to skip any question you may feel uncomfortable answering. Questions regarding institution and program are to be able to gather additional institutional/organization and regional contexts. All answers will be kept anonymous to extent permissible by law.

1. Name?

2. Please select a pseudonym – any first name that is not your own – for the purposes of this research and to help protect your anonymity. A confidential key will be held only by the researcher that connects you to your selected pseudonym.

3. Hometown?

4. Current Age?

5. Age during the first-year of doctoral study?

6. Highest level of parent’s education?

7. How do you identify in terms of:
   - Gender?
   - Race?
   - Ethnicity?

8. What language(s) do you speak?

9. Undergraduate Degree and institution? (Include city, state, country)

10. Master’s degree and institution, if applicable? (Include city, state, country)

11. What was the name of your institution during the first-year of doctoral study (include city and state)?
12. What is/was the name of your doctoral program? (e.g. History, Educational Psychology, etc.)

13. Were you enrolled full-time or part-time during your first year of doctoral study?

14. Were you employed during your first-year of doctoral study (this can include graduate assistantships and fellowships)? If so, where did you work (include all employment/fellowships)?

15. Did you begin your doctoral studies straight out of undergraduate? If not, how many years did you take off before beginning your doctoral program? What did you do during this time off?

16. What is your current year in your doctoral program?

17. If no longer in a doctoral program or if graduated, what is your current employment status? If graduated, what was the semester/year of your doctoral graduation? What are you currently doing?

18. Are there any additional identities or information you would like to share?
Appendix E: Testimonio Instructions

Phase 1: Testimonio

Instructions
Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, and Carmona (2012) describe testimonios as a “…critical reflection of [one’s] personal experience within particular sociopolitical realities” (p. 364). Additionally, Pérez Huber (2009) argues that scholars have utilized testimonio as a way to “…document and/or theorize their own experiences of struggle, survival, and resistance, as well as that of others” (p. 644). Ultimately, testimonios give voice to People of Color experiences.

The purpose of this study is to explore the first-year experience for Latina doctoral students at predominantly White institutions. In order to highlight your voice and experience, you will be asked to provide your testimonio of your first-year doctoral experience in a method of your choosing, whether it is through oral or written form. Each participant will have 2 weeks to submit their testimonio. Attached you will find a few sample testimonios as examples, including my own.

Testimonio Prompt
Please describe your first-year doctoral experience, including your perceptions of the program prior to beginning, some difficulties or challenges, key support systems, and any salient moments during that first-year. Below are a few additional questions to possibly consider addressing in your testimonio. However, please know that these are just to help you get started and you do not have to address all or any of these questions.

1. Why did you choose to pursue a doctoral degree? What experiences made you choose to pursue your particular doctoral program?

2. What were some feelings or experiences you felt before you started your doctoral program? How prepared did you feel to begin your program?

3. What were some significant experiences (e.g. most successful, most challenging, most surprising) during your first year? What were some strategies or systems of support you utilized during your first year?

4. What are the things you wish you knew before you started? Is there anything you would have changed during the first year?
**Testimonio Formats**

**Written:**
There is no page limit for written *testimonios*. You can choose to write your *testimonio* in narrative form or through another format, such as a poem. If you choose to write your *testimonio*, please save it as a Word document file and send it to Pecero.1@osu.edu.

**Oral:**
For those choosing to do an oral *testimonio*, we will schedule a time where we will go over some of the questions above and discuss your first-year experience. It can be either through phone or a video chat platform. The interview will last no longer than 30-45 minutes. The oral *testimonios* will be recorded for transcription purposes.

**Please let me know which format you have chosen when you submit your consent form. If you choose to do an oral *testimonio*, please provide me with a few dates/times where we can conduct the *testimonio* over phone or video chat.**

**Phase 2: Follow-Up Interviews**
The follow up interviews will occur approximately 3-4 weeks after receiving your *testimonio*. The follow up interview will last between 30-60 minutes and will be an opportunity to discuss your *testimonio*, talk about any additional details you would like to share, and to ensure that it is accurately presented.

Additionally, I will present you with a preliminary analysis of the *testimonios* received and talk through some common themes amongst all of the participants. Ultimately, I want these interviews to serve as a collaborative process to analyze the first year experiences of Latina doctoral students.
Researcher Testimonio

This dissertation topic stems from my own identity as a Latina/Mexican-American doctoral student. Researching and reading about Latina doctoral students was a form of therapy during my first-year of doctoral study. As a native Texan, I grew up in Houston with my mother, grandmother, and aunt. I moved to Austin to attend The University of Texas in Fall of 2007 where I completed my undergraduate and then master’s program. Although UT-Austin was a predominantly White institution, with White student making up 55.1% and Latina/os 15.6% of the student population during the Fall 2007 semester, I was able to feel connected to my roots and culture by joining Latina/o organizations (Fisher, 2008).

Beginning my master’s program was an eye-opening experience. Although I stayed on the UT-Austin campus, I began experiencing the fear and doubt of my abilities as I began graduate school, something that is prevalent among historically underrepresented students (Clance & Imes, 1978). I remember how much fear I had when I began classes and how it continued during that first month. It felt as if everyone else seemed so sure of themselves and had experiences and knowledge that I did not. During a departmental gathering, I opened up to some of my classmates who also identified as Latina and realized they felt the same way. With their support, and the support of my advisor, I found a place in my program and was able to successfully finish. The friends I made were a supportive group that made me think that I too could pursue a doctoral degree.

Choosing to pursue a PhD at another institution in a different state was a huge decision. I thought that my experiences during the master’s program would make my transition into a PhD easy. However, those feelings of inadequacy and fear I had felt during the first month of my master’s program came back in full force. Much of it was due to moving to a different state and attending another predominantly White university where the Latina/o population was less than 4%. At the time I began my program, I was the only Latina doctoral student in the program and felt pressure to do well so I would not be seen as less adequate than everyone else.

Aside from making a huge transition into a doctoral program, I also had to make a huge transition in moving to a different state where I knew nobody. Although I had been able to quickly get through it during my master’s program, it was much different now. I began suffering from anxiety so severe to the point that I almost left my program midway through the first semester. I also felt lots of guilt for not being near my family or supporting them when I knew they were going through tough times. I missed my family, fiancé, and friends, as well as lots of elements from my culture that I could not find in Columbus, OH. Furthermore, I felt that some of the messages I received during my first semester went against what I wanted for my own life and career. For instance, during my Proseminar class, we were visited by various faculty from the department. During one
class session, a professor within the department revealed that what made them successful was cutting off family and friends during the dissertation phase. I do not believe the professor was aware of the message they were sending to a group of first-year doctoral students. Looking back, I knew that was an informal doctoral socialization message (Wiedman, Twale, Stale 2001) that, luckily, I chose to ignore. It instead fueled me to move through this program on my own terms without ever feeling pressured to give up some aspect of myself just to fit in to the culture of the department, discipline, and academia.

I was fortunate that I had a supportive advisor that helped me get through that first year and a support system in my family and friends that encouraged me and motivated me to continue. Additionally, I was blessed with a great cohort who understood and shared their own doubts and fears of being new doctoral students. As a way of coping through the stress of the first year, I decided to do my final research paper in one course on Latina doctoral students where I found many articles written specifically about this population. Like myself, many participants spoke of the fear, inadequacy, and doubt—everything I was experiencing. During my first year, I sought out support groups for Latina graduate students and was able to find one on Facebook. This social media group was amazing as hundreds of Latina graduate students from across the country would post their stories, their struggles, and their triumphs. I realized that although Latina doctoral students were a small group, relative to the dominant groups in graduate school, these women were preserving against all odds—sometimes self-doubt, racism and sexism within departments, amongst much more. There were often stories shared of bias language in the classroom, not receiving adequate support from their advisor, or feeling as if they were the only ones going through these struggles. The amount of posts seeking out advice and resources from other Latinas was inspiring, and illustrated the need for more discussion and research on this population.

At this time, I am currently in my third year of doctoral study. It has been a struggle to get this far, and my view of academia is pretty negative as I can see what it can do to people who do not have support or do not feel valued by their program/department. Despite this, I stay and write on topics such as these so that other Latina doctoral students know they are not alone.
Additional Sample Testimonios


In 2003, I graduated from Arizona State University with dual degrees in Political Science and Chicano/a Studies. I had come to Tempe four years prior without a plan and graduated with a political consciousness and newfound confidence in my academic and leadership potential. But this “success” did not come without its costs.

Like a ceramic bowl that breaks and is glued back together, my wholeness was restored, but the fragmentation that I experienced left its mark.

Some would say that framing this process as deficit does not recognize all that I, my family, and community have gained through education. I realize that what I call costs can also be considered assets and that what I call fragmentation can also be understood as growth. I am conscious that my “successful” socialization into the academy has facilitated important opportunities. Instead of subtractive, this process can also be understood as additive—I gained a new dimension of self. However, being optimistic about it requires hard work—it just doesn’t feel natural. The truth is that most days I feel like I’ve lost more than I’ve gained.

I feel that I had to suppress the migrant farm working border girl to allow the scholar to emerge. In restraining the border girl, I also held back from my family, my culture, my community, and my roots, and I constantly wonder if it’s worth it. I wonder if the social and emotional cost that I have paid for academic success is too high.

I know that the person who left San Luis, Arizona in 1999 is within me. She and her experiences are reflected in the work that I do and in the passion that fuels me. I know she’s there, but sometimes I wonder if others, especially my childhood friends and family know she’s actually me.

Our lives have forked so sharply and while I know that my friends and family are proud of me, I also know they suspect me of not understanding them anymore. I fear that perhaps I’ve veered too much from who I was that they no longer recognize me.

What is happening here is an act of courage; it’s an act of resistance. It’s an act of truth-telling in a very different way but still extremely valid. Those of us who are senior on this panel—20 years ago when we were your age, this session would not have been accepted at ASHE; there would not have been an audience. We would have been told we were crazy. And so this is a very significant event in the history of ASHE and I wanted to take a moment to recognize that.

Irene, querida hermanita, my little sister. I cried when I read your testimonio. I cried because your story connected me to my story. I too am a border woman. I was born in Laredo, Texas, which literally and figuratively makes me a border woman. But, I’m also a border woman in the academy. You know, I’m neither here nor there. I’m sometimes accepted; sometimes I’m not, even at my senior status.

Irene, you talk about certain dualities, cost/assets, strengths/deficits, gains/losses, comfort/discomfort, the familiar/the unfamiliar. And the academy also deals with dualities. You have research/practice, theory/practice. But these dualities exist for a reason. To know night, we have to know day. To know man, we have to know woman. So, to know our assets, we have to have some costs; otherwise, we wouldn’t recognize that there are assets. And so, what I say to you is that I think that you are moving forward because you mention how you are now viewing these things in a different way.

And in actuality, those dualities exist, the Mayans and the Aztecs told us, so that we would play in those dynamics; see how things are similar and dissimilar. We are right in this middle where there is the resolution of the duality. At some point you will grow to recognize how all of these costs and all of these things that you view as very painful, and they are painful, but how those now can be assets to give you the wholeness and the identity that you seek.

So, I thank you, Irene, and know that I am walking the path with you. Muchas gracias.
I carry in my heart the lessons my parents taught me along with the memories of the moments that shaped my educational aspirations. These memories and lessons sustain me during the difficult times and help me feel like I am back in the safety net of home even when I am thousands of miles away.

Despite dreams for a better life for all of us, I don’t think any of us understood what types of sacrifices we would all have to make in order to get una mejor vida. I do not think that my parents envisioned that pursuing my education would mean having to leave home and breaking away from the familia. They also didn’t expect that an unspoken barrier would build up between us. Furthermore, they did not anticipate that education would mean that their only daughter would not marry young and give them nieces to spoil.

I too did not understand that my education would place me in this strange space where I am in constant conflict between old and new, home and unknown places; tradition and innovation. I naively thought that education would give me a never-ending freedom. Although in many ways my education has given me freedoms that my parents never had the privilege of experiencing, such as economic freedom and a freedom from physical labor, it has also brought me to new and unfamiliar restrictions. These restrictions come in the form of academic standards that I blindly trip over every day in my doctoral program as I am socialized into the academy. Standards such as objectivity and the ability to work autonomously are unfamiliar because they are not based on mis tradiciones, mis valores.

Even as I struggle to hold on to the lessons and values given to me by my parents, the academy is covertly pushing me into solitude and confinement. I am left wondering if solitude was the inmensa vida my parents had envisioned for me. Somewhat, I don’t think so because I do not think the inmensa vida means feeling lonely and confused more often than affirmed and enlightened.

You talked about several polarities in your testimonio. I think the polarity between tradition and innovation is really key because we are constantly creating, we’re creating research, we’re writing, we’re creating courses. Sometimes that is in contrast to tradition where do what’s expected, but remember there’s autonomy in creation too. You have a disposition for collaboration and that’s another tension—I think we work at the intersection of autonomy and collaboration.

I was also struck by the way you contrast economic freedom and freedom from physical labor to the restriction that academia offers us. Sometimes we think that we have to buy into that restriction because we have chosen this career, this life. But know that you can reconstruct that reality just as you are reconstructing what it means to be a Latina in your family.

In fact, that’s one of our greatest opportunities—we are reconstructing what it means to be Latina. This is part of that innovation that you spoke of in your testimonio. We are creating a new existence and new gender role patterns for ourselves in relation to our traditions. I, too, have experienced the unspoken barriers that emerge as we educate ourselves, move up in the academy, and acquire a new language. This makes us more conscious of how we interact with the people who are so important to us and adds to our responsibilities as Latina academics. For me, it means that I have to be more intentional about connecting with my external family so that they don’t think that I think I’m better than them. Because that is one of the things I really fear.

Overall, I loved reading your story, Jessica, because it made me think so much of my own. The advice I’ll offer is to combat that loneliness and isolation no matter where you go. Lastly, because we come from an ethic of hard work, we often think we can take on a lot in the academy, but we must remember to balance our health. Reach out to those around you; please reach out to me in whatever way that I can help you.

FIGURE 2  Haber Mi Gozo by Jessica Ranero; Dialogue Partner: Anna Ortiz.
As the child of a tortilla maker and Bascom Program laborers turned entrepreneurs, I learned the value of hard work not simply by taking on tasks but by cleaning and waiting on tables to support the family business. In my world, the term service has a few connotations. My culture and upbringing in a community service-oriented family have taught me that giving back in a heartfelt way is absolutely essential. However, service in academe seems less essential for tenure, often taking a backseat to research and teaching. It pains me that I would question any decision to engage in service, particularly the activities from which I draw great personal gratification, yet the pressures within the academy that will judge my success impact my decision-making process.

Throughout graduate school, I've found myself limiting my service involvement and now make decisions against a backdrop of other demands, such as my need to make academic progress, develop other aspects of my life, and strive for greater balance between my work and family life. There is no question that I am influenced by the expectations of my academic socialization, and this is something I have struggled with. As I see others passionately engaging in diversity advocacy, I sometimes feel that I could be fully in the trenches and question whether my decision to play a more limited role has been the right decision. Am I succumbing to a socialization process that limits or even denies culture and community? I'm not so naive that I believe such a change in how we view service in tenure — a revolution, really — could easily take place in research universities, but I hope that, with supportive allies, change can indeed occur.

Until this time, I grapple with the reality that this is not the world that I live in at my university. Despite the drought, it is highly likely that I will continue to take those calls from the Upward Bound counselor who wants me to meet her high school students, the summer research program that needs mentors for undergraduate students, and the students who need academic help. I may not contribute to my tenure case, but it might encourage or better equip a few more students to consider and complete a stage of higher education that they might not have considered or thought possible otherwise. It's difficult to have any regrets about that.

I suppose that my story is very different, and I probably should have titled this, if I would have written it, "How I became a Latina." I come from an Argentinian family where we were voluntary immigrants, and I'm not a first-generation college student. My story of immigration is not a story of struggle at all; it was a planned immigration. The biggest struggle was, and it's kind of ironic now when I hear some of the "other" stories, is that my father was a surgeon in Argentina and, at the age of 40, when we decided to come to the U.S., he had to start his medical profession all over again.

I think that one of the things that really surprised me was how self-directed you are and how you're thinking about things. I never thought of when I was a doctoral student. When I read your testimonio about service I thought, "This is not about service. This is about activism." In the academy, we define service as unpaid administrative work for the university. What you're talking about is a kind of activism that enables people who are in positions of power, as tenure professors, to use the resources to enable the success of others. In order for you to be the activist that you want to be, it is very important that you not do service. Because, the way in which you will be able to do what you want to do for others, what has been done for you, you will need to reach that position that gives you the power to help others. We often think that service and teaching and research are separate. Research to me is to, as in Freire's words, to act in the world to change it. And that's the kind of research that I was able to start doing after tenure, but drawing much on the experience of being in community organizing. I encourage you to think about becoming as Ricardo Stinon-Salazar would say, "an institutional agent" that has the social network to help others become like you.

When I read your testimonio, the first thing I thought about was my first student at USC, Marta Soto, who died of cancer two years ago. Her parents also had a restaurant, and I thought of Marta and how much she would have enjoyed to have been here with us, so I thank you for inviting me and for helping me keep Marta's energy and sensibilities alive with me.
On February 20, 2009, during my first year as a faculty member, I was supposed to attend admissions interviews. Instead, I was in the doctor's office hearing the words, “You have cancer.” Too many questions entered my mind: How would I handle the pressures and stresses of academia while dealing with cancer? How would my vulnerability affect my relationships with colleagues and students? As I began to lose my hair and my level of energy decreased, I incorporated the consequences of the chemotherapy into my schedule. I had chemo on Thursdays, knowing that I could recuperate during the weekend and then resume teaching on Tuesdays. I updated students, faculty, family, and friends through a blog. Students sent care packages and cards and raised money for breast cancer research. When others said I should not focus on my research, I argued that my work was what I should think about. I wanted to believe that there was life for me after this battle, a distinct memory. While engaging in scholarly activities, I could take a break from facing the horrors of cancer and the difficult surgical decisions that would later occur. On the days I lost hope, I prayed for just one more day so that I could be remembered for doing something of value, one more day to make a difference in the lives of those around me, one more day to write about and advocate for the communities I loved. Perhaps this was a bit unorthodox, but keeping that routine and those ambitions uplifted my spirit.

What it meant to be a faculty member changed on the day of my diagnosis. Cancer reminded me that I should not fear my journey to tenure; that I was strong enough to endure the challenges with grace and gratitude. Cancer granted me an opportunity to have faith in others, to have patience in myself. Now, my scholarship means greater meaning for me. I believe in waging some battles, but only if they lead to enhancing the work that we do as faculty, the work we do in developing practitioners and policymakers, and most especially, the work we do to advocate for students and their families. As I continue to face the consequences of my diagnosis, I am confident that having and defeating cancer will make me a better researcher, colleague, and friend. I am La Sobreviviente.

When I read your testimonio, I was surprised how relevant it was to aspects of my life. The one thing that comes through is the amazing strength we have within us. We are full of insecurities, and we never realize how strong we are until it comes to a test. Yours is an amazing story of hope, enabling us to understand that we can get beyond the challenge. What I hear in your story is your strength in accepting who you are; you have a wisdom that many of us still are acquiring. To understand where we get our strength will only make us more useful to a variety of communities. As an assistant professor, you're going to doubt yourself every day. But, academia is a trapeze act, and the next bar you're going to catch, you've done it before, so you can catch it again. I never really thought about this before but, if you don't catch that bar, you have a net. It's okay to fall. You have to ask; what am I to learn from this experience? I think that is key.

During a serious illness, the first thing you have to do is plan the rest of your life, which is difficult to do because you're not going to care about that syllabus, you're not gonna care if you deliver the perfect lecture. When I was diagnosed with a tumor on my spine, I knew I had to make a will and contact my brothers and sisters to let them know. These are the things that when you're young, you don't want to think about, but you really put things in perspective. During my illness, I started doing a lot of reading about the body and healing. Now I believe that everything happens for a reason.

So, what's the advice? Do what you love to do. You love the questions, ask the questions. You love finding the answers, go find the answers. Do what you love to do whether it means taking some time out or exploring other pieces of yourself. Thank you for your strength and for sharing what you learned because it's a valuable lesson. One of the things we learn is that the body is an amazing creation. Our bodies want to naturally heal and get back to equilibrium. The only reason the body cannot get back to equilibrium is because something is preventing it, and that could be our own thought processes; it could be a health issue. That's the one thing that I learned that was most amazing, the healing power of ourselves. Thank you for your testimonio.
Appendix F: Follow-Up Interview Protocol Questions

(Note: Due to the semi-structured nature of this interview, not all questions will be asked of each participant depending on their testimonios and where they want the conversation to go)

Thank you again for providing me your testimonio and agreeing to do a follow up interview. Again, you are free to stop at any time or not answer any question you do not feel comfortable answering. Ultimately, I want this to be a time for you to share anything additional you would like about your testimonio, as well as take some time at the end to discuss some preliminary findings from the testimonios I have collected.

1. Begin by telling me a little bit more about yourself or anything you may not have included in your questionnaire or testimonio.

2. After reflecting back on the testimonio you provided to me, is there anything else you would like to add?
   - Follow up on questions regarding specific testimonio for each participant.

3. Tell me about your current doctoral experience at this point:
   - What are some significant experiences (e.g., most successful, most challenging, most surprising) that you’ve experienced after your first year?
   - Do you still have the same support systems as during your first year?

4. How did your outlook on graduate school change after your first-year, if at all?

5. How did your first year help prepare you for subsequent years in your doctoral program, if at all?

6. What are your current plans for the rest of the time in your doctoral program? What about for when you obtain your doctoral degree?

7. What advice would you give to future Latina doctoral students? For those in your discipline? For those in your specific program?

8. What recommendations or advice do you have for institutions, programs/departments about how best to support Latina doctoral students?
9. Overall, how was the process of submitting a testimonio? How did you feel when you were writing/speaking about your experience?

At this time I will read to you some preliminary findings from the testimonios collected so far. I want to get your thoughts on these findings and talk about any other patterns or themes regarding the first-year experiences of Latina doctoral students.

10. Before ending this interview, is there anything else you would like to share? Thank you again for your participation in this study. Please feel free to contact me if you have anything else you would like to share.
SUBJECT: Latina Doctoral Student Study: Follow Up Interview Scheduling

Dear (Participant’s Name),

Thank you for completing the demographic survey and your testimonio. I wanted to schedule the 30-60 minute follow-up interview that will discuss your testimonio and the emerging themes of the study. Below are a few available dates/times:

[Insert dates and times]

Please let me know if any of these dates/times will work for your schedule. If not, please feel free to let me know what dates/times will work best for you. Additionally, please let me know the video chat platform that you prefer (e.g. FaceTime, Google Hangout, Skype, etc.).

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to ask!

Sincerely,

Veronica Pecero