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The Paradoxical Experiences Of Young Hispanic College Students: Academic Success In The Face Of Age-Related Stigma

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THE PARADOXICAL EXPERIENCES OF YOUNG HISPANIC COLLEGE STUDENTS: ACADEMIC SUCCESS IN THE FACE OF AGE-RELATED STIGMA

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Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my family and friends for supporting me throughout my academic career thus far. Especially to my father Mario Garcia, who was always willing to listen to my ideas as I was developing them and to my sister Julie Garcia Martinez and brother in law Christian Martinez for helping me during the last stages of my thesis. I especially dedicate this to my mentor Dr. Sara Grineski for all the opportunities she has given me, for her support and guidance, and for continuing to give me great mentorship despite the long distance.

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by

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Abstract

There has been growth in programs such as the Early College High School Initiative in order to address the inequalities that racial/ethnic minorities, such as Hispanics, face when it comes to pursuing a higher education. As a result, there has been an increase of nontraditionally aged students (i.e., young students under 18) in higher education. Despite likely increases in young students attending universities, little is known about the young students' academic performance and the challenges they face while attending college; this thesis addresses that limitation through two studies using institutional and interview data from one university. The first study used generalized estimating equations to compare the academic performance of young Hispanic students to traditionally aged Hispanic students as well as qualitative interviews with a subset of 15 young students to explain the quantitative results. The second study concentrated on analyzing the qualitative data to examine the age-related stigma that these Hispanic students faced. Results from the first study indicate that young students outperformed traditionally aged students in terms of GPA over three semesters in college. The interviews showed that high quality high school preparation in programs designed for students on paths to become young college students; an openness to seek help from professors; and a lack of partying were some possible explanations behind the academic success of young Hispanic students. Results from the second study showed that there are various ways in which young Hispanic students experience age-related stigma, such as peers thinking the young students are not competent enough as well as the disparaging comments young students have heard. Young students in this study actively sought to manage their age-related stigma through impression management and through changing their original path in order to achieve their long-term goals. Despite their positive academic outcomes, young Hispanic students still face challenges such as age-related stigma. While it seems that these students are coping well, they may feel too young which influences them to postpone their post-graduation plans. This suggests for future research to examine age in higher education and follow these young students to see how age-related stigma evolves as they pursue their long-term goals.

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Chapter 1- Introduction

1.1 BACKGROUND & OVERVIEW

While there has been an increase in the numbers of Hispanic students enrolling in college, their retention rates are poor, suggesting a leaking pipeline (Hernandez, 2000). As a result, there has been growth in programs such as dual credit enrollment, advanced placement (AP), and the early college high school initiative in order to address the inequalities that racial/ethnic minorities, such as Hispanics, face when it comes to pursuing a higher education. Dual credit enrollment and the early college high school initiative were implemented in order to address the lack of preparation that students face when pursuing a higher education. As a result of these programs there has been an increase of nontraditionally aged students (such as young students under 18) in higher education. Some research has looked at various ways in which the students from these programs have transitioned to college but little research has concentrated on the effects that young age can have on student experiences. Despite likely increases in young students attending universities, little is known about the young students' academic performance and the challenges they face while attending college and very little is known about Hispanic students in this age demographic.

This thesis is made of two related but differing studies that are based on institutional data pertaining to students at a university in the Southwest. Chapter 2 of this thesis consists of a study that quantitatively analyzes the academic performance of young Hispanic students in terms of GPA across three semesters relative to their traditionally aged peers. In addition, this study uses qualitative interview data from 15 students included in the quantitative analysis in order to explain the results of the quantitative analysis. Chapter 3 of the thesis consists of a second study relying entirely on the qualitative data that was obtained through the 15 interviews of the young

Hispanic students. This study concentrates on age-related stigma that young Hispanic students face when transitioning to higher education and associated challenges.

1.2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Study 1 addressed the following research questions (RQ):

RQ1: How do young Hispanic students perform in terms of cumulative GPA in relation to traditionally-aged Hispanic students, controlling for relevant covariates?

RQ2: What are some possible explanations for the academic outcomes of young Hispanic students?

Study 2 uses ideas from Erving Goffman in order to illustrate the challenges that young Hispanic students face when pursuing higher education and addresses the following questions:

RQ1: What sorts of age-related stigma do young Hispanic students experience?

RQ2: How do they cope with the age-related stigma?

1.3 SIGNIFICANCE

This thesis contributes to the research related to Hispanics and age in higher education. This is significant because prior studies have concentrated on analyzing mature students (students over 25 years old). Studies that address young students define them as students who are under 21 (Richardson & Woodley, 2003) or students who took college courses while in high school (Arbona & Nora, 2007; Berkner & Chavez, 1997; Hoachlander, Sikora, Horn, & Carroll, 2003; Wassmer, Moore, & Shulock, 2004). These definitions are limited because students who are 21 are quite different than students who are 17 in terms of their life experiences, and many

students who take a college course while in high school enter college as traditionally aged students just like those that did not take college courses in high school.

The focus on Hispanic students is important given that Hispanic students are a growing demographic nationwide. Very limited research has looked at young Hispanic students in higher education, and even less has analyzed their experiences, outside of academic performance, as I do in Chapter 3. Research examining this is important because it can inform the design of ECHS, AP and dual credit programs and how universities can better support young students of color; specifically when it comes to these students transitioning to full-time college students as well as continuing their education in graduate or medical school.

Chapter 2- Academic Performance of Young Hispanic Students at a Hispanic Serving Institution

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Programs such as dual enrollment and the early college high school initiative were implemented in order to address the challenges that underrepresented and minority students face when pursuing and transitioning to higher education institutions. As a result of these programs targeted at high school students, there has been an increase in the numbers of young students (students under 18 years of age) attending college. While some research seeks to understand how the students from these specific programs transition, little research has concentrated on the effects that young age can have on students' academic performance and especially their academic performance at four-year institutions. This portion of my thesis will seek to answer the following two research questions: RQ1) How do young Hispanic students perform in terms of cumulative GPA in relation to traditionally-aged Hispanic students, controlling for relevant covariates? RQ2) What are some possible explanations for the academic outcomes of young Hispanic students? I utilize three semesters of institutional data to analyze how young students perform in relation to traditional students in terms of GPA over a three-semester period, while controlling for relevant covariates. In addition, I seek to understand the results of the statistical analysis and offer some possible explanation through analyzing interviews with 15 young Hispanic students.

A focus on Hispanic students is important since they are the largest minority group in the United States. There has been a recent need to look at the inequalities that Hispanics face in higher institutions, for the majority of literature concentrates on white and black comparisons (Lopez & Patten, 2015; Small & Newman, 2001). More than half of Hispanic students first enroll at community colleges; however, data has shown that two-year institutions do not help minority

students obtain a bachelor's degree (Arbona & Nora, 2007; Hoachlander, Sikora, Horn, & Carroll, 2003). The literature also demonstrates that Latinos begin college with lower levels of "college readiness," which relates to high school GPA, senior class rank, ACT, and SAT test scores (Berkner & Chavez, 1997).

2.2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.2.1 Age and Higher Education: A focus on mature students

When looking at the literature related to age and higher education, most studies concentrate on mature students. Mature students are defined as students who are 25 years or older when they start college. There are several common misperceptions about mature students that have been disproved in previous studies. These are that mature students lack study skills (Richardson & King 1998; Richardson, 1994); that their age impairs their studying abilities (Richardson, 1994); and that they underperform in higher education, which is not the case since they have been shown to perform better than their traditionally-aged peers (Hoskins, Newstead, Dennis,1997; Halpern 2007). For example, each 10-year increment of age upon entering college positively affected students' GPAs by .25 points (Cantwell, Archer & Bourke, 2001). Overall, mature students have higher rates of course completion and possess the skills needed for studying (Richardson, 1994). There might be ceiling on age effects, as Richardson and Woodley (2003) found: after students were 50, their likelihood of obtaining a degree decreased. Gender is a well-known correlate of academic success, with females having better academic outcomes than males (Sheard, 2009; Crisp, Taggart & Nora, 2015). Nonetheless, mature-age females had the highest GPA of any group studied (Scheard, 2009).

2.2 Young Students: An understudied but growing group

The increase in young students attending universities has not been mirrored by an increase in research looking at this population. Surprisingly, I was not able to find many studies comparing the performance of young students with older students and there was no literature on young Hispanic students. One of the only studies to address this was conducted in the United Kingdom and the authors found that the chances of obtaining a "good degree" (defined as a degree with first class or upper second class honors) were highest among the youngest age group (under 21) at 62.7%. The second highest was 60.3% among the 31-40 year olds (Richardson & Woodley, 2003). However, in this study young students were defined as students who were under 21 years old. For the purposes of this analysis, young students are defined as those that were not yet 18 when they started attending college. This definition reflects the reality that due to dual-credit and early college high school programs (to be discussed next), students under the age of 18 are entering the university with substantial college credit. In some cases, young students are classified as juniors based on their credits.

In order to address the challenges that underrepresented and minority students face when pursuing a higher education, programs such as dual credit and the Early College High School Initiative (ECHSI) were implemented. Dual credit means that students take college-level classes at their high school and receive both high school and college credit for those classes (Andrews, 2004). All 50 states offer dual credit programs and 46% of 4 year universities and colleges reported having dual credit programs, meaning that students receive college credit through their affiliated institution, even though the students take the classes at the high school (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2013). Being in a dual credit program increases the overall academic achievement (i.e., GPA) of students in high school and increases the chances of them enrolling and completing a college degree (Karp, Calcagno, Hughes, Jeong, & Bailey,

2007; Adelman, 2006). Despite their success, dual credit programs have faced the criticism that they are restricted and only allow honor students to participate (Berger, Adelman & Cole, 2010). This in turn limits the amount of students who make use of this program, with only 5% of students participating in 2002 and 2003 (NCES, 2005b).

In response to this weakness in dual credit programs, another program was created that concentrated on creating entire high schools specifically designed around the dual enrollment model that would serve underrepresented students. Underrepresented students are minority students who typically come from low income backgrounds and are often times first-generation. These schools are called early college high schools (ECHS) and they are high schools that allow students to take college courses while still in high school with the ultimate goal of the students graduating high school with an associate's degree (60 college credit hours). ECHS were pioneered through the Early College High School Initiative (ECHSI), first started in 2002 by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. As of Fall 2009, there were more than 200 ECHS programs in the U.S. (Berger et al, 2010). ECHS have been true to their mission; in that first year, 80% of ECHS students nationwide were from racial or ethnic minority backgrounds and 70% were from low-income families (Air& Sri, 2005).

The majority of the literature provides justification for why programs like dual credit enrollment and ECHSI were created, as well as the immediate benefits that these programs have on the students while they are enrolled in those programs. Several studies have begun to examine how these students perform while seeking higher education. The majority of the studies have shown positive outcomes for students who took college coursework in high school. The students were more likely to graduate from high school and more likely to enroll in college and have

higher GPAs than their counterparts (Karp, Calcagno, Hughes, Jeong, & Bailey, 2007; Swason, 2008; Haxton, Song, Zeiser, Berger, Turk-Bicakci, Garet, Knudson, Hoshen, 2016).

While some studies have followed the students after graduation, the majority of these studies are limited to analyzing these students in community college or only analyzing their first-semester college GPA. One study did analyze the impacts of ECHS two years after college, and this study concentrated on comparing treatment students (students who were offered admissions before the first day of school) and control students (lottery applicant students who were not offered enrollment) (Haxton et al, 2016). This study found that 24.9% of the students who attended an ECHS (in the treatment group) earned a college degree as compared to only 4.7% students who did not attend an ECHS (in the control group), and that graduation rates were significantly higher for minority students as compared to white students, with treatment students being 10 times more likely to obtain a college degree than students in the control group. (Haxton et al, 2016). However, while this study considered race, they compared all minority groups to whites and did not specify specific minority groups (e.g., Hispanics).

In addition, these studies looking at high school programs do not examine age directly, rather they look at students who took college course work in high school (Arbona & Nora, 2007; Berkner & Chavez, 1997; Hoachlander, Sikora, Horn, & Carroll, 2003; Wassmer, Moore, & Shulock, 2004). This matters because they do not include young students that enter college through other routes and they include many students who do not enter college at a "young" age but who take a few dual credit courses in high school.

This study addresses a gap in the previous literature by examining how young Hispanic students, many of whom have come through dual credit and ECHS programs, perform in terms of cumulative GPA in a four-year comprehensive public university over three semesters.

Previewing the results, I find they do better than their peers. It also extends previous research by bringing in the voices of young Hispanic students through an examination of reasons behind their academic success.

2.3 DATA & METHODS

2.3.1 Study Context

This study took place at a university in the US Southwest. I have chosen to conceal the institution's name to protect the anonymity of the young students who participated in the study. The study institution has a fair amount of young students, many of whom come from ECHS programs and/or with dual credit. In the Fall 2015 term, which is the first semester included in this study, the average age for undergraduate students at this university was 21, and 291 students out of 20,220 undergraduate students were under the age of 18. This accounted for 1.40% of the undergraduate population. In addition, this university is a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI). HSIs are defined as institutions that serve a minimum of 25% Hispanic students and play an important role in assisting first-generation, low-income Hispanic students. The majority the students are from the region and 80% are Hispanic, and another 5% are international students from Mexico. In addition, 57% of the undergraduate students were among the first generation in their family to attend college.

2.3.2 Quantitative Data Collection

I used institutional data that was assembled and collected through the EXCEL[1] evaluation plan. The data set contains college students (of all ages) within this university who participated and did not participate in programming provided through the EXCEL program. This EXCEL programming includes a scholarship and course-based undergraduate research experiences

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[1] This is a pseudonym, and is another layer of protection for the research participants.

(CUREs). Students in the study were enrolled in biology, chemistry, psychology, or electrical engineering CURES, SCI 1301 or UNIV 1301 courses (these are introductory courses required in all degree plans and majors) or were recruited through a student recruitment tool from the university's psychology department. The dataset runs from Fall 2015 through Fall 2016, and includes data at three points in time: Fall 2015, Spring 2016 and Fall 2016. Before beginning the analyses, we excluded the 85 non-Hispanic students, since this thesis focuses only on Hispanic students. We also studied only students with a GPA of 2.0 or higher in order to study students who are in track to graduate (211 students had a GPA lower than 2.0 in any of the semesters and were excluded), and making the final analysis N= 678 students.

2.3.3 Quantitative Variables

The independent variables used are the following: age, sex, whether the student received a Pell grant, whether a student is full time or part time, their major, their academic classification, and time. Within these variables there are two groups: time invariant and time variant. The time invariant variables are those that do not change each semester, i.e., age when the semester started in Fall 2015, sex, and high school rank. In terms of age, my key variable of interest, as of Fall 2015, 23 students in the sample are "young", which is defined as under 18 on September 1, 2015, 605 are "traditional" students (between the ages of 18-24.9 on September 1, 2015), and 50 students are "mature", which I defined as 25 or older.

Sex (1=female, 0=male) is included because women tend to have higher GPAs than men (Sheard, 2009). High school class rank was included, for a student's high school academic performance is a predictor of their college GPA (Stater, 2009). This variable was standardized before being included in the model. Time variant variables are those that can change each semester, i.e., receiving a Pell grant, being a full time or part time student, major, academic

classification, if they received an EXCEL scholarship, and if they received a scholarship that was not through EXCEL. Students have values for these variables in each of the three semesters. Receiving a Pell grant (1=received Pell grant, 0=did not receive Pell grant) was included as a socioeconomic variable since having a low income is related to worse GPA (Walpole, 2003). A student can qualify for a Pell grant if their "expected family contribution" cannot cover the cost of attendance at the institution (Stater, 2009). Whether a student is enrolled part time or full time (1=full time, 0= part time) was included, for students enrolled part time tend to have higher GPAs (Cantwell et al, 2001). The students' major was included, for it has been linked to academic performance, including retention rates and persistence (Leppel, 2001). Academic classification was used since there can be variation in grade distributions across the different classifications (Addus, Chen, & Khan, 2007). It is worth noting that academic classification is not equivalent to our variable of time, since students take different numbers of credits each semester and progress to a higher classification (from sophomore to junior) at different rates. The EXCEL scholarship (1= EXCEL Scholarship, 0= No EXCEL Scholarship) and Non-EXCEL scholarship (1= Non-EXCEL scholarship, 0=No Non-EXCEL scholarship) variables were used since students that are scholarship recipients have slightly higher GPAs (Henry, Rubenstein & Bugler, 2004). Time is also included as a variable in the model, and it includes Fall 2015=1, Spring 2016=2, and Fall 2016=3.

The dependent variable is the student's cumulative GPA in each semester, which is an important indicator of academic achievement (Cantwell et al, 2001; Sheard, 2009; Zeegers, 2004). Descriptive statistics for all variables are found in Table 2.1 (with the exception of time).

Table 2.1. Descriptive statistics for all analysis variables (original data).

Continuous Variables

Variable	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Dev.	% Missing
Cumulative GPA Fall 2015	678	2.07	4.00	3.32	.51	0
Cumulative GPA Spring 2016	678	2.04	4.00	3.24	.50	0
Cumulative GPA Fall 2016	678	2.02	4.00	3.21	.50	0
High School Class Rank	585	0	687	107.46	122.04	13.7

Dichotomous Variables

Variable	N	Yes	No	% Missing
Mature in Fall 2015	678	50	628	0
Young in Fall 2015	678	23	655	0
Sex: Male	678	234	444	0
Undeclared in Fall 2015	678	37	641	0
EXCEL Scholarship Fall 2015	661	47	614	2.5
EXCEL Scholarship Spring 2016	661	47	614	2.5
EXCEL Scholarship Fall 2016	661	61	600	2.5
Non-EXCEL Scholarship Fall 2015	557	122	435	17.8
Non-EXCEL Scholarship Spring 2016	557	117	440	17.8
Non-EXCEL Scholarship Fall 2016	556	104	452	18.0
Pell Grant Fall 2015	660	426	234	2.7
Pell Grant Spring 2016	661	422	239	2.5
Pell Grant Fall 2016	661	394	267	2.5
Full Time/Part Time Fall 2015	659	574	85	2.8
Full Time/Part Time Spring 2016	660	569	91	2.7
Full Time/Part Time Fall 2016	629	518	111	7.2
Major[a]:				
General Studies Fall 2015	678	37	641	0
General Studies Spring 2016	678	32	646	0
General Studies Fall 2016	678	55	623	0
Liberal Arts Fall 2015	678	136	542	0
Liberal Arts Spring 2016	678	149	529	0
Liberal Arts Fall 2016	678	159	519	0
Business Fall 2015	678	39	639	0
Business Spring 2016	678	43	635	0
Business Fall 2016	678	49	629	0
Health Sciences Fall 2015	678	93	585	0
Health Sciences Spring 2016	678	93	585	0
Health Sciences Fall 2016	678	87	591	0

Engineering Fall 2015	678	108	570	0
Engineering Spring 2016	678	99	579	0
Engineering Fall 2016	678	97	581	0
Classification[b]:				
Freshman Fall 2015	678	406	272	0
Freshman Spring 2016	661	279	382	2.5
Freshman Fall 2016	619	30	589	8.7
Sophomore Fall 2015	678	202	476	0
Sophomore Spring 2016	661	262	399	2.5
Sophomore Fall 2016	619	370	249	8.7

Note: [a] Physical and Life Sciences majors and [b] Junior/Senior were used as a reference groups.

2.3.4 Quantitative Analysis Methods

In order to address missing data (see percentages in Table 2.1), the data were multiply imputed using IBM SPSS version 24 prior to running the multivariate model (i.e. the generalized estimating equations or GEEs). Multiple Imputation (MI) is used in order to address bias in a statistical analysis that may be related to missing data. MI uses a regression-based approach to create multiple sets of values for missing observations. When missing values are not missing completely at random (MCAR), there is potential for a bias, which can be avoided by using MI (Penn, 2007). We imputed missing values for 20 datasets, which is a preferred method in MI for it maximizes power (as opposed to using 3—5 data sets) and specified 250 between-imputation iterations to assure that the resulting imputations were independent of each other (Enders, 2010). The 20 imputed data sets result in separate models which are combined into pooled model results (which we report here); MI techniques appropriately adjust standard errors for missing data as part of the pooling phase (Enders, 2010). The analysis variables stated above were included in the multiple imputation procedure.

I use Generalized Estimating Equations (GEE) to analyze the multiply imputed data. GEE is an extension of generalized linear models (GLM) that takes repeated measures and clustering into consideration (Garson, 2012). In this case, the clusters are temporal, since each student has three sets of values for each time variant measure: Fall 2015, Spring 2016, and Fall 2016. GEE is used to analyze how the time variant and invariant measures and the change in time itself influence cumulative GPA across the three points in time in order to examine how young students perform in terms of GPA, controlling for other relevant covariates. We also conducted a sensitivity analysis to explore if entering the study through a CURE (and therefore taking one or more CUREs) was related to GPA in order to see if findings were sensitive to this specification.

To determine the best fitting models, I conducted a series of model fit tests by changing the model's distribution and link functions. We first tried an identity link with Gamma, inverse Gaussian, Tweedie, and normal. Since inverse Gaussian and gamma had much better fits than the others, we then tested the log link functions for each to see if they fit better than the identity function. We also tested four different correlation matrix specifications to determine the best model fit: independent, AR (1), exchangeable, and unstructured. A working correlation matrix is used to account for the correlation among repeated measures (Rochon, 1998). Some other statistical techniques account for the intracluster correlations too, especially when the dependent variable is normally distributed. However, GEEs offers the additional advantage of not requiring the correct specification of the correlation matrix in order to reach unbiased statistical conclusions about the covariates' effects, given that the robust estimation of standard errors be applied (as is the case in our analysis). In this case, I specified the AR(1) correlation matrix, which assumes a first-order autoregressive relationship (i.e., time series data with equal time intervals), so that all the off-diagonal elements are a function of time (Garson, 2012). After testing the different variations of the GEE, I found that Inverse Gaussian distribution with a logarithmic link with a working correlation matrix of AR(1) had the best fit. The model fit was based on the quasi-likelihood under independence criterion for model fit which resulted in a goodness of fit of 46.336. This specification makes conceptual sense since the dependent variables have values greater than 0 and are positively skewed (Garson, 2012).

2.3.5 Qualitative Data Collection

To help in understanding the quantitative results, I interviewed 15 students, selected from the dataset described above, who were not 18 at the time they began attending this university. To create my sampling frame, I first selected all the young Hispanic students in the dataset who

were not yet 18 (as of September 1, 2015) at the start of the Fall 2015 semester (n=34). An email

was initially sent to all students, and I interviewed the 15 who were interested in participating. A

$20 Starbucks gift card was provided as an incentive for the students who agreed to participate.

A semi structured interview format was used to guide the interview. The interview guide

included questions on their high school experiences, experiences at this university and with

CUREs (as applicable), mentorship, and long-term goals. The average length of the 15

interviews was 59 minutes with the minimum being 26 minutes and the maximum being 1 hour

and 38 minutes. The interviews were conducted between July and September of 2017 in my

office at the university. In terms of the breakdown of the students, 9 students were involved in

CUREs, including 4 EXCEL students, while 6 students had not been involved in CUREs. See

Table 2.2.

Table 2.2. Demographics of 15 Hispanic Student Interviewees for Fall 2015

Student Pseudonym	Age on September 1, 2015	Sex	CUREs	EXCEL Scholarship	ECHS	Pell Grant	Major Area	Classification in Fall 2015
Jonathan	17	Male	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	PLS[1]	Junior
Selena	17	Female	No	No	No	Yes	Engineering	Sophomore
Andrea	17	Female	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	PLS	Junior
Brandie	17	Female	Yes	No	No	Yes	PLS	Freshman
Diana	17	Female	Yes	No	No	Yes	PLS	Freshman
Paulina	17	Female	No	No	No	Yes	Liberal Arts	Freshman
Cassandra	17	Female	Yes	No	No	No	PLS	Freshman
Melody	17	Female	No	No	No	Yes	PLS	Freshman
Julie	17	Female	Yes	No	No	DK	PLS	Freshman
Laura	17	Female	No	No	Yes	No	PLS	Junior
Emma	17	Female	No	No	No	DK	PLS	Freshman
Chris	17	Male	Yes	No	Yes	No	PLS	Junior
Adan	17	Male	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Engineering	Freshman
Clarissa	17	Female	No	No	No	Yes	PLS	Freshman
Nathaniel	17	Male	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Engineering	Sophomore

Note: Abbreviations used in table: **CURE**s, course-based undergraduate research experiences sponsored by EXCEL; **EXCEL**, pseudonym for an undergraduate program; **DK**, do not know; **ECHS**, early college high school; and **PLS**, Physical and Life Sciences

2.3.6 Qualitative Data Analysis

With the students' consent, the interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using N*VIVO qualitative analysis software. The data was coded using several key themes, which were the following: 1) high quality high school preparation in programs designed for students on paths to become young college students; 2) an openness to seek help from professors; and 3) a lack of partying. I analyzed the data in three stages (Strauss & Corbin, 1988). The initial stage consisted of exploring preliminary themes that emerged from the data. In the second stage, I was able to create a framework for the themes as well as identify subthemes. In the final stage I used selective coding in order to confirm and refine my initial codes.

2.4 QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

Table 2.3 reports pooled results for the model predicting GPA. Being young in Fall 2015 instead of traditionally aged was associated with a significantly higher ($p<.01$) GPA across the three semesters under study. Other significant findings are related to major and classification. Students with majors in Liberal Arts ($p<.01$) and Health Sciences ($p<.05$) had significantly higher GPAs than students in the College of Science. In terms of classification, freshman and sophomore students had significantly higher (both $p<.01$) GPAs than did juniors/seniors. Time was statistically significant, with GPA decreasing across the three semesters. High school class rank and student sex were also significant, with students who had a lower high school rank (i.e., closer to the top of their graduating class) having better GPAs ($p<.001$) and women having higher GPAs than men ($p<.01$). The other variables (Pell grant eligible, full-time/part-time status, scholarship status, and the other major groupings) were not statistically significant.

Table 2.3. Results of generalized estimating equation[a] predicting GPA

Variables	B	SE	p
Intercept	1.325	0.0123	<0.001

Young in Fall 2015 (ref: traditionally aged)	0.059	0.0197	0.003
Mature in Fall 2015 (ref: traditionally aged)	-0.015	0.0194	0.435
Male (ref: female)	0.027	0.0101	0.008
Time (semester)	-0.017	0.0022	<0.001
High School Class Rank	-.044	0.0057	<0.001
Pell Grant	-0.004	0.0063	0.530
Full Time (ref: part time)	0.006	0.0050	0.248
Freshman (ref: junior/senior)	-0.015	0.0059	0.011
Sophomore (ref: junior/senior)	-0.011	0.0036	0.002
General Studies (ref' science)	-0.001	0.0073	0.918
Liberal Arts (ref' science)	0.021	0.0071	0.003
Business (ref' science)	0.000	0.0099	0.969
Health Sciences (ref' science)	0.018	0.0077	0.022
Engineering (ref' science)	-0.002	0.0081	0.826
EXCEL Scholarship	0.010	0.0107	0.350
Non-EXCEL Scholarship	0.013	0.0074	0.076

[a]Results reported are pooled across the 20 imputed datasets and the model uses an Inverse Gaussian distribution with a logarithmic link and a working correlation matrix of AR(1).

In terms of the sensitivity analysis, taking a CURE was not significantly related to students' GPA and adding that variable to the model did not affect the young coefficient's significance (p<.05).

2.5 QUALITATIVE RESULTS

The interviews with 15 young students are useful in order to offer possible explanations for young students' high GPA. The following themes appeared as possible explanations: 1) high quality high school preparation in programs designed for students on paths to become young college students; 2) an openness to seek help from professors; and 3) a lack of partying. Across the interviews, 14 out of the 15 of the young students interviewed remarked that completing college-level coursework in high school helped them feel prepared for their college classes at this university. Taking college-level courses in high school, taking high school classes that were structured like college courses, and having the opportunity to see the material a second

time in college, since they had already had similar courses in high school, enabled them to feel prepared to take college classes and to do well in them. Out of the 15 students that were interviewed, 13 entered this Southwest university with college credits ranging from 3 hours to 60 hours (two had 6 hours, one had 12 hours, three had 15 hours, one had 18 hours, one had 20 hours, and one had 27 hours, and 4 had associate's degrees) and 2 entered without any college credits. The 2 students without credit had taken college-level course through dual credit or AP programs, but had been unable to receive credit for those courses either due to being unable to take the AP test, a low score the AP test or the credit not being accepted in their specific major. The students with credits obtained them through dual credit offerings at their high schools, Advanced Placement (AP) programs in their high school, or by attending classes at the local community college as part of an early college high school (ECHS) program. Among the group with credits, four were a part of an ECHS program and the other 9 obtained college credit through the AP, dual credit, or a combination of both programs.

Regardless of the way in which they obtained this credit, the students stated how beneficial it was for them to have earned these credits before starting classes at this university. Adan stated how taking AP classes was beneficial for him:

> Academically, I felt very prepared. I went in there [to the Southwest University] very confidently because I feel like the AP classes that I had taken in high school had prepared me almost more than enough for some classes. Like I found myself knowing more calculus than my peers around me in my sophomore-level classes as a freshman. Because I did have an astounding professor [at high school], he was amazing.

Having previous experiences doing college-level work in high school, as was the case for Adan, helped many of the young students feel prepared to do well in their college classes. Given the quantitative results, that early preparation seemed to translate well into college GPA for these young students.

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In addition to actually completing college-level work for credit, students also stated how their high school teachers in these dual-credit, AP and ECHS programs helped them prepare for college by giving them realistic expectations for their college classes. Brandie mentioned the differences between her regular high school classes and her AP classes:

> For my AP biology, my professor, my teacher, he was also like student at the university and he would tell us like, 'oh, this is how it's going to be in college. Like you, like you need to straighten up.' Then my regular teachers, they would just tell me like they [college professors] wouldn't care about you, they would just give you your papers.

Brandie found the specific college readiness advice given by her AP teacher to be useful and it was a benefit she received from taking that AP course, where the teacher was more in tune with college experiences. Students found that their experiences in college-level courses in high school helped them adapt faster to the college academic environment.

It was the case that young students sometimes took classes in college for which they had already taken a similar version in high school. The students took these classes so as part of the AP or IB program and were typically high achieving students. The International Baccalaureate (IB) program is similar to AP with the only exception being that the credits earned through this program are valid for any university across the globe. Having been introduced to the material in high school helped them gain a better understanding the second time around in college, which resulted in them getting better grades. Selena explained how her high school calculus class helped her prepare for the college version:

> I took Calculus 1 my first semester [at the the university], and I took that in high school and it was really bad for me. I almost failed that class [in high school] and that panicked me a lot. I was like 'Okay this is not for me. I need to change my major or something.' Then when I started taking it here at the university, it was a really easy class, so that helped me a lot.

A second explanation for young students having higher GPAs than traditionally –aged students is that they were not afraid to seek help and go to their professors' office hours. While I

do not have a comparison group of traditionally-aged interviewees, the level of engagement that

the young students had with their professors outside of class seemed notable. While 3 of the

students stated that they did not go to professors' office hours, this was because they did not feel

they had yet had a need to so. These students did indicate that if they did have questions, they

would feel comfortable seeking help. Those who did seek help expressed how beneficial it was

for their grades, for example Chris stated:

> If I'm taking a class, I generally go to [the professor's] office hours. If I have anything,
> any questions, or after tests, I just to go see how I did and go over the questions with him.
> Often times, I find that there is a lot of errors with the scantron or something like that. Or
> something happens where I could have gotten a higher grade. If you don't go and ask
> them, you'll never find out.

In Chris' case, going to see his professor had multiple benefits for his grade, including asking

questions and learning more, understanding the source of his errors on exams, and finding

mistakes in grading that earned him back additional points. Chris' comfort in seeing his

professors outside of class was not unique to this group of young Hispanic students, even though

it is not that common among traditionally aged Hispanics students.

It seems like these interviewees felt comfortable seeking help in college because they had

high school teachers as mentors and had formed strong relationships with the teachers in their

high school. Paulina explained the different ways in which her high school mentor encouraged

her and helped her to develop skills that would enable her to succeed in college:

> You can tell she was just one of those teachers that literally wanted nothing but the best
> for you. So, she would push you, but it's literally because of her that I know so much
> about writing. That I'm able to write, that I'm able to approach other professors, that I'm
> prepared for university. She definitely went out of her way to make all of us comfortable
> at that.

Overall it appeared that these young students, who were already high achieving, were enabled by

their mentors to have confidence and to feel comfortable seeking help when needed despite their

young age. This prepared them well for interacting with professors in college. It appears that acknowledging the important role that high school teachers had on their past and current successes may have allowed the students to realize that if they cultivated the same types of relationships with their college professors, it would likely help them succeed.

A third explanation for the success of young students in terms of GPA is their lack of partying. Young students by definition are not of age when they begin college; at 17 they are still considered minors. The students talked about how they were not able to engage in certain activities with their peers, such as going out for drinks or to concerts that required them to be of age. Apart from being under age, there were other factors that kept these young students from partying, including a strong sense of responsibility to do well in college, a lack of freedom (e.g., living at home, not having a car), and maturity beyond their young years. Due to their young age the majority of students lived with their parents. In fact, only one student did not live with his parents during the first year of college, instead he lived in the on-campus housing. Overall, only two other students had ever lived in on-campus housing at the time of the interview and none of the students had ever lived off-campus with roommates or alone.

While it might seem like the young students would see their inability to party negatively, they did not see having fun as an important aspect of their college experience. For example, Jonathan stated the following:

> So, definitely being an early college high school kid, having a tight schedule, and not having a car kind of just makes you focus on why you are at this university. Like, you are there to study, do well in classes, and earn your degree. So, I guess I didn't get that much involved in that whole aspect, like the partying.

As is evident from Jonathan's quote, it was not just being under 21 that kept him from partying, but also the fact that he saw his status as an early college high school student as one in which good grades were essential. He was also from a lower income background, as is the cases for

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many young students, and did not have access to a car, which would have given him more freedom.

In Cassandra's case, she graduated from high school a year early and did so despite several faculty, teachers, and peers advising her against it. Considering her own experience, she recognized how important it was for other young students to see her be open about her age, despite being hesitant to do so at first: "Some people do acknowledge (their age) and I think that's something cool, not something to be frowned upon." When Cassandra's age was shared with others in a campus publication, she felt relieved. She said, "And then the article really helped because it was like 'okay, now everyone knows'. Well not everyone, but now more people know and it's looked at in a better light." Looking back at some of the backlash she faced for wanting to skip a grade and graduate early from high school, Cassandra mentions how her decision influenced others to also graduate early, which she sees positively. In addition, when asked whether the article that highlighted her young age helped, she stated the following: "Hopefully, I think it did, but just the fact that I graduated early and people were like 'oh she did well at the university, then I think that's a good choice and decision to make'." With Cassandra's quote, it is evident that she recognized how important it was for her to not only do well in college but also be open about her experiences as a young student in order to encourage other people to follow her footsteps.

Maturity also played a role in the young students' decision not to party. All 15 of the students mentioned how they felt they were more mature than peers their age. Selena remarked on her maturity *vis a vis* her peers:

> I just think because I act more mature than my age and I don't really connect with students who are my age. They're younger than me, well, younger in the sense that they're a year behind me, or two. I don't know, like I started school and I was really focused on all of my classes. Those who are my age, they're more careless, you can say.

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In the end, young students attributed their success to their level of maturity, which influenced their decision to concentrate on their academics rather than party.

2.6 DISCUSSION

This paper used institutional data to compare the academic performance of young students to traditionally aged students and found that young students outperformed traditionally aged students in terms of GPA over three semesters in college. Then, through the use of in-depth interviews with young students, I offered possible explanations for the quantitative results including: high quality high school preparation in programs designed for students on paths to become young college students; an openness to seek help from professors; and a lack of partying. In this discussion, I will highlight the important quantitative findings, review the explanations for the quantitative results, and discuss their relevance to previous literature.

Given my focus on age, it was notable that being young was associated with significantly higher GPA across three semesters as compared to traditionally aged students. As previously mentioned, minimal literature has studied younger students and those who have define young as students who are under 21 years of age. In this study, I defined young as students who were under the age of 18 when they first began attending college in order to isolate out students who began college when typical students are still in high school. Despite differences in operationalization of young age, my results are consistent with a study conducted in the United Kingdom where authors found that students under 21 had a 62.7% chance of obtaining a good degree, however the chances were also high for older students between the ages of 25 and 50 (Richardson & Woodley, 2003). In terms of older age, being mature (25 years and older) was associated with lower GPAs across the three semesters as compared to traditionally aged

students, although this finding was not significant at p<.05, suggesting that mature students and traditionally aged students had no statistically significant differences in GPA. This finding is not consistent with previous literature that has found mature students perform better than their traditionally-aged peers (Cantwell, et al, 2001; Hoskins, Newstead, Dennis, 1997; Halpern, 2007). The majority of the studies that consider how the students' age influences their performance in higher education were conducted in the UK, this may account for the differences in their results.

Other significant findings not related to age are related to sex, high school class rank, major, classification, and time. In terms of sex, Latinas had higher GPAs than Latinos. Given that, the literature looking at gender and academic performance among Latinos/as found that being female was positively related to the students' academic outcomes (Arbona & Nora, 2007; Cole, 2008; Fisher, 2007; Otero, Rivas, & Rivera, 2007; Crisp, Taggart & Nora, 2015). Students who were closer to the top of their high school graduating class had better GPAs over the study period. Previous literature shows that high school academic performance is the best predictor for college GPA (Hoffman & Lowitzki, 2005) and is consistent with our findings. Students with majors in Liberal Arts or Health Sciences had significantly higher GPAs than students in the College of Science. This finding is unique since the majority of the literature surrounding college major concentrates on retention and major persistence extending from the orienting idea that choosing a major that fits a person's interest is more important than the major itself (Allen & Robbins, 2008). The limited amount of studies that take students' major into account when looking at students' GPA might be due to this focus on "fit" and persistence in the literature (Allen et al, 2008). Students who were freshmen and sophomores also had significantly higher GPAs than those who were juniors/senior students and GPA decreased over time for the

students. These finding are not consistent with previous literature that shows college GPA increases across the four years at institutions in the University of California system (Geiser & Santelices, 2007) and at a large private university in the northeast (Grove & Wasserman, 2004). This might be due to the fact that that this study only accounts for three semesters as compared to eight or the different student demographics in these studies. In my study, all students were Hispanic and many were working-class students.

There is so little literature on the academic performance of young students in college. Therefore, it was important to pair the quantitative data with voice of actual young students, currently navigating college, in order to begin to determine why young students are having academic success. The qualitative data suggests that high quality high school preparation in programs designed for students on paths to become young college students, an openness to seek help from professors, and a lack of partying are contributing to young students' success.

The young Latino/a students attending the university in the Southwest that I interviewed had all taken AP classes, dual credit classes, or classes at the community college due to their participation in an ECHS. These classes proved to be good training ground for high school students who would become young college students, for it helped them prepare for their college classes at the university. Previous studies that looked at the academic performance of students who participated in these programs have also found that these students have higher college GPAs than their counterparts (Young, Slate, Moore, Barnes, 2014; Andrews, 2004; Dixon, 2017; Ganzer, 2014, Jones, 2014). In the case of the students who were interviewed, taking these types of classes taught them what to expect in their university classes and in some cases exposed them to the same material in high school that they would see again at the university; this enabled them to perform better the second time around. While their high school classes served as good

preparation for their entry-level university classes, it was only when they began taking upper division classes at the junior and senior level that they faced difficulties and felt less prepared. The quantitative results showed decreasing GPAs over time for all students, including but not limited to the young students. In the case of the young students and the other students as well, it may have been that all students struggled as the difficulty of their courses increased over time.

Higher GPAs among young students may also relate to their openness in seeking help and going to their professor's office hours. The finding is supported by a quantitative study showing that positive interactions with professors, such as receiving constructive criticism, were positively correlated with Hispanic students' GPAs (Cole, 2008). The majority of the students mentioned seeking help when needed and those who did not seek help still felt comfortable enough to do if the situation ever called for it. Considering that previous studies have demonstrated that middle-class students are more comfortable interacting with authority figures like professors (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Stuber, 2011), it's important to note that these young students are from Hispanic backgrounds and many are from poor families and they would not be expected to be behaving in this way, based on previous studies. However, they seem to more closely reflect what Jack (2016) has referred to as 'privileged poor' students. These students are from low-income backgrounds but attended boarding, day, and preparatory high schools and were comfortable seeking help from authority figures such as professors in college (Jack, 2016). Jack (2016) explains that the "privileged poor" are relatively comfortable with professors because they have been exposed to elite environments, while what he calls "doubly disadvantaged" students live in less secure environments and attend disadvantaged schools. All 15 of the young students attended publically funded high schools in El Paso. In many ways, the students had backgrounds similar to the "doubly disadvantaged". For example, many faced

financial hardships such as having their electricity cut off because they were unable to pay for the bill. Unlike the "privileged poor", they did not leave their distressed communities but still experience similar comfort levels, which seems to reflect the success of the local programs in preparing students well and the young Hispanic students' comfort at this Hispanic serving Institution. Young students did not feel nervous or uncomfortable in interactions with professors and were the first to initiate the interaction.

The young students' willingness to seek help was influenced by their high school experiences. All of the young students had mentors in high school who guided them which may have enabled them to gain the confidence they needed in order to seek help in college. This is important considering how previous literature has highlighted the importance of mentor outreach and personalized communication for low-income high school graduates attending college (Castleman & Page, 2014). While we do not have a comparable group of traditionally age college students with which to compare, the students' ability to communicate effectively with their professors at the college level and seek help when needed seems above average for this population of students and may have contributed to the young students' high GPA. Previous studies have highlighted the importance that faculty interactions can have, not only students motivation and learning but also on their academic achievement (Komarraju, Musulkin & Bhattacharya, 2010). The majority of the literature surrounding the ECHS initiative has concentrated on evaluating the students during the program (Air et al, 2010; Berger et al, 2010; Miller et al2013). These studies have recognized how important small close knit and supportive environments are for the success of their students and even called for evaluating how these students transition to larger environments, such as a four-year university (Kaniuka, 2010). Through these interviews, we were able to see how having strong relationships with the teachers

at their high school seemed to translate into students' communicating and forming helpful relationships with their professors at the university. This in turn has helped young students succeed academically.

Young students' academic success is also likely connected to their lack of partying. Being under age may have prevented young students from legally engaging in activities such as partying and going out to night clubs, however the students did not see this as a negative experience. Previous studies have shown that students who spend more hours partying and at clubs had lower GPAs (Plant, Ericcson, Hill & Asberg, 2005). In fact, all of the young students stated they felt they were more mature than peers their age which influenced them to focus more on their classes rather than other aspects of college life. As a result these young students spend a lot time on school work. This might also be influenced by their status of Hispanic working class students. For the most part, they are the first in their family to attend college and are influenced by family expectations. While some students did mention how wary their parents were of them attending college due to their young age, they were still supportive and proud of their academic achievements. While other studies have demonstrated the benefits that students have living on campus (Turley & Wodtke, 2010), it appears this was not the case for these young students. Seeing themselves as more mature and their status as young Hispanic working-class students influenced their focus on academics which helps explain why young students have a higher GPA as compared to traditionally-age students.

2.7 CONCLUSION

Overall this study demonstrates considerable success of young Hispanic students in terms of cumulative GPA and positive college experiences. Through the quantitative data I found that young Hispanic students had significantly greater GPAs than traditionally-aged Hispanic

students. The qualitative data allowed us to examine possible explanations for the young students' GPAs. High school experiences (e.g., taking AP/dual credit classes, forming strong relationships with their teachers) enabled the students to adapt well to their college coursework. Despite their young age, students felt mature and this may have influenced their lack of partying, which translated to the young students focusing on their academics.

Minimal research has looked at the academic performance of young students (those who were under the age 18 when they began college) and especially those that are from racial/ethnic minority backgrounds like the Hispanic students in my study. Considering how the majority of young students in this study came from programs such as the AP, dual credit, and ECHS program, this study also contributes to the literature on those programs. The majority of the studies on those programs have looked at the GPAs of students in community colleges, and concentrated on first semester GPA only. This study contributes to that literature by studying the GPA of students in a four-year institution as well as considering cumulative GPA across three semesters. Finally, most of the literature uses quantitative data in order to explain the academic performance of students and this paper contributes to that by offering possible explanations through qualitative data.

2.8 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

My study was limited due to its sample size and only analyzing young Hispanic students at one HSI university, which helps in giving college access to first-generation, low-income Hispanic students (Laden, 2004). A larger sample of students at multiple universities would have enabled me to consider differences within universities such as differing demographics, the resources that universities offer to young students, and whether these resources are helpful. While this study does look at GPA for three semesters, which is a longer period of time than

previous studies, it would be beneficial to look at the GPA of young students throughout their entire college career. Another limitation related to the qualitative data is that I only interviewed young students; therefore, I do not have a comparison group to see how the experiences of young students differed from traditionally aged and mature (older) students. Considering how programs such as the ECHS initiative began as an effort to help minority and underserved students, having a study that compares these students to other students in terms of their academic achievements as well as their transition to and experiences within the university, would be beneficial to see the degree of help that these programs offer young students. My study suggests that future research on college student success should consider age as an important variable when studying college transition for students, especially underrepresented and minority students.

Chapter 3- Age-Related Stigma of Young Hispanic College Students

3.1 INTRODUCTION

There has been an increase of nontraditionally aged students in higher education, which points to the importance of researching their experiences in college. The majority of the research concentrates on mature students who are 25 and older and little research has concentrated on young students (students under 18 year of age) attending college. Young students typically come from programs such as those offering dual credits and the early college high school initiative, which was implemented in order to address the challenges that underrepresented minority students' face when pursuing and transitioning to college. Few studies have looked at young Hispanic students attending four-year universities and the majority concentrates on their academic performance. Few studies have considered the experiences and challenges that young Hispanic students face when seeking higher education. This portion of my thesis, will illustrate the challenges that young Hispanic students face when pursuing a higher education, drawing on ideas from Erving Goffman. In doing so, I use in-depth interviews with a subset of the young Hispanic students included in the parent quantitative study (see Chapter 2) in order to look at challenges they encounter in higher education and how the young students manage and cope with these challenges.

3.2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Considering how Latinos are the largest and second fastest growing minority group in the United States, there is a growing need to look at the inequalities that Hispanics face in higher education institutions. Historically, the majority of literature concentrates on white and black comparisons (Lopez & Patten, 2015; Small & Newman, 2001). The rate of Latinos enrolling in college has increased substantially in recent years with 69% of Hispanics that graduated from high school in 2012 enrolling in college (Fry & Taylor, 2013). The majority of Latinos begin

their college education at community colleges, with Latinos contributing to about 16% of students enrolled in a community college (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). However, data has shown that attending these two-year institutions does not help Hispanic minority students eventually obtain a bachelor's degree (Arbona & Nora, 2007; Hoachlander, Sikora, Horn, & Carroll, 2003).   In addition to community colleges, 46% of Latino students enroll in Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) (Arbona & Nora, 2007). HSIs are defined as institutions that serve a minimum of 25% Hispanic students and play an important role in assisting first-generation, low-income Hispanic students. Despite the increase in Hispanics enrolling in college, as is demonstrated in the previous statistics, they are less likely than white students to enroll in four-year institutions, as well as selective colleges (Fry & Taylor, 2013). While the increase in Hispanics enrolling in college and graduating from college is a positive trend, their graduation rates are still insufficient, with only 8.5% of bachelor's recipients being Hispanic (Fry & Lopez, 2012).

3.2.1 Non-Traditional Age Groups in Higher Education

Most studies related to age and higher education concentrate on mature students and evaluate their academic performance as well as disprove several misperceptions about mature students (Hoskins, Newstead, Dennis, 1997; Halpern 2007; Richardson & King 1998; Richardson, 1994; Cantwell, Archer & Bourke, 2001; Richardon, 1993; Scheard, 2009). The increase in young students attending universities has not been mirrored by an increase in research looking at this population. Studies that address young students define them as students who are under 21 (Richardson & Woodley, 2003) or students who took college courses while in high school (Arbona & Nora, 2007; Berkner & Chavez, 1997; Hoachlander, Sikora, Horn, & Carroll, 2003; Wassmer, Moore, & Shulock, 2004). These definitions are limited because students who

are 21 are quite different than students that are 17 in terms of their life experiences, and many

students who take a college course while in high school enter college as traditionally aged

students just like those that did not take college courses in high school. For the purposes of this

analysis, young students are defined as those that were not yet 18 when they started attending

college. This definition reflects the reality that students under the age of 18 are entering the

university, often due to programs designed to encourage this (to be discussed next), and with

substantial college credit. In some cases, young students are classified as juniors based on their

credits.

3.2.3 Dual Credit, Advanced Placement (AP), and Early College High Schools

Students enrolled in dual credit classes at their high school receive both high school and

college credit for that class (Andrews, 2004). All 50 states offer dual credit programs and 46% of

4 year universities and colleges reported having dual credit programs, meaning that students

receive college credit through their institution, even though the students take the classes at the

high school (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2013). Being in a dual credit

program increases the overall academic achievement (i.e., GPA) of students in high school and

increases the chances of them enrolling in college and completing their degree (Karp, Calcagno,

Hughes, Jeong, & Bailey, 2007; Adelman, 2006). Despite their success, dual credit programs are

critiqued, for they only allow honor students to participate (Berger, Adelman & Cole, 2010).

This in turn limits the amount of students who make use of this program, with only 5% of

students participating in 2002 and 2003 (NCES, 2005b).

In response to this weakness in dual credit programs, another program was created that

concentrated on creating entire high schools specifically designed around the dual enrollment

model that would serve underrepresented students. Programs such as the Early College High

School Initiative (ECHSI) were implemented in order to address the challenges that underrepresented and minority students face when pursuing a higher education (e.g., less likely to enroll in and graduate from college than white students). Underrepresented students are minority students who typically come from low income backgrounds and are often times first-generation. These schools are called early college high schools (ECHS) and they are high schools that allow students to take college courses while still in high school with the ultimate goal of the students graduating high school with an associate's degree (60 college credit hours). ECHS were pioneered through the Early College High School Initiative (ECHSI), first started in 2002 by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. As of Fall 2009 there were more than 200 ECHS programs in the U.S. (Berger et al, 2010). ECHS have been true to their mission; in that first year, 80% of ECHS students nationwide were from racial or ethnic minority backgrounds and 70% were from low-income families (Air& Sri, 2005). Some early colleges have lottery-based admissions where they randomly select students from a list of eligible applicants and then screen out students who are not first generation, underrepresented minorities, or low-income (Edmunds, 2017).

The majority of the literature provides justification for why programs like dual credit enrollment and ECHSI were created, as well as the immediate benefits that these programs have on the students while they are enrolled in those programs. Several studies have begun to examine how these students perform while seeking higher education. The majority have shown positive outcomes for students who took college coursework in high school. The students were more likely to graduate from high school and more likely to enroll in college and have higher GPAs than their counterparts (Karp, Calcagno, Hughes, Jeong, & Bailey, 2007; Swason, 2008; Haxton, Song, Zeiser, Berger, Turk-Bicakci, Garet, Knudson, Hoshen, 2016).

While some studies have followed the students after graduation, the majority of these studies are limited to analyzing these students in community college. One study did analyze the impacts of ECHS two years after college. This study included control students (lottery applicants who were not offered enrollment) and treatment students (lottery applicants that were offered enrollment before the first day of school). In terms of the background characteristics, the percentage minority students was similar between the treatment group (52.5%) and control group (53.7%), as was the percentage of first-generation students (21.6% of the treatment group vs. 19.9% of the control group); 47.3% of the treatment group were low-income as compared to 45.2% of the control group (Haxton et al, 2016). This study found that 24.9% of the students who attended an ECHS (in the treatment group) earned a college degree as compared to only 4.7% students who did not attend an ECHS (in the control group), and that graduation rates were significantly higher for minority students as compared to white students, with treatment students being 10 times more likely to obtain a college degree than students in the control group. (Haxton et al, 2016). While this study did consider race, they compared all minority groups to whites and did not specify specific minority groups (e.g., Hispanics).

While not restricted only to students coming through ECHS, the results presented in Chapter 2 show that being young as compared to traditionally aged was associated with a significantly higher GPA for Hispanic students at a HSI. Despite this positive outcome, young Hispanic students still face challenges when pursuing a higher education, even at a HSI. Previewing the results, I find that one of the challenges that young students face is age-related stigma. Elaborating on this challenge, I focus on the different ways that young students cope with age related stigma, such as impression management and role embracing.

3.2.3 Age-Related Stigma

A challenge that young students likely face is age-related stigma. Stigma occurs when there is a gap between what someone's identity is and what it ought to be, based on societal expectations (Goffman, 2009). A person who is stigmatized is seen as someone who possesses an undesirable difference, such as someone with a physical deformity or someone who is a recovering alcoholic (Goffman, 1963). In the case of a deformity, the stigma has already been discredited (i.e., it is readily apparent). For the alcoholic, the stigma is less perceivable, making it discreditable (Goffman 1963). It is likely that the alcoholic would try to hide his/her past in day-to-day interactions and pass as "normal" (in Goffman's terms).

In the case of the young student, his/her undesirable difference may be his/her young age, which may not be readily perceivable to his/her peers or professors, making it a potentially discreditable stigma. Young age may be seen as undesirable because young students can often times be seen as immature or lack the competency to be in a university classroom setting. It seems likely that young students would work to keep their age private from their peers and professors. If their age becomes known, they may experience age-related stigma.

Most prior research on age-related stigma has focused on older people, and specifically older women (Day & Hitchings, 2011; Berger, 2009; Garstka & Schmitt, 2004). It has demonstrated that there can be a gap between an older person's identified age and their actual biological age (Day & Hitchings, 2011), such that they feel and act 40 but are technically 60. In contrast to the discreditable stigma that young students might face, age-related stigma is more often discredited, since older age is more visible and is attributed to specific stereotypes, such as old people being unproductive, and can translate into lower status (Day & Hitchings, 2011). In the case of older people, stigma can also arise from changes that occur in the body and mind,

such as wrinkles, gray hair, and weight gain or forgetfulness. It can also arise from specific situations, such as being asked to do something that places heavy physical demands on the body that the person can no longer do (Widrick & Raskin, 2010).

Due to perceived stigma, older people seeking employment may change their appearance in order to look younger when they report for a job interview (Berger, 2009). As they age, most eventually accept an older identity. They began to feel old (felt identity) when the image that they were projecting to employers (presented identity) was received to be that of an "older" worker (social identity) (Berger, 2009). It may be that something similar happens with younger students; they began to feel young (felt identity) when the image they project to their peers (presented identity) is received to be that of a "young student" (social identity).

Previous literature has demonstrated different ways in which people use impression management and role embracing in order to cope with stigma (Berger 2009, Sheperd & Haynie, 2011; Snow & Anderson, 1997). Individuals experiencing stigma use impression management in order to control the image they convey to others (Goffman, 1959). Impression management is also used when there is a break when the feedback they receive from others does not mesh with their desired social identity (Bozeman & Kacmar, 1997). While not focused on age, entrepreneurs use impression management techniques in order to cope with the stigma associated with failure and do so by either developing a positive self-view or negative self-view (Sheperd & Haynie, 2011). Older people, and specifically women, used clothing and fashion in order to appear younger; however, this proved to be somewhat problematic when it came to dressing for cold weather, for older women would avoid items such hats (Day & Hitchings, 2011). Similar to this, older workers also used impression management by dressing younger, specifically during job interviews, and by maintaining a good physical health in order to fit in (Berger, 2009).

One way that an individual can manage the image they are presenting is through role embracing. When an individual is role embracing, he/she meets all of the demands of a role and see himself/herself through the role. People commonly role embrace when they are new to the role or sees themselves as representatives of the role (Allan, 2014). It may be that young students embrace the student role, for they are new college students and also represent students in their program, such as the ECHS. Counter to the idea of role embracing is role distancing, whereby an individual will separate themselves from a role in order to demonstrate that they are more than the role (Goffman, 1975). Traditionally aged students typically distance themselves from the student role because they want to show others that there is more to them than just being students. When role distancing, individuals leave gaps in their presentation that can be filled by other selves (Allan, 2011). If young students were to distance themselves from the student role, those gaps could be filled with other stigmatized selves, such as being too young and incompetent. Due to the perceived stigma that young students experience, they may feel the need to fully embrace the student role.

Another reason that people embrace a role is to demonstrate to others that they are qualified and capable of performing the role (Goffman, 1975). Since young students may be seen as not competent enough, they may embrace the student role in order to show that they are qualified and capable of being college students. One study looking at the ways in which people use role embracement as a way to deal with stigma found that homeless people cope with the stigma of being homeless by embracing their role of being homeless through openly telling people they are "bums" or "expert garbage divers" (Snow & Anderson, 1997).

3.3 DATA & METHODS

3.3.1 Study Context

This study took place at a university in the US Southwest that is also a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI). The majority of students are from the surrounding region and 80% are Hispanic, another 5% are international students from Mexico. In addition, 57% of undergraduate students are among the first generation in their family to attend college. Young students also attend the university and many of them enter the university through ECHS programs and/or with dual credit. In the Fall 2015 term, when all students interviewed for this paper were 17, the average age for undergraduate students at the university was 21, and 291 students out of 20,220 undergraduate students were under the age of 18. This accounted for 1.40% of the undergraduate population. Detailed age statistics are not reported for other universities, therefor it is unknown how the percentage of young students at the university in the Southwest compares to other universities.

3.3.2 Data Collection

I interviewed 15 Hispanic students attending the university that were not 18 at the time they began attending the university. The students were drawn from institutional data that was assembled and collected through an evaluation plan for an undergraduate scholarship and research program at the university, which we call EXCEL[2]. The institutional data set contained 678 Hispanic college students (of all ages) who participated and did not participate in programming provided through the EXCEL program and who were attending the university in Fall 2015. This EXCEL programming includes a scholarship and opportunities to engage in course-based undergraduate research experiences (CUREs). There were 34 young Hispanic

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[2] This is a pseudonym, used to protect the confidentiality of research participants.

students in the dataset who were not yet 18 as of September 1, 2015. An email was initially sent

to those students, and I interviewed the 15 who were interested in participating. Table 3.1

compares the interviewed students to all the students in the interview pool. Students that were

interviewed were more likely to be women, Pell grant eligible and full time than the pool as a

whole; they were also more likely to be science majors. They were similar in terms of percent

with an EXCEL scholarship and percent with an engineering major.

Table 3.1. Comparison between interviewees and non-respondents to the invitation to be interviewed based selected attributes (Fall 2015)

Variable	Interviewed Young Students (n=15)	All Young Students (n=34)
Sex: Male	4 (26.7%)	14 (41.2%)
EXCEL Scholarship 2015	4 (26.7%)	6 (17.6%)
Pell Grant 2015	10 (66.7%)	12 (35.3 %)
Full Time 2015	15 (100%)	19 (55.9%)
Major (Fall 2015):		
General Studies	0 (0%)	11 (32.4%)
Liberal Arts	1 (6.7%)	1 (2.9%)
Business	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Health Sciences	0 (0%)	0(0%)
Physical and Life Sciences	11 (73.3%)	16 (47.1%)
Engineering	3 (20.0%)	6 (17.6%)

A $20 Starbucks gift card was provided as an incentive for the students who agreed to

participate. The average length of the 15 interviews was 59 minutes with the minimum being 26

minutes and the maximum being 1 hour and 38 minutes. The interviews were conducted between

July and September of 2017 in my office at the university. In terms of the breakdown of the

students, 9 students were involved in CUREs and 4 of those 9 received a scholarship from

EXCEL; 6 students had not been involved in any EXCEL programming. 10 students receiving

Pell grant, meaning that they qualify for federal aid based on their low-income background and

status as a US citizen or permanent resident. See Table 3.2.

Table 3.2. Demographics of 15 Hispanic Student Interviewees for Fall 2015

Student Pseudonym	Age on September 1, 2015	Sex	CUREs	EXCEL Scholarship	ECHS	Pell Grant	Major Area	Classification in Fall 2015
Jonathan	17	Male	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	PLS[1]	Junior
Selena	17	Female	No	No	No	Yes	Engineering	Sophomore
Andrea	17	Female	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	PLS	Junior
Brandie	17	Female	Yes	No	No	Yes	PLS	Freshman
Diana	17	Female	Yes	No	No	Yes		Freshman
Paulina	17	Female	No	No	No	Yes	Liberal Arts	Freshman
Cassandra	17	Female	Yes	No	No	No	PLS	Freshman
Melody	17	Female	No	No	No	Yes	PLS	Freshman
Julie	17	Female	Yes	No	No	DK	PLS	Freshman
Laura	17	Female	No	No	Yes	No	PLS	Junior
Emma	17	Female	No	No	No	DK	PLS	Freshman
Chris	17	Male	Yes	No	Yes	No	PLS	Junior
Adan	17	Male	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Engineering	Freshman
Clarissa	17	Female	No	No	No	Yes	PLS	Freshman
Nathaniel	17	Male	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Engineering	Sophomore

Note: Abbreviations used in table: **CURE**s, course-based undergraduate research experiences sponsored by EXCEL; **EXCEL**, pseudonym for an undergraduate program; **DK**, do not know; **ECHS**, early college high school; and **PLS**, Physical and Life Sciences

A semi structured interview format was used to guide the interview. The interview guide covered questions related to high school experiences, experiences at the university in the Southwest, age-related experiences, and long-term goals. All students were asked about their high school experiences and how they helped them prepare to apply and attend college. Those who were a part of an early college program were asked about their experiences attending college and high school at the same time. Participants who were not a part of an early college program were asked about their experiences with taking AP (advanced placement), IB (international baccalaureate), or dual credit courses. All students were also asked about their overall experience with transitioning to a university full time as well as their experiences with registering and advising. Other questions include how their peers and faculty reacted to their age, and their comfort level within the university due to their age. If students had a faculty mentor, they were asked about the relationship with their mentor and to rate them on many levels from

their psychological and emotional support to their academic subject knowledge. All students were asked about their current post-graduation plans, whether they feel they have had enough time to decide on their future plans, and how prepared they feel to pursue them. Students were also asked if the faculty at the university and their parents have been supportive of their goals.

3.3.3 Data Analysis

With the students' consent, the interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using N*VIVO qualitative analysis software. The data were coded using several key themes that were further broken down into various subthemes. I analyzed the data in three stages (Strauss & Corbin, 1988). The initial stage consisted of exploring preliminary themes that emerged from the data, such as challenges that young students faced. In the second stage, I was able to create a framework for the themes, age-related stigma, as well as identify subthemes. In the final stage I used selective coding in order to confirm and refine my initial codes. I coded for the following themes: describing the age-related stigma and managing the age-related stigma. The second theme had two subthemes: impression management and changing their long-term goals.

3.4 RESULTS

3.4.1 Describing the Age-related Stigma

When asked whether they would hide their age, the majority of the students stated how they would not speak about their age unless directly asked about it. However, if asked, they would be honest and answer truthfully; none of the students reported ever lying about their age. While many students were able to keep their age from their professors, it was harder for them to do so with their peers. This was because they interact more with their peers and form friendships with them. While how often each young student was asked about his or her age varied, 14 out of

the 15 interviewees reported being directly asked about their age at least once while at the university.

The students' young age was exposed in two main ways: their peers overhearing their age, or being asked either directly or indirectly. For example some students were simply asked by their peers or the topic of age would come up during group interactions in the classroom or outside of the classroom where the students mention their age as part of the group conversation. Many students explained how their interactions with their peers changed after their peers became aware of their young age and experienced age-related stigma as a result. In order to show how the interactions with their peers changed, I will draw on the case of Laura. Laura began attending the university during her senior year of high school as part of an ECHS program and was 17 at the time. She began attending the university as a full-time student after her high school graduation and was classified a junior at that time.

Laura's peers found out about her young age when they overheard her disclosing her age to her professor in the context of asking him/her about her eligibility for a program since she was part of the early college program. She stated how before this interaction with her professor, she socialized with a group of students that sat near her in the class and she described them as being "super friendly". After they found out about her age, this group of students changed the way they treated her. She added, "Every time I would ask them questions, they'd just shut me down. I just never stuck around with them, like I was trying to be friendly and trying to communicate in class, and no."

Similar to this experience, other young students also had peers, with whom they were previously friendly, distance themselves from the young students, after becoming aware of their

young age. In the case of Jonathan, the topic of his age came up during an interaction with a group of his peers and he described how they reacted to this:

> I remember this one experience with this girl, she was mean. I had this girl for my lab and she wasn't in my lab group or anything but I would talk to the girl like before class because we had to wait in lab for people to leave so we had time to kill. I remember having a conversation, me, this girl and these other two guys and one of them knew me. He was a grade above me and I was really good friends with him. I don't know how the conversation came up about ages and stuff and she found out I was 17. This was when I was still in high school and the girl completely stopped talking to me.

Jonathan is also and ECHS alumni who began attending the university his senior year of high school and was 17 at the time. As Laura's and Jonathan's quotes demonstrate, once the young students' age was out in the open, they were treated differently due to their age.

Many young students spoke of the challenge of having their peers underestimate them because of their age. The majority of these experiences happened when the student was engaging in required group work as part of class requirements. In Paulina's case, she described how her age played a role in the type of tasks she was assigned in the group. Paulina was 17 when she began attending the university. She reported, "people would always look at you and be like 'okay how old are you?' 'Well, I'm 17.' You know, at the time. And they would be like 'okay well you can handle decorating the poster.'" Because of her age, Paulina's peers decided she was not adept for anything other than decorating.

While none of the students had a negative interaction with professors related to age, they were not open about their age to their professors. Out of the 15 students, only 5 mentioned that any of their professors were aware of their young age. Professors that knew were those that were the students' mentors and, therefore, had a closer relationship with the students. The majority of interviewees said that topic never came up with their professors. Nathaniel was 17 when he

began attending college and was 19 and a junior at the time of the interview. When asked if any of his professors were aware of his age, Nathaniel stated the following:

> I don't even think they have access to that information. I think it's probably just the ID number, but if they do, then they probably are aware of my age. But to my knowledge I'm not entirely sure if any of them have been. It's because I'm not social with my professors, so no. That I know. I don't think any of them are aware of my age.

Since the interactions that young students had with their professor were more limited than the interactions with their peers, the students were less likely to disclose their age to professors. The desire to not share their age with their professors did not lead the students to avoid interactions with them. In fact, many students described having interactions with professors outside of class. For example, they talked about the benefits they gained from going to a professor's office hours. Even among those students that had not visited office hours, they said they were comfortable enough doing so, if needed. Overall, it seems like young students felt comfortable seeking out interactions with professors and were often the first to initiate the interactions; but they did not choose to openly discuss their age with their professors.

Although young students had not had one-to-one negative interactions with their professors related to their age, they had heard professors make negative comments about young students in passing and this caused them to be concerned. Andrea was also an ECHS alumni who began attending the university while still in high school at the age of 17. When asked whether she had heard professors make any comments about young students, Andrea reported, "I have heard of it. Kind of, like some professors think that we are just too young. That we don't take it seriously and that we are not mature enough." These comments made by professors were enough to contribute to the stigma that students experienced, as well as influence their decision not to be open about their age. As previously mentioned, Nathaniel stated that his professors were not aware of his age; however, he was still wary of the stigma he might experience if his

professors had knowledge of his age. Nathaniel further commented on this when stating the differences between him and traditionally aged students: "Well, actually there is a difference because sometimes, like going to office hours and meeting your professors. Sometimes they tend to take other students more seriously than they do me, for instance. But that's only once they find out your age, but I mean, I don't think that's happened to me." Even though Nathaniel did not experience this, he was still aware of the stigma he might experience being a young student as compared to his traditionally aged peers.

To summarize the findings in terms of age-related stigma, young students were usually not open about their age, unless specifically asked about it. The students appeared to be uncomfortable discussing their age in the context of college. Some even stated it was even 'weird' for them to be asked about it during the interview. The vast majority of their professors were not aware of their age to begin with. They were less able to hide their age from their peers, for their peers were more likely to ask about their age, especially if they interacted with them through in-class activities and group projects. Due to this, their peers and classmates stigmatized young students more so than did their professors. They were stigmatized in that their peers said negative comments to them and thought the young students were not competent enough due to their age. This led the students to employ specific strategies to manage the stigma and retain a positive face in the university.

3.4.2 Impression Management

Because of these negative experiences, the students developed strategies for managing age-related stigma through impression management and changing their plans in order to achieve their long-term goals.

In order to cope with stigma, the students sought to project an impression of themselves

as mature and belonging in college. They did this by altering their appearance to look older, surrounding themselves with older peers, and fully embracing the role of college student. While altering their appearance in order to look older was not something that most young interviewees did, students who held leadership positions or jobs within the university were more likely to describe altering their appearance. For example, Adan brought up how he was focused on trying to look older, especially when he first began college at the age of 17. He said:

> I tried to grow my facial hair because it would make me look older. I was always concerned, like, 'I need to look a little bit older.' Only recently have I started looking my age. Because back then, the thing is in college, I looked fairly young. I always looked young. My friends would make fun of me like 'dude you look like you're 15,' so it was kind of annoying.

Adan was 19 and a junior in college at the time of the interview and worked as a research assistant in the university. From his quote we can see how he was concerned with looking young especially when he first began attending the university. Several other students stated how they started dressing more professionally. Apart from dressing professionally, this impression management technique varied by gender with women concentrating on wearing makeup and men working out in order to be more muscular and attempting to grow out their facial hair, as was the case for Adan.

A second technique used by students was to surround themselves with older peers outside of the classroom. All 15 students reported having friends that are older than them. While spending time with older students in the classroom was already a given since the students were taking college classes, the young students sought to cultivate relationships with these students outside of the classroom. Andrea began attending the university while still in high school, as a result the majority of her peers were also from the same early college program as her. However, as she began progressing through her college career, she made new connections with her older

peers. In the following quote, Andrea described why she made connections with her peers in class: "Yes, I feel like I've made friendships along the way. I'm very much a person that needs a buddy in a class. So I make a friend and it's always really nice because I'm able to. I'll see them around and I'm like 'oh how is everything going and how are you doing'". Andrea further explained how she liked to be of help to her peers:

> So when it comes to class, I'm really open. So the people that I come in contact with I always tell them like 'hey if you guys ever need help, or if you guys want to start studying groups, you guys are more than welcome. Let me know, I'm here to help'. Like I'll give you an example, I really like helping people so I'll tell them 'I found this really great tutor. He is amazing, like guys, like for reals, he's really good'. So I'll give information to people, in o-chem [organic chemistry], I offer my services all of the time. So like 'we are going to be meeting up at the library, if you guys want to come'.

Through Andrea's experience, we can see how she sought to interact with peers in her classes, who were older than her, and how she was open to helping them out and engaging in activities that were beneficial for them. She did not limit herself to only interacting with students from her ECHS program. Through this she was able to cope with age-related stigma by seeking to connect with older peers and demonstrate to them that she was willing to put in the necessary work and help them as well. Other students remarked that they found older friends because they felt more mature than students in their own age group. Young students may do this as a way to cope with the age-related stigma they experience from other less friendly peers.

A third technique that students used was to embrace the role of the college student. They did so through a variety of ways such as taking on hard tasks in group projects, seeking help from professors, and being involved in extracurricular activities. Since the young students were often times underestimated by their peers when it came to working in group projects, the students may have felt the need to prove that they were capable and did so by taking on hard tasks within these group projects. Paulina did this by taking on extra responsibilities. She explained: "The

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students underestimate everything you would do, and it turns out when one of them would slack it, I would pick up the slack. I always had to prove that I could do the amount of work that I was doing." Interactions like the one described by Paulina left young students wanting to prove to their peers that they were capable, often times even going the extra mile to do so.

As an element of their role embracing, young students were very involved with professors and would seek help if they had any questions. While some students mentioned they have not had the need to go to a professor's office hours, 14 out of the 15 students said they were willing to seek help from professors if needed. Clarissa mentioned the time she went to her professor for help: "My first semester with my pre-calculus teacher, I would stay after class every day and she would always help me. She would give me practice problems, like a friend. She would show us and stuff like that." Just like Clarissa, most young students took the initiative to seek help or simply be in contact with their professors. Clarissa was not only 17 when she began attending college but was also classified as a sophomore due to the amount of credits she was able to obtain through taking dual credit classes in high school. Taking initiative in ways that allowed them to perform better academically was a strategy used by students to prove that they were capable of being at the university and might help reduce stigma. The remaining two students were clear about preferring to figure things out on their own and taking on that challenge before asking a professor for assistance, which can also be considered reflective of fully embracing the student role. For example, Nathaniel explained: "Actually, I don't really like to go to office hours just because I feel I can learn the material. You know, it's a challenge. I kind of want to learn by myself. The only way I'll ever only go to office hours is when I really don't understand something." Whether it was seeking help when needed or challenging themselves by trying to solve academic challenges alone, young students engaged in these methods and

demonstrated to their peers and themselves that they had fully embraced the student role.

Young students also embraced the role of a college student by being involved in extracurricular activities within the university. This helped them to fit in with their peers and become part of campus life. 13 out of the 15 students were involved in some sort of club or organization such as the Student Government Association or the Medical Professions Organization. Young students found several resources within these organizations that allowed them to network. Brandie explained how being a part of the pre-dental society for students who want to become dentists was beneficial for her: "A lot of them were just like, they were really smart and they were just good influences. They taught me a lot about dental school, like how to get in. It really helped me figure what I wanted to do." Through time spent in clubs and organizations, the young students were able to make meaningful connections with their older peers and they were able to transcend the identity of being just a young student (and potentially stigmatized) to being a competent peer on the same career path as the other students.

3.4.3 Changing plans to achieve long-term goals

Separate from impression management, young students also changed their plans when it came to achieving their long-term goals in order to manage age-related stigma. While all of the young students were set in a career choice at the time of the interview, many had decided to alter their original plans to achieve their career goals. Young students realized that their age was a barrier for their long-term goals and that they could no longer have the same expectations. This was especially true for the students who were considering a career in the medical field, for they were aware of the stigma that surrounds young doctors. For example, Cassandra stated how she was aware of the stigma she might experience in her future career if she earns her MD at a young age:

> If someone has a really young doctor that graduated early from college and high school, they're not going to feel very secure, comfortable. They usually like people that are older. It's kind of a stereotype for doctors. As a young person, they're like 'get me the doctor' [but] 'I am the doctor,' stuff like that. They're like 'oh, they're lacking in knowledge and experience' that's something that I've taken into consideration.

Cassandra skipped her junior year in high school and was 17 when she began attending the university. The possibility of facing stigma in her future career has not yet influenced Cassandra's plans. She is set on becoming a doctor, and has not made any decisions to postpone applications yet but she also stated that she was in no hurry to graduate early, since she is already ahead as compared to a traditionally aged college student. Due to the head start that she had, she took on leadership roles within the university without fear of falling behind.

On the other hand, some young students did change their plans in order to help them on the path to achieve their long-term goals. For example, some postponed or were considering postponing their pursuit of graduate or medical school. While some students were influenced by a lack of time, others were directly affected by the stigma they experienced such as having peers and professors think they were not ready to be in a university. Laura had a clear idea of her career goals, but decided to alter her plans due to her age. She had decided to postpone medical school applications for a year and stated the following, "I already know what I want to do. It's more of trying to figure out how to get there. I feel like I'm mentally prepared in the sense that I know what I want to do and I'm going to get there one way or another." Similar to Cassandra, Laura described her fear of having her age influence other's perceptions of her knowledge: "Sometimes I felt like I didn't want to say my age because I didn't want people to look down on me and be like 'oh she doesn't know anything, she just came in". While Laura did feel academically prepared to pursue medical school, her experience of being stigmatized by her

peers may have influenced her decision to delay her applications since there was no academic reason for her to do so.

In terms of coping with stigma, young students adopted a series of techniques in order to manage the age-related stigma they experience in college. The first coping mechanism directly related to impression management which translated to three different techniques. The first was to alter their appearance in order to appear older, the second was to surround themselves by older peers, and the third was to fully embrace the role of college student. Students also coped by changing their plans in order to better facilitate their eventual achievement of their long-term goals. While all of the young students were determined to achieve a specific career path, many decided to change the original plans because of their age.

3.5 DISCUSSION

Results showed that there are various ways in which young students experience age-related stigma, such as peers thinking the young students are not competent enough as well as the disparaging comments young students have heard. This is similar to a study that looked at the age-related stigma that older workers faced. Employers often times believe common stereotypes of older workers, such as them being less creative and trainable (Berger, 2009). While many of these stereotypes have been disproved in previous literature, Berger (2009) states that employers still believe and are influenced by them when it comes to hiring decisions. In a similar way, it seems as if some traditionally aged students and professors believe stereotypes that young students are not ready for college and act on them. For example, some stereotypes about young students are that they are immature and not competent enough to take college-level coursework.

Studies looking at age-related stigma tend to concentrate on those who are older (Day & Hitchings, 2011; Berger, 2009; Garstka & Schmitt, 2004). One study found that contrary to previous findings, older adults did not disidentify with their age (Garstka, Schmitt, Branscombe & Hummert, 2004). Unlike the homeless who openly announced being homeless (Snow et al, 1997), young students were not open about their age. However, similar to the older adults, they did not disidentify from their age when asked about it. Another study that concentrated on older workers found that the older workers' social identity influenced their felt identity to be that of an older person when the image they were projecting (presented identity) was read as an older worker (Berger, 2009). Young students may experience something similar in that when their social identity is that of a "student that is too young", it may begin to influence their felt identity. This was seen in the students who decided to delay applying to medical or graduate school due to concerns about their age.

It is not known if other young Hispanic students experience similar stigma elsewhere. This is because most studies that considered age and higher education concentrate on "mature" students. These studies have disproved the common stigma that mature students' age impairs their study skills (Richardson, 1994) and found that mature students have better academic outcomes than traditionally aged students (Cantwell, et al, 2001; Hoskins, Newstead, Dennis, 1997; Halpern, 2007). The studies, which have concentrated on young age, define young as students under 21, and are limited to analyzing their academic performance (e.g., Richardson & Woodley, 2003). In this study, it was important to define young students as those who were under the age of 18 when they first began attending college in order to capture the experiences of students that come to college campuses at that early age, many of whom are from ECHS and dual credit programs. Most of the studies that look at the effect of these programs focus

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narrowly on students' academic performance and use quantitative methods (Cantwell, et al,

2001; Hoskins, Newstead, Dennis, 1997; Halpern, 2007; Young, Slate, Moore, Barnes, 2014;

An, 2015; Andrews, 2004; Dixon, 2017; Ganzer, 2014, Jones, 2014). Qualitative methods, like

those used here, are important since they can illuminate the lived experiences of young Hispanic

students. A related qualitative study examined the experiences of Latinas in an ECHS program,

but was limited by only analyzing their high school experiences (Locke, Stedrak & Eadens,

2014). In that case study, the authors found that this ECHS helped Latinas be successful and

addressed the challenges they faced, such as the lack of college narratives at home (Locke,

Stedrak & Eadens, 2014).

Young students in this study actively sought to manage their age-related stigma through

impression management and by changing their long-term goals. This is similar to the way older

workers would change their appearance by dressing younger and/or keeping a good physical

health in order to manage age-related stigma (Berger, 2009). This is similar to the techniques that

young students used in order to appear older. The students dressed professionally in order to

appear older and also maintained a good physical health by working out in attempt to bulk up

and look older. These techniques were generally helpful for the students and not harmful to

them. This contrasts with older women who sometimes put their health at risk while engaging in

age-resisting techniques, such as not dressing appropriately for the winter, (Day& Hitchings

2011).

A second technique that young students use was to surround themselves with older peers.

The literature demonstrates that being engaged with peers in friendship networks, such as

through studying and athletic activities, reduces the likelihood that Latino students will drop out

of high school (Ream & Rumberger, 2008). Considering how friendship networks influence

school persistence among high schoolers, it may be that young students recognize the importance of surrounding themselves with specific friendship networks. In this case, young students surround themselves with older peers in order to potentially minimize age-related stigma.

Young students also managed age-related stigma by fully embracing the role of being a college student. One way in which young students embraced the student role was through interacting with professors. This likely has other benefits, beyond just managing stigma. Previous literature has highlighted the importance that faculty interactions have on students' academic success. For example, one study found that interactions with faculty outside the classroom have had a bigger impact on the students' academic motivation than other predictors such as previous academic performance and academic aptitude (Komarraju, Musulkin & Bhattacharya, 2010). Young students also embraced the student role through becoming involved within the university through organizations and taking on leadership roles. Apart from helping to reduce age-related stigma, extracurricular activities such as belonging to organizations have positive impacts on students' educations gains in terms of grades and retention rates (Tinto, 1997; Kuh, 2006). Unlike the coping techniques older women use to cope with age-related stigma, the impression management techniques that young students employ such as changing their appearance in healthy ways, and role embracing seem broadly beneficial.

Young students also manage age-related stigma through changing their original path in order to achieve their long-term goals. It is important to note that young students did not change their goals, but rather changed the plans they had in order to reach that goal. Something similar was found for older workers in that they would manage age-related stigma through changing their original employment goals (Berger, 2009). Older workers would either change the type of employment they were seeking or change their geographical location. Similar to this, many

young students explained the ways in which they changed the pathway to achieve their long-term goals. For example, many postponed or where considering postponing their pursuit of graduate or medical school.

It appears that young students feel a mix of both fitting in and feeling too young. While it seems that young students are coping well with the age-related stigma though changing their appearance, surrounding themselves with older peers, and embracing the student role. It may be that the students began to feel young (felt identity) when they were perceived to be a young student by their peers (social identity) and this influenced them to postpone their post-graduation plans.

3.5.1 Limitations and Future Research

My study was limited in that I only interviewed young Hispanic students at one Hispanic Serving Institution; therefore I do not have a comparison group of traditional aged and mature students or young Hispanic students at primarily white institutions, where their experience with stigma might be different. Having these comparison groups would be useful in order to better elaborate on the challenges that young Hispanic students face. Another limitation includes interviewing the students once, after their second year in college. This amount of time allowed the students some perspective and reflection on when they were 17, but a longitudinal study starting while they are still in high school and following them post-graduation would be useful in order to see how age and age-related stigma impacts students long-term. Given the students concerns about the potential stigma of being young professionals, it would be valuable to follow these students in their careers. Doing so would help inform future efforts like ECHS programs, since it is unknown how students who start college so young fair in the long run. A long-term study would be valuable to help determining whether more programs should be implemented and

providing feedback in improving the structure of ECHS. My study suggests that future research look at the experiences of young Hispanic students in higher education, and especially to consider the challenges they face when transitioning to higher education institutions in order to improve their academic success.

3.6 CONCLUSION

Overall this study demonstrates the stigma that young Hispanic students face when pursuing a higher education. An awareness of this challenge is important when examining at programs that enable young students to attend college and how they are preparing their students for college. While the young students in this study have positive academic outcomes in terms of GPAs that exceed their traditionally-aged peers (see Chapter 2), they still experience age-related stigma. Young students were mostly stigmatized by their peers, since their interactions with them led to their age being exposed more often. As a result of this age-related stigma, young students employed various techniques in order to manage the stigma. Young students engaged in impression management by changing their appearance, surrounding themselves with older peers and embracing the student role. These techniques ultimately seem to have unintended positive consequences on their academic development and achievement, which may be reflected in their higher GPAs relative to traditionally aged students (see Chapter 2). But, in order to minimize age-related stigma, young students also changed their academic pathways, often times delaying their pursuit of graduate or medical school, in order to achieve their long-term goals. It is unknown how those decisions might impact the students, whether positively or negatively, in the future.

Minimal research that has looked at young Hispanic students in higher education, and even less has analyzed their experiences outside of academic performance. Research examining

this is important because it can inform the design of ECHS, AP and dual credit programs and how universities better support young students of color; specifically when it comes to these students transitioning to full-time college students as well as continuing their education in graduate or medical school. Young age has been underemphasized in research surrounding both the impacts of these programs and higher education. Improving our understanding of how the status of a being a young and underrepresented student influence their experiences in higher education is an important direction for future research.

Chapter 4-Conclusion

4.1. SUMMARY

This thesis has analyzed the experiences of young Hispanic students in higher education in terms of their academic performance (Chapter 2), and age-related stigma and coping techniques (Chapter 3). Due to the programs that enable minorities to get a head start on their college education while still in high school, there has likely been an increase in young Hispanic students attending universities. With this increase in young students, it is important to explore the trajectories and experiences of these young students face once they graduate high school and enter college. The two studies in this thesis are among the first to focus on young Hispanic students in higher education.

Chapter 2 consists of analyzing the cumulative GPA, across a span of three semesters, of young Hispanic students attending a Hispanic Serving Institution. Results revealed that young students have significantly higher GPAs than traditionally-aged Hispanic students. Through the qualitative data, I examined some possible explanations for the young students' GPA. High school experiences (e.g., taking AP/dual credit classes, forming strong relationships with their teachers) enabled the students to adapt well to their college coursework. In addition, young students expressed that they felt mature despite their young age, which may have influenced their lack of partying, which translated to young students focusing on their academics.

Chapter 3 described the age-related stigma that young students experience as well as the various techniques that young students employed in order to manage the stigma. Young students used impression management in order to cope with the stigma by changing their appearance, surrounding themselves with older peers and embracing the student role in ways that were generally beneficial to their college trajectory. But, young students also changed their academic

pathways by delaying their pursuit of graduate or medical school, which may have been an outcome of the age-related stigma they experienced and its impact on their felt identity.

4.2 SIGNIFICANCE AND DIRECTION FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This thesis contributes to the research of Hispanics and age in higher education as well as the research surrounding programs such as dual credit, AP, and the ECHSI. While there has been an increase of programs that help underrepresented minorities seek and transition into higher education, Hispanics still face barriers. For this reason, this thesis has focused on young Hispanic students. While the young students in this study have positive academic outcomes they still experience age-related stigma. Thus, there is a need for greater understanding of the programs that seek to help Hispanic students transition to college and in the process enable them to attend college at a young age. In terms of bringing the two studies together, we can see that age-related stigma may not have affected the young students' academic performance, for young students still performed better than traditionally aged students in terms of cumulative GPA. In addition, it appears that through using impression management techniques young students are coping well with the age-related stigma they encounter as undergraduates. However, it seems that young age may affect young students when it comes to their post-graduation plans. Since young students are aware of the possible stigma they may encounter in their future careers, this can influence their decisions to post-pone their plans such as applying for graduate and medical school.

With this being said, one of the implications of this thesis for ECHS programs is the recommendation that they provide their students with more guidance on their post-graduation plans and careers. This guidance includes giving them timelines for applying to graduate school and professional school, and beginning to prepare them for tests like the MCAT, LSAT or GRE

while they are still in high school. Even though it might feel premature to have 16 year olds taking graduate and professional test prep courses, the reality is that they are actually college sophomores and will be best prepared for their next steps if they start preparing early and can avoid having to delay their post-graduation plans.

Future research should seek to not only examine young students' academic outcomes in college but also seek to analyze the overall experiences of these students. Considering how programs such as the ECHS initiative began as an effort to help minority and underserved students, having a study that compares these students to other students in terms of their academic achievements as well as their transition to and experiences within the university, would be beneficial to see the degree of help that these programs offer young students. My thesis suggests that future research on college student success should include age as an important variable when studying college transition for students, especially underrepresented and minority students. Considering the students concerns about the potential stigma of being young professionals, it would be valuable to follow these students in their careers. Doing so would help inform future efforts like ECHS programs, since it is unknown how students who start college so young fair in the long run. In addition, a long-term study would be valuable to help determining whether more programs should be implemented and providing feedback in improving the structure of ECHS.

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6. Vita

Marilyn Garcia was born in El Paso, Texas where she currently resides. Garcia started attending classes at the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) as a high school senior in the Spring semester of 2014 while still attending Northwest Early College High School. While pursuing her double major in Psychology and Sociology, Garcia began doing research as part of an independent study course under the direction of Dr. Aurelia Lorena Murga. After graduating with her Bachelors in Spring of 2016, Garcia was accepted into a National institutes of Health-funded summer research program through BUILDing SCHOLARS. Through this program, she was placed at the University of New Mexico as a mentee of Dr. Barker and Dr. Goodkind. While at UNM, she worked for the Refugee Well-Being project. In Fall of 2016, Garcia began studying to earn her Master of Arts in Sociology at UTEP, where she has worked as a teaching assistant and research assistant during her time in the program. Garcia will continue pursuing graduate studies and will enroll as a doctoral student in Sociology at the University of California at Irvine the Fall semester of 2018.