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## **Familia First! A Qualitative Study On The Impact Of Latinx First-Generation College Students' Degree Completion On Their Family In A U.S.-Mexico Border Community**

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*FAMILIA* FIRST! A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON THE IMPACT OF LATINX  
FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS' DEGREE COMPLETION  
ON THEIR FAMILY IN A U.S.-MEXICO BORDER COMMUNITY

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Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership and Administration

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Stephen L. Crites, Jr., Ph.D.  
Dean of the Graduate School

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2020

## **Dedication**

To my beautiful wife Arlaé, thank you for being supportive of my academic journey through the many countless nights of my classes, writing sessions and group projects. I know this was especially tough during the last 20 months after welcoming our first child. You showed your inner strength and dedication with taking on the larger role of maintaining the household during all of my late nights at the office. I'm especially grateful to you for being my sounding board and shoulder to cry on when I thought I couldn't finish this degree. You are amazing – I love you!

To my brother Luis for accommodating my fluctuating class schedule while we were both balancing our own personal and professional lives with watching over our mother and stepfather. I know it wasn't easy but these past 4 years you did all you could to make it work for me – you are a smart and driven individual. I love and appreciate your tenacity!

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Finally, to my precious daughter Aviana, you have the whole world ahead of you. Let this educational milestone accomplishment of mine serve as inspiration and example on going after anything you want in life. You are a very beautiful and smart girl who I know will do a lot of great things in the future. Don't ever let anyone stop you from reaching your dreams. Your daddy loves you!

*FAMILIA* FIRST! A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON THE IMPACT OF LATINX  
FIRST- GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS' DEGREE COMPLETION  
ON THEIR FAMILY IN A U.S.-MEXICO BORDER COMMUNITY

by

LUIS JAIME MENDEZ, B.A, M.A

DISSERTATION

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The University of Texas at El Paso  
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## ABSTRACT

Completing a bachelor's degree is a major milestone. The achievement can further be heightened by those who are the first in their families to graduate. By the same token, the attainment of a degree by first-generation Latinx students, who have statistically low percentages of education as compared to other ethnic groups, is crucial.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the familial impact of Latinx first-generation degree completion. The primary research question directing the study was: How does degree completion impact families of Latinx first-generation college students in a U.S.-Mexico border community? Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) model served as an appropriate theoretical framework and provided a better understanding of the spoken experiences of research participants.

Data was collected through open-ended interviews from seven Latinx first-generation college graduates and nine individual parents. *Testimonio* was the methodological approach used for this study. The approach gave opportunity to capture detailed documentation of how bachelor's degree completion was formed and experienced as cultural wealth by the student and their family.

As a result, five interrelated themes emerged after thorough coding and analysis of the transcribed data: (1) *ability to overcome past familial barriers to education*; (2) *coming to the US from Mexico for their children's education*; (3) *return on investment and sacrificios to the familia*; (4) *navigating through new spaces*; and (5) *opening doors for advanced degree attainment*. This study raises implications for higher education research and practice.

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## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

### **Background**

#### **Latinx Population in United States**

The population of the United States has seen a significant shift in its ethnic and cultural composition over the last 20 years (Marrota & Garcia, 2003; U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). One of the largest changes has been within the Latinx<sup>1</sup> community (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). The last official Census Bureau count in 2010 showed approximately 50.4 million Latinx individuals living in the country, which accounts for 16% of the population (U.S. Census Bureau Public Information Office, 2016). Included in that number are 19.8 million U.S. immigrants who, according to the Migration Policy Institute, identify as Hispanic or Latino/a (Batalova, Blizzard & Bolter, 2020). Statistical predictions for 2020 have the count rising to approximately 62 million, or 18% of the country's population. As a result, statisticians who focus on U.S. population growth have forecasted that by 2060 the Latinx population will be around 111 million, or approximately 28.2% of the total population (Flores, 2017; U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). The growth is significant to understand the impact the Latinx population has on the country.

#### **Latinx Representation in U.S. Education**

A similar growing trend exists in the representation of Latinxs in the K-12 public school system. Currently, Latinxs comprise 25% of U.S. public school enrollments (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). The states with the highest representation of Latinx students are California, Florida, Illinois, New York, and Texas. The U.S. Census Bureau (2016) reports that 71% of

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<sup>1</sup> The term Latinx is used as a gender-neutral identifier of individuals of Latin American descent (Salinas & Lozano, 2017).

Latinxs ages 25 and older completed high school compared to 88% of the White non-Hispanic population. While these numbers are significant, it is important to also note that the U.S. Census tends to undercount the actual representation of Latinxs, as many may not self-identify as Latinx or report all family members due to immigration status concerns (Flores, 2017; Marrota & Garcia 2003).

When it comes to higher education, Latinx students represent 35% of degree-seeking enrollments at both 2 and 4-year institutions, which is 2% higher than African Americans, 9% lower than Whites, and 29% lower than Asian Americans (Krogstad, 2016; Ryan & Bauman, 2016). Redford and Hoyer (2017) document how in the U.S., as of 2016, 15% of Latinxs age 25 and older have completed a bachelor degree or higher in comparison to 21% of African Americans, 35% of Whites, and 54% of Asian Americans. Yet, the need for a higher education degree is vital for a country transitioning from an industrial society toward one that is knowledge-centered (Schalk & Nichols, 2018). Hence, as the cultural and ethnic makeup of the United States continues to change (U.S. Census, 2018), Latinxs stand to benefit the most from higher education access and completion, given low participation rates.

It is prognosticated that the upcoming decade will have a large percentage of jobs that will require specialized degree training. Of course, the personal benefits of degree attainment may include higher quality jobs, pay, and increased job security. In addition, there are also public benefits associated with higher levels of education. Among those are the potential to lower the need for public assistance or social programs used to offset costs affecting those earning less and receiving limited benefits (Ma, Pender, & Welch, 2016; Schalk & Nichols, 2018). Higher education is also connected to increased health, civic engagement, volunteerism, and less probability of criminal activity and/or incarceration (Schalk & Nichols, 2018; Trostle, 2016).

Several studies acknowledge the value of higher education and the potential impact it has for upward mobility (Carnevale, Rose & Cheah, 2011; Long, 2010; Reeves, 2014). Espinosa, Kelchen and Taylor (2018), for example, report a 30% increase in social mobility amongst Latinx students following degree completion.

A recent demographic report from the Brookings Institute shows a strong correlation between parent education level and the degree attainment and eventual earnings of their children (Reeves, 2014). In other words, parents that value and have completed a college education will have a greater impact on their children's academic and socioeconomic future versus parents who only completed minimal levels of education and represent lower income demographics (Reeves, 2014; Venator & Reeves, 2016; Vilorio, 2016). However, in spite of the data on the correlation between college completion and higher wage attainment, there is a lack of information about the effects of social mobility on family members or household that may result from the degree attainment of first-generation college graduates. Research suggests that first-generation students become aware of career aspiration opportunities through the networks they begin developing or the individuals (e.g., counselors, tutors, financial aid officers, employers) that they come into contact with at institutions of higher education (Moschetti & Hudley, 2015; Wells, 2008). The potential for upward mobility that is a result of degree attainment has the potential to alter the socioeconomic course of an individual and possibly their immediate family (Haveman & Smeeding, 2006). This suggests that the first-generation student has the ability to become an agent of change for the current and future generations.

### **Statement of the Problem**

While previous studies describe barriers faced by first-generation students attempting to complete a college degree (Falcon, 2015; Hernandez & Lopez, 2004; Means & Pyne, 2016;

Saunders & Serna, 2004; Strayhorn, 2008), there is a lack of literature that addresses the impact of degree completion on their immediate family. The opportunity to document voices from both Latinx first-generation students and their families on the post-higher education experience can be beneficial to institutions and practitioners wanting to gain further insight on the benefits for families impacted by this educational milestone. Findings from this study can contribute to existing literature exploring how degree completion affects first-generation college students' families.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to use a community cultural wealth perspective to examine the impact of degree completion on families of Latinx first-generation students. The research context is a US/Mexico border community, where the population of over 839,000 has approximately 22.8% with a bachelor's degree in comparison to 77.5% with a high school degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020) and where a majority of the over 25,000 students that attend the local public 4-year university are classified as both Hispanic/Latinx and First-Generation (The University of Texas at El Paso, 2019).

This topic is vital because, to date, the literature has predominantly focused on family-related barriers that emerge for first-generation college students prior to and/or during college enrollment (Means & Pyne, 2016; Ovink & Kalogrides, 2014; Torres, 2004). As a result, most literature is examined through a deficit-based approach. Information about the impact of degree attainment from an additive lens is not readily available. This study can produce meaningful insight for academics, institutions, and policymakers shaping education systems and practices (Means & Pyne, 2016; Redford & Hoyer, 2017).

The research question that will be used to guide the focus of this study is the following:  
How does degree completion impact families of Latinx first-generation college students in a  
U.S.-Mexico border community?



## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

As a primary investigator of a grant-funded program that focuses on the college transition, retention and ultimate degree completion of first-generation students, my interest in this area of focus stems primarily from working at a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI), located on the U.S.-Mexico Border, that has an enrollment of over 89% Latinx students (Mendez, 2015). The daily interactions I have with members of this demographic, which I also identify with, has encouraged me to dig deeper in understanding the dynamic that is present, not only with the student, but with members of their immediate family; specifically, the heads of household. The challenges and motivations that each student carries within them through their personal background and upbringing are just as important as those they will face in higher education. As such, it is important to investigate and synthesize the experiences and journeys documented in previously published academic journals and articles for the purpose of this study.

The following literature review first explores the characteristics associated with first-generation Latinx college students. Secondly, it identifies the representation of first-generation Latinx Americans as it connects to first-generation college students. The next section informs on the phenomenon of *Familismo* within Latinx families. Finally, I explore how cultural and social capital (Bourdieu, 2011/1986) served as reference for community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) which became the theoretical framework I used to direct my study. It is important to note that this study's intent is not to box all Latinx first-generation students and their families into one category. The Latinx community represents various social, cultural, and economic conditions that may not be represented within published literature (Ramirez, 2003).

## **First-Generation Latinx College Student**

Attainment of a college degree amongst first-generation students, specifically Latinxs, is considerably low when compared to second and later-generation students (Venator & Reeves, 2016; Walpole, 2003; Strayhorn, 2008). College students who come from households where neither parent has attained education levels beyond high school are defined as first-generation (Gibbons & Borders, 2010). Siblings enrolled in or completing higher education coursework, regardless of order of enrollment or attainment, are all considered first-generation.

### **Characteristics of Latinx First-generation college students**

Low overall household income, parents with limited knowledge about the higher education admissions and navigation process, and the probability of the student not having participated in college preparation courses in high school are characteristics that tend to be associated with first-generation college students (Gofen, 2009; Wilbur & Roscigno, 2016). Recent statistics show that first-generation college students make up approximately 50% of the overall enrollment and 30% of entering freshman at public institutions of higher education (Cataldi, Bennet, & Chen, 2018; Redford & Hoyer, 2017). Of first-time freshman, 27% of first-generation college students are Hispanic or Latinx. A large number of these students enrolled in moderately to non-selective public institutions as compared to a small percentage that entered highly selective private/non-profits. Studies also show that first-generation Latinx make up a large majority that receive financial aid to cover tuition even as they represent a lower percentage of degree completion as compared to their White/Anglo counterparts (Gist-Mackey, Wiley, & Erba, 2018; U.S. Department of Education, 2016a). Moreover, data also shows that a larger percentage of Latinx first-generation college students will enter a 2-year community college or trade school as compared to a 4-year university.

## **Barriers**

Typical barriers present for first-generation college students include having to work a part-time job to pay for school-related expenses not covered by financial aid in addition to various levels of responsibilities to support the family (Redford & Hoyer, 2017). Also, there is evidence of miscommunication that hinders persistence towards degree completion that may include classes not being offered which may affect full-time enrollment. Other factors affecting retention and persistence include required enrollment in math and/or English remedial courses due to low entrance exam scores which may cause loss of interest in the desired major field and difficulties meeting program requirements for their desired degree choice (Gist-Mackey, Wiley, & Erba, 2018; Stebleton & Soria, 2013).

Psychological and emotional issues are other barriers that need to be considered as potential degree completion roadblocks for first-generation college students. Discouragement, isolation, and impostor syndrome are very prominent among this student demographic and can be a major factor in the ultimate success or failure of these students (Gist-Mackey, Wiley, & Erba, 2018; Wilbur & Roscigno, 2016). In particular, Is conflict with trying to maintain the same high school study habits and approaches with classes and assignments in college even as they are more significantly challenging and demanding. The stigma associated with these feelings can validate preconceived perceptions centered on trying to attain an educational level that has never been accomplished in the student's immediate family household.

Language barriers have also been documented as primary contributors to the higher education challenges experienced by Latinx first-generation college students (Gist-Mackey, Wiley, & Erba, 2018; Zalaquett & Lopez, 2006). Deficient English-language skills among some parents makes it difficult for effective translation and communication about the student's college

experience to take place. Equally problematic is the same deficiency by the first-generation Latinx college students which may cause problems during the first year of higher education (Gist-Mackey, Wiley, & Erba, 2018). This leaves the student at a disadvantage with trying to resolve any difficulties with navigating through a college campus on their own, as compared to students whose parent(s) are proficient in the English language and completed a college degree. The ability to express issues or concerns about situations connected to their new educational environment are potentially regulated to the numerous professionals on college and university campuses, but only if there is an immediate and positive connection established between the student and any given faculty or staff members.

### **Connection with The Campus**

A lack of community or sense of belonging at their institution of higher education can also be present as they tend to be conflicted with spending time after classes on their campuses versus devoting time to employment or family responsibilities. Joining social or academic groups might not be as easily accepted or understood at the higher education level (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Stebleton & Soria, 2013); even as studies show that campus involvement aids in retention and degree completion (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Stebleton & Soria, 2013). A connection can be attributed to the students' lack of involvement in high school and the need to use non-class time to tend to family responsibilities or work additional hours to contribute to the household expenses (Engle & Tinto, 2008). This conflict can be prominently experienced by students attending an institution closer to home (Cuevas, 2019; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Saunders & Serna, 2004).

Varying degrees of transition between high school and college/university can be encountered by both student and family. Limited or non-existent pre-college preparedness

programs added to a lack of familiarization with higher education can be main contributors to the effectiveness of the transition. For many, a sense of ambiguity, fear, and uncertainty can immediately develop among many Latinx first-generation college students within the first week of classes (Boden, 2011; Gist-Mackey, Wiley, & Erba, 2018).

Amongst the resources on campus aimed at incoming freshman, mentoring programs, both professional and peer led, have shown great success in bridging the gap that is present amongst first-generation college students (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Zalaquett & Lopez, 2006). Mentoring programs can alleviate some of the transition stressors students encounter the first few weeks on campuses and can also aid in facilitating valuable communication between first-generation college students and the information they share with their parents (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Zalaquett & Lopez, 2006). A number of institutes of higher education have begun to understand that it is impossible to expect all incoming students, especially first-generation college students, to have had clear and effective information during their transition from high school to college or university (Redford & Hoyer, 2017; Zalaquett & Lopez, 2006).

### **Socioeconomics**

There are many barriers that contribute to the low representation of Latinxs in higher education (Hernandez & Lopez, 2004; Means & Pyne, 2016; Walpole, 2003). These can include parents with English language obstacles, limited knowledge on the part of student and parents regarding college opportunities, and weak or non-existent communication between the student, family, and high school counselors. Moreover, weakening socioeconomic conditions coupled with a growing Latinx population may overwhelm educators and counselors in public schools, leaving less time for student-counselor discussions about the benefits associated with attending college (Means & Pyne, 2016). Consequently, the desire for first-generation Latinx students to

further their education frequently stems from their own personal educational goals, aspirations, and through various degrees of encouragement and moral support from parents and/or family members (Hernandez & Lopez, 2004; Means & Pyne, 2016).

Many first-generation college students come from lower socioeconomic demographics with overpopulated schools which can sometimes make it impossible for counselors to spend adequate time and advise students on their pre-college preparation (Means & Pyne, 2016). Some school districts are understaffed which then require staff members, including guidance counselors, to serve several roles at a time. This educational staffing deficiency can trickle down to virtually no information or ability to hold college entrance workshops for families of students interested in continuing their education after graduation. Thus, the families' access to knowledge towards advanced educational attainment becomes a casualty of the school's deficient resources (Hernandez & Lopez, 2004; Means & Pyne, 2016).

A 2016 Labor Statistics report documents a strong correlation between educational attainment, weekly median income, and higher probabilities of unemployment (Carnevale et al., 2011; Vilorio, 2016). The higher the educational degree, the higher the prospects of higher paid employment and job security. However, research also shows a significant increase in probability of degree completion by students whose parents completed higher education versus those whose parents had not (Carnevale et al., 2011; Venator & Reeves, 2015; Vilorio, 2016). While higher education degree completion can be a catalyst for upward mobility, statistics for degree completion by first-generation college students remain low.

In general, the majority of Latinx first-generation college students have their parents' support to obtain a college degree; however, the literature also suggests that family support can vary greatly based on various factors such as SES, family size, and understanding of information

related to college degree requirements (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005; Strayhorn, 2008). Parents of low SES first-generation college students tend to work lower-wage jobs that yield them very limited benefits and job security (Gofen, 2009). Research literature suggests that high levels of dissatisfaction and stress is common amongst individuals who hold positions that only require a high school diploma or GED certificate (Calzada, Tamis-LeMonda, & Yoshikawa, 2013; Desmond & Turley, 2009; Hernandez & Lopez, 2004). The psychological effect derived from these experiences can lead to a feeling of resentment about failed access to educational opportunities and career aspirations that generate greater wages and earnings. As a result, one of the few assets that low SES Latinx parents hold onto is their family, especially, the need to protect them from external forces or influences outside of the household structure.

This literature further states that family obligations are amongst the primary reasons, next to SES, for a high attrition rate amongst Latinx first-generation college students in institutes of higher education (Strayhorn, 2008). Financial and emotional support for low SES students throughout K-12 completion on the part of the family and/or guardian is seen as a norm, which carries the expectation that students will secure employment after high school graduation. In lower SES Latinx families, the lack of expendable income makes it difficult for college to be a reality, especially when access to information on scholarship, grant or loan assistance is unattainable or incomprehensible by both student and family. The fear of incurring additional debt upon a limited household budget along with losing a source of income makes the investment of another 4-6 years of college very unrealistic in most cases (Calzada et al., 2013; Steiha, 2010). Student loans are rarely considered an option due to strong cultural beliefs against this educational practice (Krogstad, 2016).

## **Cultural Borders**

The challenge towards degree completion by a Latinx first-generation college students is harder, though not impossible, to navigate successfully (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Thayer, 2000). Obstacles that may appear along the way, require guidance and networks for the students to overcome (Kiyama, 2010; Thayer, 2000). Many times, older generations of families see institutions of higher education as borders they are not meant to cross into. The disconnect that can sometimes happen is due to the lack of personal reference parents have towards degree programs and career goals that their children may be trying to communicate to them about. The higher education environment can be perceived as alien territory to many first-generation students, their families and peers (Thayer, 2000). Other cultural borders that can be accessed for the first time include internships and co-ops connected to potential professional careers, campus involvement with student organizations (e.g., Greek letter, professional, political), and access to college/university-sponsored cultural events (e.g., theater performances, music recitals, gallery exhibit openings, invited speaker events) (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Thayer, 2000).

While barriers in navigation can be alleviated through successful partnerships and communication between the students and professionals across campuses, there are other hurdles that may take more time to overcome. Cultural and symbolic borders that have been generationally erected and reinforced by a student's family tree can sometimes add to the challenges between parent and student when it comes to the ultimate success of Latinx first-generation college students (Bernal, Aleman, & Garavito, 2009; Engle & Tinto 2008). Equally important is the likelihood U.S. education policies and opportunities may not correlate with any lived experiences of first-generation American parents (Suárez-Orozco, Pimental, & Margary, 2009).



## **First-Generation Integration in US Education**

First-generation Americans are defined as the first to migrate to the United States in their family (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2009). A 2003 Census Report estimated that over 80% of new immigrants into the United States came from Latin-America, Asia, and the Afro-Caribbean Basin. Latin-America had the highest percentage (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). Families immigrate into this country for the purpose of securing better opportunities than what older generations experienced in their home country, which also includes providing their children with educational opportunities not previously attainable within their family history (Hill & Torres, 2010; Means & Pyne, 2016; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2009).

### **Socioeconomics**

For many, the lack of opportunities available in their home countries make it difficult for first-generation Americans to climb out of a low socioeconomic reality. Further, the appeal of trying to secure a more prosperous *American Dream* is appealing enough to take their chances, legally or illegally, in the United States (Hill & Torres, 2010; Ramirez, 2003). Upward mobility is an expectation that they grasp onto when coming into the United States. However, as access to a quality education connected to higher paying positions becomes more fantasy than reality, the possibility of achieving higher socioeconomic levels becomes difficult (Hill & Torres, 2010; Ramirez, 2003; Goldenberg, Gallimore, Reese, & Garnier, 2001).

A report from the U.S. Department of Labor (2017) shows that Latinx immigrants in the United States are paid considerably less than their native-born counterparts; approximately 81%, even as they represent almost 50% of the foreign-born labor. Moreover, Latinx immigrants have a higher percentage of working in service positions than management, professional, and related occupations. Higher-level positions are mostly made available to those with advanced

educational attainment; an area where degreed Latinx immigrants and native-born citizens lag behind compared to other ethnicities. Another eye-opening figure is that the immigrant Latinx work force has high percentages of representation in both the younger 18-24 and older 60 plus age demographics (U.S. Department of Labor, 2017). Equally important is the reality that a large number of the first-generation American immigrant workforce lacks basic comprehension and communication of the English language which, though it doesn't largely interfere with the positions they tend to attain, makes it difficult to obtain higher-paying opportunities (Murray & Negoescu, 2017; Reeves, 2014).

### **Latinx Representation in Schools**

Latinx first-generation American students represent a fast-growing demographic within the United States education system with considerably low attainment levels (Langenkamp, 2019). A large number of these students come from first-generation American parents that come from low socioeconomic status. Though parents of first-generation college students believe that education can lead to more lucrative careers and higher income potential, the knowledge needed to attain resources and tools necessary for equal access tends to be met with frustration and disillusionment. American acculturation and integration is difficult for individuals that have lived the majority of their lives in a different country that encapsulated different attitudes, traditions, and survival skills (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2009). The experience in an alien country can generate feelings of fear, loneliness, and inferiority, especially with regard to their immigration status. While some of these feelings can subside over time, many families come with or are in the process of having children who will need guidance and encouragement to survive.

Generation 1.5 is the identifier given to children of first-generation American immigrants who are born in a foreign country and immigrate with their parents into the United States

(Benesch, 2008). These children come into the American school system requiring remedial classes in order to acclimate them into the English language. These courses are identified as ESL (English as a Second Language) and will be beneficial to the students if they are administered effectively. However, research shows that the level of effectiveness is dependent on the school's willingness to use their first language as an asset and not a deficiency when trying to bridge their understanding and practice of the dominant English language (Hill & Torres, 2010). Statistics on the U.S. Public School System show that in 2010, 16% of Latinx school children were foreign-born or categorized as Generation 1.5 with very limited to no proficiency in English (Hill & Torres, 2010; Olivos & Mendoza, 2010). The language challenge becomes further amplified as families place a large expectation in the school systems to provide remedial courses for the purpose of strengthening their children's vocabulary use (Hill & Torres, 2010). The importance placed on the schools to accommodate this need tends to make the ESL students ineligible for pre-college preparation tracks or courses that will increase their potential for post-high school education enrollment (Goldenberg et al., 2001; Hill & Torres, 2010). Regardless of the commitment levels of schools to provide these remedial courses, studies show that approximately 40% of Generation 1.5 students tend to drop out of their schools due to frustration or limited benefit perceived with the ESL classes (Olivos & Mendoza, 2010).

### **Communication Breakdown**

A major challenge faced by first-generation American immigrant families is communication with the English-language K-12 schools with limited Spanish interpretation (Engle & Tinto, 2008; McKay & Estrella, 2008; Olivos & Mendoza, 2010). Feelings of exclusion and lack of consideration when it comes to ensuring adequate transmission of information between school officials and families are consistently documented in numerous

surveys conducted with immigrant parents for the purpose of identifying the disconnect (Ramirez, 2003). The school, for many parents, can become an extension of the home when effective communication is present. However, the belief that there can be consistent communication between parent and teacher is often challenged when language barriers are present and the lack of bilingual and ethnically-connected educators is made painfully evident. As a result, the educational expectations of how much the child or adolescent can attain can become quite diminished as parents are unable to effectively promote or motivate their children to scholastic success because of information lack (Hill & Torres, 2010; Goldenberg et al., 2001).

Furthermore, many students of first-generation American families tend to live in lower socioeconomic communities with underperforming schools that provide very limited access to counseling or information geared towards future college/university enrollment and resources available to parents and families (Falcon, 2015). The parents disconnect with the schools tends to be associated with the aforementioned language barriers or with their failure to truly gain an understanding of how the education system works in the United States (Falcon, 2015; Goldenberg et al., 2001). While there is a good amount of hope for the benefits of education, the challenges the parents face within their own cultural and social limitations can deter their children's progress.

Goldenberg et al., (2010) documented the feelings many students reported on how their parents viewed education as a potential game changer. They viewed education as a key to success as they themselves were unable to be promoted or receive higher pay due to their lack of school completion and English-language proficiency (Goldenberg et al., 2010). However, it eventually tapered off as they began to believe that there was discrimination against their immigration background with no value given to their knowledge of the job they performed. The

belief was that the education system in America discriminates against the non-White immigrant people and intentionally subject their families to inferior educational practices such as inadequate curriculum, less-experienced non-bilingual teachers, and unapproachable administrators at the schools. Instead of the economic difference maker that they believed an education would provide, they primarily focused on strengthening the language skill and the assimilation to American culture in order to be able to defend themselves against oppressive English-language environments.

### **Education Connections**

Parental involvement, as experienced by immigrants, is indirectly discouraged as most school administrators would prefer to run the schools with limited interference by community members (Hill & Torres, 2010). Participation in parent groups can also be intimidating to parents who struggle with the English language as compared parents that don't. The lack of connectivity with such groups will eventually lead to disassociation by those that don't feel comfortable in that environment, including first-generation American immigrant parents (Hornby & Lafael, 2011). Unfortunately, their absence is often not followed-up with, as these parents are not expected to be engaged in their children's education. A common belief held by some in educational institutions centers around the assumptions that lower SES minority parents are too busy with their jobs or household responsibilities to care about the welfare of their children in schools (Quiocho & Daoud, 2008). The reason the children end up failing is not the school's fault, but that of the household they belong to. Laziness and disinterest are at the core of the misconceptions that are sometimes connected to first-generation American parents (Quiocho & Daoud, 2008; Tarasawa & Waggoner, 2015).

First-generation American parents understand that a university education is very valuable, but at the same time not attainable by all (Langerkamp, 2019). Many realize that there are costs involved with going to college that can put a major strain on an already-limited household income. For many, the risk is too high to even consider in their current socioeconomic situations (Calzada et al., 2013; Steiha, 2010). The longer they are able to survive and navigate themselves in the United States, the better it will be for the overall well-being of the family. However, studies show that students whose parents achieved low levels of education in their home countries will flourish in U.S. public schools if they are exposed to adequate educational materials and instruction (Goldenberg et al., 2001). This can be a result of having the immigrant families instill the value of education for their impending future.

It becomes important for the schools, representing K-12 and higher education to initiate outreach efforts that will better inform these families of resources and tools available for them while their children are in school (Hill & Torres, 2010; Langerkamp 2019). Guidance is needed to direct students and their parents towards opportunities that can make a major difference in the future lifeline of the family. Immigrant families, as do non-immigrants, have unique needs that cannot be ignored or be given a “one size fits all” approach (Ramirez, 2003). They come from different backgrounds, experiences, and educational attainments. Educational institutions should be consistent with dissemination of accessible information for all families with opportunities for further clarification as necessary. There needs to be careful listening and acknowledgement to their concerns and requests for a prosperous acclimation and acculturation to the American education system (Langerkamp, 2019; Ramirez, 2003).

“Students will rise to their level of expectations” (Goldenberg et al., 2001, p. 548) is a phrase that was continuously repeated by Edward James Olmos’ character of teacher Jaime

Escalante in the movie *Stand and Deliver* (1988) to his math class of first-generation low-income students. The importance of that line can be connected to the way children and adolescents are more apt to be motivated and encouraged by what is expected of them by both parents and teachers (Hill & Torres, 2010; Goldenberg et al., 2001). First-generation Americans will engrain their belief system into the mind of their child based on how they perceive the environment to be for them and their family. If effective communication, information, and transition resources are invested into these individuals, the return can be lucrative for their school-aged families and future generations; especially if the family members demonstrate a high aptitude towards careers that can be enhanced and reachable through a college/university education.

### **Familismo**

*Familismo*, as explained by Calzada, Tamis-Lemonda and Yoshikawa (2013), is both a cultural practice and cognitive defense mechanism evident in many Latinx families, especially those who are first-generation American. The phenomenon is centered on the motto of “family first” (p. 1697) and that nothing is more important than the bond the family has with itself and those that are closely connected to them. The heads of household, mostly the patriarch, will limit potential emotional and environmental stressors from intruding or affecting the family (Calzada et al., 2013; Desmond & Turley, 2009; Ovink & Kalgorides, 2015). They will use personal experiences to justify reasons for granting or denying access to resources, people, and networks based on how they perceive outcomes.

*Familismo*, as a sociological construct, is heavily attributed to Latinx families, though there are similar characteristics that can be attributed to other minority cultures. This phenomenon is defined as the expectation to give priority to a family’s needs and welfare over any one individual in the household group (Calzada et al., 2013; Desmond & Turley, 2009; Ong

et al., 2006; Ovink & Kalogrides, 2015; Torres, 2004). Loyalty, solidarity, and reciprocity within a family that also exhibits signs of interconnectedness and limitless allegiance to all things that will keep a legacy strong within the social unit is the number one priority. The desire and intent to break away from generational strongholds in a family can lead to added stress and cognitive interference in trying to achieve goals that may be alien to the household (Calzada et al., 2013). *Familismo* reflects the idea that a strong family bond can be a double-edged sword since family support and nurturing is necessary to improve an individual's confidence in the life choices that they make, while at the same time, interdependence amongst family members may create resistance to change in educational and/or career paths. This is especially true when it comes to educational goals conflicting with family obligations and expectations (Dennis et al., 2005; Sy, Fong, Carter, Boehme, & Alpert, 2011).

Individual needs are often pushed aside by those of the family unit as a whole (Calzada, et al., 2013; Ojeda, Navarro, & Morales, 2011). The realization and acceptance of the sacrifices made by the parents in their desire to provide all they can for the family cause their children to feel a sense of obligation on their wishes for them. This psychosocial stronghold can also limit their independent thinking towards educational goals and career aspirations. Perceived selfishness can inundate their thought process when thinking about what they would like to see themselves doing in the future, possibly away from the current family unit. This is not to say that they don't want to continue providing and supporting for their family, but information they generate through their schooling and from within peer groups can begin to cause this form of dissonance. However, several studies have shown that any major decision, whether educational and career oriented, that is often taken by the student is done with the family unit as a whole in mind (Vasquez-Salgado, Greenfield, & Burgos-Cienfuegos, 2015).



## **Latinx Educational Attainment**

A recurring statistic that is mentioned in several articles is the low percentage of degree completion by Latinx first-generation college students even as their enrollment numbers continue to show an increase throughout the years (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016; Vasquez-Salgado et al., 2015). Currently it is estimated that 10% of the Latinx first-generation college students that enroll in four year higher-education programs graduate with a bachelor's degree (Saunders & Serna, 2004; U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). For many family obligations supersede those on the personal education front, specifically higher education (Ojeda, Navarro, & Morales, 2011). Whether it centers on taking care of younger or older family members, attending functions locally or out of town that may conflict with class attendance and assignments, or possibly having to request extra hours or shifts to help out with family debt, *Familismo* can be a factor in positive and negative outcomes associated with college or university success.

Added to the role of *Familismo*, in the context of barriers to Latinx education attainment, is the concept of gender. Traditional gender-stereotyped familial expectations have historically instilled a sense of obligation within young Latinx women to stay and support the matriarch and the household until they are married (Rios-Aguilar & Kiyama, 2012). Culturally, education past the K-12 level was targeted more to males by the heads of household (Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009; Rodriguez, Guido-DiBrito, Torres, & Talbot, 2000). Females that attended a college/university were rarely allowed to access institutions outside their hometown (Rodriguez et al., 2000). However, recent studies have shown that first-generation females attend institutes of higher education and graduate at slightly higher percentages than males (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016; Vasquez-Salgado et al., 2015). This could be attributed to the cultural gender expectation by many Latinx families for men to provide for the household economically. Having males attend

college versus being employed full-time or even serving in the military, which can provide a steady stream of income, could explain the disparity between genders and college attendance. The mindset of what is best for the family takes precedence over the male's personal desire for a future career track.

### **Family Achievement Guilt**

In line with *Familismo* is a phenomenon that Covarrubias, Romero and Trivelli (2015) investigated as an offspring of Piokowski's theory of Survivor's Guilt, academically-termed as *family achievement guilt*. This fairly new concept centers on the hesitation or concern of a Latinx college student's possibility of exceeding their parent's educational attainment levels. As with *Familismo*, the focus is on the welfare of the family as a whole and not on the individual. Because of this family dynamic, a Latinx first-generation college students is careful not to disrupt the strong connection and respect owed to the heads of household.

Issues that students experience within the dynamics of this theory include the hesitation and lack of confidence to share successes in mastering curricula at educational levels that were never reached by either parent. Feelings of trying not to come off as smarter or more knowledgeable in areas unknown to parents can often cause weakened communication within families (Covarrubias, Romero, & Trivelli, 2015; Irlbeck, Adams, Akers, Burris, & Jones, 2014). first-generation college students will sometimes notice a disconnect with parents or feelings of disinterest in topics shared between student and parent in the household. Added to this is the student having to negotiate between the identity they possess at home versus the one at school. A good number of students have reported this dilemma as reason for not returning for a 2<sup>nd</sup> year of college/university or completing a bachelor's degree (Irlbeck et al., 2014; Engle & Tinto, 2008).

Involvement with the campus is another casualty of *family achievement guilt* (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2014). The time most non-first-generation college students dedicate to connecting and integrating with the campus culture is not consistent with first-generation students, especially Latinx students. The cultural upbringing, for those that do make it into college/university, has engrained in them that time spent outside the classroom should be spent at home with family or at work earning money to contribute to the household budget. Involvement in student organizations or peer mentoring programs, which have shown a high percentage of retention success, are often not a prioritized option for this demographic (Covarrubias et al., 2015; Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2014; Engle & Tinto, 2008). As a result of this reality, first-generation college students lack experiencing cultural and social programs/events not previously made available to them in their individual home communities.

Support and encouragement by parents to seek additional guidance from members of the community or professionals in the schools will eventually help the student navigate through educational spaces that were once foreign and/or inaccessible to some members of the family (Samuelson & Litzler, 2016; Yosso & Burciaga, 2016). This can eventually lead into better transition and integration into areas of higher education (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Samuelson & Litzler, 2016). College and university staffs have recently begun exploring outreach efforts that will benefit Latinx first-generation college students and first-generation American immigrant parents. Opening the lines of communication and offering them a space to express their challenges and potential barriers to degree completion is an example of an early intervention effort (Covarrubias et al., 2015). Equally being practiced is the identification and validation of the student and family assets in connection to the educational journey for the benefit of retention and persistence towards graduation (Covarrubias et al., 2015; Engle & Tinto, 2008).

In conclusion, it is important to support the need for studying the impact of degree completion in higher education on both Latinx first-generation college students and first-generation American immigrant families. It is clear, through the information accessed and analyzed, that there are many contributing factors that lead to the low Latinx degree completion percentages documented in this country (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016; U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). However, a lack of research focusing on the outcomes experienced by those that have completed advanced degrees and the significance it has generated within their families and communities, specifically with Latinx, is needed in order to paint a complete picture of the Latinx Population's connection to higher education. The expectation is that the information generated in the overall findings will benefit the gap that currently exists in academic literature focusing on the Latinx First-Generation college student demographic.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of degree completion amongst first-generation Latinx college graduates on their family. Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) model served as the theoretical framework from which I formulated the interview questions and used as guidance to analyze the data collected. Cultural and social capital (Bourdieu, 2011/1986) served as a catalyst for Yosso (2005) in the development of the CCW model. Examining how Bourdieu (2011/1986) identified cultural and social capital through a deficit lens helped me understand the evolution of a theory acknowledging the assets of those groups undervalued and overlooked. In the following section, I provide a brief synthesis on Bourdieu's (2011/1986) social and cultural capital theories followed by Yosso's (2005) CCW model as concepts and theories to frame the understanding and guide my topic of current study.

## **Cultural, Social Capital and Community Cultural Wealth**

Regardless of the challenges and obstacles first-generation college students face when accessing and transitioning to higher education, the immediate household and personal networks a student is connected to can serve as the bridge to degree completion within a first-generation American family (Samuelson & Litzler, 2016; Yosso & Burciaga, 2016). Institutions of higher education have traditionally been connected to networks that represent the white middle-class values and tend to dismiss the lower and working class as having deficit-laden capital that puts them at a strong disadvantage to succeed (Moi, 1991). Capital is comprised of surplus value and investment (Marx, 1933, as cited in Rios-Aguilar, Kiyama, Gravitt & Moll, 2011). Additionally, “the classical theory of capital argues that the dominant class – the capitalists – makes the investments and receives the profits of the investments” (Lin, 1999, p. 29, as cited in Rios-Aguilar et al., 2011). Newer theories such as CCW “deviate from the classical theory of capital because they argue that all individuals – capitalists, workers, laborers or masses – can invest in the acquisition of capital and receive the profits of such investments” (Kiyama, 2010, p. 167).

Pierre Bourdieu’s (2011/1986) theory on social and cultural capital sheds light on socioeconomic inequality in relation to education. “The function of the educational system, Bourdieu argues, is above all to produce the necessary social belief in the legitimacy of currently dominant power structures, or in other words: to make us believe that our rulers are ruling us by virtue of their qualifications and achievements rather than by virtue of their noble birth or connections” (Moi, 1991, p. 1023). This theoretical belief grants legitimacy on individuals and groups that connect with social and familial networks that have knowledge and success navigating higher education while delegitimizing those that don’t (Bourdieu, 2011/1986). He writes “Capital, which, in its objectified or embodied forms, takes time to accumulate and which,

as a potential capacity to produce profits and to reproduce itself in identical or expanded form, contains a tendency to persist in its being, is a force inscribed in the objectivity of things so that everything is not equally possible or impossible” (Bourdieu, 2011/1986, p. 280). In general, those that are perceived to have high levels of capital maintain the ability to keep reproducing and benefit from those gains. Others considered to represent minimal amounts are believed to be disadvantaged and unable to connect with resources to improve their current situations.

Cultural capital as theorized by Bourdieu (2011/1986) is connected to the knowledge passed on by the cultural group one belongs to. In families it includes qualities such as language skills and cultural knowledge which can ultimately define a person’s class position (Rios-Aguilar & Kiyama, 2012). Emphasis is placed on the middle and upper class who are positioned to share and maintain their cultural capital with those in their own groups (Bourdieu, 2011/1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Lehmann, 2014). Cultural capital can also be described as “cultural knowledge as a resource of power used by individuals and social groups to improve their positions within the social class structure” (Joppke, 1986, p. 57). Other forms of cultural capital include access and acquisition of books, art and advanced skills which could yield additional economic impact (Joppke, 1986; Lehmann, 2014). These types of acquisitions can sometimes be perceived as high cultural signs, behaviors and tastes used for cultural exclusion of lower socioeconomic classes (Rios-Aguilar, Kiyama, Gravitt & Moll, 201).

For Latinx first-generation college students this framework views them as disadvantaged in the area of higher education “because their sociocultural environment may not provide the types of cultural capital required for success in school, such as academic attention, certain linguistic patterns, behavioral traits, orientation toward schooling, high expectations, or encouragement of college aspirations” (Kiyama, 2010, p. 5). Scholars like Wolfgang Lehmann

(2014) and Yosso (2005) challenge this type of philosophy as students from low socioeconomic backgrounds have increasingly shown their resilience and persistence towards completing higher education at campuses across the nation. The capital they gain is a result of the transformative experience they undertake through connections and knowledge gained from the higher education experience. Instead of trying to emulate those that might come from higher socioeconomic levels they use the capital gained at their college/university to build on the strengths they already culturally possess through their upbringing (Lehman, 2014, Yosso, 2005).

The need to acknowledge this subsection of society, that historically includes large percentages of minorities, is necessary in challenging the traditional White middle-class dominance that other cultures have been measured against (Bourdieu, 2011/1986). Knowledge of histories and strengths of lower class and underrepresented communities of color, in education, may yield stronger connections by those institutions in fostering their ultimate achievement (Yosso, 2005).

*Familismo* as a form of cultural capital is predominant amongst Latinx families that use family strengths and history to maintain cohesiveness and loyalty with one another (Calzada et al., 2013). It can also serve as a form of instilling pride and sense of accomplishment through the stories shared about the family's background about current and older generations. The dreams and aspirations that each have or once had are vital to encouraging younger members to plan ahead and set goals (Kiyama, 2010; Samuelson & Litzler, 2016). While many first-generation American families lack the opportunities to secure high paying and more fulfilling career positions, their struggles and stories can help motivate the others to take advantage of all resources available through education. The lessons learned through the open communication

between parent and child can give advice and suggestions towards avoiding some mistakes or pitfalls that others may have encountered in their own lives.

Social Capital is the accumulation of networks or groups of people one interacts with to help them achieve and maintain access to various resources. The key interactions and relationships between people ensured that desired outcomes were continually generated amongst them (Bourdieu, 1986/2011). Bourdieu (1986/2011) described social capital as having a group benefit, with a belief that social resources embedded in social relations served the purpose of creating and reproducing an unfair type of advantage. Individuals that are part of upper social classes will access resources from members in their same social networks for personal gain. However, one of Bourdieu's (1986) fundamental assertions regarding social capital was rooted in the inequities in which social class played a significant factor towards social capital attainment. He argued that those in higher socioeconomic classes had better access to resources than those that came from lower- and working-class socioeconomic networks. Another of his assertions was that the White/Anglo race was the measuring stick that other ethnicities would be compared against.

As for education, Bourdieu (1986/2011) theorizes that the higher education system is set up to reproduce and promote to middle class values. The cultural assets that the lower- and working-class students bring to the institution are often overlooked and not referenced (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Swartz, 1977). In effect, the lower-and working-class demographic is set up for failure due to the lack of capital that is passed down from their family in relation to knowledge, disposition and skills (Gandara, 1995; Swartz, 1977). "The higher educational system is part of a more general theory of cultural transmission...that links knowledge, power, socialization and education." (Swartz, 1977, p. 547). By contrast parents that represent middle



class values and advanced educational attainment can be an asset to their degree-seeking students as compared to those that can't. They can be a valuable network to guide and reinforce expectations connected to higher education. Thus, Latinx first-generation college students' representation of social capital is seen as deficit-laden using Bourdieu's (1986/2011) theory. This deficit view dismisses other forms of capital these students possess.

Challenging the idea that individuals not born into dominant capital groups (e.g., White middle class) are deficient in capital, Yosso (2005) developed an asset-based model connected to their experiences. The work of Yosso (2005) has questioned the notion that first-generation Latinx college students bring deficient capital to higher education institutions. She argued that it is the educational institutions that don't recognize the cultural wealth of first-generation Latinx college students and their families. The practice of investigating this demographic of students through a deficit perspective has been prevalent (Kiyama, 2010; Wilbur & Roscigno, 2016; Yosso, 2005; Yosso & Burciaga, 2016)

One of the most prevalent forms of contemporary racism in U.S. schools is deficit thinking . . . deficit thinking takes the position that minority students and families are at fault for poor academic performance because: (a) students enter school without the normative cultural knowledge and skills; and (b) parents neither value nor support their child's education. (Yosso, 2005, p. 75)

Yosso (2005) identifies the value of CCW Capital that is connected to an individual's aspirations as well as the family and social condition they are born into. This is important within the scope of Critical Race Theory (CRT), which is the foundation for this branching theory, that challenges using the historical lens of deficit-thinking in justifying the current social, economic and cultural standings of communities of color, such as Latinx first-generation college students

and first-generation American immigrant families, based on historical context (Yosso, 2005; Yosso & Burciaga, 2016). Instead the focus is placed on the valuable strengths and experiences of minority and marginalized groups. The six forms of CCW Capital (figure 1.) according to Yosso and Burciaga (2016) are aspirational capital, linguistic capital, social capital, navigational capital, familial capital, and resistant capital.



FIGURE 1 Community Cultural Wealth Model. Adapted from Yosso (2006).

**Aspirational capital** refers to the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers (Yosso & Burciaga, 2016, p. 2). For many Latinx families the inability for older generations to complete basic levels of education became a primary force with not letting that happen with their younger generations. Examples of stories shared amongst the household and social networks allowed for motivation in setting goals for the future (Gandara, 1995, Huber, 2009, Yosso, 2005). Hope is represented amidst institutional perceptions of low academic abilities.

**Linguistic capital** includes the intellectual and social skills attained through communication in multiple languages and/or language styles (including communication through art, music, poetry, theatre, and dance) (Yosso & Burciaga, 2016, p. 2). The ability of first-generation Latinx students to translate information related to their educational experiences and/or daily livelihoods to immigrant parents is an example of this (Yosso, 2005). Huber (2009) described how the experience strengthened the confidence of dual language minority students and strengthened their communication assets for use in the higher education environment.

**Social capital** can be understood as networks of people and community resources (Yosso & Burciaga, 2016, p. 2). This includes networks such as acquaintances and relationships cultivated over the years by individuals. Community-based organizations, religious institutions and extracurricular activities and community events are sources to draw social support from (Yosso, 2005). A study by Luna and Martinez (2015) shared how first-generation university students benefitted from interactions with classmates and participation in campus organizations. These experiences were seen as resources that strengthened their social capital for long-term success in higher education.

**Navigational capital** refers to skills in maneuvering through social institutions. Historically, this implies the ability to maneuver through institutions not created with Communities of Color in mind (Yosso & Burciaga, 2016, p. 2). The social connections students accessed have proven to be valuable in getting around symbolic barriers such as university admissions applications or having to get documents or signatures for the purpose of securing educational funding (Luna & Martinez, 2015). The relationships established with community mentors who have accessed higher education institutions have also been effective in directing students within hostile educational climates (Stanton-Salazar, 2010). Culturally relevant

supports as documented by Stanton-Salazar (2010) have shown to be effective in navigating higher education through institutional agents.

**Familial capital** refers to those cultural knowledges nurtured among familia (kin) that carry a sense of community history, memory, and cultural intuition (Yosso & Burciaga, 2016, p. 2). Similar to Bourdieu (2011/1986) in the concept cultural capital that focuses on family and community connections and the importance to give back to both. A study by Samuelson and Litzler (2016) described how Latinx students, studying engineering, were motivated by their parents to not give up and persevere in spite of challenging courses. This motivation replicated itself with those students reaching out to younger middle school students to mentor them towards educational success.

**Resistant capital** refers to those knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenge inequality (Yosso & Burciaga, 2016, p. 2). Resistance can take several forms including those of self-defeating, oppositional and conformist (Yosso, 2005). The perceived danger of losing cultural knowledge due to structural inequalities become reason to move toward transformational resistance; moving past foundations of racism. Latinx first-generation college students can tap on this asset to maintain focus on completing higher education. The motivation is driven by acknowledging the sacrifices their parents endured to get them to access an educational opportunity (Auerbach, 2006; Gist-Mackey, Wiley, & Erba, 2018; Luna & Martinez, 2015).

Yosso and Garcia (2007) described the use of resistant capital through a play “Chavez Ravine” - describing the displacement of minorities in 1940’s Los Angeles. The need to fight a dominant group from demolishing the houses built by Mexican Immigrants for the purposes of erecting a real estate project led to the resistance. The coming together of a neighborhood

showed the community wealth embodied by the home owners in fighting the oppression and marginalization directed by a dominant class.

The CCW model builds on the classical theory by Bourdieu (1986/2011), which views groups in the lower-and working-class as deficient in capital needed to successfully navigate through degree completion. While the Latinx first-generation college student population may not benefit from having others in the household with higher education experience, they do maintain access to funds of knowledge that can be translated into various forms of capital for their educational attainment goals (Kiyama, 2010; Yosso, 2005). Rendón et al., (2016), for example, claimed that additional forms of capital, which were expressed as *ventajas* and *conocimientos* (wealth and knowledge), existed. They included *ganas*/determination, ethnic consciousness, spirituality/faith, and pluriversal cultural wealth. In the case of ethnic consciousness, Rendon et al. (2016) define the asset as a form of cultural pride that generates desire to give back and strengthen their own communities through their sense of loyalty. Giving focus to the Latinx community expands upon the concept of community as defined through Yosso's (2005) model. In the same manner, Ballysingh (2019) introduced assets identified as MCW (maternal cultural wealth) that are connected with honoring the love, respect, and hard work instilled by the student's mother toward the students' upbringing as motivation for academic success. These forms of capital are closely connected to familial and aspirational capital as described in Yosso's (2005) model, and include emotional capital, custodial capital, filial piety, and provident capital.

The literature review on Latinx first-generation students and families in addition to the sociological attributes of *familismo* were vital in the choice of theoretical framework and research methodology selected for this project. For the purpose of this study, I chose to use

Yosso's (2005) CCW model to understand the impact of Latinx first-generation students' degree completion on their families.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This project used a qualitative approach. Qualitative research allows the researcher to interpret the human experience using words collected in interviews, which are then to be transcribed, coded, and interpreted into rich and descriptive analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). These words aid in allowing the researcher to understand the construction of the participant's world. A qualitative approach is the best methodology for this research study because the use of words to describe a phenomenon or event allows us to make sense of the lives and experiences of both first-generation Latinx students and their parents (Creswell, 2013).

An early decision that must be made when conducting qualitative research is whether to approach your research with a bounded, focused, and highly organized framework, or a looser, more conceptual framework that allows for flexibility on the part of the researcher as information is gathered. I knew that the primary topics I wanted to investigate were first-generation Latinx degree completion and the impact this educational attainment on their families. I also knew that my main interest was on how these two concepts were perceived and realized by Latinx students at a border university. My research design, therefore, was loosely bound, allowing flexibility for data collection.

### *Testimonio*

As part of qualitative research, I used a qualitative narrative method known as *testimonio*. A *testimonio* is a Latin term for testimony, narrative and first-person storytelling (Huber, 2009; Reyes & Rodriguez, 2012). The emergence of *testimonio* is connected to the field of Latin American Studies where it was employed to document oppression and injustice with marginalized groups and individuals (Huber, 2009; Reyes & Rodriguez, 2012). An early example of contemporary *testimonio* is in the book titled *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me*

*nació La Conciencia* that recorded the narrative of human rights activist Rigoberta Menchu who was connected to an indigenous Guatemalan community (Burgos-Debray, 1984, as cited in Reyes & Rodriguez, 2012). Rigoberta's *testimonio* documented her accounts of the atrocities witnessed while fighting for indigenous and human rights during a period of civil unrest in her country. The world-renowned book shed light on the injustices and brutality suffered by the poor indigenous population in Guatemala. Almost two decades later, a group of Latina scholars collaborated for a project that used the *testimonio* methodology to record and document the challenges and experiences faced by U.S. Latinas in the professoriate landscape of higher education (Latina Feminist Group, 2001, as cited by Huber, 2009).

*Testimonio* has successfully emerged within other fields (e.g., anthropology, education, ethnic studies) as a valuable research method. Chicano/a scholars in the United States have employed *testimonio* as way to study marginalization and oppression connected to race, gender, sexuality and undocumented status (Reyes & Rodriguez, 2012). While there is no set definition for *testimonio*, scholars have remained consistent in using the method to document individuals' verbal journeys, calls to urgent situations and as an approach to enhance knowledge and build theory through lived experiences (Huber, 2009; Reyes & Rodriguez, 2012).

The intention of *testimonio* is to promote affirmation and empowerment of the narrator. The process is meant to be liberating to the speaker and conscious-raising to listener and readers (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga & Carmona, 2012; Reyes & Rodriguez, 2012). *Testimonio* differs from oral history or autobiography in that it involves the participant in a critical reflection of their personal experience within particular sociopolitical realities (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012).

*Testimonio* methodology closely aligns with a Critical Race Theory (CRT) framework which focuses on issues of race, oppression and challenges to dominant ideologies connected to



educational theories and practice associated with communities of color (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012; Yosso, 2005). As a supplement to CRT, Latino/a Critical Race Theory, LatCrit, is utilized to investigate issues through educational research that can potentially be overlooked by CRT. These issues include language, immigration status, ethnicity and culture (Solorozano & Diego Bernal, 2001, as cited in Huber, 2009). CRT and LatCrit serve as theoretical foundations for Yosso's (2005) CCW model which was the guiding framework for the *testimonio* method utilized for this study.

The storytelling process representative of *testimonio* allows for the participant to look at their personal identities and past experiences in ways that provide catharsis and self-empowerment (Diego Bernal et al., 2012; Huber, 2009; Reyes & Rodriguez, 2012). This qualitative method can be vitally important when trying to gain insight into how impacting educational attainment can be for families of Latinx first-generation graduates.

### **Research Context**

The area chosen for this study was El Paso, TX, located within the intersection of three states and two countries (Forbes, 2019; U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). Its population was approximately 840,000, with over 80% of the population identified as Latinx and 15% of its citizens identified as having a bachelor's degree or higher (Texas Higher Education Data Corp., 2018; U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). The location was ideal for this study, as the targeted participants came from a public four-year institution of higher education where over 50% of the over 25,000 student population identified as first-generation and 80% identified as Latinx (Mathew, 2019). The institution further identified as a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) that has been serving the region since 1914.

## **IRB Approval**

Prior to initiating the research, I submitted a request to conduct research with human subjects from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Upon reviewing my application, a concern was identified regarding a potential conflict of interest that might arise with interviewing past participants from the program I oversee. Once I explained that participants identified had no immediate or future impact on the current job functions I carry out, I was allowed to proceed with one condition: Required approval from the Vice President of Student Affairs to use past participant data for recruiting purposes.

## **Participant Recruitment**

After receiving permission from IRB on conducting this research study (Appendix A), the process of identifying participants was initiated. I requested and subsequently received approval from the Vice President of Student Affairs and my supervisor to access information from the Blumen Database, a third-party vendor software program that is used to track first-generation college students (Appendix B). The database is housed under the federally-funded TRIO Student Support Services Program (SSSP) at a public four-year institution. My position as project director for SSSP has given me experience with Blumen in accessing contact information for all individuals that have participated in the program over the past 10 years. The database tracks a wide range of student information that includes their high school GPA, household income, family members' level of educational attainment, university GPA and bachelor's degree completion status. Reports that were generated from this database allowed for the identification of Latinx individuals who had graduated with a bachelor's degree within a period no less than two years from the date the research began.

Twenty-four individuals, based on the research study criteria for participation, were emailed an invitation to interview for this study (Appendix C). This number was chosen with an expectation that at least half of the individuals contacted would agree to participate in the study. Other factors considered with the anticipated participant goal included the timeline identified to conduct the interviews and analyze the data (Seidman, 2013).

Potential participants were given a description of the *testimonio* study that was being conducted as well as justification to why they had been identified as potential participants. Eligibility criteria included bachelor's degree completion of no earlier than 2 years from the date of the study in addition to having been identified as a first-generation Latinx student. Also required of participants was access to one or two of their parent(s).

The objective was to recruit a group of Latinx first-generation college graduates to participate, along with one of their parents, in individual interviews to share their *testimonio*. Purposeful sampling was used to assure that the participants chosen had completed a bachelor's degree in 2017 or earlier which would allow them to share experiences that best explained the impact higher education completion has had on them through personal and in-depth recollections (Creswell, 2015; Seidman, 2013).

After an initial introductory phone conversation with 10 interested Latinx first-generation college graduates, only 8 agreed to provide at least one parent to participate. Two graduates were not able to find a convenient meeting time, for both them and their parent, which ultimately eliminated them from consideration. Additionally, after beginning the meeting process a third family decided not to participate as the one parent who initially agreed to be interviewed felt uncomfortable with the topic of the study once the consent form was reviewed with them. In the end, only 7 families completed the interview process resulting in a total of 16 participants and 14

interviews. Two graduates were each able to have both mother and father participate in a joint session. The 16 participants included 7 students and 9 parents.

### **Data Confidentiality**

Upon agreeing to participate in the study, participants (students and parents) were given individual consent forms (Appendix D). Consent forms for parents/guardians were made available in both English and Spanish. Potential participants were asked to sign the appropriate informed consent document prior to engaging in an interview. An introductory meeting was held with potential interviewees over the phone prior to the actual appointment to record their *testimonio*. The purpose of the phone meeting was to collect general background information (e.g., age, place of birth, occupation) and ensure that there were no questions or concerns as to the mission and goals of the study. At the start of their appointment, each participant was given an opportunity to choose a pseudonym to safeguard their identity and provided with a copy of the appropriate informed consent document to keep. Additional copies of consent forms were made available to participants as requested. The researcher kept signed informed consent documents as described in the security measures section.

It was important to protect and safeguard the identity of all participants as stated in the consent forms (Seidman, 2013). The confidentiality of participants in interviews were protected through the use of pseudonyms in all contexts other than the informed consent documents, which in turn were kept separate from data in which pseudonyms are used. For the scheduled interviews, participant privacy was protected by collaborative negotiation between participants and the PI in regards to the timing, location, and course of the interviews. Participants were given the opportunity to interview at their homes or at the PI's work office after normal hours of operation. This ensured that participants were in as much control as possible regarding whether

the information they shared would be overheard by people other than the researcher. If at any time before or during an interview a participant wished to stop participating or skip a question, they were free to do so. As previously mentioned, two families were not able to find a convenient meeting time, for either student and parent, which ultimately eliminated them from consideration. Additionally, after beginning the meeting process a third family decided not to participate as the one parent who initially agreed to be interviewed felt uncomfortable with the topic of the study once the consent form was reviewed with them. Ultimately, participants who chose to opt out of the interview would have any pre or post-interview information shredded, destroyed, and/or deleted from any devices or files used for the project.

### **Data Collection Methods**

Data was gathered through *testimonios* shared by students and their individual parents. Initial contact was made with all interviewees via telephone to confirm their willingness to participate in the research. *Testimonios* were shared in both English and Spanish and were held during the month of October into the first week of November 2019. The majority of the scheduled interviews to collect *testimonios* were held at my on-campus office location. One interview with parent participants was requested and held at their residence, while another parent opted to conduct her interview in the courtyard of her work location. Three student interviews were held over Skype as the participants were located in different parts of the country for graduate/professional school or career purposes.

*Testimonios* were audio-recorded through the use of a mini-digital voice recorder. Each *testimonio* lasted between 60-90 minutes. The average time of all *testimonios* was 57 minutes. Observational notes were also taken during each interview. The goal was to jot down important words, phrases or non-verbal reactions that had the potential for a follow-up, without interrupting

the interviewee, when the timing was appropriate to approach these noted items (Seidman, 2013). Memos were written a short time after each interview to generate initial thoughts on possible codes and themes that could be used for the study (Creswell, 2013).

Parent interviews included the following open-ended questions in a semi-structured format. These questions were translated into Spanish to accommodate non-English speakers:

1. What does degree completion by your child represent for you and your family?
2. What thoughts or feelings did you experience when your son or daughter told you of their decision to pursue higher education?
3. How do you think degree completion is valued or looked at by the community? How has this impacted you?
4. Has your son or daughter participated or affiliated with any social or community groups because of their educational attainment? How has this impacted you?
5. How will or has degree completion impact(ed) your family?
6. How do you see degree completion influencing your child's and family's future?
7. What advice would you give parents who have children thinking about higher education?
8. What can a bachelor's degree do for a U.S.-Mexico border community like ours?

(Spanish)

1. ¿Qué representa para usted y su familia la obtención de un título por su hijo?
2. ¿Qué pensamientos o sentimientos experimentó cuando su hijo o hija le habló de su decisión de continuar su educación superior?
3. ¿Cómo crees que la comunidad valora o ve la finalización de los títulos? ¿Cómo te ha impactado esto?
4. ¿Su hijo o hija ha participado o se ha afiliado a algún grupo social o comunitario debido a su logro educativo? ¿Cómo te ha impactado esto?
5. ¿Cómo impactará o habrá logrado la graduación (ed) en su familia?
6. ¿Cómo ve la finalización de la titulación que influye en el futuro de su hijo y su familia?
7. ¿Qué consejo les daría a los padres que tienen hijos que piensan sobre la educación superior?
8. ¿Qué puede hacer una licenciatura para una comunidad fronteriza de EE. UU. y México como la nuestra?

Student interviews included some of the following open-ended questions:

1. How has degree completion affected your life?
2. How did the journey through degree completion impact your family's life?
3. Why did you choose the degree path you ended up graduating with?
4. What were the initial feelings you experienced days after graduation?

5. In what way were your parents helpful in your degree completion?
6. What opportunities have become available as a result of your degree completion?
7. What advice would you give high school students who are thinking about going to college?
8. What can a bachelor's degree do for a U.S.-Mexico border community like ours?

(Spanish)

1. ¿Cómo ha afectado tu vida la finalización de la carrera?
2. ¿Cómo impactó la vida de su familia el viaje hasta la finalización de la carrera?
3. ¿Por qué elegiste la carrera de grado con la que acabaste de graduarte?
4. ¿Cuáles fueron los sentimientos iniciales que experimentó días después de la graduación?
5. ¿De qué manera fueron útiles tus padres para completar tu grado?
6. ¿Qué oportunidades se han hecho disponibles como resultado de la finalización de su título?
7. ¿Qué consejo le darías a los estudiantes de secundaria que están pensando en ir a la universidad?
8. ¿Qué puede hacer una licenciatura para una comunidad fronteriza de EE. UU. y México como la nuestra?

For both demographics interviewed, probes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Seidman, 2013) were sometimes initiated based on how the participants answered questions during the sharing of their *testimonio*. Probes were utilized in order to stimulate more in-depth descriptions to responses that were significant towards learning more information on the recollection of personal experiences. These questions were important and generated valuable information for identifying different types of cultural capital (Yosso & Burciaga, 2016). Approaching my research qualitatively did not limit me or the participants to predetermined questions; rather it provided freedom for the participants to express themselves in their own words. Placing emphasis on what they *felt* was most significant. In the same way, this method was useful with stimulating conversation during periods of silence or brief responses (Seidman, 2013).

Finally, analytical memo-writing and/or journaling was conducted immediately after each interview session so that they could enhance the transcription process as the interviews were coded (Seidman, 2013). The documentation included thoughts on how the participant's

responses related to the research question and theoretical framework (Saldaña, 2015; Seidman, 2013). Initial sensemaking of the data was the primary goal of this process.

### **Data Analysis**

This study utilized a three-phase analysis (Huber, 2009). The *testimonio* methodology allowed individual participants to engage with the sharing of in-depth personal narratives on family impact connected to Latinx first-generation degree completion. The process included preliminary, collaborative and final data analysis phases. All data was dis-identified, transcribed, and simultaneously analyzed during each of the three steps.

In the preliminary phase a narrative analysis was used in identifying some initial codes and thematic patterns. A code book was created for the interviews that contained individual code sheets for each participant. Each sheet had the complete English or Spanish transcription of an individual *testimonio* on one column, followed by two additional columns specific for the cycle and types of coding that were utilized. This process was additionally aided through notetaking using a LatCrit lens to document feelings and thoughts on what came to light through the initial coding. The notes were extremely helpful in documenting initial English-language reactions to the Spanish *testimonio* transcriptions. First-cycle coding included attribute, descriptive, and In Vivo coding (Saladaña, 2015). The preliminary phase included multiple readings of the narratives, memo referencing and at least one audio playback of each transcription to gain a better understanding of the personal journeys of each individual *testimonio*.

Attribute coding which included demographic information (e.g., participant type, sex, age, educational attainment level, current occupation, location of interview, date of interview, and length of the session) preceded the transcription of each *testimonio* (Saldaña, 2015). In Vivo coding, on the second column, is a type of verbatim coding where certain English and Spanish



words or phrases were extracted from lines of transcribed data. Descriptive coding, on the third column, was utilized to generate topics, via a noun or short phrase, that was used as identifiers of importance within the passages of the interview transcript.

The analysis was guided by a CCW lens which allowed for focus on how various forms of capital were instrumental with the impact of degree completion on families of Latinx first-generation students. This process also allowed for particular attention to be paid to how the representation of familismo emerged through each *testimonio*. The codes and themes generated served as a launching pad for discussions with the participants in the collaborative data phase (Huber, 2009).

The collaborative data phase differed from the one Huber (2009) documented in the three-phase analysis model. Instead of bringing together all the participants through a focus group, I reached out individually to them via scheduled phone or face to face conversations to share some of my initial codes and themes. This process allowed the participant to share their reactions to the preliminary analysis in addition to confirming and critique the findings for a deeper understanding of the data. The decision to forgo the focus group was based on the desire to safeguard the identity of each participant and provide them a comfortable personal reflection space. The collaborative phase evolves *testimonio* from a data collection method to a methodology of expanding knowledge in the area being researched. It allows the researcher to view the data in a way that might have not been possible without this interaction (Kruger, 1988, as cited in Huber, 2009).

Huber (2009) guides this phase of the data analysis through a Chicana feminist epistemological approach which taps into one's cultural intuition to view the knowledge production critically. Cultural intuition allows the researcher and participants to collaboratively

discuss and maintain dialogue throughout the data analysis (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012; Huber, 2009). This also allows the researcher to utilize their personal experience, cultural knowledge and professional background to aid in the process.

The final data analysis phase combined the processes used in the first two phases to contribute toward a second and final cycle of coding to further develop themes that would structure the overall findings. Pattern coding was applied as part of the second cycle to condense the larger group of codes from the first-cycle and collaborative phase into smaller categories (Saldaña, 2015). The goal was to find connections between codes already generated and create meta codes that would further aid in the development of major themes and ultimately help identify causes and explanations in the data. There were some initial codes such as “family sacrifice” and “family pride” that evolved into meta codes after continuous referencing within discussions with participants in the collaboration phase. The themes that emerged from the meta codes became the outline for the story that was told, in the form of a chronological history experienced by each generation of family interviewed, connected to the research question, in the results section of this project. The goal of the data gathering and analysis was to be able to report a story of how the selected participants had been impacted by the milestone of higher educational attainment in their individual experiences.

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness of the findings was accomplished by maintaining a reflective journal of the process and through written analytic memos based on initial thoughts that generated early themes and codes (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Saldaña, 2015). This practice was constructive in acknowledging and documenting personal biases on the information being gathered. Additionally, the process of triangulation was utilized to ensure the credibility and

trustworthiness of the information being generated through the analysis (Creswell, 2015). The process included corroboration of *testimonio* transcription with observational notes, generated through memo-writing and journaling in addition to referencing of studies examining the phenomenon being studied (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Member checks also served as way to ensure that the information being reported was accurately interoperated. This was accomplished by sharing the *testimonio* transcriptions with the participants via email and soliciting reactions to their personal narratives through scheduled phone or face to face conversations. Finally, peer review conducted by a fellow doctoral student, at certain points through the data documentation, aided in the researcher's credibility and trustworthiness of interpretations (Creswell, 2015; Saldaña, 2015). The trustworthiness of my data findings is enhanced by my positionality which has connected me with first-generation college students and families for over 19 years.

### **Positionality**

As the primary investigator of this study, my professional position influenced every step of the research process. My role at a public four-year institution of higher education is that of a program director for a federally-funded grant that serves 200 first-generation, low-income, and/or special needs undergraduate students with resources and assistance to successfully complete a bachelor's degree. The majority of the participants in the program are of Latinx descent. I have experience working closely with undergraduates in the roles of instructor, advisor, and academic coach. My position also requires that I produce data reports, both qualitative and quantitative, that tracks student demographic information as well as academic progress and campus/community involvement, which then gets sent to both our funding agency and campus supervisor on a yearly basis. This experience has been beneficial in understanding how to arrange the data that will be reported as part of the research findings of the overall

project. Equally important is the fact that I, as the primary investigator, identify as Latinx, first-generation with first-generation American parents. Having had the participants know that about me prior to the study made them feel comfortable sharing their experiences with and not see me as an outsider trying to exploit their individual journeys.

## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to document the experiences of first-generation Latinx students and their families with a focus on how the completion of the first baccalaureate degree in the immediate household has impacted students and family members. The main research question that guided this study was: How does degree completion impact families of Latinx first-generation college students in a U.S.-Mexico border community? I chose *testimonio* as the methodological approach with this study in order to analyze the data generated around the research topic. This method privileged the voices of individuals who have been historically marginalized and not given an adequate platform to share their story such as Latinx first-generation college students and family members (Espino, Vega, Rendon, Ranero, & Muñiz, 2017). Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005) was the framework I employed to frame the open-ended semi-structured questions used during the individual interviews. The *testimonio* approach sought to give voice to historically oppressed individuals (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012) in order to highlight and affirm their lived realities (Reyes & Rodriguez, 2012).

### Participants

#### Vega Family

**Vincent** is a 29-year old U.S.-born Latino who graduated with a bachelor's degree in criminal justice in 2017. His degree journey took 7 years to complete. He is a first-generation graduate who currently lives in Juarez, Mexico with his father Juan. He comes from a single-parent household as both his father and mother separated at a very young age. His mother, whom he never had a strong relationship with, recently passed away.

He recalled the stress of starting high school in the United States and feeling challenged with his limited English-speaking skills. He is very appreciative of the decision made by his

father to further to his education and he hopes to eventually seek a master's degree in Business. He currently works as an Administrative Office Manager at a public four-year institution.

**Juan** is a 59-year old Latino born and raised in Juarez, Mexico. He is divorced and recently widowed. He never completed a four-year degree but received technical/vocational certifications in business, criminal justice, and psychology. His current occupation is importer of motorcycles and parts in Juarez where he also currently resides with his son Vincent. His past occupations include working in the oil fields in Texas and also the Juarez Customs Office.

He recalls growing up in a low socioeconomic household and having a tumultuous relationship with both parents. Eventually he separated from the household and learned to be self-sufficient vowing to never allow his son to go through the same dire situations that he was subjected to. He acknowledges individuals in his community for stepping up and offering him advice and resources to eventually stand on his own two feet.

### **Cantera Family**

**Agatha** is a 27-year old Latina born and currently residing in El Paso, Texas who also lived most of her childhood in Juarez, Mexico. She graduated as a first-generation college student with a degree in Speech and Language Pathology in 2017, which took 6 years to complete. She comes from a single-divorced-parent household. She graduated with a master's degree in 2019 and currently works at clinic as a registered Speech and Language Pathologist.

She acknowledges the support both parents gave her growing up and knows there is not enough money out there to pay them, especially her mother Gabriela, back for all they did. She credits her undergraduate success to several programs and various individuals that didn't give up on her even after she failed some courses. One of her fondest memories is her mother giving her "\$5 to buy something while using the free internet at the coffee shop to complete her

assignments”. Her long-term goal is to get a doctorate and share some of her craft and knowledge with students and communities in Mexico.

**Gabriela** is a 49-year-old Latina born and raised in El Paso, Texas. She is the daughter of two parents who worked in sewing factories. Gabriela is divorced and has one daughter, Agatha. She is a paraprofessional for one of the city’s school districts. She attended a public four-year institution but did not complete her degree in teacher education due to being pregnant at the end of her third year of attendance. One of her former positions was that of a teacher at a private school in Juarez, Mexico. Gabriela has regrets of not finishing her degree and hopes that one day she can return and complete what she started many years ago.

She takes a lot of pride knowing that her daughter completed both a bachelor’s and master’s degree in speech and language pathology. One of her fondest memories is a picture she has of her daughter and ex-husband attending the first day of Head Start and being featured on the front page of the local newspaper. She believes that both her and her husband’s goal of having their daughter complete a college degree is the best source of pride for the entire family.

### **Perez Family**

**Alex** is a 23-year-old Latina born in El Paso, Texas and raised in Juarez, Mexico. She comes from a household of 5 which includes both parents and 2 older siblings. Alex took 6 years to complete a bachelor’s degree in Psychology. She is considered a first-generation college graduate due to the fact that her father received his degree in Mexico, which is not recognized in the United States. Her mother Noly recently received an associate’s degree from El Paso Community College in data processing. Alex currently works as an academic advisor at a public 4-year university and is currently pursuing a master’s degree in Educational Leadership and Foundations. Alex currently resides with both parents.

Alex recalls having to go back and forth from Juarez to El Paso to attend the university. There were some hard-economic times as her father sometimes worked multiple jobs in order to help supplement the education of all 3 siblings. She is grateful to her parents instilling the importance of completing a baccalaureate degree and giving her encouragement to keep striving for more. Alex's older sisters moved out of El Paso and live in California. She believes the educational accomplishments by her and her siblings have motivated both parents to seek advanced degrees themselves.

**Noly** is a 52-year-old Latina who is married and has 3 daughters. She was born in the US but resided most of her life in Mexico. She earned an associate's degree in data processing while her husband got a bachelor's degree in Business and a master's degree in Human Resources Management. She currently works in data processing and lives with both her husband and daughter Alex.

Noly is proud of the educational attainment by her 3 daughters. It was always her and her husband's plan to ensure that all 3 siblings would complete their college degrees. While the investment in education has come with some economic twists and turns, their commitment has never swayed. Baking and culinary arts is an area that Noly would like to explore now that the financial challenges of funding their children's education have been lessened to Alex finishing a master's degree.

### **Romo Family**

**Damien** is a 30-year-old Latino who graduated with a degree in mechanical engineering in 2016. He was born and raised in El Paso, Texas and is currently residing in Ft. Worth Texas. Damien works for Lockheed Martin as a project engineer. He is a first-generation college graduate along with his sister who graduated from another public university in Texas. His mother



Coco currently works as a director at a regional medical school. His father works for a parcel delivery service as a warehouse manager.

While Damien's journey through bachelor's degree completion took 9 years, he is grateful for the support and encouragement given to him by both parents and sister. He recalls "not wanting to give up" with his chosen undergraduate major even though it challenged him at every level possible. There were some stressful moments, even as his mother tried to get him to "consider other majors/programs", but ultimately his tenacity for engineering won out.

**Coco** is a 64-year-old Latina that hailed from a large family growing up in El Paso, Texas. Her parents were born in Juarez, Mexico and she had 7 siblings, 2 males and 4 females. She completed her degree around the same time that both her children did. She has been married for over 30 years and remembers the struggle of growing up in a large family and not having the educational opportunities made available to her due to her gender and the messaging from her parents that "boys got the education and the girls became the housewives".

Her fondest memories of watching her children complete their degrees was the competitiveness amongst them to share their individual experiences with both parents. They had a "sibling rivalry" of sorts. She did admit that there were times when she felt her son Damien was struggling too much with his Engineering Major that she would tell him it was "ok to change career tracks" but he never listened.

### **Torres Family**

**Anahi** is a 26-year-old Latina who graduated from a public 4-year university in 2017. She received a bachelor's degree in education and was the first in her family to complete a baccalaureate. Being the oldest of 2 siblings, she carries a large responsibility of trying to get as far as she can career wise to "pay back" her parents Jesus and Albina for all the sacrifices they

made for her during her 5-year undergraduate track and her current 2<sup>nd</sup> year attendance at Law School. She also wants to be an encouragement for her special needs' younger sister.

Her motivation is to learn all the laws that have been made to help the lower socioeconomic, oppressed and marginalized populations. She hopes to someday come back to El Paso and work close to her family. One of her greatest past accomplishments was working as an intern for a Texas Congressman. She currently resides in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

**Jesus** is a 56-year-old Latino and **Albina** is a 55-year-old Latina. They were both born and raised in Mexico. Jesus comes from a family of 5 in Durango, Mexico. Albina comes from a family of 6 in Juarez, Mexico. Their immediate household is comprised of 2 daughters for a total of 4 members of the family. The father works as an electrician and the mother is a housewife. Their daughter Anahi is currently attending Law School in Milwaukee, Wisconsin while the youngest daughter attends middle school and is special needs. Albina completed high school in Mexico while Jesus completed his GED here in the US.

Both parents are proud of Anahi's accomplishments that include the completion of a bachelor's degree and the commencement of her second year of Law School at Marquette University. Jesus attributes his daughter's high career goals to the tenacity he showed coming to this country undocumented and working hard to get to where he is now. Albina, acknowledges her daughter's desire to achieve her high goals. There is nothing in their possession that they wouldn't give up to help fund and support their daughter's career education.

### **Cruz Family**

**Juno** is a 26-year-old Latino who graduated with a degree in forensic science and chemistry in 2016 from Magnolia University. He comes from a household of 4 with both parents, Gomez and Morti, and a younger sibling. He currently resides in Austin, TX where he works as a

fingerprint analyst for a state agency. Juno recently completed a master's degree in Higher Education and is currently enrolled in a doctorate program in Austin. His bachelor's degree completion took 5 years.

He acknowledges the sacrifices his parents undertook in enrolling him in private education for high school and willing to fund his tuition at any university that he chose to attend. His parent's hard work is a motivating factor for him to succeed and wants to hopefully return home someday to work and be a source of support for them. His future goals include being a professor at an institution of higher education.

**Gomez** is a 47-year-old Latino and **Morti** is a 44-year-old Latina, both born and raised in El Paso, Texas. They have 2 sons that includes Juno who graduated from Magnolia University in 2016 and his younger sibling who is currently attending the same institution. Gomez and Morti both completed high school but neither attended college/university. Gomez currently works as a customer service representative at a home improvement center and Morti works as an investigator for a state organization.

Gomez and Morti are proud of the educational accomplishments both sons have undertaken and have used their own personal lack of educational direction from their own parents as a motivating factor towards their own children. They are especially proud of Juno's recent master's degree completion and current enrollment in a doctoral program at another Texas institution of higher learning. "Everyone around us knows what he's accomplished and look up to him" is how Gomez expresses his pride in Juno's educational completion.

### **Del Toro Family**

**Estela** is a 30-year-old Latina who currently resides in Las Cruces, New Mexico. She works for a space grant at Organ Mountain University. She is a first-generation college graduate

in multi-media production from Magnolia University. She has no siblings and was brought up primarily by her mother Estefani. Her degree completion took five years.

Though she has mixed feelings about her degree completion due to the lack of employment opportunities it has garnered her so far. However, she is grateful for having a parent that stuck by her through thick and thin. She aspires to complete a master's degree in environmental studies as her passion has now led her to gain interest in issues that affect our overall world. She continues to have a great relationship with her mother and remains in limited contact with her father. She cherishes the close friends she gained while doing her undergraduate studies.

**Estefani** is a 65-year-old Latina who was born and raised in Durango, Mexico. She is married and has 2 children, which includes Estela who is a recent first-generation college graduate. She has recently been given disability by the state but previously worked over 30 years as a home care assistant and also in various businesses both in Mexico and the US in sales and light manufacturing. Her education level is only completing middle school in Durango. She currently resides with her husband in El Paso, Texas. Her husband works as a boot maker for a local manufacturer.

Estefani is proud of the degree accomplishment by her daughter whom she raised many years as a single-parent in El Paso, Texas. Her husband remained in Mexico while trying to fix his US residency papers. She believes that Estela is the fruit of her labors and sacrifices she undertook while making sure she got all the educational opportunities necessary. Estela has brought "great pride to both her father and I."

## **Themes**

The following five themes were identified after analyzing the numerous codes that were generated through first and second-level coding. These themes were developed through the categorization and emerging patterns observed and subsequently defined (Saldaña, 2015). They identify trends within the narratives shared for a better understanding of their experiences with the subject of study. Each theme was representative of a recurring topic that emerged through the experiences of the participants as they shared narratives of their personal journeys connected to educational attainment. The five themes cohere with one another as part of a large generational roadmap that documents the path toward the first degree completion and the impact it makes on the family.

### **Theme 1: Ability to Overcome Past Familial Barriers to Education**

The parent participants shared experiences they had growing up in families where education was not a priority for them at various levels in K-12. Six of the nine parents interviewed grew up in Mexico and shared the varying levels of access to education that was available to them in their individual households during their childhood through adolescent years. For most of the parents, their experiences related to the taxing costs associated such as textbooks, supplies and uniforms. The potential accumulation of these costs would sometimes be significant enough to not encourage children to fully pursue education and sometimes place economic responsibilities and pressures on them as well as other barriers. Schools in Mexico were not mandatory or easily accessible for lower socioeconomic classes.

Jesus, for example, spoke about his parents having such a volatile relationship due to extreme poverty that they didn't allow him to go to school, which placed the welfare of his siblings on him. Jesus was eventually kicked out of the home and into the street when both

parents separated and moved on to other personal relationships. Jesus described how his parents' decisions subjected him to emotional and physical abuse with no immediate concern for his basic needs or future well-being.

Se separaron los dos y me aventaron a mi a la calle, entonces se fue mi papa y se caso con otra señora y se fue mi mama y se caso con otro señor...[S]iempre quería estudiar y no me dejaban. Ellos me golpeaban mucho y mi padrastro y mi mama no me daban comida ni nada...si no llevaba comida yo a la casa no comía, entonces tenía que estar por la calle pidiendo o trabajando. “Oiga le hago mandado” entonces para conseguir leche para los [hermanos] porque yo aparte de que fue un maltrato [para mi] tenía que cuidar a mis hermanos...por eso estaba impuesto a sufrir en la calle, ósea me quedaba en los parques, o me quedaba donde pudiera, y mi estudio, pues yo quería estudiar siempre. [Yo] tuve que andar solo en la vida entonces pues yo no considero que tengo papa y mama.

Jesus' struggle for his own personal well-being, as stated in his *testimonio*, was centered on trying to navigate himself around the environment he grew up in with little to no guidance from his parents. His will to survive was fueled by his natural instinct to provide for his younger siblings who were dependent on him for their own existence. The resistance fought toward the oppression placed on him by an unstable family unit provided him with valuable knowledge resources he would be able to build upon for continued persistence in life.

The sentiment of needing to fend for oneself and not having education be a priority was echoed by Juan, another parent who participated in the study. He remembered being so excited to start the very first day of public school in Mexico and having a single parent who was dealing with other issues and not having any interest to accompany him to this important milestone. His

mother merely asked him to access his navigational memory for locating the school on his own in order to attend classes.

Estaba esperando el día de entrar a la clase, el primer día y le dije a mi mamá, “oye mama, a qué horas nos vamos a ir a la escuela ya necesitamos irnos”. ¿Me dijo, “te acuerdas donde fuimos el otro día por esta calle (points index finger outward) todo derecho hasta Sigüenza? (snaps fingers) Órale vámonos”. Desde ahí, todo lo que hice en la vida lo hice solo, desde los cinco años. No fui al kínder, me quedé formado en el patio, se metieron todos a los salones y yo no sabia qué hacer hasta que salió la maestra [Conchita] de kínder que había tomado lista y vio que le faltó uno y ahí estaba yo en el patio en el medio después de los honores a la bandera estaba yo en el patio forma, “oye tú cómo te llamas”, y "No pues ándale tu eres lo que nos falta”.

The *testimonio* shared captured the disappointment and confusion of being left alone to try and access public education. Luckily, he was able to find comfort in a community member, a teacher, who took him under her wing to get him acclimated to the first day of school. Years later, Juan too was kicked out of his home and forced to look for food and shelter. He was offered a safety net through another community member, a friend’s mother, who took him in and allowed him to finish his studies without the stress of being homeless as he explained in his recollection of events.

A mí me corrieron de mi casa a los 17 años, yo tenía unos amigos desde los 5 años, 6 años por ahí o 7, no me recuerdo, convivimos desde muy chicos y la mamá de ellos me trató a mí... me encontré un día acostado en mi troca en la cochera en su casa, y ella salía a trabajar por enfrente. Entonces metió mi troca en la noche y me dormí en mi troca y de salió por la cochera como las 5:30 en la mañana. ¿Me dice, “que esta haciendo aquí?” Yo

creo ya había preguntado que porqué mi troca es ahí, y me dijo, “a las 5 de la tarde llego del trabajo. Aquí te quiero ver a las 5 de la tarde”. Y pos estaba yo asustado no me dijo, en la tarde llegué, me sirvió de comer, me dijo, “a ver, ¿que paso?” Pos ya le platicué, “no pos es que yo corrieron de mi mama en mi casa”. Dijo, “mira, nada no me andes con tu *chipleses* de dormir en tu troca, aquí tienes tu casa, es tu casa, allá arriba es tu recamara, no tienes necesidad de estar batallando”. Y me trato como a sus hijos. Igualito me dio el mismo trato. No me dio de comer frijoles y a ellos carne. Les daba carne a ellos y frijoles y a mí me daba carne y frijoles. Y Yo siempre dije a ella, yo le he dicho a ella, “te agradezco” a ella como ella fue así conmigo”.

The community member, in this situation, became a part of a significant extended family for Juan. Her commitment to his well-being ensured that he be able to complete high school without the stress of having to fend for basic necessities. This act thus became a valuable piece to his educational attainment. Juan’s son, Vincent, believed that this experience influenced his father’s desire to see him succeed and accompany him as much as possible in his scholastic journey.

Other parent participants talked about not getting the “push” to finish school or even think about education past the high school level. They attributed it to their own parents having completed minimum levels of school themselves and not being much of a resource towards understanding the benefits of completing an education. Noly, for example, a parent in the study, spoke about having a father, who was the only financial provider, that invested all their money and resources into a laundry business that would eventually collapse. Failure to have a Plan B for the family’s welfare left them with no safety nets to fall on. There was no extra money to contribute toward college and she, along with members of her household, lacked awareness of resources to effectively seek options to offset the costs towards higher education.



Another barrier that came up for some of the female parent participants was one that centered on gender. Coco and Morti, for example, spoke of a desire to access higher education, but were mostly dissuaded or not given the motivation to pursue higher education. While they were both born in the U.S., they described how some decisions revolved around their brothers doing well in school, without any encouragement or regard for their overall schooling. Morti recalled the following below.

They didn't motivate me...I think they were really focused on the boys getting good grades and just bettering themselves. I don't think that the push was there for me necessarily... I think my parents, because they were from old school days, they did what they had to.

The cultural norms that held Morti back, which were practiced over many generations within her family, were ultimately halted through a gained awareness. This knowledge was strengthened through the informational resources she learned about from her own social circle and educational networks she was able to access.

Similarly, Coco remembered the recurrence of one gender being marginalized over another due to expectations practiced by her household, especially her mother.

Coming from a Hispanic family, boys were encouraged, at least on my mother side, boys were encouraged to complete a college education. Females was more about being housewives...Females are supposed to be housewives and the males are supposed to support their family. That's just the way it was...[F]or her mother it was find a good job [versus education]...whatever it was, whatever being working at a store, working wherever. To her, that was a good job or getting married. That's just the way she was brought up.

Once again, cultural barriers set up by family tradition in the past remained. In these accounts, no one challenged Coco or Morti, until recently. Their family just accepted them as a way to maintain the stability of the household. Both Coco and Morti made it a point to not let those oppressive structures dictate how they would promote educational opportunities for their own children.

Recent graduate participants validated some of the sentiments expressed by the parents in this study. They acknowledged how education, beyond the public school level, was not a priority or interest for their grandparents. For example, Agatha talked about the missed educational opportunities her parents would've liked to have completed in regards to four-year degrees in Teacher Education for her mother and Psychology for her father. Agatha's parents lacked the motivation and direction from their own households due to finances and the types of low-wage, labor-intensive career positions historically connected to them. Agatha's family occupational history included various jobs and careers connected to agriculture and maquiladora work that involved a majority of the household members. The largest part of the challenge was attributed to having family connected to lower pay, and labor-intensive positions that were passed down throughout generations due to their limited socioeconomic awareness.

Anahi, Juno and Alex equally expressed recollections of missed opportunities their mothers shared with them during conversations aimed at motivating them towards their subsequent degree completion. In all three of their cases, there was an interest in pursuing college degrees but lack of knowledge connected to navigating campus resources resulted in their inability to access education beyond high school for Anahi's mother or early withdrawal from initial college enrollment for both Juno and Alex's mother.

In contrast, Estela talked about the economic pressure put upon her parents by their own families to contribute to the household at an early age and not having the time or ability to consider higher levels of education.

My grandpa, he worked hard... I don't remember specifically where he worked, but yes. They would come in from the Delicias, Chihuahua and then come work at Roswell, New Mexico at a farm and it was seasonal. They will do that... My dad always wanted to be a lawyer. He could have gone, but his parents didn't have the incentives and he worked very young. My mom, too, she started working when she was 11 years old... she would have liked to be a nurse. She wanted to be a nurse. My uncles and aunts from her side of their family, most of them are teachers, but she always worked. The money that she earned, she would give to my grandma.

As heard in her *testimonio*, for one reason or another Estela's mother was the one that was left out of any educational opportunities because of the need to have her contribute to the household's financial stability. The overwhelming sense of having to provide for the family's made it difficult to conquer and express her desire for access to education. Estela couldn't understand the decision for her mom taking on the responsibility of being the sole income earner even though she believed it could be somewhat gender related, as experienced by the aforementioned female parent participants.

Yes, it's that sort of thing [gender expectations]...[Mom] was the only one supporting the family at that time. My other family members, my uncles and aunts, they wouldn't work even though some of them were older than my mom. They just wouldn't have a job. They wouldn't like to work. My mom felt obligated to help my grandma because my grandma

will take care of them and just stay at home taking care of whatever stuff has to be done at the house.

The sense of obligation instilled by Estela's grandparents placed an enormous burden on her mother, Estefani to work and provide income to support the household and education of her siblings. While Estefani was not the only female in the household she became the victim of an oppressive gender expectation that denied her the ability to participate in basic schooling and ultimately drove her away from her household to fend for herself. The imprint left on Estefani from this experience ultimately fueled her motivation to keep this from affecting her own children in the future. Estefani shared in her *testimonio* how she eventually took steps to ensure there were no barriers for her daughter Estela in her educational pursuits.

By the same token parent Gomez understood at a young age that he needed to contribute to his single-parent household through odd jobs and available opportunities – ultimately putting his educational opportunities on the back burner. He related this to his gender expectations and having a household whose knowledge capital was very limited and ultimately led to some difficult financial realities.

I never met my father. I was brought up by a single parent and my grandmother. More my grandmother was like my father figure. My mom had no more of an education than a fifth grader back in the time. My grandma, I don't know how far of education but it's probably minimal. I was already being taught more of the labor force going out and start making something for myself without education. At 10 years old, I was already mowing lawns and then learning the concept of making a living or earning a living without education. No, I didn't have the support because they pretty much couldn't answer what one plus one was...I had to pretty much learn on my own.

The barriers faced by Gomez would also eventually leave some hard lessons learned about how not to repeat this familial history with his own children. Gomez, along with his wife Morti, made it a point to not let socioeconomics be a deterrent toward their sons' education.

Recent graduate participants believed that the struggles their parents had with education while growing up were motivational factors for them to pursue higher education upon completion of high school. Their parent's barriers became motivation for their children's eventual pathway towards higher education access and eventual attainment of a four-year baccalaureate degree.

The *testimonio* shared by the participants detail the barriers perceived by education in their own families. Parent participants had accounts of economic challenges which caused them to work at a young age, which in most instances left little time for thoughts about educational possibilities. Gender expectations became a barrier for some as they were faced with living up to responsibilities set upon them by their households. Most information shared was validated by the college graduate participants who reiterated some of the same stories in their own *testimonios* when asked about their parents' educational opportunities.

### **Theme 2: Coming to the US from Mexico for their Children's Education.**

Another theme that emerged through the critical analysis of the transcribed *testimonio* data was that of the decision taken by parents, born in Mexico, to come to the US for the purpose of educational opportunities with their children. Five out of the 7 families interviewed shared experiences tied to immigration from their home country to the Texas border city. For most it was through their own understanding of the value of a US education for better future opportunities, which would hopefully include access to higher education. One parent, Juan,

expressed through his *testimonio* the recommendation he received from a co-worker about enrolling his son, Vincent, into a private school in the Texas border city.

Un día platicando con un amigo de aquí de El Paso, me dijo, “¿oye, te recomiendo una escuela, ahora qué va a terminar tu hijo secundaria en Juárez?” Si, le dije, cómo no, dije a mí me gustaría que el estudiara en El Paso, pero mi hijo no quería estudiar en El Paso. Entonces me dijo, “mételo en [private school]”. Dije, “¿cuesta dinero?” Me dijo, “no te vas arrepentir.”

The recommendation given to Juan by an individual in his social circle allowed him to take advice he might have not been privy to by any other means; given his limited knowledge of educational resources. In this case, someone with first-hand knowledge about educational opportunities in the US, assured him it was a potential investment that would deliver healthy returns in regards to educational attainment.

That decision was met with resistance by Vincent as he was not feeling comfortable leaving the majority Spanish-speaking environment in Mexico. Juan shared that throughout this grade schooling the decision of where to attend was mostly dictated by his son, but comfortable with the information shared by his colleague, he moved him to a private catholic high school across the border in Texas.

I didn't like it. The first two years, I hated my high school. It was horrible because it was a really hard transition from a bilingual school to all English school and all male school. I was like, “eh, no. I don't like it....” It was different. In Juarez, it's not the same. It's not the same English level as in El Paso. It's completely different, and [school] was really hard for me...but two years after that, I got used to it and I started enjoying it.

Vincent's apprehension about starting in a new school, in a foreign country, made the transition a difficult task to initially overcome. He spoke about being apprehensive speaking amongst his teachers and peers due to his self-awareness with his thick accent. This would eventually be coped with, as his sense of confidence within his scholastic environment strengthened over time.

Regardless, the action taken by the parent would ultimately have another challenge associated with it as Juan decided to remain in Mexico to live. Vincent would trek across the border multiple times a day throughout the high school years and in the initial years at the institution of higher education. While Vincent was a US citizen through birth, Juan remained a Mexican citizen with travel access across the border via visa.

Jesus, Albina, and Noly made similar decisions in wanting to access American public-school education to their families across the U.S.-Mexico border in Texas. However, they included relocation as part of the plan. Noly and her husband felt that Alex and her two other older daughters would have better opportunities by finishing high school in the US and ultimately gain the knowledge necessary to continue onto the local university.

We already had our ideas since we got married and felt what was going to be good for our children, but if we are right or wrong, we didn't know... We explained to them that there were more opportunities for them to advance in [US] than in Mexico, because even though... well, it could be, but I think it's harder [in Mexico] than here in the United States because it's step by step. It has to be one thing and then the other one and the other one and the other one. So, it was easier here to advance and to achieve all their dreams and whatever. Up to now the three of them have achieved everything they have set their minds to. They have the thoughts, the ideas and I just pushed them. Well, my husband and I pushed them to advance in the United States... better opportunity. The first years I

think...learning, globally everything, it was in Mexico...up until high school and then we thought that it was time for them to advance, but in [US].

Noly's connection with higher education was through her own completion of an associate degree in community college prior to the birth of her first daughter. That fund of knowledge would allow her to understand the differences between Mexico and US educational opportunities even as she chose to reside across the border in Mexico with her husband for most of her children's upbringing.

For Jesus and Albina, the decision to come to the US was mostly connected to a combination of immigration, education, and medical issues. Jesus initially came to the US illegally to work at a young age and would travel back and forth between countries in order to help his family as much as he could. Eventually upon marrying Albina and subsequent birth of his two daughters, he was able to get resident status and fix papers for the rest of the family to accompany him in the US. In their transition several possessions were left behind, including the home they had purchased. Ultimately, the choice was to give the two girls the opportunities they themselves weren't fully given by their own parents.

[N]osotros cuando ya llegamos a Estados Unidos a nuestra edad, ya uno no dice vengo a cumplir el sueño americano—que dice que, pues, es tener muchas cosas—sino más bien uno viene ya a ayudar a que nuestros hijos... el sueño americano es *pushar* a mis hijas a que sigan ellas hacia adelante.

Jesus explained that coming to the US was not about his dreams anymore but about the opportunities that he hoped his daughters would move towards. The “push” that he references in his quote is he and his wife's way of encouraging them to do all they can to access opportunities than he and his wife ever could. This primary goal drove Jesus and Albina's expectations for



their daughter's long-term prosperity when the decision was made to come to the US from Mexico. The American dream was about having limitless potential primarily through education and eventually through the networks created on this side of the border.

However, like others, Anahi struggled with the transition. Her parents did everything they could in their power to ensure she would not easily give up. Jesus and Albina believed that their patience and commitment to the process, in the end, ensured the path toward long-term success.

Ella batallo mucho cuando nos venimos aquí...empezó *high school*...La iban a poner aquí como en [el diez], pero no quise por que se iba a estresar ella. Y como no sabe inglés, entonces va a estar muy difícil. Entonces les dije, “bájenla un grado y póngala en básico.” Y la pusieron en el nueve. Porque dije, la van a poner en diez, se me va a decepcionar poquito tiempo y se va a querer salir... Ella decía que los primeros días fueron horribles, fueron bien feos. Si hubiera sido de que estuviéramos nosotros todavía en Juárez—porque empezó la preparatoria de que fuera ida y vuelta—dice, “yo no me hubiera quedado aquí. Yo me hubiera ido a Juárez.”

Placing Anahi in one school grade lower than the standard was one way Jesus and Albina safeguarded their children. Also, to keep their children from crossing the border every day to attend school, Jesus and Albina sold their possessions in Mexico and moved to the U.S. This action cemented the understanding, among the entire household, that their new life was going to be completely settled on the US side of the border region. The confidence in the family's strength with this move, along with the extended families' blessings, made it possible to execute.

Anahi was aware that her parent's full commitment to education in the US may have caused them a greater deal of stress. In any case, there was never a time that she recalled being without the necessary resources to navigate effectively from high school into college. Whatever

was needed for her successful completion of courses was almost always provided by her parents. Jesus also confirmed this through his *testimonio*.

Cualquier cosa que necesita mi hija, pues, trato de apoyarla. “Ya, ándele hija, si necesita para esto. Si ten, tenga para la escuela, y tenga para lo que necesite. ‘Y ahora que voy a hacer?’ Pues has lo que tu quieras, pero de todos modos cuentas conmigo. Con toda la familia para apoyarte en todo. Si no tenemos dinero, lo que tengamos aquí en la casa, lo que haiga, vendo un carro, hago lo que sea.”

The devotion associated with providing Anahi all that was necessary for education included selling-off of personal items. Nothing, besides the family unit, held an irreplaceable value when it came to scholastic support. The investment was always towards Anahi’s subsequent degree completion in a US institution of higher education.

In the case of Estefani, Estella’s mother, immigration concerns motivated her decision to stay in the U.S., after a long period of crossing the border between Texas and Mexico for work. In the following *testimonio*, Estefani talked about the stressful decision to move to the US without the support of her husband.

Mi esposo quería siempre vivir en Juárez y yo iba y venía desde que Estela nació. Trabajaba con una señora de vuelta porque no tenía quien me la cuidara y me la traía acá y nos quedamos y íbamos cada ocho días a Juárez y luego ya era ir y venir entonces un día me dijo la de inmigración, “Si el lunes vuelves a pasar, te voy a quitar tu residencia porque no vives en El Paso, vives en Juárez.” Y luego le dije, “Si, esta bien.” ¿Y luego ya ese fin de semana le dije a mi esposo, “No te quieres ir?” Y dijo, “No, no, a mi no me gusta El Paso.” Entonces le dije, “Bueno.” Pues entonces me habían dado 500 dólares de un *income tax* y luego le dije, “Okay, pues, yo ya me voy.” Y vine y rente por primera

vez con Estela, me la traje, y fue que la metí a la [middle school], allí, y rente en [una calle cercana]. Sola yo y Estela, y así no las navegamos unos años y él todavía se quedó allá y no era que se quería venir y ya como hasta los diez algo así años, ya se decidió.

The need to reside in the US was forced on her because of a conversation she had with a US Customs officer during her weekly routine of crossing back and forth over the international bridge between the US and Mexico. She continuously made the trek, accompanied by her infant daughter, in order to maintain employment as a housekeeper with a family in the US. The officer questioned her long-term residency and expressed his belief that she indeed lived in Mexico and not in the US as her residency visa allowed. Fearing that she would lose her residency visa, she tried to convince her husband to move to Texas. When her husband refused to move she told him she would be using some saved income tax return money to fund room and board for both her and their daughter Estela. The confrontation with the US Customs officer made the move to the US necessary. While Estefani's husband eventually moved across the border to live with her and Estela, the decision still took some time. Nonetheless, the risk of staying behind and possibly losing the opportunity for her daughter Estela to gain access to educational opportunities in the US was too valuable to lose.

Estefani, like Juan from the Vega family also talked about being encouraged from her own circle of current and former bosses, for her child's educational benefit, prior to the time she had to make the decision to stay in the US. In this way, the navigational challenges associated with coming to a foreign country were eased through knowledge gained from social networks established by the individuals.

Sí, yo siempre pensaba eso porque las patronas que tenía y todos me decían que,

“¿porque no te vienes? Porque no te traes a la niña para que se vaya enseñando el inglés y

todo eso, y todo, y te quedas aquí y todo.” Tenia muy buenas patronas y todo, “Y quédate acá y todo.” Pero por estar allá también, “Que déjame o no déjame.” Y todo eso hasta que ya le dije, “No sabes que, ¿no te vas?” “No, yo no me voy.” So, me vine yo.

Estefani’s work contacts felt that the best possible outcomes for her and Estela would be made in the US. Estela, her daughter, also believed that the decision taken by her mom was the best in the long run because a climate of violence was beginning to brew in Juarez, which she believed would have eventually altered her higher education plans. She was grateful for that decision, encouraged by her mother’s social circle, and the dedication her mother showed her when completing high school and eventually transitioning to the local university. A common sub-theme that Estefani mentioned in her *testimonio* echoed by other participants was the difficult transition with feeling comfortable in the English-language environment within the schools and area of employment.

[A]l principio cuando vine antes de los 1980’s, porque trabajaba con personas de *babysit*. Entonces eran puras amigas de la señora Maggie y que hablaban inglés y todo y batallaba mucho y todo me decían, ella me traducía “Ok, no, no, no es necesario, que nada más los cuides.” Y que esto y el otro y ya, la hacia de *babysit* y todo. Ya cuando empecé a trabajar con las personas en el *nursing home* y todo, ya batallaba pero aprendía de Cristina, y de la televisión y todo, y me podía defender con los trabajos o hablar con los de la escuela.

Though Spanish-speakers can normally navigate effectively in a U.S.-Mexico Border community, Estefani’s insistence in understanding English led her to seek and effectively use the language through practice conversations with her daughter and watching English-language television. This gave her added confidence in speaking up for herself in her different U.S.

employment opportunities. Estefani's tenacity towards understanding and communicating in English provided her with a strong foundation to successfully navigate through educational and economic spaces which ensured her effective survival in the U.S. The drive and determination that she represented was very impacting for her daughter who saw her as a "role model" for fighting and not giving up, which she would use as a motivator for her eventual educational attainment. Estela referred to Estefani as her "best friend" who had always been there to vent with in regards to stressful situations and also to be the first to hear about any triumphs achieved. The family unit, though not as strong as the other families interviewed, was still stable enough to be a resource of support throughout the schooling journey in the US. The aspiration for Estela to pursue a higher education was because her mother Estefani did not want to see her go through hardship.

Estela recognized the desire for her success that stemmed from her family unit. She stated in her *testimonio* that the passion she had for school came from a combination of guidance and support from her teachers in grade school in Juarez, and her mother's acquaintances and coworkers "*consejos*" [advice] from across the border in El Paso. The impact of the social networks within both communities was vital to her eventual formative path towards adulthood and career navigation.

The Cantera family shared similar experiences when deciding to bring Agatha to the U.S. from Mexico. Gabriela, Agatha's mother, shared that her husband was equally invested in Agatha's educational trajectory. She talked about the pride her immediate and extended family exhibited when the local newspaper published a picture of Agatha and her father arriving to school on the first day of head start. The excitement and passion for school was continuously

felt at the onset. “Agatha always had her little bag filled with books, colors and markers...ready for school”

As the daughter of a teacher who taught multiple subjects in a private school in Juarez, Agatha, in subsequent years, began to show signs of struggle with math and science. She was very “stubborn, real stubborn” when it came to grasp math and science homework through her schooling in Juarez.

They used to say it’s because Agatha has a strong character and she doesn’t like help, she is too stubborn. There was times when I would say, “*Mija*, after two it’s three and then four.” And she would say, “no, it’s cause that is not the way my teacher taught it to me, it is 1,2,4,5,6.” And I would make her count, “No it’s 1,2,3,4,5, and 6. Now you count.” “1,2,4, 5,6...” ... and it would continue like that... However, a psychologist would tell me to always recognize Agatha’s’ character. Never criticize her character. Always see all the good that character will bring her. And I think the one thing that has really pushed her is when people doubt that she can do something. It’s like telling them I will show you that I can do it. It might not be good, but I have noticed that when you put Agatha in a position in which you can doubt her capability, she will tell you I will show you that you can trust that I have the capability of doing it.

Gabriela’s wealth of knowledge in the area of teaching gave her the resources necessary to access assistance that would become a benefit for her daughter in the long run. The language used with teaching, in this case, had to be adaptable to the learning barriers her daughter was putting up. Gabriela was able to use her personal connection to find an intervention. Gabriela’s career-connected navigation eventually led her to access proper tutoring for Agatha. When both Gabriela and Agatha decided to permanently relocate to the US, for the last years of high school,

those earlier tutoring resources allowed Agatha to effectively acclimate in a way that eventually stimulated her desire to attend a four-year university.

The decision to come to the US for educational opportunities was driven by knowledge and determination instilled within the parent participants. Whether it was through an awareness cultivated through individual resource exploration or word of advice from someone in their social circle, the decision would eventually validate the parent participant's course of action for their families.

### **Theme 3: Return on Investment and Sacrifice to the Familia.**

All the parent participants were equally clear about not expecting any type of financial gain or “payback” from their children from their educational accomplishments and subsequent career opportunities. To all of them, the attainment of a higher education degree was enough return on the investment made. However, the stories that were shared about how much sacrifice was made by the parents toward their children's educational persistence and ultimate success were ultimately impacting and validating towards their efforts.

Parent Gomez talked about the decisions that needed to be made in regards to expenditures towards higher education.

“How are we going to pay for their college?” At one point we had like 10 finance companies...\$20 came to us to go eat on one Friday per year after paying the bills...

[Educational expenses] was tough. I think what that teaches you a lot as parents is about the money you have... because we didn't have as much money, we were able to bond a little more. We learned to make our own fun in our own activities...it's been tough.

The sacrifice entailed with adding educational expenses as a need for the household was something that Gomez and Morti were willing to undertake regardless of the effect on their

budget. Mortí saw it as a “blessing” to be able to accompany her children’s educational journey along with them via the different conversations they had while they would engage in family activities and events. This account turns a major stressful memory into a positive learning experience by sharing how economizing led to increased family time and enhanced communication. Ultimately, it produced an investment towards the household which made the overall sacrifice a positive return in the form of an ever-strengthening cohesive family unit.

Juno, Gomez and Mortí’s son, acknowledged the investment made towards his education and the decision-making that came as a result of the household budgeting his family endured during his first-degree completion.

[Household Expenses] has never ever been a really easy one. We have definitely struggled as a family. I know my parents really relied on me to a certain extent to help them out when it was needed. I know that it hasn't always been a good situation with this definitely, like I said, yes, faith is the center of our lives but when it comes to an economic standpoint it was something like we always had to really work hard for and seek out whether it was applying for scholarships or applying for whatever it was financial needs... We've always had to stay together and really any decision that it came to whether it was paying something off or getting more line of credit and a certain credit card or building my credit or building their credit, I know that we've always managed to come to a decision, we talk about it, we're able to then say, okay, this is something that'll benefit us or you know what, this is something that has to be done at the moment and we will somehow deal with it later.

*Familismo*, which instills a sense of loyalty and responsibility amongst Latinx families (Calzada et al., 2013), was evident and depicted in this example as a cultural asset. The *testimonio* above



confirmed this phenomenon in the sense that the welfare of one member of the household becomes the priority of all its members with positive results expected and no anticipation of negative consequences. Within our conversation, Juno recognized the pressure entailed with understanding the sacrifice his family was taking on for he and his brother's educational success; especially with the budgetary juggling they undertook. He goes on to share how his educational goals were valued more than any financial contribution he might've given to the family.

They may have told me, sometimes, yes where there's a conversation that has come up where, yeah you know what, we may need your help to pay a bill or two... It didn't ever get to a point to where, okay, I have to put college aside and I need to now get a full-time job. If I was able to help make a contribution, that was great. If I couldn't, they understood that and I think that's been one, positive effect of being able to know that I didn't have that to deal with that stress and my parents were going to support me.

Whether I was able to help out in a little way by getting a part time job or where, school was priority and I didn't have a job, they would still support me.

The pressure of paying for college and not being a major contributor to the household's budget was lessened for Juno through the encouragement of complete family support. Juno was keenly aware and appreciative of the sacrifice his family made for his educational success. This awareness was added motivation for him to succeed in completing his first degree.

By the same token, Alex acknowledged that her family struggled financially for the purpose of ensuring she got the education needed for the benefit of her future. She learned this specifically from the educational routine she had to endure during first few years of attending school in the US. The need to adjust to this reality was motivated by the understanding of what her parents were going through for her expected success.

It was very difficult because it was during the recession in both in Juarez and El Paso. My dad had lost his job in Juarez and he didn't have a stable income. My mom was working sometimes three to four jobs at a period of time, and I was living with my grandma... It was a little bit hard because I had to cross the [international] bridge. When I moved in with my grandma, I crossed back and forth every week. I would go back to Juarez Friday, Saturday, and come back on Sunday and then be alone with my grandma throughout the entire week. My grandma, she never knew how to drive. It was learning how to use the bus to get to places... I couldn't go out a lot because I didn't want to ask for my parents to give me money because I knew maybe they couldn't afford it. Instead of going into that conversation, I knew to just stay at home. I could do other things that didn't require money... I [eventually] started earning money as a part time student or part time student employee, but it wasn't a lot of money. I could only contribute and maybe relieving them the payment of a cell phone. I bought my own cellphone. I used to pay for my own cell phone. I was like, I'm going to contribute to the internet, I'm going to pay the internet monthly. Little things like that, I started helping them out... my grandma passed away... I went back to Juarez because I couldn't live here by myself. I crossed every single day until maybe two years later. Then, my dad applied for his citizenship and we came over to live and put our house in Juarez for rent. Here, well, he was paying for the rent in an apartment, in a big apartment, which are more expensive, and then paying for all the utilities, paying for internet, phones for everybody. It was a little bit of added costs, especially because rent in Juarez cannot be as expensive as it is here in El Paso, especially with the conversion of dollar to pesos and everything. It was a little bit hard. When I started looking for a job outside of campus, that's when I was able to buy my first

car, but whenever I couldn't meet the payment for the car, they would help me. Not with entire payment, but half of it, maybe. It was hard trying to manage our budgets so that I could afford the car to buy it and come from the Eastside to [the university] every day to school, pay for gas, if it needed repairs, anything just to have that in case of an emergency too. It was hard trying to budget all of our paychecks towards that. Also, whatever little I earned, trying to contribute however I could to my parents. Even though my mom wouldn't ask for it, I still would feel like I needed to contribute.

Alex, like Juno, didn't feel the pressure by her parents to contribute to the household – however, she too understood that the family was sacrificing a lot for her educational success. Whether it was her mom having to work multiple jobs due to her father being laid off to having to live with her grandmother in the US, she too realized that the investment put towards her education was something not to be taken lightly. She explained that when her whole family eventually moved to the US she felt it was necessary to obtain a part-time job in order to contribute a little to the household.

Noly, Alex's mother, explained that another sacrifice that came with coming to the US was not having her husband's educational degree recognized. Though he had received a four-year degree in Business Administration with a concentration in Human Resources, in Mexico, he could not find a company that would validate those credentials in El Paso, TX. He ultimately ended up working as an overnight stocker at Walmart which didn't yield as much money as a position that would've been connected to his educational training. The income earned by Noly, with her associate's degree, along with her husband's limited the household's budget throughout Alex and her sister's undergraduate degree completion journey.

The experience of taking on multiple jobs by both parents as well as by children was also shared by Damien, as he reflected on the extra effort needed to maintain a household and support the higher education pursuits of both he and his sister.

[T]hrough that whole journey, my parents, mainly my father, worked two jobs the whole time. He's never stopped and he's still working two jobs right now. My mother, at a time when my father had gotten laid off from one of his jobs, she started working two jobs as well. She did two jobs for five years until we got into a balance or rhythm economically or in a financial way that we were able to be balanced and be okay... [if]I wanted some steak or I wanted some pizza for dinner, but my mom, my mother was only able to make us like pork chops every other week and we had to make them last. If we had gatherings, family gatherings with food and stuff, we would take as many leftovers as we can and just make them last through the whole week...it wasn't until I guess me and my sister started working in retail on our own that we were able to buy some of the things that we wanted. Until we got into a financial stabilization, we were able to afford a little bit more things... We were able to make some steaks and keep going and going from there. But even, I'm talking about food but like clothes as well, we were only able to get Walmart brand clothing. Even at that, it'd be like some deals... till this day, my father is still working two jobs. My mom, I think she's about maybe a year or two away from retiring finally and she'll be able to be okay... financially it was a struggle, but they were able to make it, we were able to make it. My mom would always say, "I don't know how we're going to do it," but she was able to do it. Now, today, after we've finished school, they're both in a good spot to where, if they retire, they can retire comfortably.

Damien recalled food insecurities and the need for multiple jobs by both parents as major sacrifices involved with helping finance household expenses which also included education. He understood the need to scale back on preferential meal and clothing choices as well as getting a part-time job, along with his sister, in order to alleviate some of the pressures the family was facing and contribute to the family.

According to Damien's mom Coco the completion of degrees by both children take a "tons of bricks" off both she and her husband's shoulders and allows them to "finally breathe". She felt that not having to worry about her children's futures was enough payback for Coco and her husband.

All the hard work, all that what they given to us is like all that hard work we've done, his two jobs working, my jobs, trying to pay for those tutoring classes...everything that we did, everything that we were spending, it's like that's what they bring us joy, that was our payback. You know what I mean? That was our investment.

Coco viewed educational success as a substantial return on the investment put forth by both her and her husband with their children. The reality of not having to worry about continued educational expenses and knowing Damien and his sister could now fend for themselves alleviated most of the financial challenges they endured while supporting the road towards degree attainment.

Similarly, in regards to hardships endured during the road to degree attainment, mother and daughter Gabriela and Agatha corroborated with each other in their individual *testimonio* recollections. Gabriela, who earned a limited income teaching in Mexico, recalled specific challenges when financial aid wasn't available to fund Agatha's tuition and other related expenses.

[F]inancially, I have enough to support you in the local university...there were moments in which Agatha, specially the first years, where her gpa got really low and financial aid wouldn't help, we had to pay for [her] to keep going, and the books or when she needed a computer...other things. So, we had to get it so Agatha could have everything she needed...she needed a computer that was 1000 dollars, so [ex-husband] put in half and I put in half. When she brought us a list of her books needed, her dad would pay half and I would pay half. We would always go [50/50]...Agatha had a house, and food I would try to take care of that. But when Agatha needed a car, I would tell [ex-husband] "come on, Agatha needs a car." So, then her dad looked to see how he could support her. He has always supported her a lot and given her all she needs in whichever way he can make it happen.

Through an amicable agreement between Gabriela and her ex-husband, they were able to equally support their daughter Agatha's higher education expenses when her grades fell below financial aid's minimum requirements to receive a grant award. In addition, room and board was handled by Gabriela while her ex-husband did everything he could to provide her a mode of transportation for school by whatever financial means possible.

Agatha recognized the commitment which was made even harder due to the fact that Gabriela lived in the US with her while her stepfather, who was battling a health crisis, remained in Mexico. Gabriela worked tirelessly to find a way for her husband to come to the US and live with both of them.

It was tough. It was very tough. It was very tough because we had a sick family member. We still have. Thank goodness we have [stepfather], but he fell sick/ill. It was very hard because he didn't have papers. He didn't have any other family over there. We were

trying to give him, or my mom was trying to give him, the best she could, but we were struggling with rent. I was working a minimum wage job, which I'm very grateful for, but it wasn't enough for things that I had to buy in regards to food or even pay a bill or something. I could pay my gas and things to eat for myself. Ultimately, funny thing that right after I graduated from my bachelor's, my mom couldn't do it anymore and we lost our house. She had to move to Juarez, but I finished. We lost our house in order for me to finish...My father tried to help her as much as possible with bills, medical bills that my stepdad had, but then we couldn't do it anymore. That's when my mom moved back to Juarez.

The family's ability to endure financial challenges in order for Agatha to compete a four-year degree demonstrated the commitment to education by the household. Even though her parents didn't require her to, Agatha found part-time employment as most of the student participants interviewed in this study, to try to alleviate some bills being generated by the family.

Unfortunately, there came a point where the sacrifices being made to accommodate Agatha's education eventually led to having her mother move back to Mexico for economic reasons; even after degree completion.

For all the parents who shared their *testimonio*, the desire to do all they could to offer unconditional support to their children's educational ambitions, for the betterment of their futures, was the number one focus. The investment and sacrifices made for education were done without hesitation and with complete commitment till the eventual attainment of a higher education degree. The rewards that came as a result of degree completion were sometimes things never envisioned or expected. This was best illustrated by the *testimonio* Gabriela shared about one night while out shopping with her daughter.

Last week, we were in the store and I had told Agatha that I started running and that I needed clothes, and we went to the store and I was buying different clothes, and I see her start getting a lot of active wear clothes, shirts and trousers, and I told her what is all this, and she said “I’ll tell you right now.” And when we paid... She gave me the clothes and told me “this is for you” .... (*voice begins to break but quickly recomposes herself*). It is not the fact that she bought me something, it’s the sentiment connected to it. It’s the fact that she values, right, and not because she has bought it but because there is a lot of people that graduate and don’t provide their parents anything. But the fact that she bought that for me. I told her no Agatha, that is your money, because she is trying to buy herself a car. And she says “no mom, this is for you, they paid me and I want to share it with you.” And I told her you know Agatha I like that you share, not only with me, I am person that believes in God and many things, and I have always thought that when you share what you have, God provides you with a lot more. And you grow as a person when you share. Not only economically but the knowledge and your way of being. So, I see it, and that she tries, she is barely beginning, “tell me mom do you need money?” No, I don’t need it...and she says “really mom? I have money...” I tell her I know you have money, save it so you can buy whatever you need. “But I can help you mom, you’ll see that little by little we will move forward.”

Gabriela believed that the values Agatha had acquired throughout her degree completion were a combination of her upbringing, gained awareness of financial challenges in the family and personal motivation for future career success. Agatha’s way of expressing her gratitude and respect for her mother’s commitment to her during her undergraduate career was demonstrated through an unexpected gesture she made by purchasing some needed clothing items Gabriela



was shopping for. As expressed in the abovementioned *testimonio* excerpt, Agatha used that opportunity to let her mom know that she was able to assist with any expense she needed to take care of. In a way, this was Agatha letting Gabriela know that her new career position and salary had her in a place to be able to contribute more to the family.

The overall return on investment was best represented through the impact the recent first-generation degree attainers made on their individual families. There was an expressed degree of comfort within the household associated with increased expectations for better professional career opportunities for the college/university graduates with less likelihood of having to survive through multiple low-wage/low-skilled positions. For all of the parent participants, the degree attainment becomes the fruit of the sacrifices put forth by the *familia*. Juan best explained it when he spoke about what he told his son Vincent during his higher education journey. He told him to please “gift” him his degree so he can proudly display it on the wall in his living room. He believed that the framed degree will bring comfort and joy to all the memories of the sacrifices their “*familia*” endured on the journey towards graduation.

#### **Theme 4: Navigating Through New Spaces**

All participants unequivocally believed that the completion of a four-year higher education degree in the household increased overall knowledge and expectations of the impact it brings to each of them and their family. For some parents it elicited feelings of wanting to go back and possibly complete a degree of their own, while for others it set goals for their own communities and children’s future families; which each of the first-generation graduates acknowledged as well in their *testimonios*. In effect it allowed them to get through new spaces and access resources that older generations were unable to.

Juan's son Vincent talked about the ever-changing economy that needs more people to access higher education and attain degrees, especially in areas like the border community of El Paso, Texas.

Because it's really tough out there. Even with a degree, it is not easy and you're not going to get a lot of opportunities...if you do, but with minimum wage. With minimum wage, you're not going to get far because the cost of living has increased, but the salaries haven't. They haven't. To be successful, you have to get education and you have to get a degree... I really value my degree. Yes, I value my degree and I value the opportunities that I have...for [future family] I would push them further still. Push them to get a master's or even a doctorate if they can, if it's possible, because the more you study and the more you prepare yourself for the future, the more successful you're going to be...we all learn from each other.

Vincent's beliefs were grounded on his increased knowledge of the job market in the region he resides in through the career exploration he underwent while attending the university. He was aware of what is out there for people with limited educational and job skills because of jobs he undertook while attending school. This type of impact can be attributed to gaining information in a higher education space which he has been the first in the family to successfully access and maneuver through.

Like Vincent, parent participant Jesus believed that individuals need to look beyond their current situations and invest in bettering their overall lives. He recalled talking to a coworker about how the lack of education, for him, would make him easily replaceable and not offer an opportunity for continued advancement in his current employment. His desire to keep expanding on his acquired knowledge in the field of electrical professions and self-motivation to get state

certifications would make it more feasible for him to decline jobs if the pay is not agreeable to him. He acknowledged that a four-year degree will open more doors for his daughter that are currently unattainable for him. However, he felt that the education he has gained through the different technical trainings he has participated in are valuable to him and his family, despite his lack of schooling.

Yo no tengo un alto nivel de estudio, pero voy a un lado y con mis certificados voy a un lugar y le digo deme tanto y si me dicen “no”, no pues no trabajo. Y luego va otra persona y le digo, cuanto tienes aquí, “pues tengo trece años aquí” y luego dicen “pero no quiero salirme, porque si me salgo me voy a ir a otro lugar y voy a empezar de abajo.” Y le digo y cuanto te pagan y dice “once cincuenta”, trece años once cincuenta y digo no. ¿Me dicen “es muy poquito?”, y les digo pues si estas perdiendo trece años en tu vida... Yo todavía quiero mi master [electrician certification]... El tener un título es la calidad de vida que van a tener para toda la vida... Pues estoy esperando a que me autoricen el examen, mande aplicación y todo ya nomas el día que me digan ahí estoy.

As a parent, Jesus was encouraged that access to a state exam for a master certification, as a licensed electrician, would not only validate his accumulated knowledge but would increase his ability to provide more for his family and community. He knew that not having an educational degree or certification with a job, in the long run, will lead to the devaluation or low compensation by a company toward an employee. He believes that when a person with limited education leaves a low-paying job for another, the tendency is to start at the same or slightly higher rate than the previous position. During his *testimonio*, Jesus spoke increasingly about wanting to share his knowledge with the younger generations that he tends to encounter in his various jobs. He expressed sadness toward those that dismiss advanced degree attainment for the

lure of slightly higher wages that can sometimes lead to short-term ambition. One particular experience allowed him to use his knowledge about the benefits of education toward a former young coworker.

Yo eso lo veo como una derrota, lo que si le digo a los jóvenes que lo veo como una derrota, y me dicen “¿por que traigo mi carro nuevo, tengo mi trabajo?” Y les digo, “¿sabes que ya perdiste?” Y me dicen, “¿por qué?” Y les digo, “mira tu ya tienes tu carro nuevo, ya te fuiste a endeudar, tienes que pagar la deuda de eso, luego vas a pagar la deuda del carro y los intereses y te doy poquito para que te cases porque andas bien arreglado y con tu carrito nuevo le digo date poquito tiempo y vas a andar sufriendo ahí. Es que, ¿hacia donde vas? si lo estas disfrutando cinco, seis, siete meses. Una mujer bonita se va a juntar contigo y ya.” Tiempo después estaba vendiendo burritos y le digo, “¿que paso? Pedro, es que te dije te dije. ahora andas vendiendo burritos para poder pagar el carro. ¿Y ya no vas a vivir con tu mama vas a tener que rentar apartamento, a donde te fuiste? A un hoyo, pensaste que era una liberación muy bonita al salir con tu carro bonito, pero no lo viste poquito más adelante que fue un hoyo. Si hubieras seguido adelante poquito mas, hubieras podido tener un estudio.” Decía, “mira tú andabas de ayudante mío, ¿qué te pasó?” Le digo, “podrías tener un futuro de ingeniero, algo grande. Mira nomas que paso. Estas siguiendo las instrucciones de alguien que ni siquiera está en la escuela.” Cuando el estaba en [la universidad], el estudiaba en [la universidad] y se salió. Yo a la mayoría de la gente le digo, hagan un estudio hagan un título siempre los aconsejo y los *pusho*.

Jesus believed in encouraging the youth as he is keenly aware that they will eventually be the future leaders and contributors to his community and society as a whole. This awareness comes

from the experience of putting a daughter through higher education and having conversations with her about all she was learning throughout her journey. His daughter Anahi's successful completion of a bachelor's degree and her subsequent interest in pursuing a higher degree to become a lawyer has impacted him in a way of becoming an advocate for advanced education. In another excerpt from his *testimonio* he recalled telling another recent college graduate who got disillusioned with the lack of job opportunities in the area about not limiting his career prospects to the current community he resided in.

Conocí a un muchacho y me dice “oiga maestro.” Yo le dije no nomas ando ayudando a los niños aquí y me dijo “pensé que era el maestro.” No soy maestro, pero en que te ayudo, “no es que le hablaba porque quería saber como trabajar aquí para ser maestro.” Le digo, “¿usted tiene titulo?” ‘No, pues, si tengo’ “¿Y luego que espera joven?” ‘Como que ¿que espero?’ “Pues para trabajar.” ‘No, es que no hay trabajo.’ “¿Seguro que no hay trabajo en todo Estados Unidos?” ‘Es que me mandaron de San Antonio que fuera allá.’ “¿Y que espera?” ‘Es que aquí tengo a mi mama y a mi familia y no me quiero ir.’ Le digo, “usted tiene cierta edad, tiene que salir de tus padres y salir a buscar tu camino. Vete, dura un tiempo y te regresas y te puedes llevar a tu familia. ¿Hace cuanto te recibiste?” ‘No pues hace dos años.’ Le dije, “estás perdiendo tiempo. Tanto lo convencí dijo, ‘sabe qué señor, me voy a ir. Se lo prometo que me voy a ir.’ Le dije, “pues no lo quiero volver a ver por aquí.”

Jesus' experience with witnessing his daughter complete her degree and eventually finding a passion in the field of legal studies gave him an understanding of how a university education can help you cross through generational and familial borders not previously equipped to do so. A key moment both he and his daughter Anahi recalled was when she recently helped him navigate

through a workman's compensation issue that happened at one of his places of employment. He was injured while at work and he felt that his employers were giving him the runaround with filing his claim with human resources.

Fue una lastimadura que me paso y desafortunadamente cerraron ellos una fecha... cuando cerraron esa fecha abrieron otra con diferente lesión cuando era la misma y después me dijeron que era torcedura pero tengo todos los papeles tengo la lesión los MRI's de lo que me lastime...el doctor del estado me dio incapacidad de un cinco por ciento porque solo fue torcedura... Ella [Anahi] era la que me ayudaba en esto...yo ya no quería complicarse con tanto problema que ella trae por el trabajo y le digo déjalo mejor así y yo aquí a ver como le hago.

After getting frustrated about the lack of action over his case he discussed it with his daughter who stepped in and got him connected with a lawyer to pursue his claim, that was ultimately resolved over a settlement. Although he initially hesitated getting her involved she made a case for understanding some of the laws affecting workers in Texas. Anahi was stubborn about wanting to help her dad based on knowledge she had acquired through higher education. Anahi remembered telling her family about some options that she had recalled from some of the legal classes she had taken.

I feel like I've been able to help them not be taken advantage of because kind of like with the lawsuits that my dad like filed, I'm like, "You need to file that lawsuit. Don't be scared," because it was rightful for him to do that, and he didn't want to. I was like, "no, you need to and don't be scared of doing it." ... He got hurt. He didn't want to do anything about it like before, and I'm like, "no, yes, you need to." ...it's still an ongoing thing. I

know he gotten a little bit of money for the initial settlement, and it's still going on and hasn't been completely closed.

Anahi's insistence in wanting to help her family navigate through a legal space that they had little knowledge on was an asset for them in the long run. She was able to use her understanding of workman's compensation rights in a way that might have not been possible otherwise.

Equally connected, Albina shared a time when Anahi was able to help her get through an immigration situation because of who she knew through an internship opportunity the university made available to her.

A mi una vez como me ha ayudado ella mire hace como un año yo entré a hacer mis tramites para la renovación de la residencia, pues no me llegaba la residencia, no me llegaba y ya hice la extensión y se acabó la extensión y no me llegaba la residencia y tuve que hacer cita en inmigración y fui al [oficina de inmigración], y me dijeron "tiene que traer intérprete", dije donde agarro un interprete Anahí está trabajando. Y le dije miya tienes que venir a ayudarme pues que me van a decir ahí y luego como es por cita...en eso se paro Anahí atrás y dijo apenas alcance a entrar y me dijeron, "Ya no le podemos dar la extensión tiene que ir al consulado mexicano a sacar un pasaporte, tiene que llegar ahorita en dos horas porque si no se acaba su tiempo de cita, y dentro de estas horas ya no le podemos dar otra extensión", es que ya se me acabó la extensión de la residencia y me dijeron que tengo que esperar a que llegue la mica...Le dije "¿miya y ahora cómo le vamos hacer?"...filas y filas en el consulado mexicano. Le dije "pues en dos horas yo no voy a salir" y de repente se encuentra al cónsul, y le dice "¿señorita Torres que anda haciendo aquí?" Anahí trabajaba en una fundación, en la fundación y ellos trabajaban mucho con el consulado y Anahí era como el enlace. Y le dice "¿que anda haciendo por

aquí, la mando por un trámite que le mandó su jefa?”, y le dijo “no es que vengo porque mi mama tiene dos horas para sacar su pasaporte mexicano, si no no se lo van a sellar en inmigración.” “Denme el nombre de su mamá”, le dijo y a las dos hora ya estábamos allá. Todo eso fue por Anahi, si no yo no hubiera. Fue un logro de ella por el inglés, y por su trabajo y conexiones.

Anahi’s work with the local community foundation during her undergraduate years gave her insight to working with immigration issues with the projects she was asked to participate in. The contacts she made through that experience allowed her to help her mother during an emergency immigration issue that had limited time to resolve. Anahi’s ability to navigate successfully through this type of new space was due to her educational opportunities.

Ultimately, Jesus and Albina value degrees and certifications as a necessary part of life that will open doors and set the tone for the future. Jesus, in particular, expressed that the weight of a college degree or certificate could provide a stronger position when negotiating a job salary, leading to a productive life. With this intention, Anahi recognized her father’s tenacity toward wanting her to complete her education by immersing her with connections to spaces in the form of neighborhoods and restaurants that were out of reach for most people based on their socioeconomic levels. She was encouraged to recognize that, the only difference between her families and others in higher class levels was, the networks and opportunities that may be attributed to higher education and the job opportunities connected to them. Both her parents, especially her father, believed that the sky was the limit for her career potential.

Yeah. My dad would always emphasize [higher education] so much to me. He'd be like, you need to go to school to be somebody in this world. My dad was always a big advocate for me to continue school and to continue... my dad always wanted me to be a



lawyer. I remember from a long, long time ago, he always said, you should go for it, you should be a lawyer, you can do this, you're smart. Then I was always like, no, I don't want to, but then when I got to college I realized, you know what? This is something that I could actually do, that I would like to do, so I am now in law school... I was very lucky to have my parents because they were always there for me for everything.

The support system given to Anahi by her parents was vital to her initial degree completion and career aspirational goals that included completion of law school. The belief in her talents and capacity to learn was very impacting.

Albina attributed her commitment to support Anahi through all levels of education through her experience with her parents growing up in Mexico when she attended public school.

[A]sí pasó con mi papá, mi papá es una persona responsable la persona más trabajadora que yo conozco. Éramos tan pobres, éramos tan pobres en esa en mi casa éramos bien pobres, y pero siempre que yo le decía a mi mamá cuando yo estaba estudiando, yo le decía, “oiga mamá es que ahora me están pidiendo que un cuaderno.” “¿Para que?”, y yo veía que no había nada. Me decía “déjame le digo a tu papá”, y mi papá, así como llegaba “pues mañana se lo compramos”, siempre todo lo que le pedí que nos pedían en la escuela para mi carrera todo me compraron y todo me dieron yo no sé como o con quien el hiba, pero fue por el esfuerzo de mi papá, y a través de mi mamá pero ellos como me ayudaron ellos nunca nos dejaron a los que quisimos estudiar. Yo siempre quise estudiar y los que quisimos nos dieron hasta donde yo estudiara.

Even though Albina came from a low-socioeconomic background, her parents did all they could to support the basic education she and her siblings desired to have. There was never a school expense that she recalled struggling with in spite of the family's financial reality. She attributed

that to the community she grew up in and the people her father networked with to potentially access various resources. The experiences lived by both parents, through their own families, became influential in deciding how to support their daughter through an educational space they had limited knowledge on.

Like Jesus and Albina, parent Estefani also believed the power of degree attainment is one that cannot be taken lightly or pushed off. They expressed that an education allows for more freedom to go to different places and succeed. They both believe that living in a U.S.-Mexico border community, and not taking advantage of all the resources available for degree attainment, is not an intelligent move.

[S]i no aquí en El Paso que es tan pequeñito se va a otro lado a buscar un futuro, míreme, en mi caso, siempre me he querido ir a California, siempre me he querido ir a California desde que llegué aquí y estudiar y todo y un título es muy importante, la educación es muy importante, no la puede detener aquí, yo le digo que el que aquí no quiere estudiar es porque es flojo, y yo conozco a mucha gente...tengo muchos familiares aquí, testigos de Jehová, nomas se graduaron de *high school* y hasta ahí llegaron, nomas...no quisieron mas escuela...eran flojos! No, yo nunca quise eso para Estela, aquí en El Paso... vine yo de un pueblo para acá sin papeles, sin nada, un dia me dijo una persona muy importante en una agencia, “Has logrado mucho, has logrado porque tu viniste sin ambiciones, sin nada.” Sin nada llegue a aquí, ni siquiera. Pero ya cuando llegue aquí dije, “Yo nunca me voy para atrás, aunque ande trabajando de *babysitter*, de todo, yo nunca me voy para atrás.” ...el estudiar de Estela y todo ha sido maravilloso.

Estefani was adamant about what she wanted for her daughter. When coming to the US from Mexico she knew that there was no turning back and all the challenges she confronted were done

with one goal in mind – to access the best education possible for Estela. A hope associated with that goal is for her daughter to know that an education can get her to go to different places and not just remain in her hometown. Estefani gets upset talking about her sibling's children who don't take education as seriously and didn't want to continue with higher education after high school. She believed it's nothing but laziness and laments how she wished she would've had the opportunity to complete an education herself and got to California – a place she always wanted to live in. Nonetheless, Estela's degree completion has left a feeling of limitless possibilities on her mother, for her daughter, that extend beyond the U.S.-Mexico Border.

Like Estefani, Coco thinks it is important to think beyond geographical or generational borders. Both her children's degrees have afforded them life options.

It's essential. It doesn't necessarily mean living in the border region or anything. I think anywhere you live, education is very important. It's very important because it helps you to communicate and that is very important. Communication is the key on how to express yourself... The opportunity that [son's] degree has provided him is that he is going to be out of town. Damien is not coming back. My daughter has already said "if I end up here, it will be if I get into medical school", she goes, "but other than that, I'll probably be out of town too." So, their education has afforded them to be competitive in other cities and with other individuals. So, having a degree is, yeah, it's very important, very, very crucial, very crucial. It just depends what you want out of life. The degree is going to provide you with the opportunity to get a good job, it's just up to the individual where, you know, the degree would only take you so far. From there, you just need to figure out what is it that I want.

Like Estefani, the impact of degree completion has given Coco's children opportunities that could extend outside their hometown. Opportunities to access additional educational and career resources that were not made available to Coco when she was growing up. These prospects come as a result of familial support through the initial road towards degree completion for these first-generation Latinx students.

Damien's *testimonio* supported his mother's expectations of what the degree can do for anyone whether they stay in the community they grew up in or venture to another city, state or country.

When you graduate and got your degree, you already improved yourself 100%, because you already went through the classes, you already went through the hard work. You already know how to study, you already know how to problem solve, you already know how to ask the questions, analyze, so on forth. Now, the next step is when you get that degree, now you can use it. If you don't want to leave the border town city, that's fine. Go ahead and use it and improve the city then in wherever your degree is. If it's in the medical field, improve the city at Las Palmas [hospital] and there. Improve it, make your own hospital there. Or teach on; you can teach there at the university, inspire future generations, so it's a little bit of both.

Damien's overall belief was focused on the power of higher education and how the benefits gained through completion led to limitless opportunities. Knowledge gained through degree completion, with full family support, gave him the confidence to believe in the power of education and how it could change the future for him and his family. His perception validated the need to have more people invested in degree completion for future potential transformation within their communities.

By the same token, Gomez and Morti trusted that those with higher education degree attainment will go far in changing the perception of opportunities that can become available in one's own community. They felt that those staying behind to invest in a border city like El Paso would bring enormous benefit for future generations. Gomez specifically placed the onus on the younger population from the city that is finishing their higher education.

Our [younger] population of El Paso, they are the ones that can make a difference here.

Who makes the difference is the parents right now...saying, "You know what, I want you to go out there and makes this place a better place to live." I always say install that to make it, to say, "You know what, I want you to pick up all the education and make El Paso a better place to live." I'm tired. I get tired of people who say, "Oh, we got to go to Dallas, San Antonio." I'm tired. I really am. When I go out of El Paso, yeah, I promote El Paso. "Have you ever been to El Paso?" We have everything here and it's sad to say that people come and [leave] because of wages not equal to their education. When we say that there's no money in El Paso, there's plenty of money in El Paso. It is just where it's going and where it's filtering to us. I don't know. Yeah, that's pretty much my feel to it. Got to change the culture.

The hope to enhance the opportunities in the community is what Gomez believed parents should strive for in supporting their children's higher education goals. He expressed a desire to see parents encourage their high school graduates to enroll in college or a university to make the city better and erase the negative stigma that tends to accompany it. Ultimately, Gomez expressed that his family's prioritization of education would impact his family by knowing they contributed to the betterment of their city's culture.

Equally important for Gomez' wife Morti was the desire for equal and continued investment toward both their sons' individual futures. Her feelings primarily stemmed from not being able to complete her own educational goals due to a number of circumstances.

I hope the opportunity we wanted for us...we live through them... when it comes time for their families, they're going to be that much more involved and they're going to push them and they're going to also be just as delighted, I think, but I do think that it's going to significantly help them raise their children and hopefully their children... I'm very happy and very honored and proud to be the parent of two amazing kids because they are giving it their all to education.

Seeing the excitement and motivation to complete degrees acknowledges the messages both parents engrained in their household toward their children's personal goals. The biggest takeaway for Gomez and Morti came from knowing they were able to make a difference in their children's education futures unlike their own individual situations growing up. They expressed confidence in knowing the seed of higher education they planted and cultivated will go on and have an everlasting impact with their family.

Being "honored" to see them succeed was echoed by other parents in the study. Juan, for instance, talked about the way that someone with a degree is perceived, valued and treated in his hometown of Juarez, Mexico.

Cómo lo valoro pues eso es lo que es el estatus que va a tener uno en la vida. Lo que usted sea lo que haya estudiado desafortunadamente usted si tiene un título es alguien, si no lo tiene, no es nada. Desafortunadamente de aquel lado en lo personal de aquel lado así lo he visto yo. Si usted tiene un título es alguien triunfador, si no tiene título no es triunfador. Sí mucha gente se ha descompuesto mucho la sociedad en ese aspecto hay

mucho, cómo le diré, hay mucho desdén si ustedes alguien, si usted doctor, si usted licenciado, si usted es administrador, contador lo que sea, es alguien y lo tratan bien. Si no es, no lo tratan bien la gente. Se nota el trato, se ve en las calles, se ven dos lugares donde usted llegue. Si usted llega un restaurante por ejemplo ya lo conocen que es el doctor fulanito, el licenciado fulanito, y la atención que le dan los meseros a esa gente es diferente al de otras personas que no lo son sin fijarse en el vestir en el hablar en gente que no tiene mucho... pero es bueno, es bueno.

Juan who decided to reside in Mexico, despite his son Vincent receiving his high school and university education in the US, acknowledged the impact the first degree in the family has made. Regardless of socioeconomic background in Mexico, those with degrees are treated with a respect that the average citizen does not tend to encounter. He believed that though this may seem oppressive to those unable to access educational opportunities, it significantly valued degree attainment based on what he has seen and experienced in his lifetime. For Juan, having a family member achieve a goal not previously accomplished within the immediate family is a great triumph for the entire family.

Adding to the value and perception of a degree regardless of what side of the border a person resides in, parent Noly spoke of the need to be educated and the resources, on both sides, made available for an increased sense of stability in the future.

Oh no. They have to. Now, if they're still in Mexico they need to get a college degree and here in the United States do as much as you can to help your family, your kids, to get a college degree. We, like I said before, we have that thought that it will be better for them to advance and like I said I think that we did the right thing try to teach them that they have... or try to tell them to go forward and we know that it was the right way to raise

them. So, we know up to now that we did the right thing. So, we gave advises to other people if they live in Mexico go ahead and get as much education as you can and right here [US] the same thing. They have a lot of resources to be in help here in the United States and in Juárez they have a certain way of getting some help too from the government. So, if they can then go ahead and get them. Try to get as much as you can. I think it is the best thing.

Noly believed that the current economic situation needed to motivate parents towards supporting their children's education regardless of what side of the U.S.-Mexico border they resided in. Her expressed support for education was likely enhanced by the degree completion of all 3 daughters and their individual access to well-paid professional positions. Her knowledge of resources available to navigate through higher education expanded through each daughter's subsequent enrollment at a U.S. university.

Finally, the impact of their children's journey toward degree completion led some of the parents to consider going back to complete a degree that was once started but not finished. For others, their children's achievements gave them a feeling of pride and satisfaction knowing that educational spaces, once considered unimaginable for them, were a reality for their own children. The encouragement and dedication shown for the first-generation graduates impacted them as well. Alex and Vincent, for example, share their parent's continued desire to complete a degree though, for each of them, language barriers and age are main concerns that may limit any progression toward a degree. Gabriela would like to "someday go back and finish the teaching degree" she once almost finished prior to the birth of Agatha. On the other hand, Coco who has already completed a bachelor's, has some interest in completing a masters. However, time is an issue due to her current employment and she is hesitant about doing online courses as they seem



“impersonal and too technologically difficult”. Morti is in the midst of finishing a bachelor’s and is grateful to have her son advising and tutoring her in some of the courses she is completing.

Only one participant, Estela, expressed a somewhat neutral response to the importance and need of higher education based on personal experience. Her challenge after graduation with struggling to find a job in her major field of study became the principal driver toward her attitude. Estela’s testimonio showed an initial pessimistic outlook that eventually transitions into a glimmer of hope.

I had trouble finding a job afterwards [bachelor’s degree completion]. I was without a job for three months until I found one job. It wasn't the best job, so I kind of was disappointed because I found a job assisting a real estate person. Then afterwards, I knew I couldn't find something that I really wanted because I tried, Then I thought, well, what I care about the most is job security, so I looked for a job at a school and I found a job at [a university]. It helped me because otherwise I wouldn't be able to find the job in Las Cruces because most of the jobs are in hotels or gas stations...that sort of job. I graduated and I had my diploma and stuff, but I didn't have any money. I was completely broke after I graduated...[now] I’m doing some video-editing and graphic design and some secretarial work... I get that sometimes college is not for everyone, but I don't know. I think that it is worth it. If you really find it within you, you can really do something with it. I think that this region, the economy is getting better. I don't know. I'm not an analyst... I think it is getting better. I think we have a lot more opportunities. I think it's starting to get the attention of people that want to really build something here [El Paso/Las Cruces area]. I mean I will tell them, "Don't get discouraged. Have hope."

The hope that keeps her inspired comes from the knowledge that she accumulated through her higher education degree completion combined with her familial aspirations and support for her. Furthermore the resistance to remaining in El Paso for career possibilities eventually led her 40 miles away to another city in another state connected to the U.S./Mexico border.

### **Theme 5: Opening Doors for Advanced Degree Attainment**

Parent and student participants both shared strong feelings about how the completion of the first degree opened the door to more advanced degree opportunities. Most parents acknowledged that their awareness about degree types, requirements, and career options were not fully comprehended until the first member in their family successfully completed a degree. Specifically, they acquired knowledge associated with higher education through conversations had with their degree-seeking children. This information had not been a part of a majority of the parents' individual upbringing due to disconnection with education from their own parents. The lack of awareness toward advanced educational resources for the household was mostly cultural and socioeconomically connected. They could only go as far as the older generations' personal knowledge and experience could guide them. However, once those knowledge resources were uncovered and accessed, the benefits associated with degree completion played a big part with their perception of value. Coco spoke about the need to continue seeking advanced degrees in order to make it based on what she sees every day at her own place of employment.

I have told them that a bachelor's degree is now equivalent to a high school diploma. I said that's what I've seen. I said, I had positions opened, I got people with master's applying for \$15 an hour—people with masters! So, I tell them, I said, you know, it's very important that you continue your education because I do remember my mom. For her it was important that all of us got a high school diploma. That was important to her.

But I tell them a bachelor's now is like equivalent to a high school diploma. I said later on, not even a master's ...there's a lot of people here that are going for their Ph.D.'s. Coco, who herself completed a degree at the same time both her children did, values what the degree can do as far as opening opportunities. She is also aware to the fact that the current job market and economy is consistently evolving towards advanced degrees for higher paying positions. She sees that daily in her work at a local medical school.

The potential pathways towards advanced education completion become more accessible, by a first-generation student and their family, after the first degree was attained by someone in the family. What was once unattainable is now seen as a stepping stone towards bigger goals even if the fear of the unknown continues to be part of the individuals feelings of wanting to accomplish more. Damien shared this such feeling in part of his *testimonio* about being in his current career while still thinking about what else the future has in store.

One thing that I always tell myself is don't get too comfortable. It's better to be uncomfortable at times. I started work and it was like me drinking from a fire hose, very uncomfortable, a lot of knowledge. Now I'm starting to get a little bit comfortable where I'm at, but again I'm getting a little bit more high anxiety, stressed, a lot of work, uncomfortable, which is great. I like it. Everything is different. What's next is I keep on learning. I never stop learning. I'm going to keep on learning. I'm going to keep bugging my mentors there. I'm going to keep asking questions from my team leads. I would like to go back to school and get a masters in project management. That will be the next stepping stone. Then from there, I'm still in between taking a technical path in engineering or a management path in engineering. That's something that I really need to look into and see what I would really enjoy.

Damien and his mother's ability to break through an educational threshold once believed to be inaccessible within their household would go on to motivate and encourage thoughts about advanced degrees. The aspirations set by his parents toward his future career potential were made possible through both positive and negative reinforcements they directed towards him. In particular Damien recalled times when his mother Coco would try to change the career path for easier and timely degree completion.

My mother would support me a lot, but then there were times where I felt she didn't understand that I really, really liked or loved engineering. That I wanted to stay with it because there were times where I may have not done so well on an exam or in a class and she always says, or she stated, "Well, try another major or try a different class because you'll be staying and staying in the same class and you won't get anywhere." That's where we sort of bumped heads on, and she didn't really understand. In a way, she was supportive in helping me, but I don't think she realized that some of the things she said really sort of disappointed me in a way. It felt like she gave me—what do you call them? Obstacles that I had to prove myself to her that this is really what I wanted. That was my mother. My father, he said, "it doesn't matter how long it takes. It can take you four or it can take you 10 years. As long as you go and you get the degree that you want, I'll always be proud of you and I'll be happy for you."

While Damien's parents represented both types of reinforcements, according to his *testimonio*, there was a sense that they wanted to see him succeed in a way that could lead to future doors opening for opportunity. The aspiration was more towards educational degree attainment than specific to any type of field of study. The hope was that whichever path was taken would lead to a fulfilling career.

In like manner, student participants Juno and Estela shared how getting their first degree and starting their careers after graduation led them to discover an interest for another career area. Estela began working with a NASA Grant Program a few years after receiving a bachelor's in electronic media and soon found a passion for studying the planet and its natural resources. She credited this to not being able to work in an area that was closely connected to her degree major, which eventually sparked a passion in wanting to advance her knowledge in this job-connected field.

I think within the next five years, I will like to earn [advanced] degree in environmental engineering and work in that field, either at a water treatment plant or for some government agency, but helping people and helping the environment. That will be my ideal job, and getting also the word out there to the communities.

The appeal for this newfound interest could also be connected to the intellect she had as a young child in Mexico when she had a good relationship and connection to STEM [science, technology, engineering and math] education because of the investment her teachers put towards her. The opportunity to be immersed in this type of environment established a link between past accumulated knowledge and advanced career interest.

When I was growing up, I had really good teachers in Juarez. They will encourage me to go into those knowledge competition and then you will take like the test there. You will get a prize if you got a really good score. My teachers will encourage me to go into those competitions... I think a couple of times I won first prize. It was nice to compete...I really like my teachers...it would cover math, science, writing...I won first place several times...my parents were happy.

Estela's *testimonio* exemplifies the impact community resources have on people whether they are sought after or are connected with through chance encounter. In her case, teachers in grade school recognized a talent in her learning skills and took initiative to cultivate it through extracurricular activities that allowed her to stimulate and build upon her intellectual capacity. In addition, the effective communication between school, student and parents made the process an effective collaboration.

Equally impacted, Juno became interested in a different career field that stemmed from working at the Office of New Student Orientation at his institution during his undergraduate degree journey. While his bachelor's was in science, his experience working in a student services-related area opened his eyes to wanting to work in a higher education position. This opportunity was impacting to his knowledge in a career field he may have never discovered had he not enrolled at an institution of higher education. In Juno's *testimonio* he expressed how the limited careers historically represented in his family gave him some knowledge about potential academic majors to consider at the start of his college career. While he would eventually complete a degree in a science-based field, the hands-on experience and connection to a student-services field left quite an impression on him. He eventually left his hometown due to a job opportunity made available because of his degree completion. However, he eventually enrolled in a master's program in order to follow his evolving career passion and also spent his off-time teaching computer classes in a low-income community center.

So, I'm up there getting my master's degree...Being that I was in a type of a higher education type program I really started seeing that [passion]...Now being that I have taught for a little bit, even though it's a volunteer opportunity. The courses that I took in my master's program, they really led me in another direction and gave me insight into

even more opportunities to where I want to be in an educational setting. So, a goal for me is that I'll probably, within the next three to five years, maybe even sooner, is to work in a university setting as a counselor or advisor. Being that I love helping others.

Juno recently completed his master's in higher education and immediately enrolled in a doctoral program which he felt was just a "natural progression" toward what he wanted to accomplish for his long-term career goal. His mother Morti truly believed that earning his first degree and working on campus, as a first-generation student, gave him the confidence to keep seeking advanced educational opportunities.

He has the highest level of education in our family... I don't think him getting his doctoral had anything to do with, "I'm going to do this to make parents happy." It was something that he decided. "This is what I want to accomplish. This is my goal and I'm going to continue." Yeah, I think that's amazing. What a wonderful young man to think on his own after finishing his first degree and not think, "I'm going to do this for my parents." ... He loves to get the [students] involved in a way where they're not so much focused on, "Okay, yeah, this is the lesson but let's do it hands on." I think that's what he wants to do...teaching. He just lives off of that...He's a really good teacher. Yeah, tutor, advisor or teacher...he was an orientation leader...that broke him out of his shell...that has a lot to do with what he is today.

Morti expressed pride during her *testimonio* in regards to the impact the first degree made on Juno to want to continue seeking advanced degree attainment. The dedication by the household towards completion of a bachelor's degree became the catalyst for their child to gain awareness and value the different career paths made visible through education.

The pride that degree completion brings to the families is evident across all participants sharing their *testimonio*. Strong emotions of happiness, fulfilment and hope are shared throughout the documented pieces and were apparent with each of their facial and vocal expressions I witnessed. Juan, for one, repeatedly spoke about wanting to prominently display the framed degree on the wall for everyone to see and recognize that this is just the beginning of more things to come.

Yo estoy muy orgulloso de mi hijo se lo repito es un gusto muy grande y le dije, “oye, necesito el título. Regálame un título en cuadro para ponerlo en mi sala de mi casa. Es lo que quiero que me acuerde porque nos sacrificamos tanto tú como yo hijo dicen que estudiar así que sacarás tu título carrera delante. Regálame tu título, yo quiero para ponerlo”.

Juan was adamant that he wanted to see more from his son, as far as education and admitted to putting a little pressure on him. He was committed to continuing to support his son in whatever way possible to continue attaining advanced degrees.

Yo le dije, “a ver mi hijo, ya lograste tu primer objetivo, que era terminar tu carrera. ¿Que sigue? ¿Sigue tu maestría?” Dijo “si, pero espérame, dame chanza.” Le dije, “yo te ayudo mijo, yo te ayudo. Ahorita me está llendo otra vez bien, gracias a Dios, en mi trabajo. Ya tengo otro trabajo, tengo 3 trabajos ahorita.”

Even with the need to work multiple jobs, the motivation and support from his father continued to be evident.

Vincent believed that his completion boosted his confidence toward accessing an advanced degree in the near future but gets a little stressed by his father’s aspiration for him to do it soon. His current position at the local university encourages his desire to strive for a



master's degree, especially because 3 coworkers that make up his close social network are currently working towards one themselves. The influence his coworkers ignite in him and the financial support pledged by his father make a master's degree a potential reality.

This trend was also echoed by Jesus and Albina, who recognized that the first degree was extremely challenging, financially, but still wanted to let their daughter know that there was no limit to what she wanted to accomplish educationally for the purpose of a long-term professional career. The most telling with their commitment to Anahi's education was the fact that she had already started a teaching career in San Antonio, after completing her bachelors, but immediately had a change of heart and desire to go to law school. Jesus and Albina didn't waver one bit and instead found ways to work with their daughter towards that new educational goal of hers.

La llevamos a San Antonio...a los cuantos días nos dijo que se quiere devolver. Ándale, ya había gastado yo todos mis ahorros...como diez mil gastamos ahí...pero la apoyamos y empezó a mandar las solicitudes y ay mando muchas. En unas la aceptaban y en otras no pero la aceptaron en muchas gracias a dios y ya dijo "esto es lo que me gusta." "¿A dónde quieres ir?" y le dije, "mija, ¿estas segura? Estas muy lejos allá. Vas a estar sola allí. ¿Quién te va a ayudar allí si se te descompone el carro? Aquí lo dejas ya nomas dices 'ama dígame a mi papá que venga' y ya va tu papa. Pero allá vas a estar sola. Nadie te puede ayudar." Y me acuerdo mucho que dijo, "mira, mama, yo no quiero que pasen tres años y decir, 'hay, yo ya hubiera terminado.'" Y yo le dije que tampoco nosotros vamos a ser los culpables de que tu no fueras a terminar. Si tu dices "vamos," y pues lo que le decimos "a donde vayas iremos." Y ahí vamos, y adónde vayas allá vamos nosotros juntos...la familia.

Jesus described the challenges associated with having to find additional resources within the family's personal property to sell in order to move their daughter back home. He and his wife Albina were adamant about not wanting to live with the regret of not being able to support their daughter's career aspirations that went beyond what she initially sought after. Regardless of the financial burden they would incur, all family members supported Anahi's decision to take on a part-time job and work towards taking the Law School Admissions Test (LSAT) and begin applying at schools nationwide. The *testimonio* by Jesus and Albina brings the idea of the family unit remaining close and strong even with the reality of a family member having to separate to another city/state for advanced educational attainment connected to future career aspirations.

Interdependence within the family is a main attribute of *familismo* and has been a generational practice amongst Latinx families (Calzada et al., 2013; Desmond & Turley, 2009; Galanti 2003; Martinez, 2013; Ovink & Kalgorides, 2015) and was evident through the interviews conducted for this project. Historically throughout generations, the males would primarily be tasked with seeking and maintaining employment opportunities to provide household finances (Ovink, 2014; Saenz & Ponjuan, 2008) while the females stayed behind to assist the matriarch with the care of the home. The dynamic surrounding leaving for education, especially for the females, is one that most recently has occurred especially after the completion of the first degree (Galanti, 2003). Estefani recognized the need to accept this type of change even though she admitted in her *testimonio* that there was an initial sense of betrayal when her daughter Estela left the home to seek future opportunity.

Nunca creía de Cristina que se hubiera ido, nunca cuando me dijo y todo ha sido el peor día de mi vida...le dije, “no me abandones” ...pero aun la soporte...y no se fue muy lejos...yo la entendí...nos hablamos muy seguido.

The unconditional support, after initial shock of a family member leaving, connected to opportunities that become available because of education are ultimately accepted. This becomes associated with the increased awareness and need for family validation toward professional territories that were not historically accessible to older generations.

Anahi recognized her parent's full support for her long-term education and career ambitions as aforementioned by Jesus and Albina. She believed it was important to get as much education as you can even if it meant "moving out of El Paso" because there is a possibility that you can return someday and give back to the community – including "opening doors for others".

The analysis formed from the participants' *testimonios* was that, once the first degree was completed by a household member, continued support for advanced degrees was encouraged and many times expected by both student and parents. What was once unknown, in regards to higher education, was now made clear by the first degree received in the household. The impact of degree attainment would shed light toward potential masters, professional and doctoral programs.

The overall impact of degree completion by first-generation Latinx students on their families in a U.S.-Mexico border community is one of expectations for futures with better access to resources and opportunities. This is attributed mostly to the career paths that were once unknown or unattainable to past generations of the participants who shared a personal *testimonio* for this research. The cultural and economic barriers overcome by families through hard work and various levels of sacrifice, have now given way to a greater sense of accomplishment and prosperous future outlook. The access to various forms of capital, that each participant readily acknowledged as vital to their educational goals, successfully paved a path for the first four-year degree graduates in their households.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Completing a bachelor's degree is a major milestone. The achievement can further be heightened by those who are the first in their families to graduate. By the same token, the attainment of a degree by first-generation Latinx students—who have statistically low percentages of education as compared to other ethnic groups—is crucial (Gandara & Contreras, 2009). This chapter summarizes the findings representative of seven families who reside in a U.S.-Mexico border community and the experiences connected to the educational accomplishments of a member of their individual households.

### **Discussion**

The goal of this study was to uplift the voices of first-generation Latinx students who completed a bachelor's degree in a U.S.-Mexico border institute of higher education, and their family members who witnessed and/or supported their degree attainment journey. The primary research question that guided my study was: How does degree completion impact families of Latinx first-generation college students in a U.S.-Mexico border community? My current positionality as project director for a federally-funded program specifically aimed at first-generation and low socioeconomic undergraduate students provided an adequate launching point for this subject matter.

Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) model served as the theoretical framework from which I formulated the *testimonio* interview questions and ultimately analyzed the data collected. Using a CCW lens provided a better understanding of the spoken experiences of research participants. The methodological approach I used for this study was *testimonio* (Reyes & Rodriguez, 2012). The process allowed me to capture detailed documentation of how bachelor's degree completion was experienced by the student and their family. *Testimonio* gives

voice and empowerment to marginalized individuals that may not otherwise be given a platform to share their lived experiences. It serves as a form of liberation and affirmation through a first-person account of the challenges and victories connected to personal identifiers such as race, immigration status and socioeconomic conditions. It also becomes cathartic to the narrator by serving as a sounding board to express critical perspectives of cultural resistance and survival that may serve as a guiding source for others (Reyes & Rodriguez, 2012; Solorozano & Yosso, 2001). As a result, five interrelated themes emerged after thorough coding and analysis of the transcribed data captured. The five interrelated themes connected to the guiding research question included: (1) *ability to overcome past familial barriers to education*; (2) *coming to the US from Mexico for their children's education*; (3) *return on investment and sacrificios to the familia*; (4) *navigating through new spaces*; and (5) *opening doors for advanced degree attainment*. The themes are connected in the form of a chronological history experienced by each generation of family interviewed. They are also representative of the different forms of capital that were present and impacting to the first higher education degree completion in the household.

The first theme, *ability to overcome past familial barriers to education*, regarded parent participant's lack of knowledge and capacity to effectively access and navigate the educational system. Most parents acknowledged it was mostly economically driven, while others saw additional connections to cultural practices and beliefs, or family dysfunction which affected the households' educational outlook. The inconsistent commitment towards educational support in the household caused most of the parent participants to be subjected to working multiple low-wage, low-benefit jobs that limited their financial opportunities. Such experiences fueled a desire among parents to not have that pattern repeat for their children. The impact of the parents' adolescent experiences was seen as a primary motivating force. All parents interviewed shared

*testimonios* about the support they provided toward their children's degree completion. This finding is related to other literature about Latinx student educational attainment, whereby limited educational achievement, immigration status, family size, and economic responsibilities by the heads of a household can be very influential in the amount of access to education that is made available (Calzada et al., 2013; Steiha, 2010; Strayhorn, 2008). First-generation graduates corroborated the aspirations shared by the parents towards their educational access, success, and motivation for their higher degree attainment. Parent participants were able to overcome the limited or non-existent educational opportunities they experienced through two forms of capital that Yosso (2005) theorizes in the CCW model used for this study. Aspirational capital was evident as student participants mentioned several instances where conversations took place with their parents about continuing their education past high school. In the same way, the desire for the students to finish a bachelor's degree was seen as resistance capital predicated on not wanting the current generation to struggle with career options that parents encountered. Overall, the ability for parents to use a deficit they experienced in their own adolescence and turn it into an opportunity for their children was made evident in the individual testimonios.

The second theme, *coming to the US from Mexico for their children's education*, identified the individual motivations and decisions which led parents to seek better schooling options in the U.S. early in their children's upbringing. Actions that parents took were a result of socioeconomic realities that included inconsistent access and commitment to education encountered in their own household. The parents believed that educational opportunities were more abundant in the US as compared to what they, along with older generations, experienced in their home country. This finding is consistent with literature that addresses the decision for families to emigrate to the U.S. from Mexico (Hill & Torres, 2010; Means & Pyne, 2016;

Suárez-Orozco et al., 2009). Research indicates that the appeal of trying to secure better opportunities for their family is a major influence towards the risks associated with immigrating into the United States (Hill & Torres, 2010; Ramirez, 2003). The risks taken by some of the parent participants included leaving a lot of personal possessions behind, in addition to both familial and social networks, for the purpose of seeking a better future for their children. Student participants also acknowledged the instability of the economy and growing climate of violence as additional circumstances shared by their parents for wanting to seek a better livelihood in the U.S. Equally mentioned throughout the narratives was the guidance that family and friends provided to them when making the decision to move. Yosso (2005) identifies the importance of familial and social capital in the CCW framework as vital to accessing information and resources needed to successfully navigate through places or experiences not previously connected to. For participants interviewed, making the trek across the U.S.-Mexico border for the purpose of accessing educational opportunities proved to be beneficial to both the parents migrating and the students adapting to a majority English-language school curriculum. The ability for students to use dual languages, English and Spanish, was another finding that parents reported as being valuable for their adaptation and navigation in the U.S. Yosso (2005) identifies linguistic capital as a vital resource used to share *cuentos* (stories), maintain effective *platicas* (talks) and offer *consejos* (advice) between family members. In this case the students were able to communicate with their parents, via learned bilingualism, on the triumphs and challenges connected with their educational journey. It is important to note that of all the families who chose to access education and establish homes in the U.S., only one chose to remain in Mexico. This was due to the participant's unwillingness to uproot his life and employment which led him to require daily travel across the international bridge throughout his son's educational journey.

The third theme, *return on investment and sacrificios to the familia*, identified the limited employment opportunities experienced by both foreign and US-born parents. Having to work multiple low-wage jobs was reported by all parents as a main but willing sacrifice to supporting the higher education journey of one or more family members. This finding is consistent with research on Latinx communities that study the wage levels of families with limited education and proficiency with the English language as well as immigration status (Reeves, 2014; U.S. Census Bureau, 2017; U.S. Department of Labor, 2017). Student participants also reflected on financial struggles encountered in the household during their undergraduate experiences. Their persistence towards degree completion was the top priority for each of their families. None of the student participants reported being asked by their parents to work and contribute to the family finances. At the same time, participants acknowledged that investment in college education required additional expenses not usually supplemented through financial aid or scholarships. This finding identified a disconnect that institutions of higher education have with Latinx families from low SES backgrounds: effectively communicating options related to educational expenses (Cuevas, 2017, Rios-Aguilar et al., 2011). This failure in communication by educational institutes ultimately triggers additional sacrifice by parents in the form of increased workloads to financially supplement their children's degree completion (Kiyama, 2010).

For most students, their awareness and respect for their family's struggle led them to seek part-time employment as a way of offering a minimal contribution to the household by offsetting one or two bills. Parent participants recognized the positive intentions exhibited by their students but were adamant that it wasn't something required of them. The sense of loyalty, respect and awareness of the whole household's needs and not necessarily an individual's is a key element of *familismo* (Calzada et al., 2013; Steiha, 2010; Strayhorn, 2008). Using the CCW lens in



analyzing these findings uncovered evidence of resistant, navigational and familial capital amongst both groups of participants (Kitama, 2010; Yosso, 2005). The families collectively fought against their own socioeconomic limitations which might have oppressed their desire to successfully navigate through bachelor's degree completion. Parent participants viewed the access to advanced career and educational opportunities for their children as the ultimate return on investment after graduation. For some was the feeling of peace knowing that their children had the necessary tools and resources to secure career positions and fend for themselves. Immense pride was described as an overarching impact of degree attainment by both participant groups. Equally important, parents viewed their children's degree completion as symbols of the fruits of their labor.

The fourth theme, *navigating through new spaces*, regarded the impact described by all participants on the household's ability to support and successfully navigate through degree completion. Findings revealed that all families believed they benefited by being able to gain knowledge towards educational resources not previously made accessible to older generations. The potential for advanced degree attainment and access to higher paying professional positions were seen as assets equally invested and valued by both parents and students. Gained entry and successful navigation towards a higher education degree was expressed as a familial resource impacting current and future generations. This finding aligns with the CCW theoretical framework in identifying educational attainment as a familial asset that has the ability to influence their social and community networks (Rios-Aguilar & Kiyama, 2012; Yosso & Burciaga, 2016) as well as related to the building of cultural capital within the family unit (Kiyama, 2010; Wells, 2008; Yosso, 2005). Student participants expressed that the knowledge acquired through their individual field of study, in addition to the miscellaneous employment and

engagement opportunities at the university, opened the door to career pathways not previously known. The ability to communicate their individual journeys and future goals with their parents for motivation and support was evidence of continued representation of aspiration capital between parent and student, familial capital aimed at evolving and preserving the foundation of the household as educational attainment is achieved, and linguistic capital as a way to share knowledge that can be interpreted and accessed by all members of the immediate household as a type of resource (Yosso, 2005). Through the individual *testimonios* of the participants, the narratives successfully described the challenges and reactions connected to bachelor's degree completion. The educational accomplishment elicited feelings of hope and prosperity at various levels for all research participants. Most importantly, it documented the outcomes as a result of access through educational borders not previously crossed.

The fifth and final theme, *opening doors for advanced degree attainment*, was identified as a belief consistently expressed by all participants. Students shared that completion of this milestone opened up possibilities for further education and access to resources for themselves and their families. Parents equally voiced the desire for their children to access advanced education and use it as an example and potential encouragement towards current and future family members' educational outlooks. A few parents interviewed also viewed degree completion within their household as a motivating factor for their own GED and/or potential higher education attainment. This finding expands on existing literature focused on the educational attainment of the Latinx community. It also complexifies the notion that a student's academic and socioeconomic success can only be impacted by parents who have completed a college degree (Reeves, 2014; Venator & Reeves, 2016; Vilorio, 2016).

By applying the Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) model (Yosso, 200), the data analysis revealed a better understanding of how degree completion by a Latinx first-generation college students impacts the family in a U.S.-Mexico border community. The analysis yielded me five interrelated themes through the *testimonios* each of the participants voiced during the interviews conducted. In answering the research question, the significance of the findings reveal the following: The impact of bachelor's degree attainment generated (1) immense pride by both student and family over the educational achievement; (2) justification for parents who took a risk in migrating to the U.S. to seek opportunities, that included educational access for their children; (3) a symbolic reward for parents as a result of their *sacrificios* and investment of time, money and dedication towards their child's persistence towards degree completion; (4) a sense of contribution for the betterment of society and community through expectations for continued access and completion of advanced degrees, by both parents and students, for current and future generations of the family; and (5) parent and student awareness of advanced educational opportunities and social mobility connected to successful attainment of the first four-year degree in the household.

Overall, the culmination and significance of all the findings viewed through a CCW lens reveal a validation for the household's funds of knowledge as capital. Different forms of capital were used to guide and encourage familial educational goals, that came as a result of life experiences and lessons shared and learned along the way. Equally important to the identification of capital was the impact of familismo on post-degree completion. The representation of familismo within the *testimonio* narratives went beyond the scope of social mobility and economics. The family unit represented a support system that remained consistent even after the students' degree completion journey. This was made evident through the show of support by the

family as some college graduates chose to pursue paths that granted them independence from their immediate family structure (Ovink, 2014). The support by the household toward individual life choices of family members was meant to boost personal growth and a degree of individualism, while maintaining loyalty and commitment (Calzada et al., 2013; Desmond & Turley, 2009). These practices corroborated by all participants differ greatly of the realities the majority of parent participants lived through in their own adolescent upbringings. As such, the monolithic and static view of familismo as represented in much of published literature is presented as an asset-based paradigm that supplemented the forms of capital identified through a CCW perspective.

### **Implications for Research**

As the Latinx population continues to grow into the largest minority group in the country (Flores, 2017; U.S. Census Bureau, 2018), it becomes vitally important to understand why their bachelor's degree rates lag behind other ethnic groups (Redford & Hoyer, 2017). The purpose of this study was to examine how the attainment of a higher education degree impacts both the graduate and their family. One of the main reasons for conducting this study was my positionality, as principle investigator, at a public four-year HSI located in a U.S.-Mexico border community. With this in mind, several implications for future research are offered.

This study was based on seven self-selected participants who were successful at reaching the educational milestone of a bachelor's degree at one institution located in a border region where 80% of the enrollment is Latinx. The study is not meant to generalize the experience of first-generation college graduates but is merely an example of what these students and their families derived from their individual journeys. A one-size-fits-all approach is not applicable to

an entire demographic (e.g., Latinx first-generation students and families) based on the findings of a single study.

Research needs to be conducted with demographics that lacked access and knowledge to begin or adequate resources to persist through higher education. Literature surrounding this topic identifies several socioeconomic factors that are present with students unable to achieve degree completion (Means & Pyne, 2016; Redford & Hoyer, 2017; Strayhorn, 2008). Venator and Reeves (2015), for example, looked primarily at parent educational levels and employment wages as forecasters for their children's future socioeconomic success. However, research needs to continue to look at other factors that may serve as additional indicators (e.g., immigration status, family size, single/divorced parent home, foster, adoption and homeless, etc...) for Latinx communities.

Further research is also necessary into *familismo* to be studied as an asset-based phenomenon that serves as a predictor for higher education access and success. Literature and research obtained for this study looked at this dynamic through a majority deficit lens (Calzada et al., 2013; Desmond & Turley, 2009; Ong et al., 2006; Ovink & Kalogrides, 2015; Torres, 2004) that often linked *familismo* as giving priority to “family obligations [that] often interfered with academic success” (Calzada et al., 2013; pg. 1698) and resulted in lower enrollment at institutions of higher education. The families that participated in this study described strong elements to *familismo* that included expressed evidence of respect, loyalty and dedicated commitment to the household. The potential to do a longitudinal study with an entering cohort of Latinx students through a mixed-method approach could serve in better understanding this phenomenon's connection to degree completion. Additionally, conducting this research in a non-

HSI environment could also add to the existing literature on the connection to degree completion rates for Latinx students.

Additional research is also needed to address the concept of funds of knowledge in relation to social and cultural capital connected to the Latinx community. Rios-Aguilar, Kiyama, Gravitt and Moll (2011), for example, identified funds of knowledge as a theoretical framework that aids in documenting the lived experiences of Latinx and other underrepresented communities as valuable lessons passed down through generations of these families. This serves as a form of capital exchange amongst individuals used for access and navigation through areas and situations where they experienced socioeconomic disadvantages. The narrative data transcribed for this study documented examples of this concept through the *consejos* (advice) and *sacrificios* (sacrifice) (Cuevas, 2019; Kiyama, 2010) parents shared with their children as encouragement towards degree completion. Expanded research, like the *testimonios* shared by the parent participants, give access to experiences that would normally remain private between family members and their close acquaintances. This data would aid in comparing and contrasting funds of knowledge with traditional forms of social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) in their connections to educational access and completion; specifically, in Latinx households supporting higher educational aspirations.

A final implication for research surrounds the gap in current literature that documents the post-graduation experiences of both first-generation Latinx students and their families. Most published studies document experiences in K-12 and/or transition into 2 and 4-year institutions of higher education. The need to address this gap is especially important as large numbers of Latinx students are consistently enrolling at a majority of US colleges and universities (Gandara & Mordechay, 2017; U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). While this dissertation study adds to the

existing gap in literature, it only samples participants from a one public four-year institution in Texas. The importance of recruiting additional voices from other institutions (2-year, public, private and elite) would provide vital and important data for the Latinx community which could also extend to other minority communities.

### **Implications for Practice**

With regards to implications for practice, the following recommendations are based off the conclusions I drew from the *testimonios* shared by participants. The first recommendation is for higher education institutions to make a concerted effort to reach out to first-generation American families and offer outreach initiatives aimed at informing them about US higher education opportunities. As a director of a federally-funded TRiO Student Support Services Program (SSSP), the grant regulations prohibit the program from actively recruiting off-campus at high schools and community events. Our participants are typically recruited at New Student Orientation sessions through referrals from academic advisors and/or faculty and staff. Parent involvement at these sessions is very minimal even though the university provides a 4-hour family information session. The majority of parents that attend these sessions tend to have some form of experience with higher education through their own degree attainment or that of another child in the household. Increasing a family's higher education awareness through specialized outreach efforts has the potential to aid in retention and persistence towards degree completion. The outreach must also be made available in both English and Spanish. This recommendation is based off some of the participant's narratives that described the benefits associated with openly communicating about challenges and successes experienced during their higher education journey. The shared experience allowed for parents to continuously update their knowledge base on higher education policies and course requirements.

Another recommendation is for institutes of higher education to actively increase campus employment opportunities for first-generation college students. Working on a campus has the ability to engage students with professional connections to key faculty and staff as well as raising awareness towards advanced degrees and/or potential careers in higher education. Several student participants spoke about the hourly or work-study employment they maintained while completing their degrees. The experiences led some towards internships, co-ops, and civic engagement opportunities that impacted their current careers. They also expressed how these experiences worked around their class schedules, which took the pressure off having to look for employment that would have interfered with the number of courses they were taking. As documented in the findings, many student participants found it necessary to seek part-time employment in order to offer a minimal contribution to the household expenses. This is a common concern for many students that enroll at an institution that has a high percentage of students from low socioeconomic families. While federal work-study positions are made available throughout the year, the demand usually outweighs the supply and not all students are eligible. Institutional Advancement offices could be a good starting point for institutions of higher education to secure more employment projects on campuses for low-income first-generation college students.

A final recommendation would be for institutions to actively develop and offer mentoring programs for freshman first-generation college students. The students would be assigned an upperclassman mentor upon entry to the institution and would be required to do monthly check-ins during the fall and spring semesters of their freshman year. The mentors would be trained to offer academic and social advice connected to campus life. They would also be equipped to serve as referrals to other services (e.g., counseling, student health center, campus police, etc...).



Additionally, it would be important for the mentors to be representative of some of the same backgrounds as the freshman first-generation college students. The SSSP department that I direct on campus provides mentoring for the 200 participants served. The social resource is a requirement that program participants must access throughout their undergraduate enrollment. It has proven to be effective for the small population served. Expanding this service could be beneficial with increasing knowledge and access towards educational resources available to all students. This practice could further impact the student's family by expanding on their social capital connected to education. The anticipated communication between student and mentor has the potential of being shared with the parents; thus, giving them symbolic access to an educational space not previously accessed.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Trying to finish a dissertation in the midst of a worldwide pandemic is not an easy task. The continuous loss of focus and motivation due to the mandatory stay-at-home orders and never-ending news reports on the Covid-19 virus was both emotionally and physically draining. However, maintaining a good communication structure with my fellow cohort 21 members (specifically Jovita, Isela and Christian) and my dissertation chair Dr. Cisneros, via phone or online virtual platforms, kept me grounded at times when I felt unmotivated or lost with my writing. The encouragement and motivation given to me was characteristic of *familismo* in the sense of offering support to shield me from disappointment or failure.

In my identification as a Latinx first-generation graduate and position as a student affairs professional at a four-year HSI, I am committed to supporting first-generation students navigate toward the completion of a higher education degree. I believe that the study I conducted can be

of benefit to other graduate students that might be interested initiating research with Latinx first-generation college students at an HSI.

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## APPENDIX A: IRB LETTER



### Institutional Review Board

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Office of the Vice President for Research and Sponsored Projects  
The University of Texas at El Paso IRB  
FWA No: 00001224  
El Paso, Texas 79968-0587  
P: 915-747-7693 E: irb.orsp@utep.edu

Date: August 16, 2019

To: Luis Mendez, M.A.

From: University of Texas at El Paso IRB

Study Title: [1472616-1] FAMILIA FIRST! A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON THE IMPACT OF LATINX FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS' DEGREE COMPLETION ON THEIR FAMILY IN A U.S./MEXICO BORDER COMMUNITY.

IRB Reference #: College of Education

Submission Type: New Project

Action: EXEMPT

Review Type: Exempt Review

Approval Date: August 16, 2019

Expiration Date: August 15, 2021

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The application for the above referenced study has been reviewed. This study qualifies as exempt from review under the following federal guidelines: **[45 CFR 46.104(d)(2)]**.

If Institutional data (secondary or other) will be used for this research project please verify with the applicable department that such data may be used. Additional institutional clearances and approvals may be required. Accordingly, the project should not begin until all required approvals have been obtained.

Exempt protocols do not need be renewed. Please note that it is the Principal Investigator's responsibility to resubmit the proposal for review if there are any modifications made to the originally submitted proposal. This review is required in order to determine if "Exemption" status remains.

This exemption does not relieve the investigators of any responsibilities relating to the research subjects. Research should be conducted in accordance with the ethical principles as outlined in the Belmont Report.

You should retain a copy of this letter and any associated approved study documents for your records.

We will put a copy of this correspondence on file in our office.

## APPENDIX B: SUPERVISOR LETTER OF AGREEMENT TO ACCESS DATA

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO



Vice President for  
Student Affairs

August 5, 2019

Institutional Review Board  
Office of Research and Sponsored Projects  
The University of Texas at El Paso  
500 W. University Avenue  
El Paso, Texas 79968

Dear Colleague:

The purpose of this letter is to grant permission to Luis Jaime Mendez, a doctoral student and full-time staff member at The University of Texas at El Paso, to conduct dissertation research utilizing participant data and information gathered from his direct involvement and oversight of the TRIO Student Support Services Program. The project, Familia First! A qualitative study on the impact of Latinx First-Generation College Students' degree completion on their family in a U.S./Mexico Border Community entails interviewing students who are the first in their families to receive an undergraduate degree. The UTEP TRIO Student Support Services was selected because of its mission to work directly with first-generation students in achieving the goal of degree completion in a higher education institution located on the U.S./Mexico Border. The program is an organizational unit within UTEP's Division of Student Affairs.

I support Mr. Mendez's research effort and authorize his utilization of programmatic data. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Gary Edens".

Gary Edens, Ed.D.  
Vice President for Student Affairs

500 West  
University Ave.  
301 Union East  
El Paso, Texas  
79968-0636  
(915) 747-5076  
FAX: (915) 747-5476

## APPENDIX C: EMAIL SAMPLE

Dear UTEP Alum –

A Dissertation Research Study, being conducted by Doctoral Student Luis Jaime Mendez, is seeking Latinx First-Generation college students who completed a bachelor's degree from a 4-year college/university no earlier than Spring 2017 to participate in an individual interview. You have been identified as someone that fits the research criteria. In addition, we are asking for one of your parents or legal guardians to also make themselves available to interview separately. The primary purpose of the study is to understand the social and cultural effects, on both graduate and parent, that have occurred because of this educational attainment within the family. The overall aim of the study is to develop a deeper understanding of how being the first in the family to graduate impacts the socioeconomic position and educational outlook of the household. Participants will be asked to sign a consent form. Individual interviews will take approximately 60 minutes. Participants will be given and or select a pseudonym to protect their identity. All information shared will be kept confidential and secure. A date, time and location for the individual interview will be determined to accommodate the participant. Your consideration and participation are greatly appreciated. However, there will be no hard feelings if you do not choose to participate.

If you have questions and are interested in participating in an individual interview, please contact the Principal Investigator, Luis Jaime Mendez at [ljmendez@utep.edu](mailto:ljmendez@utep.edu) or (915)747-7681.

Thanks for your consideration.



**Jaime Mendez**  
Director

Student Support Services Program  
The University of Texas at El Paso  
113 Union West  
El Paso, TX 79968  
Office: 915-747-5349

[utep.edu/student-affairs/student-support-services-program/](http://utep.edu/student-affairs/student-support-services-program/)





## **APPENDIX D: INFORMED CONSENT FORM**

University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) Institutional Review Board  
**Informed Consent Form for Research Involving Human Subjects**

**Protocol Title:** FAMILIA FIRST! A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON THE IMPACT OF LATINX FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS' DEGREE COMPLETION ON THEIR FAMILY IN A U.S./MEXICO BORDER COMMUNITY.

**Principal Investigator (PI):** Luis Jaime Mendez

**UTEP College of Education – Educational Leadership and Foundations**

### **Introduction**

You are being asked to take part voluntarily in the research project described below. You are encouraged to take your time in making your decision. It is important that you read the information that describes the study. Please ask the study PI to explain any words or information that you do not clearly understand.

### **Why is this study being done?**

A qualitative dissertation research study, being conducted by Doctoral Student Luis Jaime Mendez, is seeking Latinx first-generation college students who completed a bachelor's degree from a 4-year college/university no earlier than Spring 2017 to participate in an individual interview. You have been identified as someone that fits the research criteria. In addition, we are asking for one of your parents or legal guardians to also make themselves available to interview separately. The primary purpose of the study is to understand the social and cultural effects, on both groups, that have occurred because of this educational attainment within the family. The

overall aim of the study is to develop a deeper understanding of how being the first in the family to graduate impacts the socioeconomic position and educational outlook of the household.

Approximately 12 - 20 participants, which includes parents/legal guardians, will be enrolling in this study that is part of a UTEP College of Education Doctoral Dissertation Project.

You are being asked to be in the study because:

- (a) you identified yourself as a first-generation college student while attending UTEP and you subsequently received a bachelor's degree.
- (b) you are the parent/legal guardian of a first-generation college student who graduated from UTEP with a bachelor's degree.

If you decide to enroll in this study, your involvement will last about 60 minutes at a location to be determined/chosen by both you and the researcher, Luis Jaime Mendez.

### **What is involved in the study?**

---

If you agree to take part in this study, the researcher will arrange a time and location, that is mutually agreed upon between the PI/interviewer and participant, to conduct the interview for the dissertation project. Questions selected for the interview will ask about educational background, cultural resources and reflection on the educational journey as either a first-generation college student or parent/legal guardian of a first-generation college student. Interviews will be audio-recorded through the use of a handheld device (e.g., iPad or mini-digital recorder). Each interview will last approximately 60 minutes.

The researcher will be analyzing the data and look for themes or other important findings in the content of the data relevant to the research goals. All data will be dis-identified, transcribed and added to the final report through the use of a pseudonym, chosen by each participant, as the sole identifier for any data used from the interviews. Participants will be given the opportunity to

provide contact information for potential follow-up questions. The timeframe for follow-up questions will not exceed 3 months. The longer timeframe for follow-up questions is meant to allow sufficient time to transcribe interviews and to conduct preliminary analysis, which and often reveal the need for a follow-up and/or clarifying question regarding the content of the interview.

### **What are the risks and discomforts of the study?**

There is minimal risk posed by participation in this study. Two potential risks stemming from participation include the risk that confidentiality of participants' responses might be compromised, and the risk that potential questions related to personal, social and academic experiences may be disconcerting to some participants. Strict security protocols, as detailed in this document have been put in place to address these risks.

Emotional discomfort that could stem from questions related to personal, social and academic experiences is also considered to be minimal. The questions asked are necessary for the purpose of the study. However, a participant has the right to refuse to answer or skip a question at any time as well as opt out of the scheduled interview. In the event that there is emotional distress present when answering a question, the interviewer will stop and give enough time to the participant to compose themselves. The interviewer can opt to end the session if there is evidence the questions are becoming too uncomfortable for the interviewee. At the same time, a list of community counselors identified through the UTEP University Counseling Center will be made available to participants whom the PI feels might benefit from such referral, or at the request of the participants. No payment will be provided for physical or psychological harm attributed or associated with participation in this study. No deception will be involved in this study.

Participants will be informed about the nature and topic of the study prior to the participation, via the recruitment efforts and informed consent procedures and documents

### **Are there benefits to taking part in this study?**

There are no direct benefits to the participants. Participants may find benefit in reflecting on their individual journey towards achieving a college degree or supporting a family member towards the attainment of that educational goal.

The benefits of this study are intended to inform educators and administrators about any barriers and/or socioeconomic effects during and after the journey of degree completion taken by first-generation college students and their families.

### **Will I be paid to participate in this study?**

You will not be compensated for taking part in this research study.

### **What other options are there?**

Participants have the option not to take part in this study. There will be no penalties involved if you choose not to take part in this study.

### **What if I want to withdraw, or am asked to withdraw from this study?**

---

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You have the right to choose not to take part in this study. If you do not take part in the study, there will be no penalty or loss of benefit.

If you choose to take part, you have the right to skip any questions or stop at any time. However, we encourage you to talk to a member of the research group so that they know why you are leaving the study. If there are any new findings during the study that may affect whether you want to continue to take part, you will be told about them.

The PI may decide to stop your participation without your permission, if he or she thinks that being in the study may cause you harm.

### **Who do I call if I have questions or problems?**

---

You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may call the PI, Luis Jaime Mendez, at (915) 526-2301 or email [Jlmendez@utep.edu](mailto:Jlmendez@utep.edu).

If you have questions or concerns about your participation as a research subject, please contact the UTEP Institutional Review Board (IRB) at (915-747-7693) or [irb.orsp@utep.edu](mailto:irb.orsp@utep.edu).

### **What about confidentiality?**

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Your part in this study is confidential. The confidentiality of participants in interviews will be protected through the use of pseudonyms in all contexts other than the informed consent documents, which in turn will be kept separate from data in which pseudonyms are used. For the scheduled interviews, participant privacy will be protected by collaborative negotiation between participants and the PI in regards to the timing, location and course of the interviews. This way, interviews will be scheduled by participants for a time and place selected in which participants indicate they feel comfortable engaging in interviews. This will ensure that participants are in as much control as possible regarding whether the information they share may be overheard by people other than the PI. If at any time before or during an interview a participant wishes to stop participating or skip a

question, they will be free to do so. This will ensure that their privacy is maintained in terms of personal or sensitive information they might share in the course of the interview. Participants who opt out of the interview will have all information shredded, destroyed and/or deleted from any devices or files used for the project.

The results of this research study may be presented at meetings or in publications; however, your name will not be disclosed in those presentations.

Every effort will be made to keep your information confidential. Your personal information may be disclosed if required by law.

Organizations that may inspect and/or copy your research records for quality assurance and data analysis include, but are not necessarily limited to:

- Office of Human Research Protections
- UTEP Institutional Review Board

Because of the need to release information to these parties, absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.

The project's IRB-sanctioned researcher and Doctoral Program supervisor will be the only individuals that will have access to the audio and transcribed interview data. Aliases assigned to participants will be used in filing and storing data. Consent forms, background information sheets and any other paper files containing personal information will be stored away in a secure location that can only be accessed by the PI. Recording devices containing interview information will also be stored away in a secured location, which will be locked away in lock box or room. In addition, any paper files scanned into digital files will be locked away as well in a safety box or room. Extreme caution will be exercised in ensuring no actual or traceable names will become accessible through any document or file on any university-owned computer without proper

password usage. All files will be kept for additional information, verification or if additional analysis is needed.

### **Mandatory reporting**

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If information is revealed about child abuse or neglect, or potentially dangerous future behavior to others, the law requires that this information be reported to the proper authorities.

### **Authorization Statement**

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I have read each page of this paper about the study (or it was read to me). I will be given a copy of the form to keep. I know I can stop being in this study without penalty. I know that being in this study is voluntary and I choose to be in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Name (printed)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## VITA

Luis Jaime Mendez was born in El Paso, TX. He is the eldest of two sons of Luis Alfredo and Hermelinda Mendez. He also has an older sister from his mother's previous marriage and 3 stepbrothers and 1 stepsister on his father's side. After graduating from El Paso High School in 1988, he enrolled at The University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) as a first-generation college student during that same year. He completed a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology with a minor in Theater in May 1997.

In 2001, Luis Jaime accepted a position as Assistant Director of the UTEP Student Success Programs. He enrolled in graduate school in 2003 and completed a Master of Arts in Theater in 2006. He was promoted in 2006 as UTEP Director of New Student Orientation and served in that capacity for 6 years. In 2012 he accepted the directorship of the UTEP TRiO Student Support Services Program (SSSP). In 2016 Luis Jaime began his doctoral studies in Educational Leadership and Administration at UTEP.

On the UTEP campus, Luis Jaime has served on various student and academic affairs committees. On the national level, he has been an active member in several national organizations including NASPA (Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education), Texas TRiO, COE (Council for Opportunity in Education), and NODA (Association of Orientation, Transition and Retention in Higher Education) – where he also served as a board member and helped start the First-Generation Student Network. Furthermore, he has led several conference presentations, talks and workshops for the abovementioned associations. Luis Jaime has a passion for promoting student success for the first-generation college student demographic.

Contact Information: Luis Jaime Mendez  
Jlmendez@utep.edu