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**Persistence of First-Generation Mexican American University Students in a
Hispanic Serving Institution**

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**Persistence of First-Generation Mexican American University Students in a
Hispanic Serving Institution**

by

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Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Texas at Austin

May, 2005

**Persistence of First-Generation Mexican American University Students in a
Hispanic Serving Institution**

Publication No. _____

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2005

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Mexican Americans are underrepresented in higher education and are less likely to complete a college degree than any other group in the United States. College drop out rates of Mexican American students are highest in the first year of college as a result of the many barriers they face. One such barrier is being the first in one's family to attend college, leaving one to on their own to navigate through the college system. The purpose of this study was to identify the factors, as perceived by first-generation Mexican American university students, influencing the persistence of students in their first year of college and into their second year at a Hispanic Serving Institution. In addition, this study compared the perceptions of students in relation to gender. This study was conducted following qualitative research methods, utilizing focus groups and in-depth interviews to fully

capture, in richness and detail, the experiences of first-generation Mexican American university students. The findings of this study suggest that the factors contributing to the persistence of participants are exemplified in at least one of three major components. These components include participant self-concept, familial support, and institutional climate, together forming the foundation of college persistence among first-generation Mexican American university students.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

As the fastest growing population of our nation's ethnic minority groups, Hispanics will play a major role in the economic and social development of the United States in the coming decades (Chapa & Valencia, 1993; Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, 2000). The Hispanic population increased by 44% between 1990 and 2000 and will account for two-thirds of the growth in the college-age population within the next decade (Vernez & Mizell, 2001; Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, 2000).

The health of the United States economy, which is growing more dependent on the knowledge and skill of Hispanic workers, is at risk as one in five of every new entrants into the labor force was of Hispanic origin in 2000. In a global economy that requires a level of knowledge and skill attainable only through a college education, the educational disparity of Hispanics is of national concern. Inequalities in education and income levels pose a threat to America's social order by creating an economic and social divide increasingly drawn along the lines of ethnicity and race (Vernez & Mizell, 2001). In order to reach new heights of prosperity, the United States needs a well-educated Hispanic population (President's Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans, 1996).

Historically, Mexican Americans have been subject to educational isolation and inequality, resulting in low participation rates in postsecondary education (Aguirre & Martinez, 1993; Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, 2000). Many factors contribute to the participation rates of Mexican Americans in higher education. Among

these factors are those that may present themselves as either challenges or resources to Mexican American students. The factors affecting student persistence include educational aspirations, financial resources, social support systems, and the campus environment (Gloria, 1997; Hernandez, 2000; Lopez, 1995; Nora, Rendon, & Cuadraz, 1999). The success of colleges and universities in their efforts to improve student retention is dependent upon their understanding of these contributing factors. This is of particular importance for those institutions that serve a significant number of Mexican American students.

Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) play a major role in the education of Mexican Americans in the United States. Unlike Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), founded for the purpose of meeting the needs of African American children, HSIs came in to being as a result of the percentage of Hispanic students who attended them (de los Santos & Rigual, 1994). HSIs, defined in 1993 by the Higher Education Act, are colleges and universities with at least 25% Hispanic enrollment, of which, 50% are identified as low income (Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, 2000). HSIs, although accounting for only 5% of all institutions in higher education, are attended by 49% of the Hispanic population enrolled in colleges and universities. HSIs tend to have a higher representation of Hispanic faculty and administration, however they far from mirror the Hispanic composition of the student body (de los Santos & Rigual, 1994). Non-HSI institutions fare even worse in this area, which is reason for concern.

Due to the paucity of Hispanic personnel in higher education, there are few mentors that Mexican American students can look to who have encountered similar obstacles and

successfully managed the academic system (Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000). In 1992, there were fewer than 3% Hispanic full-time instructional faculty and staff in higher education (White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans, 2000a). The Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (as cited in Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000) indicated that the faculty to student ratio for Hispanics was 1 to 76 as compared to 1 to 54 for African-Americans and 1 to 24 for White students. In order to increase the representation of Mexican Americans in administrative, faculty and staff positions within higher education, it is imperative to increase the degree completion rates of Mexican American students. This, in turn, will positively impact degree completion rates of Hispanics at various levels. Hispanic personnel will not only act as mentors, but will advocate for Hispanic students when making programming and policy decisions. Thus, it is important to learn more about the persistence and retention of first-generation Mexican American university students and the role HSIs play in their education.

Statement of the Problem

Recent research has indicated that 80% of all Hispanic undergraduates leave institutions of higher education without graduating (Pidcock, Fischer, & Munsch, 2001). Mexican American students who begin college do not always return after their first year, much less complete a bachelor's degree. Dropout rates are highest in the first year of college. This first year is most critical given the multitude of barriers faced by Mexican American students as they transition into college life (Nora, Rendon, & Cuadrez, 1999). Furthermore, the number of HSIs is increasing as the percentage of Mexican American students who attend them also rises (Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities,

2000). As a result, research aimed at identifying the factors that contribute to the persistence of Mexican American students within these institutions is both timely and necessary.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify the factors, as perceived by first-generation Mexican American university students, influencing the persistence of students in their first year of college and into their second year at a HSI. In addition, this study compared these students' perceptions in relation to gender.

Research Questions

The research questions addressed in this study consist of the following:

1. What factors, as perceived by first-generation Mexican American university students, contribute to the persistence of students in their first year of college and into their second at a Hispanic Serving Institution?
2. How do the factors that contribute to persistence compare in relation to gender among female and male first-generation Mexican American university students?

Methodology

This study was conducted following qualitative research methods to fully capture, in richness and detail, the experiences of the participants studied (Patton, 2002). Data were collected through focus groups and in-depth individual interviews. In addition, the researcher maintained a journal reflecting upon interactions with participants. Reflexivity is an awareness of the ways in which a researcher, as an instrument in research with a

particular social identity and background, has an impact on the research process (Robson, 2002). Through this methodology, the voice and personal experiences of Mexican American university students, which can often be lost in quantitative research, were heard and documented. Participants were selected according to the following criteria:

- First-generation Mexican American university students
- Enrolled in a HSI as freshman with no prior college experience
- Persisted into a second year of college

Conducting individual interviews, following the focus groups, allowed for further exploration of emerging themes and gave the participant an opportunity to respond in a more intimate setting. Data analysis involved identifying, coding, categorizing, classifying, and labeling the primary patterns (Patton, 2002). Identifying patterns common to the group helped to eliminate inconsistent responses that might have arisen during the interviews.

Definition of Terms

FIRST-GENERATION. In this study, this term refers to those students whose parents have never attended any two or four-year colleges or universities.

HIGHER EDUCATION. Higher education refers to education within an accredited, degree granting, two or four year college or university.

HISPANIC. The U.S. Bureau of the Census defines Hispanic as a person of Mexican-American, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central or South American, or other Spanish culture, or origin, regardless of race (de los Santos & Rigual, 1994).

HISPANIC SERVING INSTITUTION (HSI). HSIs, as defined by the reauthorization of

the Higher Education Act of 1993, are those colleges and universities with at least 25% Hispanic enrollment, of which at least 50% are low income (Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, 2000).

MEXICAN AMERICAN. In this study, this term refers to those who originate from Mexican ancestry.

NON-HISPANIC WHITE. This term refers to a person who is not of Mexican American, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central or South American, or other Spanish culture, or origin, regardless of race.

PERSISTENCE. Persistence is defined as the continuation of a course undertaken in spite of obstacles or difficulties (Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 2002). In this study, the term "persistence" refers to a student's decision to continue to attend college without any breaks in attendance.

POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION. This term refers to formal education beyond high school.

RETENTION. Retention is defined as the act of keeping possession or to hold back (Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 2002). In this study, the term "retention" refers to a university's ability to maintain the enrollment of a student.

Significance of the Study

This study expanded upon the body of literature that exists on issues related to Hispanics in higher education and the role of HSIs. More specifically, this study added to the research on Mexican Americans, the fastest growing ethnic group that comprised 64% of the Hispanic population in 1994 (President's Advisory Commission on

Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans, 1996; Solorzano, 1995). This is of significance, as noted by Solorzano, (1995), given that most studies do not recognize the importance of examining Hispanic subgroups independently. In addition, Solorzano (1995) states that examining Mexican Americans separately reinforces the importance of treating each subpopulation as discrete entities for the purpose of research and policy making.

There are many factors within the context of this study that are significant to the expansion of current literature on the topic. Given the underrepresentation of Mexican Americans in higher education, Rodriguez (1996) found it significant to identify the variables and student characteristics related to the success of this group of students. Not only are Mexican Americans underrepresented in higher education, they are the least educated group among Hispanics and the total U.S. population with a 5% college completion rate (Chapa & Valencia, 1993; Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000; Ortiz, 1995). The college completion rates of Hispanics is disproportional because Mexican Americans make up the largest subgroup of Hispanics (60%), followed by those from South and Central America (23%), Puerto Rico (12%), and Cuba (5%) (Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000). Mexican Americans are the fastest growing minority group in the U.S. and rank highest in unemployment and lowest in median earnings than any other Hispanic subgroup (Chapa & Valencia, 1993; Lopez, 1995).

This study is unique in that most studies are conducted on college campuses with low percentages of Hispanic students. In contrast, this study was conducted utilizing participants enrolled at a HSI. In fact, minority students (45% Hispanic) make up the

majority of the undergraduate population at the university selected for this study. Another point of significance is the region at which this study was conducted. The university from which the sample was drawn is located in Texas, the state with the second largest Hispanic population in the U.S. (Chapa & Valencia, 1993.)

The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (n.d.) stated that in comparison to California, New York, Florida, and other large states, Texas falls short in higher education enrollment rates, degrees awarded, federal research funding, and nationally recognized programs. By 2008, Texas will become a minority-majority state, with Hispanics accounting for more than 40 % of the state's population (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, n.d.). The large concentration of Mexican Americans in Texas indicates where interventions and programs would have the greatest numerical impact (Chapa & Valencia, 1993). As a result of these staggering statistics, it is important to examine the factors contributing to the persistence of Mexican American students. This study adds to the research on HSIs and the need to redefine themselves to meet the needs of Hispanic students.

The use of interviews allowed the researcher to capture the richness and depth of the stories expressed by the participants. Qualitative research is able to provide a rich description of answers to the questions of "how," "why," and "in what ways" that are often lost through quantitative methods (Hernandez, 2000). The issues Hispanic students face were brought to life through the voices of participants, which in turn will give members of administration and governing boards an opportunity to learn how policies

and programming within institutions of higher education may enhance a student's experience in college.

Delimitations

This study cannot account for all Hispanic subgroups given that the focus is on Texas, which has a predominant Hispanic subgroup consisting of Mexican Americans. This study focuses on first-generation Mexican American students' first year attending a public university in Texas, identified as a Hispanic Serving Institution. Since this study was conducted on a campus with a minority majority undergraduate population, it does not account for the racial discrimination and discomfort that students may encounter at a predominantly White college campus.

This study did not explore factors within the sophomore, junior, and senior years of college that may influence student persistence and retention, nor did it capture the experiences of Mexican American students transferring from community colleges or other four year institutions. The study did not control for the academic preparation of Mexican American males and females. The small sample size of the focus groups was a delimitation of this study. Furthermore, there were fewer males than there were females who participated in the individual interviews from which data was presented and conclusions drawn.

Limitations

The nature of qualitative research limits the ability of this study to generalize findings to the larger Hispanic population. In general, interview data may be distorted due to personal bias, anger, anxiety, politics, and lack of awareness since interviews can

be greatly affected by the emotional state of the interviewee at the time of the interview. Also, data collected through interviews is subject to recall error, reactivity of the interviewee to the interviewer, and self-serving responses (Patton, 2002).

Summary

Chapter I has identified the demographic and educational trends of Hispanic students in higher education. In addition, the issue was raised of the importance of identifying the factors that contribute to the persistence of Mexican American students in an effort to increase bachelor's degree completion rates. This study proposes to do so through the collection and analysis of focus group and interview data obtained from first-generation Mexican American university students who attended their first year of college at a Hispanic Serving Institution. The following chapter consists of a review of the relevant literature. Chapter III outlines the methodology utilized to conduct the research for this study and Chapter IV presents the findings. Chapter V provides a discussion of the findings and presents conclusions.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of Mexican Americans in the United States and in education with particular focus on higher education. The first section provides historical perspectives, followed by a discussion of the current status of Mexican Americans. This includes a look at demographic trends and the economic impact that this population has on the economy. National and state initiatives to close the educational gap between Hispanics and the general population are reviewed along with the recent attention placed on Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs). The next section describes the factors contributing to persistence. Theories of persistence and retention are introduced, followed by the identification of the theoretical framework to be utilized for this study. The chapter will conclude with a review of previous research and a summary.

Historical Perspectives

Mexican Americans in the United States and Texas

Prior to 1910, little attention had been given to the educational, health, economic, or political status of Mexican Americans (Sanchez, 1997). Sanchez (1997) explains that an influx of Mexicans entered the United States as a result of the Mexican Revolution and World War I. Many were driven across the border to escape the effects of war, while others were recruited as contract laborers. Sanchez (1997) states that efforts to improve the condition of Mexican Americans were slow; however, World War I and II boosted the acculturation of this group through employment, good wages, and education provided by the military. Sanchez (1997) adds that pressure from Spanish-speaking groups led to

the development of government-sponsored programs to improve the conditions of Mexican Americans. Despite these efforts, Sanchez (1997) indicates that Mexican Americans in Texas lagged behind those in other states in terms of access to adequate health and educational programs. This group encountered violations of fundamental civil rights. In the 1930's California and New Mexico showed considerably more concern for the Mexican American minority groups than did Texas (Carter, 1970). The conditions experienced by Mexican Americans in Texas in the early 1940's were described in a report by the Works Project Administration (Kibbe, 1946):

As a result of low incomes, poor housing, and bad sanitation, disease is widespread among the Mexicans. Tuberculosis and diarrhea have taken a particularly heavy toll. The local health service is unable to care for all of those who need medical assistance.

Education of the Mexicans is also on a low level, partly because family migrations make it impossible for the children to attend school regularly. In 1938 the average 18-year-old youth had not completed the third grade school (p.129).

Laija and Ochoa (1999) identify four psychosocial variables that have impacted the social mobility and educational access of Mexican Americans. These variables include the legacy of the Mestizaje, denial of rights, lack of English skills, and immigration. The first variable, the legacy of the Mestizaje, is described as the discrimination and racism against Mexican Americans as a result of their indigenous heritage and the belief that they were enemies of "American" civilization. In fact, the

term “Mexican,” which held negative connotations, was used, rather than “Mexican American”, to describe this group of people.

The second variable Laija and Ochoa (1999) describe is the denial of rights. When the United States acquired the Southwest in 1848, through the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, it guaranteed its Mexican inhabitants rights to property as well as retention of Catholic faith, Spanish language, and cultural traditions (Laija & Ochoa, 1999). According to Laija and Ochoa (1999), these promises were not kept. In fact, Mexican Americans in Texas found themselves with few rights, often segregated from theaters, restaurants, and public and educational facilities.

The third and fourth variables, lack of English skills and immigration, brought inequality and discrimination by the majority population. Laija and Ochoa (1999) state that Americans viewed the ability to speak English as fundamental to participate in American society. Since the majority of Mexican Americans did not speak English, they were marginalized by mainstream society (Laija & Ochoa, 1999). Laija and Ochoa (1999) explain that Mexican immigrants came to the U.S. in response to increased labor needs and were paid lower wages than were immigrants from other countries. Laija and Ochoa (1999) indicate that it was not until the civil rights movement of the 1960's that the treatment of Mexican Americans, once considered the natural order of the Southwest, was seen for its inequality and discrimination. Finally change could be seen, often as the result of litigation, especially in regards to education (Laija & Ochoa, 1999).

Mexican Americans in Texas have brought about several lawsuits to rectify racial discrimination and poor educational opportunities in public schools. Five significant

cases were presented by Acosta and Winegarten (2003). In the 1930 case, Del Rio ISD v. Salvatierra, the State court of Appeals found Texas in violation of the Fourteenth Amendment of the United States Constitution. In 1970, the federal case of Cisneros v. Corpus Christi ISD resulted in the court recognizing Mexican Americans as a minority group and extending to them the protection granted by the U.S. Supreme Court's famous Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas in 1954. In Edgewood ISD v. Kirby case of 1984, Mexican Americans sought to remedy the inequities of using property taxes to fund schools, a practice that left property-poor districts unable to adequately educate children.

Mexican Americans in Education

The first study of the education of Mexican American children in Texas was conducted in 1928, revealing numerous factors of inequality (Weinberg, 1977). Such factors included: school segregation and unequal access, barriers to the full utilization of educational experiences, lack of financial resources, low quality of teachers, misconceptions of Mexican Americans' intellectual ability, and instruction in a non-comprehensible language (Laija & Ochoa, 1999). Some studies conducted in the 1930's continued to consider Mexican American children to be mentally inferior until IQ began to be seen more as a reflection of the social environment (Carter, 1970). Although Mexican American children were required by law to attend school, they were often restricted from some school districts and limited to schools specifically designated for Mexican Americans, known as "Mexican schools." These schools focused on instilling 'American' values, eliminating the incorporation of Mexican cultural heritage and

language. Schools designated for Mexican American children also lacked the financial resources to provide adequate facilities and materials for instruction (Laija & Ochoa, 1999).

Although “Mexican schools” existed on the premise that separation was beneficial to Mexican children, as indicated by Carter (1971), certain actions and conditions raised the question of motives. These schools were deemed beneficial because they gave Mexican children an opportunity to overcome deficiencies and protected them from having to compete with Whites, thus avoiding feelings of inferiority. Motives in question included (Carter, 1970):

- (1) The tendency for “Mexican schools” to have vastly inferior physical facilities, poorly qualified teachers, and larger classes than Anglo schools.
- (2) The practice of placing all Spanish-surname children in segregated schools, even though some were fluent in English. The fact that Negro children were sometimes assigned to “Mexican schools” suggests a racial rather than language basis for segregation.
- (3) The lack of effort to enforce the often weak attendance laws.
- (4) The failure to demand enrollment and attendance of Mexican American children while counting them on the school census. This Texas practice was abolished when the state shifted to “average daily attendance” as a basis for financial support.
- (5) In numerous cases the discouraging of individual children from attending school at all, especially in secondary-level institutions (p.68)

Laija and Ochoa (1999) also note school attendance, placement, retention, and dropout rates as factors inhibiting Mexican American children from obtaining an

adequate education. In addition to a shorter school year and fewer hours taught each day in comparison to their White counterparts, Mexican American children were also faced with work responsibilities. Many children contributed to their family's income, often requiring frequent migration in search of employment. It was common practice to place Mexican American children in the first and second grades for two or more years regardless of their age and ability and retain them in first grade at a higher rate than White children (Laija & Ochoa, 1999).

Laija and Ochoa (1999) indicate that, in the classroom, Mexican American children were taught by poorly trained, often, unqualified teachers who were unacquainted with the culture and traditions of this population. The academic achievements of Mexican American children were attributed to low intelligence and low potential rather than poor instruction and language barriers. English was emphasized in the classroom, and students were punished, at times humiliated, for speaking Spanish on school grounds (Laija & Ochoa, 1999).

Carter (1970) states that in Texas, the first significant concern for intercultural education during World War II and the immediate postwar years was most likely prompted by economic interest. Carter further explained that because of the rampant discrimination, when the federal government contracted with Mexico for agricultural labor, the Mexican government refused to permit its nationals to work in some areas of Texas. As a result, the Texas Good Neighbor Commission was created which encouraged the state's education authorities to consider the problem of schooling children of Mexican descent (Carter, 1970).

Lyndon Johnson signed into law the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), which concentrated on five major areas. These included helping disadvantaged children, starting school libraries, promoting community wide projects for educational change, and upgrading state departments of education. In subsequent years, although a great amount of money was contributed to this effort, the disadvantaged children who were to be the primary beneficiaries seldom received more than \$200 per academic year. Funds for activities to aid disadvantaged children supported efforts to modify the child through remedial programs rather than modifying the educational delivery system (Carter & Segura, 1979).

In 1971, a report was published by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights entitled *Ethnic Isolation of Mexican Americans in the Public Schools of the Southwest* (Aguirre & Martinez, 1993). This report was significant in that it identified educational segregation as a constraint on Mexican American students' access to educational opportunities. It also identified educational inequality as a contributing factor to the social and economic inequalities experienced by this group.

Aguirre and Martinez (1993) explain that educational isolation and inequality have had several negative effects on Mexican American students. These include low self-esteem and reluctance to participate in the dominant society, lower educational attainment as measured by tests, placement into low ability tracks, and under-representation in some academic content areas. Aguirre and Martinez (1993) state that these effects have created the dilemma of high dropout rates among Mexican American students in high school. In addition, they note that despite the 1971 findings of the U.S.

Civil Rights Commission, the isolation of Mexican American students has increased, having detrimental effects on efforts to improve educational outcomes. The high dropout rate of Mexican American high school students limits the number eligible to continue into postsecondary education.

In 1984, the Hispanic Policy Development Project issued a report on the condition of secondary education of Mexican Americans in the United States and presented similar findings of decades past. The report indicated that these children came from poverty, attended inferior and highly segregated schools, were overage for their grade levels in high school, and were disproportionately enrolled in remedial English and other nonacademic subjects. These findings began a series of new initiatives taken by Mexican Americans to direct attention away from debates over bilingual education and refocus it on the schools' inability or unwillingness to meet the diverse needs of culturally distinct children. Major consequences of this neglect included extremely high drop out rates and poor preparation for college. Mexican Americans find institutions of higher learning as much a concern as secondary schools. Although policy concerns of today are different than those of the 1930's, the issues raised are the same: inequality of resources and treatment by the public schools and their detrimental consequences on the life chances of Mexican Americans (San Miguel, 1987).

Mexican Americans in Higher Education

The history of Mexican Americans in higher education remained obscure until the civil rights movement of the 1960's. The Chicano movement, most intense in California, yet impacting the Southwest, called for changes in the U.S. to recognize oppressed

groups in economic, political, and cultural achievement. Students walked out of classes and schools, charging that they had been victims of discrimination and that the U.S. educational system had failed to meet their needs. Discriminatory practices cited included: punishment for speaking Spanish on school grounds, disproportionate placement of Mexican Americans in classes for the educable mentally retarded, absence of English language programs for Spanish-speaking students, and the lack of courses in Mexican American studies (Aguirre & Martinez, 1993).

As a result of a conference held by the Chicano Coordinating Council on Higher Education in 1969, Chicano student organizations adopted the name El Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán (MEChA). MEChA was instrumental in the establishment of Chicano studies and Mexican American academic and research units and student support programs at universities throughout the country. More recently, the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU), comprised of college and university administrators, has emerged, advocating for Hispanics and their educational needs (Aguirre & Martinez, 1993).

The recognition of the under-representation of Mexican Americans in higher education led to efforts made to provide adequate funding, increase access and retention, and develop academic programs in Mexican American studies (Aguirre & Martinez, 1993). Despite these efforts, Mexican Americans continue to lag behind other groups in terms of completion rates of bachelor's degrees. This has been cause for concern, given demographic trends and potential economic impact.

Current Status of Mexican Americans

Demographic Trends

Trends in the United States

Hispanic Americans will become the largest ethnic group in the United States over the next century and are expected to comprise 25 % of the total U.S. population by 2050 (President's Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans, 1996). The Hispanic population has reached almost 32.5 million, growing 44% since 1990, while the total population increased 10% (Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, 2000). The median age of Hispanics is 26.6 as compared to 35.8 years of age for the total population (Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, 2000). Chapa and Valencia (1990) indicate that Mexican Americans constitute 60% of the total Hispanic population, predominantly represented in California, Texas, and New York. California and Texas alone account for a little more than half of all Mexican Americans (Chapa & Valencia, 1993). Chapa and Valencia (1993) state that the high concentration of Mexican Americans in a few states is significant for both research and policy considerations and merits further deliberation on the effects of educational prospects for this population.

Trends in Higher Education

The U.S. Census Bureau suggests that by the year 2030 Hispanic students age 5 to 18 will reach 16 million in number, or 25 percent of the entire school age population (President's Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans, 1996). Lane (2001) notes that by 2015, Hispanic undergraduate enrollment will have

increased by 1 million throughout the country, accounting for 15.4 % of the nation's campus population. She further explains that it is projected that during the next 20 years, California, New York, Texas, Florida, and Arizona will experience an undergraduate enrollment increase of 1.4 million students, half of which will be of Hispanic origin (Lane, 2001). Currently, 50% of all Hispanics enrolled in higher education are concentrated in California and Texas, whereas 75% are enrolled in five states to include California, Texas, New York, Florida, and Illinois (White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans, 2000b). As a young population, Hispanics constitute a significant proportion of the nation's future workforce and are therefore vital to the economic strength of the U.S. (Perez & Salazar, 1993).

Economic Impact

Perez and Salazar (1993) explain that, although Mexican Americans represent a vibrant and sizeable source of workers, their demographic power is contingent on improvements in their social, educational, and economic status in order to strengthen the economy, for both themselves and the nation. They also note that a direct relationship between their educational attainment and socioeconomic status exists, a relationship crucial to the understanding of the social and economic position of Mexican Americans in the United States. Proctor (1970) states that, "Education is the corridor through which America's minorities move from rejection, deprivation, and isolation to acceptance, economic efficiency, and inclusion" (p. 43). Mexican Americans have lower levels of educational attainment than Whites or African Americans, a factor contributing to the concentration of low-wage employment and high rates of unemployment and poverty for

this group. Clearly, the formulation of policies to address the impact of undereducated and unskilled Mexican Americans on the economy is critical (Perez & Salazar, 1993).

It was predicted that by the year 2000, up to 80 % of jobs in the U. S. would require cognitive, rather than manual skills, and 52 % of jobs would require at least some postsecondary education (President's Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans, 1996). In addition, the shortage of workers with high levels of communication, mathematics, computer, and other technological skills would become more severe if the under-representation of Mexican Americans in higher education continued. Hispanics were underrepresented in managerial and professional positions within the workforce. Eleven percent of Hispanics held these positions, as compared to 27 % of Whites. Hispanic males were said to have participated in the labor force at a rate of 90.2 % and women at 58%, which was expected to increase to 80% by the year 2005. This fact alone is reason to invest resources to improve the educational attainment of this population (President's Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans, 1996).

Closing the Educational Gap

Educational Attainment

Mexican Americans are the most poorly educated group among Hispanics and the total U.S. population (Gandara, 1982; Ortiz, 1995). From 1980 to 1997, the gap between Hispanics and non-Hispanic Whites widened in college enrollment from 9 to 19 percentage points (Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, 2000). Had the enrollment rate of Hispanics increased at the same rate as non-Hispanic Whites, there

would be almost half a million additional students enrolled in college (Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, 2000). In addition, although Hispanics are attending and graduating from college in greater numbers, they remain less likely to graduate than the general student population (Flores, 1994; Richardson, 1988). Flores (1994) indicates that 41% of Hispanic students graduate from four-year institutions in comparison to 54% of the general population.

Although Hispanics have increased their bachelor's degree attainment over the past decade by 90%, in comparison to an 11% increase for Whites, recent research has indicated that 80% of undergraduates leave college without graduating (Perna, 2000; Pidcock, Fischer, & Munsch, 2001). In 1996, Hispanic students represented 7% of associates and 5% of bachelor's degrees earned in the total population (White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans, 2000b). In that same year, Hispanics earned approximately 4% of all master's degrees and 2% of all doctoral degrees (White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans, 2000a). Also worth noting, in 1992, Hispanics represented fewer than 3% of full-time instructional staff and faculty in higher education (White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans, 2000a).

National Efforts to Close the Gap

In 1996, a report by the President's Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans, *Our Nation on the Fault Line: Hispanic American Education*, made several recommendations for the attainment of educational excellence for Hispanic Americans. Three principles were identified as guidelines for the

implementation of recommendations. The first stated that government, at all levels, in partnership with local Hispanic and non-Hispanic communities, must ensure that schools attain quality educational outcomes. Secondly, long-term strategic plans should be developed through collaborative approaches with public and private sectors at the local, state, and national levels to monitor and ensure high standards of educational attainment among Hispanics. Lastly, the coordination of inter-federal-agency efforts would maximize the pooling of resources and delivery of services (President's Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans, 1996).

Premised on these guiding principles, five recommendations were offered. One of the five overarching recommendations made was to take corrective action at every point along the educational continuum to include early childhood, elementary, middle school, high school, and adult education. The second recommendation was to facilitate the access into postsecondary institutions and provide appropriate support. Another recommendation was to build the capacity in the education professions, followed by the recommendation to promote the design and appropriate use of testing and assessment. Lastly, each federal agency was challenged to contribute to reverse a legacy of neglect and to ensure Hispanic Americans equitable opportunity in educational attainment (President's Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans, 1996).

Efforts to Close the Gap in Texas

The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board produced a report entitled *Closing the Gaps: The Texas Higher Education Plan* outlining the goals of closing the

gaps in higher education participation and success, in educational excellence, and in funded research over the next 15 years (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, n.d.). The state of Texas recognizes the importance of improving the accessibility and quality of education for its people to enrich the future of the individual as well as the state. Texas is also mindful of the large gap that exists among ethnic groups in both enrollment and graduation rates from the state's colleges and universities. By the year 2008, Texas will become a minority-majority state comprised of 40% Hispanic, 11% African American, 45% White, and 4% from other groups, including Asian Americans. With the projected growth of the Mexican American population, particularly along the Texas border, it is evident that creative solutions are required to meet the state's educational challenges. These solutions will be based on the state's vision for Texas higher education:

Every Texan educated to the level necessary to achieve his or her dreams; no one is left behind, and each can pursue higher education; colleges and universities focus on recruitment and success of students while defining their own paths to excellence; education is of high quality throughout; and all levels of education, the business community, and the public are constant partners in recruiting and preparing students and faculty who will meet the state's workforce and research needs (p.6).

Hispanic Serving Institutions

A fairly recent development since the early 1970s, involves the concentration of Hispanic students at colleges and universities now commonly referred to as Hispanic

Serving Institutions HSIs) (de los Santos & Rigual, 1994). HSIs are not yet uniformly defined. The most important, though the most restrictive, legal definition of HSIs is found in Title III of the Higher Education Act of 1965 (HEA), as amended (Benitez, 1998).

Title III authorizes federal aid programs to institutions that serve needy and underrepresented students and meet the following criteria (Benitez, 1998):

- Cannot be for-profit
- Must offer at least two-year academic programs that lead to a degree
- Must be accredited by an accrediting agency or association recognized by the secretary of education
- Must have high enrollment of needy students
- Must have low-average education expenditures (Title III, Section 312, HEA)

In addition to meeting these criteria, to be recognized as an HSI an institution must

- Have at least 25 percent Hispanic undergraduate full-time-equivalent (FTE) student enrollment
- Provide assurances that no less than 50 percent of its Hispanic students are low-income individuals *and* first-generation college students
- Provide assurances that an additional 25 percent of its Hispanic students are low-income individuals or first-generation college students (Title III, Section 316, HEA) (p.59-60)

The most frequently used criterion to identify HSIs are accredited degree granting public or private nonprofit institutions of higher education with at least 25 % total

undergraduate Hispanic full-time equivalent student enrollment (White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans, 2000). This definition does not have legal status. Most federal agencies and other funding resources tend to rely on the definition of the HEA Title III statute when developing policy and funding priorities (Benitez, 1998).

HSIs were not founded for the purpose of meeting the educational needs of an underserved population, as was the case in the establishment of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) (de los Santos & Rigual, 1994). Thus, Hispanic students do not have access to such a network of Hispanic colleges whose historical mission is to serve this specific population (Olivas, 1997). HSIs resulted from the growing number of Hispanics attending college due to the increase of federal funded financial aid programs of the 1970s made available to students from low-income backgrounds. Many of these students turned to lower-cost two-year and four-year public institutions within their communities, while some attended four-year private institutions, which were also at the forefront of providing educational opportunities to Hispanic students.

Approximately 40% of the Hispanics enrolled in undergraduate education are concentrated in fewer than 200 HSIs in the United States (White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans, 2000b). Texas alone accounts for almost 20% of Hispanics enrolled at HSIs (Dervarics, 2000; Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, 2000). Given the projected growth of college-age Hispanics, the number of HSIs is expected to increase as many Hispanic students elect to attend HSIs based on

their proximity to home and reasonable costs (Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, 2000). As a result, Hispanic education leaders have been advocating for increased federal funding to assist HSIs in their efforts to improve the college completion rates of Hispanic students (Dervarics, 1997, 2000).

Many HSIs are underequipped and understaffed and unable to hire competitively, develop undergraduate and graduate programs, maintain modern research facilities, or offer high-tech learning environments. This may raise questions about the quality of instruction and the possibilities for student and faculty advancement at HSIs. Information gathered by the U.S. Department of Education shows that

- The total revenues of HSIs are 42 percent less per FTE student than at other institutions.
- Endowment revenues at HSIs per FTE student are 91 percent less than at other institutions.
- HSIs spend 43 percent less on instruction per FTE student than other schools.
- HSIs spend 51 percent less on academic support functions per FTE student than other schools.
- HSIs spend 27 percent less on student services per FTE student than other schools (Benitez, 1998).

Despite their limitations, HSIs have a higher rate of completion of Hispanic students than do majority institutions. As a result, HSIs have begun to request increased government funding and have set out to gain credibility as a successful educational alternative for Hispanics. The success of HSIs depends upon greater financial resources

and a political commitment to meeting the needs of the nation's Hispanic population (Benitez, 1998).

HSIs received national attention during the Clinton administration, as the president announced during a White House conference in 2000 several goals for Hispanic education, including higher education completion rates. This was pivotal in raising the awareness of Hispanic education challenges and the need for increased funding to support HSIs. Not only have HSIs received greater funding since the 2000 White House conference, but they have also gained new stature within federal agencies, as several federal departments have initiated new outreach efforts with HSIs (Dervarics, 2000).

Since HSIs were not created specifically for the purpose of serving Hispanic students, they are faced with the challenge of redefining and reshaping themselves to meet the needs of Hispanic students (de los Santos & Rigual, 1994). Only when Hispanic faculty and administrators are adequately represented on these campuses, and when curricula and programming aimed at addressing the barriers faced by Hispanic students are developed, will HSIs be able to transform themselves into true "Hispanic serving institutions." HSIs are able to retain students through graduation with the understanding of the barriers affecting Hispanic student persistence.

Factors Contributing to Persistence

The first year of college is the critical point at which dropout rates tend to be highest. Many Mexican Americans are the first in their families to attend college and find the transition to college a difficult one. This is a time when they separate from family and friends, break family codes of unity, and assume a new identity as they strive to balance

work, family, and college and the assumption of a new identity (Nora, Rendon, & Cuadraz, 1999). Although all students experience academic stressors and adjustment difficulties, according to Gloria and Rodriguez (2000), the transition to college life is generally more difficult for Mexican American students in comparison to White students. They also note that persistence is affected by cultural incongruence, non-supportive university environments, financial and socioeconomic concerns, educational stereotypes, and a lack of mentors. Research indicates that students unable to remain on campus as a result of familial responsibilities, having to work off campus, or commuting to college are often unable to integrate fully both socially and academically and ultimately leave higher education altogether (Munoz, 1986; Nora, Rendon, & Cuadraz, 1999).

Commitment, Self Expectations, and Self Efficacy

A student who is committed to obtaining an education in the midst of a myriad of barriers is more likely to persist than one who is not (Lango, 1995). In fact, a student's personal commitment to an academic or occupational goal has been identified as one of the single most important determinants of college persistence (Vasquez, 1997).

Persistence is influenced by a person's sense of self, specific expectations, and a sense of responsibility for one's successes and failures (Lango, 1995). Likewise, family has an impact on student commitment to complete college, which was found to be far more important than financial resources to fund college (Vasquez, 1997).

Parents play a key role in instilling in their children a sense of self-efficacy or a relentless drive to persist despite adversity and at times empowered by it as it draws out an inner strength. Fostering a culture of possibility, according to Nora, Rendon, &

Cuadraz (1999), encourages student achievement and influences educational aspirations and expectations. They note that educational goal commitments of Hispanic college students affect intentions to re-enroll in their second year of college as well as their persistence behavior. Furthermore, the desire to earn an undergraduate degree reflects the mindset that Hispanic students bring to college regarding its importance.

A study was conducted with Hispanic students utilizing the College Self-Efficacy Instrument to determine the instrument's validity (Solberg, O'Brien, Villareal, Kennel, & Davis, 1993). The researchers proposed that self-efficacy plays an important role in understanding Hispanic college adjustment. Three subscales were generated and were found to have good convergent and discriminant validity, as well as strong internal consistency. These included course efficacy, roommate efficacy, and social efficacy. Course efficacy involved writing papers, class performance, and time management. Roommate efficacy involved interpersonal aspects of communal living and managing household issues. Social efficacy involved various aspects of social and interpersonal adjustment to include speaking in class and with school personnel, dating, and integrating into the peer milieu. Studying the relationship between Hispanic college adjustment and self-efficacy can lend itself to the development of programs aimed at increasing efficacy expectations (Solberg, O'Brien, Villareal, Kennel, & Davis, 1993).

Another study noted the importance of new students' need for self-esteem to include variables such as self-confidence, a sense of being in control, pride in oneself and what one does, respecting oneself and being respected by others, and valuing oneself and

being valued by others (Terenzini, Rendon, Upcraft, Millar, Allison, Gregg, & Jalomo, 1994). They further state, in reference to incoming freshmen, that:

The important role of self-perceptions is apparent in such themes as the academic, social, and cultural character of the transition process for nontraditional students; in the need for early validation from faculty and peers (whether the validation is of an academic or interpersonal nature); in the need for connectedness and a sense of belonging at the institution; in the move to interpersonal independence and autonomy; and in proving oneself capable of success, however the individual defines that concept (p.72).

Network of Social Support

Family

The family is a primary means of social support for Mexican Americans students. The family, as stated by Gloria and Rodriguez (2000), places great value on providing material and emotional support to other family members, relying on family members for help and support, using family members as referents for attitudes and behavior, and placing the needs of the family before individual needs. In a study conducted by Terenzini, Rendon, Upcraft, Millar, Allison, Gregg, and Jalomo (1994), it was found that first generation college students were faced with multiple transitions to include academic, social, and cultural issues. Being the first to attend college meant veering from family tradition, creating a significant and intimidating cultural transition. It was also found that students who lived on campus appeared to develop greater personal independence and autonomy from family, thereby changing the nature of their relationship based on

equality of adults rather than that of a parent-child relationship. Parents' fears of their children never returning home raised anxiety levels of these students in ways uncommon to most middle class, White students, faculty, and administrators.

Research indicates that family encouragement is crucial for Mexican American students, often the first in their families to attend college (Rodriguez, 1996). The family plays an important role for first-generation students in providing support to encourage attendance, persistence, and success in college (Terenzini et al, 1994). Emotional and financial support from parents, siblings, and extended family members, according to Lopez (1995), often allows students to perform at their fullest academic potential as they engage in university coursework. On the other hand, family responsibilities such as caring for a sibling, grandparent, or the entire family can have a negative impact on a student's decision to remain at college (Nora, Rendon, & Cuadraz, 1999).

The support of family, also noted by Hurtado, Carter, and Spuler (1996), was identified as an important aspect of college adjustment in the first year of college. In their study, they found that students who had less difficulty separating from the family, while maintaining family relationships and support, experienced better personal-emotional adjustment. As a result, research indicated that students tended to be better adjusted if they were able to maintain independence while maintaining supportive relationships with parents.

Peer Relationships

As noted by Lango (1995), the successful Mexican American will have a network of friends with similar backgrounds and interests. In a study conducted by Strage (2000),

high ratings of positive rapport with peers were associated with high levels of confidence, underscoring the importance of the role peers play in student persistence. Peer mentorship and support, according to Gloria and Rodriguez (2000), have been found to create a comfortable academic environment. They further state that participation in mentoring programs and Mexican American student organizations provides direct personal and academic support. In a study by Terenzini, Rendon, Upcraft, Millar, Allison, Gregg, & Jalomo (1994), first generation students' support of one another in the educational and cultural transition to college life was described as follows:

These students supported one another by consciously avoiding criticism of one another's work or performance. The cooperative nature of the passage was evident in students' discussing classwork together outside of class, learning from the comments others made in class, making sure too much fun did not interfere with getting schoolwork done, reminding each other in subtle ways that academics was the first priority (p. 69).

According to Terenzini, Rendon, Upcraft, Millar, Allison, Gregg, and Jalomo (1994), first generation students found strength in numbers and viewed the transition to college as a rite of passage, both educationally and culturally, that all must experience. On the other hand, Hurtado, Carter, and Spuler (1996) found that a first year student's reliance on support from other first year students alone may ultimately place them at a disadvantage. They explained that although they do provide one another with a certain level of support, they are unable to provide the support students need to make positive changes in their academic habits. Hurtado, Carter, and Spuler (1996) state:

One of the clear facilitators of student adjustment involves the nature of affiliation that students develop with peers (both within ethnic groups and across ethnic groups). The results revealed how important upperclass students are to a student's adjustment to the campus community. Upperclass students and resident advisors significantly influence students' social adjustment and attachment (p. 153).

Faculty/Staff as Mentors

University personnel, to include faculty and student support staff, have been found to serve as positive resources for Mexican American university students. They provide emotional and instrumental support through encouragement and assistance with coursework (Lopez, 1995). Hispanic faculty members and administrators represent individuals who have successfully managed the educational environment and have the ability to enhance a student's self-efficacy in succeeding academically, enhancing their persistence (Gloria, 1997). Unfortunately, it is rare that Hispanic students see affirming reflections of themselves in their instructors or in the administration of their campuses (de los Santos & Rigual, 1994).

A lack of role models or mentors has been found to contribute to the nonpersistence of Mexican American students in higher education (Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000). There is a scarcity of Hispanic role models in both overall numbers and in representation across academic fields (Avalos & Pavel, 1993). In addition, Hispanic women, now constituting the majority of Hispanic college students, encounter even fewer Hispanic faculty and administrators of their own gender to serve as role models and mentors. In 1995, Hispanic women held 1.3 % of full-time faculty positions and 0.7 % of

administrative positions, while men held 1.7 and 1.3 % respectively (Ortiz, 1995).

Research indicates that Mexican American students are more likely to succeed if they have a mentor who takes a personal and academic interest in their educational experiences (Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000). A student's motivation to succeed may be influenced by an instructor's interest, as found in a study conducted by Terenzini, Rendon, Upcraft, Millar, Allison, Gregg, and Jalomo (1994):

In some instances, the cooperative nature of the transition was brought directly into the classroom, as instructors required students to learn about, and then introduce, a classmate; constructed group assignments that required students to get to know each other and to work together on a common project; or invested so much of their own energy and time in helping students that the students came to feel a positive obligation to work hard to succeed (p. 69).

Researchers of this study also indicate the importance of early interaction between students and faculty, preferably beginning with orientation, as it reflected their interest and willingness to help students find a home in the new academic community.

Employing minorities in senior leadership positions, according to Richardson and de los Santos (1988), sends a clear message about the value of cultural diversity among administrators. They use the University of Texas at El Paso as an example. Within a 10-year period, the institution was able to double their Hispanic enrollment. Richardson and de los Santos (1988) attribute this to the increase in community support and fiscal commitment, due in part as a result of strong minority leadership. During that time,

minority leadership included the Dean of Students, the Dean of the College of Science, and the Directors of Financial Aid and Admissions.

Campus Environment

Viewed as a component of one's social system, Gloria and Kurpius (1996) state that the university environment influences a student's attitude about remaining in college. Mexican American students who do not feel valued by faculty and administration, according to Hurtado, Carter, and Spuler (1996), are more likely to perceive racial/ethnic tensions in the campus environment. Many Hispanic students may also feel culturally or racially isolated, given the lack of Hispanic role models or mentors, lack of Hispanic issues or materials in the curriculum, and a lack of visible Hispanic support programs. As a result, Hispanic students may have difficulty making the transition to college or getting involved in institutional life, therefore leading to higher rates of attrition (Nora, Rendon, & Cuadrez, 1999). Furthermore, they may experience the anxiety of breaking close family ties or the loneliness and tension from finding their way on campus, leading to feelings of alienation, discouragement, and overwhelming proportion (Flores, 1994).

Mexican American students, as Flores (1994) suggests, need adequate support systems, encouragement, guidance and counseling, ethnic minority organizations and cultural service centers, high levels of involvement in student life, and favorable relationships with faculty members and academic advisors. One study reported that students identified academic counselors as particularly important in facilitating their academic adjustment and attachment to the institution (Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996). Formal student support services and informal relationships can help facilitate persistence,

especially for first-generation Mexican American college students whose family members may not fully understand the student's specific higher education experiences (Gloria & Kurpius, 1996). Nonpersisters who viewed the university environment as competitive and impersonal, as indicated by Gloria and Kurpius (1996), had fewer contacts with fellow students and individuals within their academic network.

The type of college a student attends affects the likelihood of completion, as noted by Lango (1995). The history, size, control, selectivity, and racial composition of the institution influence a student's perception of the college (Hurtado, 1994). For example, Hurtado (1994) states that a college's historical legacy of exclusion of various ethnic groups can continue to influence current practices that determine the prevailing climate. She further notes that this legacy influences the views of administrators, faculty, and students in relation to the role of Hispanic students in the college community. Particularly on highly selective campuses, Hispanic students may feel as though they do not "fit in" and that they are perceived by others to be "special admits," admitted based on factors other than their academic record (Hurtado, 1994).

She contends that the more closely the college reflects its own community, the more likely it is that students will complete their degree program. In a study conducted by Hurtado (1994), it was found that racial tension and experiences of discrimination were more likely to be reported among Hispanic students at larger campuses and least likely on campuses with high Hispanic undergraduate enrollments. She also notes the importance administration and faculty have on student perceptions of the college climate. Students

who perceived administrators as open and inclusive and faculty as caring about the welfare of students were less likely to report racial tension.

The data on HSIs obtained in a study by Solorzano (1995) supports the notion that the number of Mexican American faculty and peers present in an institution has a positive impact on degree completion. He notes that according to role model theory, more Mexican Americans in faculty and research positions would lead to greater numbers of Mexican American students aspiring to high-status occupations.

Sense of Belonging/Fit

Mexican American students' perceptions of cultural congruity have been implicated as a contributing factor of persistence (Gloria & Kurpius, 1996). These students may experience cultural incongruity within the university setting as a result of differing values, beliefs, and behaviors in comparison to the dominant group. Mexican American students, according to Gloria and Kurpius (1996), are faced with having to balance their participation in two cultures in order to succeed academically. They provide an example in which a Mexican American student is criticized by those in the university as being "too Mexican." In contrast, those in the student's support system external to the university environment may describe the individual as "too White." In other words, the student may feel pressured to adopt characteristics and behaviors similar to that of the majority group, while losing or downplaying those characteristics and behaviors representative of the Mexican American culture, in an attempt to fit in to the campus culture. On the other hand, the student may experience, as a result of these new characteristics and behaviors, resentment from his/her support group. Members of the

support group may perceive the student as abandoning her culture and may fear that she is distancing herself from the group. This puts a strain on the student, as noted by Gloria and Kurpius (1996), who may feel caught in the middle, wanting to remain loyal and to identify with his or her cultural roots while wanting to “fit in” and succeed within the middle class White male values of academia. The degree to which Mexican American students adhere to cultural proscriptions, as stated by Gloria & Rodriguez (2000), varies by age, proximity to culture and family, and sustaining reinforcers within their ethnic group. For example, a student who leaves home to attend a predominantly White college in a predominantly White town many miles away may find it more difficult to maintain one’s culture in comparison to a student who remains closer to home in which communication and visits with family and friends becomes more feasible, thus being more closely connected to one’s culture. In the absence of family and friends, an institution or town with a Mexican American population may provide the student with an opportunity to remain connected to one’s culture.

Membership in religious organizations and social-community organizations are, according to Hurtado and Carter (1997), to be significantly related to students’ sense of belonging. They further explain that these organizations seem to have a strong external-to-campus affiliations. One explanation for this is that Hispanic students who belong to these organizations have a stronger sense of belonging because they maintain connections with these external campus communities, hence maintaining a link to the communities with which they were familiar before they entered college. For those Hispanic students who attend predominantly White universities, feeling at “home” in the campus

community may be associated with maintaining interactions both within and outside the college community (Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

Financing Higher Education

The primary source of strain for Hispanic students involves finances and financial aid (Flores, 1994; Munoz, 1986; Vasquez, 1997). Family contributions towards college costs have risen most for those who occupy the bottom tier of the economic ladder, according to Nora, Rendon, and Cuadraz (1999). Furthermore, they state that low-income families have no reserves to draw upon and are often reluctant in securing loans that may exacerbate family debt. Research indicates that low family income affects dropout rates and chances of completing college (Vasquez, 1997). As a result, students may be required to incur greater debt, work outside of the school, and rely more on increasingly undependable sources of institutional aid (Munoz, 1986).

Financial assistance is an important factor in the persistence process. Expanded financial aid, better information about it, and simplified financial aid processing were found to encourage Hispanic students to remain in college (Flores, 1994). In fact, those who received high levels of noncampus aid and campus-based financial aid were found to enroll in more semesters, earn more semester hours, earn high grade point averages, and receive some form of college credential. In general, Hispanic college students rely more on scholarships, workstudy programs, and loans for financing their undergraduate education than does the majority population who receive more parental assistance (Vasquez, 1997). Scholarships and grants, as noted by Vasquez (1997), have been found to produce small increases in persistence rates as well as participation in workstudy

programs. On the other hand, reliance on loans and savings appear to decrease student persistence. Being able to pay for college related expenses unburdens a student of financial hardship and strengthens one's commitment to an institution given that it provides the financial means to remain in college (Nora, Rendon, & Cuadraz, 1999).

Gender Differences

Although both Mexican American male and female university students encounter challenges and resources, experiences differ in relation to gender (Lopez, 1995). Mexican American females tend to have greater difficulties with finances and family domestic responsibilities than their male counterparts (Gandara, 1982; Lopez, 1995). Males, however, experience greater academic and racial discrimination, whereas females experience greater gender discrimination. In addition, Mexican American parents contribute to these differences by their hesitancy to allow daughters to attend a university (Lopez, 1995; Simmons, 2002). On the other hand, a mother's academic encouragement is salient to the degree completion of daughters, while it was hypothesized that males would report having received lower levels of encouragement (Lopez, 1995).

For many years, Mexican American women lagged behind their male counterparts in the attainment of undergraduate degrees, as a result, much research has been conducted to study this group which has been described as facing triple oppression of race, class, and gender (Gloria, 1997). More recently, these women have surpassed Mexican American men in the completion of associate's, bachelor's, and master's degrees. They still, however are less likely to achieve a doctoral or professional degree (Simmons, 2002).

Mexican American University Women

The persistence of Mexican American women through graduation, according to Gloria (1997), is lower than that of their male counterparts. Many barriers account for their low participation in higher education, as suggested by Vasquez (1997) in the following:

Support for women and strong identification with the positive aspects of one's culture seem particularly important for Mexican American women who must struggle with sex-role conflicts as well as inoculate themselves against the patterns of prejudice and discrimination that often otherwise result in negatively internalized messages about one's worth as a woman, as a member of an ethnic minority group, and in many cases, as a member of the low economic group in this country (p. 464).

In fact, despite their superior academic performance in comparison to men, Hispanic females were found to be more likely to drop out of college after their freshman year (Vasquez, 1997). Mexican American women encounter different familial and personal stressors such as maintaining a family and household, as well as placing the welfare of the group or family over one's individual pursuits (Gloria, 1997). Research also indicates that Hispanic women tend to have significantly lower academic self-concepts than do Hispanic men (Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

Family support is crucial to the success of Mexican American university women as noted by Lango (1995) in the following passage:

This aspect of the Mexican American woman is very important because the support of her family is vital to her entering and completing a program of higher education. Without family support, the Mexican American woman will find it extremely difficult to take on nontraditional behaviors, manners, and attitudes that are looked on by her culture as disrespectful. The support of her family and especially her mother allows her to feel somewhat at ease with actions that a Mexican American woman from a traditional Mexican American family would usually not have taken (p. 46).

A study by Gandara (1982) found that parental aspirations were more clearly conveyed to Mexican American men than for women. In addition, she found that male subjects reported that both parents held a somewhat higher value for education and more frequently encouraged graduate education. Despite this finding, female subjects attributed much of their success to strong maternal support of their educational aspirations and economic independence.

Although the support of the mother is an important contributor to motivation and persistence, the Mexican American woman faces a double dilemma (Lango, 1995). Not only must she face an externally imposed system of racial domination, but she also faces a system of sexual domination within her own culture. Family is often perceived to be the female's primary responsibility in Mexican American culture. This may be why parents are reluctant to encourage their daughters to further their education and object to travel to attend prestigious colleges across the country (Simmons, 2002). Lowered parental expectations negatively influence a Mexican American woman's decision to remain in

college, as do the challenges of balancing competing family and school values (Lango, 1995).

Research indicates that Mexican American women who adhere to traditional sex roles do not attend and persist at the same rate as more nontraditional women (McGlynn, 2002). Also, several studies have shown that the educational aspiration of Mexican American women is the most important predictor of college attendance and persistence. Especially significant for Mexican American women, McGlynn writes, “Student aspirations, level of self-esteem and motivation, having a role model, and students’ perceptions of what significant others aspire for them are all factors that have been shown to affect college attendance and persistence in general” (p.39).

Educated women, as noted by Niemann and Romero (2000), may threaten traditional male authority and the higher status assumed by men who hold the concept of traditional gender-roles. These men may be threatened by educated women and perceive them as unlikely marriage partners. This in turn creates a conflict for women who may feel that they must choose between an education or marriage with partners from their ethnic communities. Equally debilitating to the persistence of Mexican American women are the negative stereotypes held by college peers and professors.

Mexican American University Men

Men may receive more positive messages from their families regarding the value of education but, they may experience conflict between educational and relationship goals (Niemann & Romero, 2000). Traditionally, men are expected to assist in the financial support of their families. Higher education may delay this immediate support,

especially for men from low socioeconomic status who might be expected to contribute the most to their families.

Mexican American men, as noted by Simmons (2002), are facing difficulties in their social adjustment. In a study conducted by Hall and Rowan (2001), it was found that Mexican American men in higher education encounter problems that extend from matters of race and discrimination. They further noted that Mexican American men are valued less and educational personnel expect less from them. Lastly, Hall and Rowan (2001) contend that according to their data in the study, higher education has not fulfilled its purpose in educating this group.

Theoretical Perspectives of Persistence and Retention

A great deal of research has been conducted in relation to college student persistence, much of which has been based on the highly acclaimed model of student departure introduced by Vincent Tinto. The basic premise of the model is that social and academic integration is essential to student retention, providing a foundation for analyzing the multiple factors contributing to persistence (Rendon, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000). The theory of student departure is described by Tinto (1993) as follows:

Drawn from the work of Emile Durkheim and Arnold Van Gennep, this theory will argue that colleges and universities are like other human communities; that student departure, like departure from human communities generally, necessarily reflects both the attributes and actions of the individual and those of the other members of the community in which that person resides. Decisions to withdraw are more a function of what occurs after entry than of what precedes it. They are a

reflection of the dynamic nature of the social and intellectual life of the communities which are housed in the institution, in particular of the daily interaction which occurs among its members. Student departure may then serve as a barometer of the social and intellectual health of institutional life as much as of the experiences of students in the institution (p. 5).

Despite the popularity of the model's utilization in research, some critics have questioned its validity in fully capturing the experiences of nonwhite students, given that the model is based on an assimilation/acculturation framework (Rendon, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000). The contribution of Tinto's model, as reported by Hurtado and Carter (1997), is its emphasis on the importance of the college environment and the central idea that students must be engaged in the life of the college. They go on to discuss the model's shortcomings including the fact that it does not acknowledge that integration is complicated by racially tense environments for diverse groups of students whose responses to adversity are complex.

Although Tinto's model is the paradigm of choice when examining student departure, according to Kuh and Love (2000), alternative approaches are warranted. Using culture as an analytical framework, the authors introduce eight propositions based on cultural constructs and processes that yield insights into the transactions between students and their institutions in relation to persistence and student departure. Cultural propositions include:

1. The college experience, including a decision to leave college, is mediated through a student's cultural meaning-making system.

2. One's cultures of origin mediate the importance attached to attending college and earning a degree.
3. Knowledge of a students' cultures of origin and the cultures of immersion is needed to understand a student's ability to successfully negotiate the institution's cultural milieu.
4. The probability of persistence is inversely related to the cultural distance between a student's culture(s) of origin and the culture of immersion.
5. Students who traverse a long cultural distance must become acclimated to dominant cultures of immersion or join one or more enclaves.
6. The amount of time a student spends in one's cultures of origin after matriculating is positively related to cultural stress and reduces the chances they will persist.
7. The likelihood a student will persist is related to the extensity and intensity of one's sociocultural connections to the academic program and to affinity groups.
8. Students who belong to one or more enclaves in the cultures of immersion are more likely to persist, especially if group members value achievement and persistence. (p. 201).

Examining student departure from a cultural perspective, as noted by Kuh and Love (2000), allows researchers, policy makers, and institutional leaders to better understand the complex phenomena, revealing aspects of institutional functioning that

may contribute to the promotion of higher rates of student persistence and educational attainment.

A Psychological Model of College Student Retention was introduced by Bean and Eaton (2000), which recognizes that:

Students enter college with a complex array of personal characteristics. As they interact within the institutional environment several psychological processes take place that, for the successful student, result in positive self-efficacy, reduced stress, increased efficacy, and internal locus of control. Each of these processes increases a student's scholarly motivation. These processes are reciprocal and iterative with continuous feedback and adjustment. (p. 58).

This model takes into account the characteristics, which the student brings with them to college as well as the effects of the institutional environment on the student's experiences. Academic and social interactions lead to the level at which students perform and integrate academically and socially into the institutional environment. This may determine a student's attitude, loyalty to the institution, and sense of belonging, at which case they may be more likely to persist. The significance of this model in relation to this study is its emphasis on individual differences of students and how these differences affect their experience. More specifically, this study will identify gender differences to include student perspectives of and interactions with the institutional environment.

Summary

This chapter introduced historical perspectives of Mexican Americans in the United States and more specifically, in higher education. Mexican Americans were faced

with social, economic, political, and educational inequality, resulting in the under - representation of this group in higher education. The current status of Mexican Americans was also discussed in this chapter in relation to demographic trends and the economy. As Mexican Americans become the largest ethnic group in the United States, the strength of the economy is contingent upon improvements to their social, educational, and economic status. Furthermore, this chapter described efforts made to close the educational gap between Mexican Americans and non-Hispanic Whites and identified the relevance of HSI's to the education of Mexican American undergraduate students. The factors known to contribute to the persistence of these students were also presented in this chapter as well as how they differed in relation to gender. Lastly, theoretical perspectives of persistence and retention were presented. This included a look at Tinto's model of student departure, Kuh and Love's use of culture as an analytical framework, and Bean and Eaton's Psychological model of student retention which takes into account the individual differences of students. The following chapter discusses the methodology used in this study to gain a better understanding of the persistence of Mexican American students.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter revisits the purpose of the study as well as the research questions addressed. An explanation of the research design is presented, followed by a description of the sampled population. This includes the process by which participants were selected. The procedures for gathering data are discussed as well as the process through which data was analyzed. The chapter concludes with a summary of the methodology.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify the factors, as perceived by first generation Mexican American university students, influencing the persistence of students in their first year of college and into their second year at a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI). In addition, this study compared these students' perceptions in relation to gender.

Research Questions

The research questions addressed in this study consist of the following:

1. What factors, as perceived by first-generation Mexican American university students, contribute to the persistence of students in their first year of college and into their second at a HSI?
2. How do the factors that contribute to persistence compare in relation to gender among female and male first-generation Mexican American university students?

Research Design

This study followed qualitative research methods utilizing focus groups and in-depth interviews. A qualitative approach was utilized to fully capture, in depth and detail, the experiences of the participants studied (Patton, 2002). Qualitative methods place great emphasis on the varying perspectives and experiences of people, while taking into account the experiences of the researcher that may have an effect on what is studied and how findings are presented (Patton, 2002). It is these varying perspectives and experiences, captured only through qualitative research, that provide the richness of information necessary for a better understanding of the phenomenon studied. Such is the strength of qualitative research methods. The method's weakness lies in its inability to provide a broad, generalizable set of findings presented succinctly and parsimoniously as quantitative research methods do (Patton, 2002). However, qualitative research gives voice to the population being studied, which is lost in quantitative research.

This study followed a constructivist theoretical perspective based on a naturalistic strategic framework. Naturalistic inquiry allows for a “discovery-oriented” approach that minimizes investigator manipulation of the setting and places no constraints on what the outcomes of the research will be (Guba, 1978). Guba and Lincoln (1989) present the following assumptions of constructivism:

- “Truth” is a matter of consensus among informed and sophisticated constructors, not of correspondence with objective reality.
- “Facts” have no meaning except within some value framework, hence there cannot be an “objective” assessment of any proposition.

- “Causes” and effects do not exist except by imputation...
- Phenomena can only be understood within the context in which they are studied; findings from one context cannot be generalized to another; neither problems nor solutions can be generalized from one setting to another...
- Data derived from constructivist inquiry have neither special status nor legitimation; they represent simply another construction to be taken into account in the move toward consensus. (pp. 44-45).

Patton (2002) explains how constructivism captures and honors multiple perspectives, attending to the ways in which language, as a social construction, shapes, distorts, and structures understandings. This study captures these multiple perspectives through individual interviews. Constructivism, Patton (2002) adds, places an emphasis on how methods determine findings and the importance of thinking about the relationship between the investigator and the investigated. The researcher kept a journal which documents this relationship.

University Setting

The university in which the study was conducted was selected based on its identification as an HSI. As noted earlier, HSIs are colleges and universities with at least 25% Hispanic enrollment of which, 50% are identified as low income (Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, 2000). The institution selected for this study was The University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA), which was established in 1969 (“University of Texas,” 2004). UTSA was mandated by the 61st Legislature to "serve the needs of the multicultural population of San Antonio, the South Texas region, and Texas,

emphasizing programs that contribute to the technological, economic, and cultural development of the city, region, and state" ("University of Texas," 2004, ¶ 2).

San Antonio is the state's third largest city and the ninth largest in the country ("Handbook of Texas," 2005). It is a leading force in South Texas, an area of increasing demographic and economic importance to the state because of its strong ties with Mexico and the recent passage of NAFTA ("University of Texas," 2004). In 2003, San Antonio had a population of 1.2 million; 62% were Hispanic, 30% were non-Hispanic White, 6% were African Americans, and 2% consisted of other ethnic categories (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). Among people at least five years of age, 46% spoke a language other than English at home. Of those speaking a language other than English at home, 93% spoke Spanish (U.S. Census, Bureau, 2003).

Ricardo Romo was named the fifth president of UTSA in May of 1999. He is the first Hispanic president in the university's history. UTSA currently offers 103 degree programs (55 bachelor's, 37 master's, and 11 doctoral) and is the second largest component in The University of Texas System. The university has six colleges to include business, education and human development, engineering, liberal and fine arts, sciences, and public policy. UTSA also consists of a school of architecture and an honors college. It has been one of the state's fastest growing public universities over the past decade. UTSA has a goal to become a doctoral/research intensive institution (20 doctoral degrees in three disciplines) by 2007 and a doctoral/ research extensive institution (50 doctoral degrees in 15 disciplines) by 2015. The mission of UTSA is referenced below ("University of Texas," 2004):

The University of Texas at San Antonio is the premier public institution of higher education in South Texas, with a growing national and international reputation. Renowned as an institution of access and excellence at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, UTSA is committed to research and discovery, teaching and learning, and public service. UTSA embraces the multicultural traditions of South Texas, serves as a center for intellectual and creative resources, and is a catalyst for the economic development of Texas (§ 1).

The university is comprised of three campuses, the 1604 Campus, the Downtown Campus, and the Institute of Texan Cultures. This study involves the 1604 and downtown campuses, the two sites in which student enrollment is based. The larger of the two is the 1604 Campus, established in 1969, which received its name for its location on highway 1604. It is located on the northwest side of San Antonio on 600 acres. Groundbreaking ceremonies took place in 1995 for the newer, more intimate campus located downtown, thus referred to as the Downtown Campus. The 11 acre campus was dedicated in 1997 and offers courses leading to both undergraduate and graduate degrees in several disciplines. A shuttle service provides transportation between the two campuses for easy access (“University of Texas,” 2004).

Together, UTSA serves over 26,000 students with a minority population of 56.5% and more specifically, a Hispanic population of 45.3% as of fall 2003. In 2001, the retention rate for freshman, returning for a second year at UTSA, was 64% (UTSA Office, 2005). This was an increase over the previous ten years. There were no significant differences in retention rates across ethnicities, with Hispanic retention rates recorded at

64% as compared to Whites at 64.1%. The Downtown Campus alone serves 6,092 students, some taking classes at both the downtown and 1604 locations. The minority population downtown is 64.3% and the Hispanic population is 55.1%. The 1604 Campus is comprised of 54.4% female, whereas the Downtown Campus is comprised of 64.2% female. The university provides access and opportunity for a large number of historically underserved students. More than 56% of UTSA's students come from underrepresented groups in higher education and many are first-generation students ("University of Texas," 2004). Tables 1 through 5 provide more detailed demographic information ("University of Texas," 2004).

¹Table 1: Student Enrollment by Classification, Minority Status, Gender, and Age at the University of Texas at San Antonio

ENROLLMENT	NUMBER	PERCENT OF TOTAL
Total Headcount	26,175	
Undergraduate	22,537	86.1%
Graduate	3,349	12.8%
Doctoral	289	1.1%
Female	14,230	54.4%
Male	11,945	45.6%
Minority*	14,786	56.5%
Age less than 17	8	0%
Age 17-22	14,064	53.7%
Age 23-29	7,137	27.3%
Age 30-39	3,179	12.1%
Age 40-49	1,304	5.0%
Age 50-59	445	1.7%
Age 60-69	35	0.1%
Age 70+	3	0.0%
Unknown	0	0.0%

¹ Demographic information adapted from UTSA website ("University of Texas," 2004).

²Table 2: Student Enrollment by Ethnicity at the University of Texas at San Antonio

ENROLLMENT		
DIVERSITY		
White Non-Hispanic	10,620	40.6%
Black Non-Hispanic	1,593	6.1%
Hispanic	11,848	45.3%
Asian Pacific Islander	1,212	4.6%
American Indian or Alaska Native	133	.5%
International	766	2.9%
Unknown	3	0%

² Demographic information adapted from UTSA website ("University of Texas," 2004).

³Table 3: Student Enrollment by College at the University of Texas at San Antonio

ENROLLMENT BY COLLEGE		
Business	5,780	22.1%
Education and Human Development	4,300	16.4%
English	1,755	6.7%
Liberal and Fine Arts	5,381	20.6%
No College Identified	2,401	9.2%
Public Policy	873	3.3%
School of Architecture	795	3.0%
Sciences	4,880	18.6%
VP Downtown	10	0%

³ Demographic information adapted from UTSA website ("University of Texas," 2004).

⁴Table 4: Minority Student Enrollment by Class at the University of Texas at San Antonio

MINORITY ENROLLMENT BY CLASS		
Freshman	3,719	14.2%
Sophomore	2,417	9.2%
Junior	2,760	10.5%
Senior	4,019	15.4%
Certificate Undergraduate	149	.6%
Transient Undergraduate	8	0%
Special Undergraduate	58	.2%
Post Baccalaureate	2	0%
Graduate	1,573	6%
Doctoral	81	.3%
Total	14,786	56.5%

Table 5: Minority Status Defined by Ethnicity

* MINORITY INCLUDES
Black Non-Hispanic
Hispanic
Asian Pacific Islander
American Indian or Alaskan Native

⁴ Demographic information adapted from UTSA website ("University of Texas," 2004).

Participants

The sample consisted of Mexican American students who persisted through their first year of college and began their second year. Participants had begun a second year of college and are referred to as persisters. All of the participants were first-generation students. For this study, traditionally aged participants were selected to include 19 and 20-year-olds in their second year of college.

Participants were selected through a purposeful random sampling. Purposeful random sampling adds credibility and reduces bias when purposeful sampling is larger than one can handle, although it does not lend itself to generalizability (Patton, 2002). There are no rules for sample size in qualitative research and the validity, meaningfulness, and insights generated from it have more to do with the information richness than with sample size (Patton, 2002).

Criterion sampling, selecting participants based on a set of criteria, was used as a strategy in selecting participants (Patton, 2002). A request was made to the university's registrar to provide a list containing the contact information of students between the ages of 19 and 20, who began first year of college at UTSA in the fall of 2002 with no previously earned credit, and were enrolled for a second year at UTSA in the fall of 2003. From this list of 388 students, another list was generated capturing those students with Spanish surnames. There were 165 names in total. All 165 students were sent a letter of introduction, a participant response form (Appendix C), and a return envelope. The letter of introduction specified the criteria necessary to participate, which included self identification as first-generation and Mexican American, as was defined to them.

Students also received a follow-up phone call soliciting their participation in the study. They were informed about confidentiality and the purpose of the study and were asked for their consent to participate. To summarize, participants met the following criteria:

- Spanish Surname
- Self identification as a first-generation Mexican American university student
- Enrolled in a HSI as a freshman with no prior college experience
- Between the ages of 19 and 20
- Began first year of college at UTSA in the fall of 2002 with no previously earned credit
- Was enrolled, or persisted, for a second year at UTSA in the fall of 2003

A total of 13 students participated in the study. There were fewer males who participated than there were females. Three students participated in focus groups, two men and one woman. Ten other students, different from the focus group participants, were interviewed individually. Seven women and three men participated in these interviews. Each participant was given a fictitious name to protect their identities.

Focus Group Participant Demographics

Demographic information was collected from the participant response forms, found in Appendix C. Three students participated in focus groups, two men and one woman. Participants were asked to report their age, sex, major, number of credit hours earned, whether they were full-time (registered for 12 or more hours) or part-time (registered for 6 or fewer hours) students, grade point average (GPA), permanent home (home town), whether Spanish was their first language, if they lived with their parents, if

they had siblings attending college, if they worked (if so, how many hours), and if they participated in any extracurricular activities. The demographic information is captured in Table 6.

Table 6: Focus Group Participant Demographic

Participants ⁵	Raul	Adolfo	Gina
Age	20	19	19
Sex	M	M	F
Major	Psychology	International Business	Psychology
Credit Hours Earned	31	45	36
Part-time / Full-time Student	Full-Time	Full-time	Full-time
GPA	3.0	Not Provided	Not Provided
Texas Home Town	San Antonio	Edinberg	San Antonio
Spanish is First Language	Yes	Yes	No
Live with Parents	Yes	No	Yes
Siblings Attending College	Yes	No	No
Work / Hours per Week	33-36	None	None
Extracurricular Activities	None	None	None

⁵ Pseudonyms were given to participants to protect their identities.

Individual Interview Participant Demographics

Demographic information was collected from the participant response forms, found in Appendix C. Ten students, different from the focus group participants, were interviewed individually. Seven women and three men participated in these interviews. Participants were asked to report the same information as was requested from the focus group participants. The demographic information is captured in Table 7.

Table 7: Individual Interview Participant Demographics

Participant ⁶	Vanessa	Donna	Yvette	Rachel	Jesus	Elena	Paul	Delia	Michelle	John
Age	19	19	20	19	19	19	20	19	19	19
Sex	F	F	F	F	M	F	M	F	F	M
Major	Communi- cations	History	Political Science	Biology	Engineering /Criminal Justice	Education	Biology	Political Science	Biology	Biology
Credit Hours Earned	35	42	33	50	37	48	48	30	53	47
Part-time or Full-time Student	Full	Full	Full	Full	Full	Full	Full	Full	Full	Full
GPA	2.8	2.75	2.4	3.3	2.58	2.75	3.93	2.75	3.05	3.1
Texas Home Town	San Antonio	San Antonio	San Antonio	New Braunfels	Brownsville	San Antonio	San Antonio	San Antonio	San Antonio	San Antonio
Spanish is 1 st Language	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Live with Parents	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Siblings in College	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Work/ Hours per Week	19	19	25	25-30	None	None	None	14	20-25	None
Extracurricul ar Activities	None	None	None	None	None	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

⁶ Pseudonyms were given to participants to protect their identities.

Procedures and Data Collection

Prior to collecting data, approval for the study was obtained from the Institutional Review Boards of both, the university in which the study was to be conducted and the university in which the researcher is affiliated. It was not until permission was granted that the request to the registrar was made for a list of prospective participants. The data collection procedures utilized in the study included focus groups, individual interviews, and a journal kept by the researcher to document the interviewer's perspective.

Focus Groups

A focus group is an interview with a small group of people, typically consisting of 6 to 10 participants, with similar backgrounds (Patton, 2002). Small groups of four to six participants afford more opportunity to share ideas (Krueger, 1988). Group interviews usually last one to two hours. Focus groups have many advantages such as the ability to capture the voices of many in a limited amount of time. Also, data quality is enhanced by the interaction of participants which allows for the assessment of shared and/or opposing views (Patton, 2002).

Following Northcutt's (2001) notion of utilizing focus groups to generate data, the researcher used focus groups to develop the protocol or guide for the individual interviews. The focus groups in this study lasted approximately one and a half hours and were led by a facilitator, the primary researcher. A tape recorder was used, providing a permanent record and allowing one to concentrate on the interview (Robson, 2002). Participants were asked to provide impressions of their first year in college and the factors that contributed to their persistence. Themes that arose from the focus groups

provided the basis from which an interview guide was developed to use within the individual interviews. The focus group has been effectively utilized as a precursor to the development of a more structured instrument such as the interview guide (Robson, 2002). Furthermore, focus groups are commonly used in conjunction with other methods such as observations and individual interviews (Robson, 2002).

Two focus groups were scheduled on the same day. In the first focus group, only two of the five confirmed participants were present. In the second group, only one of the five confirmed participants were present. This resulted in a total of three participants for the day, two men and one woman. Due to the travel required for this study, combined with the prescheduled individual interviews the following week, there was no time to arrange additional focus groups.

The focus groups began with introductions, an explanation of the study, and some general questions to create a comfortable atmosphere. The participants were then asked the questions as outlined in Appendix A. The use of open-ended questions allows the respondent to answer from a variety of dimensions rather than being led by what the researcher suspects is on the mind of the interviewee (Krueger, 1988).

Individual Interviews

Individual interviews were used to collect data for this study. Interviews allowed for further exploration of emergent themes, providing an opportunity for participants to share their stories in an intimate setting. The purpose of interviewing is described by Patton (2002) as follows:

The purpose of interviewing, then, is to allow us to enter into the other person's perspective. Qualitative interviewing begins with the assumption that the perspective of others is meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit. We interview to find out what is in and on someone's mind, to gather stories (p.341).

Ten students participated in the individual interviews, seven women and three men. In this study, interviews with persisters (those that began their second year of college) lasted approximately an hour and a half each and were audio recorded and transcribed. The individual interviews in this study were conducted utilizing an interview guide which was developed incorporating the themes generated from the focus groups. The purpose of the open-ended interview, as noted by Northcutt (2001), is to access the perspective of the respondent rather than planting ideas in someone's mind. Also influenced by Northcutt, this researcher used a standardized open-ended interview with a free flowing conversational style, allowing for flexibility in the sequence of questions. The interview guide can be found in Appendix B. The interview guide ensured that the same basic themes were explored with each participant, yet allowed for the interviewer to build a conversation within a particular subject area (Patton, 2002).

Positionality

The role of the researcher as an instrument becomes crucial to the credibility of the study. As a result, the researcher kept a journal throughout the course of the study. Researcher bias refers to what the researcher brings to the situation in terms of assumptions and preconceptions, which may impact participant selection, questions

asked, or the selection of data to be analyzed and reported (Robson, 2002). Reflexivity helps to identify areas of potential bias.

Reflexivity, defined by Davies (1999), is means of turning back on oneself, a process of self-reference. She further states that:

In the context of social research, reflexivity at its most immediately obvious level refers to the ways in which the products of research are affected by the personnel and process of doing research. These effects are to be found in all phases of the research process from initial selection of topic to final reporting of results. (p.4).

Reflexivity, as stated by Patton (2002), reminds the researcher to be attentive to and conscious of the cultural, political, social, linguistic, and ideological origins of her own perspective and voice. In addition, reflexivity calls for self-reflection and self knowledge, and a willingness to consider how one affects what one is able to observe, hear, and understand in the field (Patton, 2002).

A description of the researcher helps the reader to understand her position within the context of the study. Knowledge of her own experiences and background may provide insight into the biases or assumptions she may bring to the study. The researcher in this study holds a master's degree in counseling psychology. Social constructivism provided the theoretical basis for which counseling practices were taught in this graduate program. Therefore, through coursework and a 500-hour direct client contact practicum, the researcher is an experienced interviewer, able to elicit information through focused, non-leading questioning. She has lived in the city in which the study was conducted and has worked in higher education for almost ten years. She has worked at a Hispanic Serving

Institution consisting of a majority Hispanic population. The voice and perspective, or reflexivity, of the 33-year-old, Hispanic, female researcher were captured through writings in a journal during the course of the research, presented in Chapter IV. Her writing will be italicized and presented in first person narrative form.

Data Analysis

The data analysis involved identifying, coding, categorizing, classifying, and labeling the primary patterns found in the focus groups and interview transcriptions (Patton, 2002). Transcripts from the focus groups were analyzed to identify common themes. An interview guide was developed based on these themes. This guide was utilized to conduct individual interviews. Following each interview, the audio tapes were transcribed and carefully examined or coded line by line, using the themes identified in the focus groups. Axial and theoretical coding, as used in Northcutt's (2001) Interactive Qualitative Analysis (IQA), was also applied to this study. Axial coding was utilized to analyze the text for specific examples of discourse that illustrated the theme. The coded text was compared and contrasted to find relationships or patterns among themes known as theoretical codes or models (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). The results are displayed through the presentation of segments of text as examples of concepts and theories (Ryan & Bernard, 2000).

QSR NUD-IST, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software program, was utilized to facilitate the coding process. The acronym stands for non-numerical, unstructured data – indexing, searching, and theorizing and was developed for the purpose of importing, managing, storing, and analyzing qualitative data (Burton, 2000).

Burton (2002) describes NUD-IST as a ‘theory builder’ which allows the researcher to make sense of data by categorizing or coding the material and creating an easy to use tree structure to manage the data. Patton (2002) indicates that, “This descriptive process of analysis builds a foundation for the interpretive phase when meanings are extracted from the data, comparisons are made, creative frameworks for interpretation are constructed, conclusions are drawn, significance is determined, and, in some cases, theory is generated.” (p. 465).

Through the triangulation of various data sources, the credibility and validity of this study’s findings were enhanced. This was achieved by utilizing focus groups, individual interviews, and the researcher’s journal. The use of focus groups and individual interviews distinguish how participants respond in public versus private. Participants were asked to discuss the same topic over time. These approaches contributed to the process by which the information obtained was compared and crosschecked for consistency (Patton, 2002). In addition, the journal kept by the researcher provided triangulated reflexive inquiry involving self-reflexivity, reflexivity about those studied, and reflexivity about the audience, providing a framework for analysis and reporting (Patton, 2002).

Summary

This chapter reviewed the methodology utilized for this study. The chapter began by restating the purpose of the study and the questions to be answered. The research design was then presented followed by a description of the sample population and means by which the university and students were selected as participants of this study. Lastly,

the procedures for conducting the research and the process through which data was collected and analyzed were discussed. The next chapter reviews the results of the study.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings of the study, addressing the purpose and research questions. The first part brings life to the participants through the presentation of individual profiles. The next section identifies the factors, as perceived by first generation Mexican American university students, that contributed to the persistence of students in their first year of college and into their second at a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI). These factors are then compared in relation to gender. This chapter concludes with the reflective accounts of the researcher which allowed the reader to understand her position as well as the lens through which she viewed the contributions of participants.

Participant Profiles

Profiles presented in this section include participants from both the focus groups and individual interviews. These profiles help to capture the spirit and individuality of each participant and the experiences they brought to the study. Participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identities.

Raul was from San Antonio and had an older brother that was already attending UTSA. He was majoring in psychology and planned to earn a PhD to become a psychologist. Raul worked up to 38 hours a week to help his family and to save enough money to buy a car. His father recently had health problems which has caused Raul much stress and concern. Raul described his relationship with his father as difficult at times because they were both stubborn and “hard-headed.” More recently, their relationship had improved. Raul described his father as “traditional Mexican, but to the core.” He was

stricter than most parents and was never to be questioned by his children as to what he expected from them. He pushed them to do their best and instilled a strong work ethic.

Adolfo grew up in Edinberg, a town located in what is known as The Valley in Texas. His major was international business, and he dreamed of owning his own business once he graduated from college. For Adolfo, college was an expectation of his parents. He was either to go to college or move out and support himself. He described his high school as a poor school where bad things happened. He only knew of three peers who had gone to college, but had since returned to Edinberg. Adolfo attributed his desire to earn a degree to his parents who told him that if he did not earn a degree, he would not be able to do anything.

Gina lived in San Antonio and began taking classes at UTSA's Downtown Campus her first semester and then took classes at the 1604 Campus her second semester. She was encouraged by her boyfriend to attend a university rather than a community college, which she had originally planned to do. She received assistance applying for college and financial aid through an organization called Project Stay, which sent representatives to her high school.

Gina lived with her parents who were in their 60's. Her father completed the sixth grade and her mother earned her G.E.D. She described her parents as old-fashioned and strict. She was not allowed to go out with friends. She was to go to school and return home immediately. She attributed her academic success in high school to her parents' strictness. Although, they expected her to do well in secondary school, they never

suggested she go to college. Gina credits her boyfriend for her desire and drive to complete college.

Vanessa's views of traditional gender roles differed from her parents. She spoke of her father as the dominant figure in the family and provided numerous examples of how her parents lived out traditional gender roles, imparting their beliefs on their daughters. She was open-minded and independent in her thinking. Vanessa described how college gave her the outlet to voice her opinions without getting in trouble.

Donna, like Vanessa, had started out at the Downtown Campus. She felt like she fit in more at the Downtown Campus as compared to the main or 1604 Campus. She described how she thought she fit in better there because the campus was smaller, it had more Hispanics attending, and it was closer to home. She stated that the people were different and went on to say how there were not any "Greeks" at the Downtown Campus like there were at the main campus.

Yvette's story was very inspirational, particularly for teenage mothers. Yvette delivered a son when she was 16-years-old. She married his father and has remained with him. She spoke of her son as the motivating factor for pursuing a college degree because she wanted a better life for him. Also motivating was the desire to prove her extended family wrong. She felt as though her family thought she would not make it and would end up in a dead-end job because she had gotten pregnant. She described her dreams of moving out of state and becoming a lawyer or maybe a lobbyist. She was determined to seek out her dreams, despite what many would consider a significant barrier. Her

husband was supportive of her college education even though he himself was not in college. Yvette described how he would help her study and cope with exams.

Rachel commuted from New Braunfels, a small town about 30 minutes outside of San Antonio. She lived in the dorm her first year, however she moved back home soon after. She described how her mother did not like the idea of her moving out of the house. She told Rachel that she would have to pay for the dorm herself. The first year, the money she received from grants and scholarships paid for tuition and living expenses, however her sophomore year, she did not receive enough aid to cover the dorm without having to take out a loan. She decided to move back home for financial reasons and as a result of a negative experience she had had with her roommate and because her boyfriend and job were in New Braunfels.

Rachel described her boyfriend as supportive of her education, however he himself was not in college. Her boyfriend's father was a supportive role model to her. She spoke of how he too was the first in his family to obtain a college degree and how he had become successful. She felt she could relate to him since he was aware of what she was going through. She also identified her family practitioner as a role model. She spoke of her fear of pursuing a degree in biology and trying to gain admittance into medical school, but then she thought to herself, "Dr. Campos did it, and different Hispanics in our community have done it, so if they have done it, I can do it."

Jesus was from El Paso and lived his first year in an apartment with his older brother who was attending graduate school to become a dentist. In Jesus' second year of college, he moved on campus with three roommates. He described how his mother did

not want him to move away, however since his brother lived in San Antonio, she felt a little more at ease. Jesus looked forward to going home from time to time because his family and friends would come together for a cookout in his honor. He described how before he moved out, his mother would tell him to do his chores, whereas now he was treated like a guest. He said they treated him differently now.

Jesus went to a medical magnet high school which prepared students to go to college. He said that two out-of-state institutions paid for him to visit their campuses. This was his first time on an airplane. One of the institutions was Oberlin College in Cleveland, Ohio. It was like another world to Jesus. He described the terrain, which was very different from the desert of El Paso. He said it was the first time he had seen trees.

Jesus mentioned all the courses he had taken in high school and how even his calculus II course in college seemed like review. He was gifted in math and the sciences. He was majoring in mechanical engineering, but was now thinking of changing his major to criminal justice to become a police officer.

Elena was from Brownsville, Texas. She was the typical small town girl looking for the first available opportunity to venture out into the world. She described how everyone knew everyone and spoke of the gossip that came along with living in a small town. Although her parents were sad that she was leaving, they were supportive of her decision because they knew how important it was that she received a good education. Elena wished she could still help her family like she had done in the past. She was the eldest of four children, and she often looked after her siblings, ran errands, and helped around the house. Elena went home at least every three weeks. She missed watching her

siblings grow up, and she missed her house. Her homesickness was no surprise to her because her family was very close, but she knew she would have more opportunities if she went to UTSA.

For the first time in college, Elena had a boyfriend which she found to be difficult. Her boyfriend had recently completed his bachelor's and was starting his master's. Elena's boyfriend is from Laredo, Texas. She described how they can relate to one another because he too is Mexican American, and they shared the same culture and values.

Paul was from San Antonio and graduated from a small, Christian, private school. He had entered the honors college at UTSA as a freshman. He had learned about the program from an acquaintance of his father's. Paul was wise beyond his years. He had such a positive attitude and outlook on life. Already, he knew that he would be going to graduate school once he completed his bachelor's. He spoke of the responsibility, focus, and attitude necessary to succeed, characteristics of which he seemed to embody.

Delia spoke of the difficulty she experienced her first year as a result of her pregnancy. She was expecting her first child during her first semester at college. She explained how her instructors were very understanding of her situation and allowed her to take an incomplete grade for the semester and complete the course.

Delia was born in Del Rio, Texas. Her father was in the military, and she had lived in Okinawa, Japan. They later moved to San Antonio, and her parents divorced when she was 12. Her father continued to travel with the military, while she lived with her mother. Delia described her father as very conservative, and for a while, he did not

allow English to be spoken in the house because her little brother was forgetting how to speak Spanish. Delia stated that she agreed with some of her father's beliefs, however she did not agree with many others. Because her father was the man of the house, she said that her mother put up with a lot that she would not have put up with herself. She described him as "machismo," and stated that what he said went. When he asked them to jump, they were to ask how high.

Her parents were initially disappointed when they learned of her pregnancy, however they quickly supported her to continue her education. Her parents surprised her because she described them as extremely conservative, and when they found out she was pregnant, the first thing they told her was that she did not have to marry the father of her child and that she was still going to college. She had initially planned on attending the University of Texas at Austin or the Air Force Academy, however she had to put this dream aside because she was going to need the help of her family with her baby. Having a child altered her ability to participate in the kind of activities she would have been involved in had she not become pregnant. Like Yvette, Delia was also motivated to complete her degree as a result of her desire to provide a future for her child.

Michelle was from San Antonio and graduated from an all female, private, catholic high school. She had a boyfriend who had attended the neighboring, all male, private, catholic high school. He started out at UTSA, however he was placed on academic probation and began taking classes at San Antonio College, with the hopes of raising his grade point average and transferring back. Michelle stated that he was not as

focused as she was and that she constantly spoke to him about the need to do well in college.

Michelle's boyfriend was from the northeast side of town, a more affluent area of the city. She stated that she had grown up primarily around Hispanics, and that she was being exposed to the Anglo culture through UTSA and through her boyfriend's friends. Although her boyfriend was Hispanic, he had many Anglo friends. She described how she thought they were probably more judgmental of her than they actually were. She was not sure how they perceived her. Her boyfriend's friends made "ghetto" jokes, referring to where she lived. She said that they didn't know what ghetto was. She explained, "To the truly ghetto, I'm spoiled, and I'm rich because I have my own car, and I went to private school, and I have a big house." At first, she was offended, but then she became used to their comments. She did not think they meant to hurt her.

John, a native of San Antonio, was an undocumented college student. Although he was eligible for in-state tuition under House Bill 1403, somehow he was categorized as an international student at UTSA, which created all kinds of challenges for him. He had to come up with a large sum of money to prove sustenance and was fearful of being deported. John spoke of the limitations that were placed on him as a result of his residency status. He was a very bright young man and very articulate. He had already applied for citizenship and was awaiting his interview which would take place in 15 years and two months.

Question 1: Factors Contributing to Persistence

A total of nine themes emerged from the data related to factors that contributed to first-generation Mexican American student persistence in their first year and into their second. The themes arose from both the focus groups and the individual interviews, many of which were congruent with the findings in literature. Each theme is listed below followed by its description:

- Parental and Self Expectations -

Students indicated that their parents expected them to push themselves and succeed academically. Parents also expected that them to pursue a college education. Participants described the expectations that they placed on themselves to do well academically and to earn a college education.

- Institutional Proximity to home-

Students chose the university based on its proximity to home.

- Academic Preparedness -

Students described being academically prepared to handle the rigors of college.

- Institutional Fit -

Students indicated that they felt like they “fit in” at the college. Students described the college as comfortable and the people as helpful and friendly. They enjoyed being with people who shared their interests.

- New and Exciting Experiences -

Students described their enjoyment of being exposed to new and exciting experiences. This included meeting new people, experiencing freedom and independence, and growing as a person.

- Financial Resources -

Students stated that financial aid and financial support from family left them free from financial difficulties.

- Institutional Support Systems -

Participants identified many ways in which they received support from institutional services and resources.

- External Support Systems -

Participants drew strength from the support they received from parents, friends and family, mentors and role models, and their religious faith.

- Motivation to Finish -

Students identified factors that inspired them to continue their education and complete a degree.

The voices of participants are presented in the form of excerpts from the individual interviews to illustrate the essence of each theme.

Parental and SelfExpectations

Parents placed high expectations on their children to perform at their best. As a result, participants adopted this value and pushed themselves to excel. Some of the participants reported that it was an expectation of their parents that they attend college. They also indicated that their parents emphasized the importance of succeeding

academically. Academic achievement became a self expectation of participants and this included earning a degree.

Parental Expectation to Attend College

Participants indicated that their parents expected them to attend college. For some, it was not even a choice. They had to go to college. The importance of an education was emphasized. For one student, the expectation was to become a doctor or lawyer. While for another, it was thought that he would change the identity of the family.

- It wasn't so much an influence, but my parents always instilled it in me. A lot of my friends had big parties when they graduated from high school, and it wasn't something that my parents were exactly proud of, it was expected that we graduated from high school and attend college, so it was something that was always instilled in us.

Parental Expectation to Succeed Academically

At an early age, participants learned from their parents that earning good grades was an expectation. Parents became upset if a grade of "C" or even a "B" was earned. These grades were not accepted in the household. Students would receive a lecture on expectations and often times, privileges would be taken away. They were encouraged to push themselves academically and to do their best.

- My father wanted straight A's all the time. I guess because I got them all the time, then they expected them of me and then when I had difficulty in a subject and I got a B, they would be like, "We don't accept that because you can get straight A's because we've seen you get straight A's." My mom used to be like, "Oh, an

A and B that's fine, you're on the honor roll," but then she was like, "You can get A's. I don't want to see B's." At times it was frustrating because at times I would get a B because I wasn't great in that subject. Basically they expected straight A's.

Self Expectations

Participants also placed high expectations on themselves. They took pride in the grades they made and worked very hard to maintain the grades that they were used to earning. If a lower than expected grade was earned, they took it very hard. Participants spoke of their dedication and determination to do well academically. They pushed themselves just as their parents had instructed them to do while growing up. They had dreams of graduating with honors and attending graduate school. Earning high grades would afford them this opportunity.

- Well, sometimes I get a B in my classes, but I really strive for an A. But sometimes I can't get an A, you know. Getting a C is bad for me, because I feel like I failed that class. Because my mom always was A, B...I guess she already implemented that system in me, but I really try to come to class all the time and not get a C.

Institutional Proximity to Home

Participants perceived institutional proximity, or UTSA's distance from home, as an advantage. Participants wanted to remain close to home while pursuing their college education. They emphasized the importance of their family and how much they relied on them for emotional support. Those that lived at home relied on their family to keep them

grounded and out of trouble. Those that lived away from home enjoyed the close proximity so that they could visit with friends and family regularly. For some, moving away for college was not a possibility given the cost of room and board. One described living at home as a way to concentrate on his studies rather than having to find work to pay for his expenses.

- My thing was the distance. I wanted something close to home. As much as I wanted to get away from home, my family is the world to me and my boyfriend lived in New Braunfels at the time, so I really wanted something close to there, my job was there.
- I like being at home. All my friends are like, “Move out already.” Some of them have asked, “Do you want to be my roommate?” My parents, they don’t give me total freedom, but they give me enough so that I won’t get into trouble. They keep me grounded.

Academic Preparedness

Participants’ were equipped to handle the rigor of college given their prior academic preparation. Many described how Advanced Placement (AP) classes prepared them for college level work. Participants indicated that they had developed the study skills in high school to become successful and were able to apply them in college with some refinement. They attributed their academic preparedness in college to their educational background in high school.

- I think I was really ready. As far as my intellectual capability of doing the work, I could do it and I could handle it...My senior year I took a lot of AP courses which

my counselor really stressed. “Take AP courses, Take AP courses.” So my whole senior year it was nothing but AP courses, boring but kind of lecture, but that’s what it is here. It’s just that teachers stand up there and talk an hour and a half and you just take notes and that’s how it was. I was just really prepared because I took the AP courses.

- The first year was like an academic down step. Over there, I even had some teachers that were doctors in my high school. I wasn’t surprised when I talked to my professors and heard the big words, because in high school I took calculus, advanced physics and advanced chemistry and biology and they wanted me to take like algebra and remedial here, but I just tested into the other ones. My first year, I reviewed everything I already new. It wasn’t like the stuff was new. I saved almost \$2000 testing out of classes...I was real prepared coming into college. The only difference is that there’s more reading in college.

Institutional Fit

Participants felt like they belonged at UTSA. They felt comfortable and welcome within the institutional climate and found the people to be helpful and friendly. Many indicated that friends from high school and family members were also attending the college. This helped them to broaden their network of friends on campus. They enjoyed interacting with people who shared their interests. Although students stated that they fit in at both campuses, some students were more comfortable at the Downtown Campus as compared to the 1604 Campus. This was attributed to the proximity to home, greater number of Hispanic students, and the smaller size of the Downtown Campus.

- I had a pretty easy transition with friends because it wasn't like I was completely...my sister had come to UTSA. I knew a lot of her friends from high school. I knew a lot of her friends who were in sororities, so I had come to UTSA for on-campus events. I would stick with my sister, and I would get to know her friends. I didn't like the fact that I was known as Serena's little sister. Once I was known as Vanessa, everything was cool.
- The downtown campus is a little bit different. I thought that I fit in there more (than the 1604 campus) because the campus is smaller and also, there's a lot more Hispanics that go there, I guess mostly because it's on the west side on the south side, so I did like that campus better...I feel like I fit in pretty good (at the 1604 campus). I knew that I could go out and make friends. I think I did pretty good.

New and Exciting Experiences

Participants enjoyed being exposed to new and exciting experiences. This experience ranged from meeting new people from diverse backgrounds, gaining freedom and independence, to growing as a person. These experiences contributed to their desire to continue their education.

Meeting New People

Participants described how they met people from all walks of life, in state, out of state, and international. They found enjoyment from learning about their cultures and values. They were surprised to learn that many of these fellow students shared their same interests. One student was pleased to have the opportunity to meet fellow Christians.

- I'm learning about new things, meeting new people, and experiencing college, and I can always say that at least I went to college...I guess because you get a broader view of how society is. You meet people from different countries and you learn about their cultures or even in your own city, you meet people from different parts of town that you've never gone to. You meet new people and just like, it lessens your ignorance to other things.

Freedom and Independence

College provided the freedom and independence desired by participants. College was an outlet for what some described as a controlling home environment. They were able to share thoughts in class that were not accepted at home. Participants enjoyed the freedom of doing what they wanted, when they wanted both in terms of their social lives and academically. No longer were the days of high school when their schedules were predetermined and attending class was closely monitored by school officials and parents. Although students admitted that finding a balance was difficult, they enjoyed being able to make decisions for themselves.

- It was more because my parents were really strict. I think Latino family units are so close and close knit and my parents were very strict, and I grew up "Curfew is at this time, and curfew is at this time." I really just wanted to go. I wanted to leave, and I wanted to experience what I couldn't do as a junior or senior in high school. Just be on my own. It proved to be much harder than I thought it would be, but my mom was always there to help me and pick me up and give me money...I like the freedom. I liked being on my own. Even though it was kind of

tough, I liked the coming and going as I pleased and really being on my own and having a place to be. I just felt that I was independent, and I was one person, not the youngest daughter of my family or part of something else. I was a part of something new and bigger and better and by myself and I really liked that.

Personal Growth

Participants described becoming educated about world issues, looking at things from different perspectives, and becoming more mature in their thinking and actions as a result of their college experiences. They described learning a great deal about themselves and their place in society, discovering things that they never knew they could accomplish. They learned that they were capable of making sound decisions and that it was important to listen to the opinions of others and have an open mind.

- It was just a nice way to get to know people and get to know myself. I think I grew a lot within my freshman year...My senior year, I was really, you couldn't tell me anything because I would always have a remark back for you and if you hurt my feelings, I was going to hurt your feelings ten times more. If you cried, I felt bad for you because I wasn't going to stop. It's like there's not so much viciousness in college. There's not so much girl drama like fighting over boys. I was able to learn, "Hey this isn't normal," like having a girl want to kill you because you dated her ex-boyfriend isn't normal. It was a way to clear my head and let the past be the past and move forward.

Financial Resources

Participants were able to fund their college expenditures through available financial resources. Resources included state and federal financial aid as well as familial support. Financial aid consisted of grants, loans, and scholarships. Familial support came in the form of room and board, tuition assistance, transportation, and other living expenses.

Financial Aid

Financial aid provided the means necessary for participants to attend college. Scholarships were awarded for academic merit and community involvement. Some participants received enough grant money to cover tuition and fees, while others took out loans.

- My freshman year was great. My whole school was paid for with grants. I got some loans too or got qualified for loans, but I declined them. It was all of grants with about 2 to 3 thousand dollars left over. Keep in mind, I had a lot of scholarships. I had 3 or 4. I had a music one. I had a church one. I had a community or Lions club, something like that, but I still worked maybe just on weekends. I would go home every weekend from the dorm. So my freshman year was good. I had a lot of money to play with. School came first.

Familial Support

Parents, grandparents, and siblings were identified as individuals that provided financial support to participants. Living at home made it possible for some students to attend college. Those that lived off campus received food, toiletries, and laundry

assistance from parents. Family also assisted with transportation, spending money, and clothing.

- My parents pay for my car payment and insurance and my cell phone bill. I feel like the least I can do is pay for my school because I can do it. If I were in a bind, I know they would help me out, but I pretty much go to work to pay for school.

Institutional Support Systems

Participants identified many ways in which they received academic support from institutional services and resources. Institutional support services consisted of an orientation, referred to as Roadrunner Camp, tutoring, a freshman seminar class, and career services. Participants indicated that they received supplemental instruction (SI) in certain classes which was led by a student who had previously taken the course and completed it successfully. Some participants described the support they received from counseling/advising services, learning communities, and the honors program. College mentors and role models also provided support to the students.

Orientation

Orientation is a summer program at UTSA, offered to entering freshman prior to the start of their first semester. Orientation is a means by which students meet faculty and staff, build relationships with other students, and learn of the various programs and support services offered by the college. Participants reported that the orientation gave them the opportunity to meet new people and make new friends. During the orientation, they were provided information about the various student support services available to them and how they could be accessed.

- I went to Roadrunner Camp (orientation). They have that here in the summer before the semester starts. It was fun. We got into different groups and competed like in field day activities.

Tutoring

Participants described the tutoring assistance they received from the Tomás Rivera Center. Participants described their level of comfort working with these peer tutors because they were close in age and the material was presented in a way that was easier to comprehend than how it was presented in class. Also inviting was the atmosphere of the center. Participants chose to complete homework there rather than the library because of the student activity and access to assistance.

- I went to the Tomás Rivera Center a few times, whenever I needed it. I also went when I was doing math work. We have a math lab which is run by graduate students, math students. I was in calculus, going through all that, I was there whenever I could get there because I really wanted to learn it, and I also needed the help, so I was very proficient about getting there, taking care of everything, and I had no problems with it. It was what I needed to do.

Freshman Seminar

The freshman seminar at UTSA is what many institutions refer to as an orientation course. Students learn about topics such as learning styles, study skills, student support services, and healthy living to name a few. Participants described the freshman seminar as an opportunity to meet other freshman and to improve their study skills.

- My freshman seminar course taught us how to take notes...Now I'm able to take down what I think is important, read a little bit more.

Career Services

Participants visited Career Services to help them select a major and career field. They described learning all the different occupations that could be sought with a certain degree and what their earning potential might be. Students obtained assistance with their job search to include resume writing. Counselors were available to administer career assessments, provide guidance, and direct towards resources for further exploration.

- I guess actually Career Services. I would go over there to take the tests. I didn't know what I could do with a history degree. They had books on what history degrees you could do and what jobs you were able to get with that. That was really a big help because I didn't know at all what to do. I went and used their books and did that test which tells you what you could be good at and stuff like that...I guess when I went to orientation they came to tell you what they (career services) do, and when I would pass by, I saw that they had different sessions like resume and other career stuff.

Supplemental Instruction (SI)

Participants indicated that some classes were assigned supplemental instruction leaders. According to the participants, these were students who had taken the class previously and were hired by the Tomás Rivera Center because of their skill in a certain area of study. They led SI sessions outside of the regularly scheduled class. During this

time, students would be able to review material from class, ask questions, and prepare for quizzes and tests.

- Well, I went to my SI's... We have assigned leaders (SI) in the classes... Like from the Tomás Rivera Center, and they will have sessions after class on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, and we have practice quizzes and stuff like that... Well, they were always in class, and when I came for registration during my first year, they were talking about the SI leaders, and how they really help you, and stuff like that... Well, that's what the SI leaders are, students... They are on work-study, I guess, so they get paid.

Counseling/Advising

Participants received assistance from counselors/advisors throughout their freshman year. Students described having to meet with an advisor four times within the freshman year. Advisors would work with them if they had not yet selected a major. They helped them to map out their classes for their major, informed them of policies and procedures, and reminded them of important dates and deadlines.

- My undergraduate counselor. She was so nice. I don't know if I was just lucky or they're all like that, but she was great helping me with my schedule and helping me organize my time. She was great with that. I really appreciated that.

Learning Communities

Learning communities are courses that are linked, across disciplines, by a common theme. A group of students register for the same set of classes, thus creating a

support network. Learning communities were described by participants as a great way to meet other people. They call upon each other for academic support as well as friendship.

- My first semester, I was in this learning community, and I had the same people throughout the whole day, so that's how I also got to know people 'cause we were all together in the same classes. So that really helped because now, I still have them for some of my classes, and we all know each other, and then they know other people, and so I get acquainted and that really worked...Because when I first registered here, they told me about it (learning communities), and if I wanted to be a part of it, just join in, and I was going to be with the same people, and I thought it was good since I didn't really know anyone that was going into my field from my friends. So, I'm like, "Well I'll meet people there."

Honors Program

The honors college is a program for gifted students, giving them an opportunity to work more intimately with faculty and other gifted students. It is geared towards those students who are interested in attending graduate school upon completion of their undergraduate degree. The honors college requires a research component, and students are matched with mentors to assist them through their undergraduate program.

- When I came in, I was a little bit nervous, but I was pretty confident that I was going to do well because I got into the honors college, and I had always been real focused...When I got to the honors college, I knew that I was going to be a little bit above the game and being able to do something that only a certain handful of students are able to do, I decided to go ahead... Essentially what it is, is that, as

part of the honors college, you have certain benefits to take certain classes, honors classes that are usually smaller and usually a little more difficult, but not always. You have a whole other environment with the smaller classes, so it almost seems easier. It's a little more challenging. It's nice because everybody who's in the class with you is an honors student. Usually they're very focused, so you're in a good environment as far as that goes. Essentially what happens is you take about 30 hours for tier II honors, and at the end of your college career, you have to do an honors thesis. It just gives you good experience as far as people going on to graduate school or higher level degrees. It gives you a good chance to do research on anything in your subject. It gives you the opportunity to have a mentor relationship with someone. A lot of experiences that you get from this is what you need to graduate.

College Mentors/Role Models

Participants identified faculty and staff at the university as individuals who have made a positive impact on them. They have served as role models and mentors to these students, encouraging them to complete their degrees and providing the guidance necessary to reach their goals. They have developed strong relationships with these students and have supported them both emotionally and academically.

- What I want to do, right now I work as a tour guide with the admissions office so I've become real close with the assistant director of admissions and she's like a real cool person. She's 27, so she's showing me that you can do this at a young age.

- I've kept in touch with my teacher from last semester. She's like the best teacher I've had here so far. That really helps, communicating with a professor... They actually take the time. They know your name. Like a professor I have this semester, I think he's just the sweetest man. Like he'll see you in the hall and say, "Hi." He'll say your name. That's what I notice. When I came to college, I thought no one's going to know my name. I'm just a number, and I just thought that's really nice when they know your name.

External Support

In addition to institutional support, participants reported other forms of support received from parents, friends and family, mentors and role models, and their religion. Participants spoke primarily of the emotional support provided by these sources, however financial and academic support were also mentioned. The emotional support was most valued by students because it gave them the will to continue their education.

Parents

All participants mentioned that parents were the most supportive individuals in the lives of participants. Parents were described as strict (or traditional Mexican), involved in their lives, and emotionally supportive. They felt as though the way in which their parents had raised them had prepared them to do well in college. This upbringing contributed to their ability to make good decisions, push themselves to do well, and show that they were responsible. Parents showed their children that they were proud of them for attending college and made efforts to assist them.

- I guess maybe my family. They're real supportive of me going to school and carrying on...They're encouraging me. If I need help, or if I need to go to the library then they'll give me a ride to the library or any kind of help they can give me. Also financial, my family is helping me with the money...I think my family is proud of me for going to college...They're proud of me trying to go to school and trying to make it...They tell me that they're proud of me. They're supportive, and they understand when I am going through finals. "I'm stressed, so leave me alone."

Support from Friends and Family

Participants described how friends and family supported them both emotionally and academically. Many called upon friends, siblings, and extended family to assist them with their school work. They also described the encouragement they received from extended family to continue their education. Female participants indicated that their boyfriends and husbands were supportive of their desire to gain a college education.

- And I was also with my husband, "Well, help me do this. Tell me repeatedly." And I would tell him the answer. You know, we would study like that. He also helped me a lot with my studying and coping with tests and exams.
- This year pre-cal, one of my friends is taking pre-cal and is really good at math at SAC (San Antonio College), so he helps me whenever I need help and helps me do my homework or study for the test. Help from friends and family and then the Sis I'd use a lot...I have a sister-in-law. Math is like a really hard class for me, so

everything else is fine, but like my math my second year, my sister-in-law helped me with college algebra.

Mentors/Role Models

Participants indicated that role models and mentors inspired them to continue their education. Since their parents had never attended college, they were unfamiliar with what college was all about. Participants felt understood by role models and mentors and looked to them for guidance because they had once been college students themselves. The students were inspired by these individuals because they came from similar backgrounds and they were proof that their dreams were possible.

- My boyfriend's father or his step-dad. His father from like 2 years old. He graduated from UT in Austin with a mechanical engineer degree and is working at Motorola and is making big bucks, and he's very dedicated at his work at Motorola...He really inspires me because he is the first person to go to college in his family, and it just inspires me because I feel like engineering isn't an easy thing, and I might want to go into pre-med, and I'm like and that's not an easy thing either, but seeing that he did it makes me feel like, "Well I can do it." If he did it, then I can do it...I really relate to him because he's been to school and knows how hard it is. He says when it gets hard, "you can do it. Just see it through all the way. Don't quit. Don't drop a course. If you really have to, then do it, but try to stick with it. Things will get better." He gives me advice a lot of times, but it's really just seeing him and the way he is that it really inspires me, so it really makes me want to work harder and keep with it...Biology is my major. Now that

I've taken my basics, I'm starting to get into the sciences and doing all that, and I really want to go pre-med and then I'm really scared. So, I'm really not sure.

"Can I do it?" Then I think, "Well Dr. Campos (family doctor) did it and different Hispanics in our community have done it, so if they have done it I can do it. "

Religious Faith

Religious faith was identified as a source of encouragement and support. One's faith made it possible to overcome obstacles and believe that a college education was a possibility. Friendships with fellow Christians provided a network of emotional support. The strength derived from one's faith made any dream seem like a possibility, including a college education.

- My faith in Jesus Christ is basically everything that pulled me through because that allowed me to gain the friendships with the people I did. That also allowed me to have some orderly direction in life...There hasn't been a semester where I don't have a trial, a really big impossible thing that I can't get done...I look back now, and I've seen myself through impossible situations, and I know when the time comes to face another impossible situation, I know that through faith in God, I'm going to get through it. That's how it's been every single semester. It almost feels like God's just preparing me for when I have to take on this residency status. Every semester something more impossible comes along the way, more blocks, and then I get through all of them, and that encourages me in knowing that when I have to deal with my residency status as far as applying to medical school or

getting a job, I know that I have been through impossible things before, and I know that I can get through them again.

Motivation to Finish Degree

Participants reported many personal motives that contributed to their desire to finish their degrees. Achieving financial security was a factor as well as the ability to prove a point. Some felt that completing their degrees would be encouraging to others, while others were interested in the opportunities that a degree would afford them. Some indicated that they were motivated by being the first in their families to earn a degree, and still others were motivated by their children. Accomplishing something was a motivational factor for several of the participants.

Achieve Financial Security

Participants indicated that they were motivated to complete their degree because of the financial security they knew it would bring them. They did not want to struggle financially like their parents and siblings had. They wanted to be able to afford a house and provide for their family. Participants wanted the ability to be independent and not have to rely on their families for financial assistance. Their parents wanted a better life for them and participants were driven by this.

- I think because we see my parents struggle paycheck to paycheck...I hear my mom say, "We're \$300 in the hole." I'm there when my mom says, "Can I borrow \$300 mija." My mom doesn't want us to live like that...I just want to know that I'll be able, if anything were to happen to me and my boyfriend, I want to know that I'll be able to support myself on my own, and God forbid if we were to get

married and have kids and we were to get a divorce, I want to know that I won't have to struggle to provide for my family. That keeps me going, knowing that I can't rely on anybody.

Prove a Point

Some participants were motivated by their desire to prove a point to someone that did not believe that they could go to college and complete a college degree. Both students with children indicated that because they had become pregnant, people doubted their ability to continue their education. Others had friends who told them they would not make it in college. Rather than being discouraging, these comments motivated them to continue their education.

- Now, they can't believe I do what I do. That's why I wanted to do it, to prove them wrong. I wasn't what they thought I was, you know... Well, because I got pregnant. They probably thought I wasn't going to make it, that I was going to end up with a dead-end job. But now, they are like, "Oh my God."

Encourage Others

Participants stated that they were motivated to complete their degrees because they felt like it would influence others to seek a college education. Earning a college degree would also bring encouragement to the family for a brighter future. The success of the participant is shared by the family. If one succeeds, they all succeed in one way or another.

- It's hard to tell my little sister that she has to go to college if I don't have a college degree. It's hard to tell my little cousin, "You're slacking in high school,

you can't do that anymore." He's as smart as me. He's just lazier than me and does barely enough to get by, so it's hard to tell him he has to do it if we're not going to college...One of my other cousins who's older than me tried telling him, "You have to go to school," but my cousin took a break this spring semester, so he was like, "Why should I listen to you, you're not in school right now." It's like being a hypocrite for telling him to go to school...My little sister has big dreams, but her big dreams don't involve academics which we're trying to push her.

Opportunities with College Degree

Participants stated that they knew a college education would provide them with the opportunity to do what they wanted to do in life. They were motivated by these opportunities because they did not want to end up in what they thought to be a boring job. They did not want to earn minimum wage, they wanted to be leaders.

- And I feel like when in the summer, when I start working fulltime, I feel like, "Oh, I don't want to be like this, like working all of the time for just a minimum wage." I don't want to be like that. So, I want to be my own boss. I don't want anybody to be the boss of me.

First in Family

Participants identified being the first in their families to earn a college degree as a motivation to continue their education. It would bring pride to them and their families. Earning a college degree would improve the social and economic status of their family. Some of their siblings had attempted college, but never completed a degree. They did not want to let their families down.

- There wasn't a defining experience, but one of the biggest influences on me, my parents never went to school for higher education...To me, I thought it was a big deal to take it one step further, to do what my parents did and then take it one step further. I wanted to go another step as far as my education. I saw that as a goal for me. As I got older, I thought this is really what I want to do. I wanted to go to college and experience that life because it's something that my parents never got to do. I saw it as something I could do that would be totally my own. It was a life experience that even my parents didn't have. I thought I could be a better person because I could experience something else, and it would benefit me all around.

Participant's Child

Both participants with children identified them as the reason for completing their education. They wanted to provide a better life for them than they had. They wanted them to have a life full of opportunities and free from financial struggles. They felt as though they were setting the example for their children by going to college and earning a degree.

- It's weird explaining how I feel, because I love learning. That's mainly the point why I came to school, and because of my son, a better life for him...A better life for him. Yeah, than we had.

Sense of Accomplishment

Participants indicated that they were driven to complete their degrees for the mere sense of accomplishment. They felt as though earning a degree was a major accomplishment that is earned by an elite group of individuals. Earning a degree would define them as successful members of society. They had friends and family who never

attempted to go to college, or attempted, but never completed a degree. Earning a degree was something very special to participants.

- Not only for my son, but also for myself because I always felt like every time I wanted to accomplish something, I want to finish it. I want to accomplish it... I really want my degree and I really want to follow international relations.

Question 2: Comparison in Relation to Gender

The factors contributing to persistence were compared in relation to gender, unveiling four differences among female and male first-generation Mexican American university student participants. Although both female and male participants identified the nine themes, four differences were found regarding two themes. These included external support systems and motivation to finish. Unlike the male participants, female students identified individuals of the opposite sex, with whom they shared romantic relationships, as members of their support system. Female participants also placed more of an emphasis on their extended family's role in their support system than did their male counterparts. Female participants identified their children and their own families as motivators to complete their college education, whereas males did not. Finally, female students attributed their motivation to complete their degrees to the need to prove a point to others, whereas the males did not identify this factor.

Support from Romantic Relationships

Female participants indicated that their boyfriends or husbands supported them in their educational endeavors. These men were proud of the accomplishments of the female

participants. One participant described how her husband helped her study for exams by quizzing her.

- He's really supportive, and he's very proud of me. Every chance he gets he's like, "She's doing so good," and this and that. He's really supportive, and he's very proud and really awesome.

Emphasis of Extended Family in the Support System

Female participants spoke repetitively of the support they received from their parents and siblings. They made more references to their families than did their male counterparts. They described the bond they shared with their families which led them to stay close to home. The female participants relied on their families to listen to them, encourage them, and care for their children. They described having open lines of communication with their parents and siblings.

- My parents did play a factor. I rely on my sisters so much. They're like my backbone at times. How do you get by without someone who's always stuck by you? My older sister has always been the one that I go cry to...My little sister is like a ball of laughter because she's such a dork. I wasn't willing to give that up yet.

Children and Family as Motivators

Female participants indicated that their own children and families motivated them to complete their degrees. Some spoke of their current families and others spoke of the families they hoped to have in the future. They wanted to provide their families with financial security and exemplify the value of a college education for their children's

benefit. They believed that their children would be more likely to attend college if they understood the value of an education. An education would lessen the possibility of experiencing the same financial difficulties faced by their parents.

- I see how they (her parents) struggle...I am doing this now so that I can be able to provide for my kids and for my family and to buy a house and not have to move in with my parents like my sister and brother did. I want to be able to buy a house. Just not to worry about things like that. I have a boyfriend and we are real serious, and we want to get married, but we know that we have to wait until I get out of school or almost finished with college.

Motivated to Prove a Point

Unlike their male counterparts, female participants indicated that they were motivated to complete their degrees because they wanted to prove to those that doubted them that they were able to accomplish their goal. For some, it was because of their pregnancy that people in their lives thought they would be unable to complete a college education. For others, it was proving to their peers that they could succeed in college.

- Some people went back (home) after the first year. I don't know. When you go back they'll be like, "See. I told you, you wouldn't make it. I told you, you were going to come back," and I don't know. I just couldn't give up like that. I wanted to just stay and finish it off...because they are stuck there and they weren't going to go anywhere, and whenever I go back home, they are still there (at the restaurant she used to work at). They are still servers there. Some of them had gone off (to college) and came back and they didn't make it.

Reflexive Accounts from the Researcher

This section is a reflection of my thoughts and impressions as I embarked upon my own journey through this study. As I mentioned in Chapter III, reflexivity is a process of self-reference, an acknowledgment of the effect that the researcher has on the findings reported in a study. The commentary that follows allows the reader to understand the position of the researcher as well as the lens through which she viewed the contributions of participants. Being privy to this information allows the reader to make their own assumptions, putting into perspective the context in which the findings are presented within this study.

My story begins on the day in which the focus groups were scheduled. As I drove into San Antonio, I realized that it had been less than a year since I had moved from San Antonio to Houston. I had lived in San Antonio from sixth grade through high school, went to UT in Austin for my bachelor's, and then returned to San Antonio for another seven years. The drive in was like coming home. I know the town well, so I drove straight to the institution, which was a familiar scene. I had been on the main campus many times. I entered the building in which I had reserved a small conference room. It was the college center, a fairly new building, modern with its architecture and furnishings. I prepared the cozy room, assembling my audio recorder, paperwork, and the light refreshments I planned to offer my guests.

One of the participants arrived, a male student by the name of Raul. I introduced myself, thanked him for coming, and offered him refreshments. I told him that we were waiting for four other students. As the scheduled time for the focus group quickly

approached, I became anxious to greet the remaining participants. Another male entered the room. His name was Adolfo. I welcomed him and asked both men to excuse me while I attempted to contact the remaining participants. I was able to get a hold of one who apologized, saying that something had come up. I later found a message on my cell phone from another participant who was calling to cancel. I never did hear back from the fifth student. I was disappointed given that I had confirmed with all five of them the night before. I had to look at the bright side. At least two had shown. I was going to make the best out of the time I had with them.

I tried to be very informal and make the participants as comfortable as possible. I was wearing jeans and a shirt which I thought epitomized the “young, eager, graduate student.” I started off with a few light questions. It was not long before Raul took the floor and was very forthcoming with information. I had to facilitate the group to allow for both participants to share their stories. I was very pleased with the way the focus group ran. Although I only had two students in the group, I felt like I had captured a great deal of rich information. I knew that my next focus group, which would begin in a couple of hours, would be comprised of females, so I felt fortunate to gain the voices of the male perspective. I also felt as though they enjoyed engaging in conversation. They left in good spirits.

In between focus groups, I went to the campus’ food court and bought a snack. I sat outdoors where several tables were set up for students to congregate. It was a great location to observe the campus life. As I took notes from the focus group I had just completed, I could not help but look at my surroundings and think about what the young

men had shared with me. Some of their comments came to mind as I observed students going about their day to day lives at college. It was almost as if these students were acting out the scenes in which the two young men had created in my mind. I now viewed this college, which I had visited time and time again, in a new light. My people watching came to an end as I gathered all my things to carry to the next focus group.

I walked over to the same building in which the first focus group was held, except this time I was in a different conference room. It was a bit smaller, but served its purpose none the less. As before, I set up the room as I felt necessary and awaited the arrival of the next group. I was hoping that it wouldn't be a repeat of the previous group in terms of the number of participants. It was not. Instead, this time only one female showed for the focus group. Needless to say, I was less than pleased. I had also confirmed with these students the night before and weeks prior. I was in disbelief. Regardless of my personal distress, I carried on and told myself, "It could always be worse." I was grateful to the one female student for making an appearance.

Gina appeared for the scheduled focus group on time. She was a bit soft spoken at first, but quickly became more comfortable and talkative. Like the young men I had met with earlier, I was impressed with Gina's willingness to share with me what I would consider personal accounts of her experiences. As I listened to Gina, common themes were becoming evident as she described experiences similar to that of the young men. There were, however, some differences. Some were obviously gender based, while others were yet to be determined. Our discussion concluded, and I thanked Gina for her time and candidness.

It had been a long day, and even though I was disappointed with the low turnout, I was inspired by the young students who I had just met. I never tire from speaking to college students. I suppose that is why I chose a career in higher education. Listening to them takes me back in time to my own undergraduate experience. I was alive with wonder and hope for what the future held as were they. Although my experiences were a bit different from these students, there are still things to which I can relate. As a college administrator, knowing the college system is now second nature, however there was a time where many things about college were foreign to me. In speaking with these students, I am reminded of how confusing the system can be and how each experience contributes to one's personal growth.

There was no time to form additional focus groups, as I had already scheduled individual interviews for the following week. I was determined to do everything possible to insure that the participants would show. I immediately called them, sent emails, and reminded them the day before we were scheduled to meet. I told them how important it was for me that they show up for the interviews. There was some last minute rearranging of schedules, however I managed to conduct ten individual interviews. For this, I was proud and encouraged.

The first interview I conducted took place at the downtown campus, an even newer facility than that at the main campus at highway 1604. Again, I had driven from Houston and made my way to San Antonio to conduct my first interview at 9 a.m. I had also visited this campus in the past, so it was a familiar scene as well. Unlike the serene main campus, located on the outskirts of San Antonio, the downtown campus is located in

the heart of the city. Parking is located under the freeway, and the student population is predominantly Hispanic. There was a much different feel at this campus as compared to the main campus. I think the difference has to do with the more intimate setting of the downtown campus, the cultural climate, and the socioeconomic status of the students.

I met Vanessa in the library and utilized one of the study rooms to conduct the interview. What struck me most about this interview were Vanessa's views about traditional gender roles as compared to her parents. It was interesting to hear how open-minded and how independent she was in her thinking as compared to her parents. Her two sisters shared her views, which made me wonder if the support they provided one another gave them the freedom to think differently than their parents. I enjoyed listening to her story because I consider myself a strong, independent woman who does not like to be held to traditional standards. I was impressed with her because I felt she shared my values of the role of women in society. It made me hopeful for the future that there are young, Hispanic women, such as Vanessa, that have the ability to make a difference.

Once I concluded my interview with Vanessa, I was headed back to the main campus for the remainder of my interviews which occurred over two days. I returned to the same building where I had conducted the focus groups. Having been there before, I was very comfortable in my environment. My second interview was with another female student by the name of Donna. Like Vanessa, she too had started out at the downtown campus. I thought it was interesting to hear her describe how she felt like she fit in more at the downtown campus as compared to the main campus. She echoed my initial impressions of the downtown campus.

My third interview was with Yvette, a young mother who became pregnant her senior year of high school. I was impressed with her determination to seek out her dreams, despite what many would consider a significant barrier. Also impressive was her husband's support of her college education even though he himself was not in college.

Rachel was scheduled as my fourth interview. Numerous thoughts came to mind as I listened to Rachel. The first was in regards to her mother's negative reaction to her daughter's desire to move out of the house. Rachel seemed to be a very intelligent and a responsible young woman, so why did her mother not want her to move out? Rachel stated that when she lived in the dorm and came home on weekends, her father would tell her that her mother would cry every Sunday night and would fall asleep on Rachel's bed. Rachel expressed how that affected her. A part of me felt as though her mother was being selfish by placing so much pressure on Rachel to stay at home, not considering her desire to venture out into the world. The second thought that came to mind was that both Rachel and Yvette were in relationships with men who were not attending college. Luckily they were supportive of the women's education, however my own biases made me feel as though these women should have sought out men with similar educational and career goals as their own. I was pleased that their relationships did not influence them to abandon their goals. Lastly, I was intrigued by Rachel's description of her role models. She chose these individuals as role models because she could relate to them given their similar backgrounds and Hispanic origins.

Jesus was the first male that I interviewed individually and was the first that had traveled a significant distance to attend UTSA. He was from El Paso. While trying to

decide where to attend college, Jesus had visited Oberlin College in Cleveland, Ohio. This was of interest to me because my older brother had attended college there, and I knew the caliber of students that were accepted to that institution. I remember I was in high school when my family and I drove my brother to Oberlin for his first year of college. It was like another world, and Jesus described it as such.

When I asked him what his interest was in pursuing criminal justice, he said that he wanted to do something exciting, like being a cop. I thought to myself, “You have to be kidding me.” Jesus was obviously a very bright young man with the potential for greatness, and he wanted to be a cop? Again, my own biases were revealed. I wanted Jesus to reach, what I believed to be, his maximum potential, and becoming a police officer was not what I had in mind. A career in law enforcement I could understand, however I expected one that would best utilize his gifts. I felt Jesus had grown up with limited exposure to the world beyond El Paso other than what he had learned from books, school, and the media. I knew that what he learned in college would be an eye-opening experience.

My sixth interview was with Elena who was from Brownsville, Texas. After our interview, which took place in the evening, she had planned to drive to Brownsville to visit her family. I thanked her for her willingness to meet with me despite her long drive ahead. Elena spoke of her negative experiences with her roommates. The way she described these experiences was humorous. It took me back to my own college days and reminded me of how difficult it could be adjusting to living with someone other than a family member. Elena also described the difficulty of having a boyfriend for the first time

in college. It was entertaining to listen to her talk about how distracted she had become and how much time it had taken away from her school work and how she planned to “put a stop to it”. I was happy to hear that her boyfriend was also academically driven. Elena described how she and her boyfriend had come from similar backgrounds , as was the case for the other female participants I had spoken with who were also in relationships with men.

I met with Paul for the seventh interview. What stood out about Paul was his wisdom beyond his years. He was a responsible young man who, when he spoke, sounded more like a parent than a 20 year-old college student. He was very observant of others and the results of their actions. He learned from this and applied these lessons to the way he lived his life. He was an introspective young man who made me want to know who he would become in the years ahead.

My eighth interview was with Delia. She spoke of the difficulty she experienced her first year as a result of her pregnancy. I admire Delia for her courage to continue with her education, despite her pregnancy. I also commend her parents for supporting her in her education. I hear of so many stories where young women think that they are unable to attend college because they had a child. Yvette mentioned earlier that having a child made it that much more important to seek an education.

Delia described her father as conservative and for a while, he did not allow English to be spoken in the house because her little brother was forgetting how to speak Spanish. Looking back on my own childhood, I wish my parents would have spoken Spanish when I was growing up. I took two years of Spanish in high school and two

semesters in college, and I still cannot understand the language. Delia also spoke of her father's dominance as the man of the household and how she rejected this traditional role. I wondered what in Delia's environment or life experience led her to reject the value of a man being the head of the house. Regardless, I was pleased to hear her express her opinion.

Michelle, the ninth student I interviewed, described how her boyfriend's friends made jokes about where she lived. They considered her neighborhood to be on the poor side of town. It hurt me to listen to her speak about how they joked. It was interesting to hear how she made meaning of what she had experienced, discounting what had to have been hurtful words. Although she said she knew they did not mean to hurt her feelings, I felt it had to be painful. I grew up on the northeast side of San Antonio and attended an upper middle class high school. I knew exactly what she was describing. As high school students, we only associated with those from "respectable" areas of town. One did not date others from outside certain boundaries or else you would hear similar remarks as experienced by Michelle.

My final interview had to be the most interesting and touching. I met with John, a native of San Antonio, who told me his story of what it was like to be an undocumented college student. What was to become of him once he completed his bachelor's? Would he be able to work or follow his dream of going to medical school? None of this could happen until he gained citizenship, which is not an easy feat. At first John seemed skeptical about the interview with me. He asked me more questions about the interview than the others had. He wanted to make sure he understood the purpose of the study, how

I would be using the audio tapes, and how his identity would be protected. I assured him that I would never reveal his true identity. At one point in the interview, he indicated that his accent was usually better and that he wasn't feeling well. John said he noticed that when he was ill or nervous his accent became more evident. He explained, "I guess the Mexican in me comes out because that's what I fall back on when I get scared."

Regardless of his initial hesitation with the interview, he shared his experiences freely. I was moved by his story.

In concluding these interviews, I reflect on the information I have gathered. Did I ask all the appropriate follow-up questions? Did I miss something as a result of my focus on one topic or another? Did I pick up on everything that the participants wanted me to hear? As much as I made a conscious effort to refrain from influencing participant responses, did I inadvertently do so in one way or another? Did my own biases lead me to selectively hear what was of interest to me? I had asked myself similar questions prior to the interview in an effort not to influence the participants in any way or to taint the data collected.

The time I spent with these students was an invaluable experience for me. I was touched by their willingness to share the intimate details of their stories. I was so grateful for the time they afforded me. The voices of these students will forever echo in my mind and have contributed to the way in which I view the academic world.

Summary

This chapter presented participant profiles and responded to the two research questions posed in Chapter III. The first question involved the factors, as perceived by

first-generation Mexican American university students, that contributed to the persistence of students in their first year of college and into their second at a Hispanic Serving Institution. Nine themes were presented. These included parental and self expectations, institutional proximity, academic preparedness, institutional fit, new and exciting experiences, financial resources, institutional support systems, external support systems, motivation to finish.

The second question asked how these factors compared in relation to gender. Although both female and male participants identified the nine themes, four differences were found regarding two themes. These included external support systems and motivation to finish. Unlike the male participants, female students identified individuals of the opposite sex, with whom they shared romantic relationships, as members of their support system. Female participants also placed more of an emphasis on their extended family's role in their support system than did their male counterparts. Female participants identified their children and their own families as motivators to complete their college education, whereas males did not. Finally, female students attributed their motivation to complete their degrees to the need to prove a point to others, whereas the males did not identify this factor.

Excerpts from the individual interviews were presented which captured the voices of participants and supported the findings. This chapter concluded with the reflective accounts of the researcher which allowed the reader to understand her position as well as the lens through which she viewed the contributions of participants. The next chapter

provides conclusions drawn from the study, implications for policy and practice, and considerations for future research.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

Introduction

This chapter contains a review of the purpose of the study, the research questions posed, and the methodology used to conduct the study. A summary of the findings is presented followed by a discussion of the factors found to contribute to the persistence of participants. Also discussed is how these factors differ in relation to gender. Conclusions are drawn followed by implications and considerations for future research.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify the factors, as perceived by first-generation Mexican American university students, influencing the persistence of students in their first year of college and into their second year at a Hispanic Serving Institution (HIS). In addition, this study will compare these students' perceptions in relation to gender.

Research Questions

The research questions addressed in this study consist of the following:

1. What factors, as perceived by first-generation Mexican American university students, contribute to the persistence of students in their first year of college and into their second at a Hispanic Serving Institution?
2. How do the factors that contribute to persistence compare in relation to gender among female and male first-generation Mexican American university students?

Methodology

This study was conducted following qualitative research methods to fully capture, in richness and detail, the experiences of the participants studied (Patton, 2002). The institution selected for this study was the University of Texas at San Antonio, an HSI. Participants included those who were first-generation Mexican American university students, enrolled in a HSI as freshman with no prior college experience, and persisted into a second year of college.

Through the triangulation of various data sources, the credibility and validity of this study's findings was enhanced. This was achieved by utilizing focus groups, individual interviews, and the researcher's journal. Data was collected through focus groups and in-depth individual interviews. Themes that arose from the focus groups provided the basis from which an interview guide was developed to use within the individual interviews. Conducting individual interviews, following the focus groups, allowed for further exploration of emerging themes and gave the participant an opportunity to respond in a more intimate setting. The researcher's journal involved self-reflexivity, reflexivity about those studied, and reflexivity about the audience. Through this methodology, the voice and personal experiences of participants were heard and documented as well as the voice and perspective of the researcher.

Data analysis involved identifying, coding, categorizing, classifying, and labeling the primary patterns found in the interview transcriptions (Patton, 2002). QSR NUD-IST, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software program, was utilized to facilitate the coding process. Following each interview, audio tapes were transcribed and carefully

examined or coded line by line, using the themes identified from the focus groups. The coded text was compared and contrasted to find relationships or patterns among themes. Results were displayed through the presentation of excerpts from transcripts in support of each theme. Comparisons were also made in relation to gender.

Summary of Findings and Conclusions

Nine themes were identified by participants as factors that contributed to their persistence in their first year and into their second. Parental and self expectations, a theme identified by participants, referred to the high expectations parents placed on their children to perform at their best, thus resulting in the participant's adoption of this value. Participants perceived institutional proximity, or UTSA's distance from home, as an advantage. Participants wanted to remain close to home while pursuing their college education. The theme, academic preparedness, reflected participants' belief that they were equipped to handle the rigor of college given their prior academic preparation. Participants felt comfortable and welcome within the institutional climate and found the people to be helpful and friendly, thus identifying institutional fit as a theme. Participants enjoyed being exposed to new and exciting experiences. These experiences ranged from meeting new people from diverse backgrounds, gaining freedom and independence, to growing as a person. Another theme, financial resources, referred to participants' ability to fund their college expenditures through state, federal, and parental support. Participants identified many ways in which they received academic support from institutional services and resources, also referred to as institutional support systems. In addition to institutional support, participants reported other forms of support received

from parents, friends and family, mentors and role models, and their religious faith. Finally, participants reported many personal motives that contributed to their desire to finish their degrees. These included achieving financial security, proving a point to others, encouraging others to earn a degree, taking advantage of opportunities afforded to them as a result of having a degree, being the first in their families to earn a degree, providing a better life for their children, the feeling of accomplishing something.

Although all nine themes related to both female and male participants, within two themes, external support systems and motivation to finish, four differences were found in relation to gender. Unlike the male participants, female students identified individuals of the opposite sex, with whom they shared romantic relationships, as members of their support system. Female participants also placed more of an emphasis on their family's role in their support system than did their male counterparts. Female students identified their children and families as motivators to complete their college education, whereas males did not. Finally, female students attributed their motivation to complete their degrees to the need to prove a point to others, whereas the males did not identify this factor.

The factors contributing to the persistence of participants are exemplified in at least one of three major components needed for college persistence among first-generation Mexican American university students, yielding a tri-dimensional foundation of persistence model. The model's components, as illustrated in Figure 1, include student self-concept, familial support, and institutional climate. Together, they form the

foundation of college persistence among first-generation Mexican American university students.

Student self-concept represents participants' self-efficacy, internal locus of control, self expectations, and commitment. Self-efficacy refers to the level of confidence a person has that he or she is able to produce a desired outcome, while internal locus of control refers to the belief that outcomes are due to one's own actions (Solberg, O'Brien, Villareal, Kennel, & Davis, 1993). The successful Mexican American student is one with specific expectations and a commitment to earn an education despite barriers faced (Rodriguez, 1996). Participants were successful because they were confident of their ability to reach their goals and because they took ownership of their responsibilities as a student.

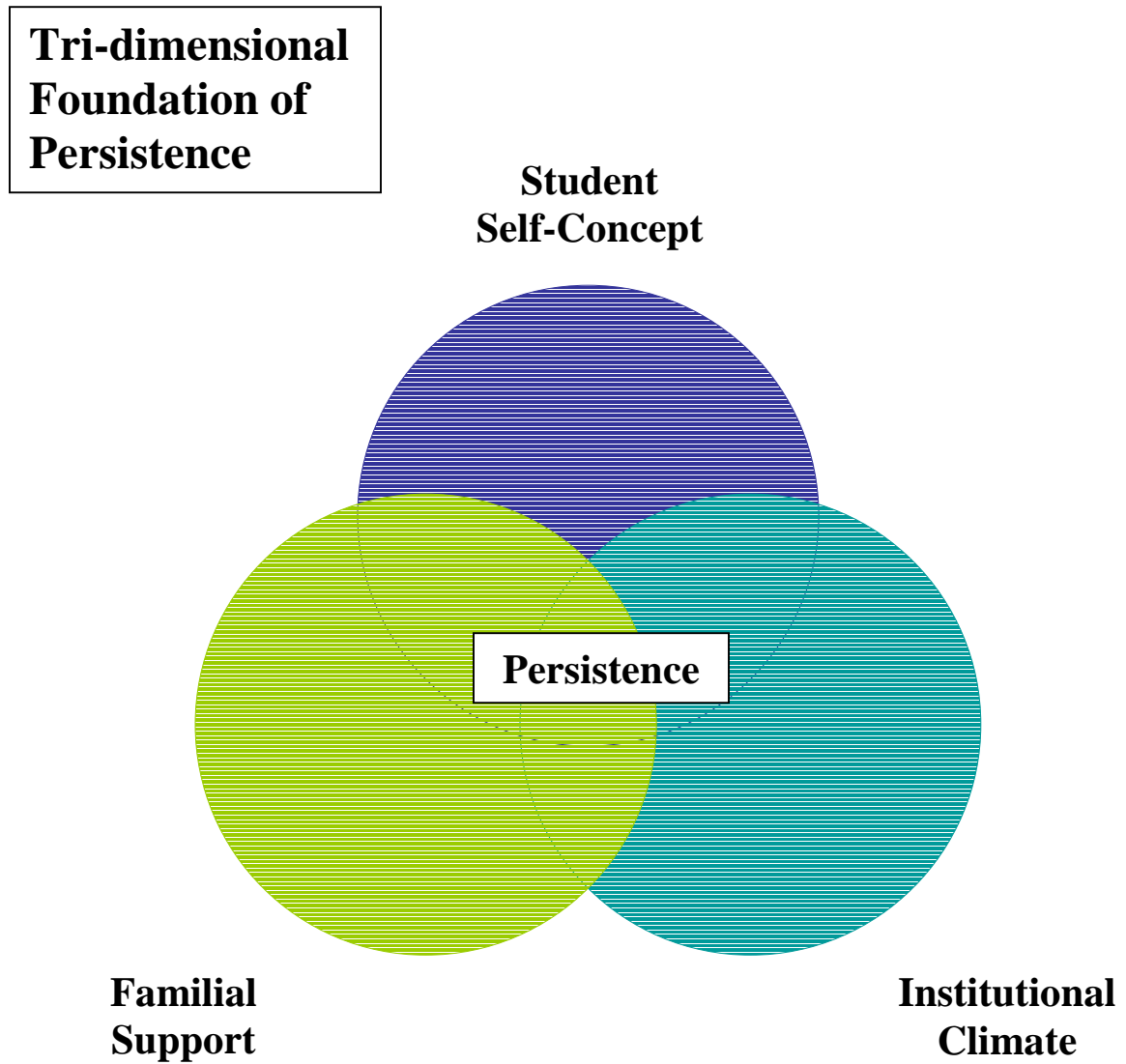
Participants attributed their success to familial support. Assistance from family came in many forms to include emotional and financial support, child care, and encouragement to do one's best. Emotional and financial support from parents, siblings, and extended family members, according to Lopez (1995), often allows students to perform at their fullest academic potential as they engage in university coursework.

Institutional climate refers to the student learning and training environment, academic curriculum, faculty environment, and academic and personal support systems, such that it welcomes and provides a culturally relevant and inclusive venue for each student (Gloria, 1997). Institutional support systems, financial aid, and new and exciting experiences are factors contributing to student persistence. Proximity to home and

institutional fit are also important to the persistence of first-generation Mexican American students.

From a theoretical perspective, like Tinto's (1993) model of student departure, the tri-dimensional foundation of student persistence model recognizes the importance of the institutional climate. Similar to Bean and Eaton's (2000) psychological model of college retention, the tri-dimensional foundation of student persistence model takes into account the importance of individual differences to include self-efficacy and internal locus of control. However, unlike either model, the tri-dimensional foundation of persistence model places great emphasis on the role of the family as a key component to persistence. This model reflects the importance of each component (institutional climate, self-concept, and familial support) and portrays how, combined, they form an optimal foundation for student persistence.

Figure 1: Components of College Persistence among First-Generation Mexican American University Students



Parental and Self Expectations

Parental expectations and self expectations proved to be a contributing factor to the persistence of first-generation Mexican American university students. Throughout their lives, parents influenced them to do their best and to push or challenge themselves to succeed. Self expectations also played a key role in the persistence of participants. Not only were they influenced by their parents' expectation to complete their education, but they were also influenced by their own drive to succeed. Had their parents not instilled this value in them, perhaps they would not be where they are today. They held high expectations for themselves, and many were planning to attend graduate school. Vasquez (1997) asserts that the family has an impact on student commitment to complete college. He further reported that a student's own commitment to an academic or occupational goal has been identified as one of the single most important determinants of college persistence. Furthermore, a student who is committed to obtaining an education in the midst of a myriad of barriers is more likely to persist than one who is not (Lango, 1995).

Institutional Proximity to Home

An institution's proximity to the home of students is an important factor contributing to the persistence of first-generation Mexican American university students. The ability to live at home made it possible for students to attend college. By remaining close to home, first-generation Mexican American students may be less likely to encounter the negative experiences often faced by Hispanic students attending predominantly White institutions away from home. The degree to which Mexican

American students adhere to cultural proscriptions varies by age, proximity to culture and family, and sustaining reinforcers within their ethnic group (Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000). Attending college close to home makes visits with family and friends more feasible, thus remaining connected to one's culture. In the absence of family and friends, an institution with a Mexican American population may provide an opportunity to remain connected to one's culture, providing optimal conditions for persistence.

Academic Preparedness

Academic preparedness is a factor contributing to the persistence of first-generation Mexican American university students. High school coursework, such as advanced placement (AP) classes, helps to prepare these students for the rigor of college. These classes challenge students and provide a close likeness to an actual college course. Rodriguez (1996) stated that students who express confidence in their academic abilities are more likely to achieve higher grades and persist than students who lack confidence. The degree of confidence students have in their ability to do well academically is an important determinant of college adjustment and persistence (Solberg et al., 1993).

Institutional Fit

A student who feels as though he or she "fits in" the campus environment is more likely to persist than one who does not. Interacting with other Hispanic on campus provides students with a sense of comfort. Students who have siblings or friends from high school attending their college have a greater sense of belonging their first semester of college. First-generation Mexican American university students are more likely to feel as though they fit into the campus climate if Hispanics account for the majority of the

population. The more closely the college reflects its own community, the more likely it is that students will complete their degree program (Hurtado, 1994). The more Hispanic staff and faculty are represented within the college community, the more likely Mexican American students will persist. This conclusion is congruent with the data on HSIs, presented in a study by Solorzano (1995), indicating that the number of Mexican American faculty and peers present in an institution has a positive impact on degree completion.

New and Exciting Experiences

New and exciting experiences contribute to the persistence of first-generation Mexican American university students. Meeting new people, being a part of something new and exciting, and communicating with students who shared their interests reinforces their desire to persist. Lango (1995) noted that the successful Mexican American has a network of friends with similar backgrounds and interests. Personal growth and freedom, experienced by students, increases the likelihood of persistence. As Hurtado, Carter, and Spuler (1996) found, students had a tendency to be better adjusted if they were able to maintain independence while maintaining supportive relationships with parents. Students are eager to be a part of something new and exciting and to gain some sense of freedom, however at the same time, they want to maintain close relationships with family who kept them “grounded and out of trouble.” Family provides the security needed by students to venture out and make new discoveries about themselves and the world around them.

Financial Resources

Financial resources are critical to the persistence of first-generation Mexican American students. Availability of funds becomes the basis for deciding where to go college, where to live, and the number of courses to take. The availability of funds, as a factor, is congruent with the literature which indicates that financial assistance is an important factor contributing to college persistence (Flores, 1994; Vasquez, 1997). Being able to pay for college related expenses unburdens a student of financial hardship and strengthens one's commitment to an institution given that it provides the financial means to remain in college (Nora, Rendon, & Cuadraz, 1999).

Institutional Support Systems

The persistence of first-generation Mexican American university students is enhanced by institutional support systems. Faculty and staff have the ability to make a positive difference in the college experience of these students. This supports literature indicating that university personnel serve as positive resources to Mexican American students and provide emotional and instrumental support through encouragement and assistance with homework (Lopez, 1995). Furthermore, they are more likely to succeed when mentors take a personal and academic interest in their educational experience (Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000). Numerous student support services such as tutoring, supplemental instruction, counseling/advising, and career services have a positive impact on the college experience of first-generation Mexican American students. This reflects the literature that recognizes support services as facilitators of student persistence, especially for first-generation students whose families are unfamiliar with the college

experience (Gloria & Kurpius, 1996). Active participation in orientations, learning communities, freshman seminars, and honors programs, which focus on providing individual attention and a forum for networking, improve the likelihood of persistence among these students. As others affirm, the importance of early interaction between students and faculty and the provision of group assignments that require students to get to know one another and work on a common project (Terenzini, Rendon, Upcraft, Millar, Allison, Gregg, and Jalomo, 1994).

External Support Systems

Access to a strong network of support outside of the university environment is very important to the persistence of first-generation Mexican American university students. Parents, friends and family, role models and mentors, and religious faith constitute effective external support systems. Literature emphasizes the importance of the family, peer relationships, and role models on student persistence (Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000; Lango, 1995; Rodriguez, 1996). The family plays a primary role in the lives of first-generation students by providing support that encourages attendance, persistence, and success in college (Terenzini et al, 1994). The successful Mexican American has a network of friends with similar backgrounds and interests (Lango, 1995). Membership in religious organizations have a significant relationship to one's sense of belonging, maintaining a link to the community with which one had prior to entering college (Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

Motivation to Finish Degree

Being motivated by something or someone contributed to the persistence of first-generation Mexican American university students. Motivating factors relate to the completion of a degree to achieve financial stability, access greater opportunities, and gain a sense of accomplishment. Proving a point to those skeptical of one's ability to succeed and being the first in one's family to earn a degree are motivating factors for some first-generation Mexican American university students. Earning a degree to encourage others may also serve as a motivating factor. The challenges experienced by these students may actually motivate them to complete their academic pursuits, succeeding in the face of adversity (Lopez, 1995). Rather than perceiving these challenges as barriers, Lopez (1995) states that some Mexican American college students perceive these challenges as "fuel" to succeed.

Comparison in Relation to Gender

Female first generation, Mexican American university students may be more likely than their male counterparts to identify significant others as members of their support systems which contribute to their persistence. Being in relationships with men who are supportive may play a key role in the persistence of female, first-generation Mexican American university students. These men are part of their support systems and may provide emotional, academic, and financial assistance. This is congruent with the literature that acknowledges that encouragement from significant others is directly related to persistence (Rodriguez, 1996). This differs from the research of Niemann and Romero

(2000) stating that men may be threatened by educated women, in turn creating a conflict for women who feel they must choose between their education and their partners.

Female first-generation Mexican American university students may place greater emphasis on their family's role in their support system than do their male counterparts. This supports the research indicating that high achieving Mexican American women often attribute their academic accomplishments to the support they receive from their families (Gandara, 1982). Furthermore, a mother's emotional support is a salient resource to Mexican American daughters completing college (Lopez, 1995).

Female first-generation Mexican American university students may be more likely than their male counterparts to identify their own children and families as motivators for completing a college education. McGlynn (2002) indicates that young Mexican American females who marry young and have children are less likely to persist than those who delay marriage and motherhood. Contrary to McGlynn's research, children and families can also serve as motivating factors that contribute to the persistence of first-generation Mexican American university students. These women are motivated to complete their degrees so that they are able provide for their families, achieve financial security, and serve as role models to their children. Those who postpone marriage and motherhood, likewise, pursue an education for the sake of their future families. Presented in research is the idea that Mexican American females are expected to focus on creating and maintaining a family and household, placing the welfare of the group or family over one's individual pursuits (Gloria, 1997). This focus is presented as a hindrance to college attendance and persistence, assuming that Mexican American

females will set their educational dreams aside for the good of the family. Yet at the same time, the desire to earn a degree may also stem from this focus on the family and the desire to adequately maintain a household thus contributing to persistence.

Female first-generation Mexican American university students may be more likely than their male counterparts to complete a degree because of their motivation to prove a point to others. The skepticism experienced from others about one's ability to earn a degree may be perceived as a challenge, thus motivating one to complete her academic pursuits (Lopez, 1995). Female students may experience skepticism from others as a result of becoming pregnant, being one of few to pursue a college education in one's community, stereotypical views of Mexican American women, or just being female.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings of this study present several implications for both policy and practice. The need for a seamless transition from high school to college is evident. In high school Mexican American students should be encouraged by teachers and counselors to challenge themselves with coursework that prepares them for college. Students should not only take the minimum amount of courses required for graduation, but should also be encouraged to take those courses that help them transition into college level work. Counselors and teachers should inform students of the benefits of taking honors, advanced placement, and dual credit courses. The message to students should be that although college is challenging, it is attainable. They should not be led to believe that a college degree is too difficult to obtain or beyond their reach. They should be exposed

to role models, which they are able to identify with to gain the sense that they too can achieve their dreams. With the guidance and encouragement of mentors, counselors, teachers, and outside organizations, Mexican American students are more likely to go to college and persist.

Students in college should receive career guidance and assistance with the selection of a major. College advisors and counselors should advise students of their degree plans and how to accomplish objectives to fulfill degree requirements. It is also important that staff become familiar with issues relating to undocumented immigrants if their state has passed legislation to assist these students. If students are eligible for in-state tuition, staff must know the requirements students must meet to qualify and must be sensitive to the needs of this population. Confronting multiple obstacles as a result of untrained staff could lead a student to abandon all hopes of attending college.

College programs must be available to assist students in developing a social network of faculty, staff, and students. This can be accomplished through orientations, freshman seminars, learning support services (learning communities, tutoring, supplemental instruction), mentoring programs, and any other programs that provide students with an opportunity to work in more intimate settings where they are able to build relationships with students, faculty and staff.⁷ Finally, every effort should be made to employ qualified staff, faculty, and administrators who mirror the demographics of the

⁷ Based on data from the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, UTSA ranked third out of 35 institutions in its total and percentage of faculty, administration, enrollment and degrees awarded to Hispanics under President Ricardo Romo's leadership (University of Texas, 2005).

institution's student population. Such mentors are critical to the persistence of first-generation Mexican American university students.

Parents should be provided information, in either English or Spanish, both in written and oral form, explaining the advantages of their children taking challenging coursework in high school. Parents should also receive from colleges and high schools information about the benefits of attending college. They should be guided through the application process for both admissions into college and financial aid. Again, information should be distributed in both English and Spanish, mailed to the homes, and presented at the high schools. Parents should be educated on the economic return of their investment if they must take out loans to pay for college. The more parents understand the process and benefits of pursuing a college education, the more likely they will be supportive and encourage their children to do so.

Considerations for Future Research

The answers to the questions posed in this study evoke several more questions ideal for further research. This study was conducted utilizing qualitative research methods and a small sample which limits the ability to generalize findings to the larger Hispanic population. This study did not explore factors contributing to persistence of students in the sophomore, junior, and senior years of college, nor did it capture the experiences of Mexican American students transferring from community colleges or other four year institutions. Further research in these areas is warranted. What are the experiences of Mexican American students in their later years in college? What are the experiences of transfer students and what factors contribute to their persistence?

The participants introduced in this study told stories of success and triumph. However, what became of those students who entered the institution as freshmen and never persisted into a second year of college is unknown. Research in this area would help to understand the factors that contributed to their withdrawal from college. Being privy to this information may provide high schools, colleges and universities, and policy makers with the knowledge necessary to improve policies and practices. This may help to increase the persistence of Mexican American students and bring them closer to the rate at which Non-Hispanic Whites complete college degrees.

Another area of interest for further research would be a comparison of persistence between Mexican American students who traveled to attend college versus those who attended a more centrally located institution. The majority of participants in this study drew on the support of their families, both emotionally and financially, by living at home or close to home. Others started their college education at a nearby campus, the Downtown Campus, and then traveled to the main campus, further away from home, to take courses not offered downtown. Perhaps further research might suggest providing Mexican American students opportunities for higher education in closer proximity to their homes.

One last suggestion is to further the research on the struggles experienced by undocumented Mexican immigrants who grew up attending public school and know no other home than the United States. Research is needed to bring life to the stories of these individuals so that lawmakers better understand their plight and the impact they have on

the economy. This study presented one story of an undocumented Mexican immigrant, however there are many stories left to be told which deserve attention.

This study presented the experiences of first-generation Mexican American students attending an HSI. Factors contributing to their persistence were presented as well as a comparison based of gender. It is hoped that the stories of these participants will help to motivate institutional policy makers and administrators to closely examine the policies and practices in place that address the needs of this population. Continuous research and evaluation is necessary to ensure the availability of ample opportunities and to provide the best services possible for student success.

APPENDIX A

Focus Group Questions

1. Tell me about your experience as a first year student in college.

Probes: What were your initial impressions?

 What was your first semester like?

 What about your second semester?

2. What were the most positive aspects of your first year in college?

3. What were the most challenging aspects of your first year in college?

Probes: Did you overcome these challenges?

 If so, how did you overcome these challenges?

4. What factors contributed to your decision to return for a second year of college?

Probes: What factors allowed you to continue?

 What factors influenced you to continue?

 What factors motivated you to continue?

APPENDIX B

Individual Interview Questions

The questions that I am about to ask you were generated as a result of my discussions with other college students. They described their first year college experiences and provided examples of the positive aspects and challenges that they encountered. They also provided insight into the factors that contributed to their decision to return for a second year of college. I would now like to ask you some questions to learn more about your first year experience.

1. Tell me a little bit about your first year experience here at UTSA. What sticks out most in your mind?
2. Some students indicated that someone in their lives influenced them to attend college. Did anyone influence you to attend college?

Probes: How did they influence you?

3. Some of the students I spoke with stated that work posed a challenge in college, while others indicated that financial aid and financial support from family left them free from financial difficulties. What was your financial situation like your first year of college?

Probes: Did you work? What type of financial aid did you receive? How did your parents provide financial support? What other challenges did you face your first year?

4. Parental involvement has been identified as a reason for attending college and doing well. Some students have described their parents as strict, old-fashioned, and “traditional Mexican,” with an interest in whom their children hung out with. How would you describe your parent’s involvement?

Probes: Involvement with academics? Were there differences in rules for males versus females?

5. Some students indicated that their friends in high school did not place an emphasis on education and were often involved in gangs, drugs, or pregnancies. What was your experience?

Probes: What were your friends like? How many went to college? How many are still in college?

6. Some positive aspects that students identified about their first year in college included being with people with similar interests and those who placed an emphasis on grades, engaging in intellectual conversations, and meeting people from different backgrounds. What were the most positive aspects that you can recall from your first year in college?
7. Although students enjoyed the freedom and independence of college as compared to high school, some identified feeling underprepared academically in terms of the amount of reading required, note taking, taking exams and being responsible for keeping with deadlines and the work load. How would you describe your first year in terms of being academically prepared?

Probes: In what ways were you prepared? In what ways were you not prepared?
Did you overcome any challenges in this area, if so how?

8. Some students identified learning about resources or student support services through orientation and accessing the Thomas Rivera Center for tutoring. What was your experience with student support services?

Probes: Which services did you use? How did you learn about them? Were they helpful?

9. Some students indicated that they fit in with the other students on campus, while others described feeling intimidated. Some indicated that their socioeconomic status and Hispanic identity hindered their ability to make friends. What was your experience with fitting in?

Probes: How did you fit? How did you not fit in? Do you feel as though you fit in now?

10. What expectations do you have for yourself? What motivates you to continue with your education?

APPENDIX C

Participant Response Form

Name: _____

Mailing Address: _____
Street City/State Zip Code

Phone Number (s): _____
Home Cell Business

Email Address: _____

How would you prefer to be contacted? (Circle all that apply)

Mail Email Phone If phone, which number? _____

Age: _____

Gender (circle one): Male / Female

Major: _____

How many credit hours have you earned at UTSA? _____

Are you attending part-time or full-time (check one)?

___Part-time (6 hours or less per semester) ___Full-time (12 hours or more per semester)

What is your GPA? _____

Where did you graduate from High School? _____
City State

Is Spanish your first language? (circle one) Yes / No

Do you live with your parents? (circle one) Yes / No

Do you have siblings that attended college? (circle one) Yes / No

Do you have a job? (circle one) Yes / No

If yes, how many hours per week do you work? _____

Are you involved in any extracurricular activities (i.e. Clubs, organizations, sports, church, volunteer, etc.)? (Circle one) Yes / No

If you answered yes to the previous question, please specify the activities in which you are involved: _____

Please check how you would like to be involved in this study:

____ Focus Group Participant ____ Individual Interview Participant ____ Either Group or Individual

Which days of the week are you available to participate (check all that apply)? Please indicate the hours of the day in which you are available to participate.

____ Monday: What hours are you available? _____

____ Tuesday: What hours are you available? _____

____ Wednesday: What hours are you available? _____

____ Thursday: What hours are you available? _____

____ Friday: What hours are you available? _____

____ Saturday: What hours are you available? _____

____ Sunday: What hours are you available? _____

Please complete and return by (date) by mail or email.

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Vita

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