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**WHAT WORKS: FACTORS INFLUENCING COMMUNITY
COLLEGE HISPANIC FEMALE ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT AND
PERSISTENCE TO GRADUATION**

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COLLEGE HISPANIC FEMALE ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT AND
PERSISTENCE TO GRADUATION**

by

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TREATISE

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my husband Robert B. Hoek. I offer my deepest gratitude for his love and support through this daunting effort. He never wavered; he always believed in me and gave me comfort and kindness throughout the process.

Next to my mother and father, Rita Johnson and Bill Johnson. I hope in some way you both can see parts of yourselves in this work and feel deep pleasure in the reaching of this goal. Without Rita's intellectualism and Bill's passion, I could not have hoped to arrive at this moment.

To my close women friends, mentors and all the others who have assisted and supported me in this study, I would not have completed this study without your strength, wisdom and help.

Finally, to *las mujeres* in this study for their courage and deep wisdom in sharing their stories creating enriched lives for future Latinas.

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The purpose of this study was to further investigate Dr. Ruth Hamilton Romano's (1999) research that identified factors contributing to Hispanic female student retention and graduation. This dissertation studied predominately Hispanic females from a community college located in south Texas to ascertain factors that positively contributed to retention and college graduation. Current student persistence research has focused on *why* Hispanic students leave college, but this work focuses on the factors that *support* Hispanics obtaining degrees. Previous research identified six major factors that contributed significantly to student success and graduation. Those factors include academic integration, student integration, institutional commitment, goal commitment, support by significant others, and campus-based aid. The research questions utilized in

this study were based out of these six factors. The study queried 229 Hispanic women who graduated in the 2004-2005 academic year. Utilizing a multi-method research approach, both quantitative and qualitative research was used. Research data were gathered through electronic and paper surveys along with focus group and individual interviews. The results of Romano's (1999) study revealed that the two most important factors identified by the Hispanic women were goal commitment and the support of significant others. The results of this study showed that goal commitment and financial aid were the two most important factors. Support by significant others was the third most important factor reported by the women. A new factor emerged from the research that is worthy of future research. Hispanic mothers reported that a driving force for their own academic success and graduation was the need for them to serve as positive role models for their children's educational futures. The Latinas desired to demonstrate through their achievement that educational success was possible for their children.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Re-Examining the American Dream

As a nation of immigrants, the United States has fiercely championed the “American dream” whereby each successive generation is blessed with limitless opportunities to improve its status and live an ever more prosperous life. A critical ingredient necessary to achieving the American dream is education. Thus, public schooling became a staple of American life in the early 19th century under the vigorous leadership of Horace Mann, the Father of American Education (Cremin, 1957). Mann’s common school movement dramatically transformed the new nation because education, once the exclusive right of the rich, suddenly became “available and equal for all, part of the birthright of every American child...the great equalizer”(Cremin, 1957, p. 8) which Mann anticipated would eradicate poverty, ensure progress, and promote democracy.

As envisioned by Mann, public schooling extended only through high school, and until the mid-20th century, a high school diploma could indeed secure the prosperity associated with the American dream. After World War II, however, the credentials obtainable only through higher education were increasingly required to enhance the quality of life for citizens and to improve their ability to contribute to society.

Today, on the threshold of the 21st century, the American educational system, despite the best efforts of Horace Mann’s many notable successors, continues to fall short of its promise of equality, especially in the area of post-secondary schooling. The current demographics of those who successfully secure higher education suggest a troubling failure of America’s egalitarian vision of producing a well-educated and diverse populace. A recent report from the Pell Institute

(Lee & Mortenson, 2004) reveals a growing gap in the economic stratification of those who obtain higher education degrees. The report states that only seven percent of students in the lowest income sector attain college degrees by age 24. This figure is compared to 39 percent from middle income groups and 52 percent from the highest income bracket (Lee & Mortenson, 2004). According to Bergman (2005), educational attainment in the United States in terms of race reveals the same disappointing trend with 28 percent of whites, 17 percent of blacks, and only 11 percent of Hispanics holding any kind of college degree.

Community colleges stand at the forefront of higher education in this country by providing open access and affordable opportunities to those seeking a college education. U.S. Census Bureau data reports that the number of students attending college has increased 15 percent over the last 10 years (Evelyn, 2005). Community colleges presently serve more than 11.6 million of those students. Nationwide approximately 30 percent of all students who attend community colleges are minorities, and that figure is substantially higher in states such as Texas, Arizona, California, and Florida where minorities are quickly becoming majority populations (American Association of Community Colleges, 2006). Nearly half of all minorities in higher education attend community colleges, and 58 percent of all Hispanics in college are enrolled in community colleges (Rendon, Garcia, et al., 2004). As Hispanics flock to post-secondary institutions, they are the population segment creating the largest community college enrollment growth in the nation. According to de los Santos (2005), approximately 1.2 million more Latino students are projected to be enrolled in American colleges by 2015.

Although the number of Hispanic students is growing, the retention of Hispanic students in schools nationwide is not keeping pace. According to Zalaquett (2005), Latinos have the highest dropout rate of any ethnic group in the United States. In 2000, approximately 530,000 Hispanics, aged 16 to 19 years, were high school dropouts; these figures represent a rate of 21.1

percent (Day, 2003). Not only are Hispanics not graduating, but those who do not go on to college face bleak prospects for the future both in quality of life and in their ability to participate effectively in society. From an economic perspective, individuals who obtain a two-year degree earn 25 percent more than those with only a high school diploma. Community college graduates earn a median income of close to \$38,000 annually compared to high school graduates who earn only \$30,000 (Baum & Payea, 2004). Carnevale and Desrochers (2004) further report:

While workers with associate's degrees earn less, on average, than those with bachelor's degrees, 83 percent of workers with associate's degrees have earnings that are similar to bachelor's degree holders...Overall, associate's degrees generally provide workers with a wage boost of about 20 to 30 percent over a high school diploma. (p. 41)

It is clear from these statistics that educators need to focus on factors that can increase Hispanic student success and persistence to graduation.

For Hispanic students, the "financial aid gap" also looms large. Compared to members of other ethnic and racial groups, close to 50 percent of all Latino students are from low-income families earning less than \$40,000 annually (Jaschik, 2005). However, when it comes to receiving financial aid, Latino students receive smaller packages on average than any other racial or ethnic group. In terms of state aid, only 16 percent of Latino undergraduates receive state aid, and only 17 percent receive institutional aid nationwide (*Excelencia in Education*, 2005).

Academically, Hispanics often fall into the category of "at-risk" students who not only are responsible for paying tuition, fees, and living expenses but also must pay for medical insurance and child care while going to school. Roueche and Roueche (1999) define at-risk students as those possessing a long list of characteristics that include:

- ✓ First generation learners/little support
- ✓ Pathways to success unknown
- ✓ Poor self image
- ✓ Have not left the neighborhood
- ✓ Work 30 hours a week
- ✓ Returning women

- ✓ Large minority population
- ✓ Economic insecurity
- ✓ Academically weak
- ✓ Poor or low test scores

In addition to the above characteristics, many Hispanic students have young children who require child care. For example, approximately one-fourth of all Texas undergraduate students are parents. Of those, 14 percent are single parents (McMillion, Ramirez, et al., 2005). Fifty percent of all low-income college students live at home, and 65 percent work an average of 24 hours a week just to make ends meet (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2002). Further, soaring loan and credit card debt is scaring more and more low-income “at-risk” students away from the prospect of going to college. For a growing number of students, living at home and working is the only way they can afford to stay in school.

Unfortunately for Hispanics in Texas, the state is ranked 49th of 50 states for graduating college students within six years of admission. Hispanic students in general in Texas are graduating from high school at only the 50 percent rate, and of that figure, only 8.9 percent eventually go on to earn college degrees (The Institute for Demographic and Socioeconomic Research, 2004).

In south Texas where this study was conducted, 53 percent of the population is Hispanic; therefore, the majority of the citizenry is in jeopardy of never having access to higher education. The south Texas city that was the site of the study ranks 53rd among the nation’s 69 largest cities for its percentage of high school and college graduates, and the city ranks last among Texas’s largest cities in its percentage of high school and college graduates. In a recent Census Bureau analysis of this city, 25 percent of those 25 years of age or older have not completed high school, and 78 percent have not received a bachelor’s degree (Palo Alto College Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Community Development, 2004).

The policy brief *Collision Course* (Lumina Foundation, 2005) notes that the higher education system as a whole is suffering serious “leaks” in student success. According to Orfield (1998), it is imperative to recognize that higher education profoundly affects the development of students in many ways that are not readily quantified. Positive race relations and genuine cultural diversity in post-secondary institutions contribute to a broader spectrum of academic ideas and learning on campus, which, in turn, can enhance cross-cultural understanding in the community at large. Without such inclusivity, Kinzie, Palmer, et al. (2004) warn:

In the coming years, we may see two distinct faces of the college-choice process: While we may laud the social progress made in the past 60 or 70 years because of the increased number of women, low-income students and students of color now enrolled, a closer examination of students’ destinations will reveal one set of choices for low and moderate-income students and a distinctly different set of destinations for middle- and upper-income students. (p. 47)

In Texas where minority demographics serve as a bellwether to future national demographic trends, the Hispanic population is expected to comprise roughly two-thirds of the state’s total population by the year 2040 (Murdock, 2004). If states such as Texas do not keep pace with their increasing minority population and do not actively facilitate minority student access into/completion of higher education, the socioeconomic consequences, as Kinzie, Palmer, et al. (2004) predict, are dire.

Currently, Texas ranks 45th of 50 states in having 12 percent of its population either not fully or only marginally employed, and the state ranks 38th by having nearly 30 percent of its available jobs paying below the poverty threshold (Waldron, Roberts, & Reamer, 2004). Further, Texas ranks 30th of 50 states in terms of median household income with the overall average household income at \$39,927 and the Hispanic household median at only \$29,873 (Murdock, 2004). Average household incomes has been predicted to decrease by 12 percent by 2040 if more minorities do not attain some level of higher education (Murdock, 2004). Thus,

strategies to increase access to higher education for Hispanic students, the fastest growing segment of the community college population in Texas, seem imperative to ensure the future economic and social survival of the state.

By 2050, America's Hispanic population is projected to grow to 98 million, one third of the country's population; women of Mexican origin will number 32 million (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005). This dissertation study focuses on the community college education of Hispanic women in Texas because Latinas now constitute the largest minority group of females in the United States (Cuadraz, 2005). Increasing their educational attainment seems key to the overall success of future generations of Hispanic college students and to society as a whole. The research that forms the basis of this dissertation has been designed to provide additional information that will help female Hispanics persevere and graduate from community colleges. Specifically, this study explores factors contributing to female Hispanic student persistence and academic achievement. Current student persistence research too often focuses on why Hispanic students leave college, but this dissertation examines factors that support female Hispanic students' academic success as they pursue the American dream.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to further explore the work of Ruth Hamilton Romano (1999) who utilized interviews and a survey to identify and rank-order factors that contributed to the success of Hispanic females who graduated from a southwestern Arizona community college. Romano's study examined six key factors and how they contributed to student retention and graduation. These factors were: academic integration, student integration, institutional commitment, goal commitment, support by significant others, and campus-based financial aid. Romano reported that the two most important factors identified by community college Latinas as

contributing to their academic success were: 1) their focus on the goal of completing college and 2) the support they received throughout their educational journey from significant others. The total population for Romano's research was 47. Because a higher student subject threshold can provide increased reliability, the student subject threshold for the current study was 229.

This study used interviews and surveys to replicate aspects of Romano's research but also extended her work by drawing on a larger population (229 potential study participants) to determine whether a significant number of female Hispanic students would again identify goal commitment and the role of significant others as the two most important factors effecting college retention and graduation. Utilizing both quantitative research with the use of a survey instrument and qualitative research with a focus group and individual interviews, this study was designed to further illuminate how the six factors initially described by Roman impacted student retention and graduation.

It is the intention of the research to provide an improved road map that will make it easier for future Latinas to navigate the pathways of higher education and persevere to graduation. The study also intends to increase institutional knowledge about the needs of Latinas attending community college. To create a more just, more equitable society, institutions must begin incorporating organizational and instructional factors that educational research has identified as contributing to the academic achievement of Hispanic students.

Statement of the Problem

The study identified and investigated factors known to contribute to the success of female Hispanic community college students in regard to academics, retention and graduation. In addition, the research examined whether the two factors identified by Romano (1999) -- goal commitment and support by significant others -- resurfaced as the most important of the six

factors or whether new factors would emerge as significant. The research questions that guided this study were:

1. To what extent does academic integration influence Hispanic female student retention and graduation from a community college?
2. To what extent does student social integration influence Hispanic female student retention and graduation from a community college?
3. To what extent does institutional commitment influence Hispanic female student retention and graduation from a community college?
4. To what extent does student goal commitment influence Hispanic female student retention and graduation from a community college?
5. To what extent does support by significant others influence Hispanic female student retention and graduation from a community college?
6. To what extent does campus-based aid influence Hispanic female student retention and graduation from a community college?
7. What other factors emerge from the study as contributing significantly to student retention and graduation?

Definition of Terms

Hispanic/Latina/o – Broad ethnic terms used to reference persons of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, Central and South American, and Spanish decent.

Mexican-American – Persons of Mexican decent who were born and reside in the United States.

Associate Degree – The degree awarded by community colleges after the student completes a specified number of course requirements and credit hours.

Goal Commitment – The student’s planned commitment to completing college and graduating (Tinto, 1975).

Campus-based Financial Aid – Any kind of scholarship, grant, loan or monetary gift students receive from the academic institution they attend.

Significant Other – Any person who plays a supportive role (e.g. spouse, family, friend, teacher) in the educational aspirations and goals of the student.

Institutional Commitment – The student’s ability to feel comfortable and familiar with the institution (Tinto, 1975) in which she/he is enrolled. Further, John Bean (2005) describes a student’s loyalty to the institution as a psychological state of being that reflects institutional commitment.

Social Integration – The process where students become better socially integrated into the institution (Swail, Redd & Perna, 2003).

Academic Integration – The process through which students make connections with others while doing academic work. Astin (1984) found that students who have greater interaction with faculty and peers had greater academic integration and better likelihood of graduating.

Hypothesis

The hypothesis for this study, designed to replicate Romano’s research (1999), was that student goal commitment and support by significant others would re-emerge as the top two factors influencing the retention and graduation of female Hispanic community college students.

Assumptions

The Hispanic female graduates would provide accurate and well-considered answers to the research questions. The ultimate research results would provide useful information to college

faculty, staff, and administrators with the aim of retaining and graduating higher numbers of Hispanic females in community colleges. The research results would be of direct benefit to Hispanic community college females.

Limitations

The research conducted is conducted and interpreted through the lens of a non-Hispanic female with more than 20 years of community college experience working at a predominantly Mexican-American south Texas community college. The Hispanic women in the research were predominantly Mexican-Americans; therefore, the sample may not be generalizable to all Hispanics.

Delimitations

Because the Latinas surveyed in this study graduated from a south Texas community college in the 2004-2005 academic school year, the findings may not be generalizable to others in different parts of the country or in different time periods.

Significance of the Study

Since the late 1960s, there have been thousands of studies on the topic of retention as a key indicator of institutional effectiveness (Seidman, 2005). The vast majority of these studies have focused on why students leave school. This study will focus on reasons that Hispanic women choose to stay in college and persist in obtaining an associate degree. The Pew Hispanic Center (2005) reports that the nation's Hispanic population will triple over the next half century and that 67 million Hispanics will be added to in the nation's population by 2050. Consequently,

it is critical for community colleges to better understand the factors that contribute to retaining students and to assisting them to graduate.

Despite the rapid growth of the Hispanic population, Mexican-American women remain among the most undereducated citizens in our society (Quintana, Vogel, et al., 1991). For example, in the United States, the attrition rates for Hispanic women in higher education are approximately 43 percent higher than for white women (Hernandez, Vargas-Lew, et al., 1994). If this study can produce more evidence about what factors are viewed as being most important for female Hispanic retention and graduation, then this crucial information can be provided to post-secondary institutions so that they might more effectively support the academic achievement of Hispanic women.

Summary

This study investigated factors that contributed to the success of Hispanic female students who graduated from a south Texas community college. It is anticipated that the findings of this dissertation will add to the body of knowledge identifying factors that support Hispanic female student academic success, retention, and graduation. The topic that is being investigated is one of singular urgency. The Pew Hispanic Center (2005) reports that only 51 percent of all Hispanic children have mothers who themselves have finished high school in comparison to 93 percent of white children. Of Hispanics who do graduate from high school, only 53 percent are minimally qualified for admission to college (Pew Hispanic Center, 2005). Enrolling in and graduating from a community college is a significant achievement for Hispanic women which creates a positive ripple effect not only for the individual woman but for her family and the community as a whole. Through this study, we can learn from successful Latinas about the factors that helped

them achieve academically, graduate from community college, and more fully participate in the American dream.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Historical Overview of Student Retention Research

It is important to have a sense of community college historical development when observing the evolution of the study of student retention. Community colleges nationwide have been in existence for approximately 100 years and became a *network* of institutions in the late 1960's when more than 457 community colleges were built during a time when baby boomers matured to college-going age (American Association of Community Colleges, 2006). Today approximately 1,166 community colleges operate nationally and 72 currently operate in the state of Texas (American Association of Community Colleges, 2006). Between the early 1900's and the 1950's, the initial development of community colleges provided the opportunity for higher education to students who might not otherwise have had access to a postsecondary education. It was through this initial growth of enrollment and new access that the antecedents of the study of retention began to emerge. Student differentiation across varying institutions also was proven to influence the likelihood of whether or not students would complete their studies and earn postsecondary degrees:

This trend was further fueled by slowly increasing expectations that a college degree was a valuable asset in the competition for entry into higher paying professional positions over merely having a high school diploma along with some college education. (Berger & Lyon, 2005, p. 13)

In addition to increased access, the beginnings of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960's brought to the forefront a more diverse student body clamoring for admission to higher education. In the 1960's, student dissatisfaction with the political aspects of post-secondary education led researchers to examine administrative policies in higher education. In the early

1960's, research focused on individual characteristics of academic failure; by the late 1960's, scholarship increasingly centered on understanding how affective characteristics and social contexts contributed to students' lack of success and difficulty in completing college (Seidman, 2005).

William Spady's article, "Dropouts From Higher Education: An Interdisciplinary Review and Synthesis"(1971), is viewed as cornerstone research for retention studies because he looked at the sociological model of student departure. This model reveals student interactions with the college environment as being pivotal in determining if a student would dropout. Spady (1971) suggests that if the student and the environmental norms were congruent, the student could successfully assimilate academically and socially, thus, increasing his/her chances of persistence and success in college.

Vincent Tinto built upon Spady's work in his 1975 article, "Dropout From Higher Education: A Theoretical Synthesis of Recent Research." Tinto's interactionalist theory of student departure has been the most often cited theory in student retention literature. Tinto (1975) contends that students bring with them certain inherent characteristics (psychological/social/environmental) which, when coupled with their commitment to the institution and to graduating, can influence departure decisions. He also suggests that if institutional and organizational interventions are made early in the college-going process, student academic and social integration can be impacted (Tinto, 1975; 1987).

Bean's (1980) later theoretical perspective, which used organizational theories to illustrate student perceptions of institutional routines, communication, and rewards systems, showed how organizational elements could influence student institutional satisfaction. Braxton et al. (1997) utilized Bean's work to test Tinto's theory of academic and social integration by postulating that a student's social integration was more crucial to understanding student

departure than academic integration. In “Appraising Tinto’s Theory of College Departure,” Braxton et al. (1997) note that additional research is needed to further explore psychological, social, and institutional organizational impacts on student social integration and graduation goal commitment.

From both critical theorist and feminist theorist perspectives, much of the new research from the 1990’s to the early 2000’s challenges the dominant hegemonic cultural structures of historically white male-dominated college campuses that pose some of the greatest challenges for Hispanic student success:

Unfortunately, higher education has embraced the meritocratic illusion that it has been, is, and will remain objective and color blind, but we believe that its assertions of neutrality serve to maintain existing race, class, sexual and gender privileges while clearly devaluing and marginalizing Latina/o college students. (Solorzona, Villapondo, et al., 2005, p. 289)

Works by Amaury Nora (1990; 2004) and Laura Rendon (1994; 1995(a); 1995(b); 2002) explore the social and economic barriers for Hispanics and the need to validate Hispanic students’ cultural experiences as legitimate academic and social retention factors which can increase student success.

After community colleges’ initial growth period from the 1960’s through the 1980’s, there is now significant pressure for institutions to become more accountable for student success. Institutional accountability is now required by federal and state governments as well as local business, industry, and community constituencies. Community colleges must continually work to assess the local community’s and industry’s satisfaction with graduates by documenting developmental completers and by ultimately tracking performance in subsequent college-level courses (Roueche, Roueche, & Ely, 2001).

These assessment demands are increasing in scope. Key indicators of institutional effectiveness utilized at the state level include reports on successful graduation and transfer rates,

licensure exam scores, job placement success, student persistence (from fall to fall), and student satisfaction reports (Roueche, Johnson, et al., 1997). Nationally, initiatives such as the *Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE)* are providing relevant data about student experiences at their colleges. Institutions of comparable size can compare data and better understand how to engage students effectively by identifying areas of improvement (McClenney, 2005). Community colleges across the United States are working to develop *a culture of evidence* (McClenney, 2004) as a core operational value for their campuses.

A recent report published by the Lumina Foundation suggests that additional research is required in retention and persistence because the majority of current research has been focused on four-year colleges (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005). In addition, little data exists on effective institutional practices because flawed methodologies prevent meaningful evaluation (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005). It is through ongoing institutional assessment and further research focused on community colleges that more information concerning best practices for retaining students will develop.

Defining Student Retention/Dropouts

The ability of institutions to measure student retention is often a complex process with no legitimate consensus about exactly what is the correct or the best way to measure student persistence and retention. Hagedorn (2005) reports that retention and dropping out are often viewed as “two sides to a coin, retention is staying in school and dropping out is leaving school prematurely”(p. 91).

Hagedorn (2005) offers succinct definitions for both a college persister and a nonpersister: “A student who enrolls in college and remains enrolled until degree completion is a persister. A student who leaves the college without earning a degree and never returns is a

nonpersister” (p.89). A nonpersister is often referred to as a “dropout.” A dropout, however, is viewed as a more complicated matter by Alexander Astin in his book *Predicting Academic Performance in College* (1971) because dropouts may eventually become non-dropouts. Astin notes that students may attend many colleges during their educational journeys, moving in and out of a state of enrollment.

Tinto (1987) suggests that dropouts (student departures) occur because of incongruities associated with: 1) a student’s intention (i.e., educational/occupational goals); 2) a student’s social and intellectual adjustment to the institution; and/or 3) a student’s specific match to the institution (e.g., its size, ethnic make up, locale, etc.).

In Chapter Four of *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition* (1987), Tinto draws on Emile Durkheim’s social/psychological work on suicide to create parallels between the act of suicide and student dropout or departure. Tinto specifically uses Durkheim’s notion of egoistic suicide (leaving) that occurs when people fail to become integrated into the local community in which they desire membership. This parallel suggests the necessity of both social and academic integration for the success of students.

Social and Academic Integration

Much research has been done that reveals that the more socially and academically students are involved with each other, the college faculty, and the institution, the more likely they will be to achieve success and persist to graduation (Astin, 1984; Nora,1987; Tinto, 1998; Pascarella, Pierson, et al., 2004). Astin’s (1984) involvement theory suggests two basic tenets of student interaction:

- 1) Students can maximize their college experiences when they make connections in college doing such activities as academic work, participating in extracurricular activities, and interacting with faculty and staff.
- 2) The more psychological and physical energy students invest in the academic experience, the more potential develops for their own talent to emerge.

Although it is known that academic and social integration affect persistence in different ways, research has also shown that when these two areas interact, they foster persistence (Stage, 1989). According to Stage (1989), students are more likely to persist when both academic and social integration occur in reciprocal ways. Tinto (1998) believes that academic and social systems of colleges overlay classroom and college settings in such a way that experiences both within and beyond the classroom impact student persistence.

Student academic integration can be fostered institutionally through specific instructional intervention strategies such as culturally mediated instruction, attention to learning styles, and learning-centered teaching approaches such as learning communities.

From an institutional policy perspective, students need to accrue academic achievement during the first year of college as it is found to be a substantial influence on subsequent semester retention and degree completion (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Social integration and the need for students to develop “cultural capital” to navigate institutional barriers, particularly for those students who are first-generation college students, have been found to be key to student success. Pascarella et al. (2004) describes cultural capital as “a form of capital that resides in relationships among individuals that facilitate transaction and the transmission of different resources” (p. 252).

Students who come from households where one or more parents have earned college degrees possess a greater sociological advantage for success at college than those students who

are first-generation college students (Rendon, 1995b). Parents who are college graduates are able to provide their children with educational roadmaps for successful navigation of institutional organizations and appropriate social behavior. Those students who have no familial support for such matters face a greater challenge for social and institutional integration. Colleges that provide opportunities for students to engage with their peers and within institutionally constructed social settings improve overall student engagement (Anderson, 2004). Academic and social integration and involvement can come in different forms both inside and outside of the classroom (Rendon, 1994).

In a study of first-year community college students where the majority of the subjects were Hispanic, Rendon (1994) found that students who did not get involved either socially or academically included the following types:

- Full-time mothers
- Students who have been out of school for some time
- Students who are afraid of failure
- Students who are scared of a new culture
- Students who dropped out of high school
- Students who did poorly in high school
- Married students
- Physically disabled students
- Students who feel out of place in a new environment
- Students who have self-doubts, who feel incapable of learning
- Those who have been “off track of life”
- Single parents
- Immature students
- Apprehensive students (p.10)

Institutions with sensitivity to students who struggle with lack of developed cultural capital can bolster their academic and social integration through strong institutional support and targeted instructional methods.

Female Hispanic college students working toward academic and social integration often find themselves struggling between two dynamics: the Hispanic machismo patriarchal structure’s

view of the woman's role in the family and the goal of pursuing higher education for a better future (Gutierrez, 2002). Hispanic women, expected to stay close to home to serve the family, can be criticized "for not living up to saintly, passive, devout, loyal, and virginal expectations" (Mendez-Negrete, 2000, p. 44). Family can be viewed as a primary resource for Latinas, but it can also play a negative role by creating guilt and stress for pursuing educational goals rather than familial-based activities (Rosas & Hamrick, 2002).

Institutional Commitment, Goal Commitment, and Significant Others

When students feel comfortable and familiar (integrated) within an institution, they are better able to navigate and find their way to important institutional resources that subsequently assist them in achieving their educational goals. In a dissertation examining the contributing factors to the success of Hispanic female community college graduates, Romano (1999) reports:

The more the student becomes familiar with the institution and infiltrates the system, the greater will be his/her commitment to the institution and his/her goals of completing his/her college education...The highly successful student should couple institutional commitment with goal commitment to ensure completion of college. (p. 27)

Other researchers support this position and have found that social and academic integration leads to institutional commitment (Tinto, 1975; Nora, 1987; Nora, 1990). Tinto (1975) states that student commitment to the institution is an important element in their ability to persist in college.

In "Nine Themes of College Student Retention"(2005), John Bean reports that there is a central difference between institutional fit and institutional commitment: "fit has a primarily social component and is affected by social integration variables while loyalty seems to be more of a psychological component and is affected by other psychological dispositions" (p. 220).

Romano (1999) posits that goal commitment is the most important retention factor for female Hispanic students. According to her research, the second most import factor for Hispanic

persistence to graduation is the “help and encouragement they [female students] received from a significant other” (Romano, 1999, p. 121). Nora (1987) also reports that when students maintained stronger commitment to the institution and held well-developed educational goals, they met more with faculty and counselors and interacted more in social activities on campus.

A recent eight-year study (Nora, 2004) that followed students from the ninth grade through high school and into college found that students want to attend college and persist where they feel they “fit in” on personal and social levels. Nora (2004) describes fitting in as including positive personal and social feelings that facilitate social interactions and relationships with other students and faculty.

Rendon (1994) writes elegantly about how first-generation Hispanic college students must navigate invalidating terrain in the academy and how crucial “supportive others” can be to student success:

A great deal of invalidation is built into the present model of teaching and learning found in most two and four-year institutions. Calling students by social security numbers, discounting life experiences, detaching faculty from students, promoting fiercely competitive environments that pit students against each other, are just some examples of invalidating situations students experience. This forces students to seek validation outside of class. The effect that out-of-class validation agents have on students is incalculable. Parents who provide consistent encouragement, spouses who are supportive, peers who lend a helping hand—all of these validating agents act to suppress the invalidation students may be receiving in class. (p. 19)

In a study designed to determine what factors contributed to a successful education for Latino students at Long Beach City College (Creason, 1994), 88 percent of students said that someone in their family or personal life supported their educational endeavors; 58 percent said they had a significant person on campus (faculty or staff) assisting them; and 48 percent said that a family member, whom they considered a mentor, had helped them with their college experience. The Long Beach study also reported that students who had definitive educational

goals—for example, declaring a major—were more likely to graduate than those students who had not set such educational goals.

Many community college students come to college without the support of family and friends. Many first-generation Hispanic students do not have role models to show them the way. Gillette-Karam, Roueche, et al. (1991) reported that it is particularly important for minority students to see other minorities in positions of responsibility within the academy. Institutions that hire Hispanic faculty and administrators can provide role models who illustrate persistence in higher education.

Latino students need role models and mentors from their family and their life before going to college in order to help negotiate the pressure of feeling stretched between two cultures. They also need role models from their new world in the academy to help with the demands of the academic world. Richard Rodriguez (1982; 1992) made famous the story which explained that his academic success was contingent on hiding his own Latino culture in order to be accepted into the culture of the academy. Rendon (1993) speaks about her own split existence when she started community college:

Like Rodriguez, when I started to attend college, I found myself living between two worlds, leaving old friends behind and changing my identity. For me, going to college was not very ‘normal.’ It represented a break from family traditions. I was the first in my family to attend college, as my parents had only gone to the second and third grade. (p. 4)

For students who must leave their own culture to traverse a new and alienating academic environment, having mentors who are supporters and guides is imperative for student success.

In a recent dissertation concerning factors related to the educational goals and occupational aspirations of Mexican-American women in college, Gutierrez (2002) reported how critical support is for female students. “Lack of family support, particularly for Mexican American women, may prove detrimental to educational goals: especially, if further education is

viewed as separating from the family” (p. 38). We know that education is ultimately and invariably the process of bringing change through new learning, and it does indeed change the person and her/his life. According to Gutierrez, Hispanics who experience higher levels of educational attainment and success are those who are most assimilated in the new educational culture.

Navigating these new academic borders for students requires significant energy as students are negotiating multiple worlds. Developing the cultural capital to assimilate into the academy, while at the same time working to maintain scholarship, can be extremely difficult. Educators have debated whether students should have to negotiate these borders at all and have even suggested a radical restructuring of the dominant power structures of academia as a possible solution (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Stanton-Salazar (1997) offers a short-term strategy that is the systematic intervention of efforts oriented toward enhancing the social networks of working-class minority youth. Research has shown that with support from faculty, staff and other extended institutional and social networks, Hispanics can successfully increase their academic achievement.

Campus-Based Aid

A large body of research has been focused on the effects of financial aid on student decisions concerning whether to go to college and whether to persist to graduation (Heller, 1997). Researchers such as Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) report:

Studies using the 1989-90 national Beginning Post-secondary Student Survey and the 1992 follow-up indicate that students who receive financial aid (compared with those who do not) are less likely to leave postsecondary education after two years and more likely to earn a degree or certificate. The impact of financial aid was particularly evident among students enrolled in two- or three-year programs and those from families with the lowest incomes. (p. 408)

If students who receive higher levels of financial aid have greater persistence levels, then Hispanic students who are currently receiving the lowest levels of financial aid could benefit from increased aid. Currently, low-income students are receiving a declining share of financial aid grants. Since many Latino students are low-income, the limited amount of financial aid available and the increasing cost of higher education are impeding Latino participation in college (Santiago & Brown, 2004).

Almost half of all Latinos in higher education are enrolled in community colleges (Santiago & Brown, 2004). Close to 60 percent of all Latino undergraduates receive some form of financial aid to pay for college (Santiago & Brown, 2004). However, Latino students receive smaller packages on average than any other racial ethnic group (*Excelencia in Education*, 2005). In terms of state aid, only 16 percent of Latino undergraduates receive state aid and only 17 percent receive institutional aid nationwide (*Excelencia in Education*, 2005).

The four primary ways to pay for college are: grants, loans, work-study, and personal resources. Hispanics, unfortunately, receive the lowest average amount of financial aid by type and source of any ethnic group (Santiago & Brown, 2004). In Texas, the typical student with a bachelor's degree from a public university now graduates with \$15,766 of debt (Texas, 2005). Such debt is growing because payments are tied to prevailing commercial lending rates. In July 2005, the rate for Stafford federal student loans increased from 3.37 percent to 5.3 percent (Texas, 2005).

The average Pell grant received per student is about \$2,500. The average student loan recipient receives \$3,000 (Texas, 2005). Those sums cover some public institutions' tuition and fees but do not come close to covering other costs including books, room, board and transportation. Pell used to cover 77 percent of public four-year institutional costs, but it now covers only 42 percent (Texas, 2005).

Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) report that grants are especially beneficial for low-income students; even after controlling for student academic achievement and background characteristics, an additional \$1,000 in grant aid can reduce dropout rates by 23 percent. Romano (1999) reported that Pell grants have the largest effect on retention followed by work-study jobs. Romano suggested two reasons to explain the work-study impact on students:

The first reason is the importance of on campus job environment for Hispanic students. Generally, on campus life is a supportive environment for students to continue their education. Also, when students work on campus there is more understanding around midterms and finals time to receive time off. Secondly, receiving a paycheck each week assists in the financial burdens students are faced with and they can concentrate on studying. (p. 37)

In Texas, the majority of undergraduate students currently are considered “non-traditional.” Non-traditional students are those who are low-income, minority, and/ or older than the traditional college age student. Traditional students represent only 40 percent of college students, and the majority of “non-traditional” students are Latinos (Santiago & Brown, 2004). Many Hispanic students must pay for medical insurance and childcare in addition to paying tuition, fees and living expenses. About one-fourth of all Texas undergraduate students are parents; of those, 14 percent are single parents (McMillion et al., 2005).

Nationwide, 50 percent of all low-income college students must live at home, and 65 percent work an average of 24 hours a week just to make ends meet (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2002). Another striking fact regarding student college expense is that nationally as many as a quarter of all students now are relying on credit cards to finance their education (Baum & Payea, 2005).

Summary

The review of the literature shows that there are multiple factors that affect student retention.

The literature also reflects an evolving understanding of the number and complexity of factors involved with persistence, retention and academic success. Seidman (2005) suggests that future research on student retention and persistence should focus on the factors that will increase student success and graduation for low-income and underrepresented students in higher education today. This review has highlighted low-income Hispanic students, and the literature has demonstrated that considerations for the retention of Hispanic students in general and Hispanic females in particular are different from the general student population. The Hispanic population of community college students is growing rapidly, and there is an urgent need to better serve Hispanic students in general and female Hispanics specifically because they represent the fastest growing segment of community college enrollments (Seidman, 2005). Very little research has been conducted concerning Hispanic women, but some studies have found differences in persistence between Hispanic males and females (Rosas & Hamrick, 2002). As Oviatt (1999) reports, research concerning the success of Hispanics in higher education is still in its infancy, and more consideration of key factors affecting success is needed.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter describes the methods and procedures used to assess factors contributing to the academic persistence of female Hispanic graduates of Rio Bravo College, a community college located in south Texas. The following elements will be detailed within the chapter:

- 1) Restatement of the problem;
- 2) Research design methodology;
- 3) Population and sample of the study;
- 4) Validity/reliability;
- 5) Research design and procedures;
- 6) Instrumentation (individual interviews, focus group, survey);
- 7) Data collection procedures;
- 8) Data analysis procedures;
- 9) Demographic data;
- 10) Summary.

Restatement of the Problem

The study identified and investigated six factors which have been known to contribute to persistence in relation to academic success, retention and graduation. The research sought specifically to examine whether or not the two areas of student goal commitment and support by significant others were reported by female Hispanic graduates of Rio Bravo College, a community college located in south Texas, as the two most important factors contributing to

their success. The research questions, developed by Romano (1999), were designed to ascertain:

1. To what extent does academic integration influence Hispanic female student retention and graduation from a community college?
2. To what extent does student social integration influence Hispanic female student retention and graduation from a community college?
3. To what extent does institutional commitment influence Hispanic female student retention and graduation from a community college?
4. To what extent does student goal commitment influence Hispanic female student retention and graduation from a community college?
5. To what extent does support by significant others influence Hispanic female student retention and graduation from a community college?
6. To what extent does campus-based aid influence Hispanic female student retention and graduation from a community college?
7. What other factors emerge from the study as contributing significantly to student retention and graduation.

Research Design Method

The research design and procedures were developed to fully describe the research problem, determine and review the research design (multi-method design), describe the population, identify how the sample was selected, describe the process for individual interviews, describe the process for the focus group interview, describe the subject group and process used to survey the group, and describe the process of identifying unknown outcomes in the study.

Population and Sample

The study population was comprised of the 229 women who graduated from Rio Bravo College during the 2004-2005 academic year with an Associate of Arts, Associate of Science, or Associate of Applied Science degree and who listed “Hispanic” as their ethnicity on their college application. All of the women in this population were sent -- either electronically or through the mail -- an initial letter of introduction (Appendix A) asking them to participate in an individual interview or a focus group and to complete a survey. The survey (Appendix E) was enclosed with the introductory letter or could be taken online.

Basic demographic information was collected from all participants in the study (Appendix F). Rio Bravo College provided information concerning the graduates’ majors and ages.

Individual interviews were conducted with six women from the population of 229 individuals. A self-selected group of the first six volunteers made up the individuals who were interviewed from the total number of potential interviewees.

A focus group, comprised of seven different Hispanic women, was also formed. A self-selected group of the first seven women interested in serving on the focus group made up the individuals who participated. Krueger (2002a) indicates that 6-8 participants in a focus group is the preferred number because it allows for maximum participation but is still an administratively manageable group. The purpose of the focus group and the individual interviews was to provide rich qualitative information that may not be accessible through traditional survey mechanisms (Krueger, 2002a).

Focus groups have often been utilized to provide a potential mechanism suited to the advancement of social justice for women because it validates, through their own words, examples of individual and collective survival and successful coping strategies (Madriz, 2000).

Mertens (2005) notes that feminist researchers often use focus groups and interviewing techniques to be able to verify emerging themes and interpret and incorporate new questions as they proceed in their study:

Using focus groups as a research strategy would be appropriate when the researcher is interested in how individuals form a schema or perspective of a problem. The focus group interaction allows the exhibition of a struggle for understanding how others interpret key terms and their agreement or disagreements with the issues raised. (p.245)

The survey, which was field tested by Romano (1999), asked participants to rank order six factors known to impact retention and graduation rates according to their importance to each of the respondent's own academic success and graduation.

Validity

Validity is conventionally defined as the extent to which the instrument being utilized measures what it was intended to measure (Mertens, 2005). In addition, any instrument being used should be able to measure the attributes intended without any undue bias which could emanate from gender, race, class, disability, etc. (Mertens, 2005). The survey being utilized had been field tested in previous research (Romano, 1999) and provided a rank ordering of the six known factors along with the ability to rank order other factors which were deemed important by the female Hispanic graduates. To prevent accidental bias in sampling and increase the validity and credibility of the survey's outcomes, all Hispanic females who graduated in the 2004-2005 academic year were invited to participate in the study.

Some controversy exists in utilizing the terms *validity* and *reliability* within the context of qualitative research because it can be argued that these terms come out of the positivist paradigm and a qualitative researcher should use entirely different terminology (Morse and Richards, 2002). According to Morse and Richards (2002), reliability requires that the same results be obtained if the study were replicated, and validity requires that the results accurately reflect the phenomenon

studied. This mixed method study has both quantitative and qualitative dimensions. The survey itself, the quantitative component, replicates the Romano (1999) study; however, the information obtained from the focus group and individual interviews was analyzed using qualitative strategies and, as a result, resists replication. Unlike quantitative research, qualitative inquiry requires delving deeply into the lives of study participants to apprehend their understanding of the key factors that helped them to succeed and graduate from community college. The use of a focus group and individual interviews represents a sociological case study approach that invites the women to share their college life experiences to ascertain common factors.

In describing qualitative research, Morse and Richards (2002) comment:

But there is a difference between using a rigid conceptual framework that dictates data collection and adhering to the philosophical basis of the study. Such philosophical paradigms as feminism, postmodernism, and critical theory do not create variables lists; rather, they provide ways of looking and focusing the method used in a particular direction, for a particular purpose. Overlaying a study with such a theory, provided it is explicit, is not a source of invalidity but rather a lens to give your project a particular focus. (p.171)

The past work of Romano (1999) serves as a guide, but the current work will be inductive using analytic questions to probe the responses of the interviewees. Room has been made as well to follow up on any significant deviations that develop from the questioning and interviewing process. Morse and Richards (2002) point out that qualitative inquiry is an active process that demands the researcher always be thinking, confirming and possibly refuting data in its ongoing collection.

Reliability

Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest that during the course of the study, reliability is defined as “whether the process of the study is consistent, reasonably stable over time and across researchers and methods” (p.278). The basic tenets of this study remained close to the constructs of Romano’s 1999 study in terms of the factors being studied, the survey utilized, and the questions asked. The larger student population surveyed in this study allows for a more numerically substantial and

reliable result of what Hispanic females at this particular south Texas community college report as the key factors to their success and how those factors ultimately impacted retention and graduation.

In the qualitative portion of the study, which utilizes a focus group and individual interviews, the researcher serves as the instrument for gathering the data (Morse & Richards, 2002). The conversation that occurs in the focus group and the interviews allows for in-depth questioning and discussion of the specific factors that contributed to the success of the participants as graduates of Rio Bravo College.

Research Design and Procedures

The research design for this study is a multimethod approach. Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest that using a qualitative-quantitative linkage often assists in mutually supporting the overall data collection. The quantitative aspect focuses on the ranking of survey factors and the collection of demographic information. The qualitative aspect focuses on the interpretation of information gleaned from the individual interviews and the focus group. As Miles and Huberman (1994) report, the strength of qualitative research is its local “groundedness” which illuminates what “real life” is like in the area of study:

That confidence is buttressed by local *groundedness*, the fact that the data were collected in close proximity to a specific situation, rather than through the mail or over the phone. The emphasis is on a specific case, a focused and bounded phenomenon embedded in its context. (p.10)

Further, Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest that qualitative research provides a unique richness that can reveal complexity through “thick description”(Geertz, 1973) that is vividly located in the context of what is being studied. Qualitative approaches use the participants’ words to paint an intricate, holistic picture of their perspectives in a real world setting (Creswell, 2003).

Significant awareness of ethnic qualitative study is required to interact sensitively with the participants in the interviews and focus group (Kruegar 2002b). As Donna Mertens (2005)

suggests, an ethnic researcher needs to include oral communication - grounded in holistic notions of human beings, participant observation, and oral history to allow people of color to articulate how they have constructed their own reality. Van Maanen (1988) advises against withdrawing from the culture and, instead, urges the researcher to be fully engrossed in the daily lives of participants as much as possible. For the past 20 years, this researcher has been fully and actively involved on a daily basis in south Texas culture and in community college education at Rio Bravo College.

Kruegar (2002a) indicates that conducting qualitative research with focus groups allows the socially oriented researcher to have probing discussions that possess high validity at low costs. Focus groups also assist the researcher gain a deeper understanding of the research domain quickly and efficiently (Morse & Richards, 2002).

The combining of mixed methods research often provides a more complete understanding of the variables in the study and the influence of those factors. Mertens (2005) suggests that by using more than one method within a given research study, one is able to obtain a more detailed picture of the complexities of the human experience.

Instrumentation

All prepared questions were based on the six factors identified by Romano (1999): academic integration, social integration, institutional commitment, individual goal commitment, support from significant others, and campus-based financial aid. In both individual interviews and the focus group, the researcher offered room for additional responses. Basic demographic information, such as age and academic major, was provided by Rio Bravo College; however, to ensure consistent information, additional demographic data was collected on the survey instrument (Appendix F).

Focus group:

A focus group was conducted which used questions concerning the six known factors contributing to academic success and an open-ended seventh question. The researcher, who acted as the group moderator, remained open to deviations to the scripted questions that occurred during the focus group process. In addition, the researcher created a warm, hospitable context for conversation by serving the participants lunch prior to the group session.

Individual Interviews:

Six individual interviews were conducted (see Table 1). Open-ended questions were asked to encourage participants to describe their personal experiences of success in graduating from college. In the process of probing the students' experiences, emotive responses were also noted. The researcher remained open to the possibility of other factors, beyond the initial six, surfacing during the interview process.

Survey:

The survey replicated the instrument developed by Romano (1999) that had been field tested and shaped from the interviews and focus group work in her research. Survey respondents were to rank order the six factors known to affect persistence and retention. In addition, the survey asked a seventh, open-ended question to determine if there were any other factors that were significant to the Hispanic female graduates' success in achieving their degree. The survey was provided to participants both by mail and online. The survey results helped to guide questioning in the focus group and in the interviews.

Data Collection Procedures

Survey administration was conducted utilizing both an electronic (SurveyMonkey) and a paper survey. The first contact of all 2004-2005 Hispanic female graduates was made by email/mail

asking for survey responses either electronically or by mail (a response envelope had been enclosed). A second request for survey responses went out by email/phone call shortly after the initial letter.

Next, a focus group was created. All focus group members were asked to complete a survey if they had not done so and were also asked to sign consent and release forms (Appendices B&G). The focus group was scheduled for a two-hour period in a conference room on the Rio Bravo College campus. Lunch was served and the session was taped utilizing two tape recording instruments. The researcher discussed and asked questions concerning all six areas with special emphasis on the top factors ascertained by the survey results. The researcher summarized key findings at the conclusion of the focus group. A transcription of the focus group session was completed.

Following the focus group, six individual interviews were arranged at times that were convenient to each participant's schedule. If the interviewee had not completed a survey, she was asked to do so prior to the interview. All participants in the interviews signed a release and consent forms (Appendices B&G). The interviews were scheduled for one hour. Refreshments were served, and all sessions were recorded utilizing two tape recording instruments. Each interview was summarized by the researcher at its conclusion. A transcription of the interviews was completed.

Data Analysis Procedures

The survey represented six known factors assumed to impact retention and graduation rates. The survey also asked an open-ended seventh question that would allow respondents to provide other important reasons for success in graduation. The survey group was asked to rank order these statements from one to seven, one being most important and seven being the least important. Thus, the lowest number would have the greatest weight, and the highest number would have the least importance.

The focus group session and all six interviews were transcribed and merged with field notes. The transcription was checked twice to assure accuracy and completeness. The transcripts were coded for themes. Both the frequency and intensity of statements were noted.

Demographic Data

Demographic information was collected from responses gathered on the survey instrument and during the individual interviews and the focus group session. In addition, Rio Bravo College's Office of Admissions and its Office of Institutional Effectiveness provided further data that served as secondary demographic information. The secondary source information included the list of 229 female Hispanic graduates from 2004-2005 as well as the graduates' date of birth and major. This additional information enhanced the demographic information captured on the survey instrument.

Summary

This chapter has described the methods and procedures that were used to conduct a multi-method study at Rio Bravo College, a community college in south Texas. The research design methodology and the population studied were discussed. The instrumentation and data collection procedures were reviewed in detail. The following areas were addressed: 1) restatement of the problem; 2) research design methodology; 3) population and sample for the study; 4) validity/reliability; 5) research design and procedures; 6) instrumentation (individual interviews, focus group, survey); 7) data collection procedures; 8) data analysis procedures; and 9) demographic data.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Introduction

This chapter provides the findings and results of the study. The information is divided into five sections: 1) a discussion of the specific methods and procedures used; 2) a presentation of demographic information about the participants; 3) the results of the focus group and individual interviews (qualitative data); 4) the ranking of the survey factors (quantitative data); and 5) a summary of the findings.

Previous research (Romano, 1999) identified several factors that impact retention and academic achievement and graduation. The seven research questions formulated for this study were based on these known factors:

1. To what extent does academic integration influence Hispanic female student retention and graduation from a community college?
2. To what extent does student social integration influence Hispanic female student retention and graduation from a community college?
3. To what extent does institutional commitment influence Hispanic female student retention and graduation from a community college?
4. To what extent does student goal commitment influence Hispanic female student retention and graduation from a community college?
5. To what extent does support by significant others influence Hispanic female student retention and graduation from a community college?
6. To what extent does campus-based aid influence Hispanic female student retention and graduation from a community college?

7. What other factors emerge from the study as contributing significantly to student retention and graduation?

The first six research questions replicate the study done by Romano (1999). The final open-ended question was created to extend Romano's findings and probe for additional factors that study participants viewed as significant to their academic success. Although designed as a replication study, this research enhances the work done by Romano by basing its findings on a larger population. In 1999, Romano surveyed a population of 47 individuals with a 23 percent return rate (11 respondents). The present study surveyed a population of 229 individuals with a 21 percent return rate (48 respondents).

The current research also incorporates a substantial qualitative component that builds on the field-testing done by Romano in the development of her research instrument. Table 1 provides a grid that aligns the study's primary research questions with the more specific questions asked to those participating in individual interviews and the focus group. The order of questions on Table 1 reflects the sequence used by the researcher.

Table 1 Questions to Identify Each Factor

<p>Primary Research Question</p> <p>1. To what extent is academic integration influential to Hispanic female student retention and graduation from a community college?</p>	<p>1. [ACADEMIC INTEGRATION]</p> <p>We have learned that there were lots of different things within our lives that contributed to our successes. Tell me how many of you really “got into” school? Was there a teacher you really liked and remembered? Why? What was the class like? Did you feel engaged? What made you feel engaged? Did you ever go up to the teacher after class and talk about assignments? Did a teacher ever show interest in you or your work? Did you ever go up to a teacher after the class was over and tell him/her how much you enjoyed the class? Did you take an orientation class? Was that a helpful class?</p>
<p>2. To what extent does student goal commitment influence Hispanic female student retention and graduation from a community college?</p>	<p>2. [GOAL COMMITMENT]</p> <p>When you started college did you already know how to effectively set goals and achieve them? If not, how did you learn to set goals? What were your initial goals when you first enrolled at Rio Bravo College? How did your goals in college change over time? Did you have the same major or did that change from when you started to when you finished? Did you expect to graduate college when you first started or were you just going to take some courses? Did you go through the commencement ceremony? Why or why not?</p>
<p>3. To what extent does support by significant others influence Hispanic female student retention and graduation from a community college?</p>	<p>3. [SIGNIFICANT OTHERS]</p> <p>Was your family supportive of you going to college? If so how, if not why not? Was there someone who was important to you in the college going process – other than family? What kind of support is needed from family and friends in your opinion? How did you approach balancing the various aspects of your life while going to college and how did support from others contribute/or not? Did your</p>

	<p>family/friends pitch in to help? Did your family/friends encourage you to keep on going? Who was the most influential person to you and in what ways was this person most influential. How was your overall health while going to college? How did significant others help you maintain your health (mental, physical, emotional)? If you were going to be able to assist another woman through college, what kind of support would you offer her and why?</p>
<p>4. To what extent does campus-based financial aid influence Hispanic female student retention and graduation from a community college?</p>	<p>4. [CAMPUS BASED FINANCIAL AID] What was the situation for you financially -- did you pay for college, did your family, husband, etc.? What part did financial aid play in being able to go to school? Could you have gone to school without financial aid? How did you learn to navigate the paperwork connected with financial aid? Did the people you worked with support you by giving you time off during finals or if you had a paper due? What is the most valuable lesson you learned about financial aid that you would want to pass on to other women?</p>
<p>5. To what extent does institutional commitment influence Hispanic female student retention and graduation from a community college?</p>	<p>5. [INSTITUTIONAL COMMITMENT] What made you decide to come to Rio Bravo College? Friends, family or teachers from high school? Was it the location? Did you take pride in attending Rio Bravo College? How well did you get to know Rio Bravo College? What did you like best about Rio Bravo College? Did you become familiar with all the offices like Financial Aid, Transcript, graduation, writing lab, computer lab? How would you describe overall how you feel about Rio Bravo College?</p>

6. To what extent does student social integration influence Hispanic female student retention and graduation from a community college?	<p>6. [SOCIAL INTEGRATION]</p> <p>Did you meet new friends in class and plan to meet them after school? Did you join clubs or organizations? Have any of you used the tutoring center, study groups, or writing lab? Where did you go to have fun on campus? How did you feel when you started each class? Did you feel you fit in? At the end of the 16 week semester, did you feel you fit in? What did you think of the other students who attended there? Did you feel you had a lot in common with the other students? What did you like best about the social aspects of college? How do you think the social aspects of college affected you? Did the social aspects of college help or harm your progress towards graduating?</p>
7. What other factors emerge from the study as contributing significantly to student retention and graduation?	<p>7. [OTHER FACTORS]</p> <p>Suppose you had one minute to talk to the president of Rio Bravo College about the needs of Hispanic women. What would you say? What recommendations would you make to the institution to better meet the needs of Hispanic women at Rio Bravo College? Are there any other statements you would like to make?</p>

Methods and Procedures

Listed below is a detailed description of how data for the study was collected and evaluated.

Action 1: A list of female Hispanic graduates from the 2004-2005 academic year was requested from Rio Bravo College's Dean of Institutional Effectiveness. The list of 229 graduates included names, addresses, telephone numbers, college e-mail addresses, academic majors and degrees awarded.

Action 2: Letters were sent to all 229 potential respondents asking them to participate in a study of successful Hispanic female graduates (Appendix A). The letter included a paper survey and an email address if the students preferred to respond electronically. The letter informed the students that they should expect a call within the next two weeks inviting them to participate in either a focus group or an individual interview.

Action 3: After two weeks, calls were made to the women asking them if they had received the mailing and explaining that this was part of a doctoral dissertation about successful Hispanic women who had graduated from Rio Bravo College. Calls were done in alphabetical order from the master list of graduates. Using this method, the women were asked on a first-come, first-serve basis to participate in a focus group. After seven individuals had agreed to serve as members of the focus group, the women who were called subsequently were asked in the same first-come first-serve fashion to participate in individual interviews. Six women agreed to individual interviews.

All 229 women were called to encourage participation in the survey. Survey participants were given a two-week deadline in which to return the survey. In actuality, however, a 30-day window was used to provide for optimum return rates from both electronic and paper surveys. Only 11 participants chose to utilize the electronic (SurveyMonkey) survey. Thirty-seven individuals filled out and returned the paper survey.

Of the 229 graduates who were called, 83 telephone calls yielded no answers without answering machines on which to leave a message; 58 had voice mail and received a message; and 41 were wrong numbers. Only 15 letters were returned as undeliverable without a forwarding address. Table 2 illustrates the communication efforts and their respective results.

Table 2 Communication Efforts

CATEGORY OF PARTICIPATION	ACTUAL PARTICIPANTS
Total Women Graduates	N=229
Agreed to Participate in focus group.	7
Agreed to participate in individual interview.	6
Agreed to participate in electronic survey. (all e-mails were Palo Alto College assigned- no electronic feedback available)	11
Agreed to participate in written survey	37
No Answer/No Answering Machine	83
Left Message	58
Wrong phone number	41
Undeliverable letters	15

Table 3 illustrates the number of women who participated in the study and the respective percentage of participation.

Table 3 Participants

CATEGORY	NUMBER OF WOMEN	PERCENTAGE
Total Number of Women Graduates (2004-2005)	229	100%
Individual Interviews	6	2%
Focus Group	7	3%
Survey	48	21%
Total Participants	48	21%

Action 4: The focus group was conducted in a large conference room in the Administration Building at Rio Bravo College (Appendix C). A full, hot lunch was provided to the seven participants. The focus group was tape-recorded with two recorders in case one of the recorders would fail to function. To augment the recorded data, handwritten notes were taken by the researcher to describe facial expressions, emotions and any emphatic actions made by the group members. Introductions were made on tape to help identify specific voices. Initial instructions and group ground rules were discussed to facilitate the conduct of the focus group. An estimated two hours was planned to conduct the focus group. All focus group members were asked to fill out the written survey prior to the focus group session. All seven focus group members attended the meeting. Initially, it was planned to have only six members with an additional seventh member scheduled in case one of the women were to be absent. Forty pages of transcription were developed documenting the focus group.

Action 5: The individual interviews were conducted next (Appendix D). The locations where the interviews took place varied with four conducted at the women's place of work and two conducted in the evening at Rio Bravo College in the conference room of the Dean of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences. All interviews took place within a three-week period and were tape-recorded utilizing two tape recorders. To augment the recorded data, handwritten notes were taken by the researcher to describe facial expressions, emotions and any emphatic actions made by the interviewee. Each interview took approximately one hour. The six interviews resulted in 96 pages of transcription.

Action 6: After the completion of the focus group and the interviews, the tapes were transcribed. The transcription was then qualitatively coded for major themes and sub-themes that became apparent during the interviews. These themes and sub-themes included: AC—academic integration (sub themes= fm—faculty motivators, co—student cohorts as motivators, cs—campus services); GC—goal commitment (sub theme= gc—graduation ceremonies); SO—significant others; FA—financial aid; IC—institutional commitment (sub themes= pm—proximity); SI – social

integration; and OF- other factors (sub theme= cm-children as motivators). The frequency of comments and emotive intensity were noted. An initial evaluation was done immediately upon obtaining the transcription. A second evaluation was done approximately two weeks later to ensure for a detailed review and deeper reflection of the transcription.

Action 7: The surveys were compiled and reviewed utilizing both Excel spreadsheets and SurveyMonkey tabulation methods. All demographic information was compiled into a table and all comments listed on the survey were reviewed and evaluated.

Demographic Information

Demographic information was obtained from the survey instrument and from the Rio Bravo College's Office of Institutional Effectiveness. The data obtained is information about the Hispanic females at the time of their graduation. The demographic information obtained includes: age, marital status, number of children, first-generation in college, income of parents, whether they were the primary "bread-winners" during their college experience, country of origin (heritage), whether they continued their education after earning an associate's degree, and whether they marched in commencement. When the respondents of this study are compared to the underlying total female Hispanics population of graduates, utilizing existing available institutional data from Rio Bravo, the respondent group is reasonably representative. In terms of mean age variable, the total sample's mean age is 32. Other available institutional data included 53 per cent are first-generation college students, 63 percent had children and 70 percent are listed as economically disadvantaged. It was not possible, given available institutional data, to examine the comparability of the other survey variables listed on Table 4.

Table 4 reflects the tabulation of the survey demographic information.

Table 4 Survey Demographic Results

Category	Total Group (N=44)	Category	Total Group (N=44)
Age		First Generation in the United States	
Mean	33.9	N=	7
Range	20-60	%	16
Standard Deviation	12.76	Non-Native born	
Marital Status		N=	5
Single		%	11
N=	23	United States born	
%	52	N=	18
Married		%	41
N=	17	2nd or 3rd Generation in the United States	
%	39	N=	12
Both Single & Married		%	27
N=	2	No Response	2
%	5	Parents Education	
Married / Separated		Education of Mother	
N=	1	high school or below	
%	2	N=	35
No Response	1	%	79.5
Single With No Children		some college & above	
N=	15	N=	6
%	34	%	13.6
Single With Children		No Response	3
N=	9	Education of Father	
%	20	high school or below	
Married With No Children		N=	32
N=	2	%	72.7
%	5	some college & above	
Married With Children		N=	9
N=	15	%	20.4
%	34	No Response	3
No Response	3	Continued Education After Graduation	
Primary "Bread-Winner"		YES	
YES		N=	29
N=	13	%	66
%	30	NO	
NO		N=	14
N=	30	%	32
%	68	No Response	1
No Response	1	March in Commencement Ceremony	
Income Range	Frequency	YES	
\$10,000-\$15,000	15	N=	34
\$15,000-\$30,000	11	%	77
\$30,000-\$60,000	10	NO	
\$60,000-\$95,000	4	N=	9
No Response	4	%	20
Income of Parents		No Response	1
Mean	\$29,875.00		
Range	\$10,000 to \$95,000+		
Standard Deviation	\$20,560.70		

Of the total population of 229 Hispanic females, 108 were education majors, and 50 of these were Teacher Assistants/Aides specifically (Appendix H). There was no other major that came close to these numbers. Business Administration, the second highest major, had only 15 majors. This information is presented to explain the significant number of education majors who participated in the interviews and focus group. The seven women in the focus group represented a variety of majors: Information Science Studies, Physical Education, Teacher Assistant/Aide, General Psychology (two majors), Pre-Nursing, and Business Administration. The six interviewees were Teacher Assistants/Aides and General Education majors and, thus, were a far less diverse sample in terms of majors.

Focus Group Results

Seven women participated in the focus group which was held over two hours during lunch time. The researcher carefully noted the women's verbal and non-verbal expressions in the process of the discussion. Open-ended, probing follow-up questions were asked during the focus group. The women who participated in the focus group were assigned an identification number to ensure their anonymity. The seven focus group respondents' identifications are: FG-1, FG-2, FG-3, FG-4, FG-5, FG-6, and FG-7.

Question 1. To what extent is academic integration influential to Hispanic female student retention and graduation from a community college?

The focus group began with the question "What led you to go to college?" FG-1 responded: "I had to come back to college because my job required that I get the degree in order to continue working. I mean I was, what, 50 years old when I started coming back to school, and I didn't know if I was going to make it. I really didn't know, being out of school for such a long

time, but working with students (as a teacher's aide), I've been in education for a long time, for over 20 years now, and the fact that I had to go to college in order to keep my job, that I had to come back. It was threatening actually."

FG-2 said: "I guess one reason I came to school is my parents only have a high school education. My mom was from Mexico, and she actually started working at the elementary school that I went to as a dishwasher. Twelve years later she was the manager of the cafeteria, and, to me, that was something that I really looked up to her. Even though she didn't have her education, she moved her way up not speaking English. I just thought with an education I would probably better myself. I had one child, my first daughter at the time, and I wanted just to be a good example to her. You need an education and without it you really can't get anywhere."

FG-3 said: "For me, coming back was that I didn't want to work in just any job, and everywhere now you need a degree. I don't have to work right now, but I'm sure there's going to be a time, and I want to be prepared."

FG-4 said: "Ever since I was five years old I always wanted to have a degree for some reason. I came to Rio Bravo College because it was close to home. I am the only one in my family to go to college and graduate."

FG-5 said: "What drove me to college more was probably out of competition. My older brother went to City Community College, and he didn't complete a whole semester. He was better as far as academics so I enrolled into Rio Bravo College, and I pretty much did well."

FG-6 said: "The reason I decided to go to college was because my parents also were from Mexico, and they don't have an education. Maybe they have the equivalent of a 6th grade education. They struggled here because they don't speak English, and they can't advance or have a career. I'm not just doing it for myself; I'm doing it for them. I want to give back to them."

FG-7 said: “I graduated from high school, and I applied at a local university. They accepted me as a provisional student, but I didn’t like the way that sounded so I spoke with a Rio Bravo College counselor, and I entered a summer program, and they gave me the Trustee Scholarship. I was all excited so I went the summer, and I did good and then I just continued. Everyone went to their universities, and I stayed here at Rio Bravo College, and I didn’t want to leave.”

When asked if there was a teacher they really liked, that helped them feel engaged and showed interest in them?” FG-4 responded, “One in particular was great, Dr. A. She’s a great teacher. She was always pushing me and pushing me and pushing me.”

FG-2 said, “ Dr. H. was just excellent. Ah! She was a motivator, big-time. She told me I could do it.”

FG-3 said: “For me it was anatomy with Dr. M. It was one of my first classes coming back, and she basically let me know that I could do it. And if I could do her class, I could do any of my other classes. And then that was it; from there I was gone.”

FG-5 said: “Mr. V. was great help when I finally decided to do what I wanted to do, to go toward psychology. He knows his discipline.” FG-5 noted that this was her second attempt at college, and she was confused initially in college about what major to attempt.

FG-1 said: “My counselor, Ms. G. she gave us a plan, and she said this is what you have to do. She was there with us. She guided us and she said, ‘You need to go one step at a time.’”

FG-7 said: “I had a lot of teachers that helped. I hadn’t come to school at one point for a Saturday class, and the teacher was very understanding when I had to miss when things were happening in my life. So I think she kind of helped me see that I could do it no matter what was going on.”

When the focus group was asked who took orientation class at Rio Bravo College, four of the seven responded that they had, and that it was helpful. The topic of orientation is discussed in greater detail in the “Other Factors” category.

Question 2. To what extent does student goal commitment influence Hispanic female student retention and graduation from a community college?

The focus group was asked if they knew how to set goals and achieve them before college or did they learn this in college. They were also asked if they thought the process of goal-setting was important. FG-2 began the discussion by saying, “I’ve had to learn because in high school, I was an A, B,C, D student, and I wasn’t really sure what or how to get what I wanted. I kind of learned.”

There was agreement with this statement by FG-6 who said: “I think I also learned in college. I thought I knew what my goals were but I changed them a lot because, initially, I wanted to go to school to go into theater arts, and I changed. I went into computer information systems. I changed again, and now I’m in accounting and so I learned and I based it [setting goals] off of what was out there and what would give me the most benefit in life.”

FG-1 agreed: “I didn’t have goal setting when I got into college. I had to learn how to set goals once I got there. Like I said, it was very difficult for me because I had never graduated from high school first of all. I got my GED, and I thought it was impossible for me to go to school and finish. To graduate, I just thought it was impossible. I always tried to go one step at a time.”

FG-7 said, “I didn’t have goals when I got out of high school. I never had anybody tell me ‘You have to set goals.’”

FG-2 said that when she came to college she didn’t have any goals for herself. “I went straight from high school to a college on a volleyball scholarship. My first time away from home

all I wanted to do was party, party, party. I forgot about my classes. I came back home and realized that I really had to go to school. I met my husband, and he's from the southeast side [of town], and I said let me try Rio Bravo College, and I really, really liked it. It was pretty much just a learning experience. Now I'm really goal-oriented."

FG-4 was the only member of the focus group who said she knew about setting goals early on. "Okay, so ever since I was 17, I knew that goals were part of life. I knew I had to give half my paycheck to my father to pay for electricity, house, water and all this other stuff. Now I'm 24, my whole paycheck goes to my family. I pay the majority of the house bills. So when I was in school, I always knew I had to go to school and get good grades."

Although the majority of members did not know how to set goals before entering college, they learned to set goals in college and reported that this process contributed positively to their eventual success and graduation.

When asked if the students participated in graduation, all but two indicated they marched in commencement and felt this was very important. FG-1 said: "Not until I walked that little stage where they appreciate you and give you that little gift and the certificate saying that you made the President's List did I realize that this was a person who was way down in here [pointing to her heart and tearing up], and I didn't think she could make it, and all of a sudden here I am and I was like **Wow!**"

Question 3. To what extent does support by significant others influence Hispanic female student retention and graduation from a community college?

FG-3 identified her husband as her primary support. She is currently pursuing a bachelor's degree at a local university and said she had a difficult semester. "I would be: 'That's it! I can't take it! I'm going to drop this class!' And he'd be like, 'No, no, no! You've got to finish!' He has always been the one pushing me."

FG-2 commented, “My parents did support me, but they didn’t say much. But they were very proud of me when I did receive my associate’s.” FG-5 said: “With my parents it was pretty much like you either go to school or you work. My dad went to community college, and I remember that he walked the stage. I never really understood what that was until later. This was a big factor, and he was always pushing me.” FG-7 said, “My parents were always encouraging me, and my friends were encouraging me so it was easy to keep going.”

FG-1 spoke about how being in the Teacher Aide Program and taking classes as a cohort group provided very strong support. The strength and support offered by cohort students is mentioned throughout the individual interviews as is shown later. FG-1 said: “We came in as a group, so this group got together and studied, and we pushed each other. Even when there was a time when somebody wanted to drop out, we were like no- we can make it. We’ll help you. Come study.” FG-3 added that she utilized study groups that resulted from students with the same majors getting together. They would identify each other when they came into new classes and get together to study and work on class projects.

FG-4 said: “Rio Bravo College was a great experience. My professors, every single one of them, I’ve liked. They saw that I was a good student, and so I also get a lot of motivation and encouragement from my professors.”

The focus group members reported that help and support came from three primary areas including family members, teachers, and fellow students in cohort settings.

The focus group then was asked how they were able to maintain balance (mental, emotional, and physical) in their lives. FG-2 said: “When I would be completely stressed out he [her husband] would do dinner and would do all the things that I needed to do with the kids. Overall through my time at Rio Bravo College, my health was fine. But it was because I had him to help with the load – that was the difference.”

FG-1 commented that FG-2 was very lucky because she had a different experience. “I did get stressed out at one point and had to drop out of one class because it was very difficult for me healthwise. I got diagnosed with carpal tunnel and fibromyalgia and a herniated disc.” FG-7 said that she was not able to maintain her health. “I almost took anxiety pills because I was so stressed out. I tend to do a lot. I tend to have a lot on my plate.” The other focus group members generally commented that they were able to maintain their health through the educational process.

Question 4. To what extent does campus-based financial aid influence Hispanic female student retention and graduation from a community college?

FG-3 said: “Throughout my college experience I received financial aid, and I didn’t get any loans, which I’m glad, and I relied heavily on financial aid. If I hadn’t had financial aid, I wouldn’t have been able to pay for school because my parents couldn’t afford it.”

FG-4 agreed and said: “In the beginning of school, my dad got fired from his job. I was the only one working. I didn’t have to pay my way through school with my money. Financial aid gave me mostly everything.”

FG-5 said: “As far as the financial aid thing, I think I don’t make money at all, and I still don’t receive financial aid. Right now I’m pulling out loans. It doesn’t matter if you’re single. I don’t get anything at all. At Rio Bravo, I learned to pay my way through.” She added that she thinks many students are confused about financial aid and how to access and use it. FG-5 lives at home with her parents.

FG-2 said her experience was that her father paid the bills. “I never received financial aid. My dad paid for everything. I think without my dad I don’t know how I would have paid for school. But I know I would have probably taken out a loan.”

The rest of the members of the focus said they received financial aid. FG-7 and FG-6 both received small scholarships that gave them a boost financially and emotionally. Financial aid was critical for four of the seven women in order to attend and to graduate from college.

When the focus group was asked what was the most valuable lesson learned connected with navigating the financial aid terrain, they made the following comments: “Fill it [the paperwork] out early! The earlier the better. If you get bad grades, you’ll be put on probation. Don’t forget to go to school every day. You can only miss four days. If you have questions, don’t be afraid to ask them. Try to get the information early.”

Question 5. To what extent does institutional commitment influence Hispanic female student retention and graduation from a community college?

The focus group was asked why they specifically attended Rio Bravo College and what they felt about the college. FG-4 said that the college was close to her home. FG-2 said: “I think I came to Rio Bravo College more because I didn’t like the way [another college] looked. It looked too big. I wanted to get away, but my parents wouldn’t let me leave the city for college. This was like the closest thing to feeling like it wasn’t in [the city]. It was further from everything else in the city.”

FG-5 said: “For me, coming here it was a tight-knit community. Here your teachers know you. A lot of them know your situation. They help you and lead you in the right directions, and the support from the labs and tutoring were good. For me, Rio Bravo College was my way. I couldn’t do professors not knowing who I was.”

FG-7 agreed saying: “I had tried [other colleges], and I just felt, like she said, a close-knit community here. You were able to talk to your teachers, and they understood your situation.”

Members of the focus group were questioned about utilizing other institutional support services. The women said that they used many of the support services including math tutoring,

counseling, the library, and the computer labs. FG-5 commented that she did not appreciate the counseling area. “The only thing I think I didn’t like was just the counseling. I went a couple of times and they weren’t very helpful. I had only visited them twice, and then after that, I looked for a [faculty] advisor, and I just pretty much relied on him.”

FG-6 countered that opinion by saying: “I liked the fact that I could call my advisor or counselor any time to ask any questions. My teachers made themselves available. This is my phone number. This is my number here at school. Contact me if you have any questions or if you’re not going to be here. I’m willing to work with you. The best thing I liked about Rio Bravo College is their hours, their times, and their schedule. You can come on Saturdays. I think that was the best thing of all.”

Question 6. To what extent does student social integration influence Hispanic female student retention and graduation from a community college?

FG-1 spoke again about importance of the Teacher Aide Program cohort. “When we were a group, it was fun. We had a class with women the same age, and we were doing the same things. So we kind of went along with classes together. So when we split and we saw each other, it was like, ‘Hey, what are you doing?’ You feel good because you know somebody.”

FG-2 added that she felt all students could fit in at the college. “On this campus, there’s a place for everybody to feel comfortable. Because you have all ranges of age, and there’s always somebody in your situation. There’s always somebody who’s married. There’s always somebody who’s single with kids. There’s young ones; there’s old ones. You can relate to somebody at some point.”

FG- 4 said: “I don’t think I fit in anywhere. I think I chose to be alone because when I had friends they would tell me not to do my homework. I didn’t have many friends when I was here or at the other school for that matter. I’m just kind of antisocial really.”

FG-6 said she had a warm feeling at the college. “It was like a family that was here so it was a little easier to fit in. As I got older and I came back, I’ve always been a more talkative person. I socialize. I get to know people so that helped me a lot. I never really felt alone here.” FG-6 said that she felt people were very friendly at the campus, and she did not have any trouble fitting in.

When the group was asked if they joined clubs or social organization, five said they did not have time for extracurricular activities. One student said she joined the Education Club and the Spanish Club. As was previously noted, one was involved with athletics. Six of the seven women said they felt comfortable and integrated at the campus.

Question 7. What other factors emerge from the study as contributing significantly to Hispanic female student retention and graduation?

It was noted in both the focus group and in the individual interviews that children serve as significant motivators for women to persevere to graduation. FG-1 said she could not stop because she needed to go to school to ensure her children continued in school. “At times when it was difficult for me, and I said I’m not going to do this anymore. I’m quitting. It’s just too hard. My daughter said, ‘Mom, if you quit, I’m going to quit.’” FG-2 also noted she was pushing her three daughters to do well in school because she considered herself a role model now.

When the focus group was questioned about what other recommendations they would make if they had the opportunity to speak to the president of the college, the women spoke of the need for increased support services such as bringing in more Latina role models during orientation sessions to share their success stories. They also wanted to see more college advertising featuring Hispanic females who have made it in life.

FG-3 said: “I think for me it was to know that we are no longer a minority, and especially those of us that are first-generation Americans [who] come in thinking I’m a minority, and I

don't have things that are accessible to me. It's not true!" FG-5 was supportive of FG-3 and said that in a Chicano studies class, she learned she needed to throw off the stigma of always being labeled a minority and one who cannot accomplish things. Demographically, the city where this study takes place has a population in which the Hispanic "minority" is in the majority.

Finally, two women said more peer-to-peer tutoring is important, and student ambassadors or greeters should meet all first-time in college students to show them around the campus. Three women emphasized more information about financial aid needed to be provided to students early in their high school years.

Summarizing the Focus Group Results:

1) Academic Integration: Participants highlighted a variety of reasons for starting college, but all identified supportive faculty who made a significant difference in their ability to succeed. Rio Bravo's orientation course was viewed positively by the students.

2) Goal Commitment: Goal setting was resoundingly viewed as a vital component to student success and eventual graduation. Most of the women learned goal setting strategies in college. Participation in commencement was considered key for modeling behavior to others (e.g., children, family) and for celebrating self.

3) Significant Others: The significant others who provided support to the women were predominately family, friends, class cohort groups, and faculty. Life balance was generally maintained although a few women experienced illness which they attributed to the added pressures of school.

4) Financial Aid: Financial aid was viewed as imperative for most of the women. Also, scholarships served as empowering and motivating vehicles for financial aid.

5) Institutional Commitment: The participants liked the college's size which enabled them to be treated as persons rather than numbers. Rio Bravo College currently has an

enrollment of 8,000, which is viewed nationally as a medium size community college (American Association of Community Colleges, 2006). The women reported being well satisfied with the caliber of support services provided by the college.

6) Social Integration: The women reported that belonging to program cohorts contributed substantially to their academic and social success. Although the participants had little time for extracurricular activities, most felt a growing sense of fitting into the college as they progressed from semester to semester.

7) Other factors: For those women with children, the need to model positive educational behavior for their children was an especially powerful motivator. The significance of this factor to academic achievement was not emphasized in Romano's 1999 study. The graduates also felt that motivation, especially of Hispanic women, could be enhanced if there were more Latina role models visible on campus and in the college's advertising. Lastly, more peer tutoring and active outreach to new students by peers were suggested as strategies the college should consider for the future.

Individual Interview Results

Six women participated in individual interviews. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and was held at a location convenient to the interviewee. The researcher carefully noted each woman's verbal and non-verbal expressions in the process of the interviews. Both open-ended and follow-up questions were asked during the interviews. In the individual interviews, the women were assigned an identification number to ensure the anonymity. The interviewee respondents' identifications are: I-1, I-2, I-3, I-4, I-5, and I-6.

Question 1. To what extent is academic integration influential to Hispanic female student retention and graduation from a community college?

It is important to note that four respondents stated that they returned to school because of the necessity to obtain certification as required by No Child Left Behind. This federal legislation mandates a minimum of 60 hours of college credit for teacher assistants/aides. Two of the interview participants were General Education majors intent on transferring to a local university to obtain a bachelor's degree and teacher certification.

I-1 said that it was very hard for her to go back to school when she had two children. "It's like I missed a whole part of their growing up really. That's what I feel. I missed a lot. At the same time, they tell me that they're very proud of me for doing what I did, especially when I graduated. They thought that it was something beautiful."

I-5 said that setting an example for her three sons was key to her decision to go back to college. "I wanted to show my sons that no matter how old you are, you can still get an education in life. You can still get a new job. I'm hoping that they've learned from my mistakes of being a single parent at such a young age, and they will continue on with their education."

When asked if there was a teacher they really liked, that helped them feel engaged in college and showed interest in them, five of the six women reported specific teachers who had supported them, who modeled successful behavior for them, and who helped them feel comfortable in class. For example, I-6 spoke about one of her most memorable instructors: "Oh, we just loved this class! We would look forward to going to this class because we could ask her anything. We could stay behind, and she would try her very best to help us in anything." I-4 said: "We would look forward to going to this class because we could ask Ms. S. anything, okay. She was a positive woman, a role model because she was Hispanic, and um, I valued her work because she went through a lot of obstacles to get where she was - to accomplish and to achieve."

Five of the women made strong statements that being in a cohort group also helped them feel extremely comfortable. I-5 said: “At first I felt scared. I didn’t think I’d be able to make it or be able to survive in the classrooms, but when we realized that they were putting us in small classes with peers of our age, that’s what motivated a lot of us to continue on because it was small groups. There were about 15 of us, and we already knew each other so we all had each other’s [phone] numbers. We all could work with each other and help each other out. That’s what motivated me even more so that I wasn’t scared to continue on.”

Five out of the six women also reported taking the college orientation class and that the course enhanced their understanding of what college was all about.

Question 2. To what extent does student goal commitment influence Hispanic female student retention and graduation from a community college?

Four of the six women responded that they learned how to set goals and believed in the power of goal setting. I-1 said: “I guess you can say I learned because I had thought that being a paraprofessional, that that was it. It was a job, and I didn’t need any more education. After going to classes, now I can see it in a different way, learning what I have learned in school.” I-6 said: “Once I got into college I learned a lot. I learned how to set goals and how to work to achieve those goals, and um, I just have a completely different way of thinking of things now.”

One of the women (I-5) said that her only goal was to get from day to day. She emphasized, however, that now she was teaching her own children how to set goals. “That was mine. My goal was to get to tomorrow. Get over today and start tomorrow. But once I started school, I learned different ways of contributing to my life, not just with my children. I learned to set goals, and I taught them how to set their goals and not to stop at a certain point but to go higher on their goals. No matter what you are, whether you are Hispanic, White, Black, you can do it. If you set your mind to it, you can do whatever it is that you want to do.”

I-3 reported she knew how to set goals before entering college but viewed it as an important act, a leadership act. “I pretty much knew how to set goals. I did take some college courses after I graduated from high school, so I knew what was expected. I knew how to tackle whatever I needed to tackle, and I helped others to do the same thing. I considered myself a leader in my group, and we pretty much held together, and I would encourage others. I would help them figure out how to work through their problems.”

All six women participated in commencement and thought it was vital to celebrate, to model successful behavior for their children (five out of the six had children), and to demonstrate they could reach their educational goals and influence other family members in the process. I-5 said: “Because it was the greatest feeling, like graduating from high school and having a baby. Bringing your first child into the world. And having my children, my sons standing there seeing me.”

I-4, a single mother with five children and 16 grandchildren, said: “I think it’s [commencement] very important because I wanted to set an example for my children and grandchildren that no matter what comes your way, you need something to fall back on.” I-6 said: “I absolutely would [support participating in commencement exercises] because, I mean, you have pride in yourself when you cross that stage, and you feel rewarded for your hard work and for all the effort that you have put in yourself.”

Question 3. To what extent does support by significant others influence Hispanic female student retention and graduation from a community college?

Two of the six women received very negative support in their educational journey from family and spouses. I-4 said: “I was married, but um, he wanted failure in my life. So I came out of a relationship of violence and abuse. So because of that I didn’t feed the negative. That encouraged me more. The rejection, the poverty, being a single parent - I didn’t want that life. I

wanted something better. He divorced me. He met another woman so it was a good thing. It benefited me to go forward.”

I-2 said: “They [her husband and family] were against it [college] because I was married. I’m divorced now. I was married to a Mexican macho man, and his wife was to be at home. I worked, but I had to go home, do dinner and everything, get the kids ready and all that, and um, he was not supportive in that way. My mom lives with me, and to this day, she would not accept it either. To this day, she still gives me a rough time, but I did it. I told them.”

Two women received support that was negative at first and then eventually positive after they persevered despite animosity from their families. I-3 said with great emotion in her voice: “In the beginning, my husband was. . . It was hard because husbands demand your time, and when he saw how much time I needed in order to accomplish this. And I would have to remind him, ‘I need this in order to maintain my job.’ And it was like, okay. He started to settle down, and he realized, okay, this is what you need. Go for it. He settled down after awhile. But there were friends of mine, one of my study buddies. There was a divorce involved. The husband could not accept it. He did not want to see his wife [crying softly now]... I guess, maybe, he felt intimidated. She should have been at home with the children making his food and taking care of him and the family. She succeeded, and she got her degree also.”

I-1 also tearfully recounted how difficult the process was for herself and her family. “At first, it was hard because they had to start helping more around the house which is good for them. They need to learn anyway. The time being with my kids. It’s mostly time to tell you the truth. Sometimes you want to do something, and you can’t because you have too much homework. It’s like they say when you first went to school, that’s it. Your family you have to put aside. And that is true [wiping her eyes of tears]. You put your family aside if you want to succeed in

college because if you don't, it's no use going back to college. If you have your family in there, you get way behind. So I had to do that a lot, put my family aside. Which is hard to do."

Two of the women received outstanding support and some modeling by parents. I-5 exemplifies this: "My parents and my sisters -- they helped out with picking up my children after school. My dad put in his own computer at home -- because I was living with them at that time -- to help me out with my work and all. And if I had to stay and have a group meeting with one of my associates from the classes, they would pick up my boys and take care of them for me. My dad is a very big supporter of education. He is going to school. He's at [another college] at this moment. He's a 60 year old man, and he's still going to school. His number one goal is education. And when he saw that I was going back to school, it really amazed him. And I have an older sister that just got her bachelor's."

The women then were asked how they were able to keep mental, emotional and physical balance in their lives while going to college. Five of the six women encountered health problems that ranged from gaining weight to battling cancer. The women were often emotional as they recollected the physical and emotional price they paid to finally graduate. I-2 said: "Yes, I got sick. ... I didn't think of myself. I was like always thinking of my kids, of my ex-husband that oh I need to do this for them, and I'm gonna try to do it in between my school work, and I never thought about myself. It was everybody else. It was never me, and I just, I just did it. I just did it, and I get teary eyed because I remember what I went through, but it was like I just did it without thinking. I just said I have to do this, and I'm gonna do it. If I don't have the support from my family, then I'll have the support from somebody else, and I'll do it. I'll make it, and I did!"

I-1 said: "I gained about 50 pounds being in school. I used to be an active walker. I'm not walking anymore so I've gained weight. I can't seem to find time because if you stop the

homework, you get way behind, especially in the math classes. I've learned from other teachers what to take to control high blood pressure. So that's under control. I take stress vitamins because it is very stressful. It seems like there's times when you want to keep crying and crying and crying.

I-6, who overcame cancer in her last year, said: "Well, actually, I think I've done very good with my balance. I go for chemo treatments because I had cancer ten years ago, and my cancer returned back in July 2004, but I feel 100 percent wonderful, and it's under control and everything. And um, even, I go for my chemo, but the next day I feel like perfect, like great. And maybe in a lot of ways, it's all my studying, and all the learning and everything have helped me a lot, too. To set goals, to manage my life and be a better person. I think it has helped it all come together. It has helped me a lot in every way."

Question 4. To what extent does campus-based financial aid influence Hispanic female student retention and graduation from a community college?

All six women utilized financial aid at some point in their journey to graduation. Four of the women depended on financial aid solely to be able to attend and ultimately graduate. One of the women (I-6) had a husband who eventually made enough money so that she did not qualify after the first year, and one (I-5) had help from the school district for which she worked.

The following excerpts reflect comments from the four women who needed and utilized financial aid. I-2 said, "Financial aid covered everything...Ms. G. helped us go through the whole process. After that we did our own."

I-3 said that she could not have attended college without financial aid and told of other women she knew who struggled. "I qualified for financial aid and that was because my son was going to school also. That helped both of us. But there are quite a few women out there that did not qualify for financial aid because their husbands made too much, but it was a struggle for

them because money was coming out of their pocket. Their children were going to school, and some were getting ready to go to college. It was just a financial problem for them.”

I-3 also reflected on the process of filling out the paperwork. “When I first saw it, I thought, this is a lot of paperwork. There were a lot of questions, and there were a lot of things that I thought - what does this have to do with going to college? But I was able to do it and figure it out and what I didn’t understand I would go to them [the Financial Aid Office] and say, ‘I don’t know what you mean by this.’”

Question 5. To what extent does institutional commitment influence Hispanic female student retention and graduation from a community college?

Three of the women said that the primary reason to attend Rio Bravo College was because it was located close to home – proximity was a key. I-2 said: “The convenience of it [the college] being close because I work down here at the high school, and I would get out at 3:30 p.m. My class would probably start at 4:30 p.m., so it was convenient for me to get there.”

Three of the women said they took pride in attending the college. I-6 said, “I took a lot of pride in attending Rio Bravo College. I like everything. I like the environment. I’m very happy with my teachers that I have, and I haven’t had any problems at all.”

Of the three women who had good feelings about the college, two emphasized the faculty were their primary source of good feelings. For example, I-5 said, “Being that is was a smaller school, Ms. G. was there all the time for us. Her doors were always open. Her phone was always open to us. I think if it wasn’t for the support, I don’t think a lot of us would have continued on. She’s one that I can say we can depend on for anything.”

All six women reported using the college’s support services such as math and English tutoring, the foreign language labs, computer labs, and the library services.

The women's overall feelings toward the institution included the following comments. I-3 said: "The camaraderie, meeting new people, meeting new instructors, to the point where it was almost like everybody knew everybody. It was very comfortable. I felt secure." I-5 said: "The atmosphere. You feel at home. It's just a feeling. You go in, and everyone introduces themselves. Everyone will say hello, and they welcome you in real good. Very helpful - the employees, the teachers. They are very warm, homey. It feels like home."

Question 6. To what extent does student social integration influence Hispanic female student retention and graduation from a community college?

Five women reported experiencing social growth and integration as they went to college and viewed it as a supporting feature in their experience. One woman reported that she was predominately a loner and stayed that way at college.

I-6 captures the women's social experiences and feelings of fitting: "I just felt lost when I first started classes. I felt very out of place at the beginning, but I have gotten to be very comfortable around the college. Now I will go to my new class, and I will be fine... Yes, I have a social aspect also because like in my art appreciation class, there are two or three girls. We call each other back and forth. We have different projects that we have to go to different museums to do, and we'll meet there. We'll call each other. We'll meet and discuss whatever it is that we need to put in our paper."

I-3 said: "I didn't let anybody intimidate me. There were some classes that I had young kids in and I thought: 'Oh my God! I can either let them make me feel stupid or I can be smart. It's my choice.' I just sat there with a positive attitude, and I just blended in with everybody else."

Two of the women spoke about "culture sharing" as part of their social growth.

I-2 said: “We would have potlucks, especially in our rooms like on Saturday’s. The teacher would say if we wanted to bring something. We’d bring big stuff, barbacoa, tamales. I remember one class the teacher said we could bring something like that so everybody brought a little something, and we had tortillas, barbacoa. We went all out. And the kids that were there, the other students; they joined in, too.” I-4 said, “You learn from other people; you learn their behavior; you learn their expectations; you learn about them.”

I-6 said, “I love all cultures [in class] because I mean everybody is different, but I’ve learned to associate with people from different cultures, being from wherever they are and to have close interaction with them.” I-3 said: “Socializing with different people. You had people from different backgrounds, different cultures. That was the great part because when we’d sit and talk about certain subjects, we were able to share our cultures together. That was interesting. That was one of the neatest things we learned.” I-5 said: “I was able to socialize with other people besides my children. It did me real good. I believe I’m more - how can I say it? - I am more open with myself. I feel that I’m a stronger person than what I thought I was. Very confident. I built up a lot of confidence in myself.”

In terms of joining social clubs none of the six women reported joining any college clubs. Their work and family commitments precluded additional activities.

Question 7. What other factors emerge from the study as contributing significantly to Hispanic female student retention and graduation?

When the women were questioned about what other recommendations they would make if they had the opportunity to speak to the president of the college, I-3 mentioned the need for having more counselors who could double as Latina role models. “They need more counselors for Hispanic women. Hispanic women have always been treated as dishrags, pretty much, by husbands, by other members of the family. A Hispanic woman is usually brought up to be a

mother and a wife. A wife being first, and a mother being second. They need strong women to go out into the high schools and to speak to these young ladies and let them know, 'Hey, I'm an Hispanic woman! I've gone through this. I've gone through that. I'm an educated person, and there's more to life than being a mother and wife.'"

Similarly, I-2 commented that Hispanic women "have to be built up. Because I think I was one of those, but like I said, I had my friend that would push me, and she'd say you can do it; you can do it; don't say you can't. You can do it, and I believe her now because I did it. I graduated."

Two women spoke about developing a women's center for women to share and support one another. I-4 urged: "Get women together. Get women together and let them write out. Let them give you their opinion. Let them put it in writing. Let them have women speakers. Let them hear what others have to say as well. They can do it. Get on up and just do something. Nobody is going to do it for you; you have to do it for yourself."

One of the women suggested the need for financial assistance. She made a specific recommendation for the college to arrange for women to check out textbooks to help them save money on classroom texts. One woman recommended additional scholarships be provided for the daycare center on campus.

I-4 spoke elegantly about the need to provide positive re-enforcement for Hispanic women. "A lot of women give up because of rejection, because of marriage, because of adultery, because of children, no babysitters, because of negative, negative thinking. Make sure that you can reward them in some way, even with some small items, with a pencil, you're appreciated."

Summarizing the Individual Interviews

1) Academic Integration: All six interviewees returned to school because of the No Child Left Behind Act. Four are teacher aides in nearby independent school districts, and two are pursuing a bachelor's in education. Five of the six women reported specific teachers who were critical in their academic integration and who modeled successful behavior for them that helped them feel comfortable in class. Five of the women made strong statements that being in a cohort group also made them feel extremely comfortable. Orientation is viewed positively by the students. Five of the six women reported taking the college's orientation course which helped them understand more fully what college was all about.

2) Goal Commitment: Four of the six women responded that they learned how to set goals and believed in the power of goal setting. All six women participated in commencement and thought it was very important to celebrate their accomplishments and to model successful behavior for their children (five of the six interviewees had children).

3) Significant Others: Two of the six women received very negative support in their educational journey from family and spouses. Two women received mixed support; initial negative support eventually became more positive. Two of the women received outstanding support and some modeling by parents. The women also reported in other sections of the interview that teachers and cohort membership helped them as well. Five of the six women encountered health problems that ranged from gaining weight to battling cancer. The women were often emotional as they recollected the physical and emotional price they paid to finally graduate.

4) Financial Aid: All six women utilized financial aid at some point in their journey to graduation. Four of the women depended solely on financial aid to be able to attend and ultimately graduate. The women reported receiving good support services at the College.

5) Institutional Commitment: Three of the women said that the primary reason to attend Rio Bravo College was because it was located close to home. Three of the women said they took pride in attending the college. Of the three women who had good feelings about the college, two emphasized the faculty were their primary source of good feelings. All six women reported using the college's support services such as math and English tutoring, the foreign language lab, computer labs, and library services.

6) Social Integration: Five women reported experiencing social growth and integration during their educational journey and viewed it as a significant feature that assisted them towards graduation. One woman reported that she was a loner and that she remained this way during her college experience. Family and job responsibilities prevented all six women from joining any college clubs.

7) Other factors: The interviewees suggested that more Latina role models on campus would motivate and inspire Hispanic women students. The participants recommended a women's center be established at Rio Bravo College to provide additional support to female students. A need was noted for more scholarships for women to use the day-care center and for a book loan program so students did not have to spend so much money on textbooks. Finally, the interviews revealed a need for positive reinforcement and recognition of Hispanic women while they were in school

Table 5 highlights responses obtained from the focus group session and the individual interviews. The women's comments are arranged according to the seven research questions that guided the study.

Table 5
Qualitative Research Summary Table

Question	Focus Group	Reference	Individual Interviews	Reference
Question 1 Academic Integration	<p>The reason I decided to go to college was because my parents also were from Mexico and they don't have an education. Maybe they have the equivalent of a 6th grade education. Seeing how they struggled here because they don't speak English, and they can't advance or have a career. I'm not just doing it for myself; I'm doing it for them. I want to give back to them.</p> <p>For me it was anatomy with Dr. M. It was one of my first classes coming back and she basically let me know that I could do it. And if could do her class, I could do any of my other classes. And then that was it; from there I was gone.</p> <p>Orientation: Four women took the course and reported a positive experience.</p>	<p>FG-6</p> <p>FG-3</p>	<p>I wanted to show my sons that no matter how old you are you can still get an education in life. You can still get a new job. I'm hoping that they've learned from my mistakes of being a single parent at such a young age, and they will continue on with their education.</p> <p>Oh, we just loved this class! We would look forward to going to this class because we could ask [the teacher] anything. We could stay behind, and she would try her very best to help us in anything.</p> <p>At first I felt scared. I didn't think I'd be able to make it, or be able to survive in the classrooms, but when we realized that they were putting us in small classes with peers of our age [cohorts] that's what motivated a lot of us to continue on because it was small groups. There were about 15 of us, and we already knew each other so we all had each other's [phone] numbers. We all could work with each other and help each other out. That's what motivated me even more so that I wasn't scared to continue on.</p> <p>Orientation: Five women took the course and reported a positive experience.</p>	<p>I-5</p> <p>I-6</p> <p>I-5</p>
Question 2 Goal Commitment	<p>I didn't have goal setting when I got into college. I had to learn how to set goals once I got there. Like I said, it was very difficult for me because I had never graduated from high school first of all. I got my GED, and I thought it was impossible for me to go to school and finish. To graduate, I just thought it was impossible. I always tried to go one step at a time.</p> <p>Commencement: Five women participated and felt it was very important.</p>	FG-1	<p>Once I got into college, I learned a lot. I learned how to set goals and how to work to achieve those goals and I just have a completely different way of thinking of things now.</p> <p>Commencement: Six women participated and felt it was very important.</p>	I-6

Question 3 Significant Others	<p>With my parents it was pretty much like you either go to school or you work. My dad went to community college, and I remember that he walked the stage. I never really understood what that was until later. This was a big factor, and he was always pushing me.</p> <p>We came in as a group, so this group got together and studied and we pushed each other. Even when there was a time when somebody wanted to drop out, we were like no- we can make it. We'll help you. Come study.</p> <p>6 out of 7 of the women were able to maintain balance and health while going to school.</p>	<p>FG-5</p> <p>FG-1</p>	<p>They [husband and family] were against it [college] because I was married, I'm divorced now. I was married to a Mexican macho man, and his wife was to be at home. I worked, but I had to go home, do dinner and everything, get the kids ready and all that and he was not supportive in that way. My mom lives with me, and to this day, she would not accept it either. To this day, she still gives me a rough time, but I did it. I told them.</p> <p>It's mostly <i>time</i> to tell you the truth. Sometimes you want to do something, and you can't because you have too much homework. It's like they say when you first went to school, that's it. Your family you have to put aside. And that is true [wiping her eyes of tears]. You put your family aside if you want to succeed in college because if you don't, it's no use going back to college. If you have your family in there, you get way behind. So I had to do that a lot, put my family aside. Which is hard to do.</p> <p>5 out of 6 of the women were not able to maintain balance and health while going to school</p>	<p>I-2</p> <p>I-1</p>
Question 4 Campus Based Financial Aid	<p>5 women used financial aid and could not have graduated without it.</p>		<p>6 women used financial aid. and four of them could not have graduated without it.</p>	
Question 5 Institutional Commitment	<p>I had tried [other colleges], and I just felt, like she said, a close-knit community here. You were able to talk to your teachers, and they understood your situation.</p> <p>I liked the fact that I could call my advisor or counselor any time to ask any questions. My teachers made themselves available. This is my phone number. This is my number</p>	<p>FG-7</p> <p>FG-6</p>	<p>The convenience of it [the college] being close because I work down here at the high school, and I would get out at 3:30 p.m. My class would probably start at 4:30 p.m., so it was convenient for me to get there.</p> <p>The atmosphere. You feel at home. It's just a feeling. You go in and everyone introduces themselves.</p>	<p>I-2</p> <p>I-5</p>

	<p>here at school. Contact me if you have any questions or if you're not going to be here. I'm willing to work with you.</p> <p>6 of the 7 women used college support services</p>		<p>Everyone will say hello, and they welcome you in real good. Very helpful, the employees, the teachers. They are very warm, homey. It feels like home.</p> <p>6 of the 6 women used college support services</p>	
Question 6 Social Integration	<p>When we were a group it was fun. We had a class with women the same age, and we were doing the same things. So we kind of went along with classes together. So when we split and we saw each other, it was like, "Hey, what are you doing?" You feel good because you know somebody.</p> <p>It was like a family that was here so it was a little easier to fit in. As I got older and I came back I've always been a more talkative person. I socialize, I get to know people so that helped me a lot. I never really felt alone here.</p> <p>5 of the 7 women reported no time for club activities</p>	<p>FG-1</p> <p>FG-6</p>	<p>We would have pot lucks, especially in our rooms like on Saturday's. The teacher would say if we wanted to bring something. We'd bring big stuff, barbacoa, tamales. I remember one class the teacher said we could bring something like that so everybody brought a little something, and we had tortillas, barbacoa. We went all out. And the kids that were there, the other students; they joined in, too.</p> <p>Socializing with different people. You had people from different backgrounds, different cultures. That was the great part because when we'd sit and talk about certain subjects, we were able to share our cultures together. That was interesting. That was one of the neatest things we learned</p> <p>6 of the 6 women reported no time for club activities.</p>	<p>I-2</p> <p>I-3</p>
Question 7 Other Factors	<p>At times when it was difficult for me and I said I'm not going to do this any more. I'm quitting. It's just too hard. My daughter said, "Mom, if you quit, I'm going to quit."</p>	FG-1	<p>Get women together. Get women together and let them write out. Let them give you their opinion. Let them put it in writing. Let them have a women speaker. Let them hear what others have to say that they say as well. They can do it. Get on up and just do something. Nobody is going to do it for you; you have to do it for yourself</p>	I-4

Ranking of Survey Results

The survey was comprised of seven statements representing each of the six factors identified by Romano (1999) plus a seventh question which allowed the respondents to list any

other areas that they deemed significant to their academic achievement and graduation. The survey respondents were asked to rank order the seven statements on the survey in order of importance with 1 being the most important and 7 being the least important. Most respondents followed directions, but four paper surveys were pulled from the tabulations due to incorrect rank ordering. A total of 44 surveys were accurately completed with 33 paper surveys and 11 electronic surveys on SurveyMonkey.

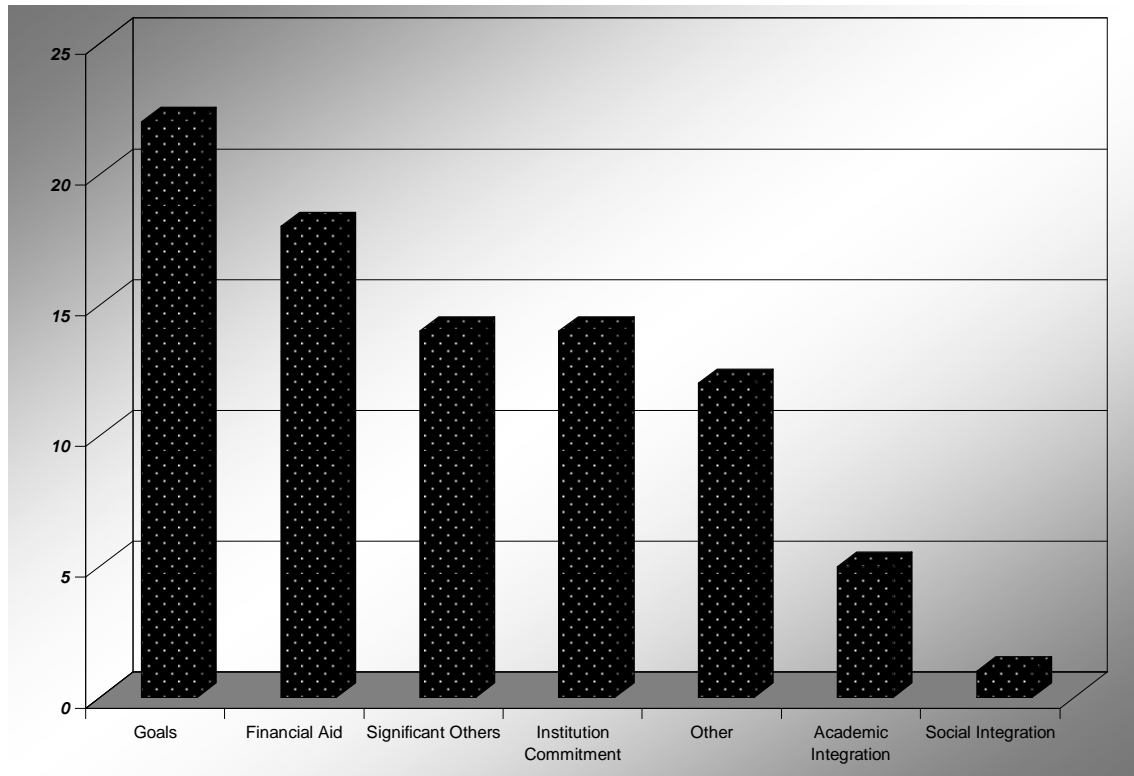
Table 6 reflects a compilation of the numerical results of the survey and the ranking frequency of results, and Table 7 provides a graphic representation of the results.

Table 6 Survey Results

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Without financial aid and /or scholarships it would have been impossible for me to graduate.	41% 18	14% 6	23% 10	2% 1	2% 1	9% 4	9% 4	44
My family (friends) encouraged me to finish when I thought I would never finish. Without their help and encouragement I would never have graduated.	32% 14	30% 13	20% 9	7% 3	11% 5	0% 0	0% 0	44
I always kept my goal of graduating college in mind. Even when times got tough I never lost sight of my goal. Without my goal, I would have never graduated.	50% 22	20% 9	7% 3	9% 4	7% 3	5% 2	2% 1	44
I was very proud to attend Rio Bravo College. Everyone was so helpful and they encouraged me and made me feel so proud to be a student at Rio Bravo College. I graduated because I felt proud about attending Rio Bravo and wanted to graduate from there.	32% 14	5% 2	7% 3	25% 11	18% 8	14% 6	0% 0	44
I really got into the social life at Rio Bravo College. I joined clubs to meet friends and really had a great time. Without those social events I doubt I would have graduated.	2% 1	0% 0	5% 2	5% 2	16% 7	23% 10	50% 22	44
Academically I just excelled. I couldn't learn enough. I enjoyed my classes and the faculty so much that I hated to leave. I often met with faculty after class.	11% 5	14% 6	20% 9	16% 7	27% 12	11% 5	0% 0	44
Other - Please add any other reasons that were important to you on the following page in achieving your degree at Rio Bravo College and rank that reason on this page.	38% 12	3% 1	6% 2	12% 4	0% 0	9% 3	31% 10	32

Other	Academic & Faculty	Something to Prove	Lose Job	Set Example To Children	H.S. Teacher's Influence	Grad.	Support Of Family/ Friends	Goal	College Close to home (Proximity)	2+2	Fin. Aid	Desire
	8	1	3	6	2	2	7	3	2	1	1	1

Table 7 Survey Results Graph



As is evidenced above, the leading factor contributing to student persistence and success was the women's ability to keep in mind the goal of graduating from college throughout their educational journey. Half of the women surveyed (22 out of 44) reported that remaining focused on the goal of graduation was the *most* important factor motivating their academic achievement. The second highest factor was financial aid with 41 percent (18 participants) indicating that without financial aid they could not have graduated. The third highest factor, calculated at 32

percent, was a tie with both significant others (e.g., family and friends) and institutional commitment (e.g., the pride the women experienced while attending Rio Bravo College) receiving 14 votes each.

The “Other” factor captured 12 votes or 38 percent of the responses. However, when these additional comments were carefully reviewed, many of the written remarks overlapped the six primary areas of focus. For example, eight comments singled out academic integration and/or faculty support as the most important reason for academic achievement. Seven comments in the “Other” category indicated support by significant others as being the most crucial for academic success. Despite these overlaps, a new factor emerged from the “Other” category. Six respondents who were mothers said their desire to set an example for their children was the most important factor in their persevering to graduation. This notion of women as leaders modeling positive educational values seems especially significant because this idea appeared not only in the survey data but also emerged in the interview and focus group discussions.

Summary

This chapter provided the findings and results of the study. The specific methods and procedures used were described. Demographic information about the participants was presented. Extensive excerpts from transcriptions of the focus group and the individual interviews were presented. The voices of the 13 women who participated in these conversations offered richly contextualized insights about the factors contributing most significantly to their academic achievement and graduation. For example, goal setting, the availability of financial aid, and the support of significant others were considered crucial to academic success. These findings from the qualitative portion of the research was supported by the 44 survey responses which ranked goal-setting and financial aid as the top two factors contributing to academic achievement. In

addition, a new factor emerged from both the survey data and the interview/focus group discussions. Women who were mothers consistently reported that their desire to serve as positive educational role models for their children was a powerful motivator for them to persist to graduation. The significance of this unanticipated finding will be discussed in the next chapter “Analysis and Interpretations.”

CHAPTER 5

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to report the analysis, interpretations, and implications of this study. The sections are: study purpose and questions, findings and conclusions, and future recommendations which include implications for practical application and future research.

Purpose and Study Questions

The purpose of this study was to build on the research of Ruth Hamilton Romano (1999) by utilizing interviews and surveys to identify and rank-order factors that contributed to the success of female Hispanic graduates from Rio Bravo College. This study examined six key factors (replicating the survey developed by Romano in her 1999 study) but, unlike Romano, also included an open ended seventh factor to allow participants to report any additional influences that they felt contributed significantly to their own stories of successful retention and graduation. The seven factors that formed the basis of the study were: academic integration, goal commitment, significant others, campus-based financial aid, institutional commitment, social integration, and “other” factors. The study utilized qualitative and quantitative research to further illuminate how these known factors ultimately impacted the Hispanic women student’s retention and graduation. The hypothesis developed for the study was that student goal commitment and support by significant others - as reported by Romano (1999) - would re-emerge as the top two factors that impacted retention and graduation of Hispanic females.

This study is unique because it alters the focus of traditional persistence research that either asks students who drop out of school why they depart or asks currently enrolled students

why they remain. Instead, this study focuses on successful Hispanic women graduates in order to learn how they were able to achieve academic success. It is the intention of this research to provide richer information which can be used to create improved community college road maps for future Latinas to better support academic achievement and graduation. It is also the intention of this study to increase institutional knowledge about the needs of Latinas in the community college setting.

Findings and Conclusions

As a backdrop to reporting the findings, it is essential to understand the demographics of the female Hispanic students who participated in this study. Rio Bravo College is located in south Texas and serves 8,000 community college students. The county service area for Rio Bravo College and the city itself reflects a 53 percent Hispanic population. The city ranks 53rd among the nation's 69 largest cities in percentage of high school and college graduates and last among Texas's largest cities. Twenty-five percent of those 25 years of age or older have not completed high school, and 78 percent have not received a bachelor's degree (Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Community Development, 2004). The Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA) reports the high school attrition rates of independent school districts. This information, which is disaggregated by ethnicity and race, indicates that high schools in the college's service area have a 55 percent attrition rate. This figure compares starkly with the attrition rate in Texas of approximately 25 percent and the national attrition rate of approximately 20 percent. Consequently, many students come to Rio Bravo College academically underprepared.

Not surprisingly, the city in which Rio Bravo College is located has one of the highest urban poverty rates in the nation. In 2002, 17 percent of the population was living below the

poverty rate, and 23% of city households received public assistance. The state demographer reports that 46 percent of the city's families earn less than \$35,000 annually (Murdock, 2004). The southern sector of town where Rio Bravo College is located contains many of the city's poorest neighborhoods.

The College enrolls approximately 8,000 students whose average age is 25. Hispanics comprise 65 percent of the enrollment, and the student body is overwhelmingly female (65 percent). Approximately 16 percent of Rio Bravo's students are first-time in college students which means that they have not previously attended college. Approximately 65 percent of the students are enrolled part-time.

The Hispanic females who participated in the study had a median age of 33 which is notably older than the median age of the general college population which is 25. More than half (56 percent) of the Latinas in the study had children. Of these women, 20 percent were single with children. Nearly 60 percent of the women earned incomes that ranged from a low of \$10,000 to a high of \$30,000. The median income was \$29,000. Thirty percent of the women reported themselves as the primary "bread-winners" in the family while they were going to college.

The Latinas in this study faced an exceptionally challenging social and economic environment, yet each overcame a host of obstacles to persevere to graduation. Their determination and valor shine through in the following analysis of the research results. The seven factors are presented in the order of their importance to the research participants as determined by the results of the survey, the focus group, and the individual interviews.

Rank Order #1: Goal Commitment

Goal commitment is defined in the literature as a student's commitment to completing college. Research in this area has also found that those students who are able to identify a major and develop an academic plan early have a better chance of persisting to graduation.

Survey respondents rated goal commitment as the number one factor contributing to their academic success. Goal commitment received 22 votes which represented 50 percent of those surveyed. In the focus group, six of the seven women reported that they did not learn how to set goals until they came to college. Learning to clearly define their academic goals was a key to their eventual success and graduation. Participation in commencement ceremonies was viewed as essential by five of the seven focus group members. In addition, the three women who were parents indicated that commencement participation was a way of modeling academic accomplishment to their children.

In the individual interviews, four of the six women said that they learned how to set goals in college and that they believed strongly in the power of goal setting to achieve objectives in their lives. A recurring idea associated with goal setting was that learning this particular skill helped the women gain a tangible sense of control in their lives. Commencement participation was viewed as an important milestone that both celebrated self and modeled successful behavior for their children. Five of the six interviewees had children.

It can be concluded that goal commitment as well as the learned skill of creating and meeting goals was clearly the most important factor contributing to the academic success and graduation of the Hispanic women who participated in the study.

Rank Order #2: Campus-based Financial Aid

Campus-based financial aid is defined as any kind of scholarship, grant, loan or monetary gift students receive under the auspices of an academic institution that enables them to pursue

post-secondary schooling. The research demonstrates that students who receive higher levels of financial aid evidence greater persistence in college. Students from low-income families are more likely to receive financial aid to attend college. However, Hispanic students currently receive the lowest levels of financial assistance and, thus, would benefit the most from increased financial aid grants, scholarships and loans.

The survey results rated financial aid as the second most important factor contributing to academic success. Financial aid received 18 votes representing 41 percent of the total respondents. In addition, financial aid appeared once in the “Other” category.

In the focus group, five women utilized financial aid, and each emphasized that such monetary support was imperative. The participants repeatedly mentioned that without financial aid, it would have been impossible to go to college and to graduate. Also, when the women received scholarships for either good grades or athletic talent, financial aid served as an empowering and motivating factor.

All six women who participated in the individual interviews utilized financial aid to some degree to pay for college costs. Four of the women depended solely on financial aid to be able to go to college and graduate. The women who were interviewed as well as those in the focus group reported getting good service from the College’s Financial Aid Office.

It can be concluded from the survey data that campus-based financial aid is the second most important factor that promotes academic success and graduation in this study. Focus group and interview conversations with the 13 participants dramatically underscored how vital financial aid is to Hispanic women who come from the largely impoverished community served by Rio Bravo College. Without substantial financial support, the educational credentials that can serve as a way out of poverty will, for many, remain out of reach.

Rank Order #3: Significant Others

A significant other is defined in the research literature as any person who actively supports the educational aspirations of a student. Latina students need family and friends who, by acting as role models and mentors, can effectively help them negotiate the pressures of academia and the conflicting demands of family, work and school. Hispanic women also need to find role models and mentors in the academy to help them meet the new intellectual and psychosocial challenges that confront them.

According to the survey data, the factor significant others, tied with institutional commitment as the third most important factor contributing to academic success and received 14 votes, representing 32 percent of the survey participants. However, significant others also garnered seven mentions in the “other” category. Consequently, these additional mentions make significant others the third strongest factor after financial aid.

The focus group reported that they had support from three primary areas: family, friends/classmates, and teachers. Six of the seven women commented on support from family members, friends and/or classmates. One of the women stated that her parents were neutral and did not demonstrably provide support. Six of the seven participants reported that they were successfully able to maintain their health and life-balance through the process of going to college.

In the individual interviews, more variation was evident in the kinds of support the women received. Two of the women received exceedingly negative support from spouses and family members. Two women received mixed support, and two women received positive support from family members. The negative responses illustrated the recurring narrative of women who experienced chauvinistic abuse from husbands who believed that the women’s role was in the home, not in higher education. Mothers of the participants -- and sometimes even

their own children -- would also provide negative feedback intended to undermine the women's educational desires. These responses underscore the idea that female Hispanic college students are often educational pioneers in their families and, as a result, can carry a significant burden while they seek to change and influence the existing patriarchal culture.

Conversely, two of the women had strong family support and active role modeling by parents or siblings for completing their education. These women's stories reflected that change is occurring in families, and that familial support can make the academic journey infinitely easier.

Unlike the far healthier women in the focus group, five of the six women who were interviewed encountered health problems ranging from weight gain to cancer. All offered emotional accounts of the duress they suffered in their pursuit of academic success and graduation.

It can be concluded that support by a variety of significant others is a strong third place factor that contributed to the academic success of most of the Hispanic females in this study. Further, significant others, whether they provide positive or negative feedback, can profoundly influence academic achievement.

Rank Order #4: Institutional Commitment

Institutional commitment is defined as the ability of students to become comfortable as members of an institutional community and familiar with the educational institution itself. Students who achieve reasonable levels of comfort and familiarity with the college environment are considered integrated into an institution. As a result, they are then better able to navigate the system and find their way to crucial institutional resources or services that can enable them to achieve their educational goals. The more fully students are integrated into and, consequently, committed to the institution, the greater the likelihood they will persevere to graduation.

The survey results indicate that institutional commitment, by receiving 14 votes representing 32 percent of the respondents, tied for third place with support from significant others. Despite the tie, institutional commitment seems a weaker factor contributing to academic success than support from significant others. For example, institutional commitment had only two mentions in the “other” category, and both comments focused on the proximity of the college to the individuals’ home.

In the focus group, the women reported that they liked the size of Rio Bravo College which enrolls 8,000 students and is considered a medium-sized institution (American Association of Community Colleges, 2006). Six of the seven women reported using support services such as tutoring, counseling, computer labs, and the library. The women reported feeling proud of going to Rio Bravo and would readily recommend the college to others.

In the individual interviews, the women indicated that they attended the College because of its close proximity to work or home and that the college felt like “home.” Several of the women commented that overall they felt employees and teachers were friendly and helpful.

It can be concluded that institutional commitment tied for third place with support from significant others. Despite the tie, institutional commitment seems a weaker candidate for third place and, thus, had only a moderate effect on study participants’ academic success and graduation.

Rank Order #5: Other

The “other” factor was defined in the study as a question that provided research participants the opportunity to make alternative suggestions about any additional factors that they thought were critical to their academic success and graduation.

In the survey results, “other” ranked fifth and received 12 votes (38 percent of the total). However, the written comments made in this portion of the survey proved particularly

illuminating. When the comments were tallied, 28 referred to one of the other six factors such as goal setting, financial aid, support by others or academic integration. Fourteen comments, however, offered fresh insights into what participants felt contributed to their academic success. Of these 14 comments, the idea that recurred most frequently (6 mentions) was parental modeling or setting a good example for one's children. The other comment that re-appeared although with less frequency (only 3 mentions) was the fear of losing one's job if a two-year degree were not obtained. This comment reflects the fact many of the study participants were teacher's aides who had been mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act to earn a minimum of 60 college credits or their public school employment would be terminated.

In the focus group, the three women who were mothers reported the need to model positive educational behavior for their children. The women also noted the need for more Latina role models on campus (teachers, staff, and counselors) and expressed a desire to see more Latinas reflected in the mass media, particularly in advertisements for Rio Bravo College.

Similarly, participants in the individual interviews wanted to see more Latina role models on campus and felt a need for more positive reinforcement of Hispanic women in general. Two interviewees recommended that a women's center be established at Rio Bravo where women could get together for mutual sharing and support. The women also commented that the availability of more scholarship and financial aid dollars would be beneficial as well as a book loan program to help defray the often exorbitant cost of textbooks. Finally, participants felt that more space for students' children was needed at the campus day care facility.

It can be concluded that the "other" factor ranked fifth in the survey and yielded a new factor which warrants attention. Hispanic mothers reported that a driving force for their own academic achievement was the need to serve as positive role models for their children. Through

their graduation from Rio Bravo College, the Latinas wanted to demonstrate to their children that with persistence and hard work, success in higher education was also possible for them.

Rank Order #6: Academic Integration

Academic integration occurs when students experience making connections in college while doing academic work, participating in extracurricular activities, and/or developing positive interaction with faculty and staff.

The survey data ranked academic integration, which received only 5 votes (11%), sixth in importance of the seven factors. However, academic integration did receive eight mentions in the “Other” category because students frequently commented on establishing positive relationships with faculty. However, even when these comments were factored into the total vote count, academic integration did not rise appreciably higher in the rankings.

In the focus group, all seven students reported establishing positive relationships with college faculty. Orientation classes were taken by four group members who stated that the class was helpful to them in understanding how to better navigate the college environment.

In the interviews, five of the six women reported strong relationships with faculty. Additionally, five women reported the importance of working in student cohort groups. All six of the students interviewed were education majors, and the Teacher Aide Program at the college utilizes cohort grouping. A recurring narrative told by the individual women was that initially, they were scared and did not think they could survive in a college classroom. However, they were relieved and found hope for their success when they were grouped in cohorts of 15 with peers of similar age from the same school district. They found motivation in getting to know one another, and they provided support to each other as together they experienced the various classes in the education program. In the individual interviews, five of six women reported taking orientation and stated that the course was helpful to them.

It can be concluded that academic integration, which ranked sixth in the survey, had some positive influence in encouraging the women to stay in school. Faculty mentoring and cohort groups were key positive factors identified by the study participants.

RankOrder #7: Social Integration

Social integration is defined as students investing both psychological and physical energy in their academic experiences by interacting with peers, faculty, and staff at the institution. Social integration, particularly for those who are first-generation college students, is coupled with the need to develop adequate cultural capital to navigate potential institutional barriers that can impede academic success. When students are able to establish strong relationships with peers and academic mentors through social interactions at the institution, educational success is supported.

Survey data indicated that social integration was ranked seventh and received the fewest votes (i.e., 1 vote reflecting 2 percent of the survey results). It can be argued, however, that elements of academic integration and support by others are both part of social integration.

Five of the seven women who participated in the focus group reported that they had no time for school clubs or social organizations while they were students at Rio Bravo College. One of the women said that going to school in program cohorts (e.g., the teacher aide cohort) was crucial to her success. Six of seven women reported a growing sense of fitting into the institution with each course they completed. This steady course-by-course progression enabled them to experience increasing satisfaction as, one class at a time, they journeyed closer to their goal of graduation.

In the individual interviews, six of the six women reported no time for any clubs or organizations on campus. Two women indicated that “culture-sharing” had been an especially

enjoyable part of their classroom activities because it enabled students of different ethnicities to share their culture through food and socializing.

In both survey data and the conversations with the graduates, social integration ranked a resounding seventh. Despite the positive experiences reported by the participants, it can be concluded that social integration exerted only minimal influence as a factor determining Hispanic women's academic success and graduation.

Recommendations

The following section is divided into two areas. The first deals with recommendations that have implications for future practice at community colleges. The second addresses recommendations and implications for future research and study.

Implications for Practice

1. Because of its valuable ethnographic insights, the study should be shared with educators at large who are concerned with the success of Hispanic females in higher education.
2. The study should be shared specifically with community college administrators and faculty who are interested in the retention and academic success of Hispanic females at two year colleges. Based on the key findings of the study, institutional innovations could be implemented to more fully support the academic achievement of Hispanic women. For example, goal-setting, a strategy viewed as critical by the research participants, could be incorporated into the content of a community college's orientation course.
3. The study should be shared with Hispanic women who are attending high school and college so they can learn about the road other successful Hispanic women have traveled. The women's stories, which are varied and often heroic, can inspire other Latinas to pursue post-secondary education and achieve academic success.

4. Faculty development for both new and current community college faculty, particularly those teaching in Hispanic serving institutions, should incorporate information about how Hispanic women learn. Additionally, instructional techniques which can create support systems for Latinas should be introduced across the curriculum. For example, cohort groups were highlighted in the study as being a particularly effective method for engaging Hispanic women and encouraging – as well as sustaining -- their academic achievement.

5. Through ongoing training and publications, all faculty and student support staff should be apprised of the key factors that foster the academic success of Hispanic women. This study indicates that Latinas who develop goal commitment and who can identify significant others to help support their educational journey are more likely to persist to graduation. Thus, teaching students about goal setting and assisting them to set and achieve realistic goals need to be priorities with those who work closely with students, especially faculty and advising/counseling staff. By learning effective goal setting techniques, Hispanic women students can, as this study has demonstrated, not only actualize their potential but also gain the necessary autonomy to take charge of their lives.

6. Community college leaders need to more aggressively pursue scholarship dollars and additional financial support for low income, Hispanic women. As tuition and fees spiral ever higher, more Hispanic women from low income backgrounds will not be able to afford what, traditionally, has been perceived as affordable -- a community college education.

7. Community colleges should consider utilizing student cohorts and learning communities across the curriculum. Much research has been done which supports the use of student cohorts, particularly with minority students (Tinto, 1998). The testimony of many of the women in this study further supports the success of this instructional technique. What seems critical for the success of cohorts and learning communities is an institutional commitment to

fully integrate these non-traditional instructional strategies into the fabric of the college as a whole.

Implications for Future Research

1. A study further exploring first-generation Latinas with children who attend community college should be undertaken to further explore the passion of mothers who desire to be role models to their children. Learning how mothers could be better supported and more effectively aided by community colleges could, in the future, help matriculate thousands more Hispanic women into higher education.

2. A study that further explores the kind and the intensity of support that emanates from the family structure could be of use. The research presented in this study indicates that family can influence persistence; however, further information on the degree of influence and the factors within the family that can enhance or detract from support can assist administrators, counselors, educators, and others structure institutional contexts that best promote the achievement of female Hispanic students.

3. More research about academically high performing Latinas could generate additional information which would help institutions develop environments more supportive of Latina achievement. In addition, research on exemplary Latina graduates would also model positive and successful academic behaviors for other Hispanic women.

Conclusion

Research has shown that the retention, success and completion of college is a multi-faceted process for students. As Astin (1993) suggests, educators need to look at making institutions work from a systems perspective and take a holistic public service approach similar to the way hospitals and clinics operate. Community colleges, which historically have been

designed to meet the post-secondary educational needs of all citizens, are required to be aware of this larger, more holistic – and infinitely more complicated -- picture of society and must be adept at matching the needs of the community with the needs of individual students. Although Astin's theory embodies the community college ideal, day-to-day institutional practice can occasionally fall short, particularly for minority students.

The women who participated in this study were singularly determined to achieve a college education regardless of the many barriers they encountered that could potentially thwart their academic ambitions. Learning to set goals for themselves and learning to obtain financial aid were challenges that all of the women in the study faced successfully. Equally intimidating could be the situation at home. Some of the women had supportive family and spouses who provided tremendous comfort and security to them as they traveled the long, sometimes bumpy road to graduation. More frequently, the women faced a road that was lonely and, on occasion, mined with hostility from those they loved best – spouses and other family members who resented the participants' commitment to education. What became apparent, especially through the interview and focus group conversations, was that many factors operating in concert ultimately led to the women's success.

Nearly 100 of the 229 Hispanic women surveyed were education majors, and education majors predominated in the interviews as well. As study data was analyzed, it became apparent that the Teacher's Aide Program at Rio Bravo College provided a window with a unique view of how an institution had responded to the community need created by the No Child Left Behind legislation. This federal mandate required all teacher's aides to earn 60 college hours or lose their jobs. For women with little education and generally low self-esteem, the necessity of returning to school was terrifying.

Through the participants' voices, we learn about the program and the tremendous academic and emotional support provided by its director. Realizing that the teacher aides were apprehensive about attending college, the program leaders created cohort groups for the women. Several interviewees described the incomparable relief they felt when they realized they would be going to class with their peers. These small cohort groups, limited to 15 students, were pivotal to the women as that they learned how to set goals, how to work the financial aid system for monetary support and how to create relationships with teachers and with each other for the emotional support that helped them persevere to graduation. Serendipitously, the data collected for this study dramatically demonstrates how Rio Bravo College's Teacher's Aide Program has taken a systems approach, as recommended by Astin, in serving the community and the students in the program holistically.

The Hispanic women in this study showed remarkable passion, grit, and determination in reaching their goal of graduating. Their academic success will change not only themselves but also their families and the communities in which they reside. Sixty-six percent of the survey respondents indicated that they were continuing their education. Clearly, success sparks further academic success.

The value of this study is its relentless focus on student success rather than student failure (i.e., lack of persistence). Future research describing why and how students persevere could produce further information to promote healthy modeling for academic achievement. Equally vital, institutional leadership coupled with effective instructional and student services teams must be willing to artfully blend theory and practice in order to create innovative multi-faceted, measurable, and systematic approaches to education. Only then will this country's growing number of post-secondary Latina students succeed not just in graduating but in standing on the threshold of the American dream.

APPENDIX A

Introductory Letter to Graduates

Stacey R Johnson
Palo Alto College
1400 West Villaret
San Antonio, TX. 78224
(210) 921-5543 work
(210) 921-5542 fax

name
address
city, state

Dear 2004-2005 Palo Alto Community College Graduate:

I received your name from Palo Alto Community College as a graduate from the 2004-2005 academic year. First let me congratulate you on your accomplishment of graduating from PAC. Currently, I am a graduate student in the Community College Leadership Program at University of Texas at Austin doing a research study concerning Hispanic women who graduated from community college. This study is extremely important because I will learn through successful women like you about the driving forces that kept you in college and kept you going through to graduation.

I will be calling you in the next two weeks to ask you to participate in my study. You can choose to:

- 1) Speak with me one-on-one
- 2) Speak with me and a group of other Hispanic women graduates
- 3) Complete the survey that is included in this mailing

If you decide now, and I hope you will, to fill out the survey it will only take approximately 10 minutes of your time. If you prefer to complete the survey electronically – it also is available on-line at *ADDRESS*. There is a self-addressed envelope enclosed for you to mail back the survey.

I hope you will say YES! When I call you later, I will answer any questions you might have about the study. The information we share will be held in strict confidence and your name will never be shared with anyone. This is a study that will help other Hispanic Women succeed in college. The results will be written up and shared with administrators and other Hispanic Women who might be trying to accomplish the goal you have achieved. Please say *YES* when I call you next.

Sincerely,

Stacey R. Johnson

APPENDIX B

Statement on Confidentiality

For Participation in a Doctoral Study

I, the undersigned, understand that I will be participating in a doctoral study. This investigator will maintain records of my contacts and conversations with her and I will be identified only by number for confidential purposes. The interactions I have with the investigator and my peers will be held in the strictest of confidence and used only for purposes of this study.

The investigator will be taping all conversations used to conduct the actual study. These conversations will be confidential and not discussed or shared verbally or in writing outside the group by the investigator unless individual consent is given.

I have read and understand the Statement on Confidentiality. I will direct any questions I may have to the investigator.

Participant Signature

Date

APPENDIX C

Letter to Focus Group Participants

Stacey R. Johnson
Palo Alto College
1400 West Villaret
San Antonio, Texas 78224
(210) 921-5543 work
(210) 921-5542 fax

name
address
city, state

Dear

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my doctoral study titled,
"What Works: Factors Which Influence Community College Hispanic Female
Academic Achievement and Persistence to Graduation."

As you know, I am a doctoral student in the Community College Leadership
Program at the University of Texas at Austin. My goal is to interview you and
several of your former classmates (day of the week), (month) (date), at (time). I have
reserved the (blank) room at Palo Alto College. I know we will enjoy reminiscing
about the time you spent at PAC and we will also be helping other Hispanic women
learn your secrets of success. Refreshments will be served!

Again, thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Stacey R. Johnson

APPENDIX D

Letter to Individual Interview Participants

Stacey R. Johnson
Palo Alto College
1400 West Villaret
San Antonio, Texas 78224
(210) 921-5543 work
(210) 921-5542 fax

name
address
city, state

Dear

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my doctoral study titled,
"What Works: Factors Which Influence Community College Hispanic Female
Academic Achievement and Persistence to Graduation."
As you know, I am a doctoral student in the Community College Leadership
Program at the University of Texas at Austin. My goal is to interview you (day of the
week), (month) (date), at (time). I have reserved the (blank) room at (blank). I know
we will enjoy reminiscing about the time you spent at PAC and we will also be
helping other Hispanic women learn your secrets of success. Refreshments will be
served!

Again, thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Stacey R. Johnson

APPENDIX E

Survey For Hispanic Women Graduates

PLEASE RETURN BLUE FORM BY
March 15, 2007

Please place a number from 1 to 7 (1 being most important, 7 being least important) next to the sentences that best describe the factors that contributed to you graduating from Palo Alto Community College.

- _____ Without financial aid and/or scholarships it would have been impossible for me to graduate.
- _____ My family (friends) encouraged me to finish when I thought I would never finish.
Without their help and encouragement I would never have graduated.
- _____ I always kept my goal of graduating college in mind. Even when times got tough I never lost sight of my goal. Without my goal I would have never graduated.
- _____ I was very proud to attend Palo Alto College. Everyone was so helpful and they encouraged me and made me feel so proud to be a student at PAC. I graduated because I felt so proud about attending Palo Alto Community College and wanted to graduate from there.
- _____ I really got into the social life at Palo Alto Community College. I joined clubs to meet friends and really had a great time. Without those social events I doubt I would have graduated.
- _____ Academically I just excelled. I couldn't learn enough. I enjoyed my classes and the faculty so much I hated to leave. I often met with faculty after class.
- _____ Other - Please add any other reasons that were important to you in achieving: your degree at Palo Alto Community
- _____
- _____
- _____

Turn page over!

APPENDIX F

Survey Demographic Questions

(Circle one)

1. Education of Mother

Elementary School
Junior High
High School
Some College
Completed College

2. Education of Father

Elementary School
Junior High
High School
Some College
Completed College

3. Income of Parents

\$10-\$15,000
\$15-\$30,000
\$30-\$60,000
\$60-\$95,000
\$95 +

4. Country of Origin (Your Heritage)._____

5. Where you born in that country'? Y / N

You're Parents Y / N

Their Parents Y / N Prior Generations Y / N

6. Number of children while attending college?_____

7. Where you single or married while attending college?_____

8. Were you the primary "bread-winner" during your PAC experience? Y / N

9. Have you continued your education since leaving X college? Y / N

10. How?_____

11. Did you march in the commencement ceremony when you graduated X community college? Y / N

APPENDIX G

Consent to Participate in Research Study

Title: What Works: Factors Influencing Community College Hispanic Female Academic Achievement and Persistence to Graduation

IRB Protocol # 2006-11-0007

Investigator: Stacey R. Johnson
Palo Alto College
1400 W. Villaret
San Antonio, TX 78224
(210) 921-5543
sjohnson@accd.edu

(Faculty Supervisor: Dr. John E. Roueche (512) 471-7545)

You are being asked to participate in a research study. This form provides you with information about the study. The person in charge of this research will also describe this study to you and answer all of your questions. Please read the information below and ask any questions you might have before deciding whether or not to take part. Your participation is entirely voluntary. You can refuse to participate without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You can stop your participation at any time and your refusal will not impact current or future relationships with UT Austin or participating sites. To do so simply tell the researcher you wish to stop participation. The researcher will provide with a copy of this consent form for your records.

The purpose of this study is to determine factors that help enhance academic achievement and persistence to graduation for Hispanic females in community college.

If you agree to be in this study, we will ask you to do some or all of the following activities:

- 1) Provide a one-on-one interview with the researcher
- 2) Speak with the researcher in a group setting with other Hispanic women graduates
- 3) Complete a survey (either electronically or on paper).

Total estimated Time : Survey (10 minutes); interviews (one hour); focus group (one to two hours).

The risk associated with this study is no greater than everyday life.

Compensation: There is no compensation provided.

Confidentiality and Privacy Protection: The data resulting from your participation may be made available to other researchers for research purposes not detailed in this consent form. The data will not contain any identifying information that could associate you with it, or with your

participation in any of the study.

Discussion sessions and individual interviews will be audio taped. Any resulting audio tapes will be kept in a locked cabinet in the researcher's office. The tapes will only be heard for research purposes only by the investigator and her associates. The researcher will retain the recordings.

The records of this study will be stored securely and kept confidential. Authorized persons from The University of Texas at Austin, members of the Institutional Review Board, have the legal right to review your research records and will protect the confidentiality of those records to the extent permitted by law. All publications will exclude any information that will make it possible to identify you as a subject. Throughout the study, the researchers will notify you of new information that may become available and that might affect your decision to remain in the study.

Contacts and Questions: If you have any questions about the study please ask them now. If you have questions later, want additional information, or wish to withdraw your participation, contact the researcher conducting the study. This contact information is at the top of the form. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, complaints, concerns, or questions about the research, contact Lisa Leiden, Ph.D., Chair of The University of Texas at Austin Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects, (512) 471-8871 or email: orssc@uts.cc.utexas.edu.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

APPENDIX H

Academic Majors of Hispanic Females

Publishing	3
Computer and Information Sciences, General	3
Information Science/Studies	3
Education, General	17
Elementary Education and Teaching	4
Teacher Education, Multiple Levels	33
Physical Education Teaching and Coaching	4
Teacher Assistant/Aide	50
Engineering, General	1
Electrical, Electronics and Communications Engineering.	1
Environmental Engineering Technology/Environmental Technology	3
Spanish Language and Literature	5
English Language and Literature, General	5
Liberal Arts and Sciences/Liberal Studies	12
Biology/Biological Sciences, General	1
Mathematics, General	1
Psychology, General	11
Criminal Justice/Safety Studies	14
Social Work	3
Political Science and Government, General	4
Urban Studies/Affairs	1
Aviation/Airway Management and Operations	1
Fine/Studio Arts, General	5
Health Services/Allied Health/Health Sciences, General	1
Veterinary/Animal Health Technology/Technician and Veterinary Assistant	4
Pre-Dentistry Studies	2
Pre-Nursing Studies	9
Business Administration and Management, General	15
Logistics and Materials Management	2
Accounting	1
Administrative Assistant and Secretarial Science, General	3
Management Science, General	6
History, General	1
TOTAL GRADUATES OF 2004 & 2005	229

EDUCATION MAJORS

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