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Traversing Literal and Figurative Borders in South Texas:

Mexican Americans and College Choice

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Traversing Literal and Figurative Borders in South Texas:

Mexican Americans and College Choice

by

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Dissertation

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Trust the process. This is the advice I heard from my dissertation chair, Victor B. Sáenz on more than one occasion. “Trust the process,” is in fact what I kept telling myself in the midst of this journey when my mind seemed to draw a blank and my prayers for patience and guidance seemed unanswered. I thank God that I have made it through. Given that this journey is not one that I took alone, I want to thank the key individuals in my life that kept me afloat both personally and professionally.

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Preface

I am a Mexican American woman from the South Texas Border who began higher education as a freshman at Texas' flagship institution, The University of Texas at Austin (UT Austin). A self-proclaimed "nerd" and number seven in my high school's graduating class of approximately 600, I had wanted to apply to other universities, but ended up only applying to one. While my parents were college educated themselves, I do not recall any formal discussion about college, and they did not assist me with my college or financial aid application. They did, however, set the expectation for me to go to college and supported me with any college endeavors if I asked for help. For what they gave me I am grateful.

After a year and a half at UT Austin, however, I decided to transfer to The University of Texas at Brownsville (UTB), a four-year institution along the U.S.-Mexico border, and the university in my hometown. My decision was one that I made of my own accord, not because I was doing poorly academically or socially as far as peers were concerned, but because I felt lost in terms of what major/career to pursue, felt uncomfortable with the debt I was accruing through loans, and unfortunately, was drawn to the idea of going back home because of a romantic relationship. In the end, I was able to graduate a year early, but I always wondered if that was the right decision. I realize that I did not have a real connection to the institution through an advisor or mentor to assist me with the decision. Hence, I believe the relationships that individuals from educational institutions forge with students are crucial to student retention.

Ironically, I moved back to Austin upon completing my bachelor's degree, where I began my career as a teacher. But when I decided to pursue my master's degree, returning to UTB to do so seemed like the only viable option, financially speaking. This in fact was the best decision I could have made because my graduate school experience was phenomenal and instrumental in instilling in me the confidence and desire to obtain my Ph.D.

I reveal this part of my life because my experience in having attended Texas' flagship institution, as well as one of its regional, border universities, informs the topic of my dissertation and my research as a critical qualitative researcher. It also provides a context for understanding my own views of higher education in general, and my positionality.

Traversing Literal and Figurative Borders in South Texas:

Mexican Americans and College Choice

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2010

Supervisor: Victor B. Sáenz

College choice is often described as a three-stage developmental process where students progress through the following phases: predisposition, search and choice (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Existing research, however, suggests this model does not account for all aspects of Latina/os' college choice experience (Hurtado, Kurotsuchi, Briggs, & Rhee, 1996; Perna, 2000), warranting further investigation. As such, in-depth phenomenological interviews (Seidman, 2006) were conducted with 20 Mexican American high school seniors from the South Texas Border, an area with postsecondary attainment rates below the state and national average (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008f), to gain a deeper understanding of their college choice experience. Guided by an integrated social capital and Chicana feminist conceptual framework, this study sought to uncover how the intersectionality of students' social identities shaped their college choice process. Specifically, this study explored how students' identities influenced their college aspirations and their access to college information, support and assistance via their social networks.

Findings revealed that students negotiated among several social identities (generational college status, sibling identity, academic identity, class identity, racial/ethnic identity, co-curricular identity, regional identity) which influenced the development of their college aspirations and their ability to access college knowledge and support from their social networks in both positive and negative ways within the four main spaces (cultural/familial space, community space, school space, and cyberspace) they occupied on a daily basis. Students' narratives further indicated that the individuals or entities in their social networks that were influential and/or considered sources of college knowledge and support included immediate and extended family members, various community members such as neighbors or members of students' religious congregations, school personnel (counselors, teachers, co-curricular sponsors), higher education representatives and institutions, peers, and various college oriented websites found on the Internet. Students also noted, however, various challenges in navigating their college choice process that centered around: 1) parents' limited college knowledge, 2) attending a local/regional institution or one outside the region, 3) combating negative educational stereotypes of Mexican Americans in general and those in the South Texas Border in particular, and 4) accessing adequate college information and assistance at school.

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Chapter 1-Introduction and Statement of the Problem

Introduction

In the United States, going to college is a rite of passage for many students indicating their transition from adolescence to adulthood (Hossler, Schmidt, & Vesper, 1999). The decision impacts both the individual and society in a long-lasting way, particularly because of the benefits that come with an increased education such as a higher salary, the ability to work for a longer period of time over one's lifespan, increased career mobility, and an overall higher quality of life (Baum & Payea, 2004; Bowen, 1997; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999). Despite such proven long-term benefits, choosing to go to college is not always a feasible or easy choice to make. In a nationwide study by the Institute for Higher Education Policy, even college-qualified students noted a number of reasons for not choosing to go to college which included increasing college costs and the perception of limited availability of aid, not having taken all of the necessary steps to enroll in college, and opportunity costs (Hahn & Price, 2008). Given the importance of this decision, it is critical to understand how and by what means students' ability to navigate the college choice process is shaped, particularly for students who come from communities that have been historically marginalized and underrepresented in higher education, as is the case for Latina/os[1.]

This chapter provides a more detailed description of this study in three major sections. The first section provides the statement of the problem. Within this section, the

[1] The terms "Hispanic" and "Latina/o/a" are used here interchangeably and in accordance with their use in the literature cited.

background of the study is provided, specifically delineating why the focus of this study is on Mexican Americans and on the South Texas Border. Under the subsection describing Mexican Americans, the educational attainment and history of unequal schooling for this population is also discussed. Following this is the purpose of the study, and finally a section that highlights the importance of the research.

Statement of the Problem

An academic achievement gap persists for Latina/o students and their non-Latina/o peers at all levels of education: a gap that has a direct impact on college choice, attendance, persistence and matriculation (Gándara, & Contreras, 2009; Hurtado, 2009; Telles & Ortiz, 2008; U.S. Department of Education, 2008). According to the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans, the improvements in the educational attainment of Hispanics made over the years are insufficient, indicating that "more work remains to be done" (U.S. Department of Education, 2008, p. xii). Specifically, there is a need to ensure that "substantially more [Hispanic students] are graduating from high school and enrolling in and graduating from postsecondary institutions" (U.S. Department of Education, 2008, p. xii). Among Hispanics, however, it is Mexican Americans[2]—the largest subpopulation within this community—who have the lowest rates of attendance and persistence in higher education (KewalRamani, Gilbertson, Fox, & Provasnik, 2007; Llagas & Snyder, 2003; Valdivieso, 1990). In fact, Mexican Americans have the lowest postsecondary educational attainment rates among all racial

[2] The terms "Mexican American" and "Chicana/o" are used here interchangeably to refer to individuals of Mexican descent born in the U.S. The terms are used in accordance with the literature cited.

and ethnic groups in the U.S. (Aguirre & Martinez, 1993; Fry, 2003; KewalRamani, et al., 2007). As such, Mexican Americans' low levels of educational attainment at the postsecondary level represent a potential loss of human capital both individually and collectively.

In Texas, a state with the second highest population of individuals of Mexican descent in the country where individuals of Mexican descent comprise the largest racial/ethnic population in the state, college enrollment and degree completion rates for Hispanics are lagging behind those of other racial/ethnic populations. For example, according to Texas' *Closing the Gaps 2009 Progress Report*, the higher education plan for Texas created by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) in 2000, Hispanic students are not meeting their target rates in participation and success. This reality has created cause for alarm among Texas legislators, educators, the business community, and other entities that realize the economic stability of the state rests upon the ability to educate Texas' growing Hispanic community.

One way to ensure that more Mexican Americans are enrolling in and graduating from postsecondary institutions then is to have a better understanding of how Mexican Americans navigate the college choice process, as such can determine access and enrollment in higher education. In the United States, the college choice process is understood as one with the following three stages: predisposition, search and choice (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Existing research, however, suggests Latina/os' college choice process is not fully explained by this model (Hurtado, Kurotsuchi, Briggs, & Rhee, 1996; Perna, 2000), warranting additional research.

Thus, the problem in not fully understanding Mexican American students' college choice process remains. This study seeks to provide a better understanding of how Mexican American students from the South Texas Border experience and navigate the college choice process. To do this, it is pertinent to first describe Mexican Americans within the context of the greater Latina/o community in the U.S., and then to do so within the context of the state of Texas and the South Texas Border region. The subsections that follow provide justification for this study.

Why focus on Mexican Americans? As of 2008, 15.4% of the total population in the U.S. was Hispanic, accounting for 46.9 million individuals (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008a), a 3.2% increase from 2007 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). Such statistics indicate that Hispanics are the fastest growing racial/ethnic population in the nation (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009), and this growth trend is projected to continue. By 2015, the U.S. Census Bureau (2008h) estimates 55.4 million individuals residing in the U.S. will be Latina/o, or 17.2% of the total population. By 2050, Latina/os will make-up approximately 27.7% of the U.S. population. Within the Latina/o community, however, individuals of Mexican descent account for an overwhelming majority, 64%, in part to the close proximity of Mexico to the U.S. that allows for a constant influx of immigrants (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). Other Latina/o subgroups comprise a far lesser percentage within the Latino community, including: Puerto Ricans (9%), "other Hispanics" (7.7%), Central Americans (7.6%), South Americans (5.5%), Cubans (3.4%), and Dominicans (2.8%) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). Nationally, Mexican Americans constitute 9% of the total population, accounting for 28.3 million individuals as of 2006 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008b).

In Texas, as of 2008, 9.1 million individuals (37.5%) residing in the state were Hispanic out of the total population of 24.3 million (Texas State Data Center, 2008a). Within the Hispanic population, however, a majority (7.02 million) were of Mexican origin (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008b). The Hispanic population in Texas faces a similar projected growth rate as that of the nation, with the number of Hispanics in the state projected to reach 10.4 million by 2015, 11.8 million by 2020, and 13.4 million by 2025 (Texas State Data Center, 2008b). The Texas State Data Center (2008b) reports that the population of Hispanics along the South Texas Border, the specific location of this study, is projected to increase as well. The following table depicts the Hispanic population growth for the four counties that comprise this area, also known as the Rio Grande Valley, and the state of Texas in five-year increments from 2010 to 2025. The percentage provided for each county reflects the size of the Hispanic population in the county in comparison to the total population in the county. The percentage shown for the state reflects the size of the Hispanic population in comparison to the total population in the state.

TABLE 1.1 HISPANIC POPULATION GROWTH IN SOUTH TEXAS

	2010		2015		2020		2025	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Cameron Co.	363,301	87.5	405,944	88.7	448,323	89.8	491,845	90.7
Hidalgo Co.	683,771	91.1	783,653	92.1	889,024	93.0	999,542	93.6
Starr Co.	66,124	97.9	73,534	98.1	80,834	98.3	88,284	98.5
Willacy Co.	20,334	88.4	21,916	89.4	23,359	90.3	24,752	91.0
Texas	9,080,459	37.3	10,436,546	39.9	11,882,980	42.4	13,448,459	45.0

Note. Co.= County; # = numerical value of population; % = percentage of Hispanic population in relation to the Hispanic population in the county or state, respectively. Texas State Data Center (2008b).

It is pertinent to consider the increasing size of the Latina/o population in general, and the Mexican American population in particular, in the context of college choice because as this community becomes a larger portion of the U.S. population, Latina/os and Mexican Americans will have an increasing impact on the economic stability of this country (de los Santos & Rigual, 1994; Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Hayes-Bautista, Schink, & Chapa, 1990; Hurtado, 2009; Telles & Ortiz, 2008). Aside from an economic argument, Gándara & Contreras, 2009 also explain a moral and social argument that can be made for increasing access and matriculation in postsecondary education for Mexican Americans. For example, Gándara and Contreras (2009) imply such a moral and social obligation by noting the inevitable "social and economic disaster" this country will face if current achievement and opportunity gaps for Latina/os and Mexican Americans are not addressed (p. 305). Specifically, the authors foretell a future for Latina/os and Mexican Americans where they are relegated to a "permanent underclass in American society" that by all accounts will be as alarming for the entire country as it will be for these communities (Gándara & Contreras, 2009, p. 305).

Hence, the key to a successful democracy, an educated polity, is compromised if a large portion of the Latina/o community is unsuccessful in accessing and completing a postsecondary education (Hurtado, 2005; Bensimon & Polkinghorne, n.d.). This predicament is compounded by the fact that many individuals of Mexican descent, particularly unauthorized immigrants, arrive in the U.S. with low levels of education, a factor influencing the overall Hispanic education levels in the U.S. (Crissey, 2009). Thus, it is important to explore in more detail how Mexican American students in South Texas

are taking the first steps towards obtaining a higher education. These first steps include deciding to go to college and then selecting a college to attend.

Educational attainment of Mexican Americans. As of 2007, Latina/os accounted for 21% of the total K-12 public school enrollment in the U.S. (U.S. Department of Education, 2009) while accounting for 15.4% of the total population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008a). In Texas, 47.9% (2.27 million) of all students enrolled in K-12 public schools during the 2008-09 school year were Hispanic, making them the largest enrolled ethnic group in the state (Texas Education Agency, 2009). This data suggests that a large portion of the Latina/o population is young and accounts for a significant part of the student population in the U.S. public education system.

National data from the American Community Survey (2006) indicates that 24.5% of Hispanic males and 23.3% of Hispanic females 25 years or older have less than a 9th grade education (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). This is significantly greater than the percentage of males and females of all other races within the same age range that have less than a 9th grade education, 6.7% and 6.3% respectively.

High school completion rates for Latina/os are also significantly lower compared to other racial/ethnic populations. As of 2007, only 60.3% of all Latina/os 25 years or older had completed high school, compared to 82.8% of African Americans, and 90.6% of Whites (Snyder, Dillow, & Hoffman, 2008). High school completion rates are similar when broken down by gender: 58.7% for Hispanic males, 61.7% for Hispanic females, and 83.5% for all other males and 84.6% for all other females (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). Additionally, foreign-born Hispanics have the lowest educational attainment

compared to all other groups in the U.S., with only 49% completing at least high school (Crissey, 2009).

Nationally, Mexican Americans come in second in the highest percentage of high school dropouts (25%), after Central Americans (33%), among all Latina/o subpopulations (KewalRamani et al., 2007). KewalRamani et al. (2007) also note that as of 2005, individuals of Mexican descent ranked the lowest in percentage of college completers at 8% among Latina/os (KewalRamani et al., 2007). In terms of numbers, this means that of the 28.3 million Mexican Americans in the U.S. as of 2006, only 1.2 million of them who are 25 years or older hold a bachelor's degree or higher. Additionally, only about 350,000 have a graduate degree among these 1.2 million (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008b).

These numbers are not surprising given that at the postsecondary level, the "proportion of Hispanic young adults completing college has not increased since 1990, though the proportions of young Whites and Blacks" has (Llagas & Snyder, 2003, p. 106). As of 2005, only "11 percent of all Hispanic young adults (ages 25 to 29) had completed at least a college degree, a lower percentage than the 28 percent of all young adults in the United States who had completed at least a college degree" (KewalRamani, et al., 2007, p. 124). Research indicates that the low level of college attainment is also in part due to Hispanics being more likely to be first-generation college students and from low-income families (Choy, 2001; Sáenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf, & Yeung, 2007). Cabrera and La Nasa's (2000b) study on the college choice process of low-income students verifies this link, as 70% of the students with the lowest socioeconomic status

have parents who never attended college. Even when other factors are taken into account, parents' education is a significant indicator for pursuing a postsecondary degree (Choy, 2001). As such, first-generation college students, many of whom are Latina/o, are at a competitive disadvantage when it comes to accessing, attending, and obtaining a degree from a postsecondary institution.

First-generation college students are also more likely to have lower educational aspirations than non first-generation students (Choy, 2001; Sáenz et al., 2007), although this trend has lessened over the last three decades for all students (Sáenz et al., 2007). First-generation college students also tend to be less academically prepared for college (Choy, 2001; Tym, McMillion, Barone, & Webster, 2004), be less knowledgeable regarding the application and financial aid process (Tym et al., 2004), and be at greater risk of leaving a four-year institution before their 2nd year compared to their non first-generation college counterparts (Choy, 2001). The latter is particularly true because first-generation college students find acclimating to the college environment a greater challenge (Tym et al., 2004).

The Latina/os who are enrolling in postsecondary institutions are overwhelmingly doing so at two-year colleges: a pattern typical for most first-generation college students (Llagas & Snyder, 2003, p. 96). In 2000, for instance, 44% of Hispanic undergraduates in the U.S. between the ages of 18 to 24 were enrolled at two-year colleges (Fry, 2002). At the same time, approximately 30% of both White and African American undergraduates between these same ages were attending two-year institutions (Fry, 2002). Alternatively,

White students make up a larger portion of the students attending four-year institutions than two-year institutions.

While Hispanics are overrepresented at community colleges, they are also highly concentrated in only a handful of postsecondary institutions primarily in the states of California and Texas and Puerto Rico (Santiago, 2008). Specifically, "over half of all Latina/o undergraduate students in higher education (54%) are enrolled in less than 10 percent of institutions in the United States" (Santiago, 2008, p. 21). Santiago (2008) notes how this concentration of Latino enrollment in higher education contributed to the "invention of a new construct, which came to be known as Hispanic-Serving Institutions" (p. 21). It is important to note that being designated a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) is based on federal law and not necessarily an institution's mission. Therefore, an HSI is one in which at least 25 percent of an institution's total undergraduate full-time equivalent student population is Hispanic.

Like the rest of the nation then, the state of Texas faces an uncertain future because it has not been able to meet the challenge of educating its rapidly growing Latina/o population that is overwhelmingly uneducated compared to other racial/ethnic groups in the state (Waller, 2004). For instance, in 2008 only 70.8% of Hispanic students obtained a high school diploma. Compared to African Americans (71.8%), Whites (88.8%), Native Americans (81.7%), and Asian/Pacific Islanders (91.2%), this is the lowest percentage among all racial/ethnic populations in the state (Texas Education Agency, 2009b). In this same year, 14.4% of Hispanic students dropped out of high school, the second highest percentage immediately behind African Americans (16.1%).

Of those Hispanic students in the state who graduated in 2008, only 32% were considered college-ready in language arts and mathematics, the second lowest percentage rate only to African Americans (25%) (Texas Education Agency, 2009b). Consequently, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board has been at the forefront of efforts to meet this challenge, often in collaboration with other state entities (e.g., Texas Education Agency, Texas State Legislature). Efforts have resulted in multiple statewide initiatives including: new and higher standards at the high school level in an attempt to ensure more students graduate college-ready (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board [THECB], 2008), and the creation of P-16 councils (Strategic Plan, 2005) that bring together regional administrators, faculty and staff from K-12 systems and higher education institutions. The purpose of the P-16 councils is to create new and sustaining partnerships that increase access and opportunity for Texas students to higher education.

Another key initiative is a higher education plan for the state known as the *Closing the Gaps by 2015: The Texas Higher Education Plan* that was adopted in 2000. The new higher education plan addresses four critical goal areas in higher education in the state: participation, success, excellence, and research (Closing the Gaps, 2000). The initiative outlines five-year targets for each goal area and provides strategies that can be implemented to reach these goals. The plan seemed to be an optimal solution at the time it was created because it "responded to pressing regional and statewide needs" (Closing the Gaps, 2000, p. 5). Unfortunately, the plan has not lived up to its promise, albeit some gains have been made in each of the four goal areas since its inception. The particular area in which the policy needs to be improved is in the area of participation, or

enrollment rates, and success, or degree completion rates, for Latina/os. According to the *Closing the Gaps 2009 Progress Report*, Latina/o participation in higher education in Texas is "well below target," while African American participation is "well above target" and White participation is "somewhat below target" (p. iii). Similarly, Latina/o success, as measured by degree completion rates, is "somewhat below target," as is the success of African Americans in the state (Progress Report, 2009, p. iii).

As such, the low levels of educational attainment among Mexican Americans, at both the national level and in the state of Texas, reflect a need to further understand the schooling experiences of these students so that they may be improved. Among such schooling experiences is the college choice process. Much can be learned from understanding how Mexican American students arrive at their decision to obtain a higher education and attend a specific institution. Specifically revealing the details and complexity of this process for Mexican American students, and highlighting how the individuals in their lives either assist or hinder this process is also useful so as to maximize those instances that are helpful and minimize those that are not.

History of unequal schooling practices. The distinct history of Mexican Americans in the U.S. is believed to have afforded this community fewer opportunities for educational, economic and social mobility compared to other Latina/o subpopulations (Blauner, 1987; Lopez & Espiritu, 1990; Telles & Ortiz, 2008). Specifically, the "white superiority ideology" (Acuña, 1988; Valencia & Black, 2002) and "deficit thinking" that incorporated the American way of life in the 19th century are believed to have particularly influenced the current state of Mexican Americans' educational attainment

(Valencia, 1997, p. 9). As defined by Valencia (1997), deficit thinking is "a person-centered explanation of school failure among individuals as linked to group membership (typically, the combination of racial/ethnic minority status and economic disadvantagement)" (Valencia, 1997, p. 9). These sentiments lent themselves to the belief that Mexican Americans were innately inferior to Whites (Menchaca & Valencia, 1990), and resulted in sanctioned segregated schooling for individuals of Mexican descent well into the twentieth century (Moore, 1970). Blauner (1987) contends that it is such schooling experiences, as described previously, that makes Mexican Americans more like African Americans and Native Americans than other Latina/o subpopulations. This likeness is also based on the notion that Mexican Americans became a part of the U.S. through force making them a colonized people and involuntary minorities in this country (Blauner, 1987). Albeit de jure segregation no longer exists, school segregation continues to manifest itself through residential segregation for these three latter groups (Orfield & Lee, 2005).

Today, on a national scale, Latina/os, and African Americans, have a greater chance of attending high poverty, high minority schools compared to their peers of other racial/ethnic backgrounds (Orfield & Lee, 2005). In 2002-2003, for instance, over 70% of Latina/o students attended schools where 50-100% of the students were minority. In comparison, only 50% of Asian and 12% of White students attended high minority schools during this same time (Orfield & Lee, 2005). Over 60% of these Latina/o students also attended schools where 50% or more of the students lived in poverty, while

only 30% of Asian and 18% of White students attended similar schools (Orfield & Lee, 2005).

For Chicana/os in particular, the U.S. schooling experience has historically been and currently remains one that is subtractive (Telles & Ortiz, 2008; Solórzano & Solórzano, 1995; Valenzuela, 1999; Yosso, 2006) in nature, a process that strips students of their cultural knowledge and identity. This subtractive schooling is accompanied by Chicana/o students often being tracked into lower level courses, provided sub par curriculum, and left wanting in regards to their language needs. All of these factors account for Chicana/os' persistent, pervasive, and disproportionate low levels of academic achievement in elementary and secondary schools (Solórzano & Solórzano, 1995; Telles & Ortiz, 2008; Valencia, 2002). What results, are high dropout rates and disproportionately low enrollment numbers for Mexican Americans in higher education (Valencia, 2002). Thus, the historical and continued unequal schooling offered Latina/os in the K-12 system on a national level directly influences this community's ability to complete high school and access higher education as low levels of high school completion suggest this leaves Latina/os depleted of the credentials deemed necessary in a knowledge-based economy. In the next section, a more detailed argument is made as to why this study focused on Mexican Americans from the South Texas Border in particular.

Why focus on the South Texas Border? The Texas Border community stretches along the Rio Grande River from El Paso in the west, to Brownsville in the south where "a complex blend of U.S. and Mexican cultures, languages and customs" flourish (Yucel,

2001, p. 1). The Texas Border is home to almost 10% of the entire Texas population, concentrated particularly in the communities of Brownsville, Del Rio, Eagle Pass, El Paso, Laredo and McAllen (Yucel, 2001). While the region's rich cultural history is an asset, its location on the border contributes to it being "the poorest area within the United States and, therefore, from an American point of view, is socio-economically deprived" (Miller, 1982, p. 3). Ironically, from a Mexican perspective the Border is a region offering "prosperity and opportunity" (Miller, 1982, p. 3). From a transnational view, this "border paradox" rightly depicts the Texas Border and provides a context for understanding the various social, educational, political and economic successes and struggles of the region (Miller, 1982, p. 3).

In 1998, Texas' then Comptroller of Public Accounts John Sharp issued a report called *Bordering the Future* that outlined the various challenges of the Texas Border region, particularly in being ranked number one in its "poverty rate, percentage of impoverished school children, unemployment rate, and share of adults lacking a high school degree" (p. 8). Among the myriad of recommendations made in the report to help increase the overall quality of life of Texas Border residents was the need to improve the college-going and attainment rates of students in the region. The *Texas Borderlands: Frontier of the Future* report, first prepared and released in 2001 by Senator Eliot Shapleigh's office from El Paso, TX, a report that has been updated every legislative since, supports Sharp's findings. Now in its fifth edition, the report dedicates a whole chapter to discussing higher education in Texas' Border region, specifically noting the rapid population growth in the area that is forecasted to "further hinder access to higher

education due to the lack of funding and enrollment capacity in the Borderlands." Thus, in response to these challenges, this study aimed to shed light on the college choice process of Mexican American students, particularly from the South Texas Border region.

For purposes of this study, and as previously noted, the South Texas Border region is defined as the four southernmost counties in Texas that comprise a region known as the Rio Grande Valley (RGV). This region includes the counties of Cameron, Hidalgo, Starr, and Willacy and is particularly unique because of its bicultural/ bilingual/bi-national nature (Brownsville, 2008). The region's location along the U.S.-Mexico border lends itself to heavy interaction with Northern Mexico, contributing to South Texas' "booms and busts" over the years (Lopez, 2006, p. 12). Home to approximately 1.2 million individuals, a majority of whom are Latina/o (86-89%) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008c), South Texas mirrors what is likely the future of many regions across the nation given the rising growth in the Latina/o population in this country. And as previously mentioned, the region itself is experiencing substantial population growth. By 2015, the population in the RGV is projected to be over 1.5 million individuals (Texas State Data Center, 2008b). Unfortunately, while the population in the region is booming, the educational attainment rates in the RGV do not reflect this growth.

The percent of South Texas Border residents twenty-five years or older with a high school diploma or GED, for instance, is between 49.2% and 62.5%, depending on the county (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008c; U.S. Census Bureau, 2008d; U.S. Census Bureau, 2008e; U.S. Census Bureau, 2008g). This is substantially lower than the state rate (79.2%) and that of the nation (84.5%) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008f). The rate of

college completion (Bachelor's degree or higher) for RGV residents within the same age range is also low: 14.5% in Cameron County, 15% in Hidalgo County, 10% in Starr County, and 10.8% in Willacy County. In Texas this rate is 25.1% and in the U.S. it is 27.4% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008f).

These low educational attainment levels, however, are not a reflection of a community that does not value education or want to succeed. On the contrary, these challenges can possibly be attributed to historical inequities in funding and systemic barriers (Santiago, 2008) that South Texas Border residents continue to confront. Historically, the higher education institutions in the RGV have received insufficient support and unequal funding, resulting in an underdeveloped infrastructure (Santiago, 2008; Yamamura, Martinez, & Sáenz, 2010). In fact, this issue has historically been a concern for institutions along the entire Texas Border.

In 1987, for instance, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF) filed suit against the state claiming Border universities were receiving less than their fair share of funding in *LULAC v. Richards* (Sharp, 1998). The suit particularly highlighted the discrepancy in undergraduate and graduate program offerings and physical facilities of Border universities compared to those of other higher education institutions in the state. Though MALDEF did not win the suit in this instance, the case brought issues facing Border universities to the fore among Texas legislators. As a result, the South Texas/Border Initiative was approved in 1989 by the Texas legislature, an initiative providing additional funds to higher education institutions on the Border for approximately ten years (Sharp, 1998). The initiative also "merged some institutions into

a larger governance system, upgraded other institutions, and authorized new academic programs and courses, including important doctoral and master's degree programs" (Santiago, 2008, p. 10).

Despite this initiative, the higher education infrastructure in the RGV remains deeply underdeveloped. At present, there are four higher education institutions in the region: The University of Texas at Brownsville (UTB), Texas State Technical College (TSTC) in Harlingen, The University of Texas-Pan American (UT-Pan Am) in Edinburg, and South Texas College (STC), which has various satellite campuses in Hidalgo and Starr Counties. Only UTB and UT-Pan Am, however, are full-fledged four-year universities offering undergraduate and graduate degrees, the latter of which are limited. Similarly, professional schools are lacking, although this is not for a lack of wanting or attempts made over the years to establish both a law school and medical school in the region. During the 2005, 2007, and 2009 Texas legislative sessions bills were proposed by RGV legislators to establish a law school and medical school in South Texas (Press Release, 2005; THECB, 2007; Texas Legislature, 2009). It was not until the most recent 81st legislative session, however, that these efforts were able to come into fruition with the passing of Senate Bill 98. This bill lays the groundwork for converting the Regional Academic Health Center in South Texas to a health science center and medical school but unfortunately does not allocate any monetary funds to the undertaking (Texas Legislature, 2009). While this is still a substantial accomplishment for South Texas residents, challenges the RGV faces in regards to higher education remain great,

indicating a warranted and overdue need for a study on the college choice process of students within this region.

Purpose of Study

As previously noted, this study focused on understanding the unique ways in which Mexican American students, the largest subpopulation within the Latina/o community with the greatest postsecondary educational needs, experienced and navigated the college choice process. In particular, this study explored the intersectionality of 20 Mexican American high school seniors' multiple social identities, specifically how such identities shaped their access to social capital that in turn either assisted or inhibited their ability to navigate the college choice process. This was done by examining how students' multiple social identities (e.g., class, sexuality, language, generational college status) and socio-cultural characteristics shaped the social capital they were able to access through their social networks (family, peers, school personnel, etc.). As such, it is pertinent to define social capital.

In the broader sense, the term social capital refers to the social networks or social relationships with people and community resources that potentially assist students in accessing and navigating society's institutions (Bourdieu, 1985; Coleman, 1988; Granovetter, 1973; Lin, 1999; Portes, 1998; Putnam, 1993; Stanton-Salazar, 1997; Yosso, 2005). In the context of this study, social capital is defined as students' social networks that act as resources that can potentially assist them in the college choice process (Ceja, 2001; Perez, 2007). In Chapter 2 the concept of social capital will be delved into more deeply.

A secondary purpose of this study is to propose and develop the use of an integrated social capital and Chicana feminist conceptual framework from which to view the college choice process of Mexican American students. Social capital theory has been used previously to investigate the college choice process (Ceja, 2001, 2006; González, Stoner, & Jovel, 2003; Kim & Schneider, 2005; Perez, 2007; Perez & McDonough, 2008), both solely and in conjunction with other theories such as social and cultural reproduction theory (Talavera-Bustillos, 1998), resiliency theory (Ceja, 2001), and chain migration theory (Perez & McDonough, 2008; Person & Rosenbaum, 2006). Merging social capital theory with a Chicana feminist perspective, however, would provide an opportunity to utilize an interdisciplinary framework that draws upon theories based in sociology, ethnic studies, and feminist studies that could yield new findings that contribute to the current body of college choice literature. It is uncertain as to whether there has been resistance in the field in utilizing such a framework, although at least one plausible explanation can be made. Because a Chicana feminist perspective is particular to Chicana/os it may be viewed as too specific a lens from which to explore the college choice process in order to make more broad based generalizations.

Given this secondary purpose, it is crucial to describe a Chicana feminist perspective in further detail. A Chicana feminist perspective is understood as a tool that acknowledges the third space "borderland" in which Mexican origin individuals reside and the unique ways of knowing from within this borderland that is based on the intersectionality of their racialized, gendered, classed and sexual identities within U.S. society (Anzaldúa, 1987; Pérez, 1999; Sandoval, 2000). The concept of a "third space

borderland" particularly refers to Anzaldúa's (1987) description of a "new mestiza," or specifically a Chicana who by all accounts is not fully Mexican or American, and thus is "caught between *los intersticios*, the spaces between the different worlds she inhabits" (p. 20). As such, this notion of space is figurative, as it exemplifies a state of being, yet can be considered literal in that it is a place where one exists. This study adopts both of these notions of space, particularly taking into account the literal and figurative spaces in which students reside in their daily lives and navigate their college choice process.

Alternatively, identities can then be understood as individuals' "self-understandings, especially those with strong emotional resonance" (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998, p. 3) that are dynamic and co-constructed (Elenes, 2003;Urrieta, 2007) because they are based on individuals' relations to others, specifically "to what one is not" (Sarup, 1996, p. 47). Other identities acknowledged within Chicana feminist research include those related to language, age, nativity, and religious affiliation. Given this definition, a Chicana feminist perspective can be useful in revealing the complexity of how Mexican American students' multiple identities simultaneously influence how they navigate the college choice process. For example, while a Mexican American student of low socioeconomic status may feel limited in their options of colleges from which to choose on one hand, they may also be privy to certain scholarships, fellowships and the financial aid process if they also happen to be a second or third-generation college student. In this respect, Mexican American students who may experience privileges in access to college knowledge through one or several identities may simultaneously experience barriers as a result of other characteristics. It is also important

to note that the majority of the population in the region where this study took place was Latina/o, and most likely of Mexican descent. Thus, students' multiple identities manifested themselves in ways that were complicated and nuanced, perhaps more so than for students in a more racially and ethnically diverse areas.

Additionally, a Chicana feminist perspective also recognizes the value that Mexican Americans give to an education overall (Valencia & Black, 2002), which contributes to students' predisposition to college (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). This perspective also acknowledges the unique ways in which the Mexican American community transmits college knowledge (Delgado Bernal, 2006), as through the use of *consejos*, or narrative storytelling, and *testimonios*, or testimonials (Fránquiz & Salazar, 2004; Villenas, Godinez, Delgado Bernal, & Elenes, 2006). A Chicana feminist perspective also acknowledges the historical and current systemic inequalities that contribute to the educational shortcomings of this minority population in the U.S. (Valencia & Black, 2002). As previously mentioned, social capital theory, as well as a Chicana feminist perspective, will be further discussed in Chapter 2.

Therefore, guided by an integrated social capital and Chicana feminist conceptual framework, this study asked the following research questions of high school seniors in South Texas:

1) How does the intersectionality of Mexican American students' social identities shape their college choice?

2) Specifically, how does the intersectionality of Mexican American students' social identities influence their college aspirations and their access to college support, information, and assistance through their social networks?

Importance of this Research

This study is pertinent to the field of higher education in general and college choice research in particular, in several ways. For one, the college choice process of Mexican American students from the South Texas Border has not been examined in the existing research literature. Research on Mexican Americans/Latina/os and college choice has been done utilizing national databases (Hamrick & Stage, 2004; Hurtado, et al., 1996; Kim, 2004; Kim & Schneider, 2005; McDonough & Antonio, 1996; Perna & Titus, 2005) where Mexican American students from the region may have been included but were not the sole focus or were a small part of the sample. Recent work on the college readiness of students in the region by Sáenz, Yamamura, Cabrera, Lopez, Martinez, Aguilar, Arambula, Muñoz, and Richardson (2008), Sáenz, Arambula, and Ozuna (2009), Cabrera and Lopez (2009), and Yamamura, et al. (2010) provide the groundwork for this study and support the notion that this region remains underserved and under-researched. Therefore, a more detailed understanding of the college choice process of Mexican American students from South Texas specifically adds to the theoretical underpinnings of college choice for this specific population. Findings from this study might also enable high schools in Texas and higher education institutions, in general, to better tailor college readiness efforts and postsecondary outreach and recruitment initiatives aimed at increasing the college attainment levels of this

population. Such efforts could ensure the upward mobility of future generations of Mexican American students from the region.

In addition, other more in-depth qualitative and mixed methods studies on the college choice process of Mexican Americans have focused on high school and/or college students in California (Ceja, 2001, 2004, 2006; González, Stoner, & Jovel, 2003; Hurtado-Ortiz & Gauvain, 2006; Perez, 2007; Perez & McDonough, 2008; Talavera-Bustillos, 1998) or the Midwest (Person & Rosenbaum, 2006; Rosas & Hamrick, 2002). As such, there is a need to understand how diversity within Mexican American communities influences the college choice process. The work of Zavella (1991) supports this notion, as her work indicates that regional differences exist among Mexican Americans in the U.S. Thus, if current college choice research does not take into account the college choice process of Mexican American students in South Texas, which potentially may be different from students in California or the Midwest because of regional differences, then a gap in the literature remains.

The second reason why this study is significant is because it posited the use of an integrated social capital and Chicana feminist conceptual framework from which to make sense of the college choice process. These theories have yet to be utilized in examining college choice in general and Mexican American students' college choice process in particular. As such, this hybrid framework is useful in helping further the research on college choice and specifically in developing more appropriate models of college choice for students of color. It is also important to note that this framework was culturally appropriate for the target population, as a Chicana feminist perspective particularly

acknowledges the unique literal and figurative third space "borderland" (Anzaldúa, 1987) from which Mexican Americans are believed to exist.

As a critical Chicana feminist qualitative researcher, it is also pertinent to note the unique perspective I brought to the study as a scholar born and raised in South Texas. Having lived a majority of my life in the region, my insider knowledge of the community provided me with greater insight than what might be afforded another researcher less familiar with the region. For example, my insider status afforded me a certain degree of trust and acceptance from individuals within the community that was useful in gaining access to the school district in which this study took place. My identity as a South Texas Border native might have also helped with making students feel more willing and comfortable in speaking with me during the interviews (Maxwell, 2005). With this unique perspective, however, came the potential of positionality bias. Thus, I aimed to limit such bias by acknowledging and staying aware of my positionality throughout the entire course of the study. The potential for such bias is further addressed in Chapter 3 under the section of Validity and Reliability.

Most importantly, this study is pertinent to the communities participating in the research, including students, parents, and high school personnel, as well as the district in which this study took place, the greater South Texas Border region, and higher education institutions. Given these stakeholders, an explicit link can be made between elementary and secondary school systems and higher education institutions; a link that supports a P-20 philosophy of education. Educators in the region can especially benefit in knowing more about how Mexican American students navigate the college choice process and

specifically how school personnel assist and/or inhibit students in this process. Educators would then be able to continue or enhance practices that are useful, while either improving or eliminating those tactics that are not. This study also lends itself to the interest of state policy makers and K-12 and higher education entities, such as the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board and P-16 councils, who aim to increase participation and higher education completion rates of students of Mexican descent in the state (Closing the Gaps, 2000).

In the subsequent chapter, existing literature on the college choice process in general and that of Latina/o and Mexican Americans in particular is provided to help build the context for this study. The methodology of this study is then addressed in Chapter 3, while Chapters 4-8 present the findings for this research. In Chapter 9, a discussion and conclusions are offered.

Chapter 2-Review of the Literature

As the main goal of this study was to examine the college choice process of Mexican American students, it was essential to have a thorough understanding of what had already been written and researched on the topic of college choice in general and the Mexican American, or Latina/o, college choice process in particular. This chapter is organized into three main parts with various subsections within each. Section one provides a general overview of existing college choice models based on three distinct types: econometric models, sociological status attainment models, and comprehensive models (Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989; McDonough & Antonio, 1996). The econometric and sociological models are briefly described because they were not utilized within the context of this study. Comprehensive models, however, are examined to a greater degree, as they are currently the most widely used in studies on college choice (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000a). The fit between existing college choice models and Mexican Americans is also discussed in section one. In section two, the focus is on Mexican American college choice research, with studies divided into three themes: 1) studies focused on race and ethnicity and college choice, 2) studies focused on familial factors and college choice, and 3) studies utilizing a social capital framework to understand college choice. Section two concludes with a critical synthesis of the college choice literature available on Mexican Americans. In the final section of this review of the literature, a combined social capital and Chicana feminist conceptual framework is posited as a means to further understand the college choice process of Mexican American students.

Models of College Choice

Several models of college choice have emerged over time to help explain the college choice process of traditional-age college students, particularly in the fields of economics, sociology and education (Hossler et al., 1989; McDonough & Antonio, 1996). These models often describe the college choice process as one with various interrelated and/or consecutive stages or phases (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000a). In this section, the most prominent college choice models are discussed.

Econometric models of college choice. Econometric college choice models assume choosing a college is a rational decision-making process, a cost-benefit analysis of sorts, where adequate and precise information provides unlimited options (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; McDonough & Antonio, 1996). Hossler, Braxton and Coopersmith (1989) note two different kinds of econometric models, those that use an institution, state or nation as the unit of analysis while others focus on the individual student. Only models focused on the individual student are considered here, as they are consistent with this study's methodology and the other college choice models presented in subsequent sections. Of the student-centered econometric models, there are three types that focus on: 1) attending college or not, 2) which college to attend among a set, and 3) calculating costs and risks, applicable to any stage of the college choice process (Hossler et al., 1989).

In econometric models, factors influencing college choice are "inputs," while the college choice decisions a student makes are "outputs" (Hossler et al., 1999, p. 143). Education related factors are considered as "inputs" and include: "student characteristics

(e.g., ability), family characteristics (e.g., income), school-related factors (e.g., class size), and perhaps even community-related factors (e.g., per capita income)" (Hossler et al., 1999, p. 143). Several of the most prominent econometric models are those derived by Bishop (1977), Chapman (1979), Fuller, Manski and Wise (1982), Kohn, Manski, and Mundel (1976), Kotler and Fox (1985), Manski and Wise (1983), Nolfi (1978), Radner and Miller (1970), and Young and Reyes (1987) (Hossler et al., 1989).

What the econometric college choice models add to the literature on college choice is a unique way of viewing the college choice process as a rational one. What is rational to some however, is not necessarily rational to others. For Mexican American students, for instance, *familismo*, or the tendency to put the wants and needs of family before one's own (Garzón, 2003; Valenzuela & Dornbusch, 1994), may influence the college choice process to the extent that a student's decision may not seem rational to one who places more value on individualism. As such, econometric models of college choice did not solely inform this study. Other models, like those derived in the field of sociology and discussed in the next section, more realistically account for Mexican American students' college choice process.

Sociological status attainment models of college choice. The sociological research on college choice focuses on a student's educational aspirations and is based on the premise that educational aspirations influence status attainment and vice-versa (Hossler et al., 1999). Blau and Duncan (1967) constructed the first status attainment model of college choice that links the positive effect a student's academic ability and family socioeconomic status can have on their aspirations (Hossler et al., 1989; Somers,

Confer, & VanderPutten, 2002). Subsequent researchers (Sewell, Haller, & Portes, 1969; Sewell & Hauser, 1975; Sewell & Shah, 1978) expanded the model to include such factors as parental encouragement, the influence of significant others, and academic performance in high school (Hossler et al., 1989). Two other sociologically based college models were created by Boyle (1966) and Alwin and Otto (1977), but these solely focus on the role of high school context on college aspirations (Hossler et al., 1989).

Overall, the main contribution the sociological status attainment college choice models provide is a clear relation between students' educational aspirations and educational attainment, while accounting for "real-world constraints" (Jackson, 1982, p. 238). Specifically, status attainment models show "how socialization processes, family conditions, interactions with peers, and school environments help shape students' college choices" (Hossler et al., 1999, p. 144). As such, sociological status attainment studies provide a measure of the inequalities in college access (McDonough, 1997). All of these aspects were particularly relevant to take into account for this study as they reflect the historical marginalization and current challenges Mexican Americans face in accessing a postsecondary education.

Comprehensive models of college choice. Comprehensive college choice models combine aspects of the sociological status attainment and econometric models, resulting in models with various interrelated and consecutive stages that are applicable to traditional-age college students (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000a). The first comprehensive models (Chapman, 1981; Jackson, 1982; Hanson & Litten, 1982; Hossler & Gallagher,

1987) are described here and evaluated for their relevancy in understanding the Mexican American college choice process.

Chapman's model. Chapman's (1981) model involves five stages: presearch, search, application, choice, and enrollment. The model takes into account student characteristics (i.e., socioeconomic status, academic performance, aptitude, aspirations), and external influences such as significant individuals in a student's life (i.e., peers, family, teachers, counselors), college characteristics (i.e., cost, academic programs, geographic location), and college marketing and recruitment efforts. Chapman is silent, however, on whether student characteristics such as race, gender, nativity, and language dominance factor into the college choice process; factors that for Latina/os and Mexican Americans can inhibit access to college information in a school context.

Jackson's model. Jackson's (1982) model contains three phases: preference, exclusion and evaluation. The preference stage reflects sociological aspects of students' lives, such as the development of college aspirations, which are influenced by academic achievement, social context (i.e., peers, school, neighborhood), and family background. Following is the exclusion phase, where students gather information on colleges they are interested in and begin excluding colleges based on: location, availability of accurate college information, family, and academic and vocational background. The colleges of interest become part of a student's "choice set" (p. 240). In the evaluation stage students rate each of the options in their choice set and select the institutions to which they will actually apply to and eventually attend. Within Jackson's model the variables that are

strongest in the overall college choice process include family background, academic experience, location, and cost.

Hanson and Litten's model. Hanson and Litten's (1982) three-stage model is considered continuous in nature and more detailed than those previously described, providing "broad sets of variables that affect the college choice process" (Hossler et al., 1999, p. 149). In stage one, the desire to attend a postsecondary institution becomes a decision to do so. The most significant influences in this stage are a student's background (i.e., race, income, socioeconomic status, parents' education, family culture, parents' personalities, religion and sex), personal attributes (academic ability, self-image, other abilities, personal values, benefits sought, personality/ lifestyle), high school attributes/school performance (social composition, quality, class rank and curriculum), and environment (occupational structure, economic conditions, cultural conditions) (Litten, 1982; Hossler et al., 1999). In stage two, students investigate institutions, while being influenced by college marketing strategies as well as individuals and media sources (i.e., parents, counselors, peers, publications, college recruiters, and other media). In stage three, students take into account the attributes of each college being considered before they complete applications for admission and are finally admitted.

Hossler and Gallagher's model. All previous comprehensive models are said to fit into the three stages provided by Hossler and Gallagher's: predisposition, search, and choice (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000a; Hossler et al., 1989; Hossler et al., 1999). The predisposition phase, beginning in grades 7-9, is developmental and accounts for students' aspirations and plans after high school, which are a function of familial

characteristics, academic performance, peers, and high school context and experiences (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000a; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Hossler et al., 1999). Between grades 10-12, students enter the search phase, where information on higher education institutions is obtained to form a "choice set" (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000a; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Jackson, 1982, p. 240). Finally, in grades 11-12, students enter the choice stage and actually decide on the college to attend from among those to which they applied and were accepted (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000a). This study took these stages into account, as participants were seniors in high school in the midst of either the search and/or choice stages.

The fit between existing college choice models and Mexican Americans. In reflecting on the college choice models previously described, all have expanded over time to take into account the influence of both individual student factors and external, social factors; the most influential being "race, socioeconomic status, parents, the college's size, location, academic program, reputation, prestige, selectivity and alumni, the student's peers and guidance counselor, and financial aid" (McDonough & Antonio, 1996, p. 4). While doing so is more realistic in nature, all of these models still fall short in helping further understand the Mexican American college choice process. Specifically, the models fail to take into account how students' racialized, gendered, classed and sexualized identities simultaneously influence their access to college information, and hence their college choice process. The models also do not incorporate or recognize Mexican Americans' culturally specific ways of knowing and/or transmitting knowledge that can be a means of gathering college information. Such means of transmitting

knowledge include: *consejos*, narrative storytelling, and *testimonios*, testimonials (Fránquiz & Salazar, 2004; Villenas, et al., 2006). These two critiques are pertinent to consider when trying to understand how Mexican Americans navigate the college choice process. Additionally, and as previously noted, Mexican Americans are also especially familial in nature (Valenzuela & Dornbusch, 1994) compared to other racial/ethnic communities and tend to place familial interests and needs before those of individual family members (Garzón, 2003). This quality can influence the college choice process. Research on Latina/o and Mexican American college choice is discussed in the segment that follows in hopes of developing and utilizing an integrated social capital and Chicana feminist conceptual framework from which to better understand the college choice process of Mexican American students from the South Texas Border.

Mexican Americans and College Choice

The pertinent literature on Mexican Americans and college choice is organized into three thematic sections including: 1) studies focused on race and ethnicity and college choice, 2) studies focused on familial factors and college choice, and 3) studies utilizing a social capital framework to understand college choice. These themes emerged during the literature review process, but are not exhaustive or exclusive as some studies fall into more than one category. Given this organization, studies that specifically focus on first-generation (Choy, 2001; Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Sáenz et al., 2007; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996; Tym et al., 2004) and low-income (Berkner & Chavez, 1997; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000b; Gibson, Gándara, & Koyama, 2004; Joyce, 1987; Kurlaeander, 2006; Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998) students are not

provided their own sections. However, some of the studies cited include Mexican American students who fall into these categories. Additionally, because there are only few studies that specifically focus on Mexican Americans and college choice, this literature review draws upon the wider array of college choice research focused on or including Latina/os. This section concludes with a critique of current college choice research on Mexican Americans.

Race and ethnicity and college choice. Several prominent studies by Hurtado, Kurotsuchi, Briggs, and Rhee (1996), Hamrick and Stage (2004), McDonough and Antonio (1996), Kim (2004), and Perna (2000) examine differences in college choice based on race and ethnicity. The findings of these studies are examined in further detail here to shed light on Mexican American college choice.

Both Hurtado et al.'s (1996) and Hamrick and Stage's (2004) studies are quantitative and use National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS) data to look at racial/ethnic differences among Black, White, Asian and Latina/o students during the predisposition phase. Hurtado et al., however, also looked at the choice stage by utilizing Beginning Postsecondary Student Longitudinal Study data. Hurtado et al.'s results indicated that Latina/os had the lowest aspirations for degree attainment at both 10th and 12th grades. Latina/o seniors were the most often to indicate they were not applying to any college, 47%. Among students who were applying to college, only 5% of Latina/os were likely to apply to at least five institutions, the lowest percentage among all racial/ethnic groups. Hurtado et al. suggest these findings are a key indicator that "for a substantial portion of various populations, the college search and choice process patterns

are distinct, and may not follow the traditional model of college choice hypothesized by Hossler and Gallagher (1987)" (p. 11). The latter is particularly true for Latina/os, who are also "the least prepared regarding knowledge about college" (p. 18). Thus, these findings also support the need to further explore the intricacies of the college choice process of Latina/os.

Hamrick and Stage (2004) measured traditional factors that influence college choice during the predisposition stage, but added two additional variables, participation in community activities and having educational mentors, to hopefully expand current models. Results of the study indicated, however, that these two additional variables did not directly influence students' predispositions to college, but did supplement the effects of other variables such as grades, school participation, and/or parental expectations. The latter of which do directly influence predisposition. For Hispanic students, "community involvement directly or indirectly was related to parents' expectations," but not to students' participation in school activities (p. 164). Hamrick and Stage suggest that this speaks to the significant role that community members and activities can have on Latina/o parents' expectations of their children. Having at least one college-educated parent also had a greater impact on the predisposition of Hispanic females, in particular, when compared to family income. This was not the case for Hispanic males, whose predisposition was directly influenced by family income.

In the studies by McDonough and Antonio (1996) and Kim (2004), Cooperative Institutional Research Program Freshman Survey data from 1994 is used to examine racial/ethnic differences in college choice. McDonough and Antonio specifically looked

at the selectivity of college choice through a "Bourdieuian-based model" that takes into account students' cultural capital and habitus within Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model. Results indicated that overall, having parents with higher educational or income levels did not assist Latina/o students in attending more selective higher education institutions. This is partly because Latina/os were more concerned with financing college than their White and Asian peers, which translated to higher attendance at less selective colleges. Even when Latina/os had greater financial support, this did not increase their college choice selectivity. Teachers were noted, however, as potentially having a positive influence on selective college attendance for Latina/os in particular. Across all racial/ethnic groups, high grades and SAT scores, as well as having taken foreign language courses, were also associated with more selective college attendance.

Kim (2004) focused on the impact of particular types of financial aid on the first college choice of students from varying racial/ethnic backgrounds. Kim found that financial aid did have different effects on attending a first-choice college across racial groups. For Latina/os, obtaining grants, loans, or grants and loans did not influence their first-choice college, indicating that other variables are more significant in choosing a college. Kim suggests that "high school academic achievement, family income, or college preferences such as location or size are more significant" for Latina/os (p. 62). Another explanation Kim offers is that Latina/os and low-income students are often limited in their financial aid knowledge and how to obtain it. Moreover, Latina/os "may not care about their choice of rank [of college]-whether it is first choice or not" due to an "unawareness of the values of attending a first-choice college" (p. 62). Advantages of

attending a first-choice college include an increased probability of degree attainment and the overall satisfaction with the college experience.

Summary. Perna (2000) synthesizes previous college choice research and suggests that all stages of the college choice process require further investigation in order to tease out racial/ethnic differences in the process. Perna notes how previous research has found that "variables that predict college enrollment vary by race and ethnicity, suggesting that the college enrollment decision-making process is different for African Americans, Hispanics, and Whites" (p. 72). Thus, this finding supports the rationale for this research as it provides an opportunity to specifically explore the college choice process of Mexican American students. Perna also suggests, however, that one way such racial/ethnic nuances can be further explored is by expanding current econometric college choice models and including social and/or cultural capital "as proxies for differences in expectations, preferences, tastes, and uncertainty about the higher education investment decisions" (p. 75).

Familial factors and college choice. The studies by Gándara (1995), Ceja (2001, 2004, 2006), Rosas and Hamrick (2002), Tornatsky, Cutler, and Lee (2002), Perna and Titus (2005), Kim and Schneider (2005), Hurtado-Ortiz and Gauvain (2006), and Person and Rosenbaum (2006) are discussed here to highlight the significance family plays in the college choice process of Latina/o and Chicana/o youth.

In Gándara's (1995) seminal case study of high-achieving low-income Mexican Americans, family plays a key role in developing students' college aspirations through a "culture of possibility" (p. 112). Valenzuela and Dornbusch's (1994) study on the impact

of *familismo* on Mexican and White students' academic achievement provides further evidence of how Mexican families support their children's educational aspirations and achievement. Ceja's (2001, 2004, 2006) studies and dissertation on the role that Mexican American parents play in the college choice process of Chicanas supports this notion as well. While Ceja (2004) found parents' college knowledge to be limited by their own low levels of education, parents were nonetheless important in both direct and indirect ways. Mexican parents were able to provide direct "educational messages of encouragement," while their daily struggles became an indirect influence on Chicanas' aspirations for a college education (p. 357). Alternatively, siblings were considered direct sources of college information.

Rosas and Hamrick's (2002) qualitative study on the search and choice stages of the college choice process for Chicana college students in the Midwest looks not only at the role of parents and siblings in the process, but peers as well. Their findings complimented those of Ceja's (2001, 2006) in that siblings provided the tangible college information students needed as well as acting as role models for students, while parents took on a more supportive role. In choosing a college, students often navigated conflicting values. For instance, while students and their families viewed independence and individualism as necessary to succeed in the greater society, within the family, notions of *familismo* and reciprocity were held in higher regard. As such, students' college choices reflected a negotiation between these two mindsets. The study also highlighted the role of peers in students' transition to college. Rosas and Hamrick

referred to peers in their study as *comadres* and *compadres* because peers often took on a supportive familial role for students once in college.

A study by the Tomás Rivera Policy Institute specifically examined the college knowledge of Latina/o parents from across the nation and focused on whether socioeconomic status and immigrant generation, assumed to be linked to social capital resources, were related to differences in college knowledge (Tornatsky, Cutler, & Lee, 2002). Results coincided with previous findings that show Latina/o parents, overall, are lacking in the necessary college information to assist their children in accessing college. Latina/o parents of higher socioeconomic and third generation status did, however, had the greatest college knowledge, indicating that "first-generation Latina/os with limited formal or informal connections—and social capital—outside of their ethnic and immigrant cohort are correspondingly disadvantaged in terms of understanding the workings of U.S. educational systems" (p. 10).

This lack of knowledge was attributed to several factors including: not effectively using counselors, teachers, and college representatives as information sources, a lack of any significant role played by formal media in helping Latina/o parents acquire college knowledge, and language barriers, that inevitably make Latina/o students "defacto communication conduits to various college knowledge sources" (p. 20). Interestingly, parents cited school counselors, teachers, and then family as the greatest sources of college information and parent-teacher conferences, printed materials, and informal conversations as the most common means by which to gain this information. Findings from this study corroborate with some of the findings of Tornatsky et al. (2002),

particularly those that indicate Latino parents are lacking in sufficient college knowledge to provide tangible assistance to students in their college choice process.

Perna and Titus (2005) and Kim and Schneider (2005) both used NELS data to examine parental involvement as a source of social capital in White, African American, Asian and Latina/o students' choice to attend college. Among these students, Kim and Schneider (2005) particularly focused on those whose parents were immigrants and on the decision to attend a selective college. The results of Perna and Titus' (2005) study indicated parental involvement was related to college enrollment, but this relationship varied across race and ethnicity. The richness of students' social networks in particular, were found to be key in increasing their likelihood of attending college. For Latina/os and African Americans this finding was deemed troublesome as students from these communities often attend high poverty, high minority schools where the social networks created are not as plentiful in the information necessary to access and enroll in college. Perna and Titus (2005) admit the study's limitations, however. For instance, in using NELS data, the proxies for "parental involvement" only reflect quantity as opposed to quality of interactions between parents and students and parents and schools and exclude the role of other family members (i.e., siblings, cousins) in the choice to attend college.

Kim and Schneider (2005) focused on the social capital of immigrant parents who were proficient in at least two languages including English, in the belief that these parents would be able to acquire greater educational resources to assist their children in the college choice process and in accessing more selective postsecondary institutions. They found that White students whose parents were bilingual were more likely to attend more

selective institutions, while there was no significant effect on college selectivity for minority students with bilingual parents. Kim and Schneider suggest this finding is a result of White bilingual parents having "more opportunities to successfully use their bilingual abilities to build social ties to the predominantly White mainstream" (p. 1197). Kim and Schneider recommend future research take into account race, social class and parent bilingualism, as well as looking more closely at the qualitative nature of social ties as opposed to simply the quantity of social ties.

Hurtado-Ortiz and Gauvain's (2006) mixed methods study investigates the role of parents, siblings, acculturation and generational status on the postsecondary plans of recent Mexican American high school graduates. Their findings support those of previous researchers in that parents and siblings did influence students' postsecondary educational attainment. Interestingly, only mothers' education was positively associated with students' college attendance. The investigators pointed to a possible difference in the role fathers and mothers play in the educational process as an explanation for this finding.

Person and Rosenbaum's (2006) mixed methods study examined the college choice process of Latina/o students in the Midwest. Their study was the first to employ a "chain migration" and "immigrant enclave" theoretical framework to examine the college choice process of Latina/os. In doing so, Person and Rosenbaum found that while Latina/os' social networks often assist in the college choice process, they may limit students' choice set of colleges because the students' college choice is solely based on the information made available to them by their social networks. Additionally, Latina/o students who relied heavily on their social networks in their college choice process were

found to be “less integrated at school” and “less likely than other students to rely on college resources for help with college-related problems” (p. 58).

Summary. This dissertation drew upon this previous research while uniquely expanding upon what was known of the college choice process of Latina/os/Mexican Americans in various ways. Specifically, the influence of family on the college choice process of Mexican American students is acknowledged by utilizing a social capital framework. In doing so, the means by which parents, siblings and other extended family members assist or inhibit students’ college choice processes are placed at the fore. The findings of Gándara (1995), Ceja (2004), Rosas and Hamrick (2002), and Tornatsky et al. (2002) indicating that parents of Mexican American/Latina/o students are limited in their college knowledge yet highly influential when it comes to students’ college aspirations are particularly considered as well. In adopting a social capital framework along with a Chicana feminist perspective, however, the current research expands on these findings by additionally taking into account cultural and familial aspects specific to Mexican American communities and validating Mexican Americans’ other various identities and ways of knowing.

Social capital and college choice. Several key studies, like those of Stanton-Salazar (1997, 2001), Talavera-Bustillos (1998), González, Stoner and Jovel (2003), Wolniak and Engberg (2007), Perez (2007) and Perez and McDonough (2008), utilize some form of a social capital framework to understand college choice for Latina/os and/or Mexican Americans and are discussed in this section. Ceja’s dissertation and 2006

study, as well as Kim and Schneider's (2005) investigation also utilized a social capital framework but are not revisited here as they were mentioned previously.

Stanton-Salazar's (1997) work on the social networks of low-income youth of Mexican descent illustrates how class, gender, and race/ethnicity influence students' "processes of network construction, negotiation, and help-seeking" within society's institutions, which in this case can relate directly to accessing and choosing a college (2001, p. 18). His research indicates that "for low-status children and youth, network processes often have more immediate functions entailing efforts by youth and their families to shield themselves from the full weight of segregation and of concentrated neighborhood poverty," (2001, p. 40) which in turn may make the notion of accessing, choosing, and attending college inconceivable or of less concern given immediate circumstances. Consistent with other studies previously mentioned, older siblings and extended family members were important sources of social and academic support that fostered resiliency among students. *Consejos*, or words/narratives of wisdom, were a means of transmitting parental expectations for children. Students' social networks were also mitigated by the degree of *confianza*, or trust, embedded within these relations.

Talavera-Bustillos (1998) utilizes an integrated social reproduction, cultural reproduction and resistance theory framework to examine the college choice process of first-generation, Chicana college students. While not explicitly a social capital framework, the notion of social capital is embedded within social reproduction theory (Bourdieu, 1983). In the study, Chicanas arrived at the predisposition stage later than proposed by Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model, often during their last two years of

high school. As a result, Chicanas often felt pressed for time in planning, searching and selecting a college; an aspect this study particularly took into account. This insufficient time to choose a college was partially attributed to students' under-resourced high school contexts that provided few adults who cared enough to assist these Chicanas with the college choice process. This latter aspect was a key area for this dissertation, as the role of school personnel in the college choice process of Mexican American students was addressed through the use of an integrated social capital framework.

Based on the educational life histories of a group of Latina students, González, Stoner and Jovel (2003) devised a "college opportunity framework" rooted in social capital theory. The framework identifies potential agents of social capital and potential agents of institutional neglect and abuse, findings that mirror those of Stanton-Salazar (1997, 2001). Parents, siblings and extended family members, as well as specialized honors programs, teachers, counselors, and college outreach and preparation programs were identified as potential agents of social capital. Alternatively, potential agents of institutional neglect included: teachers, counselors, school administrators, the school curriculum, and English as a Second Language (ESL) and Special Education tracking, all of which are consistent with Talavera-Bustillos' (1998) findings.

Wolniak and Engberg's (2007) study does not specifically utilize a social capital framework but does examine how high school contexts mitigate the social networks between high schools and colleges, which in turn function as resources for students that influence college choice. What Wolniak and Engberg found was that White middle- to upper-class students as well as students attending high performing high schools benefit

the most from access to feeder legacies. As such, Latina/o students do not necessarily benefit since they are more likely to attend high poverty, high minority schools. The study indicated, however, that if networks are built between colleges and high schools, there is an increased likelihood of other students from these schools attending.

Perhaps most relevant to this dissertation is the finding that different models of college choice exist for different types of students. High school feeder networks, for instance, influenced students differently based on gender (males were more likely to be impacted), financial need (those not needing financial aid were more likely to be influenced), and academic profile (feeder legacies were stronger for students with low academic profiles), all of which were found to be consistent with Person and Rosenbaum's (2006) and Perez and McDonough's (2008) findings.

Perez's (2007) dissertation and Perez and McDonough's (2008) study both utilize a combined social capital and chain migration theoretical framework to examine the role of family, peers, high school staff and other networks in the college choice process of Latina/o students who successfully enrolled in both two and four-year colleges. Their studies reiterate the importance of extended family, siblings, and weak ties as sources of college information for Latina/o students. Like previous scholars, both Perez (2007) and Perez and McDonough (2008) found parents to be key in promoting Latina/os' college aspirations, yet limited in the actual knowledge students needed to access and enroll at postsecondary institutions. Additionally, both studies highlight how the college information extended family members provide to students can be particularly skewed because it is based on extended family members' personal biases and experiences with

postsecondary institutions, which is often limited. These findings reaffirm those of Person and Rosenbaum (2006). Perez and McDonough's (2008) study also noted that Latina/o students relied heavily on "chain migration contacts" to diminish the challenges they would face once in college, such as being lonely and far from family (p. 256).

Summary. This study took findings from this previously described research into account. Particularly, this study considered those factors Perez (2007) found to be most salient in influencing the college choice process of Chicana/os: academic programs, proximity to home, environment, cost, and location. Similarly, the recommendation made by Perez (2007) that future studies on the college choice process of Mexican Americans use a feminist epistemological framework is also evident given the integrated social capital and Chicana feminist conceptual framework purported and utilized.

Critique of college choice literature on Mexican Americans. Two main criticisms can be offered when examining the available Latina/o and Mexican American-focused college choice research: 1) the discourse and studies on Latina/o/Mexican American college choice is primarily being driven by research(ers) in a certain geographic region, namely California, and 2) other conceptual frameworks, such as an integrated social capital and Chicana feminist framework, may provide a more detailed understanding of Latina/o/Mexican American college choice than those already presented. Specifically, a social capital and Chicana feminist framework may provide a lens from which to pinpoint specific ways in which Mexican American students navigate the college choice process with the assistance, or in spite of the lack of assistance, from their peers, family members, community members, and/or school personnel contacts.

Geographically driven discourse/research. Latina/o/Mexican American college choice research is overwhelmingly Californian, driven by researchers who were either trained at higher education institutions in California and/or who primarily do their work based on the lived experiences of the Latina/o and Mexican communities in that state. Scholars in this category include Miguel Ceja, Patricia Perez, Maria Hurtado-Ortiz, Mary Gauvain, and Patricia McDonough. The work of these academicians has enriched what is known of the college choice process of Latina/os and Mexican Americans, but gaps in the literature still remain when taking into account the variations among Latina/os and Mexican Americans who live in other regions of the United States whose college choice process may be different.

The work of Zavella (1991) illustrates that an assumption cannot be made that "there is a coherent Chicano cultural heritage" where certain "values, norms, customs, rituals, symbols, [and] material items (such as women's religious altars) form part of a 'tradition' that all Chicanos are socialized into" (p. 76). Saldívar-Hull (1991), further notes that the unique history of the Mexican Americans in Texas, or Tejana/os, "who were forced to live under a reign of terror in post-1845 Texas...urges us to remember that there is not one single Chicano/Chicana experience in the United States" (p. 211). Thus, it cannot be assumed that Chicana/o students in one region of the country will necessarily have the same college choice process as those in another region, where values, norms, and customs may be different. Based on her work with Chicanas in particular, Zavella indicates that the variation among Chicana/os can be explained by settlement and

migration patterns and "the notion of culture-region" (p. 77). This notion of "culture-region" is described as:

> A geographic and sociopolitical area where historical processes — including isolation, waves of industrialization, urbanization, and discrimination toward racialized others — have segregated racial/ethnic groups and enabled historical actors to construct particular terms of ethnic identification in opposition to the dominant society. (p. 77-78)

The latter specifically helps explain why Chicana/os "from the gulf region show Puerto Rican, Cuban, and African influences" whereas Chicana/os "from the desert regions demonstrate more indigenous influences" (p. 78). Similarly, regional differences are evidenced in variations in ethnic identification: Chicana/o is preferred in California, Mexican American or Mexicana/o in Texas, and Spanish American in New Mexico. Other significant distinctions among Chicana/os also exist based on generation, class, phenotype, sexuality, nativity, language use, religion, and whether Chicana/os are socialized and received their education in rural or urban areas.

It is also pertinent to note that state higher education infrastructures and policies differ and can be reflected in student college choices. For instance, comparisons are often made between California and Texas in regards to population demographics, education, and economics, but these states have different higher education infrastructures and policies at both the K-12 and higher education levels that can influence college choice. In looking at the number of tier-one institutions in each state, for example, California students have eight institutions from which to choose while Texas students have only three, The University of Texas at Austin, Texas A & M University, and Rice University. Both states also have percent plans that provide automatic admission to a state school for

students who fall within a designated cutoff, but these cutoffs vary. California has the top 4% plan, while Texas has the top 10% plan, the latter of which has been recently amended.

Other conceptual frameworks specific to Latina/os/Mexican Americans. Current college choice literature often utilizes a social capital framework to examine college choice within Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model. While this is useful, this approach still does not fully explain the college choice process of Mexican American students. Talavera-Bustillos (1998), Ceja (2001), Perez (2007) and Perez and McDonough (2008) acknowledged this shortcoming by integrating social capital theory with resiliency theory, social and cultural reproduction theory and chain migration theory to make sense of Latina/os' and/or Mexican youths' college choice process.

In similar fashion, Walpole's (2007) ASHE report on economically and educationally challenged (EEC) students, a term that is inclusive of students of all racial/ethnic backgrounds including Latina/os who fit this description, supports the need to continue to "look for new methodological approaches that may provide information to assist in understanding and improving EEC students' access, persistence, and outcomes" (p. 27). More specifically, Walpole (2007) suggests, "new theoretical insights could be gained from attempts at employing new frameworks" in such research (p. 84). Thus, the use of an integrated social capital and Chicana feminist framework in this study attempts to meet this need.

Stanton-Salazar's (1997, 2001) work also provides support for the need to acknowledge the culturally specific ways in which youth of Mexican descent, in

particular, share information through social networks, but his work does not specifically focus on college choice. Therefore, based on what is known of the college choice process for Mexican Americans, the following section presents the use of an integrated social capital and Chicana feminist theoretical framework from which to further understand Mexican American students' college choice process.

A Social Capital and Chicana Feminist Conceptual Framework

Before exploring ways in which social capital theory and a Chicana feminist perspective compliment each other and can be useful in understanding the college choice process of Mexican American students, a separate, more detailed understanding of social capital and a Chicana feminist perspective are provided.

Social capital theory. In reflecting on how social capital has been conceived by Bourdieu (1985), Coleman (1988), and Putnam (1993), Portes (1998) and Lin (1999) both suggest that social capital has been defined and applied in research in multiple and contradictory ways. Lin (1999) describes the major controversies related to social capital that include: 1) it being considered as both an individual and collective asset, 2) it being defined by either closed or open networks, 3) it being considered both a cause and effect simultaneously, or as a function of itself, and 4) it being questioned in its ability to be measured.

From an individual perspective, social capital consists of the social networks and the information and resources embedded within these networks that are drawn upon for individual gain. From a collective standpoint, social capital is seen as a public good, purposively produced for the sake of upward mobility and as such characterized by

boundaries, norms, trust and obligations and expectations (Bourdieu, 1985; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 1993). While Lin (1999) does not argue that the aforementioned characteristics can promote and enhance social capital, he disputes the notion that trust and expectations, for instance, can be considered alternative forms or definitions of social capital. Lin (1999) further suggests these issues should and can only be resolved when reverting to the root of the concept in being defined as "resources embedded in a social structure which are accessed and/or mobilized in purposive actions," a definition similar in meaning to the one provided in Chapter 1 (p. 35). Given this definition, Lin (1999; 2001) also urges further recognition of cyberspace, and particularly the internet, as a medium where networks and relationships can be forged, providing social capital that transcends time and space.

Portes (1998) also distinguishes between positive and negative consequences of social capital that were often not considered beforehand. For instance, social capital can provide for the observance of norms, increased family support and network-mediated benefits. However, social capital can also be a way to restrict access to opportunities for those outside a network, restrict individual freedom, as it is a means of relegating social control, can place excessive obligations on group members, and lead to norms for a group that keep them oppressed when group solidarity is based on adversity and opposition to mainstream society. Lin's (1999, 2001) work on cybernetworks, however, suggests a possible means of eliminating such negative effects. Lin (2001) argues that "cybernetworks represent a new era of democratic and entrepreneur networks and relations in which resources flow and are shared by a large number of participants with

new rules and practices, many of which are devoid of colonial intent or capability" (p. 215).

More recently, scholars of color who use a social capital framework for their research with students of color do take the possible negative consequences that Portes (1998) describes into consideration and purposefully adopt a more critical approach, as the work of Yosso (2005) exemplifies. Yosso describes social capital as "networks of people and community resources" that potentially assist in the navigation of society's institutions (p. 79). Yosso incorporates this notion of social capital within a larger model of community cultural wealth, suggesting the inherent additive qualities of communities of color.

This study takes into account this previous research, particularly Lin's (1999) solution for resolving the major controversies surrounding the definition of social capital. His suggestion to revert to the root of the concept in being defined as the "resources embedded in a social structure which are accessed and/or mobilized in purposive actions" is integrated within the definition of social capital utilized for this study (p. 35). Therefore, in the context of this research social capital can be defined as the networks, relationships, and resources embedded within the relationships (Lin, 1999) between students, families, communities and school staff that facilitate the exchange of ideas, information, and opportunities related to college access and enrollment (Perez, 2007; Stanton-Salazar, 2001).

Chicana feminist perspective. In order to fully understand a Chicana feminist perspective, it is best to first describe its origins. Arising out of the Chicano movement of

the 1960s and 1970s, the term "Chicana/o" itself holds a political connotation that for many carries with it a "strong message of pride in one's peoplehood" (Martinez, 1995, p. 1019). This "pride" is in direct opposition to the centuries of oppression experienced by Mexican Americans in the U.S. as a result of colonization since the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848 (Acuña, 1988; History of Mexican Americans, 2006; Martinez, 1995). When the "civil and property rights of Mexicans" that resided in the American Southwest at the time were not upheld, Mexican Americans almost instantly became second-class citizens fighting for equality in the economic, social, and political arenas of the U.S. (Acuña, 1988; History of Mexican Americans, 2006; Martinez, 1995, p. 1020).

Albeit there is evidence of resistance against this oppression on behalf of Chicana/os since the early 19th century, these efforts did not flourish into a full-fledged social movement until the 1960s (Acuña, 1988; Garcia, 1989). Focus at the time was on issues of "social justice, equality, educational reforms, and political and economic self-determination" for Chicana/os as a people (Garcia, 1989). At the same time, however, the many Chicanas who participated in these efforts witnessed "male supremacist practices" that were a contradiction within "a movement supposedly fighting for social justice" (Garcia, 1989; Martinez, 1995, p. 1021). The result was a new feminist consciousness and a feminist discourse (Garcia, 1989; Martinez, 1995). And while Chicana feminists "acknowledged the economic exploitation of all Chicanos, Chicana feminists outlined the double exploitation experienced by Chicanas" (Garcia, 1989, p. 223). In its early development, however, Chicana feminism was seen as a "threat to the Chicano

movement as a whole" and as a means of "undermining the values associated with Chicano culture" (Garcia, 1989, p. 225). In response to such accusations, Chicana feminists called for "a reassessment of their roles within the Chicano movement" and to "an end to male domination" (Garcia, 1989, p. 228). A reconciliation of these demands was reached when, according to Garcia (1989):

> Chicana feminists adopted an analysis that began with race as a critical variable in interpreting the experiences of Chicano communities in the United States. [Although] they expanded this analysis by identifying gender as a variable interconnected with race in analyzing the specific daily life circumstances of Chicanas as women in Chicano communities. (p. 230)

Thus, a Chicana feminist perspective is most notably focused on providing a space for the voice of Mexican American women to be heard given their racialized, classed, gendered, and sexualized identities (Anzaldúa, 1987;Garcia, 1989).

Given the historical roots of Chicana feminism, it is pertinent to acknowledge my own interpretation of a Chicana feminist perspective as it particularly relates to the decision to interview both female and male students for this study. By all accounts I sought to continue to provide a space for Chicanas' voices to be heard, but also sought to be inclusive of the needs of the Chicana/o community as a whole. As such, I do not see these two goals as mutually exclusive, and therefore find a Chicana feminist perspective lending itself to the analysis of the lived experiences of both Mexican American females and males. This notion is supported by the work of one of the most notable Chicana feminists, Gloria Anzaldúa (1987), who while demanding "admission/acknowledgment/ disclosure/[and] testimony" from Chicanos in regards to how they wound, violate, and are afraid of Chicanas, also calls for unity within the Chicana/o community (p. 84). "As a

racial entity, we need to voice our needs," she says, so that White society accepts "the fact that Chicanos are different" (p. 85).

As such, according to a Chicana feminist perspective, males, and particularly females, of Mexican descent living in the U.S. occupy and navigate an ever-changing, multidimensional third space that is both a figurative and often geographically literal "borderland," as multiple identities, conflicting cultures, and various ways of knowing are traversed on a daily basis (Anzaldúa, 1987; Pérez, 1999; Sandoval, 2000). It is from this third space that individuals of Mexican descent are able to exert their agency against hegemonic forces in some respects while simultaneously being oppressed in others (Anzaldúa, 1987). This is because the lived experiences of these individuals are shaped by the intersectionality of their multiple identities, and it is in social identities that power or oppression can simultaneously exist. Thus, integral to Chicana feminism are the concepts of space, identity and intersectionality.

In the general and literal sense, space is a "place, location, locality, landscape, environment, home, city, region, territory, and geography" (Soja, 1996, p. 1). As the work of Soja (1996) and Gonzalez and Habell-Pallan (1996) suggest, however, space is more than just a social and physical place; it is also a figurative place where identities reside and are navigated. Furthermore, as Elenes (2003) notes, the specific "borderland" space acknowledged in Chicana feminist theory can be defined as:

> The discourse of people who live between different worlds. It speaks against dualism, oversimplification, and essentialism. It is, a discourse, a language, that explains the social conditions of subjects with hybrid identities...people in-between U.S. and Mexican culture(s), with identities that are in constant flux. (p. 191)

It is this expanded notion of space that is utilized for this study, which is especially relevant considering the target population, Mexican American students.

To expand on the understanding of identity purported by a Chicana feminist perspective, the following description is borrowed from González and Habell-Pallan (1994):

> Identities are always in the process of being constructed or maintained by both dominant and disempowered communities across contested boundaries...Identities are created through a continuing process of questioning and re-evaluation that takes place in relation to specific social spaces and histories...[Thus,] identity is a complex formation that cannot be easily summed up in a single designation... Identity is not simply a matter of choice or free will, but is rather a negotiation between what one has to work with, and where one takes it from there...It is often in relation to place that identity must be negotiated and transformed.

This definition of identity once again makes reference to "social spaces," suggesting the interwoven nature of these two concepts in Chicana feminist thought. The other pivotal aspect of Chicana feminism related to identity and space is the notion of intersectionality that can be understood as the point at which "social and cultural categories intertwine" (Knudsen, 2006, p. 61). A more detailed definition provided by Davis (2008) indicates that intersectionality refers to:

> The interactions between gender, race, and other categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power. (p. 68)

Thus, intersectionality emphasizes "the simultaneity of oppressions, the interlocking systems of inequalities, and the multiplicity of gendered social locations" (Fabrizio Pelak, 2010). Despite the more detailed definition provided, however, Davis (2008) suggests there remains a vagueness regarding "intersectionality" as a concept, theory and/or

practice, but dually argues that it is in this open-ended ambiguity that intersectionality thrives.

In this research then, intersectionality was understood through students' responses when asked about how they perceived that their demographic background and various social identities influenced their college choice process. When students indicated more than one social identity as influential in their college choice process, whether explicitly (when stated in their own words) or implicitly (when suggested or revealed through their stories), this was conceived as the presence of intersectionality. As such, the intersectionality of race, gender, class, and sexual orientation are of particular importance as are other identity defining characteristics such as language, age, nativity, and religion.

In addition to notions of space, identity, and intersectionality, a Chicana feminist perspective also takes into account other cultural characteristics specific to Mexican Americans in the context of education, knowledge sharing, and relationship building, all of which can be influential in students' college choice process. One such characteristic includes Mexican American parents' concept of *educación* (Auerbach, 2006; Reese, Balzano, Gallimore, & Goldenberg, 1995; Valdés, 1995), which literally translated means education. For Mexican origin people, however, *educación* is more holistic encompassing more than just schooling or book learning, but the learning of "manners and moral values" as well (Valdés, 1995, p. 125). Consequently, this concept shapes Mexican American parents' notion of parental involvement as being one that is more comprehensive and participatory in nature, and not solely academically focused (Zárate, 2007). This was significant in the context of this study because students' parents did not

necessarily adhere to the mainstream notions of parental involvement by attending college presentations for instance, but yet were still considered by students as helpful, or involved in their college choice process because of the emotional support parents provided.

Similarly, a Chicana feminist perspective acknowledges the culturally unique ways in which knowledge is shared and transmitted between Mexican origin parents and children, extended family members and children, and among siblings and peers through *consejos* (narrative storytelling) (Delgado-Gaitan, 1994; Fránquiz & Salazar, 2004; Valdés, 1996; Villenas, et al., 2006) and *testimonios* (testimonials) (Villenas, et al., 2006). As Delgado-Gaitan (1994) notes:

> The Spanish connotation of *consejos* extends the notion of the English language translation for the pragmatic purpose of solving a problem. In Spanish, *consejos* implies a cultural dimension of communication sparked with emotional empathy and compassion, as well as familial expectation and inspiration. (p. 300)

Alternatively a *testimonio* can be further understood as "an authentic narrative, told by a witness who is moved to narrate by the urgency of a situation" that is exploitive, oppressive, or a misrepresentation of actual history (Yúdice, 1991 p. 17). Thus, the *testimonio* provides a vehicle through which the witness can summon the truth and portray his or her personal experience in the midst of a situation, not as a representative, but as an agent of "a collective memory and identity" (Yúdice, 1991, p. 17). Such ways of knowing are considered "pedagogies of the home" (Delgado Bernal, 2006) and coincide with the anthropological research in education regarding Latinos'/Chicana/os' "funds of knowledge" (González, Moll, Tenery, Rivera, Rendon, Gonzales, & Amanti,

1995; Velez-Ibañez & Greenberg, 1992) that are often disregarded and at times labeled as barriers to students' academic aspirations and success.

Finally, Chicana feminism affirms the role and use of *respeto*, or respect (Fránquiz & Salazar, 2004; Valdés, 1996) and *confianza*, or mutual trust (Fránquiz & Salazar, 2004; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2003; Vélez-Ibañez & Greenberg, 1992) as key to the formation of relationships and the transmission of knowledge within Mexican American communities. In the context of education, Fránquiz and Salazar (2004) specifically found that Mexican American students' learning was optimal when they were able to build relationships with school personnel that mirrored those in their personal lives which were built on *respeto* and *confianza*. Students also benefited when they were exposed to and given the opportunity to be *buen ejemplos*, or good examples.

These characteristics were pertinent to consider in this study, particularly in the analysis of data, given that students interviewed were seniors in high school and the role that social capital played in their college choice process was being examined. Additionally, all of the aforementioned concepts potentially shape all of the social relationships of students of Mexican descent both inside and outside of the school setting.

Merging social capital theory and a Chicana feminist perspective. While social capital theory is useful in identifying the relationships between individuals and others, as well as the resources available within and through these relationships (i.e., ideas, information, opportunities), that assist in the navigation of society's institutions, social capital theory fails to explicitly take into account how these relationships and the

flow of information are influenced by issues of class, race, gender, sexuality, language, age, and nativity, for instance. In the context of college choice, these issues are of particular concern as schools are (re)producers of societal inequalities, privileging individuals whose characteristics are more like those of the White, middle-class who are in power.

The need to more fully acknowledge and explore the means by which students' multiple identities influence college access and choice was recognized by Walpole (2007) in her work on economically and educationally challenged students. However, in her work she does not focus on Mexican Americans in particular. She also solely provides a review of literature that takes into account the intersectionality of students' social class, gender and racial/ethnic identities: a majority of research that is cited in previous sections of this chapter. Therefore, if the college choice process of Mexican American students is to be understood more fully, a framework that takes into account the lived experiences of individuals of Mexican descent is necessary. A Chicana feminist perspective provides this.

A hybrid social capital and Chicana feminist conceptual framework helps to illuminate how the intersectionality of Mexican American students' identities shape the relationships they form with family, friends, community, and school personnel that in turn either assists or inhibits the flow of necessary information to access and enroll in a postsecondary institution. Additionally, a Chicana feminist perspective delineates the culturally specific ways in which Mexican American communities transmit information, which has not been specifically taken into account within the college choice context.

Chapter 3-Methodology: Understanding Mexican Americans' College Choice

In order to understand how Mexican American students navigate the college choice process, this study employed a qualitative methodology (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). A qualitative research design was particularly well-suited for answering the research questions posed in this study because it helped illuminate the meanings students made of their lived experiences within the context of the college choice process, the relationships among dynamic forces at play in this context, and the processes by which events and actions took place that influenced how they were able to navigate the college choice process (Maxwell, 2005). Additionally, a qualitative research design lent itself to fully exploring the key tenets that came with using a Chicana feminist conceptual framework, such as the intersectionality of race, class, gender and sexuality, as well as other social identities, could not be quantified.

Specifically, this study utilized a phenomenological approach (Seidman, 2006; Schutz, 1967) where in-depth interviews were used as the main source of data collection. As such, students' narratives were weaved together and presented as a whole, as opposed to case study format, in order to express the overall interpretation of students' college choice experience. Doing so was appropriate because this study sought to develop a detailed description of a phenomenon, or process, that could not be directly observed, as well as develop an understanding of how this process is interpreted, both of which Weiss (1994) notes as reasons to conduct a qualitative interview study. Additionally, qualitative interviews are advantageous to use when attempting to understand the world from someone else's perspective (Kvale, 1996) and when the purpose is to interpret such

perspectives and not derive facts or laws (Rubin & Rubin, 2005; Warren, 2002), both of which this study attempted to do. Furthermore, using in-depth interviews as a means of collecting data on the topic of college choice is a method that has been used by leading researchers in the field in their work on college choice, including McDonough (1997), Ceja (2001, 2004, 2006), and Perez (2007).

Therefore, this chapter is devoted to explaining the methodology utilized in this study. In doing so, this chapter is divided into the following seven sections: 1) Gaining access to field sites, 2) Description of field sites and district, 3) Participants and recruitment, 4) Procedure for data collection, 5) Data analyses, 6) Validity and reliability, and 7) Limitations and delimitations. Within the "Participants and recruitment" section, two subsections are included that focus on the research protocol and obtaining informed consent, and confidentiality of research data. Similarly under the section on data analyses, three subsections are provided that pertain to student interviews, counselor interviews, and additional data. Finally, the section on "Validity and reliability" contains four subsections on triangulation, researcher bias/positionality, rich, thick description, and respondent validation.

Gaining Access to Field Sites

In deciding to explore the college choice process of Mexican American students from the South Texas Border, I was charged with gaining access to high school seniors in the region. While not living in South Texas at the time of the study, I was originally from the area and drew upon my familiarity, connections, and insider status in both the city of Villa Verde and the Villa Verde Independent School District (VVISD), respective

pseudonyms for the city and district in which this study took place. Gaining access to the VVISD in particular was deemed optimal because it is a large school district with a total of five traditional high schools and one Early College High School. The Early College High School is described by the VVISD as "a limited enrollment school designed to enable students to achieve two years of college credit, tuition free, at the same time they are earning a high school diploma." The school is also "designed to boost graduation rates and increase the number of high schools students prepared for postsecondary success." As such, I believed such a school district could provide a large pool from which to recruit participants. Despite such advantages however, I also recognized how not living in the region for almost fifteen years also relegated me to an outsider status to a certain degree, an identity that could pose a challenge to gaining entry into the VVISD. As such, there was still a need to build trust with school personnel at the district and school levels.

The first step taken then was to follow the formal protocol to gain permission to conduct research in the VVISD. I completed the application that was accessible on the VVISD website in May of 2009, and then arranged to visit the district that same month to turn in the application and personally visit with the principals of the two high schools that I hoped to gain access to. The two high schools, referred to as Fuente High School (Fuente) and Paloma High School (Paloma), were chosen, once again, in part to my knowledge and personal connections at these two sites. I also assumed that in interviewing students at two high schools within VVISD, instead of one, there was a higher probability of variability among student participants, as each high school is located in a different geographic region within the district and the city of Villa Verde.

During the visit to the VVISD in May of 2009, I submitted my completed application for research and set up individual meetings with the principals at both Fuente and Paloma High Schools. During the individual meetings, I explained the purpose of the research and what would be asked of student participants. I also answered any questions the principals had, and offered to share my findings with them and/or their schools' staff once the study was completed. Consequently, both principals agreed to take part in the study, with the understanding that interviews would begin the following school year in September of 2009. I also explained to principals how I did not live in the region, and would commute once a month and remain in Villa Verde for a week at a time to conduct student interviews and collect any other data needed until the study was completed.

During this initial visit, contact was also made with one counselor from each high school. At that time, I explained the purpose and procedures for the project and asked counselors if they would mind being contacted for assistance with the recruitment of students in the fall. I also shared my own background as a former elementary school counselor with the contact counselors, as a means of building rapport with them. My experience as a counselor also informed my understanding of counselors' duties and time constraints. Thus, I was aware of the need to be flexible in the means by which counselors could assist with recruitment. The counselors I spoke with agreed to assist and/or refer me to another counselor if need be. I also asked counselors at the time, if they would be willing to be interviewed themselves, in order to gain their perspective of students' college choice process. The counselors that assisted with the recruitment of participants agreed to be interviewed and they also referred me to at least one additional

counselor at each high school that might be willing as well. In all, five counselors were interviewed, two counselors from each high school and one district level higher education counselor. As such, these initial meetings with counselors proved invaluable, as it was primarily counselors at both schools who assisted with the recruitment of student participants. Further details regarding these counselors are provided in the "Participants and recruitment" section of this chapter. In the section that follows, a more thorough description of Fuente and Paloma High Schools, as well as a few details about the Villa Verde Independent School District are provided.

Description of Field Sites and District

The two high schools that were the sites of this study are traditional, 9th-12th grade high school campuses. Both schools serve students with similar demographic backgrounds but vary slightly in size and location within the Villa Verde Independent School District (VVISD). Fuente High School (Fuente), for instance, is the larger of the two sites and is centrally located in the district and city. During the 2008-09 school year, the total student enrollment at Fuente was 3,125 (991 freshman, 747 sophomores, 747 juniors, and 640 seniors) (Texas Education Agency, 2009b). The ethnic composition of the school was .1% African American, 94.8% Hispanic, 3.6% White, .1% Native American, and 1.5% Asian/Pacific Islander. Among the student body, 87.7% were considered economically disadvantaged, while 9.2% were identified as Limited English Proficient. Students considered at-risk comprised 52.6% of the student population (Texas Education Agency, 2009b). Additionally, 8.7% of students were in Bilingual/ESL

education, 8.9% were in Gifted and Talented Education, and 11.3% were in Special Education (Texas Education Agency, 2009b).

For Fuente's graduating class of 2008, there were 590 graduates with 562 of them graduating with a Recommended high school diploma. Among these graduates, 57% were considered college-ready in English/Language Arts, 66% in Mathematics, and 46% in both subjects. The percentage of students who took the SAT from the graduating class of 2008 was 48.4%, while the average SAT score for this graduating class was 944. When divided further by race/ethnicity, Hispanic students from Fuente's 2008 graduating class obtained an average SAT score of 934, versus their White counterparts who obtained a 1045.

Alternatively, Paloma High School is located in the northwest region of the VVISD. During the 2008-09 year at Paloma High School, the total number of students was 2,488, with 812 freshman, 687 sophomores, 551 juniors, and 438 seniors (Texas Education Agency, 2009b). Of these, .2% were African American, 97.2% were Hispanic, 2.4% were White, 0% were Native American, and .2% were Asian/Pacific Islander. Additionally, 96.9% were considered economically disadvantaged, 11.1% were Limited English Proficient, and 66.7% were considered at-risk (Texas Education Agency, 2009b). Also, 11% of students were in Bilingual/ESL Education, 5.1% were in Gifted and Talented Education, and 13.9% were in Special Education (Texas Education Agency, 2009b).

Paloma High School's 2008 graduating class consisted of 446 students, of which 416 graduated with a Recommended high school diploma. Within this graduating class,

54% were considered college-ready in English/Language Arts, 48% in Mathematics, and 33% in both subjects. The average SAT score for these students was 899, although only 39.7% of the entire graduating class of 2008 actually took the SAT. Among SAT test takers from this class, Hispanic students averaged a score of 894, while White students averaged 941.

It is also pertinent to note the organization of the counseling department at both school sites, as college related information and materials are generally disseminated to students through the counseling and guidance department at respective schools within the district. Thus, describing the organization of this department at each school provides a better understanding of the types of services provided to students and the means by which they are provided. The organizational structure of the counseling department at each school was gauged through the counselor interviews and through participant observations. At Fuente, the contact counselor specifically indicated that there was one counselor for approximately every 600 students. The way students were assigned to a counselor was based on their last name. For example, one counselor might see all students whose last names begin with A through F. As such, each counselor saw students from varying grade levels, from ninth graders to twelfth graders.

At Paloma, however, students were assigned to a counselor based on their grade level so that all ninth graders, for instance saw one counselor that followed them throughout their high school career. At Paloma, there was also a designated higher education counselor that dealt strictly with preparing students for college. When interviewing this counselor, she indicated that the higher education focused counseling

position had only been adopted the year before by the school principal. She said it helped alleviate "a lot of stress and work from the regular senior counselor" and allowed her to deal solely with "scholarships, financial aid, applications, testing, [and] college reps [representatives]," for instance. A senior counselor, however, remained at Paloma, and she handled the record keeping and credit counts of senior students.

Equally significant to mention are the multiple college information sessions and college fairs for high school seniors and their parents organized by the VVISD which participants mentioned and that counselors verified. One in particular was University Day that took place on September 17, 2009. According to students and counselors, University Day was described as a college fair. It consisted of having high school seniors from the various high schools in the district visit Villa Verde's City Events Center during the school day for 2 hours per school. At the event there were approximately 70 postsecondary institution representatives set up at booths able to disseminate college information from their campus and personally visit with students, when possible.

Several students also mentioned a Parent's College Night, which occurred on September 30, 2009 and according to the district level higher education counselor, was "an orientation for any senior parent" on the college application process. Topics covered at the orientation included the financial aid application process, the college entrance exams required of students, and the services provided by the high schools and district to help students with this process. Counselors interviewed also confirmed and provided additional details regarding these events, and also mentioned other college information sessions that were provided to all students and parents in the entire district.

Participants and Recruitment

This study adopted a purposeful sampling procedure (Patton, 1990) where participants included 20 students who met the following criteria: identifying as Mexican American, being a senior at either Fuente High School (Fuente) or Paloma High School (Paloma), and aspiring to attend a college, whether that be a two or four-year institution, after graduating from high school. In addition to these criteria I was interested in recruiting student participants that were not all in the top 10 or 15% of their class to ensure greater probability that students would come from various academic and demographic backgrounds. Additionally, an equal number of student participants were recruited from the two high schools (10), with an equal gender balance. Ensuring that an equal number of males and females participated in the study was important, as research has found gender to be influential in the college choice process of Latina/o students (McDonough, Nuñez, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2004; Perez, 2007). Additionally, in keeping with the Chicana feminist perspective adopted for this study, including both males and females ensured the ability to fully explore the intersectionality of gender in the college choice process of Mexican American students.

Prior to the first individual interview, all students were asked to complete a one-page questionnaire where demographic and contact information was requested (See APPENDIX A for Student Questionnaire). The questionnaire yielded additional data useful in understanding students' backgrounds. All students were either 17 or 18 years of age, and self-identified as either Hispanic or Mexican American. Thirteen (65%) of the students indicated they were not in the top 10% of their class, indicating that seven, or

35% were. Half of them were first-generation immigrants, in that both parents were born outside of the U.S. All parents not born in the U.S. were born in Mexico. More than half (12) of all students were of first-generation college status, or 60%. This designation was given when a student had parent(s) or caretaker(s) who had not obtained at least a bachelor's degree (Choy, 2001). All except for two (90%) were bilingual, speaking both Spanish and English. Fourteen students identified as Catholic, or 70%. And 60%, or 12 out of the 20 students, came from two parent households, whether biological or not. A table depicting individual student demographic data is provided in APPENDIX B.

In addition to students, two counselors from each high school and the designated district level higher education counselor were interviewed once using the same procedures as those used with students. The two counselors from Fuente High School were the contact counselor, who will be referred to as Ms. Manzano, and the head counselor at the school who will be known as Ms. Elizondo. The two counselors from Paloma High School were the contact counselor, who is also the designated higher education counselor at the school, who will be referred to as Ms. Carson, and the senior counselor, who will be known as Ms. Davila. The district level higher education counselor will be referred to as Ms. Jordan. These interviews were particularly useful as they strengthened the reliability and validity of findings based on student data. This is further discussed in the section on validity and reliability.

Student participants who met the criteria for the study were recruited with the assistance of school counselors and teachers. At Fuente High School, the contact counselor, Ms. Manzano, suggested to recruit student participants from among those who

were enrolled as helpers in the library and/or counseling office. Ms. Manzano indicated that student helpers were seniors who had obtained all of the credits necessary to graduate and were officially enrolled in a course and assigned to either the library or counseling office to assist in daily administrative and routine duties throughout the eight periods of the school day. Ms. Manzano also stated that student helpers were from various academic backgrounds. Therefore, all student participants from Fuente High School, except for one, were student helpers from the library or counseling office and were personally asked to take part in the study by me. The one student participant who was not a student helper was nominated to take part in the study by the head counselor at Fuente High School. I personally asked this one student to participate. This student was the last student interviewed in the whole study, in part because an original student helper who had taken part in the first interview was not able to participate in the second interview. Therefore, the last student was the only student whose first and second interview took place from one day to the next.

Recruitment of participants at Paloma High School was done with the assistance of the contact counselor, Ms. Carson, and a French teacher, who was the mother of a friend of mine. Ms. Carson and the French teacher personally asked seven students to participate on my behalf. Ms. Carson set up the first interview times for these students. Three student participants were then recruited using the snowball sampling procedure (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) where I asked one of the student participants to suggest other possible participants that fit the criteria of the study. I shared these students' names with Ms. Carson who then contacted these students on my behalf and asked if they would be

willing to take part in the study. Upon agreeing, subsequent first interview times were scheduled by Ms. Carson.

Procedure for Data Collection

This study predominantly drew upon aspects of Seidman's (2006) model for conducting phenomenological individual, semi-structured, in-depth interviews with student participants. Qualitative interviews allowed for the emergence of complex and intricate themes in the context of the integrated social capital and Chicana feminist conceptual framework used in this study. This method was also particularly suitable for this study because it allowed for the behavior of students, in this case navigating the college choice process, to be "meaningful and understandable" as it was "placed in the context of their lives and the lives of those around them" (Seidman, 2006, p. 16-17).

In Seidman's model it is suggested that each participant be interviewed three times, so that:

> The first interview establishes the context of the participants' experience. The second allows participants to reconstruct the details of their experiences within the context in which it occurs. And the third encourages the participants to reflect on the meaning their experience holds for them. (p. 17)

For the purpose of this study however, the first two interviews were merged into one. As such, the first interview with students focused on their life history in the context of the college choice process and on the details of how they were navigating the college choice process, while the second focused on the meaning of the college choice process from their perspective (see APPENDIX C for interview protocol). The merging of the proposed first and second interviews in Seidman's model was deemed appropriate for

three reasons: 1) merging interviews one and two helped achieve maximum efficiency, as some of the questions and conversations in Seidman's proposed first and second interviews may have been redundant, 2) reducing the overall number of interviews with each participant helped ensure their continued participation throughout the study, and 3) it ensured that participants were not overburdened in being asked to take part in more than two interviews, particularly because of their young age and the possibility that they would be busy with college preparations as seniors in high school. Additionally, previous research studies on the college choice process of Mexican Americans have utilized two to three interviews per participant and obtained sufficient data from which analyses, implications and conclusions could be drawn (Ceja, 2001; Perez, 2007).

All student interviews took place over the course of one academic school year (September 2009-May 2010) on school grounds, at a time that was convenient to the participant. All interviews were conducted and study materials provided in English. Students were offered Spanish versions of consent forms and the opportunity to have the interviews conducted in Spanish, however, there were no students who asked for either accommodation. Interviews lasted an average of 39 minutes, with the shortest lasting 15 minutes and the longest lasting 45 minutes. The length between students' first and second interview ranged from a month to two months, except for one student whose first and second interview were conducted from one day to the next. This student was the last to be interviewed in the entire study during the final data collection visit to the VVISD. Thus, interviewing this student from one day to the next was due in part to my own time constraints, and to the inability of another student who had taken part in the first

interview to take part in the second interview. All interviews were digitally audio-recorded and transcribed as they occurred. For instance, as first interviews with students were completed, they were transcribed so that they could inform the course of action in regards to follow-up questions during the second interviews. Follow-up questions in the second interviews either helped clarify or expand upon previous answers to questions in the first interviews. Once all student transcripts had been completed they were coded by hand, and later organized further using thematic tables on Microsoft Word.

As previously mentioned, five counselors were also interviewed for this study as a means of triangulating (Willis, 2007) the data. Counselors were interviewed only once and asked questions similar to those asked of students (see APPENDIX D for the interview protocol used with counselors). Counselor interviews lasted an average of 22 minutes, with the shortest lasting 17 minutes and the longest lasting 35 minutes. The interviews with the counselors from Fuente and Paloma High Schools were conducted on site, while the interview with the district level higher education counselor, Ms. Jordan, was conducted over the phone, as I was not in Villa Verde when the opportunity to interview her arose. As such, this interview is the only one that was not digitally audio-recorded. I attempted to type as much of the interview verbatim while it was occurring, however, and filled in any missing comments or responses from memory immediately after the conversation to make the transcript of the interview as complete as possible.

In addition to counselor interviews, participant observations (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) were conducted in the counseling offices at both high schools on the days that students were interviewed. During these observations, the interactions between students

and school personnel and their peers were noted, as well as the general environment of the office and the college literature available to students there. These observations typically lasted 2-3 hours long, and occurred on at least three occasions, thus yielding field notes that were also considered during analysis. As defined by Bogdan and Biklen (2007), field notes are "the written account of what the researcher hears, sees, experiences, and thinks in the course of collecting and reflecting on the data in a qualitative study" (p. 119). Additionally, field notes are beneficial in that they help the researcher stay abreast of the progress of the study, help the researcher remain keen to the possible influential nature of the data, and assist the researcher in visualizing how the data is shaping the research plan (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Thus, I found it beneficial to utilize this additional method of data collection.

The counselors that were interviewed also provided additional documents, such as college event fliers, that were other forms of data that informed analyses. Analytic memos (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998) were also created to provide additional, richer data for this study. Specifically, I utilized analytic memos to help document my own understandings of my experiences in interviewing students and interacting with counselors and other school personnel. These multiple sources of data were drawn upon in order to gain a more holistic understanding of the college resources available to students via their schools and to render student data reliable and valid.

Research protocol and obtaining informed consent. Written informed consent was obtained from each student participant prior to being interviewed. Consent forms were offered in both English and Spanish. Students who were 18 years old or older were

provided an adult consent form. Students who were 17 years old or younger were provided a parental informed consent form with an assent for the student to sign.

In addition, all student participants were asked to fill out a five-minute questionnaire prior to beginning the first interview, after having obtained students' informed consent. This questionnaire was utilized to gather additional demographic background information (e.g., age, family income) on each participant, and to corroborate any personal demographic information students provided during interviews. I went over the questionnaire with students to ensure they understood what was being asked of them and to answer any questions they had. The questionnaire was based on one used in prior research on the college choice process of students of Mexican descent (Perez, 2007). See APPENDIX A for this questionnaire.

Additionally, Seidman's (2006) interviewing techniques were used as a guide with student participants in order to conduct the two individual, semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The first interview focused on their life history in the context of the college choice process and the details regarding their college choice. The key questions in this interview focused on the development of students' college aspirations, educational goals, and expectations and their sources of college information, support, and assistance, in the context of their social networks. In the second and final interview, students were asked to explain the meaning of the college choice process from their perspective, in the context of their social identities and socio-cultural characteristics. See APPENDIX C for the complete interview script that was used with students.

The interview questions utilized with counselors were based on the same interview questions used with students. In many cases, questions were exactly alike except that they were posed from the perspective of the counselor in respect to students at the school and/or within the district. See APPENDIX D for the complete interview script that was used with counselors.

The interview questions that were used in this study were derived from two main sources including Seidman's (2006) questions for interviewing and Perez's (2007) dissertation on the college choice process of Chicana/o students. Interview questions were also formulated based on the specific research questions posed in this study and the integrated social capital and Chicana feminist conceptual framework that guided this research.

Confidentiality of research data. All participants' data was assigned a code/pseudonym to protect the confidentiality of participants. This code was used to label the interview transcript and audio recording. The transcripts were stored in a locked cabinet in my home, to which only I had access. Digital audio files were password protected on my own computer. After the study was completed, the audio recordings were destroyed. The transcript data, however, was maintained for possible future studies. As such, any information that was obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential.

Data Analyses

While student interviews were the primary source of data for this study, counselor interviews, participant observations, other documents obtained at the sites, and analytic

memos were also considered when attempting to understand Mexican American students' college choice process. The manner in which these sources were included in the analyses is described here.

Student Interviews. All student interview data was digitally audio-recorded, transcribed and provided a code or pseudonym so as to protect the identification of participants. Once all transcripts were deemed accurate, an inductive analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990) was used to analyze all interview data. Analysis began with an open coding procedure (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), where themes that emerged from the data were identified based on my understanding of the data while also taking into account the integrated social capital and Chicana feminist conceptual framework used in this study. These themes provided a preliminary framework for analysis. Once initial themes were identified, these themes were further analyzed through axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), where connections between themes and sub-themes were created in order to reach a deeper understanding of the college choice process of student participants. The process of refining themes was on going, even while data was being collected, so as to generate propositions that could be confirmed or negated through further data collection.

The integrated social capital and Chicana feminist conceptual framework that was used in this study also assisted and informed the coding process and all other analyses of data. For instance, key tenets of the conceptual framework, such as the role that students' social networks, multiple identities, and culturally unique characteristics play in the college choice process, informed both the research and interview questions for this study. Therefore, by incorporating the conceptual framework into all aspects of data analysis,

the specific research questions posed in this study were directly addressed. In doing so, the integrated social capital and Chicana feminist conceptual framework was useful in helping map out the college choice process of Mexican American students from the South Texas Border.

Counselor interviews. Like students' interviews, the four interviews with the high school counselors were audio-recorded, transcribed and checked for accuracy. The fifth interview with the district level higher education counselor, Ms. Jordan, however, was conducted over the phone and thus not audio-recorded. Nonetheless, the counselor's responses were typed as close to verbatim as possible while the interview was being conducted. Immediately following the interview, missing information was filled in based on recollection and the complete transcript was checked for accuracy.

Counselors' transcripts were then reviewed and their responses were compared to student responses, as a whole, as well as the additional data collected for this study (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). As such counselor transcripts were used to "corroborate" and "elaborate" student data (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Specifically, counselors' transcripts were relied upon for greater details of school processes and organizational aspects that potentially influenced students' college choice process in their respective schools and within the district. Such details included the dissemination of college related information, the types of college presentations and events offered, and the organization of the counseling department at students' schools. Thus, counselors' responses were analyzed to the degree to which they coincided or negated student responses.

Additional data. Field notes derived from participant observations, the documents obtained from school counselors and at school sites, such as college event fliers, and analytic memos were also considered for analysis. This data was used in the same manner, as were counselor interviews, in the sense that they were treated as additional sources of data. Specifically, field notes, documents, and analytic memos were reviewed and compared to student data as a whole (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998) as a means of corroboration and illumination of student data (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Doing so, helped in the conceptualization of students' college choice process given their multiple identities and their existence both within and outside of the school setting.

Validity and Reliability

The concepts of validity and reliability are often referred to in tandem in research, particularly in studies using a quantitative methodology (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998; Willis, 2007). As Willis (2007) notes, however, "the concepts of validity and reliability are based on the assumption that you are looking for universals—for laws—and therefore want to conduct research that is generalizable and replicable" (p. 218). Yet qualitative research is interpretive in nature and emphasizes meaningfulness as opposed to generalizability or replication (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998; Willis, 2007). Thus, validity and reliability are approached differently in qualitative studies as this one.

As defined by Maxwell (2005), validity refers to "the correctness or credibility of a description, conclusion, explanation, interpretation, or other sort of account" (p. 106). It is a quality that cannot be guaranteed by adopting certain methods or procedures, cannot be treated as a product, only as a goal, and is relative to the purpose of the research and

context; existing only through evidence (Maxwell, 2005). Alternatively, reliability can be conceived as the ability to replicate a research study so as to obtain the same results (Willis, 2007). As Marshall and Rossman (1999) point out, however:

> Positivist notions of reliability assume an unchanging universe where inquiry could, quite logically, be replicated. This assumption of an unchanging social world is in direct contrast to the qualitative/interpretive assumption that the social world is always being constructed and that the concept of replication is itself problematic. (p. 194)

Therefore, the notion of reliability in the qualitative sense can be best captured in the construct of dependability. Defined by Marshall and Rossman (1999), dependability refers to the researcher's "attempts to account for changing conditions in the phenomenon chosen for study and changes in the design created by an increasingly refined understanding of the setting" (p. 194).

In this study, various measures were taken to ensure the reliability, or dependability, of data in particular. One measure included checking transcripts for any possible errors made during transcription before any analyses were made (Creswell, 2009). Another measure taken was to ensure that I did not deviate from codes once they had been created. Deviation from codes was avoided by regularly comparing data with codes, and by reflecting on the meaning of codes through analytic memos (Creswell, 2009). In order to address issues of validity, several strategies were employed that included: triangulation, addressing researcher bias and positionality, providing rich, thick description, and seeking respondent validation. Details of these strategies follow.

Triangulation. Marshall and Rossman (1999) define triangulation as "the act of bringing more than once source of data to bear on a single point" (p. 194). In order to

strengthen the validity of my understanding of the college choice process of Mexican American students from the South Texas Border then, multiple sources of data were collected. The main source of data was drawn from student interviews, but the assumptions and conclusions based on this data were corroborated, elaborated, and illuminated (Marshall & Rossman, 1999) by counselor interviews, participant observations, documents obtained from counselors, and analytic memos.

Researcher bias/positionality. In conducting this research, I inevitably brought my own values, biases, and experiences with me. To help reduce such biases, which could have influenced the means by which I interviewed participants and/or analyzed the data, it is necessary to acknowledge my own positionality in relation to participants and the context of this study (Creswell, 2009; Maxwell, 2005). My positionality is informed by my being a Mexican American woman from the South Texas Border. As such, my insider knowledge of the culture and community that was studied in some ways assisted me in gaining access to and building trust with participants. Alternatively, it is possible that my being from the South Texas Border could have also lead me to be less critical of the community I still consider myself a part of. Therefore, it was crucial to keep these biases in mind.

Additionally, it was essential to acknowledge the heterogeneity of Mexican Americans within the region, particularly in regards to such characteristics as class, religion, language use, generation, phenotype, sexuality, nativity, and where they were socialized and educated (Zavella, 1991).

Rich, thick description. In order to add to the validity of this study, rich descriptions of interviews with participants are provided (Creswell, 2009; Maxwell, 2005). Doing so assists readers in developing a thorough understanding of what occurred during interview sessions, possibly allowing them to develop a mental image of interviews as if they had been present (Maxwell, 2005). Additionally, providing rich descriptions of interviews adds a realistic aspect to results that cannot otherwise be obtained (Creswell, 2009).

Respondent validation. In order to ensure that data obtained and interpretations and conclusions made throughout the study are accurate, respondent validation (Maxwell, 2005), or member checking (Creswell, 2009), was employed. This consisted of me regularly sharing with participants my understandings of their responses throughout interviews. I also discussed with participants points of clarification that needed to be made in regards to what was said in the first interview, during the second interview. This was done to gain participants' feedback as to the accuracy of my interpretations of participants' responses (Creswell, 2009; Maxwell, 2005).

Limitations and Delimitations

Being qualitative in nature, this study was methodologically limited. For instance, findings from this study cannot be generalized to all Mexican American students, Latina/o students, and/or all individuals from the South Texas Border region. This is in part due to the fact that the inherent purpose of a qualitative study is not to generalize findings but to provide a contextual description and develop themes that are particular to a site or sites (Creswell, 2009). As Maxwell (2005) argues however, "this does not mean

that qualitative studies are never generalizable beyond the setting or informants studied" (p. 115). In the case of this research, a degree of generalizability can be assumed based on "the similarity of dynamics and constraints to other situations, the presumed depth or universality of the phenomenon studied, and corroboration from other studies" (Maxwell, 2005, p. 116). As such, findings from this study might lend themselves to other students whose characteristics are similar and attend schools and live in a region similar to that of participants.

In choosing to adopt an integrated social capital and Chicana feminist theoretical framework, findings from this research are also limited. As such, other studies that explore the college choice process of Mexican American students in general, or in South Texas in particular, that utilize a different theoretical lens might yield different findings.

There are also several delimitations in this study worth mentioning. First, students in this study were all solely attending traditional high schools. Thus, results might have varied if students were attending private, charter, or early college high schools. Additionally, in specifically restricting the criteria of participants to Mexican American students, the likelihood of undocumented students of Mexican descent participating was diminished. Thus, purposefully including undocumented students of Mexican descent might have revealed other identities that were influential in the college choice process of students, such as nativity or language. The choice to recruit high school seniors as opposed to other high school students in other grade levels or students already in college also limited findings. This decision was based on the assumption that high school students would most likely be in the final stages of the college choice process: the search

and choice phases that traditionally occur between tenth and twelfth grades (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000a; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987).

This study was also restricted by time and place. As I chose to interview students at school, most interviews occurred during an individual class period that lasted 50 minutes. This meant that I had to be conscious of not letting students go over this allotted time or else they might have run the risk of being tardy or missing a subsequent class entirely. Because students were also interviewed at their respective schools, often in the library, this setting could have also influenced students' responses. On one hand, the school library was a convenient, quiet and familiar environment that lent itself to students feeling comfortable while being interviewed there. At the same time, however, students may have felt inhibited in being interviewed in their school setting. This may have particularly been the case, for instance, when students were asked to critique the manner in which their schools disseminated college knowledge and assistance.

Furthermore, given that I did not live in Villa Verde while collecting data, and given my own knowledge of the importance of *confianza* (trust) and *respeto* (respect) in the relationships of Mexican Americans, my limited time to build rapport with students could have also influenced findings. In this respect, I minimized such limitations by utilizing my insider status as someone native to the region to build trust and respect with students, as well as school personnel.

In the next five chapters, the findings of this study are provided. In Chapter 4, the primary focus is on the role of students' multiple identities within their college choice process. In Chapters 5 through 8, the means by which students' social networks either

assisted and/or inhibited their ability to navigate the college choice process within the four main spaces that students occupied are spotlighted. Specifically, Chapter 5 focuses on students' cultural/familial space, Chapter 6 is devoted to students' community space, while Chapter 7 discusses students' school space, and Chapter 8 highlights students in cyberspace.

Chapter 4-Students' General Understandings and their Multiple Identities

This chapter has two main purposes, the first of which is to provide students' general understandings of their college choice process. These understandings were based on several emergent themes that arose out of students' narratives, were more individualistic in nature, and were less reflective of the Chicana feminist perspective adopted for this study. These themes were deemed significant nonetheless and are presented first in this chapter. The second objective of this chapter is to introduce a detailed account of the common intersecting identities among students that specifically influenced their college choice process, whether explicitly (as stated in their own words) or implicitly (as suggested or revealed through their stories). In doing so, I begin to address the first research question posed in this study: How does the intersectionality of Mexican American students' social identities shape their college choice?

In this chapter, students' most salient identities are noted separately so that the means by which they were defined and exemplified through students' narratives are more easily understood. I recognize, however, that this approach might suggest the feasibility to fragment, or compartmentalize, students' multiple identities, a practice that is counterintuitive to the notion of intersectionality proposed by a Chicana feminist perspective. As such, it is incumbent on the reader to remember that these identities played out simultaneously in the context of students' college choice process, although they are presented here individually to provide a descriptive account of how each identity emerged. When possible, explicit instances of intersectionality are noted when a student mentioned two or more identities in conjunction.

Additionally, within this description this study's hybrid social capital and Chicana feminist conceptual framework is specifically utilized as a tool to help delineate the cultural characteristics that are unique to Mexican American students. For instance, the use of *testimonios* (testimonials) or *consejos* (words/narratives of wisdom) to transmit college knowledge or support, and the role of *familismo* (familism), *confianza* (trust), *respeto* (respect), and *buen ejemplos* (good examples) are acknowledged within students' stories where appropriate.

What is the College Choice Process?

Several themes emerged within the descriptions that students provided of their general understanding of the college choice process, an understanding that was more individualistic in nature and less reflective of a Chicana feminist perspective. These descriptions were often in response to the question, "What have you done or are you doing to prepare to attain your goal of going to college?" Students also revealed their general understandings of the process when asked to provide any recommendations they would give to other students who were interested in attending as well. What resulted was an understanding of the college choice experience as being: 1) "grueling," 2) a process that requires ample time, 3) a process students believe begins with "making good grades" and taking dual or advanced placement courses, and 4) a process that is based on the "will of the student."

It's a grueling process. First and foremost, the college choice process was deemed complex, often complicated and overwhelming. Some students found it difficult

to make sense of all of the information that they needed to gather, particularly financial aid information and admission requirements. This is evident in Geneva's response:

> It's a lot of information. I didn't think, well, not that I didn't think, but, well, I didn't realize how much information it is, financial aid and then if you have a high income, you have to pay for yourself and then if you have a low income then you can get a student loan. But, then of course, eventually you'll have to pay it back, and then you can't use much of the loan because then you'll have to, go get more. You'll have to earn like, give them more money to turn and then it's like, some colleges they only want top 10% or top 5% and it's like, I don't know, since I'm pretty much so and so, average. I don't know, but it's a lot of information.

Other students described the college choice process as one that required certain steps. However, students were not always aware of all of the steps they needed to follow until they were in the midst of the process during their senior year. As such, students often had misconceptions of what the process of actually applying to college entailed. Henry shared his frustrations:

> It's a grueling process, getting into a college, and I mean a lot of people assume they just, oh, fill out my name, say where I want to go and either get in or I don't. And if there's anything I've learned, it's a lot harder than that. You fill out all kinds of paperwork, go get this, get that, have this sent over there, get transcripts from one school, get transcripts from another school. Write essays...I mean you could want to go anywhere but you might not actually complete the whole process of actually going over there.

Beto shared similar sentiments, saying "It's not easy [the college choice process], from my experience, it's not easy. It's like a lot, you can have a lot, maybe not so much stress, but it's like a lot of papers that you have to look at, like the applications sometimes can be lengthy."

Given students' lack of knowledge regarding the process, they felt ill prepared. Rocio, for instance, admitted, "It was chaotic at first but as I, I guess kept up with it, it

was fine. It's been fine...because I wasn't prepared. So, that's why I was saying like, this year I really stuck to it, I regret not focusing since my freshman year." Another student, Tony also revealed the following:

> I really don't know how, like what I have to do to go into college like a lot, so just the basics stuff, like I've been doing it pretty much...like I know for some colleges you have to take an SAT, which I took and stuff, but I don't [know] like the scores. Like all these little details some colleges ask for, that's what I really don't know.

The multi-faceted nature of the college choice process gave way to the need to plan early and accordingly to ensure there was sufficient time to meet deadlines for applications and college entrance exams.

Start early. There was general consensus among students that a large part of the college choice process was giving oneself sufficient planning time prior to senior year. Alejandra, for example, recommended to "Be informed just as you're a freshman. Like start to get informed, like what do you need and what you like. Not do to, not to do anything like last minute." Cristian echoed Alejandra's response saying students should "start as soon as they can [either in eighth grade or freshman year], like instead of leaving it to the last minute."

Several students specifically discussed the need to complete all of the necessary college admissions requirements early, such as college entrance exams, completing essays, and the actual applications. Eddie said, "Take your SATs like a.s.a.p. Cause you wait, like I waited, that's my mistake, I waited on that, and I'm gonna take [them] in January. I already applied and everything...but I can't finish it because I don't have my SAT scores, like I just can't." Alejandra also spoke of the need to apply to college early

in order to relieve stress. She suggested students, "Start early for applications...so it won't be all stressful like senior year because there's deadlines, and there's different deadlines for other colleges, scholarships and stuff." At least two other students, Fernando and Paulo, particularly saw the necessity to apply early to college in order to increase their odds of being accepted to the college of their choice. Fernando's response makes this clear:

> I'm applying early. I'm doing my essays, my resume, everything early that way I can get a good spot in college I guess. Because it's, well, I know UT [University of Texas at Austin] is a first come first serve type of thing, so I'm trying to get everything early that way I can...Like finishing junior year, I started looking into colleges and all that...Like I took my SAT, I think it was in June. After I took the SAT I started looking up colleges, started doing my essays and all that...It was around a good time. That way you don't feel like you're too rushed to finish it. Yeah, I think it was a good time.

Thus, timing is a crucial aspect of the college choice process. Students also, however, noted how a large part of the college choice process was in being academically prepared to actually enroll.

Making good grades and taking AP courses, dual classes. All students referred to some aspect of their academic preparation as being part of their college choice process. Students often noted their efforts to maintain a high GPA throughout their high school careers, and at least fifteen students explicitly mentioned taking advanced placement (AP) or dual enrollment courses as a part of their college preparations. When students spoke of dual enrollment or AP courses, however, they were often mentioned in conjunction, without a differentiation made between the two.

Fernando recommended students interested in attending college "start off with a good academic background since early because if not that's gonna affect them throughout

their high school and that effects [their college admissions because] the colleges look into your high school GPA." Zulema indicated something very similar, and specifically suggested "to start as early as you can on getting dual classes because those help boost your GPA a lot." She then shared what she believed was a common misconception among students regarding their GPA, "just because you think it's your freshman year, it's not gonna count, it is gonna count, it's either gonna help you or hurt you...I think they [freshman] don't [realize this] because they're like, oh, it's just my freshman year, it doesn't even count, but it does because starting from your freshman year, they start doing your GPA."

The decision to enroll in AP and/or dual enrollment courses was seen as a means of preparing academically for college and of saving time and money. Alejandra considered her AP and dual enrollment courses the most important aspect of her college choice process. She said, "Those [AP and dual enrollment courses] prepare you more than regular classes. Well, they do, but because they show you how to, how college classes work and how you have to be more responsible, you have to study more." Other students like Steven, on the other hand, specifically saw AP and dual enrollment courses as a direct savings in time and money. Steven voiced his opinion:

> I had heard that those credits could count for college and you wouldn't not have to pay for those classes, so I thought, if I can take these classes and if I'm smart enough to pass these classes, I don't have to take these. I don't have to ask my parents for the money to go, you know, to take that class that I could've taken in high school. That's why I'm trying to take as much as I can so that way it doesn't fall back on me, financial wise.

While students' general understandings of the college choice process included an academic component, almost half of all students interviewed believed the college choice process was dependent on a student's personal drive.

The will of the student. A large number of students explicitly placed the majority of the responsibility of navigating the college choice process and ultimately enrolling in a higher education institution on students themselves. Interestingly, most students who indicated this were male. The following conversation with Jasmin proved an exception. During her second interview, Jasmin illuminates her views:

> MM: I asked you about actual information and the type of information that the school provides about college and you said that the school does offer it but that you thought that a lot of people didn't know necessarily, like where to get that information. Why do you think that is? You know what I mean, why do you think that is that students don't know where to get it?
>
> Jasmin: I think we're just spoiled, I think we expect everything to be handed to us. We don't want to do the research and stuff like we usually get everything you know like, if you want to know something they'll give you there something. I don't know how to explain it, I just think that, we expect everything to be given to us. But that's my point like, we're too lazy to look ourselves. We don't want to take time out of our day to just do something small that might be bigger in the future. With my friends, like I ask them how, how is their you know, "How are your plans [after high school] going, like do you know what you're gonna do?" And most of them are, just don't know, they don't know what they're gonna do, what colleges, they don't know about financial aid.
>
> MM: So do you think it's because they don't necessarily want to put the work into it? Or is it because they don't know where to start? Like they don't know how to do it, you know what I'm saying?
>
> Jasmin: I think it's both of them, I mean you can't have, if you don't know where to start, how are you going to know what to look at?...I mean it's just, I think it's just a matter of how much you want it... I think they offer us stuff maybe they could offer us a little bit more but I think it's okay. You know, that it's just a matter, if we want the help or not.

The sense that perhaps students are "lazy" and therefore lack sufficient determination to realize their goal of going to college was also echoed by several of the other students including Fernando. He believed attaining this goal rested on "the will of the student." "Some people here are just too lazy to apply and they just let it pass by and that's just what keeps them behind, stuck here at [local university] and not somewhere better for their education," he declared. He added, "[It] just [takes] determination to set a goal, know that you want it, you can go to college. I mean there's money out there, just you, just gotta do the right stuff to get it." Henry was another student who firmly believed that all students had an equal opportunity to go to college, and a necessary component of the college choice process was simply having the desire to attend. This is evident in Henry's response:

> Honestly I think that if a student wants to go to college they'll go and they'll research and they'll do what they want to do. And if they're kind of like, they don't care, they don't want to, they'll just graduate from high school or get their GED and whatever happens from there it's their choices, I guess...I think we all have a fairly equal share, like we all have a good, like everybody's capable of going. Like we can. The help's there, you know. The help is there, they just have to want to go and get it or know about going and getting it.

Implicit in Henry's comments, however, is a contradiction. While he claims all students have an equal opportunity to attend college, he also notes that students not only need to get the help, but also know how to get the help, the latter of which is not always the case.

Therefore, taking students' general understandings of the college choice process into account, what follows is a more detailed description of the most prominent social identities that emerged from the data given the use of the integrated social capital and

Chicana feminist conceptual framework. What the data revealed was a complex negotiation of students' identities amidst their college choice process.

Students' Salient Identities

Taking into account the research questions and the hybrid Chicana feminist and social capital framework used to guide this study, analysis of data revealed seven social identities that were significant in shaping students' college choice process. Social identities once again being defined as students' "self-understandings, especially those with strong emotional resonance" (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998, p. 3), that are dynamic and co-constructed (Elenes, 2003;Urrieta, 2007) because they are based on students' relations to others, specifically to what students "are not" (Sarup, 1996, p. 47). This notion of identity is purported in Chicana feminist thought, specifically taking into account identities related to race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, class, language, age, nativity, and religious affiliation, for instance. As such, students' identities were at times implicit (revealed or suggested through students' shared stories) and explicit (stated by students in their own words), noted in isolation or in varying combinations with one or more identities, but still all considered intersecting as they coexisted within each student in the midst of describing their college choice process. These identities included varying combinations of students': generational college status, sibling identity, income, academic identity, co-curricular identity, race/ethnicity, and regional (South Texas Border) identity. A more detailed description of these identities is provided here with examples of how these identities emerged within students' shared stories.

Generational college status. When students described their generational college status in the context of their college choice process, this identity was deemed influential. As such, and in accordance with previous literature (Choy, 2001; Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Sáenz et al., 2007; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996; Tym et al., 2004), there were two main subcategories that emerged in regards to this identity: first-generation college status and non first-generation college status. First-generation college students often noted this status as positive as it afforded them college opportunities, such as qualifying for particular scholarships, and was a key motivation driving their college aspirations. At the same time, some first-generation college students also noted this identity as negative, or limiting them in terms of college knowledge and/or opportunities. It is important to mention that the intersectionality of income with first-generation college status often accounted for the latter sentiments. There were also some non first-generation college students who noted their own identity as advantageous to their ability to navigate the college choice process. Specifically, these students spoke more often about the inherent expectation to obtain a postsecondary degree as their parents did, an aspect that positively shaped their own college aspirations. Within several non first-generation college students' narratives, however, there were complexities that challenged the assumptions often made of students with this identity. For instance, several non first-generation college students admitted to not receiving the guidance and knowledge they anticipated from their parents, despite the fact that their parents' had obtained a college education. Such exceptions are touched upon within this section, but are more fully explored in Chapter 5.

My mom and my dad didn't go to college. More than half of all students, whether of first-generation college status or not, either implicitly or explicitly made comments regarding the influence that being a first-generation college student has on the college choice process. As previously noted, this influence was described in both positive and negative terms. For students who were of first-generation college status, the latter was more often the exception. Instead, these students drew strength and optimism from this identity, specifically as a motivation to seek a higher education. Additionally, and as previously indicated, this identity was often linked to income status.

In *testimonio* fashion, Jasmin and several other participants exposed their families' struggles and suffering as a result of their parents' either limited or lack of a higher education. It was in such lived experiences that these students found motivation and the desire to go to college. Jasmin shared her story:

> My mom and my dad didn't go to college, and I know how hard they struggle. And my mom being single, like she has to take care of three children by herself and I know if she had a college career, a college degree it would've helped her better, had an easier life. I just want to make my kids' life better when I have my own family...I don't think anyone [in my family] absolutely has like a degree, a degree. My sister's a dental assistant and my uncle and my aunt are medical assistants...I want to be the first one... It's encouraging me because like I want to be the one that made it and got the four-year degree. I want to be a doctor too.

Jasmin's response is a testimony to the truth about her family's history and how it shapes her experience today. Specifically, Jasmin exposes how her mother's situation in being a single parent without a college education has contributed to Jasmin's family's economic state. Recognizing her mother's sacrifices, however, Jasmin commits to seeking a different life path and obtaining a college degree; a step she believes will provide her with a more promising future.

Like Jasmin, Tatiana also saw obtaining a higher education as a means of providing a better life for her own future family, an aspect that can be argued is reflective of the strict gender roles given Mexican American females (Anzaldúa, 1987; Rincón, 1971) to particularly place the needs of their families before their own. Specifically, Tatiana said,

> I don't want to have to like ever suffer in the rest of my life, I always want to be able to take care of my family. And it's really hard for my parents to take care of us sometimes. Like they've told me that it's been really hard so I don't want that.

Tatiana continued specifically speaking to the connection between her parents' low levels of education, their job opportunities, and her family's low-income status. In doing so, she provides a clear example of the intersectionality of her first-generation college status identity and class identity.

> My parents they got fired from a couple of jobs and stuff, and my brother the same thing. And then I would see that it was like kind of hard for them. You know. And then I was like, that was kind of sad and it's because they don't have degrees in anything. They never went to college. No one did. My dad only went to the eighth grade. My mom only through the sixth grade and my brother dropped out when he was like a sophomore or something from here, from [Paloma], so they always really struggled...And so I think that maybe cause I'm the first one to go to college that I'll probably, like I'll have more opportunities probably I'm not sure about that but, I'm thinking.

Other students, like Maritza and Jasmin, saw this identity as both an advantage and disadvantage in some respects. This is evident from Maritza's comments,

> I'd say like being the first to go to college, they help you, there's lots of scholarships for that...So maybe that could help. It could hurt, but I don't think a lot. I think it could help more because there's scholarships...[It could hurt because] I think you'd be, you wouldn't know exactly what to do because nobody else before you had gone.

The latter portion of Maritza's comment speaks directly to the often, limited social capital available within a first-generation college student's family in regards to the college choice process. Thus, in her words Maritza conveys her understanding of the way first-generation college student status can inhibit a students' ability to navigate the college choice process. It is pertinent to note that Maritza is by definition a non first-generation college student. However, this identity is not as clear-cut for Maritza because her parents obtained their college degrees in Mexico; an aspect that provides for variation among non first-generation college students. This aspect is further discussed in the following section.

Non first-generation college students themselves, Charlie and Henry also noted other negative aspects to being a first-generation college student. Both believed that a student whose parents did not go to college might want to follow in his or her parents' footsteps and not see a need for a higher education. Charlie, for instance, shared this:

> [If] you see your mom who doesn't go to college and your dad who doesn't go to college and they're making it, you know. It makes you think like, hhmmm, maybe college, maybe I don't really need college you know. Like my parents are making it, they seem fine you know, but maybe I don't need it also. And yes, I think some people do think that way. And I would say that, that makes them like lean towards more of not going to college than actually going

Henry, also specifically noted the possibility that parents might urge a student to start working immediately after high school instead of going to college. "I think if you have parents who maybe never went to college at all, like both parents, I think it would probably be a lot harder for you," he said, "because for one, they don't know about getting into it, they...may not see the importance of it." He continued saying, "They [parents] maybe just want you to start working right away you know, like they did."

While being a first-generation college student could be seen as both positively and negatively influencing a student's college choice process, being a non first-generation college student was solely seen as advantageous. However, there were varying degrees of advantage given the specifics of students' non first-generation college status.

My parents graduated from college. Students who had at least one parent, whether biological or not, who had obtained a higher education were considered non first-generation college students. In this sense, obtaining at least a four-year bachelor's degree was considered having obtained a higher education (Choy, 2001). As such, this definition allowed for variations within the non first-generation college student identity. For instance, students with this identity included both those who had one or both parents with a college education, as well as those whose parents had obtained their college degrees in the U.S. and Mexico. Such differentiations reflected the reality of students' lives, but also accounted for a more complex understanding of the level of college knowledge and assistance students were able to receive. Nonetheless, all non first-generation college students indicated having benefited from being of non first-generation college status.

Alejandra, for instance, said this of her parents, "[They] strongly influenced [my decision to go to college] because they went to college and I know that they're successful which makes me think that I don't want to stay in high school just, I just want to exceed more, [have higher] expectations." As such, Alejandra's parents were *buen ejemplos*, good examples, who influenced her college aspirations positively. It is important to note as well, that one of Alejandra's parents is a doctor. As such, the types of college degrees

held by parents might also account for another variation in the quantity and quality of college knowledge and assistance non first-generation college students are able to receive.

Henry's comments echo those of Alejandra, although he had one parent who did not go to college. Henry particularly looks to his mother as a *buen ejemplo*, or good example, as she obtained her college education. Although he also acknowledges learning from his father what not do to. This is evident in Henry's following response:

> I think maybe the biggest [background] influence...like on my decision [to go to college], like my father didn't go to college and my mom she went on, I mean she has a master's. So, I mean it's quite a big difference there you know. One has, and he actually dropped out of high school and just got his GED to begin with too, so. She was always pushing me for college more and my father, like he pushed me for college but not as much as my mom did.

Implicit in Henry's narrative is a somewhat tumultuous negotiation between both of his parents' backgrounds' and expectations of him. On one hand, Henry has a mother with a graduate degree who has high expectations for him, which he values. However, Henry also has his father, which he acknowledged did not complete high school. Thus, while Henry is considered a non first-generation college student, his father's lack of a college education also shapes Henry's generational college status in general, as he is able to draw motivation from his father's experience like many first-generation college students did with their own parents.

Aside from being *buen ejemplos* for their children, parents of non first-generation college students were also often noted as sources of college information and knowledge. This was an advantage assumed by at least one first-generation college student, Tatiana, who indicated college educated parents would "have the information [and] they [would]

know like what to do" to help their children. Interestingly, however, at least two non first-generation college students, Maritza and Tony, noted their parents' limited ability to guide them in the college choice process because their parents had obtained postsecondary degrees in Mexico. This is indicative of the South Texas Border context, where parents may also be first-generation U.S. immigrants who completed their higher education in Mexico or another Latin American country, as was the case for Maritza and Tony's parents. Also common is for parents to work in Mexico even if they obtained their higher education in the U.S., as is the case for Charlie. Charlie shared more about this saying, "My dad, he tells me you gotta study you know, because he works in Mexico, and he's an accountant, and he does get paid well, but for Mexico well, but not for here in the U.S. They get paid in pesos, but yeah, he always tells me like study." Charlie's response further exemplifies the multiple figurative and literal borders that are negotiated on a daily basis by individuals living in this region. The variations among non first-generation college students and their implications on accessing social capital within their families, and specifically from their parents, are explored further in Chapter 5.

Ironically, Tatiana, the first-generation college student previously mentioned noted how non first-generation college students could be at a financial disadvantage. She said, "They [non first-generation college students] probably won't have as much financial aid because their parents are making money, but they can still go. They can still make it through the college." Tatiana refers to the assumption that all non first-generation college students have parents who make sufficient money to exclude them from receiving financial aid in the form of grants or need-based scholarships. Her comments, once again,

reflect the frequent intersectionality of generational college status identity and income identity. Charlie's case, however, contradicts this assumption and indicates that non first-generation college students in the region whose parents work in Mexico may be in as much need of financial assistance as other first-generation college students. In either case, it is evident that the influence of one's family income is also critical in the college choice process and often intertwined with generational college status. Following is a description of how some students' sibling identity was influential in terms of their college choice experience.

Sibling identity. While often related to students' generational college status, sibling identity emerged when students described their roles as siblings within their families as either having been influenced by, or having been influential in their college choice process. As such, at least half of all students interviewed discussed how their role as an older sibling or a younger sibling particularly played a part in shaping their college choice process. For instance, Fernando explained that a motivation for his college aspirations was based on his being the first in his family to attend college and thus needing to "set a path" and be the "example" for his younger siblings so that they too would believe that they "have to go to college, to get a future." The following conversation with Karina coincides with Fernando's comments:

> Karina: I have two smaller brothers.
>
> MM: Ok, so then you would be the first one and kind of, is that important to you [in the context of you going to college]?
>
> Karina: That's another reason why I would want to...to go to college.
>
> MM: But like to set that

> Karina: That example, like I know I want my brothers to go to college too. So I want to set that example.

Despite this feeling of obligation to be a *buen ejemplo*, or good example, Karina also admitted that, "being the oldest is hard because you know, my mom hasn't experienced me leaving anywhere. I'm really attached to my mom so I know for my smaller brothers it will be so much easier for them to go." Steven was not necessarily the oldest or the first to go to college among his siblings, but he admitted that continuing the tradition that his older brother who went to college had set in being a *buen ejemplo* for him and his younger sister was an influence on his decision to go to college. This is evident in Steven's shared story:

> My little sister is just ten years old, she's gonna go to middle school next year and for her to see my older brother get a college degree and just see her other older brother, me, get a college degree that way she can say, you know what, my brothers went to college and they have a college degree, you know what, I'm gonna do the exact same thing. Because I want her, I guess I want my little sister to know that it's okay to go to college, that she is college material, that she can get a degree and that she can support herself.

Like Steven, there were other students who benefited from having older siblings who were either pursuing a higher education or had already done so and thus, paved the way for them. When describing his reasons for wanting to go to college, for instance, Beto said, "I have five siblings, one brother, well four, one brother and three sisters and they're all older than me with the exception of one, my sister, she's younger. Everybody else has gone to college." Thus, Beto's identity as one of the younger siblings in his family shaped his college aspirations.

Alternatively, there were other students whose older siblings had not been able to obtain a postsecondary degree and the experience of seeing older siblings struggle as a result inspired students to pursue their own postsecondary education. Cristian describes such an experience in the following exchange:

> MM: What would you say some of the reasons are that you want to go, some personal reasons?
>
> Cristian: Well, mainly because my brothers they were, they started high school and then they dropped out to go work so like I want to be a little bit different and just go straight for school.

Cristian further explained, however, how he felt an expectation to do better than his older brothers, and this was something he struggled with. He said:

> The challenging part is like having to, the idea of my brothers wanting me to do a lot better than they did. So it's kind of tough to stay in that position of having that whole weight on me of knowing that everybody wants you to do a lot better than they did.

This comment suggests Cristian is figuring out how to best negotiate his college choice process given his sibling identity within his family. Aside from students' sibling identity, however, income was also a salient identity among a majority of students.

Income could either hurt you or help you. A good number of student participants personally identified as economically distressed. While they may not have known their family's particular income, it could be assumed that they came from low-income backgrounds in the manner in which they described their family' s economic hardships. As such, this was noted as an influential identity in their college choice process that in some instances acted as a motivation for obtaining a postsecondary education, but in others posed a possible obstacle to accessing college.

Cristina, for instance, was forthcoming of her class status. She divulged the following when asked what background characteristics had influenced her college choice process:

> Financial would be another one [influential aspect] because I come from a low-income family and it's kind of hard to, like we only have enough money to buy what we need and once in a while we splurge on our selves, but most of the time we just get the essentials...[that is why] the family income, like I do see it as a challenge because we don't, we don't bring in as much. So that poses, so that like says I really need to work hard on the scholarships and try to get scholarships and grants.

Tatiana felt the same pressure to obtain scholarships or grants in order to pay for college because she felt asking her parents would be a burden given their limited income. "My parents can't pay for it, and I'm not going to make my parents go through all this trouble to help me pay for college," she said. She added, "So, I always tell them, no, I'm going to get a scholarship because I don't want them to worry. They already have enough to worry about."

Seeing their parents struggle financially, however, was for many students, a main reason to actually obtain a higher education. This is clear from Zulema's comments, "Like right now at my house we're not like poor, poor but we're like barely making it and I don't want that. I know with a degree I can have more for myself and I won't have to worry about stuff like that." Interestingly, Zulema's mother had obtained a college degree, although this was only an associate's degree as opposed to a bachelor's degree. Thus, by definition (Choy, 2001) Zulema was still considered a first-generation college student. When asked how he came to the realization that he wanted to obtain a higher education, Eddie provided the following *testimonio* that echoed Zulema's sentiments:

> Actually almost eighth grade year I kind of like blew it [idea of going to college] off, but then freshman year came along and then it was two days before Christmas and my house burned down. Yeah, my house burned down and then you know, no money, we needed a place to live, fortunately a church donated, donated us a house to live. And then it hit me like, what if this were to happen like, like that and I have no money, we have no insurance what if I did have some school background, have a good job, actually have insurance and [then we would] not have to worry about this again.

While inherent in Eddie's *testimonio* are the challenges his low-income status can pose for his college aspirations, he also explicitly noted how he perceived that his low-income identity could be leveraged to his benefit. This is evident from the following conversation:

> Eddie: Some of my friends that are Hispanic yet they have enough money, they tell me, oh you're gonna get financial aid, I have to try harder. I'm...
>
> MM: So like income really could either hurt you or help you?
>
> Eddie: Yeah, they're in top 10%, they're smart, I mean, but they do have money, but won't qualify for financial aid except loans and stuff like that, which I, have low-income I can get financial aid, like money.
>
> MM: Like grants?
>
> Eddie: Yeah, like big grants, so I can see that as a challenge for them.
>
> MM: Yeah, so in your case you could see that not necessarily as a positive that you come from a low-income family, but that it can allow you to qualify for more free monies.

What Eddie's comments indicate is that while being of low-income status can pose a challenge to accessing a higher education, there is also an understanding that going to college is possible regardless of such an identity. Furthermore, students who claimed they were of low-income status drew motivation from this identity in their pursuits of a higher

education. Like income, students also noted their academic identity as influential in their college choice process.

Academic identity. All students deemed their academic performance as influential in their college choice process. Specifically, academic identity was expressed in two main dichotomous categories: 1) being in a magnet program or not, and 2) being in the top 10% of one's graduating class or not. The latter identity as a top 10% student was particularly salient because in the state of Texas, students who fit this identity are provided guaranteed admission to any public postsecondary institution in the state. These two identities, however, were not always mutually exclusive.

Being in a magnet program. Several students indicated they were in their school's magnet program that provided them access to more rigorous curriculum focused on a particular career pathway of interest. Each school in the VVISD has a different magnet program which all students can apply to, and given they meet the program's requirements, be accepted. At Fuente High School the magnet program is focused on Medical/Health Professions, while at Paloma it is focused on Law and Protective Service Professions. The advantage in being deemed a magnet student is expressed in the following comments from Beto, from Paloma High School:

> I'm in the school magnet program, it's law and criminal justice...The courses that I'm taking they are like advanced, I would say. So, and most, I've been with those students pretty much since freshman year...And well eventually, well by now senior year, most of those students in those classes are focused on furthering their education. So, and like to a certain point, like I don't hang out with them, but like since I see them everyday in my classes and I hear about what they talk about so I can like, you know, sit and talk with them and it's more like worried more about education rather than what are you going to do on the weekend, or stuff like that.

What Beto's comments indicate is that aside from the rigorous coursework that is provided through the magnet program, Beto is also exposed to peers who are interested in higher education, which inadvertently influences his college aspirations in a positive way. Like Beto, Henry, who is in the Medical/Health Professions magnet program at Fuente, shares similar sentiments. He explained, "The magnet program kind of give[s] you, I think a bit of an advantage, I mean because if you go to a school and they see you graduated from a magnet program at Fuente they might be a little bit more inclined to look at you." He also, however, added another possible dimension to one's academic identity that can shape college opportunities, "And of course if you're in the top 5 or top 10% you have almost automatic admissions to most public or state schools, so I mean that's gonna make a big influence." This identity as a "top 10% student" is further explored below, as it was explicitly noted by a majority (15) of students.

Being top 10% and not being top 10%. Students who were in the top 10% of their graduating class particularly noted this identity as influential in their college choice process. Specifically, this identity shaped students' college aspirations because they believed there was an expectation for them to pursue a higher education given this identity, while it also provided an heir of confidence as well, particularly given the guaranteed admission they were provided via this identity. This is clear in the following response, provided by Fernando:

> All the people that have helped me expect me to go to college. Like all my teachers, like right now I'm in the top [ten] percent, I'm in the top ten places, the top ten spots I guess, and I feel that they've helped me to a point that they expect me to go to college not just to finish high school and settle for something like start working at McDonald's or something like that, I'm not saying that's bad right, but

> I, they expect me to go to college...Being top 10% is actually an advantage because they automatically accept you.

Zulema also admitted something similar saying,

> Just being in top 10, made me [feel] like oh you can go anywhere, and just like you have a good GPA and you're gonna do good and my SAT's just being in top 5, I think it would help. I mean so, that is like, ok I can make it in college. I made it the top of my class.

Another student, Sergio expressed sentiments that echoed those of Zulema and Fernando, "I think my being also top 10% influences me to try and get to college...Like it's an improvement. Most people can't say that they're top 10% in their class and I'm proud to say that I am."

Alternatively, not being in the top 10% was seen as a disadvantage in that it limited college opportunities. Students who were not top 10% shared their beliefs that universities "look at them [top 10% students] more than they look at other students," and as such, top 10% students could "get admitted into colleges just so easy." Students' feelings were warranted given the guaranteed admission to any public university in Texas provided to high school graduates in the top 10% of their class. Maritza, however, also believed top 10% students, and even those in the top 5%, were privileged in other ways. For instance, she said the following:

> They [school personnel] make field trips and stuff like that with them [top 5 and 10% students] and they give them [students] days off...I don't know, last year I think they [students] went to like a field trip to like some campus from here...they [school personnel] do special things for them [students] because they're like in top 5.

While it is unclear whether the perceived privileges Maritza describes are related to greater higher education opportunities, these perceived advantages can still impact how

other non top 10% students view their college opportunities. This then can shape their confidence and ultimately their college aspirations. Additionally, other students, like Cristina, noted the limited availability of scholarships because of not being "a top 10% student." Cristina said,

> It kind of like limits the kind of resource[s], like a lot of the information that you can get because it's just, most of it's just available to them [top 10% students]. And it kind of like, kind of like puts the pressure on me like, you gotta do your best...because a lot of people that graduate from here and they're top 10% they can basically go into any college they want to and those who aren't they basically sometimes just have to pay their way through college or just go to like community college and not go where they really wanted.

Implicit in Cristina's comments is the notion that this top 10% academic identity provides an unfair advantage. These sentiments were reiterated by Eddie, who admitted "I'm not in top 10%, I'm, it's really hard for me to make it there, and they [other top 10% students] don't even try, and I mean I've heard people cheat and stuff and that's not fair. I mean I try my hardest to get in top 10, in top 10% and then they're accepted to UT." Eddie also suggested that if he were to transfer to another school that was smaller than his own, he would most likely be in the top 10% of his graduating class. In addition to academic identity, students also spoke of their co-curricular identity as influential in their college choice experience. Thus, co-curricular identity is described below.

Co-curricular identity. Participating in co-curricular activities such as band, athletics, or other student organizations had an impact on several students' college aspirations and decisions including Eddie, Beto, Rodrigo, Paulo, and Zulema. All noted their particular co-curricular identity as influential in their college choice process, although not always explicitly. For instance, Eddie shared the fact that he was the drum

major at Fuente High School and as such he felt this identity carried with it certain expectations related to college. He reveals this in the following dialogue:

> I'm in band. I'm a drum major right now it's like...because you're a drum major, they expect you to do something because from what I've known and the past drum majors go somewhere like, you're expected to do something good. I still talk to the old drum majors and stuff, they're like, one's at the University of Houston, one's at UT Austin and the other one, I don' know, he just disappeared, but I know he's in college.

Through his band identity Eddie was also able to develop a strong relationship with his band directors, which provided him with additional support and college knowledge. Similarly, Beto noted his being an athlete, specifically in track and cross-country, as a motivation to do well in school and aspire to a higher education. Specifically, Beto's identity as a student athlete lent itself to him being a high academic achiever, which subsequently influenced his role within his family. This is evident in the following response:

> I've always been like I guess the one, the role model in the family as far as like you know things to follow, and they're [Beto's parents] like yeah, see what he's doing, how he's...dedicated. Dedicated you know, in sports and still, he still keeps up with his schoolwork or you know, he can balance them out...It's in my house I would probably be like the actual definition that we have here for student athlete, which is you know, you have to be a student and an athlete, at the same time, you know, and of course student comes first. You know, you have to pass your class in order to play so I guess that you know, kind of motivated me. And I'm sure motivates others to pass, the athlete part. And well, like I said, you know in my family I've always been like the one to follow even though I'm not the oldest one, you know.

Another student athlete, Rodrigo, was the quarterback for the Paloma football team. This identity greatly influenced Rodrigo's college choice process because he was specifically being sought out to play football by various higher education institutions. He admitted,

> I've been getting a lot of letters for football scholarships and stuff and I'm interested in going, but like I really want Division I now. UT [University of Texas at Austin] is pretty much like the one like I've been wanting to go to really bad. Like pretty much I want to go to college at least for [a] four year, four year [degree].

While Rodrigo also indicated he was taking into account his career aspirations and the types of degrees that were offered at various postsecondary institutions in his college choice process, he suggested his college choice set was limited to the schools that were seeking him out because of his identity as a football player.

Aside from a band or athlete identity, other students involved in specific school organizations like Skills USA, noted this identity as influential in their college choice experience. Paulo and Zulema were both members of Skills USA, and Paulo's comments reflect the advantage of this particular identity in the development of his college aspirations:

> Skills USA it's pretty good. Like they have different career pathways, they have like competitions and stuff and like just being in that like, you get to travel the country and... like I know people that are national officers and they go to like, like my friend he travels to Arkansas, to Washington, he goes like every month he goes out for a couple of weeks, for like a week, I'm just like, he's gonna do something with his life, he knows a lot of places now, so other than that... It's opened like my eyes to the different places and I'm just like ok, that's pretty cool, I wanna actually come here someday.

What Paulo describes are the possible opportunities afforded to students given their various co-curricular identities. For instance, all of these aforementioned students were able to have greater access to school personnel, whether it was their band directors, coaches, or club sponsors, who provided support that was not as easily accessible through other school personnel. These identities also provided these students a chance to travel, and in many cases to college and university campuses that they might not have seen

otherwise and which helped solidify the notion of a higher education as an obtainable reality for them. Similarly, students' race/ethnicity also played an influential role in their college choice experience, and this is discussed below.

Being Hispanic. A handful of students explicitly noted the influence of their racial/ethnic identity on their college choice process. A majority of these specifically spoke of the advantage of being "Hispanic" because they believed this qualified them for more college scholarships. In Tatiana's case, for instance, it was a combination of her race/ethnicity and her gender that she believed was to her advantage. This belief was based on a conversation she had had with a teacher:

> One of my English teachers last year, I was telling her about that [worrying about how I was going to pay for college] and she said, "Well, you're a woman, you're Hispanic, people will pay for you to go to school." She told me that she went to school for four years and she didn't have to pay a cent just because she was Hispanic.

Paulo had similar sentiments saying, "Since I'm a minority, like I've heard that minorities get more...college opportunities, like there's more scholarships out there for minorities instead of like majorities. I think that's like given me the hope why I can probably get the scholarships because I'm a minority."

Despite this boost of confidence that some students felt their racial/ethnic identity provided them in accessing greater college opportunities, others noted how negative racial/ethnic stereotypes about Latina/os also influenced their process. For instance, Paulo also admitted the following:

> Like my ethnicity is also like, it helps me but it can also like put me down sometimes. Like, I've gone to bigger cities, like with Skills USA, and like I guess just like being with people that are like white complected [sic] they think that they're better than you, they put you down basically. I've been put down several

> times and I guess that maybe lowers my hope like to try to go out to a bigger city nah, but I'm still set on it.

Paulo exerts his own agency in this instance by finding motivation to prove the stereotypes he faced wrong. Similarly, Eddie finds motivation in not only being "Hispanic," but being of low-income status as well. "Not many Hispanics like with my type of income [go to college, and they] just like say no, I can't go. I have no money, there is no way, but like I think there is hope for that, so it's my goal to do it, to prove people wrong," he said.

Interestingly, one student, Jasmin, believed that Hispanics, particularly those born in the U.S., exhibited cultural traits that inhibited their college aspirations. These sentiments were first expressed in Jasmin's first interview, but were expanded upon in the second. The following is the conversation from the second interview:

> MM: We had started talking about why you wanted to go to college, how that was a goal for you and you had talked about that a lot of people from this area you felt tended to not go to college very much. And so, a question I have for you I guess was why do you, why do you think it is, you know, why do you think that people from this area don't necessarily go to college?
>
> Jasmin: I mean, the tuition is pretty pricey and I mean, I don't know how to explain it because it might sound mean, ok, I don't know I guess like, maybe our heritage like also has to do with it like, yeah we believe in education, but we don't take it that serious maybe. Like, I guess because we have, we have free education we don't tend to value it as much as like anybody else would like you know people who haven't had an education, they want it and they actually strive for it better.

Jasmin's response suggests the influence of the border region on her understanding of why more Hispanics in South Texas do not pursue an education. It seems she is comparing native-born Hispanics and those who have recently immigrated who might have previously had to pay for their education in their home countries. While she admits

native-born Hispanics' value of an education, she seems to struggle in identifying the reason why more immigrant Hispanics seem to "strive for it better." This comparison is a legitimate one, and has been noted in the literature in regards to how immigrant Latina/os academically outperform their native peers at the K-12 level (Vernez & Abrahamse 1996; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2002; Drachman 2006) and in regards to how the U.S. education system is subtractive for native Latina/os (Valenzuela, 1999), and eventually becomes so, for foreign born Hispanics as well. While Jasmin's response may have been the most distinct in comparison to others, however, overall students who viewed their racial/ethnic identity as influential in their college choice process did so from a positive standpoint. Additionally, a South Texas Border, or regional, identity also emerged among students that influenced their college choice experience. This identity is explored further in the next section.

South Texas Border identity. Numerous students exhibited a particular mindset about South Texas that shaped their own regional identity and their college aspirations and decisions. For instance, when explaining why she wanted to pursue a higher education Jasmin shared this:

> Coming from this area too, nobody, not a lot of people graduate, a lot of people drop out and even less people go to college and I just want to be, want to be one of those few people who get a college career and have a good life. I want to be someone in the world.

Jasmin's comments provide incite into her own South Texas Border identity, an identity shaped by the low college completion rates in the area. Jasmin, however, exerts agency in this context by choosing to break from what she perceives is the norm in the region and from this finds motivation to continue her education.

Sergio, Geneva, and Fernando also shared similar comments. Sergio said, "I think since I'm Hispanic it's more, and especially in [Villa Verde] it's more of a 'you should go to college because there's a lot of people who don't go to college and don't make a lot of money.'" He continued saying, "I want to improve the image of my city because people generally think of South Texas, mainly the Valley as a very poor and uneducated area when there is actually some people who are educated and do succeed." Evident in Sergio's words, is the automatic connection made between his regional identity and his racial/ethnic identity as "Hispanic." Given that the region is predominantly Latina/o, this connection is warranted. However, it is important to consider Sergio's negation of the assumption that all individuals from the area are "poor and uneducated." Implicit in his argument is the negation of deficit thinking (Valencia, 1997) about Latina/os in South Texas. This deficit thinking is a reality that some students must negotiate. In describing her dilemma of having to choose whether to leave the region for college or not, Geneva revealed how her stepfather seemed to find merit in this deficit thinking. She explained:

> There's benefits like if I leave [for college] and stay over there. I learn more, I'll learn more and of course if I come back, I'm not like, I'm not exactly limited from learning, but I mean, I'll just learn a little less. But that's kind of the downside to it...Well, I don't know how to say it without saying, without being mean. But to my, to my step-dad's side point of view, because he's Californian, he's from California so he thinks that we're low, not low class, but he thinks that like we're limited...People in [Villa Verde], well not people in [Villa Verde], but in general, not Mexicans, but yeah, pretty much people in [Villa Verde] or in The Valley, people in the Valley. He says that, how can I say it, higher expectations I guess...Like, people up north, out of the Valley [have higher expectations]. I don't know, I guess I have to go in order for me to find out.

This same sentiment that individuals in South Texas do not have high expectations was echoed by Fernando when he said, "By being Hispanic, not a lot of Hispanics here [go to

college], they just settle for McDonald's, or Whataburger, I mean I'm not saying it's a bad job right, but why settle for less when you know you can achieve more." While Fernando does not necessarily look poorly upon the Latina/os in the region who are working in blue-collar positions, he believes individuals in the region are capable of achieving more, as he believes he is. Fernando, however, has most likely benefited from his academic identity as a top 10% student; an identity that provided him college opportunities not afforded all others in the region. As such, all of these students' comments highlight a sense of deficit thinking that still exists in the region that is most likely rooted in the historical marginalization of this community. Such thinking has the potential to be detrimental to students' self-esteems and ultimately, college aspirations and choices.

Another aspect to the South Texas Border identity, however, emerged in the stories that Maritza and Charlie shared. Given the physical location of the Villa Verde community along the U.S.-Mexico Border, it is not uncommon for family members to live in the U.S. and work in Mexico. This was the case for both Maritza and Charlie's parents. Maritza, for example, divulged this in regards to her parents' careers and life choices:

> It's because they [parents] do have like good careers like, but like they work in Mexico so they, they have to change the money so it's not like the same...And, well, it's harder for them to like gain Mexican money and like have to change it. So, that's why they kind of wanted us [Maritza and siblings] to be like born over here so we have more opportunities, and then like it was like just [to] have a better life.

There is no doubt that in this case Maritza's familial circumstances are intertwined with her South Texas Border identity, which shapes her college aspirations. She later noted

that her parents were both college-educated, although they had earned their degrees in Mexico, which she claimed limited their ability to assist her in her college choice process in the U.S. As noted earlier in the chapter, Maritza would, by definition, be a non first-generation college student. Yet what Maritza's case exposes is that it cannot be assumed that non first-generation college students do not need as much college knowledge or financial assistance as first-generation college students. Clearly, the South Texas Border identity was influential in the college choice process of some students and the implications of this will be further discussed in Chapter 6.

Summary

This chapter highlighted the various social identities that students' negotiated amidst their college choice process: generational college status identity, sibling identity, class identity, academic identity, co-curricular identity, racial/ethnic identity, and regional identity. In doing so, this chapter answered the first research question posed in this study: How does the intersectionality of Mexican American students' social identities shape their college choice? It is important to note however, that while each identity was presented individually, students traversed multiple identities simultaneously. As such, students often had certain identities that were more significant than others in the context of their college choice process. Some identities were both positively and negatively influential, and this fluctuated as well depending on the context. Some identities were simply deemed one or the other, positive or negative.

Of particular significance were the following findings: 1) that there were variations within social identities, particularly among the non first-generation college

status identity, and 2) that other identities, such as a co-curricular identity and regional identity, emerged as influential in the college choice process. These are identities that have not particularly been noted in previous college choice literature. In terms of generational college identity, the focus of research has tended to be on students of first-generation status (Choy, 2001; Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Sáenz et al., 2007; Terenzini et al., 1996, Tym et al., 2004). This is because of the greater challenges that these students face in access, choice, and outcomes in postsecondary education compared to non first-generation college students. Findings from this study, however, indicate that there are variations among non first-generation college students that merit further attention. Specifically, differences in where students' parents obtained their college degrees allowed for distinctions in the quality and quantity of college knowledge and assistance students were are able to access from their parents. In this study, several students' parents obtained their postsecondary education in Mexico and in such cases parents were not as familiar with the higher education system in the U.S. This limited parents' ability to assist students in navigating the college choice process, and was comparable to the challenges faced by first-generation college students. Additionally, several of these non first-generation college students whose parents had obtained their college degrees in Mexico also revealed how their parents continued to work in Mexico. Because of this arrangement, parents were paid in Mexican currency. Given the monetary exchange rate then, students implied that their families still faced some economic instability. This latter notion stands in contrast to the assumption that non first-generation college students are not of low-income status and/or do not face as many financial

obstacles in accessing higher education than their first-generation counterparts. And while these students' income level could not be exactly determined, their shared stories provide evidence to this conclusion.

The other significant finding to mention is the emergence of a co-curricular identity and a regional identity within the college choice process of Mexican American students. Of the college choice literature reviewed for this study, none referred to a specific co-curricular identity as being influential. Yet, a number of students referred to their co-curricular identity as a conduit to college knowledge, assistance and opportunities particularly within their school space. A regional identity, more specifically a South Texas Border identity, also emerged. As Paasi (2003) notes, the notion of a regional identity is not new, as it has been considered in the realms of literature, anthropology, political science, sociology, psychology, musicology, and cultural/economic history. However, the influence of regional identity, specifically a South Texas Border identity, on the college choice process of Mexican American students was not explicitly noted in previous college choice research. Fortunately, a Chicana feminist perspective provided a space from which to acknowledge such an identity. A native of South Texas, Anzaldúa (1987), for instance, refers to a borderland concept that is both literal and figurative in nature. In the literal sense, the borderland is the physical space of the Texas-U.S. Southwest/Mexican border. From a more figurative and general perspective, Anzaldúa (1987) suggests:

> Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, [and] where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy. (Preface)

Thus, as Mexican American students living at the nexus of two cultures in an area that is bicultural, binational, and bilingual in nature, it is of no surprise that a regional, South Texas Border identity emerged as influential in students' college choice process.

What follows is a more in-depth look into how students' multiple identities shaped their access to college information, support and assistance within the varying contexts in which they resided. Specifically, the next four chapters are organized to reflect four figurative and literal spaces: cultural/familial space, community space, school space (both K-12 and higher education), and cyberspace. It was within these spaces that students accessed social capital, specifically their social networks, that either assisted or inhibited their ability to navigate the college choice process. Furthermore, the culturally specific characteristics that shaped students' processes (i.e., *familismo*, *respeto*, *confianza*) and the means by which students' social networks transmitted college knowledge, support or assistance, as through *consejos* or *testimonios*, are also noted within these spaces in the following chapters.

Chapter 5-The Social Capital within Students' Cultural/Familial Space

There were four main spaces that students referred to when discussing their college choice process: cultural/familial space, community space, school space (both K-12 and higher education), and cyberspace. This chapter is devoted to discussing the social capital provided to students within their cultural/familial space. The subsequent three chapters focus on students' social capital in their community space (Chapter 6), school space (Chapter 7), and cyberspace (Chapter 8). The findings presented in Chapters 5-8, address the second research question posed in this study: Specifically, how does the intersectionality of Mexican American students' social identities influence their college aspirations and their access to college support, information, and assistance through their social networks?

This chapter specifically focuses on the social capital that was available to students within their cultural/familial space. Consistent with previous college choice literature focused on the social capital of Latina/os and students of Mexican descent (Gándara, 1995; Ceja, 2004; Rosas & Hamrick, 2002; Tornatsky et al., 2002), all students named an immediate or extended family member who either influenced their college aspirations and/or provided them with college information, support and assistance. Within students' stories, the culturally unique means by which college knowledge was shared as through *consejos* (words/narratives of wisdom) and *testimonios* (testimonials), for instance, was also evident as was the influence of *familismo* (familism) on students' college choice process. This chapter is divided into three main sections that reflect these

findings: 1) immediate family members, 2) extended family members, and 3) the significant decisions and challenges students faced within this cultural/familial space.

Before delving into these sections, however, it is pertinent to revisit the notion of "spaces" adopted for this study given the focus and organization of this and the next three chapters. As posited by a Chicana feminist perspective, Chicana/os, although most notably Chicanas, are seen as living in an ever-changing, multidimensional third space that is both a figurative and often geographically literal "borderland" (Anzaldúa, 1987; Pérez, 1999; Sandoval, 2000). This "third" space indicates a break from dichotomies, where Chicana/os are not fully Mexican (one) or American (the other), but instead a combination of both (a third entity), existing in a hybrid state characterized by conflicting cultures, norms and identities (Anzaldúa, 1987; Pérez, 1999; Sandoval, 2000). The "spaces" in which Mexican Americans reside, however, is more than figurative, as it also describes a social and physical place of being. In the general and literal sense then, space is a "place, location, locality, landscape, environment, home, city, region, territory, and geography" (Soja, 1996, p. 1). It is the literal environment, as well as the figurative place where identities reside and are navigated (Gonzalez & Habell-Pallan, 1996; Soja, 1996). This Chicana feminist notion of "spaces" lends itself to understanding the college choice process of Mexican American students, as it is in both figurative and literal spaces that students negotiate their multiple social identities and are able to access social capital.

Immediate Family

A recurrent theme among students' stories was the support, assistance and/or information they were able to access through their immediate family members, be it

parents or siblings, in the midst of their college choice process. Parents were significantly influential in shaping students' college aspirations, in part to setting an expectation to go to college. Alternatively, siblings were the primary individuals in students' immediate families that provided and/or helped students obtain more tangible college information.

Expectations and aspirations. Parents were influential in shaping all students' college aspirations, whether directly or indirectly. Almost half of all students, including both first-generation and non first-generation college students, noted how their parent(s) had clearly communicated their expectations of them to pursue a college degree, often "pushing" students towards this goal. Steven, for instance, explained how his parents expressed their expectations of him by specifically asking him about his plans after high school. He reveals this in the following conversation:

> Steven: When I was a freshman I believe, they [parents] had a talk with me and they asked me, 'So what do you want to be when you get out of high school?'
>
> MM: Oh, ok so they literally like, formal sit down?
>
> Steven: Yeah, like a formal setting, and they had asked me, what do you want to be? I said, wow, I actually don't know yet, but so I really couldn't give them an answer. And they asked, what do you like to do or what are your hobbies?...So, it was mostly my family that influenced me.

Another student, Zulema, described how going to college was an expectation particularly set for her by her parents in comparison to her other siblings because she was considered the "really smart one" in her family. She explained:

> For me it's all like, you have to go to college because you just have to. Because with my siblings, my other two older ones, it wasn't like you have to go, it's like okay, you want to. But with me it's been, yes, you have to go to college and they [parents] keep pushing me to do stuff.

Given this comparison made by Zulema, it is important to note that in the midst of this conversation Zulema also revealed her status as a top 10% student and her continued high academic achievement throughout her schooling. She believed this was one of the main reasons why her parents nurtured her college aspirations more than those of her siblings. This aspect clearly denotes the influence a student's multiple identities, and in the case academic identity, can have on the support and/or assistance they are able to access via their social networks.

Students like Charlie, Tony and Maritza, all had parents who had obtained postsecondary degrees, and as such expected their children to do the same. However, these parents were not able to provide as much guidance with the college choice process as their children had hoped because these parents had attended postsecondary institutions in Mexico. Tony's comments are representative of these students' predicament, "My parents [can] not really [help], because they don't really know the system here in the U.S., like they were, they graduated from over there [Mexico] so they think it's the same over here, but like it's really not." Once again, Charlie, Maritza, and Tony's situation notes the complexity in navigating the college choice process given one's multiple identities. These students' experiences were previously noted in Chapter 4 in the section on generational college status, as their stories particularly challenge assumptions related to non first-generation college students.

In having parents who obtained their college degrees in Mexico and in some cases still work in Mexico today, the influence of students' regional identity is also evoked. Yet while students explicitly referred to how this unique circumstance limited their parents'

ability to assist them in their college choice process, parents' experiences in Mexico also positively shaped the college aspirations they had for students. This is implied in Maritza's comments when she described her parents' current work situation and finances:

> They [parents] do have like good careers like, but like they work in Mexico so they, they have to change the money so it's not like the same...And, well, it's harder for them to like gain Mexican money and like have to change it. So, that's why they kind of wanted us to be like born over here [in Villa Verde] so we have more opportunities and...like, just have a better life.

Revealed in Maritza's response is how her parents' lived experiences in Mexico inform their aspirations for her and her siblings. So much so, that they chose to move to the United States so that Maritza and the rest of her family might be afforded greater opportunities for success. Again, Tony, Maritza, and Charlie's stories indicate that there is a greater complexity that is yet to be fully explored in regards to the college knowledge and support provided by foreign college educated parents versus parents who are college educated in the U.S. This topic is further discussed later in this chapter and in Chapter 9. Overall, however, almost half of all students interviewed indicated that their parents had explicitly conveyed their college expectations for them, reinforcing the significant role that Mexican American students' immediate family plays in developing their college aspirations.

Quite a few students also explained how their parents conveyed their college expectations for them through *consejos*, or narrative storytelling/words of wisdom, which was a more, subtle culturally relevant means of doing so. For instance, Geneva said:

> My mom she's always telling me, "Don't do what I did, and don't skip classes, and go to college because I never had the chance."...She's [mother] always saying, "You should do a lot, you do a lot more when you have a degree, not just a high school degree, but when you have a college degree or any type of degree."

In this case while Geneva was not considered a first-generation college student by definition because her stepfather was a college graduate, Geneva's mother did not have the opportunity to obtain a postsecondary degree. Thus, Geneva's first-generation college status, on the part of her mother, played a role in the advice or *consejos* that her mother provided. Karina, a first-generation college student, also said something similar, "My mom's like, you can't be like me *mija* [daughter], you have to go on, be a little bit more." Interestingly, both of these individuals who imparted this advice were mothers who used themselves as examples for their daughters to learn from. In the same vein, Fernando shared the *consejos* that his parents gave him about going to college, and how they hoped he would set an example for his younger siblings, "They [parents] would just talk to me, 'You've got to go to college. Since none of us have made it, set an example for your brothers and sisters, just go to college. Get a good career.'" Fernando's generational college status and his role as an older sibling, or his sibling identity, had an effect on the type of support for college that his parents provided him.

Tatiana, Cristina, Beto, Selena and Eddie specifically noted how their parents did not necessarily expect them to go to college, but were nonetheless supportive of their aspirations to do so. These parents often used the family's financial struggles and/or their own lack of a higher education as a means to encourage students' aspirations. For instance, Tatiana admitted, "My parents pretty much said you can do whatever you want, but I want you to study... it was more always get good grades, pass." She continued saying:

> My parents are very laid back. They're very nice people. They don't pressure me into anything that I don't want to do. But they tell me what they want me to want

> to do. They want me to want to go to college. They want me to want to study. They want me to want to do a lot of stuff. And I try my hardest to keep them happy.

Despite this seemingly lax parenting, however, Tatiana revealed the support she received, "My dad's like, we'll support you through whatever you decide to do and I hope you the best [sic]...Like they don't want me to worry about anything. So, they're like go to college." Tatiana also learned not only from seeing her parents struggle economically, but from her brother as well, the benefits that can come from obtaining a higher education. She shared a story that particularly highlights this point:

> My brother he's very active right, so he has this house kind of in the back, he built these two little *techitos* [sheds] like by himself and then he decided he was going to put blocks, tiles on his backyard so we had, we were helping him put up the tiles, we were helping him put down the tiles from the truck and he drew it all out, in the summer, in the middle of the summer and I would watch him from the window sweating and working and I was like, I am not ever gonna do this, no. That's why I'm gonna go to college so I can pay someone to do it for me. My parents always taught me that too, like they'd come home from work and they'd be really tired and they'd be like, "This is why you should go to school, that way you can just sit behind a desk, do the minimum amount of work and you get more money than I do." My brother would always tell me that too, he'd come, he works at the port, so he's always outside in the sun, he welds and stuff. And he's like, "Go to school. You won't have to do this crap if you go to school."

Tatiana's story is indicative of Mexican American parents' and families' abilities to teach and nurture students' aspirations for college through example. And in Tatiana's situation, it was her income and generational college status that particularly influenced her parents to advise her and support her in her college aspirations. Some students, however, were also provided and/or were assisted in obtaining tangible college information by their immediate family members.

Providing and/or helping obtain college information. More often than not, students spoke positively about the support that parents, in particular, provided them in pursuing a college degree. Only a limited number of students, however, said their parents had provided and/or helped them obtain tangible college information. Yet while parents may have inhibited students' ability to navigate the college choice process by not being able to provide them with tangible college knowledge, students seemed very mindful of not speaking of their parents negatively in this regard. This sentiment was gauged based on the few students, the exceptions, who were forthcoming about their disappointment in not having been able to obtain more tangible guidance and information on the college choice process from their parents. Thus, the majority of students who obtained college information from immediate family members were able to access such information from siblings.

Among the students whose parents did provide them with college information, however, were Fernando, Jasmin, Alejandra and Steven. Fernando, for instance, indicated his mother had gone with him to several college focused workshops offered by the Villa Verde school district, while Jasmin and Alejandra both mentioned how their families had made an effort to stop by several college campuses they were interested in. For Jasmin, these were "unofficial" campus visits only made possible because the college campuses were on the way to a vacation destination. For Alejandra, however, these visits were purposeful, as her parents would take time off in order to take her on such visits. She explained, "Like during Thanksgiving week we're gonna visit Texas A&M, so they [parents], they don't really put limits, like where I want to go to. Like if I want to visit

like Dallas, we'll go or something, right. They'll support me. They take the day off from work." It is important to note that Alejandra's parents are both college graduates, and one of them is a doctor. Thus, Alejandra's income identity and generational college status come into play in her parents' understanding of the value in campus visits and their ability to take time off to do so.

One other student, Steven, also mentioned how his parents would notify him about scholarships. He said, "Instead of information about a specific college that is mostly what they've [his parents] helped out [with]." Alternatively, it was Steven's older brother who assisted him with filling out the FAFSA and providing him with tangible tips on how to navigate the college choice process. As such, Steven's sibling identity, in having an older brother with postsecondary school experience, afforded him the opportunity to learn from his brother, a *buen ejemplo*, or good example. Steven's experience was reflective of what a greater number of students said about the assistance they received from their siblings in particular.

As previously noted, older siblings were more often than not the immediate family members who provided and/or assisted in obtaining college information for students. Among such students were Geneva, Tony, Selena, Alejandra, Charlie, Maritza, Cristian, and Paulo. Siblings often assisted with filling out financial aid forms, as Steven's brother exhibited, as well as informing students of the needed college entrance exams and deadlines for various applications. As Maritza said of her sister:

> She just said that I need[ed] to take certain tests like the COMPASS or the SAT and ACT. And that I need to start planning, like I think January she said, the financial aid if I want to get it approved. And like all the paperwork that you need, she said that she's gonna help me with it because she already did it.

Siblings also informed students of specific coursework to take, as Charlie noted, "He [brother] tells me to like, oh, make sure like you take these specific, like if you're gonna want to do this [field of study], make sure you take these classes." Other siblings, like Selena's, would find out about upcoming specific college information sessions to take place within the Villa Verde Independent School District through their own networks, and subsequently provide this information to their younger siblings. Overall, however, siblings often provided insider knowledge of the college choice experience because they had gone through the process themselves. Alejandra provided an example of such an occasion when she shared the following:

> She [sister] passed me some tips also of what to follow, deadlines, how not to procrastinate...Yeah, how to get your stuff in on time...Well to always get somebody to help you out, like the student advisor. Other than that, just like ask for help also, like not stay with doubts, like there's some people, "Oh, well, I don't know what to do." And she said, "Well ask your teachers and stuff like that."...And she also gives me study tips on how to study, so she's also been helping me with that.

Clearly, immediate family members provided emotional and social support, as well as some tangible college resources and assistance to students in the midst of their college choice process. Although the amount and quality of the resources or assistance provided was often dependent on students' own identities, as was evident from students' stories. Other extended family members, however, were also deemed as influential in this experience.

Extended Family

Almost half of all students said that various extended family members had been influential in their college choice process in some sort of way, a finding that supports the work of González, Stoner and Jovel (2003). In their research, González et al. (2003) devise a "college opportunity framework" rooted in social capital theory where extended family members are noted as potential agents of social capital. In this study, grandparents, aunts, uncles, godparents, and cousins were identified as such sources. At times these individuals provided support for students' college aspirations, served as *buen ejemplos* (good examples) for students to follow, and/or provided college knowledge.

Henry, Geneva, and Maritza, for instance, all mentioned their grandparents as being supportive of their college aspirations. Henry divulged how his grandfather particularly wanted him to obtain a higher education. He said,

> My grandfather wanted me to go to college really bad because he had two sons and neither one of them went to college so he kind of wanted me to go...My grandfather would always tell me, like "Oh, I wish you would go to college, I wish you would go to college."

Thus, Henry's grandfather's aspirations for him were a means of setting an expectation for going to college. When asked about individuals who influenced her college aspirations, Maritza also mentioned her grandmother in her response, saying, "All of our family is really supportive of each other. So it was basically all of my uncles [and] my grandma [in addition to my parents]."

Alternatively, the type of support that students received from uncles, aunts and godparents was exemplified in Sergio's comments, "My aunt has really been encouraging

me to go...to college." From his uncles and aunts, Paulo learned the significance of a higher education and as such, they provided *buen ejemplos* for him to follow. This is evident from Paulo's own words, "My uncles, like one of them is a teacher, another one of them owns a business, [and] one of them is a police officer. I have like eight uncles and aunts, but most of them went to college and they're doing a lot better than the others... I see the benefits of going to college." For Zulema, it was her *madrina*, or godmother, who provided the most college information and influenced her specific college and career aspirations. She explained, "My *madrina's* well, one of the main persons [who influenced my college choice process] because she's a probation officer and, [Sam Houston University,] that's where she went to, and she told me it's a really good school." She further indicated that the bulk of college information she had obtained was "from the Internet and then from my *madrina*, my godmother." The fact that Zulema's *madrina* was the individual who provided the greatest assistance as opposed to Zulema's mother, who had obtained her associate's degree, is not surprising. This finding is supported by the first-generation research of Choy (2001) who found that students like Zulema, who have parents with some college experience, but not necessarily a bachelor's degree, do not have any advantage in accessing college knowledge and assistance from their parents over students whose parents lack college experience entirely.

Often closer in age to students than aunts, uncles and of course grandparents, older cousins were also identified by several students as influential in their choice to attend college. In Cristina's case, she was actually privy to some of her older cousins' college choice process. She said:

> A lot of my other cousins, they were about to graduate, and like "Oh my gosh I need to get these scholarships, I need to because I want to go to this school, I want to go to this university, I want to go to this college." And like I would sit there sometimes with them like just seeing what they would do and that, that really got me interested in college and basically why I want to further my education.

Later in the conversation, Cristina also shared this, "When one of my oldest cousins...when he started out in college and he was like, 'Oh, college is a real good place, you meet all these people. Oh my god, it's huge.' I'm like, hmmm." Cristina's reaction to her cousin was one of interest and affirmation of her own goal to obtain a college education. Given Cristina's continued reference to this one cousin, the strength of her relationship with him was gauged. She revealed this in the following conversation:

> MM: Ok, so tell me about your relationship with that cousin. How is it that he became such a big influence on this decision?
>
> Cristina: When I was younger my mom used to take care of me and him. We're cousins, but we thought, thought of ourselves as more like brother and sister because like he was there at my house everyday. We would always play and that's basically, like whenever we would go somewhere, he would always tag along. So, he was like my older brother.
>
> MM: So, do you have siblings? I didn't even look at your...[questionnaire]
>
> Cristina: Yes, I have one younger sister. She's thirteen. She's going to middle school right now.
>
> MM. So, you didn't necessarily have an older sibling to look up to, which is why your cousin, was more like that.

Cristina's response suggests the means by which an extended family member can become much more like an immediate family member, and thus influence a student's college choice process in significant ways.

Cousins were also influential in Tatiana and Geneva's goal to attend college. Tatiana spoke of two cousins in particular who performed academically well in school, and as such she saw them as role models who inspired her to do the same. She said,

> My two cousins on my uncle's side they were always really smart and I always really liked them. I thought they were very cool...I looked up to them since I was like really little. They always did so well in school so I had to do the same thing. I was always like, yes.

In turn, Geneva was motivated to learn from one of her cousin's mistakes. When asking Geneva to recall when it was that she realized she wanted to go to college, she revealed the following story:

> Actually, it was kind of recent [because of] my cousin. I actually had faith in him, because no one else had faith in him that he would actually finish high school and go to college. Well, he hasn't gone to college, but I mean, he, he disappointed me because he dropped out of high school. And I'm like, why? I actually looked up to you. You actually did stuff. Because unlike his brother, he can, he actually works hard and he can actually keep a job for more than three months. My other [cousin], his brother can't. So, I actually had faith in him, but when he, when he like, when he dropped out, I'm like, that's bad you had so much ahead of you. Because he's a really hard worker, he's a really hard worker, I mean sure he may not have, he may have skipped school and stuff, but he, when he would go to school he would do a lot of work.

When asked to further explain just how her cousin's situation particularly influenced her college aspirations, she continued:

> It made me disappointed, and it made me realize that how much, how much more he could have done. And realize that if I drop out, because I was having trouble and it was only middle school, I was having trouble because one of my teachers was really mean and they kept piling us with homework. And when he did it, when he dropped out it made me realize that, like, he was just a year from, he was just, not even a year, a few months from graduating. So I'm like, if, like, God forbid if that happened to me, I'm gonna stop and I'm gonna be stuck in a job for the rest of my life. I'm like, um, no, I'm not gonna risk that.

While students' comments in this section depict the support and college knowledge students obtained in their cultural/familial space, they also experienced several struggles as well that need to be further discussed.

Limits and Opposition in Students' Cultural/Familial Space

While negotiating their social identities within their cultural/familial space, two main themes emerged that exposed some limitations and opposition that students faced. One theme revolved around a general implicit suggestion, particularly among first-generation college students, that parents could not be relied upon as sources of tangible college information. Thus, this posed a limitation to students' ability to navigate the college choice process. Interestingly, students rarely spoke of their parents in negative terms in this regard, even when they noted this limitation explicitly. The latter was the exception, however. Instead, parents' restricted college knowledge was poised as an attribute from which to draw motivation.

The other theme that arose for a majority of students was particularly shaped by their regional, or South Texas Border, identity. Students exceptionally struggled with the decision on where to begin their college education: at a local/regional university (in the Rio Grande Valley) or at a university outside the region. This decision was difficult because it meant students had to sort out opposing values and viewpoints. Opposition to leave the region for college was rooted in students' strong ties to family and the tendency to put the needs of family first (*familismo*), while opposition to beginning at a local/regional university was based on perceptions of higher education institutions in the region as being of a lesser quality than those outside the region. What seemed to result

was a compromise between such opposing views and values, where the majority of students decided that they would begin their studies at a local/regional institution and then transfer to a larger university outside of South Texas. While this section highlights the influence of students' South Texas Border identity within their cultural/familial space, this issue is expanded upon in Chapter 9.

Parents' limited college knowledge. A number of students either implicitly or explicitly indicated that their parents did not provide them with sufficient college information needed to successfully navigate the college choice process. This was conveyed either when students failed to mention their parents as sources of college knowledge or when they noted that their parents specifically could not provide such information. Because most students interviewed were first-generation college students, this identity was considered a contributing factor to parents' limited college knowledge.

When Cristina was specifically asked where she had obtained the most college information, for instance, she said "friends, family, teachers, and the mail." After asking her to provide further details of each of these sources, she indicated that the "family" that she was referring to was her cousins, thus omitting her parents as sources of tangible college information. Later in her second interview Cristina suggested that her parents and her were learning about the college choice process simultaneously, as they had all attended the Parent's College Night organized by the Villa Verde Independent School District (VVISD). Cristina admitted that this event helped her parents "a lot with...explain[ing] like financial aid stuff like that and the process, and how to do it all."

Beto, Selena, and Karina also expressed similar sentiments. In describing the means by which his parents assisted him in the college choice process, Beto shared the following:

> Well, they [parents] do, maybe not so much guide right, because of course they are not used to it or but you know, they pushed it to where it was like, "You gotta go speak to the counselors, when is so and so, when are these universities gonna present or you know, talk to your teachers you know, what can you do?"...They told me I can [sic] ask my sisters or my brother, I mean they already graduated.

Beto's response indicates how his parents lacked the college knowledge to adequately guide him in his college choice process. Yet instead of couching this as a limitation, Beto points out how his parents suggested other individuals he could turn to for assistance, including his siblings, the school counselor, teachers, and even college representatives. Selena, on the other hand, was clear about her disappointment in her parents' lack of college knowledge. She distinctively said, "They've [parents have] helped, but yeah not as much as I would hope." In Karina's case, when asked if she could turn to her family for college knowledge and assistance she implicitly said no by saying, "It's because my mom doesn't really know about the whole college stuff, so it's kind of hard to like ask her for help." Instead, Karina admitted turning to her boyfriend for tangible assistance with the college choice process as he was attempting to get into The University of Texas at Austin.

Two students, who were of non first-generation college status, and thus exceptions, also were forthcoming about their parents' limited college knowledge. In their cases, however, this limitation was justified because their parents had obtained their postsecondary education in Mexico and thus lacked a familiarity with the U.S. higher

education system. Maritza shared the following when describing who provided her with college information and assistance:

> Well my parents don't really know anything. Because like, probably because they didn't go to college [in the U.S.], so I guess it's just my friends and my sister, and well, some of our teachers that are telling us about the scholarships and start planning and see the deadlines and all that stuff. That's pretty much it.

Tony's response to this same question was very similar. He said:

> My parents...they don't really know the system here in the U.S., like they were, they graduated from over there [Mexico] so they think it's the same over here, but like it's really not. So, my sister knows more or less and like when I ask my parents, they really don't know that much like my sister does.

Students' comments support the notion that for the most part parents were unable to provide students with the necessary tangible college information to assist them with the college choice process. Although students were reluctant to explicitly admit this, and would therefore often focus on the emotional support and motivation that parents did provide. Following is a discussion of the opposition students faced when deciding where to begin their college education.

Staying, leaving, or transferring as a means of compromise. For most students interviewed, choosing the specific college to attend immediately after graduating from high school often depended on the proximity of the institution from home. This was because students were highly influenced by their strong familial ties. For some students this decision was significant but not as challenging because their first choice of institution was congruent with their parents' wishes. For others, however, this decision was more complicated, particularly for those students whose institution of choice did not reflect the choice their parents had for them. More often than not, in order to ease students' own

hesitations in being away from family for college and to appease parents' desires, the option of beginning at a local/regional institution and then transferring to a larger, often more selective institution was the answer.

Students like Geneva, Cristina, Selena, Cristian, and Steven, for instance, all aspired to begin their college education and complete at least their "basics" at a local/regional institution of higher education, and this was consistent with their parents' aspirations for them. A few of these students also shared their hopes of transferring to either another university still in the region or another institution outside the region. Geneva for instance said the following about her choice, "I'm gonna stick to [local university] because it's more close to home. And if I move to San Antonio it'll be like too soon." When asked to expand on what she meant by "too soon," Geneva admitted,

> I go to San Antonio with my, with like my cousins and stuff and I get really homesick, so I want to stay here for a while. That, and then of course, when I go to [regional university an hour away from Villa Verde], I'll still be close to home, but not that close. So, it'll, that's what I'm thinking, it'll be a good idea.

Steven, Cristina and Cristian shared similar sentiments. They all seemed to have a fear of leaving South Texas for college because they felt the support of their family would not be as accessible to them if they left the region. Perhaps Cristina said it best:

> I want to start here that way I can get a feel for what college life is really like instead of placing myself out there because, because I know if I come here, like I can always go to my family and say, ok, I need help with this I need help with that, and if I go up there I'm probably going to be by myself and not really know as much people as I do down here. I've had a lot of cousins that, a lot of friends that have also started out there, and like they kind of have like a rough time until they like have met some people that they knew. So they could help them.

Implicit in Cristina's comments is that family can assist her once she is in college. However, given that Cristina is a first-generation college student, the actual assistance

that her family can provide her in navigating a higher education institution is most likely limited. Additionally, it is clear that the experiences that extended family members and peers have had in leaving the region for college have influenced Cristina's college choice.

Interestingly, Geneva also noted another type of fear that influenced her choice to attend a local/regional institution. She specifically revealed her feeling "scared" to attend an institution outside of South Texas because she believed such an institution would not be as reflective of her racial/ethnic background as a local/regional institution. This is revealed in her comments below:

> I know that if I go to San Antonio [for college] or something, I'm gonna be with a whole different race of people. Because like once you're out of Villa Verde or the Rio Grande Valley it's like, it's a lot different...it's not that I don't feel prepared, it's just that, I guess I'm kind of scared...and if I go, if I go to [local/regional institution] I'll still have...Mexicans and a few like, not White people but like, like just the main [people], of the usual area.

Unlike the students previously mentioned, Henry, a non first-generation college student, originally wanted to begin his college education at a local/regional university and then transfer to a larger institution outside South Texas, but his mother was against this notion. Specifically, she wanted Henry to attend an institution outside the region immediately after graduating from high school. While Henry also felt that staying "at home for awhile just to see what it's [college] like" would be optimal so that in case he had "any problems" he would have his parents to "help" and "guide" him, his mother would not have this. Henry also noted that other draws to attending a local/regional institution were the facts that it would be "easier " and "cheaper." "My mom's trying to push me away, and I'm trying to stay," he said, "all she keeps saying is Austin and San Antonio...I just like Villa Verde." During the second interview, it was evident that Henry's mother had

significantly influenced his college choice, and this was brought to Henry's attention in the following conversation:

> MM: Ok, so I would say, it sounds like your mom is driving a lot of decision-making.
>
> Henry: She is right now. When she started pushing me towards Austin, I was like no, no, no thank you. And then all of a sudden I was like, you know what, I really should go to Austin. Go do my bachelor's over there.
>
> MM: And so are you okay with that, with mom kind of driving the...?
>
> Henry: Well, it doesn't really bother me I just, I wanted to go to [local/regional university], you know well honestly it probably would've been easier for me to just get in here and start classes and to go to UT Austin I would have to put in more applications, I would have to send, if I would have...gone to [local/regional university] I wouldn't even have had to pull my transcripts, they already have it, [because of] my dual enrollment classes. So I had to go to [local/regional university] and get a paper to fill that out and then fill out another paper to have it sent to Austin because like you can't even tamper with that. They put a piece of tape on it with their initials, so it's like... A little bit more work is what it's costing me, but I guess it's kind of like everything. The more you put in, the more you get out.

Henry's decision to follow his mother's advice was understood as a sign of the *respeto*, or respect, he had for his mother, and the *confianza*, or confidence, he had in her guidance. His mother's urging, however, was also seen as influenced by her own status as a college graduate and Henry's identity as a non first-generation college student.

There were other students, however, whose minds were also changed once their parents divulged their own wishes for their children. Specifically, Maritza, Eddie, Rocio and Sergio originally wanted to begin their college education at an institution outside of South Texas, but subsequently decided to begin at a local/regional institution after talking to their parents. Maritza, for instance, shared the following: "I wanted to go somewhere far from here. My parents don't want me to because we're kind of like close together."

She continued admitting that her father particularly did not want her to leave South Texas for college immediately after high school,

> It's because my dad doesn't want me to go and like we're kind of really attached, like he doesn't want us, like me or my sister to go, and she's like studying here already. So, supposedly that's gonna help me because she could like help me through whatever she's done, like all the classes and stuff. So, that's kind of why I think I'm gonna start here. But like, I was looking yesterday at that booklet, and I really, really want to go...And then he was like, "Well, if you really want to go, like you should go."...And he looked like sad, I was like ugh, I don't know.

What Maritza revealed is how her father would prefer her to start at a local/regional university, but would still support her decision if she chose otherwise. Once her father shared his true feelings, however, Maritza seemingly felt a sense of guilt and obligation to stay, an aspect of the Mexican American cultural trait of *familismo*. Maritza's father's comments, however, were also seen as having been influenced by Maritza's gender, as a female. This conclusion is supported by Maritza's additional comments:

> They [my parents] let them [my brothers] do more things than me, and my sister because we're girls. Like, I guess they [brothers] would have more, they get more chances like if they would want to go somewhere like another college, they [parents] would let them, like whatever right. But they're [parents] more like worried about me or my sister if we would because we're girls. So, I guess, it's that, like the fact that, like they do trust us, but they're more worried about my sister and I than my brothers.

The influence of gender, however, was not a salient identity among a majority of students. When applicable, it is noted.

In like manner, Rocio, also shared the following:

> I was planning on going to [Texas] A&M, but after I talked to my mom about it, she said that she wants me to stay here for my basics first and then she will like let me transfer over there, so that's [what I will do], stay here for my basics first.

Rocio believed her mother's wishes were particularly influenced by the fact that she was the youngest of her mother's three children and the only child left at home. As such, this denoted the influence of Rocio's sibling identity on her mother's aspirations for her. She said, "I'm the last one...Like, my sister left, and my brother left, and my other sister left, I don't think my mom would want me to leave. I know she doesn't want me to leave."

Other students, like Fernando, Jasmin, Paulo, and Tatiana, dealt with similar push back from their parents, but they held steadfast to their original aspirations of attending a university outside of South Texas. When asked what individuals had influenced his decision to attend college after high school, Fernando indicated his mother's reluctance to have him attend a university outside of South Texas. This is apparent from his following comments:

> My parents what they want to do, well, not my dad, my mom she wants to keep me close. And I don't want that. She wants me to settle here for [local/regional university], and I don't want that I want to get a better education. I know up there, there's a better education. That's why I want to move up to Austin... My dad's like, he supports me, he backs me up on anything I want. And my mom's the one, like she's so attached to me that she doesn't want to let me go. Well that's how mom's are I guess.

Fernando's mother's sense of attachment reflects the close ties held by most Latina/o families. However, also suggested in Fernando's remarks is a view of local/regional universities as being of a lesser quality than those outside the region. This is significant given that local/regional universities appear to be the only college option for most of the students interviewed. A similar sentiment was revealed in Paulo's story:

> My dad told me to stay [in Villa Verde without going to college], but my mom she's like, "You can go to college, but you can just come to [local/regional university] and you can do better here." I'm just like, "No, I know it's better out there." They have like more choices out there.

What Paulo shared was particularly interesting given the fact that he had three older sisters, all of who had left the region to attend college, and his own mother was college educated as well. Thus, the notion of leaving the region to attend a university was not necessarily a foreign concept for his family. Yet, what most likely influenced Paulo's parents' specific expectations for him were Paulo's gender and sibling identity. Paulo is the youngest and the only male in his family, and he admitted that his father had an automotive business that his father had hoped Paulo would take over in time. It is likely that this aspect influenced his father and mother's feelings about his leaving the region for college. Additionally, it is possible that Paulo's mother felt attending the local/regional university was just as good an option as attending a university outside the region, as Paulo indicated the local/regional university was her alma mater. Furthermore, Paulo believed his parents held these particular sentiments because they were afraid of him leaving the region and never returning. He said,

> [It is] probably because...they [parents] know that once I go to college, I'm not gonna want to come back because, there's, and I'm gonna learn that there's better things out there [than] coming back to this city and that's probably, I think that that's what they're afraid of, maybe losing me, like to some bigger city or something.

This fear of "losing" one's child to a college outside of the region was also held by Tatiana's mother. Tatiana even noted the lengths her mother went through to try to get her stay, "My mom doesn't want me to leave. She doesn't like the idea of me being so far away so she, she actually recruited my boyfriend to convince me to stay." "She told my boyfriend's mom to tell my boyfriend to convince me to stay here [because] she doesn't want me to leave," she said. Tatiana continued indicating her willingness to compromise

in trying to fulfill her own college aspirations while also pleasing her parents, or mother in particular:

> My mom doesn't want me to leave Texas so I've gotta see if I can find a couple, three, four, five maybe in Texas and then some outside so I can see which one's accept me and then be like, ok, I'm sorry mom none of the colleges in Texas accepted me... if I really really really really really want to go to an Ivy league like all the way up there or something and I can go to Massachusetts, whatever, somewhere far away. She'll let me go, but she doesn't want me to go. But she'll let me. She'll try her hardest to make sure that I get all my stuff that I get all the money and all that stuff. That's what she says all the time. She's like, "I don't want you to go that far away but if you do end up going that far away I'll support you." My dad says so [too].

Tatiana's case highlights the tensions that arose for a majority of students in making sense of their own college aspirations and their parents' aspirations for them.

Counselors at Fuente and Paloma High Schools also attested to some of these struggles between students and parents, struggles that reflected conflicting cultural values such as *familismo* versus individualism. For instance, at Fuente High School Ms. Manzano revealed the following story of girl who had obtained a full scholarship to a university outside the state of Texas. She said:

> One of our girls she got offered a full ride in, I don't remember, it was one of the Iowa, Indiana or Idaho, one of those places...and she came to me and was like, "I don't want to leave my family." And I was like, "But you know, man that's such an awesome experience, you know, you're gonna regret it, at least try it, and if you know, you try it and say you know, I can't, I don't want to do this, at least you don't have the regret of well, maybe if I would've gone, you know."...She ended up going because the coach and I were pushing you know, at least try it *mijita* [sweetheart] and actually the university flew her down over the summer for a tour...So the coach was telling me she's totally enjoying it, and she's playing volleyball and basketball and they're gonna go play at a game in Hawaii and so now the younger sister's planning to go with her when she graduates. So that type of, you know, just trying to convince them, or persuade them [is a challenge], because the parents are saying, "Don't go, don't go." You know we're saying, "Yes go, it's an experience, you know, you'll make new friends."

Ms. Carson, the higher education focused counselor at Paloma High School also indicated that it was common for tensions to rise between parents and students when students wanted to attend a university outside the South Texas Border region. She admitted this saying, "I had students come to me who want to go to college but say they want to go to a specific college that may not be here in [Villa Verde], they may want to go outside, and their parents don't want them to." Seemingly saddened by the situation, Ms. Carson indicated that this "indeed is a challenge because although they [students] aspire to go out into [a university out of state], because the going out of state sometimes is another education as well, but for whatever reason the mom or dad, the parents want them to remain."

Aside from this particular struggle in deciding whether to begin college at an institution within the region or one outside of South Texas, Ms. Manzano and Ms. Elizondo, the other counselor interviewed at Fuente, also described another challenge that students faced when their parents had different expectations for them after high school. Ms. Manzano described this further:

> I have had kids tell me, "Well my dad just wants me to graduate because he wants me to work." You know, and I'm like no you need to go to college, but my dad says why, they didn't go to college and they're fine. And I'm like, well, yeah, they're making it day to day...So I think...it's the backgrounds they're coming from, the expectations are very different. And not saying that the lower socioeconomic [parent] doesn't expect them [students] to go to college, but I think there's more of a number saying, hey, I'm doing okay, you know and don't really expect it, and the kids will tell you, well you know I never really thought about it, my parents didn't say that. And when you talk to the other kids, it's like well my brother went to so and so, so I have to go there too. And so it's kind of like following traditions and expectations.

Ms. Elizondo shared her thoughts on this particular challenge noting *machismo* as a contributing factor. This is revealed in the following response:

> I don't think that a lot of things have changed...[since] I was in school and our expectations before going to college, but I still see a lot of the *machismo* here in our area. You know a lot of the girls, they just want to get married, have kids and that's it. A lot of the boys are expected to work and help parents and that's priority instead of going to college.

Taking into account students' shared stories then, which were in many ways supported by counselors' comments, it is clear that students faced various challenges in negotiating their social identities in the context of their college choice process within their cultural/familial space.

Summary

Significant sources of social capital within students' familial/cultural space were both immediate and extended family members. There was a prominent distinction, however, between the type of information and assistance that parents, in particular, provided compared to siblings. Consistent with previous research (Ceja, 2001, 2006; Rosas & Hamrick, 2002; Tornatsky et al., 2002) siblings more often provided the tangible college information students needed to navigate their college choice process as opposed to parents, who provided more support and motivation. This study specifically extended the latter notion by identifying the culturally specific means in which parents conveyed their support and expectations of students, such as through *consejos* or *testimonios* that were built on, *respeto*, *confianza*, and *buen ejemplos*. This was an aspect that was feasible to explore because of the Chicana feminist lens adopted for this study. These findings were also, however, consistent with the work of Stanton-Salazar (2001), who also noted

the use of *consejos*, or words/narratives of wisdom, as a means of transmitting parental expectations for students of Mexican descent.

The limited degree to which students' parents could assist them was in part attributed to their lack of familiarity with the U.S. higher education system, either because students' parents were not college graduates themselves or because they had obtained their higher education in Mexico. It is also plausible, however, that parents were unfamiliar with the American higher education system because of their own nativity, as a majority of parents were born in Mexico. As the work of Tornatsky et al. (2002) indicates, "First-generation Latina/os with limited formal or informal connections—and social capital—outside of their ethnic and immigrant cohort are correspondingly disadvantaged in terms of understanding the workings of U.S. educational systems" (p. 10). Thus, the latter statement reflects the circumstances of a majority of students, who were first-generation immigrants.

Also noteworthy was the tension that students expressed when deciding whether to begin college at a local/regional institution or a university outside of South Texas. This tension was particularly fueled by the strong role that *familismo* played in students' lives as well as their perceptions of local/regional institutions as being of a lesser quality than those outside the region. As such, this tension was localized at the intersection of students' racial/ethnic identity and regional identity. This complex negotiation is reminiscent of that found in the work of Rosas and Hamrick (2002), who found that Mexican American students often navigated their college choice process amidst conflicting values. In their research, they found that students and their families viewed

independence and individualism as necessary to succeed in the greater society, within the family, however, notions of *familismo* and reciprocity were held in higher regard. As such, students' college choices reflected a negotiation between these two mindsets. In this study, a majority of students arrived at a similar compromise and decided to begin their college careers at a local/regional university with the intent of transferring to a higher education institution outside the region after one or two years.

Aside from students' cultural/familial space, another space that students traversed in the midst of their college choice process was their community space. This was a space where students had contact with priests and neighbors, for instance, that provided some degree of college information, assistance and support. Chapter 6 focuses on these social networks in students' community space.

Chapter 6-The Social Capital within Students' Community Space

In students' community space, a number of what Granovetter (1973) considered, as "weak ties" were present. These weak ties were influential in students' college choice process in that they provided for the flow of college information, assistance and support, which is consistent with more recent college choice literature (Perez, 2007; Perez & McDonough, 2008). A few students specifically noted instances where members of religious congregations, neighbors, and a doctor, for instance, provided some type of college information or support that students deemed significant in their college choice experience.

Cristina, Beto and Tony, for example, all mentioned the role that various members of their church played in helping shape their college aspirations. As such, these students' religious identities were considered as influential in their ability to access college knowledge from these sources within their community space. Because no other students mentioned such instances however, a religious identity was not deemed a salient theme. Albeit, Cristina shared the following in this regard:

> I help out a lot at my church and basically anywhere I can help out I will. And that's where I've met a lot of the people, a lot of people that go to college and they're like, "You should go to this college or go to this, or go to that." They're all like, sometimes they tell me, "You're gonna love college."

Beto reflected on how his priest was partial to a specific college and advocated college-going by often sharing his thoughts on this specific school, "The priest in my church he goes for [Texas] A&M. Yeah, so he's always talking about the school and how great the

teachers are and stuff. I guess, cause he's gone to visit that school...I guess he knows several professors...so he gives [us], you know feedback." He continued saying,

> We'll have a youth group that we'll meet like every Monday or whatever and sometimes you know he'll [priest] talk to us, you know, "So what's going on in your life, and you know, what are you planning to do after high school, those of you that are gonna graduate?" And then we'll get into the whole college [talk]."

Tony also shared how he often turned to his pastor for guidance in regards to his college choice process and his schoolwork. He admitted:

> Sometimes classes here are sometimes hard and like I get confused like [with] a lot of work. And like all these colleges, it's like a lot of pressure, so like I just pray pretty much, and like I talk to the pastor a lot. And like, I go to church a lot and like I learn, they tell us stuff.

Students' comments reveal a degree of *respeto* (respect) and *confianza* (trust) that they had in the members of their religious congregations. As previous research has shown (Fránquiz & Salazar, 2004; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2003; Valdés, 1996; Vélez-Ibañez & Greenberg, 1992), such qualities are characteristic of the relationships in Mexican American communities. Without *respeto* and *confianza*, students might not have considered the *consejos* (words/narratives of wisdom) that were offered by these individuals as trusted and useful college knowledge.

Other students identified additional individuals in their community space that provided support and college information. For instance, when asked what individuals had assisted her in her college choice process, Selena shared this:

> The doctor that I go to he talks to me a lot, and he'll be like, asking me like questions, "Oh, well what college do you plan to go into?" and then he'll give me, like he'll tell me names of some other colleges. He's really cool with that.

Another student, Eddie even noted how he had obtained detailed and personal assistance and guidance with his college choice process from a neighbor that his mother had introduced him to. In speaking with this neighbor the previous struggle discussed in either starting college at a local/regional university or starting college at a university outside of South Texas arose. This is revealed in the following conversation:

> Eddie: My mom said, "Oh, we have a neighbor and he's, works at [local/regional university], you maybe can talk to him." I'm like ok, so he started talking to me about financial aid. He works at the financial aid office I think and he gave me like a little run down of the stuff he does and stuff that I need to do like take this, do that, don't take the loans, don't take loans. Don't take loans.
>
> MM: So, he said to not take loans?
>
> Eddie: Yeah, but like yeah, you can take loans, but don't take too much that you can't pay it back.
>
> MM: Oh, ok, so I guess he said take only as much as you need?
>
> Eddie: Yeah, and yeah, I talked to him and he told me take what you need for that like will actually help you later on, don't take courses that are not gonna help you at all...He made me realize, well not realize, he made me think a lot about my mom. Like me [being] willing to stay here and help her out, like I need to help her out. So, I guess I'll give up what I really want, like right now, maybe I can do it a little bit longer, like later on, and help her right now and then go and fulfill that dream, I guess I could say.
>
> MM: Because you had told him that you had wanted to go?
>
> Eddie: Straight to Texas State [University]
>
> MM: And he advised not to or?
>
> Eddie: He said you can do it, but like I guess he wanted to see, because he has his mom too, but she lives in Chicago and she comes back and forth and she like she, he wanted me, I'm sorry, he was, basically telling me do it for your mom, too, I mean she's by herself. Try to help her out. Like she's by herself.
>
> MM: Did he mean going to college in general to do it for your mom or did he mean like stay here?

> Eddie: Like stay here maybe help her out for a little bit and then go, fulfill what you want to do. Like she needs the help.
>
> MM: And you're okay with that, like you're ok?
>
> Eddie: Yeah, I was ok, he didn't say it like straight out, just stay here help your mom, kind of like trying to rub it in there with all the information, I'm like ok.

What is interesting in this case is the fact that Eddie's neighbor is himself seemingly operating from the intersectionality of his own identities as a neighbor as well as a higher education representative, specifically from the local/regional higher education institution. As such, the credibility of the neighbor's advice rests on the intersectionality of both of these identities. Additionally, it is unknown whether the neighbor was of Mexican descent, however the advice that the neighbor gives Eddie is reminiscent of *familismo*, a characteristic of many Mexican Americans to put the wants and needs of family before one's own (Garzón, 2003; Valenzuela & Dornbusch, 1994). This was evident when the neighbor suggested Eddie put his college aspirations of attending Texas State University immediately after graduating from high school on hold, and instead begin college at the local/regional institution so that Eddie might help his mother financially.

Not sure about where to attend college given his interest in film making, Charlie also revealed how he had been provided some specific college information that pertained to this topic from a local high school teacher that he met by happenchance. He said:

> This teacher...that I just met not too long ago, told me that UT [University of Texas] at Austin is actually a pretty good place because it's, you know a lot of fine arts people, it's like right now like a Mecca for fine arts. It made me think about that actually, I had never had UT in mind until now.

When asked further about how he knew this teacher, he explained the unique circumstances of their meeting, "I was at a birthday party with my girlfriend's niece, it's

my girlfriend's niece's birthday party, and they're neighbor's actually [with] the, the teacher." Given this newly found information, Charlie said he was going to "pay more attention to UT...look it up more," since he "never thought about UT until like couple of days ago." Charlie further divulged, "Before then it was still [local/regional university] you know. I had everything, I had everything set to [go to local/regional university]."

Similar to the neighbor who assisted Eddie in providing him with some college information, the neighbor attending Charlie's girlfriend's niece's birthday party was also operating from his multiple identities. In this case, the neighbor was also a teacher, and thus imparted college knowledge from this standpoint. This neighbor's credibility was particularly based on his identity as a teacher, enabling Charlie to trust what he said.

Thus, these students' stories exemplify the means by which weak ties within their community space had an influence on their college choice process. Other specific challenges arose within students' community space regarding their college choice process, however that specifically provided students an opportunity to exhibit their agency in some cases and bring to the fore needs of the community regarding postsecondary education.

Exhibiting Agency and Facing Challenges in Community Space

In discussing their college choice process, two recurrent themes emerged among students that evoked tension within what was deemed as students' community space. One theme focused around how students formed their college aspirations, specifically how students crouched their hopes of attending college in response to racial/ethnic stereotypes held of Latina/os at large, and those within the South Texas Border in particular. The

second source of tension that arose for students in their community space was in regards to the reputation and limitations of local/regional universities. Thus, students' racial/ethnic identity and regional identity were influential in these aspects. Given the significance of the South Texas Border context in relation to students' college choice process, this notion is further discussed in the final chapter of this study.

Proving negative stereotypes wrong. Almost half of all students explicitly noted how wanting to prove negative stereotypes about their greater and regional Latina/o community wrong, reinforced their college aspirations. This was apparent in Beto's comments as he shared a bit about his life experience:

> I was born in Mexico and then sadly there's a lot of people that have, you know, a bad...view of you know, Hispanics, or you know, Latinos or anybody that's not actually Anglo or you know, not actually born here. And so in a way that's kind of, it's kind of like a motivation that pushed me to, you know, prove [to] people that I can do it.

Jasmin, Rocio, Steven, and Eddie shared similar sentiments, specifically speaking to the stereotypes regarding individuals of Mexican descent and/or Hispanics as being "lazy" and not valuing education. Jasmin said, "A lot of people think that Mexicans tend to be lazy and they just take welfare and that we just don't educate ourselves. I guess I want to prove people wrong. Be a part of it." "I think people in general think Hispanics don't really get their education and that's like a big part why I want to go," Rocio commented. Steven distinctively said:

> I'm Hispanic so I guess a typical stereotype would be that we don't usually go to college, which is their belief, which is fine. I guess it doesn't really bother me...because it lets me know that yeah, they don't expect me to excel but my grades have proven them wrong. My top percentage has proven them wrong. How many dual and AP classes has shown them wrong.

Eddie's remarks echoed these, and he specifically explained how he felt Hispanics were often deemed "less than" in social contexts. This is evident in the following exchange:

> Eddie: It's like out of topic, but like I like to hear jokes about Hispanics, and Whites, and Blacks, but like whatever, but then I go to the more like, ok, Hispanics are thought of as less than Whites, sometimes Blacks are higher, it's like what if a Hispanic were to go up so high and be respected by others, Hispanic, come on a Hispanic
>
> MM: So you feel that, that often because of negative stereotypes of Hispanics, that it's made you want to go to college essentially to make a point that I can do it?
>
> Eddie: I'm not like that stereotype. Yeah, they say they're really dumb, they're really lazy. And I think I'm not lazy, I try just as hard as you. I can do it.

Eddie also spoke to how the intersectionality of his own multiple identities of race/ethnicity and class provided another level of tension. "I mean, not many Hispanics like with my type of income [go to college, they] just like say no, I can't go I have no money, there is no way, but like I think there is hope for that, so it's my goal to do it, to prove people wrong."

Two other students, Zulema and Charlie, indicated how their teachers had shared educational statistics and civil rights information regarding Mexican Americans that further motivated them to obtain a postsecondary education. For instance, Zulema said,

> I heard Ms. [X], my government teacher, [say] like how there's really low rate[s] for Hispanic females to gain their masters. And I was like, "I want to be able to help that go up, you know, there's like something wrong, I have to keep going and to help that go up." And that would be something, one of the characteristics [that influenced my college choice].

In this case, Zulema found agency in the intersectionality of her race/ethnicity and gender. Charlie revealed a similar sense of agency in the following discussion:

> MM: How do you think that your background and your characteristics influence or influenced your decision and planning to go to college after high school? If at all?
>
> Charlie: Well, like, what's it called, they always told us Mexicans, not all Mexicans go to college.
>
> MM: Who's they?
>
> Charlie: The teachers, they even showed little videos like this movie, what's it called, I think it was called the *Walk Out*[3], have you ever heard of that movie?
>
> MM: Yeah
>
> Charlie: Well they've even showed us that movie about how back then it would be unfair for Latinos and how hard it would be like they would basically like even say oh, and like this many percent of Latinos go, and the rest don't, you know. So, I always thought of myself as being those percent that do go, not filling out the, like the statistic of not going you know. And yeah, I would say that, that helped me out, like [it] makes me more goal driven.

Charlie's story suggests how this teacher particularly empowered him in a sense. By simply showing the movie *Walk Out* this made Charlie aware of the historical inequities in schooling provided Mexican Americans in the United States. Such is critical given the demographics of the South Texas Border community. Given that the region is, for the most part, racially/ethnically monolithic, it is possible that students do not witness explicit instances of discrimination based on their race/ethnicity. Yet, almost half of all students interviewed noted negative racial/ethnic stereotypes against their Latina/o community as influential in their college choice process. Students were able to leverage these stereotypes, to formulate a sense of agency on their communities' behalf. The

[3] A film based on the true story of Latina/o students from five East Los Angeles high schools that walked out in protest of educational inequities at their schools in 1968.

reputation and limitations of local/regional universities was another aspect of tension, however, noted among students in their community space.

The reputation and limitations of local/regional universities. In the previous chapter, it was noted that a majority of students expressed a degree of tension in deciding whether to begin their college education at a local/regional institution or another institution outside of South Texas. Often this tension was attributed to close familial ties, but a few students began to reveal another aspect to this tension rooted in a more community held belief partially based on reality. Specifically, in describing their college choice process several students began to indicate how the local/regional institutions had a reputation of being of a lesser quality compared to institutions outside the Rio Grande Valley. This reputation was in part based on students' or their social networks' understandings of the limited programs and degrees offered at the local/regional institutions. This is consistent with the historical realities confronted by higher education institutions along the entire South Texas Border where they often received less funding compared to other postsecondary institutions in the state (Sharp, 1998; Santiago, 2008; Yamamura, et al., 2010).

The fact that the local/regional universities were viewed as less prestigious than perhaps Texas' flagships is also not surprising given the fact that local/regional institutions utilize open admissions policies. Poignant in this case, however, is the likelihood that this reputation influenced students' own sense of pride in their community and themselves that then subsequently influenced their college choice process. Henry's mother, for instance, was persistent in her wishes to have her son begin college at The

University of Texas at Austin (UT Austin), and this was particularly based on her view of UT Austin as a better school than local/regional universities. Henry's story below indicates this:

> She [mother] was telling me about sending in my application to UT Austin, I was like, "Oh I was just going to send it to [local/regional university]." She was like, "Is that all your ambition?" So she started, and then she ended up going to the college night and now she's bent on me going to Austin I think. I think she just kind of wants me to get away from [Villa Verde] now. I'm not too sure why... I think it's just she feels it's [UT Austin] a better school, so she wants what's best for me you know, best I can get.

During Henry's second interview he revealed how he had since changed his mind about starting at the local/regional university.

> Henry: It seems so easy [to start at local/regional university], and now like it makes sense, like you know. You want a better education, you go to a better school. I mean not that [local/regional university] is a bad school, but more renowned school. You know, like if I graduated from Harvard law school or if I graduate from I don't know, some Montana law school, which do you think a company would go with, you know?
>
> MM: Right, so it's what's attached with, what is known of that school, ok. Ok, so now you're, your focus has shifted a little more?
>
> Henry: I've seen some people's papers that they turn into [local/regional university] and I wouldn't quite say that's college grade. Well I mean, it's good work, but there's definitely room for
>
> MM: You mean standards?
>
> Henry: Well in my opinion, I don't know what kind of grade they got. If they got that, if they got a good grade off the papers they turned in, uh, I don't know...Well, I think it's just, if you go to a more prestigious school you expect more work, better teachers. Even the peers that you'll have will be more focused on what they're doing you know...I think in general you know, the more prestigious school you go to, I don't know if I'm saying that right, the more prestigious school you go to, the more you expect that of it. I mean when you think of good schools in Texas, you think of like A&M College Station, Austin, maybe Baylor of course, you know, things of that nature. Texas Tech in Lubbock, you think of the major branch schools, you don't think of like Corpus Christi or

> Kingsville A&M, you think of College Station. You don't think of [local/regional university] or some people go to Houston, Dallas, or Fort Worth, you think of Austin or San Antonio.

While Fernando did not use the word "prestigious" as Henry did, the comments he made in comparing the local/regional university with UT Austin suggest he was referring to just that. For instance, Fernando said:

> I've heard that Austin has good facilities for preparations, like to prepare you more for what you want to focus, let's say engineering. They have better technology and knowledge up there I guess than over here at [local/regional university] which is not as, let's say, rich as UT. So, I, that's how I think it's a better education.

In this case, Fernando was explicit in comparing the facilities and funds available at UT Austin in comparison to local/regional universities, and how this influenced his college choice process. And it was in part to this that Fernando decided to begin his college education at a postsecondary institution outside of the region, specifically UT Austin.

In explaining why he wanted to attend a university outside of South Texas, Beto also referred to "greater opportunities" available outside the region. He said:

> I've heard a lot of students be like, "Oh, we should just stay here at [local/regional university]." Like I said before, I'm not trying to take anything away from [local/regional university] right, but I mean in my opinion like why not expand...there's a lot more opportunities [outside of South Texas].

He continued saying, "A lot of people would be like oh, well why are we gonna go over there [when] we can get the same schooling here and stuff you know, same opportunities, but that's not always the case. I mean there's a lot more doors out there." Again, the perception held by Beto is that local/regional universities simply do not provide the same "opportunities" as universities outside the region.

Alternatively, another student, Cristina, noted her perception of the local/regional university as being of a lesser quality and indicated this as a downfall, but nonetheless was choosing to begin her college education there. In Cristina's case, she was satisfied with this decision because attending the local/regional university allowed her to be in close proximity to her family, it was more economical, and she saw the opportunity to transfer to another school outside the region after completing her basics as feasible. These sentiments were expressed in Cristina's remarks:

> When I finish high school I'm gonna go to go the college here in [Villa Verde], [local/regional university], and get my basics and after that I'll try to see if I can go to another college a little bit more, up north where I can get a better education... A&M, Texas A&M would be one of my choices... I've heard of my aunts and uncles talk really high of A&M and other universities as well...I feel that like you go here and you learn what you can learn but, um a lot of, a lot more people tend to go upstate because that's where like, that's where people know more. Like you can get an even better understanding in some things...I've heard other people say. I guess some of the teachers, are like "Oh, my daughter goes to, or my son goes to this university and they're learning all of this." And then they're like, "And what are your cousins, what are your cousins studying?" And I'm like, "Uh."...Down here we're limited to what we can learn and if we, I feel that if I go up north, that I will be able to further my knowledge and because there's a lot more advancements [sic] that are available over there than they are down here... At the university there's not a lot of hands on stuff, most of the stuff is just straight out of the book...I'm not really that upset about it, because I am gonna start off here so I'm gonna be able, given the chance to expand when I transfer.

In analyzing Cristina's comments, one gets the sense that not only local/regional universities are looked down upon to a degree, but individuals in the region are as well, given the perception that in South Texas individuals are "limited" in their learning because of a lack of sufficient resources. Such a view of South Texas is potentially detrimental to the region, and as previously noted, can result in students having a low self-esteem, which can influence their college aspirations.

Summary

The social capital that students were able to access in their community space was from various sources, all from individuals that would be considered "weak ties" (Granovetter, 1973). These sources were less influential than students' family members, and were noted less often than family members as sources of social capital. Students did confront negative racial/ethnic stereotypes within their community space, however, and dealt with the reality of being part of a community where the local/regional universities had a less than prestigious reputation in part to programmatic and infrastructure limitations. In this respect students' racial/ethnic and regional identities were evoked within their community space. And while race/ethnicity has been noted as influential in the college choice process (Hurtado et al., 1996; Hamrick & Stage, 2004; McDonough & Antonio, 1996; Kim, 2004; Paasi, 2003; Perna, 2000), regional identity has not been.

In the context of education it has been more common to discuss the role of regional identity when discussing the relationships between higher education institutions and the communities in which they reside, or the region (Meier & Duenias, 2008). Regional identity was referred to in the work of Meier and Duenias (2008) in a way that seemed comparable to the way it emerged in this study within students' stories. While Meier and Duenias' (2008) research was done in Israel, specifically to explore the relationship between Sapir, a college, and a neighboring community, Sderot, their general findings resonated with those of this study. Specifically, their work suggests that the image of a higher education institution can shape the regional identity of residents in the community in which the institution resides. Given that students' perceptions of the

local/regional universities were low, and that universities can be seen as a reflection of the communities in which they reside, there is reason to believe that students' own self-images can be low via their regional identities. As previously noted, this sentiment can be harmful in the context of students' college choice process, particularly leading students to have lower college aspirations.

The next chapter speaks to how students navigated their social identities and obtained college information, support and assistance through their social networks within their school space, which includes both the K-12 and higher education context.

Chapter 7-The Social Capital within Students' School Space

A large portion of high school students' lives are spent at school, and as such it is of no surprise that students noted individuals and other sources within the school environment as influential in their college choice process. Therefore, this chapter is organized to reflect both the resources and entities within students' school space, which includes both K-12 and higher education environments that either assisted and/or inhibited students in the midst of their college choice process. Specifically, the high school and district programs and personnel that students noted are first described, of which include the curriculum, co-curricular programs, college events and presentations, counselors, and teachers. Following this are sections devoted to students' peers and higher education representatives and institutions. Finally, the obstacles and issues that students faced within their school space are discussed.

High school and District Programs and Personnel

In describing the individuals and/or resources within their school environment that were influential in their college choice process, students often referred to both high school and district-wide programs and personnel. For instance, students specifically noted the school curriculum, co-curricular programs such as band or athletics, and college events and presentations, such as the University Day noted in earlier chapters, as sources of college information, support, and assistance. Given the definition of social capital adopted for this study, such sources can be considered as contributing to students' social capital. After all, social capital includes students' networks, relationships, and the

resources embedded within these relationships (Lin, 1999) that facilitate the exchange of ideas, information, and opportunities related to college access and enrollment (Perez, 2007; Stanton-Salazar, 2001). Thus, the curriculum, the information and assistance provided through the co-curricular programs and the college events and presentations can be considered as the "resources embedded" within the relationships that students have with their schools and district. Considering curriculum, co-curricular programs, and college events and presentations as sources of social capital is also consistent with the work of González, Stoner and Jovel (2003) who identified honors programs, college outreach and preparation programs, school curriculum, and English as a Second Language (ESL) and Special Education tracking as either potential agents of social capital or of institutional neglect. In addition, students deemed counselors and teachers among the school personnel who were most influential in their college choice process within their school space.

Curriculum. When asked what type of college information the school provided to help them reach their goal of obtaining a college education, several students noted the school curriculum. Specifically, students noted dual enrollment and advanced placement (AP) courses. For instance, Henry stated:

> We [school] offer dual enrollment and AP classes those are college-credited classes. So, they are college curriculums. So that helps, they're more advanced placement. They have a greater weight scale on them than a regular class. Those help quite a bit. They're hard, but they're worth it.

Henry admitted that taking such courses provided him with an "advantage" that allowed him to gain "more [college] knowledge" while in high school so that he "could get just more detailed knowledge" once he was in college. In Henry's case, however, his identity

as a magnet student also provided him with access to curriculum and job-related experience that other students did not have. This is evident in Henry's following story:

> I mean as it is we have clinicals starting in a couple of weeks and I'll be practically working as a nurse at the doctor's offices, so I mean that's hands-on practice and training right there. I mean people going in there that have never heard of a medical abbreviation in their life and I'm already over here taking people's blood pressure.

Beto echoed Henry's sentiments regarding dual enrollment courses believing that they gave him an edge over other students, and particularly helped him accrue college credit free of charge. He exclaimed, "Well you know you take them and if you pass them you get credit for college. And I was like well, why not you know, might as well you know, saves you time and money in college." Cristina also admitted the advantage to taking dual enrollment courses, and specifically noted the greater access to college information that these courses provided. She expanded on this notion:

> I've taken dual enrollment classes...[And] because of the dual enrollment class, they give us a little paper and we had to like write our information and stuff like that and whether we wanted information about colleges. I put yes, and now I'm getting a lot of pamphlets, letters. In fact, I'm also getting some applications for the colleges... It's been very useful. In fact a lot of my friends they didn't, they put "no" or they just haven't taken a dual enrollment class and I read a lot of the books that they send me and I tell them well this college would be perfect for you, if you're interested in this and this is what they have, like this is basically what they're known for. And they're like "Oh wow, I didn't know that, like oh my gosh, wow!"

Cristina's comments suggest that perhaps not all students are offered the opportunity to sign-up to receive the type of college information that she was being sent. Thus, the role that her academic identity played in helping her access college information is evident. Additionally, however, students that are in such advanced courses may not necessarily understand the benefit of agreeing to receive college information if such an opportunity is

not fully explained. Overall, this instance indicates an inequity in the means by which college information and opportunities are provided in students' school space, an aspect further discussed at the end of this section.

Co-curricular programs. As noted in Chapter 4, there were a handful of students who exhibited a co-curricular identity as a result of their involvement in a co-curricular program at school that influenced their college choice process. Aside from providing the impetus for the development of a co-curricular identity, these programs and the school personnel that ran them were also sources of social capital within some students' school space. Beto, for example, was able to visit college campuses as a result of his being on the track team at Paloma High School. He said, "I've seen the UTSA [University of Texas at San Antonio] campus. I liked it. And I've seen the UT [University of Texas at Austin] campus. I was at Austin for the state track meet this past summer." Such exposure influenced his college aspirations, and made the notion of attending a postsecondary institution all the more feasible. Additionally, being on the track team provided Beto with opportunities to expand his social networks. The following story captures this:

> When we were at the state meet for track in Austin...we went to a restaurant and one of the students from UT [University of Texas at Austin] he saw us there and he was talking to our coach and he used to be his runner a few years before. And I was hearing him talk you know about classes and he was saying it was great.

In this case, Beto's coach was a link to a current University of Texas at Austin student that was able to provide Beto with first hand knowledge regarding the college experience. Beto appeared to find this insight invaluable. Beto also, however, admitted how the coaches themselves had helped him. He stated, "The coaches help you. As a matter of

fact, my coach, the track coach, his son graduated from UT... And the one who's a senior with me, he's planning on going to UT also. So, they also talk about school, you know." Another student athlete who also noted the guidance and assistance that his coaches provided him with his college choice process was Tony. "Coach [X], Coach [Y], pretty much like all my coaches, Coach [Z], they talk about like how life is gonna be after high school and stuff and it's not all about football. It's about getting your education and stuff, that's what they told me," he said. Tony's comments suggest that his coaches provided him with *consejos* (narratives/words of wisdom) that pertained to topics that extended beyond the realm of school. These *consejos* appeared to carry a lot of weight with Tony. In sharing these comments, Tony conveyed a deep respect for these men who seemingly took the time to build a relationship with him based on *confianza* (trust) and *respeto* (respect).

Alternatively, Eddie spoke of his band directors in as high regard as Beto and Tony did of their coaches. He divulged how his band directors particularly set high expectations for students and would share specific college knowledge, which subsequently would influence students' college aspirations. This is clear in Eddie's statement:

> Expectations, my band directors, like always my band directors [had high expectations for us] you know. In middle school...they would talk about how they went to school and how students come back and visit them, like, "Oh, I went to UT and then I went to Harvard" and all this stuff. I'm like, that's pretty neat. I wish I could do that. And then high school comes along and then band directors are more intellectual with you so they speak high level with you, and like [ask you], "Oh, where are you gonna go to college?" And then freshman year was like, "Where are you gonna go to college?" I'm like, I don't know yet, I'm just a freshman. [And they would say], "Well, you need to start thinking now."

Aside from setting high expectations for students, Eddie shared how his band directors actually integrated discussions about the college choice process within the classroom. For instance, he said:

> My band director...he actually tries to explain everything to us in class. Even though it's just a band class, like play a b flat, play this. He takes some time and talks about like, ok, if like, especially for freshman, "Freshman take into consideration that your grades right now will carry you through college." So they look at everything on transcripts. And he would talk about how they look at the end of junior year and the beginning of senior year, your grades. They are very important to get in.

When asked if this was typical of his other teachers, Eddie responded almost in annoyance:

> That's not typical. No, because some teachers [are] just like, "Study this, read this, do the work, study this." It's stupid, but, but he [band director] really actually, he cares about every student. That's like really appreciative of Mr. [X]. He appreciates and really helps, helps everybody out, not just me.

As implied in Eddie's comments, taking the time to discuss aspects of the college choice process with students was seen as caring, personal and an investment in students themselves. This was very much appreciated by students. Like Tony's coaches, these band directors seemed to recognize the value in building trusting and respectful relationships with their students. Doing so enabled them to impart *consejos*, or words/narratives of wisdom, with students regarding the college choice process that students subsequently took to heart.

In similar fashion, Paulo and Zulema also noted the opportunities afforded them while in a co-curricular organization called Skills USA that influenced their college choice process. For Zulema, the organization provided her with an opportunity to build a long-lasting relationship with another school leader, in this case the program's sponsor.

As such, she was able to call upon this sponsor for a letter of recommendation because she felt confident that he could speak to her character and abilities as a student. “I asked my Skills USA sponsor [to write a letter of recommendation for me]...because I’ve been with him, like I’ve known, because I’ve been in Skills since freshman year so I know him that long so, I thought that would be really good,” she said.

The stories students shared indicate the significance of co-curricular programs in the development of students’ college aspirations. Specifically, the relationships forged with the school personnel that lead these programs and the college-related experiences students were able to access through these programs were influential in how students were able to navigate their college choice process. Likewise, other students noted the influence of college events and presentations made available to them through their schools and the Villa Verde Independent School District (VVISD).

College events and presentations. There were two main college events identified by a majority of students as sources of information and assistance that their high schools and district had provided. These were a Parent’s College Night and a University Day for students held during the school day. Both of these events were previously noted in Chapter 3, in the section titled “Description of field sites and district.” One student, Alejandra, did note an assembly at Fuente High School that had taken place at the beginning of the school year that was for all seniors and focused on college. At the assembly “the principal was talking about how we could get financial aid and information about colleges and the deadlines because they were also coming up,” she said. Only Alejandra, however, mentioned this assembly, so it is unknown whether other students at

Fuente also attended it or found it useful, or if a similar assembly was offered at Paloma High School.

A few students did indicate that the Parent's College Night organized by the VVISD was beneficial to their college choice process, particularly in providing their parents with college information and assistance. Cristina's remarks are a testament to this, "They actually helped my parents a lot with. They helped explain like financial aid stuff like that and the process and how to do it all." Fernando expanded on this, specifically describing the type of information and assistance that was offered at this event. He said, "They had like different type[s] of universities...and then they...[had] like presentations on financial aid, the forms you have to fill out, the *applytexas*, they talked about that." He also stated that the event had been advertised through the announcements at school and printed fliers. Henry's mother had attended the Parent's College Night as well, and he explained his understanding of the event from what his mother had told him:

> From what I understand, I wasn't able to go, but she [mother] went, she was telling me it was a speaker, explaining that people needed to do this, and do that. There was also college representatives there, but it was mainly like a person telling them, "Ok, your kids need to have this done, they need to get these together, get this done with, if you have dual enrollment classes, get your transcripts from [local/regional university] and all that."

A greater number of students discussed the significance of University Day in terms of their ability to access college information and assistance. The event was organized like a college fair, where as Tatiana described there were "lots of booths" and students "walked around" for "like two hours." Students were able to pick up pamphlets and brochures and sign up to receive additional information from the schools by providing their email and physical address. As such, some students found this event to be

extremely beneficial. Maritza, for instance, actually named this event as the most useful of all sources available to her. She explained:

> I think it was the University Day [that was the most helpful] because I got to see like a lot of colleges. I got to see which ones were the ones that had what I wanted to be. What I want to be. And well that they just send you information about their schools with your email. And I guess that's, that's pretty much it... because well, in some you did get to talk to the people and well the letters that I've gotten it says that you can make like appointments to go like visit the school or like to call to like get more information and stuff like that. I guess that's like the most useful.

In describing what the University Day was like, Henry's remarks echoed those of Maritza's. "We went to different colleges, had representatives, we just went from table to table, asking questions, getting information, applications, things like that," he said. "It was useful, I found a lot of information. I got a lot of information from different schools not only in Texas, but Ohio State was there, some schools from Pennsylvania, I believe a school or two from Illinois, Florida has a school representative there," he added.

While not necessarily a college event or presentation, Tatiana also mentioned having attended an SAT academy that was offered at Paloma High School free of charge that by all accounts would be considered a program to assist students in their college preparations. As such, it was essential to include Tatiana's comments about this program in this section. Tatiana revealed the following when asked whether the college information that her school provided was available to all students:

> I think it is available to everybody but some people are just too lazy to go. Cause [sic] last year we had an SAT academy, 6:00 to 9:00 and we have it this year again and last year it was only like my group of friends, there was like seven or eight of us or something and there was a couple of other kids that weren't in our little group of friends and they were the only one's who went like all the time. And we were the only one's who always went. So, it's not that it's not available cause [sic] it is. They had the classes, they were paying the teachers for it, but it's just that kids don't want to go.

When asked why she thought this was the case, she further explained her perceptions of the situation. She exclaimed:

> I think maybe some of them [students] don't think that they have what it takes to get into college so they kind of give up on themselves and they're like, "I'm not gonna get in anyway, so what's the point." There's some people who know that they'll get in, they just don't think they need it. There's some kids that think they're too smart for it. But mostly it's just,"I don't' think I'm gonna get in so what's the point." And sometimes well I can't exactly say just that because they're kids who actually can't go cause [sic] the kids who are in band they stay at school until like 8:00 or something practicing so they pretty much miss the whole thing.

Given Tatiana's, and other students' remarks, it is clear that the college presentations and events offered by students' schools and district were considered valuable to their ability to access college information, support and assistance. Perhaps even more significant were the school personnel who they named as influential in their college choice process: counselors and teachers.

Counselors. All students acknowledged that counselors at their respective high schools were key sources of college information, support and assistance. Thus, they were sources of social capital for students in the context of their college choice process. For Eddie, it was counselors who first made him aware of what college was. He admitted this in the following story:

> In middle school I actually had no idea about like college. I just knew it was high school and that's it. But then counselors started coming in seventh grade year, [and they said,] "Ok, after high school you're gonna do this, you're gonna have to have so much, this is a doctorate's degree this is a master's, bachelor's." I'm like what is that? So, I got interested in it, I'm like what is that? And then I heard about all this college, I'm like, "Oh, my God!" It started stressing [me] out. And then freshman year came along and then it started hitting me, like, "I need to start right now taking care of everything."

Most students, however, referred to counselors within their current high school context and in regards to their college choice process, in particular. Thus, two sub-themes emerged within this category: 1) Counselors as sources of college information and 2) Counselors as sources of individual guidance and assistance.

Sources of college information. The type of college information that counselors provided students included: college brochures and applications, fliers advertising college events and presentations, college entrance exam information, fee waivers for tests and applications, and financial aid and scholarship information. Students did not necessarily need to meet with a counselor individually in order to obtain such information, as Maritza pointed out "They have a lot of fliers about like a bunch of colleges and the tests that you need to do and there's some applications...sometimes we go and we get some of the little fliers they have there. That's where we got the SAT dates so we could sign-up." Alejandra echoed these sentiments saying she went to the counselor's office "because they have bulletin boards and they have information on what college is coming...They put signs when the universities will come to [Villa Verde] or to the events center." Thus, stopping by the counselor's office to pick up college information was a common, and encouraged practice. In advertising for the University Day, for instance, Beto admitted, "They make announcements, they constantly make announcements [saying] come by the counselor's, come by the office and pick up a permission slip, but if the student doesn't make the effort to go, well [the student is going to miss the opportunity]." Even with such announcements, however, Jasmin believed not all students knew that they could go to the counselor's office for college information and assistance. She said:

> They [counselors] offer it [college information], I mean like they [counselors] tell you to go and, I mean the counselor, you can go, but I don't think a lot of people know, or they don't go... I think that it's important though because I guess like, not a lot of people can pay for college tuition, and you need help no matter what.

As Jasmin suggests, counselors are a crucial source for students in helping them access financial aid information. Yet if most students do acknowledge this, as Jasmin believes, it is essential to question why students may not seek assistance from counselors. While Jasmin admits that some students may not know, she also says that some simply "don't go." Taking into account the Chicana feminist lens adopted for this study then, it is plausible that students may not seek assistance from counselors in part because there has not been a strong relationship forged with them since they are not in direct contact with students on a daily basis as teachers are, for instance. Thus, the *respeto* and *confianza* that is often characteristic of strong, quality relationships within the Mexican American community may be lacking. Some students, however, did note instances in which counselors attempted to build such relationships with students by reaching out to them within the classroom setting or through other means of communication, such as email.

At both Fuente and Paloma High Schools, counselors attempted to provide students with college information through various means. For instance, Selena, who attended Fuente High School, said, "The counselors have a sign up sheet too and you put your, your email address and they'll send you scholarship information and college information." At Paloma High School, students indicated that Ms. Carson, the designated higher education counselor, provided students with a monthly newsletter with important college information and dates and did various class presentations. Fernando attested to this saying, "She [Ms. Carson] also does like a class tour, like she goes to classes and

distributes information. Either way, if you didn't get it that way, you can go into her office, and personally go get it." All of the students interviewed from Paloma High School confirmed this. Zulema and Rocio, for instance, described the newsletter that Ms. Carson provided. Zulema said:

> She [Ms. Carson] gives us newsletters every month about what's going on in that month for scholarships or stuff...they [counselors] usually give us our information in our English classes, but like I don't have one, but you could still go and they'll give it to you. Like, it's not like, oh, don't come...They always have their doors open to anybody.

Rocio described the newsletter as "a calendar" that reminded students of when they "had to sign up for the SAT's or ACT's" or to "keep up with your college essays." Aside from this more general college information, however, students also expressed their perceptions of counselors as sources of individual guidance and assistance with their college choice process.

Sources of individual guidance and assistance. Generally, counselors were seen as school personnel that could "help you out with quite a bit" when it came to the college choice process. Like previously noted by Jasmin, however, some students did not always know they could turn to counselors for such assistance, or did not necessarily feel willing to do so for whatever reason. Henry revealed such sentiments in his first interview, "I know you can go to the counselor...I just never went to the counselor...No. I just went to sign up for my SAT's, that's about it...I've pretty much done most of it on my own, pretty much." In the second interview however, Henry indicated that his mother had since met with his counselor where his mother had been made aware of his slow progress in applying to college. He explained:

> My mom actually went to the counselor a few weeks ago to set up grade speed...to check your grades on the internet and the attendance...But the counselor told her, "Well, you know, Henry hasn't filled out these papers yet, Henry hasn't done this yet, he hasn't applied to the actual schools yet."

This subsequently influenced Henry's college choice process further because his mother put greater pressure on him to complete his college applications, particularly the one for The University of Texas at Austin, where she wanted him to attend. Henry's case suggests the importance of relationship building between parents and school personnel, particularly in cases where students themselves are apprehensive about accessing school counselors as sources of college information, assistance and support.

At Fuente High School, all students also named what was called the "senior interview" as the main instance in which they were able to meet individually with counselors for guidance and assistance with ensuring that they were going to graduate and in getting them started with their college choice process. Charlie described the interview saying it was when "the counselors call you up from our class, you go and they talk to you about what you want to do or like let's see if you're gonna graduate." Ms. Manzano, one of the counselors at Fuente, verified this. She explained the senior interview further saying, "We do those to just kind of see, okay what have you done, you know, have you tested COMPASS, and you know, any placement tests, have you done your SATs, have you applied." She indicated that these interviews were done in November "because a lot of the deadlines come up in December." Furthermore, she believed this gave the counselors sufficient time to advise students on the application process. However, for those who are completely unfamiliar with the process and/or are

still developing their college aspirations beginning senior interviews in November is too late.

Nonetheless, as Charlie continued his conversation, he admitted that the senior interview "helped out" because it clarified "what your college is gonna want to ask for" in regards to college entrance exams and prerequisite courses. Eddie reiterated what the senior interview entailed, as he had just gone through the process prior to his second interview. He described it as follows:

> Eddie: They call you in...last week on Thursday they called me in just to check on, that I have all my credits to graduate.
>
> MM: Oh, was this like the senior interview I heard about, the senior interview?
>
> Eddie: Yeah, like they're taking every student to check, "Ok, you've taken everything, distinguished, you're gonna get this..."
>
> MM: Chord?
>
> Eddie: Yeah, chord or whatever, blah, blah, blah, distinguished and stuff, just to check if you're doing good.
>
> MM: And you were on track?
>
> Eddie: Yes, she's like, "Oh, you're a band student you should be doing good. You've got all your credits." Like yes, I have all my credits. "You have all your technology?" Yes I do.

Implied in Eddie's last comment is an assumption made on the part of his counselor based on Eddie's co-curricular identity. Knowing that Eddie was a band student, the counselor assumed that he would be doing well academically. As such, the counselor may assume other things about Eddie based on his other identities that may influence the quality and quantity of assistance that she offers Eddie with his college choice process.

While Charlie and Eddie had already undergone the experience of the senior interview, however, there were a few students who had not, upon being interviewed for the second time for this study. A few of these students mentioned having heard of the senior interview, but revealed their uncertainty of what it entailed exactly. Geneva admitted, "I haven't been called out yet so I don't really know what it is. But they help you with college, to go, and they help you with the applications, and they help you with the info you need like GPA." Alejandra also referred to the senior interview in her first conversation:

> They're [counselors] gonna make a day, well they haven't done it right, so the counselors could talk to us about what colleges we want to do. And get our information so they could send it to other colleges as well, so they would help us. It would be one day, but I don't know when that day [is]. I'm not sure when...It would be like a private talk between the counselor and you...I never heard about it, just 'til this year.

In comparing what Charlie and Eddie revealed about the senior interview and the perceptions that Geneva and Alejandra had about it, there appears to be a degree of miscommunication. Perhaps what the senior interview entailed was not publicized, yet students were finding out about the senior interview nonetheless. Given the expectations for the senior interview that Geneva and Alejandra had, it would behoove the counselors at Fuente to inform seniors about this interview at the beginning of the school year so as to eliminate any misunderstandings of what the interview entails. Overall, however, counselors were deemed by all students as influential in their college choice process, as were teachers. Teachers' role in providing college information, support and assistance to students is discussed below.

Teachers. While students cited counselors as being influential in their college choice process, the school personnel they had more direct and consistent contact with were their teachers. Thus, it was understandable that students identified teachers as individuals who were integral to their college choice process within their school space. Specifically, teachers were influential in developing students' college aspirations, encouraging and supporting college-going, and providing tangible information and assistance. Some teachers were also noted for actively integrating college knowledge into their courses, which students greatly appreciated.

A couple of students noted how teachers had been influential in developing their college aspirations. Geneva, for instance, recalled how a former English teacher believed in her ability to attend college. She said, "He was always the one that was telling me, 'keep going, keep going, you're a very smart student, you're very smart'...since I've known him he's been a big support." Other students expanded on this sentiment indicating that teachers had encouraged college-going among students in general, and for them in particular. Sergio, for example, stated, "I think almost every teacher that I've been with has been encouraging every student to attend college." He continued reflecting on various teachers that he had in his high school career:

> Sergio: I would say my sophomore year I had Mr. [X] for BCIS [Basic Computer Information Systems] and he's really been encouraging to go to college. Last year it was Ms. [Y] my pre-cal teacher that has been really encouraging me to go to college. I remember she passed out these notes to each student saying thank you for passing my class, I think you'd be best to go to these colleges.
>
> MM: Oh, wow, that's nice

> Sergio: And she told me on the page she said, "Try going to MIT." Or I can't remember the other, the colleges that she mentioned on the page, but she's really been encouraging.

Tony also shared his thoughts on the words of advice and encouragement that several teachers, and coaches, provided him regarding college and his future. He specifically noted how without such support, he did not believe he would be as enthusiastic about going to college. This is revealed in the following comments:

> A few teachers, like they talk about how college is and like how can it benefit you like later on in the future, how to establish yourself and stuff...This year the one that like really like opened my mind a lot was Mr. [X], like the way he talks about it and the way it's gonna happen and all that stuff. Like, he really has told me a lot, like he's pretty much helping me...Last year he was a coach, but this year just pure English teacher, English four teacher and he's young...I wouldn't have that much excitement about going to college like I would if they wouldn't have told me, like if they wouldn't have told me what could happen to me, what like all these coaches and teachers like if they wouldn't tell me like how it is, like I probably wouldn't want to go to college.

Beto's remarks echoed those of Tony, who said, "You hear your teachers you know, 'We're trying to get you ready for college,' even if you have regular courses they tell you that." Beto discussed how some of his teachers at times spoke to students about the college experience during class, and how helpful this was. He also noted how some of his teachers were easily accessible to him if he needed any assistance in school in general and with college related issues in particular. He expressed this in the following conversation:

> The teachers are, they have a good knowledge of universities and you know you can like within like a talk in the class or whatever you can ask and they'll explain you know. Teachers help a lot. They always push you to do your best. And you know, you think about it and it's like, well, I want to go to college but then I don't know, and they're like, what do you mean I don't know, do your best, you know. As long as you know you get the deadlines, or the due dates or you know just make sure you turn in your work on time, you know, do your best. So, they

> always like, you know well if you need help stay after class or come by after school or during lunch or before school. They're always there to help and then, well, they help you like in many ways not just like, you know, they're not just like, oh, I'm just in here, I've had teachers that do that, like I'm just here to teach and you know, not to make friends kind of thing. But it's better, luckily for me most of my teachers have always been like, you know if you need help, you know ask and you'll receive it. It's always been that way and well, they do help a lot.

During Maritza's first interview in September she spoke of the specific push that teachers were giving students to seek out scholarships and apply to college. "This year a lot of our teachers are putting a lot of pressure on us to look for scholarships...some are telling us...[to] start planning and see the deadlines and all that stuff" she said. Maritza admitted, "I started to apply because my English teacher said that the more you apply the more chances you have to gain more money for college." She even indicated the following, "My Economics teacher, she said that if you went [to University Day] she was going to give you like 5 points on the test or something, but that you needed to check out with her." Thus, some teachers help encourage college-going among students by providing incentives to seek out college information and to attend college events. A month later during her second interview, however, Maritza noted the following:

> My English teacher and my Economics teacher...they started like to tell us a lot in the beginning of the year but right now they're like not so much. Because, well, they just ask us once in awhile, "Did you already apply for your scholarships?" And we're like, "Oh yeah." That's like it, they don't like, before they were like, "Oh, you should go and look at this website," it had like a lot of stuff, but right now they're kind of like more focused on work.

This remark suggests that while most teachers may be supportive of students' college going in general, this support may wane further into the school year. This is concerning, given that students in their senior year are still applying to colleges and perhaps need

more guidance and support as they approach deadlines for college applications in the latter part of the fall.

Aside from emotional encouragement and support, some teachers were named for providing tangible college information and assistance to students. Cristina, for instance, said teachers had provided her with "different websites to go to." Tatiana expanded on this notion explaining how some teachers revealed the details of the college choice process to her:

> My teachers kind of help me mostly because they've already been through the whole process and like they help me a lot. I can't remember who it was who told me...but some of the teachers are like, "Yeah you need to do this, this and this, and you gotta make sure you have this and this." So they tell me a lot.

She also said "the teachers who mostly helped" were "the ones who gave the [SAT] classes [at school]." While in the SAT Academy Tatiana indicated that one of the teachers told the students, "you guys can come see me at anytime you know, and I'm like an encyclopedia on all the colleges for...whatever major you're taking, and I can find, I know good schools for all that stuff."

Other students, like Rocio, also mentioned how some teachers provided them and other students assistance with college essays and with letters of recommendation for college applications. "They've been a big help...the teachers...they, well it's the seniors, the teachers like, mostly English, they want to help you to do good on your essays, and like recommendation letters and all that stuff," Rocio admitted. Charlie, and a couple of other students, also noted how some teachers were able to integrate college knowledge into their classes. And the teachers who were accessible to assist students individually,

tended to be teachers with whom students had developed good relationships. This is evident in the discussion that follows:

> Charlie: Teachers are like one of the biggest supports actually, you know, like giving you information about the college, giving you ideas of what it's gonna be, helping you prepare. And sometimes even helping you sign up or giving you a recommendation or something like that.
>
> MM: Ok, and do they do all this like, do they integrate it within class time or is this like at other times when they give you all that kind of advice and information?
>
> Charlie: During class time mostly, but like if you need extra, it's like I said the recommendations just ask them after class and they'll probably have it ready the next period or something
>
> MM: And would you say this is like all of your teachers or some teachers or?
>
> Charlie: The teachers that basically like you, I'd say [both laughing]. I mean not every teacher.
>
> MM: Ok, so it's teachers that you kind of have a relationship, have a good relationship with I guess you would say?
>
> Charlie: Yeah, I would say that
>
> MM: And so has that been mostly teachers from this year or are you, are you even going back to teachers from previous years, or?
>
> Charlie: Well, I've, I've had good relationships with like almost every teacher of mine from back freshman year all the way up to now. I haven't gone to them yet, but I, I feel like I can.

Charlie's, and the other students', comments confirm the significance of the teacher-student relationship, and how students respond to teachers' *consejos* (words/narratives of wisdom) regarding the college choice process. As such, it is not unexpected that among school personnel, teachers were the most often noted sources of assistance in the college choice process, and thus considered among the most influential. Within students' school

space however, there were other individuals that were particularly significant in students' lives: peers.

Peers

A majority of students identified peers as individuals who were influential in their college choice process. Friends, in particular, would "encourage" and "support" students' college aspirations and would often engage students in informal discussions about college that allowed for the exchange of vital information, such as deadlines for college entrance exams or applications or details of the college choice process. Some students also stated that their friends provided more tangible resources or assistance with scholarships or financial aid, for instance. A few students also implied that their peers in their classrooms, while not always considered friends they would "hang out" with, influenced their decision to attend because their peers were focused on this goal themselves.

In the following conversation, for example, Karina divulged how her peers were supportive of her plans to attend college after graduating from high school:

> MM: Was there anyone in particular who influenced this decision [to go to college] other than maybe seeing your parents? Were there other people?
>
> Karina: My friends
>
> MM: Ok, how so, what did they?
>
> Karina: They would encourage me a lot. They still do, it's like, because my boyfriend it's like, he has a football scholarship, he just doesn't know where he's gonna go. He wants something else different, it's like [my girlfriends say], "Don't follow him, stay here, but you have to go to college, you have to go to college." It's like, "Oh yes, I am."...My best friend [X], she gives me a lot of support too.

Students also noted a great deal of informal sharing of college knowledge through conversations with their peers. Maritza, Beto and Cristina stated that they had friends who were attending a local/regional university who often spoke about the college experience with them. Maritza, for instance, said the following:

> Most of my friends already graduated last year, like most, like almost all of them so when we get together they're always talking about college and like how hard it is and like that the financial aid...that they had to get the emergency loan...So, I'm like the only one that doesn't know anything about that so they just tell me. I guess like they're helping me too.

Beto's sentiments echo those of Maritza. He said, "I have several friends that go to [local/regional university] and they kind of tell me [about college]." He expanded on this saying that in general his friends "always talk about" college, "or they constantly talk about college and then they have their older brothers or sisters and they get information from them, and then I guess they share it." Henry's perceptions of the role peers played in his college choice process were similar. He said peers provided "like word of mouth kind of things, you know, people tell me, 'Oh, we have, we can do this or that, or write this essay and you get by that deadline you can be accepted here,' and that, that's the kind of thing I've gotten from my peers." Although, he also did admit that peers did not provide "so much actual information on the application process, or for courses I need."

Other students like Alejandra, Steven, Selena, Eddie, and Tatiana spoke of how their peers had provided them with more tangible resources. When asked to describe specific examples of how her friends had supported her goal of going to college, Alejandra responded:

> Well, they do get me some information, so like if they find out about, like if the teacher tells them about a certain thing like, "Oh, there's this requirement or

> something about this university that you like, I heard about it," and then they tell me and then I research more about it. Or sometimes we go to the counselor's office together and they explain it to us.

Steven and Selena also noted how friends would provide them with specific scholarship information. "I have a couple of friends that actually go online and check for scholarships and are like, ok, have you heard about this one, have you heard about this one," Steven said. Selena acknowledged how a friend of hers had given her a "pack of papers" related to "colleges and scholarships." She said, "She was sharing it with me, she, like she had her stuff and then she shared it with me too. And I was like okay, that's nice." Eddie also spoke of his best friend and how she provided him with specific FAFSA information. He said, "She's the only person that really like does it for me, like she helps me out, like I guess she's most useful thing." Tatiana described one particular friend who she often turned to for advice and specific college information. She illustrated this in the following excerpt from her first interview:

> I have a very like college oriented friend who does all these scholarships and stuff...So, she's always like, "Oh did you get this letter from this college?" And I'm like, "No." And she's like, "Well, it looks awesome," and she shows me the letters and stuff. And she explains a lot of stuff too because she's really smart. She's number four in our class...So, she's always like, "No, you gotta [sic] take the test." Ok, so I have to take the test. And she's like, "Did you sign up for it?" No, not yet. "Sign up for it, dude, come on, seriously." All this stuff. She's very like, "Do it, now!"

Tatiana then continued to discuss her perceptions of the role of peers in students' college choice process in general. Her comments proved insightful:

> I think that some students might have more information than others because they have like, me I have friends who are motivated to go to college so I probably have more information because my friends are like, "Oh, do this, oh, do that." You know, but other kids might be with a crowd of kids who are like, "Whatever, I don't give a crap anyway. I'm not going anyway, I'm not gonna get in." So they

> probably don't have the information. But the school still has the information, like there's presentations, [and even if] kids just want to get out of class, but they [can] go and they [can] still get the information that they want...[But] if you're hanging out with people who probably don't want to go to college, you're probably going to get into the mindset that you don't want to go either. Like there's exceptions, there's always exceptions, but there are times when there's like, I guess it's peer pressure.

Tatiana's perceptions are supported by Zulema and Beto's comments because they both implied how being surrounded by peers in their advanced and dual placement courses who constantly discussed college particularly motivated them to attend as well. As such, Zulema and Beto's narratives suggest that a student's academic identity plays a role in their ability to access college information and support via his or her peers. Both Zulema and Beto felt they could turn to their peers for assistance with their college choice process because their peers were so knowledgeable and motivated. For instance, Zulema said this:

> Usually in my like AP classes, my dual classes, we usually talk about, "Have you done this, have you applied, what schools are you applying to, have you taken your SAT's?"...I guess since we're already like, you decide to get into AP because you want to get college credit, so it's like, you're getting college credit if you really want to go to college and I'll already be advanced so when you go there, so maybe because of that the students are just more dedicated and they want to go to college.

Similarly, Beto explained the following:

> Most of those students in those classes [advanced placement or dual enrollment] are focused on furthering their education. So, and like to a certain point, like I don't hang out with them, but like since I see them everyday in my classes and I hear about what they talk about, so I can like you know sit and talk with them and it's more like [they are] worried more about education rather than what are you going to do on the weekend, or stuff like that.

Considering students' shared stories, there is evidence to support the influential role that peers play in students' ability to navigate their college choice process. Peers provided support, encouragement, and at times specific college knowledge that students found

valuable. Other individuals and entities that students named as sources of support, information, and assistance were higher education representatives and institutions.

Higher Education Representatives and Institutions

More than half of the students interviewed named higher education representatives and institutions among the individuals or entities that provided them with college information, support and/or assistance in the midst of their college choice process. The most common context in which these individuals or entities were mentioned was in regards to 1) the individual presentations made by higher education representatives at students' respective schools or district and 2) the pamphlets and brochures mailed or made available to students at presentations.

Whenever higher education representatives did presentations at students' schools or at district-wide events, these instances were noted as beneficial. Eddie and Geneva, for instance, noted presentations in their school's library where, as Eddie put it, several universities "gave a little speech about their schools." Eddie found these presentations particularly useful because they gave students various opportunities to "actually get interested" in college. From these presentations, Geneva said she "got a lot of college information" and "actually had a chance to talk to...[the representative from local/regional university]." Another student, Tatiana, spoke of a particular information session presented by four major universities that was by invitation only. She divulged what she learned from the session below:

> I had gotten a letter from Rensselaer [Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute] and they had sent me an invitation to go, it was like Rensselaer, Vanderbilt, Princeton and the University of Chicago and it was like four representatives were there and I

> went and it was cool. So, that's how I got more information about Princeton. And Rensselaer sent me an application, the candidate's choice application, I don't have to do an essay and stuff...if I send it in before a certain time, yeah. And I found out the differences between early action and early decision and that stuff, because I didn't know, but they explained it to us there, so I was like ok, I get it now.

A few other students who had attended University Day also acknowledged having spoken to several university representatives. However, when asking the representatives for more detailed or personalized information, the representatives tended to simply refer students to the university's website. Students found this disheartening. Fernando speaks to this notion when he articulated the following:

> [At University Day] I was asking like, "Mam, do you know what subject tests I need to take for, to enter the Cockrell school of engineering [at the University of Texas at Austin]?" And everything she was telling me was, "Well just visit the website." So we were kind of discouraged by that because everything she would tell us, "Oh, just go visit they're website." She didn't actually tell us, "Oh, you need this, or you need this to get into it."

Alejandra also said the information provided at University Day was "okay," but she admitted, "I would like for them to give more detail about everything like the programs, how you can get in, who could support us, you know, how they have like student advisors there. I would like to know more on that not just the basic fundamentals."

Charlie talked in more detail about college representatives that visit the school and do classroom presentations. He particularly felt that because such presentations were so informative that more universities needed to do them. This is evident from the following conversation when Charlie was asked what he considered the most useful information or support that he had received in helping him plan and reach his goal of attending college after high school:

> Charlie: I would say it's basically like a tie, like either my brother helping me out, or sometimes the people from different universities come and say, "Hey I'm from..." Like Westwood came and they were like, "Oh, yeah, I'm from Westwood, college is like this, and this is what you can learn and if you have financial problems don't worry about it, we can probably see something around that or something like that." That really helps actually.
>
> MM: So, when recruiters come?
>
> Charlie: Yeah, recruiters, yes
>
> MM: And so have you been able, is that, so obviously that's something else the school provides.
>
> Charlie: Yeah
>
> MM: And you've been able to go to those or how does that work?
>
> Charlie: That actually works during class, you know like oh, we have a special guest talker, speaker, to come help you out in deciding in what college or helping you about info to college. And that really helps actually, it just...
>
> MM: So they go to the classroom or you get pulled out or?
>
> Charlie: They go to the classroom, and they basically do a power point in front of you and talk to the whole class and stuff and if you have questions they'll be happy to answer and stuff. The thing is, the thing is, not enough colleges do that. I mean the only one I've seen is Westwood and it'd be pretty good seeing other colleges you know, trying to recruit you in the same way.

Charlie provided further support for his argument saying:

> Recruiters coming more often [would help], you know some kids don't really care about going, going to college day or college night, but having them in class and already like, if you're, they're already there basically for the announcement, for college day all you'd need is for the recruiter to come for them, you know, they'd probably be like oh, this probably might help me, you know.

Charlie's comments suggest that personalized attention is key for college outreach particularly for students who are unsure of whether they should or can attend college.

Thus, K-12 schools and postsecondary institutions must continue to build relationships that will foster opportunities for such individualized attention.

Aside from university representatives themselves, students also said they obtained "a lot of information" from university brochures and pamphlets that were either mailed to them or that they were able to access either at school or from visiting university representatives. Beto, for instance said, "I get a lot of information from that [brochures] and then like they [universities] send it constantly and like it's not always the same information, you know different information." He added, "I guess you get more information on that college or university and you know...if you are interested in going, like I am, I mean, you're gonna want to do, you know, research on it and you know, and let's see what else it has to offer." Henry's comments echoed those of Beto:

> It's very useful [information provided] on the pamphlet, they tell their faculty to student ratio, things like that. That and the actual size of their schools, which gives you a lot of information about it the population they enroll and all that.

Interestingly, while brochures and pamphlets were noted as useful in students' college choice process, one student noted how one particular pamphlet depicted a racial/ethnic environment that was not reflective of her own, and thus seemed unwelcoming. This information was divulged by Maritza when asked how her being Mexican/Mexican American had influenced her college choice process:

> Maritza: Well, like in a lot of the little things that I get from the colleges, it was funny because I was telling my sister yesterday, that I was looking through one, it was like up in the north, I don't know like in Colorado or something, at one of the colleges and it just has like a lot of white people, like in the little [the pamphlet] yes. So, I was like, "I don't think I'm gonna go to that one (laughing) it's like a lot of white people. It would be weird."
>
> MM: You think it'd be weird?

Maritza: Yes

MM: So how do you think that influences you? So, yeah, you wanting to go to college, or like, well, you already are saying you want to go to college but in picking the college, so is that something that's important to you like?

Maritza: Yes, because I would feel like kind of like an outcast I guess because there won't be like a lot of Hispanics at that school, like just from seeing the little pamphlet things there's just like pure, like white people, like all with blonde hair and stuff, I was like ok, I don't think I want to go to that one.

MM: So if they sent you a pamphlet that had more diversity, people that looked you know, of more different kinds of races and ethnicities, would that make you feel better or?

Maritza: I think it would because it would make me like feel more confident be like, oh, ok, at least I could find somebody that's kind of like me, or that understands like where I come from and stuff. And just from like different people.

MM: Is that everything that you're saying, does that have any impact on why you want to stay here?

Maritza: Well, I guess because I know everybody here and they're all like Mexican I guess (both laughing) so it's always, it's mainly because I know everybody. Like, I would know a lot of people my first day, other than if I went like somewhere else.

The conversation with Maritza revealed how significant racial/ethnic diversity can be to students, as depicted on universities' printed materials.

One student, Fernando, did speak of a program called Longhorn Saturday through The University of Texas at Austin where he was able to visit the campus and attend informative workshops about the various programs and degrees offered at the university. He said, "I got most of my information from there." And although Fernando could not recall exactly how he was able to attend this program, he did recall that students from

other high schools in the district were able to attend. He also remembered that he learned of the program in the following way:

> A guy came here and my friends told me, "There's a guy giving out papers for a trip to UT [The University of Texas at Austin]." Well I came to sign up and I came to look for him and he gave me a paper and he called me over, and...[said], "Well like you might qualify to go on the field trip, will you be able to make it?" And I said yes...family members got to go, but I had to go by myself.

The information and guidance that university representatives and universities as whole can provide students is undoubtedly influential in students' college choice process. Within students' school space however, there were several challenges that students noted in accessing college information, support and assistance from their social networks.

Obstacles and Issues in School Space

The social capital that students were able to draw upon within their school space included school personnel at their schools and within their districts, as well as curriculum, co-curricular programs, and college events and presentations. Students also noted higher education representatives and entities, as well as peers among the sources who helped them navigate their college choice process. However, there were some obstacles and issues that students admitted to facing within their school space that inhibited their ability to access college knowledge and assistance. These included: varying expectations/coursework/assistance, constrained counselors, and trouble accessing college information. Additionally, issues of equity and equality arose as students pondered the thought of whether their schools provided all students with the same college information, support and assistance.

Varying expectations/coursework/assistance. Several students noted variations in the curriculum, and college assistance provided them as well as the expectations held for them within their schools. A distinction was particularly noted when comparing advanced placement (AP) and dual enrollment courses and teachers versus courses considered as "regular" and the teachers who taught such courses. Thus, these differences signified the influence that students' academic identities had on their ability to access college knowledge and support within their school space. Paulo expanded on these sentiments describing the difference in the way AP and dual enrollment teachers treated students. He said, "Just how the teachers are here. Like they, they pressure you sometimes. They treat you like college students. I'm getting prepared for that." Beto added this:

> I take a lot of dual enrollment classes, AP classes, so teachers are more into like the work and they're more focused...I have taken some regular classes and what I've seen is that the teacher you know, they like not in a bad way but they goof around with students, you know. And sometimes they're not so much focused into the class... And like also I've seen the teachers when they talk to us about the regular classes you know, or if I sometimes I'll, I have friends that take the regular, that same class but regular, and they'll say, they'll be like, "No we don't get that much homework, or we hardly ever get homework."...And I've seen some teachers give too many chances and like my dual enrollment teachers they're like, "Ok, you turn it in today, you know, 100 or I'll give you the grade, I'll grade it." And some do give you extra days, but yet they'll be like, "It's minus like 20, 30, 40."

These students' comments indicate an advantage that students deemed as high academic achievers and/or who are enrolled in such courses are provided in the context of their college choice process. Whereas students who do not possess such an academic identity are disadvantaged because they are not being held to the same expectations or provided coursework that is as rigorous as that of their peers.

Several students further explained how taking AP or dual enrollment courses were not options available to all students, as enrolling in such courses was dependent on either obtaining a certain grade point average or score on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) exam. Maritza explained, "You need to have like a certain kind of average...[to] take like AP. And to [take] dual [enrollment courses] I think you have to have the TAKS with like certain scores." Charlie admitted that he was unable to take such courses because of these regulations, even though he was interested in doing so. This is revealed in the following conversation after Charlie was asked why he was not able to enroll in such classes:

> Charlie: I don't think I qualified really.
>
> MM: So you have to qualify in order to take an AP course or what?
>
> Charlie: Yeah, like your grades from last year have to be an 85 and above, and
>
> MM: Ok, so it's not just open to everybody?
>
> Charlie: Yeah, it's not just open for everybody
>
> MM: Is that the same for dual enrollment?
>
> Charlie: Dual enrollment, yeah, because I mean they don't want to, like let's say you got a 70, 71, they don't want to put you in a class where they expect a lot more out of you, or else you're just gonna have a really hard time.

The regulations for taking advanced placement and dual enrollment courses that Maritza and Charlie described are indicative of tracking (Oaks, 1982, 1985; Oakes & Guiton, 1995) within schools based on students' academic ability. Often such tracking has been noted for reproducing inequity in schools, particularly for low-income and racial/ethnic minority students (Oaks, 1982, 1985; Oakes & Guiton, 1995).

In this case, however, an overwhelming majority of the students at both Fuente and Paloma High Schools are Latina/os. The staff at Fuente is also majority minority (77.9%), with 73.1% of teachers being Latina/o, and the second largest racial/ethnic group of teachers (25.7%) being White (Texas Education Agency, 2009b). There are similar demographics at Paloma High School, where 81.2% of all staff is of minority status (Texas Education Agency, 2009b). Among teachers, 76% are Latina/o and 20.5% are White (Texas Education Agency, 2009b). This aspect is important to consider as it verifies the power that lies within schools as institutions, structured and operated to "ensure the maintenance of current social and economic stratifications, complete with the inequities that are a part of the current social order" (Oaks, 1982, p. 108). Thus, despite the fact that a majority of the educators in the schools were of the same racial/ethnic background as students, as functioning parts within the schooling system, educators still contributed to the cultural reproduction of inequity. Although aspects of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 2000) that enabled students to access college knowledge and assistance from school personnel were noted within students' narratives, such instances occurred on a more individual level within the greater schooling institution.

The racial and ethnic matching between students and school personnel then, did not eliminate tracking or seem to increase the degree to which students were able to access college knowledge and assistance. This finding supports a notion purported by Carter (2007). In her work on the academic and social experiences of Black and Latina/o youth in schools, Carter (2007) suggests that many African American and Latina/o

teachers themselves lack training in cultural awareness and thus "do not know enough about how culture influences achievement and evaluation to effectively teach" Black and Latina/o students (p. 70). Such leads to cases in which minority teachers are not culturally sensitive to students of their own culture. Additionally, Carter (2007) notes how the heterogeneity within a racial/ethnic group, particularly in regards to social class, can also influence how teachers relate to students. Students' narratives reflect the heterogeneity within the lived experiences of Mexican Americans, even those living within the same community. As such, this study's hybrid Chicana feminist and social capital lens was utilized to help illuminate such distinctions by taking into account how the intersectionality of students' various social identities influenced their ability to access college knowledge and assistance.

Aside from tracking based on academic achievement, several students also noted specifically being informed and encouraged to take dual enrollment and/or AP courses by school personnel. Thus, indicating another level of distinction in how students were able to access these courses. For instance, Alejandra said her counselor recommended that she take such courses. She said, "Counselors, they would tell me, like since I had really good grades in regular classes, they told me, 'Well why don't you challenge yourself?' Well I did and I liked it." Alejandra further noted a distinct advantage that dual enrollment courses offered, saying, "Dual [enrollment courses] prepare you more than regular classes...because they show you how to, how college classes work and how you have to be more responsible, you have to study more... and also the AP classes." When asked if counselors informed all students of this option Alejandra responded, "They do, but they

look at your classes, [you have to have] a certain grade. I believe for dual enrollment it should be 80 and above." Comparing Alejandra and Charlie's responses, it appears that there is also a lack of general consensus on the actual requirements needed to enroll in these courses.

Cristian and Sergio, on the other hand, indicated that it was teachers who suggested that they take these higher track classes. Cristian said he "found out" about these courses through his medical teacher. He said, "She was the one asking us about it and then she explained to us like what they consisted of and I got interested in that." Similarly, Sergio divulged the following in regards to how he was informed about the option to take dual enrollment courses, "Um, mainly by my teachers, they were offering dual enrollment classes and like, ok, what is that. And they described it as you get college credit while getting a credit in high school and basically I'm like, ok sounds fine." Given that some of these students only new about these courses through their counselors or teachers, suggests the possibility that other students who did meet the academic requirements to take these classes may not have done so simply because they were not informed of this curricular opportunity.

While most students who were informed and qualified to take AP or dual enrollment courses took advantage of this chance, there were three students who would be considered exceptions. Geneva chose not to take advanced placement (AP) or dual enrollment courses, but expressed her regret when reflecting on this decision. She also exposed the variations in teacher expectations and coursework between these higher track courses and regular courses:

> I should've gone with Pre-AP or AP classes, but maybe even dual because regular class it's...I mean I'm not gonna say I'm like, gonna sound conceited, I mean I'm not high standards, but I should've gone with more people with higher standards...It wasn't as challenging. It was too easy. You had people in there that would just do the work or just like blow it off and that was it. And they would just go back and put their IPOD on or start using their phone. I don't know, I mean I was really disappointed in myself, because I was like, man I should've gone with the AP. And one of my teachers, the pre-ap teacher that I had, he kept telling me, "Why didn't you, why didn't you go to AP?" And I kept telling him, "I didn't think I was gonna handle it with all the work," but I could've done it.

Geneva's comments indicate her decision to opt-out of taking advanced classes because she believed she could not "handle it." It is possible that this perception was influenced by her previous schooling experiences in regular classes, where lower expectations were often held for students based on their academic identity. Karina, on the other hand, admitted to not having been informed of the higher track courses. She said, "I didn't do that [take higher track courses] because I really didn't know, I wouldn't come to the counselors and say, you know, what can I do so I can get college credits." In this case, Karina blames herself for not seeking out the opportunity to take such courses from her counselor. Yet, this seems counterintuitive, as she did not know about these course offerings in the first place.

Finally, Maritza was the only student who specifically spoke in reference to the limited assistance that some teachers provided to students with their college choice process. Specifically, Maritza noted how teachers "don't like, kind of like waste a class period talking about how to [apply to college], they just tell you, oh, you need to just start applying and then they just go on with the lesson." When asked to expand on what she meant and whether she believed that teachers thought it a waste of time to talk about

college, Maritza responded, "Well it's because I guess they're trying to like meet they're own deadlines." In this instance, Maritza admits her perception of teachers as not being as supportive of students' college aspirations and college choice process as they could be, but yet she still gives teachers the benefit of the doubt by acknowledging how they are restricted by the curriculum and their own "deadlines." Other school personnel that students believed were restricted, however, were counselors.

Constrained counselors. A word often used by students to describe their counselors was "busy." Counselors were seen as a pivotal source of college information in students' school space, yet often unavailable to meet individually and actually impart this information and guidance. For instance, Jasmin said this of the college information available through the counselor's office:

> In the counselor's [office] they offer it [college information] right, but they don't really like announce it, like "Oh come, you have to make an appointment with the counselor" and sometimes they are always busy, they can never help you.

Tony also shared the trouble he had in trying to get his GPA through the counselor's office, which he needed for college applications. He admitted, "Every time I go to the counselors, like oh, well we're busy, or we can't tell you right now." In similar fashion, Tatiana reluctantly shared her perception of how counselors were constrained in their ability to meet with students individually:

> Well, I don't want to give the school a bad name or anything, but my teachers kind of help me mostly...The counselors not so much because they're always usually busy with paperwork and stuff so they don't really have a chance to talk to you. But if you go in there, there's brochures and stuff that you can pick up yourself and you can look at them.

Geneva's comments helped add perspective to the situation. She shared her observations, "In the morning it's like, the counselors get there late, during lunch, they're out for lunch, and they take I'm over exaggerating but they sometimes, they do take an hour and a half lunch. And then after school they're in such a rush to go home." Thus, students often tried to meet with counselors during the school day, during classes as Geneva revealed. However, this too was a challenge because "sometimes the teachers don't let them [students] go. They [teachers] don't let them [students] go and you have to have a pass in order to go to the counselor's" Geneva said.

Given students' perceptions of counselors' limited availability to meet with them and guide them in their college choice process, it is no surprise that students felt reluctant to seek counselors' assistance. This is the sentiment Maritza also revealed, "I rarely go talk to them [counselors]...because they're always super busy. They're like always full and right now with the schedule changes. So, it's really hard to actually sit down and talk to them." Maritza did, however, stress the importance of meeting with the counselor, particularly for seniors. She offered her opinion:

> I think it would be better if they [counselors] would go actually sit and talk to the people [students] that are gonna graduate this year so they can know [about the college choice process] because a lot of people don't know. Because I have a lot of friends that supposedly applied for financial aid but I don't know I guess something happened and they didn't get it so they had to get loans. And now they have, they owe like money to school and they're having problems because they didn't do some paperwork...They [counselors] don't really like go and sit down and talk to you and tell you what you're missing, you kind of have to go and look for them...I think that we should like get more information like in our classes. Like I know the counselors are usually busy, but they like could tell...your teachers to pass out like papers.

At least two of the counselor's interviewed, Ms. Manzano from Fuente High School, and Ms. Jordan, the designated higher education counselor at the district level, admitted that the multiple roles that counselors played in schools often constrained them and effected the quality of their services. When asked if she could improve anything within the school setting to help improve college access and college-going among students at her school, Ms. Manzano shared her wish:

> It would be in the perfect world to have one person in charge to try to help these kids [with college] because it does get very overwhelming trying to, you know help this one with the you know, just applying and then you have these kids coming in, "And I need this and I need that," and you just can't really give them the help that they should where you can just sit with them and say, "Okay, let me help you." It's like, "Okay *mijito* [sweetheart] start, and I'll be right back," and you pull somebody else in, and ok, "You know, well I need credits or I need this or I need that." And I go back over there and, "Okay *mijito* [sweetheart] now where are we at? Do you have any questions, okay, *alla voy* [there I go]." You know, so you just kind of come and go a lot.

Ms. Jordan's comments echoed those of Ms. Manzano and those of students saying, "It's hard for counselors who are overwhelmed, having been a counselor myself...We are at the point that, there's only one of me, even though the counselors are gonna do all that they can but they are overwhelmed." She further divulged her wish, which was "to have a financial aid counselor that would do anything about college" at each high school.

Thus, the stories shared of students' experiences with counselors reveal the reality of counselors' current situation in being overwhelmed because of the high numbers of students they serve and the varying and multiple duties they are designated to perform. These findings are consistent with previous research that has found counselors to be inaccessible (Vela-Gude, Cavazos Jr., Johnson, Fielding, Cavazos, Campos, & Rodriguez, 2009) and basically having "too many jobs assigned to them to be effective"

(McDonough, 2005). It is possible that students' social identities played a role in their ability to access their counselor, albeit such a conclusion could not be drawn from students' remarks. Given counselors' time constraints, however, it is plausible that students' social identities are used as a means of gauging the type of college information a student might need. Given the variation among students in this study and the exceptions that have been described that counter assumptions based on generational college status or income for instance, assuming such needs could prove harmful. What is clear is that students did have trouble accessing college information from counselors, in particular. Students also discussed challenges in accessing college information within their school space in general as well.

Trouble accessing college information. Within students' shared stories of the various challenges that they faced in accessing college information within their school space, several sub-themes emerged related to 1) a lack of integration of college knowledge into classrooms, 2) the publicity and dissemination of college knowledge and opportunities, and 3) restrictions on attending college events like University Day.

Lack of integration of college knowledge into classrooms. During the interviews with students, a question was posed regarding the integration of college information into their classrooms. A majority of students indicated that while teachers generally were supportive of students' college aspirations and at times provided them some college knowledge or assistance, this was often the exception to the rule. Tony specifically said that information about college was not integrated into classes on a daily basis. Disappointed Tony said, "No, not really like I wish it could be like that everyday. Like

counselors talk about it, teachers talk about it, but...[only] once every two months or so."

Sergio reveals these sentiments in the following exchange as well:

> MM: Is there any time when like researching and talking about college and what you need to do to get there, is integrated into your classes, or not really? You know throughout your day?
>
> Sergio: Not really.
>
> MM: Not really. It's just the, but the teachers do, do support and encourage.
>
> Sergio: Yes
>
> MM: But nothing's ever really integrated, at least college like, what you need to do to get there and all that stuff?
>
> Sergio: Mmm, not really.
>
> MM: So pretty much when are students supposed to do that? Like on their own, or?
>
> Sergio: More on their own, and with someone to help you.
>
> MM: Ok, how do you feel about that? I mean what do you think about that?
>
> Sergio: Um, I think teachers should be a little bit more informative and telling their students how, how this is done. I myself have been very confused on how I should apply but that's helped, I know my counselor has been giving us ways to apply for colleges and I've tried it and it's worked out so far.

Tony and Sergio's comments reveal the fact that there is not a specific time allotted during the school day for the dissemination of college knowledge in classrooms or to discuss college preparations and the college choice process. It is essentially up to teachers to integrate this information into the curriculum. As such, the school system as a whole inhibits students from equally accessing this college knowledge, and ultimately inhibits their ability to access a postsecondary education.

Publicity and dissemination of college knowledge and opportunities. While college knowledge was not necessarily integrated into classrooms in a systematic way, the manner in which college knowledge and opportunities were publicized and disseminated was also not systematic or necessarily equitable. For instance, there was a tendency to solely target seniors in regards to college information or opportunities. Students found this problematic. Jasmin revealed her feelings saying, "I think they [school] should let other grades go [to college presentations, and events on campus] so they could know what's ahead of them. Just like to get prepared like I wish I was my freshman year." Similarly, when asked about the specific newsletter that was distributed to seniors at Paloma High School Sergio revealed his understandings of the situation:

> MM: We talked about the newsletter given to seniors here [at Paloma] and you said it's distributed through teachers. Do you think other or all other students should get the newsletter as well?
>
> Sergio: I think maybe it should start going into the other grade levels mostly juniors, they're getting close to graduation also. And it should be started early like before senior year to make sure that they have all the information.
>
> MM: And you think if that would've happened for you that you would feel more prepared?
>
> Sergio: Yes, definitely if that actually started during junior year it would've really prepared me for what I am going through this year...Junior year would be better and you won't feel so rushed. You'd have your stuff prepared to give to college and stuff and like your scholarships.

Tony also spoke of his coursework in particular, and how he preferred to have been made aware of the opportunities to take AP and dual enrollment courses since his freshman year. He revealed these sentiments when asked about what advice he would give to a

freshman starting at Paloma High School who knew that he/she wanted to go to college, as he did. Tony replied:

> Well, like that's, that's kind of what messed me up, like freshman year, I was just like a regular kid, you know, just going to school or whatever. Like if they would've told me, "Oh, like if you don't want to not waste that much money start taking AP [advanced placement] classes from here on out, this is how many hours and this is how much money you're gonna save." So like, as a freshman like that's what I would tell the student, "Get as many AP classes, save your parents a lot of money. And get scholarships and all that."

Geneva also explained how it was at times difficult to actually obtain the college information that was being disseminated through her school's daily announcements. She said,

> I try to hear it [college information] during the, during the [announcements]. And that's the bad thing you don't hear it. Well, in some classes you can because they're really quite, but in my class second period you don't hear it...That's why I want to like, like I kind of want to tell like either someone in the office, tell them...[to change] it back to in the morning because not a lot of people can hear it.

Maritza referred to a different challenge in accessing college opportunities, specifically in regards to various college trips provided to students at her school. She acknowledged that several of her friends had been able to visit various college campuses the previous year, but she was unaware of how they were able to do this. This is evident from her response:

> Some of my friends went last year [on a college visit], but I don't know how they did it. I don't know. And like last time two [colleges] were here and announced that some people were gonna go to some field trip like to one of the colleges. And we didn't know about it either. I was like hmmm...I don't know, I guess they [students] go to the counselors like all the time or I really don't know how they get the information.

Maritza exhibits her frustration in not knowing how this opportunity to visit a college campus was communicated to students. Interestingly, instead of realizing how schools might not distribute college knowledge or opportunities in an equitable fashion, Maritza

interprets this opportunity as one based on students' own motivation and responsibility. This is suggested when she notes how it is the students who "go to the counselors like all the time" that are able to access such an opportunity. Even when all students were made aware of college opportunities, however, there were instances when school imposed restrictions prevented students from accessing such events.

Restrictions on attending college events. A few students indicated knowing of University Day and wanting to attend, but were denied the opportunity. Because Selena was enrolled in certain programs at her school, for instance, she was unable to take advantage of this college opportunity. She admitted, "University Day, I did not attend because I was not allowed...Because we, like certain people from the CNA [Certified Nurse's Assistant] and EMT [Emergency Medical Technician] programs weren't allowed to go even though we had them [clinicals] in the afternoon...they didn't allow us to go." As suggested in Selena's comments, attending University Day would not have conflicted with her program requirements, yet she was still restricted from participating in the college event.

Charlie and Cristian were also unable to participate in University Day despite wanting to attend. This was due in part to the restrictions placed on high schools in the district regarding how many students they could take to the event. In an informal conversation with Ms. Manzano, one of the counselors at Fuente High School, she indicated that high schools in the district were allowed to take only 250 seniors to University Day. Given that Fuente's senior class in 2008-09 consisted of 640 students, while the senior class at Paloma during this same school year included 438 students

(Texas Education Agency, 2009b), it is likely that almost half of all seniors at both schools were unable to attend University Day, if enrollments remained consistent for the 2009-10 school year.

Thus, almost through an ironic chuckle Charlie said "I tried [to go] but, what's it called...what's it called, like they, it was already full, like the buses were full and everything." When asked how he felt about having missed this opportunity he "sadly" admitted:

> I missed out on good information...I was ill informed mostly. I guess, first of all because I was just a little too slow to get the pamph- to get the paper [for University Day]...I was just in the dark about it, like I don't know if anybody was talking about it either, yeah.

When asked if he had heard of University Day or had the opportunity to attend, Cristian revealed similar sentiments in the following dialogue:

> MM: I know there was a University Day, right, they did? Did you hear about that or did you go or?
>
> Cristian: Oh yeah, to the, they were giving out the information for those, for the field trips and it was only like for the 100 first students to go.
>
> MM: Ok, so did you get to go to that or no?
>
> Cristian: No (laughing).
>
> MM: You didn't get to go?
>
> Cristian: No
>
> MM: Did you just not make it in time or you just weren't interested?
>
> Cristian: Yeah, when I went to ask for the paper they had already given them all.

In Cristian's second interview, he admitted how he felt about not having been able to attend, "Well, it didn't really feel that bad because I could still find out on my own but it

would've been a lot of help to like see them [colleges] all in one place." While Cristian did not seem terribly upset about not having been able to attend University Day, he did suggest that not attending was a lost opportunity.

Overall, perhaps students' general sentiments regarding the trouble they faced in accessing college information within their school space were expressed through the following conversation with Cristina:

> Cristina: There's a fairly good amount of information about the colleges here at school, but not as much as some people would like...Some of the information is there and like anyone can get it, but um, sometimes you kind of have to ask for it in order to get it.
>
> MM: So it's not that easily accessible
>
> Cristina: It's not that easily...I'm a little like disappointed about that because there's a lot of people here that want to go to college and because of lack of information they're not able to choose which college to go to and sometimes end up not even going to college at all...Not a lot of people know [when university representatives come to the school]. I think that like, um, a few people found out and then those few people tell some more people and tell some more people
>
> MM: So, it's more like word of mouth?
>
> Cristina: Yes, word of mouth. And most of the people that like that do know are seniors and I think it would be better if everyone knew. Like not just the seniors, although that is the main targeted, target people, more people, like the rest of the grades so that way they can say, "Oh, wow, look!" That way they [school personnel] can get them [non-senior students] interested in college.

What Cristina and other students revealed were some of the challenges they faced in navigating the college choice process amidst their varying multiple identities within their school space. In the following section, the possible systemic barriers that also inhibited students from accessing college information, support and assistance through their social networks are discussed.

Issues of equity and equality related to college knowledge. In examining Mexican American students' college choice process through a hybrid Chicana feminist and social capital framework, a more critical lens was used to uncover how students' access to college knowledge and support was particularly inhibited in their school space, given the systemic nature of school systems. During their first interview, students were asked to describe the kind of information their school provided them, and specifically whether they believed that the information the school provided was available to all students. In answering the latter question, students were almost instinctively positive, indicating that their schools did provide college information equally to all students. At the same time however, students placed the crux of the responsibility of obtaining college information on students themselves. Yet within some students' conversations, there were evident contradictions as when several acknowledged the difference in assistance and support provided to top 10% students. Thus, indicating the influence of students' social identities in accessing college knowledge and support from their social networks within the school context.

A majority of students, including Fernando, Jasmin, Tatiana, Cristina, Henry, Eddie, Beto, Karina, Zulema, Paulo, and Charlie all indicated that their schools provided college information, support and assistance to students equally and equitably, regardless of students' backgrounds or social identities. Many of these same students, however, also indicated that obtaining this information was primarily the responsibility of each student. For instance, Cristina said, "Background doesn't come into play like in how much information you get, it's just the information is there for everyone and anyone. But the

thing is most people don't take the time to actually go and get that information that they need." Henry expanded on this with the following remarks:

> I think it [college information and assistance] is available quite equally. Students just don't take advantage of it. Because I mean, you can easily go to the counselor's office, spend maybe 5 or 10 minutes and you'll get a lot of the information that you need on scholarships, on different schools, on the kind of classes you need for different programs, deadlines for things. We also have, we have a lot of [events]. What's it called? We have a career day for college.

Eddie also acknowledged the various attempts that his school and district made to distribute college information, "I think they try to give it to everybody equally, like they provide, like for example, nights again, the college nights, the little fairs that they have for everybody." He also added, "I mean they call in every single period I guess every history class, they try to bring them so it's like everybody that has a history class comes in. So, everybody has the opportunity it's just up to the student." Karina's response echoed those of previous students, "I think it's equal it just depends on the person because there's a lot of kids here who do listen to the intercom and do listen to teachers you know, for what they have to say, and there's others who really don't care." Charlie also spoke to the individual choice that students' were believed to have:

> I think every student here has an equal opportunity you know, I mean they [high school personnel] stress it, it's their [students'] choice to whether to listen to it or not, or even, actually even be interested in going to college to receive that information. Because like teachers do try telling us but some students are just so, so bent on not even going like, "No I'm not gonna go to college." You know, some teachers just give up and some actually just keep on telling them, like "Oh, you can have a better life you know," it's like some students are like, "What? That's not possible for me." You know.

When asked why some students might think that college was not for them Charlie continued, saying:

> Cause they probably see their parents or they probably see where they live or they probably just see the grades that they're getting or the amount of studying that you do [in college], I mean, every student could make it really, but just some see different things...I'd say that if a student gets more assistance, it's because they're asking more than others. Yeah, so it's all, it all depends on the student.

Paulo even responded to the question by refocusing the attention from students' schools to the students themselves. He exclaimed:

> Well, it's not really like the school, like it's the student, like if you want to get the information, you have to look for the information, you have to ask about it, like, not everyone's gonna like just tell you about it. Like I had to like ask my counselors, it wasn't until this year when they started talking to us more about the different opportunities and like colleges, but I had to like ask the counselors and teachers around, like it's really just the student's responsibility. Like if you want to go to college, you have to try, you have to go get the stuff.

Thus, these students' perceptions suggest that their schools are providing college information and assistance to students in an equal and equitable fashion.

A couple of students, however, did notice an inequality and inequity in how college information and opportunities were distributed among students at their schools. Among these were Maritza and Tony. Maritza, for example, shared her observations regarding the limited access to University Day in particular. She said:

> Like when we went to the University Day not everybody like all the seniors could go, just like the first 200 that signed up or the first 100 or something. Not everybody could go and like so some field trips that they have, not everybody could go, just a few. The first ones that sing up and the ones that have the highest scores or whatever...I think that's not fair because not everybody's getting like the equal opportunities to see like the colleges or like see what they, they can do.

She also mentioned her belief regarding the privilege provided students in the top 10%. "Like the top 10...they kind of like give them more like privilege I guess. Because they could like choose whatever college they want to go to, if they're in the top 10 or top 5," she said. In this case, the "they" that Maritza was referring to was quite possibly the

entire schooling system in the state of Texas, given that the top 10% policy is statewide and affects both K-12 schools and higher education institutions.

Alternatively, Tony spoke to the manner in which college information and opportunities were particularly targeted to seniors, as opposed to all high school students. This inequality is revealed in the following conversation:

> MM: Would you say that that information that the school provides is available to all students equally or do you think that maybe sometimes some students don't get as much help as others, or maybe, you know, that maybe some get a little bit more?
>
> Tony: I think, well pretty much, pure seniors are the ones that get the information. Like that's the way it is, like pretty much all the seniors, like that's the only ones they [high school personnel] tell. Like they don't say juniors or sophomores or freshman, all the stuff that they need and stuff.
>
> MM: How do you or what do you think about that? Like do you think that's good or do you think that maybe not or what do you think about that?
>
> Tony: Not really, because like I said, like freshman need that information too so they can start advancing in stuff and take the PSAT like I never knew about the PSAT and the SAT. And like I didn't know about all these tests you have to take to go to college until last year, then they started telling me.

Not all students, however, were as confident or consistent in being able to state whether they believed that the information their school provided was available to all students

Numerous other students, including Alejandra, Geneva, Rocio, Selena, Cristian, Sergio, and Steven, offered contradictory responses to the question of whether their school provided college information to all students equally and equitably. Although, once again, the main responsibility of obtaining such information or gaining access to opportunities was placed on the student. Alejandra, for instance, shared her beliefs:

> I believe that if you're like a top 10 or a top 5% student, it might like help you a little bit more, because they'll [high school personnel] give you more

> information. Well it's still up to the student though, I mean the information's there with the counselors, so it's up to you...I think it [top 10 or top 5% status] might influence [a student's access to college information or opportunities]...I would say that, but other than that...It's an equal thing.

Geneva also seemed to reconsider her first response to this question upon further reflection. During her first interview, Geneva said, "I think it's pretty equal. Everybody hears it. Everybody ends up hearing about it, and if they don't it's usually because they weren't paying attention. But it is pretty fair here. It's pretty fair." Subsequently in her second interview, Geneva partially recanted her first observation. After discussing her thoughts on how her own multiple identities had influenced her college choice process, and specifically how her not being in the top 10% of her class influenced this experience, she appeared to grapple with this notion of equality:

> Geneva: I guess it's, it's not that it's unfair, it's just that they [top 10%] worked harder to get, to get more information.
>
> MM: So do you think that you deserve less information because you don't happen to be top 10, or?
>
> Geneva: No, not less. I think I'm pretty, I think I'm pretty good with information. Kind of, sort of, kind of, maybe, I don't know...It's making me think that's why. I mean I guess it depends...I always thought it was just like, I don't know, ok, you're smart, ok, so, whatever. I mean I'm fine with the way I am. I mean I get pretty good grades. I'm not [in] the [top] 10%, but then again I don't want to, I don't want to...cause...It's pretty fair...Pretty fair, it's pretty fair. Everybody gets the same information, well, everybody gets the same amount of information. Except the scholar, the top 10%, and the really, really the TM programs and stuff they get...I don't know, opportunities, scholarships.
>
> MM: That not everyone else gets?
>
> Geneva: They get more, not that they get more info, it's just that they get, ok, well I guess they get more info.

Rocio exhibited similar contradictions in her responses. For instance, in her first interview she said, "I think they [students] are helped equally [at my school]...I think they're all equal like the top 10, top 25 [in getting college information from the school]." However, when prompted to revisit this issue during her second interview Rocio replied, "They may give them more information...the counselors...to like the top 5%...But it's still the same, the counselors like the, the follow ups and all that...[but] they [top 5%] probably have more opportunities because they're in the top 5%." In analyzing Rocio's comments, it is likely that she perceived the top 5% or 10% students as getting more college information because they are eligible for more scholarships, yet she believed that they received an equal amount of assistance from counselors as far as time was concerned. However, an equal amount of time does not necessarily account for the quality of the relationships formed between counselors and top 5% or 10% students.

Similarly, when asked if the college information and assistance that the school provided was available to all students equally, Steven indicated the following during his first interview:

> I think honestly, it's distributed equally but it's only unequal when the student tends to ask more about, instead of, because you know, the counselor will just, generally just give you the information that they know, but if this student is more interested in a specific scholarship then they'll probably ask, "Ok, what about this or what about this scholarship, this grant?" I think that's when it goes a little bit, a little bit bias in that sense. Because they're more prepared and they want to be prepared and they want to be ready for college. I think that's when it gets a little bit biased.

During Steven's second interview however, he was asked if he still agreed with this response after having thought more about what characteristics, or social identities, might

advantage or disadvantage students within their school space. He replied in the following way:

> I think some of these characteristics come into play, like for some kids whose parents' income is low, I'm pretty sure they'll [counselors] ask them [students] you know, "You know, you should really check out these specific scholarships because they're the ones that help you a lot because they're a four year scholarship or a ten thousand dollar scholarship." I think when they [counselors] check your information I think that they check specific information that a certain student has and that's where they come into play and try to help out...It doesn't matter if the child does not have that much of an income from his parents, [however] or if he is fifth generation college or first-generation, it shouldn't matter because a student is a student. If that student wants to learn, why should he be denied the privilege to get a scholarship?

In this sense, Steven viewed the assistance counselors provided students as individualized, which on one hand he viewed as beneficial. Yet, Steven also revealed his dissatisfaction with assisting some students more than others based on their backgrounds, or social identities. Steven believed it would be best to provide all students with the same degree of college support.

Summary

In keeping with previous research (González et al., 2003), findings from this study indicate that Mexican American students relied on various entities and individuals within their school space for college knowledge, support and assistance. This included the school curriculum, co-curricular programs, school and district college events and presentations, counselors, teachers, peers, and higher education representatives and institutions. However, both students 'multiple identities and systemic barriers within students' schools shaped their access to college knowledge and assistance, resulting in greater opportunities for some while constraining others.

In particular, several students who were taking dual enrollment and/or advanced placement courses acknowledged the advantage in doing so, noting both the more rigorous nature of the curriculum versus that provided in regular classes as well as the higher expectations on the part of teachers. These aspects were deemed pivotal in navigating the college choice process. Given that students had to meet certain academic requirements (e.g., grade point average) in order to access such courses, however, there were other students who indicated they were not afforded this opportunity. Thus, tracking (Oaks, 1982, 1985; Oakes & Guiton, 1995) was evident within students' schools. In previous research on the topic, however, tracking is noted for particularly disadvantaging low-income and racial/ethnic minority students (Oaks, 1982, 1985; Oakes & Guiton, 1995). In South Texas, however, a majority of both students and educators within students' schools are Latina/o, providing for some degree of racial and ethnic matching between students and teachers and indicating that other distinctions may account for tracking than simply academic identity. These findings support the work of Carter (2007), who suggested that many African American and Latina/o teachers themselves lack training in cultural awareness, an aspect that may keep them from effectively teaching racially/ethnically diverse groups of students and being culturally sensitive to Black and Latina/o students, in particular.

Findings indicated that racial and ethnic matching between students and school personnel did not lessen or eliminate tracking nor did it increase the degree to which students were able to access college knowledge and assistance from school personnel in general. While more instances in which teachers, in particular, individually assisted

students with their college choice process or integrated college knowledge into the curriculum tended to occur in the context of higher track courses, such instances tended to be exceptions as opposed to the general rule. School personnel that tended to provide greater guidance and personal assistance with the college choice process were those who had built meaningful relationships with students where *respeto* (respect) and *confianza* (trust) were evident. This was the most obvious in the relationships that students had with co-curricular sponsors/teachers such as coaches or band directors. Through these relationships, these co-curricular sponsors/teachers advised and shared knowledge regarding the college choice process with students in culturally relevant ways, as through *consejos* (words/narratives of wisdom). Alternatively, counselors, who students overwhelmingly recognized as key sources of general college information at their schools, were often discounted as individuals that could provide individual assistance with the college choice process. This was primarily because counselors were perceived as unavailable and not necessarily unwilling to assist, a finding that coincides with previous studies (McDonough, 2005; Vela-Gude et al., 2009).

From an institutional perspective, schools and universities showed signs of collaborating to assist students in the college choice process and create a college-going culture within students' high schools. This was done through joint efforts to organize college presentations and events. However, such efforts were not always culturally sensitive to the extent that students' value of *familismo* was fully taken into account and understood. Efforts to be inclusive of parents and families, given this value for instance,

appeared to be minimal, with parents seemingly only invited to college events and presentations at the district level.

Despite such challenges in accessing college knowledge and assistance from school personnel, a majority of students gave their schools the benefit of the doubt when asked about issues of equity in the dissemination of college knowledge and assistance. Only a few students were forthcoming about the challenges they faced. Although some were perplexed by the question when posed, as if they had never thought about the possibility that schools were being inequitable. Such seems logical, given that schools often stress and maintain their meritocratic nature. Students are often made to feel that they earn grades that they deserve based solely on their performance, and not based on a multitude of factors that ensure the maintenance of inequitable social structures (Valencia, 1997, 2002; Valenzuela, 1999).

Within students' schools, however, peers were sources of support and at times provided college knowledge, usually in informal conversations. Among peers there was not a level of competition, but instead a sense of community, of wanting to help each other succeed. In the next chapter, students' college choice process is discussed within the context of cyberspace.

Chapter 8-The Social Capital within Students' Cyberspace

The work of Lin (1999) highlights the role of cybernetworks, or what he defines as "social networks in cyberspace" as sources of social capital (p. 43). Lin (2001) describes these networks as being "constructed by individuals and groups of individuals" as through such means as "email, chat rooms, news groups, and clubs," as well as by "informal and formal (e.g., economic, political, religious, media) organizations for the purpose of exchanges, including resource transactions and relations reinforcement" (p. 212). As such, universities and other educational entities that provide students with college related information and materials via the Internet can be considered as such organizations and thus a part of students' networks once there is a resource transaction.

Furthermore, the means by which cyberspace lends itself to this phenomenon can be more fully understood by considering the words of Lin (2001):

> Access to free sources of information, data and other actors has created growing networks and social capital at unprecedented pace. Networks are expansive and yet at the same time intimate. Networking transcends time (connecting whenever one can and wants to) and space (accessing to sites around the globe directly or indirectly if direct access is denied). (p. 216)

Additionally, with the growing use of the Internet, which has provided for the increase in communications and networking among individuals and entities, there is "a revolutionary rise of social capital" (Lin, 2001, p. 214). As such, it is of no surprise that all but one student explicitly noted the Internet as a source of college information, support, and assistance. Whether students were doing research on colleges through various websites, accessing information on or registering for college entrance exams such as the SAT, or connecting with friends through Facebook who provided them with further college

information or advice, students navigated within cyberspace, specifically utilizing the Internet, to help negotiate their college choice process. Hence, the entities that they were able to connect with online, whether they were specific university websites or the *College Board*, for instance, were sources of social capital for students. Additionally, students did not note any limits or barriers that they faced within this space.

As previously noted, almost all students named the Internet as a main conduit for college information, support and assistance in the midst of their college choice process. In doing so, most also divulged the fact that they utilized the Internet to conduct independent research, where they visited various university and educational websites on their own in order to obtain needed information. This is revealed in the following conversation with Fernando:

> MM: Where would you say that most of the information that you've gotten, where is it from?
>
> Fernando: Online, online, apply texas.org I think, I don't know. From that website, and from UT [University of Texas at Austin] the webpage.
>
> MM: The UT website. Ok, so pretty much you did it, you've been doing it on your own. Has anybody been showing you kind of, what websites, or showing you, or helping you with that, or not really?
>
> Fernando: Mmm, no [it has] basically [been] all on my own.

Fernando's remarks indicate the means by which he was solely making sense of the college information he was able to access through specific university websites and more general educational websites. In this respect, the lack of guidance from someone who is experienced with the college choice process and is perhaps more familiar with the varying educational websites available online can be of concern. Sergio and Beto,

however, shared similar sentiments. When asked the same initial question as Fernando, Beto's response was, "I would say from the colleges themselves...I've checked out their websites...I've checked out a little bit of [local/regional university], UTSA [University of Texas at San Antonio], UT [University of Texas at] Austin, and I think it was Corpus." In like fashion, Sergio indicated the manner in which he often found himself researching colleges online, "Sometimes I just sit around at home and go on the computer and I just go to colleges or universities. I type in the names."

Alejandra and Jasmin also noted their use of the Internet to access college information, albeit in more general terms. Alejandra, for example, said she had obtained the most college information "from the computer, from the Internet," specifically by "researching best schools [and] what they have in the schools." Alternatively, Jasmin first noted other means of obtaining college information, as through college pamphlets, but then distinctively mentioned the need to "research it on your own [even further] if you want to go to college." She specifically indicated it was necessary to "look at the website [where] they [universities] tell you [additional information]." Ironically, while Jasmin shared this, she also divulged the following:

> I have a computer at home but I don't have Internet at the moment...[that is why if I do] not [do it at home] I do it here in the library or at the many labs we have...There's two labs and then there's computers in the classroom...[you can go] before or after school [or] during class if you have a pass.

For someone like Eddie, who was reluctant about seeking assistance with his college choice process from a counselor, utilizing the Internet seemed optimal. In the following dialogue with Eddie he reveals why:

> Eddie: I've never talked to a counselor ever, like ever. I have not, like about asking questions, just if they call me, I go. But I never go to them. I go online and look for it myself. I've gone to the Texas State University website, [I] look [at] what they need[ed] SAT scores what type of essays, UT as well, and [local university] as well. Yeah.
>
> MM: And you have a computer at home to be able to do that?
>
> Eddie: Yeah
>
> MM: Is there a reason why you have chosen to do it that way as opposed to seeking assistance from others or even the counselor?
>
> Eddie: Uh, I don't really, like, I'm the kind of person, like [I do not ask] like oh, help me in this, help me in that, I try to do it myself. And then if I guess, like I might not ask for help, but if like, like if I need help I won't ask you for help. If you help me, I'll gladly take it and like thank you so much, but I won't ask you for help. It's like really weird, but I guess I'm like that.

Later in the conversation when asked where he obtained the most information about college, Eddie revealed what quite possibly may have been the main reason that he utilized the Internet for college knowledge so much. He said, "Online, online, computer of course. In today's world, teenagers are always on the computer, so I'm like Facebook, I'm bored of this, let me go to the Texas State University website, to applytexas.org, and look up stuff especially the essays." What is implied in Eddie's response was his tendency to often be online for various other reasons, and as such this made it all the more likely for him to access college information through the same means. Given students' heavy reliance on specific university websites for information, it behooves universities to ensure that their websites are user friendly. Perhaps, what might make doing college research online less arduous, as researching individual universities one at a time can be seen as time consuming and possibly overwhelming, the future might see the

creation of more single portals that combine aspects of social networking sites while still providing college information like that of Zinch.

Tatiana was the one exception that mentioned the "college-admissions portal" Zinch (Cohen, 2009), but given her extensive use of the site and its influence on her college choice process it was deemed essential to mention. Additionally, given the continued expansion of social networking, such sites are where the future of college choice and college admissions research is most likely headed. Tatiana explained:

> I've gone on websites like Zinch, I'm on Zinch, and colleges send me stuff from there. So, that's kind of how I've been narrowing it down...Zinch it's like um, it's kind of like having a Myspace, only not because like, it's like you have your account and then colleges send you love, they send you letters and stuff about their school and stuff and then you can like, there is a little thing where you can apply to them and you can ask them oh, well you know, what's this, what's that...It has the college stuff, it has scholarships, it has stuff to do like socializing and stuff and it has a bunch of little clubs online...So there's like clubs and all sorts of stuff that you can do and you can like put up your resume. And you can put up like, if you write or sketch art or something you can scan them and put them online and it's cool.

An unknown website to me at the time, Tatiana continued to describe how she had learned of the portal and how it had multiple capabilities. This is revealed in the following conversation:

> Tatiana: My friend, she told me to sign up for it because if you sign up
>
> MM: Oh is this the top college friend?
>
> Tatiana: Yes, the top college friend, but she wanted all of us to sign up. Like, she told all of our group of friends, like a ton of people, because if someone recommends you to go to the website and you say that someone recommended you and then you get the scholarship, they get the same amount of money.
>
> MM: Oh, I wonder is...
>
> Tatiana: It's called mooching.

> MM: I wonder if it started like if it was colleges started this, or some sort of college
>
> Tatiana: I don't know how it started, I just know. It has a cute little *monito* [character] at the end when you log out, it goes like this, it has this cute face. It's so adorable.
>
> MM: I'm gonna go on there and check it out.
>
> Tatiana: It's a pretty cool website and then actually you can check like if you're interested in the schools, you can check that you're interested, like it'll tell you. You go and like delete this thing and then it let's you, are you sure you want to, it will file that college and it won't let you get it anymore because you don't want to go there. But if you really like the college like it'll ask you ok, wait, before you go, like it gives your address and everything and you have to fill out all the information and then it'll send it to the college so that the college can send you information and you can put like yes, I'm applying here, I already got in and then it'll ask you like questions, how long did it take? All this stuff, so you can give more information to other people.
>
> MM: Oh, wow, so it's like a social networking for college.
>
> Tatiana: It's cool, it kind of reminds me of Facebook and Myspace and stuff because your friends are called dweebs...It's a pretty funny website, it's pretty cool.

Tatiana's mention of social networking sites such as Facebook and Myspace, as well as Eddie's previous acknowledgement of Facebook, suggested students' familiarity with various forms of online communication. Other students noted how email and chatting through instant messaging, for instance, were additional means of obtaining college information online, particularly from higher education institutions themselves, or students' own high schools.

Geneva, Selena, Beto, and Eddie all referred to email or instant messaging as a conduit for the exchange of college information. Geneva and Selena, for example, both noted how they had provided their email addresses to their schools in order to obtain

college information through email. Selena said this was through "the counselors, [who] have a sign-up sheet...[where] you put your, your email address and they'll send you scholarship information and college information and all that stuff." Geneva spoke of having created an "account" on the school's webpage that enabled her to "get information for school [college]." She admitted however, that she could only check her electronic mail "every once in awhile," really only "on the weekends" because of other various family obligations during the week that kept her busy. Beto also recalled having provided his email address when taking his SAT and PSAT in years past, and from this he was able to receive college information via email. He said, "They'll email you. And like I'll read them [emails] and [think] well, like oh, this is nice, and I like the way it looks and then I go on the computer and I look into it [more]."

Eddie specifically mentioned using instant messaging as a means of obtaining college information and support from his best friend who was attending college in Colorado. When asked to discuss when he had started his college choice process, and researching online in particular, Eddie shared this instance:

> It was the ending of sophomore year because I have my best friend, she's still my best friend now, she goes to, she went to Colorado State University and we'd IM [instant message] each other, chat and she'd be like, ok, what are you gonna do? So, I'm like ok, I'm gonna go online and check stuff out. Like, what's this college stuff...like actually getting in it. So, [I began] look[ing] at the websites at the end of sophomore year and then like ok, just take the SAT's and stuff like that.

Eddie's story is a testament to Lin's (1999, 2001) work on the power of social networking and the social capital that can be accessed in cyberspace. As is evident, instant messaging with his best friend about college and his future aspirations helped urge Eddie to begin his college choice process.

Overall, the widespread use of the Internet among students as a means of obtaining college information, support and assistance signified their negotiation of their college choice process within the virtual dimension of cyberspace. It is important to note that students' various social identities did not explicitly emerge as influential in this space. Such supports Lin's (2001) notion that cyberspace, and specifically cybernetworks, "represent a new era of democratic and entrepreneur networks and relations in which resources flow and are shared by a large number of participants with new rules and practices, many of which are devoid of colonial intent or capability" (p. 215). Albeit, some students did indicate not having access to the Internet at home, which could be a reflection of their income identity and the inequity that exists in access to the world wide web. Nonetheless, these students and several others did articulate the fact that they felt they always had access to computers and the Internet either at school or at the public library in Villa Verde. Therefore, students' general sentiments about their access to college information via the Internet is summarized by Paulo's words, "Just with having a computer with the Internet you can access anything basically."

Summary

This chapter focused on cyberspace, a space students traversed while negotiating their own social identities and attempting to access college information, support and assistance through their social networks as a part of their college choice process. Students specifically identified the Internet as a main source to assist them in navigating this experience. In doing so, they often described using the Internet as a means of researching higher education institutions on their own, without mentioning the assistance of parents

or siblings in this process. Students' comments do suggest that social networking sites such as Facebook and alternative means of communicating with individuals online as through instant messaging, however, facilitate the exchange of college knowledge and are on the rise. Interestingly, students did not allude to any challenges faced within cyberspace in the context of their college choice experience, particularly in regards to accessing the Internet or college information from various websites. However, this could have been indicative of this study's limitations, as specific questions related to the specific use of the Internet to assist with the college choice process were not included in the interview protocol. Nonetheless, these findings suggest a diminishing of the digital divide between low-income and/or racial/ethnic minority students and their counterparts.

The latter finding coincides with previous research by Venegas (2006). In her work on the role and use of the Internet in the financial aid process of low-income students, Venegas (2006) concludes that "the [digital] divide is not as wide as feared" between urban, low-income students and their counterparts, as they have access to Internet through various means (p. 1655). However, Venegas (2006) did indicate, "Even when students engage in the online process, they face challenges that are particular to their personal experiences" (p. 1661). In the context of this study then, the ability to navigate the Internet to access college knowledge is dependent on a students' familiarity with the resources available through this means and more generally, experience with the Internet. The implications of these findings are further explored in the final chapter of this study.

Chapter 9-Discussion and Conclusion

Introduction

Navigating the college choice process can be challenging. Even the most academically astute and motivated student can find dealing with the multitude of postsecondary options, accessing current and accurate college information, and completing the necessary steps to actually apply to a college, such as taking college entrance exams and completing the financial aid process, a bit overwhelming. This process is further complicated for students who are from low-income households (Berkner & Chavez, 1997; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000b; Gibson, et al., 2004; Joyce, 1987; Kurlaeander, 2006; Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998) or who are the first in their family to attend college (Choy, 2001; Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Sáenz et al., 2007; Terenzini et al., 1996; Tym et al., 2004), which is the case for many Mexican American students (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000b; Choy, 2001; Sáenz et al., 2007). Given that a limited number of studies have focused on exploring the intricacies of the college choice process of this particular racial/ethnic population (Ceja, 2001, 2004, 2006; González et al., 2003; Hurtado-Ortiz & Gauvain, 2006; Perez, 2007; Perez & McDonough, 2008; Person & Rosenbaum, 2006; Rosas & Hamrick, 2002; Talavera-Bustillos, 1998), there are other aspects to the college choice process of Mexican Americans that have yet to be discovered such as the role that the intersectionality of their social identities, such as their race/ethnicity, regional identity, class identity, and generational college status, and culturally unique characteristics play in their college choice process. Such revelations

could be particularly beneficial to educators in the K-12 and higher education arenas and policymakers who can utilize such information to better assist Mexican American students and their families in successfully navigating the college choice process.

This study specifically sought to expand on current research and provide a deeper, more critical understanding of the college choice process of 20 Mexican American high school seniors from the South Texas Border through individual, in-depth interviews (Seidman, 2006) and the use of a hybrid Chicana feminist and social capital theoretical lens. As such, two primary questions guided this research: 1) How does the intersectionality of Mexican American students' social identities shape their college choice? and 2) Specifically, how does the intersectionality of Mexican American students' social identities influence their college aspirations and their access to college support, information, and assistance through their social networks?

Key findings indicated students' multiple social identities influenced both the development of their college aspirations and their ability to access college knowledge and support from their social networks in both positive and negative ways within their four main spaces (cultural/familial space, community space, school space, and cyberspace) of existence. The social identities that emerged most often among students included: generational college status, sibling identity, academic identity, class, racial/ethnic identity, co-curricular identity, and regional identity. These key findings and their implications are further addressed in subsequent sections of this chapter.

Utilizing an integrated Chicana feminist and social capital theoretical framework to view the college choice process of Mexican American students was one of this study's

critical contributions to the field of higher education. While previous studies focused on the college choice process of Mexican American or Latina/o students have adopted a social capital theoretical framework, either solely or in conjunction with another perspective (Ceja, 2001, 2006; González et al., 2003; Perez, 2007; Perez & McDonough, 2008; Talavera-Bustillos, 1998), these frameworks alone provide an incomplete picture, as they do not adequately capture the complexity of Mexican Americans' lived experiences given their multiple social identities in the context of the college choice process. More specifically, while social capital theory provided the ability to identify students' social networks that were the sources of college knowledge and support (e. g., parents, teachers, neighbors) within the various spaces they occupied (e.g., cultural/familial, school, etc.), a Chicana feminist perspective acknowledged students' culturally unique characteristics and their specific existence in an ever-changing multidimensional third space "borderland" where multiple identities, conflicting cultures and various ways of knowing were traversed on a daily basis (Anzaldúa, 1987; Pérez, 1999; Sandoval, 2000). As such, three key tenets of a Chicana feminist theory that guided this study included notions of identity, intersectionality, and space. Recalling previous descriptions of these concepts, identity in this study was understood as students' "self-understandings, especially those with strong emotional resonance" (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998, p. 3) that are dynamic and co-constructed (Elenes, 2003;Urrieta, 2007), as they are based on students' relation to others and what students "are not" (Sarup, 1996, p. 47). Some of the social identities prominent in Chicana feminist thought are those related to race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, class, language, age,

nativity, and religious affiliation. Additionally, these identities are considered to be coexisting and intersecting within each Mexican American individual. Davis (2008) defines this notion of intersectionality in the excerpt below:

> The interactions between gender, race, and other categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power. (p. 68)

Thus, the lives of Mexican American students are shaped by the intersectionality of their multiple identities in the context of whatever spaces they inhabit. These "spaces" are considered both literal and figurative. Literally, space consists of a "place, location, locality, landscape, environment, home, city, region, territory, and geography" (Soja, 1996, p. 1). However, figuratively "space" is also a place where identities reside and are navigated. As Elenes (2003) notes, the specific "borderland" space acknowledged in Chicana feminist theory is defined as "the discourse of people who live between different worlds...It is, a discourse, a language, that explains the social conditions of subjects with hybrid identities...people in-between U.S. and Mexican culture(s), with identities that are in constant flux" (p. 191).

In addition to these key concepts, other aspects of a Chicana feminist perspective that were taken into account in this study included Mexican Americans' knowledge sharing, as through *consejos* (narrative storytelling/words of wisdom) (Delgado-Gaitan, 1994; Fránquiz & Salazar, 2004; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Valdés, 1996; Villenas, et al., 2006) and *testimonios* (testimonials) (Villenas, et al., 2006), and the means by which Mexican origin individuals built relationships with each other based on *respeto*, or respect (Fránquiz & Salazar, 2004; Valdés, 1996), and *confianza*, or mutual trust

(Fránquiz & Salazar, 2004; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2003; Vélez-Ibañez & Greenberg, 1992). Employing a theoretical lens that took such aspects into account was especially vital given the specific context of this study in the South Texas Border region where 86-89% of residents are Latina/o and predominantly of Mexican descent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008c; U.S. Census Bureau, 2008d; U.S. Census Bureau, 2008e; U.S. Census Bureau, 2008g).

Methodologically speaking, the main source of data for this research was based on two, individual, semi-structured in-depth interviews (Seidman, 2006) with 20 Mexican American high school seniors from South Texas. These interviews were digitally audio-recorded, transcribed and analyzed using inductive methods (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990) where open and axial coding procedures were applied (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Students attended two traditional high schools in a large school district in the region and were recruited with the assistance of school counselors and teachers. Criteria to take part in the study included: 1) identifying as Mexican American, 2) being a senior in one of the two high school sites, and 3) aspiring to attend college immediately after graduating from high school. In addition to this criteria counselors and teachers who assisted in recruitment were asked to consider approaching students from diverse academic and demographic backgrounds.

Additional data was obtained through individual interviews with five guidance counselors, two from each high school site and one district level higher education counselor, participant observations, college-related documents obtained through the counselors interviewed, and analytic memos. Like student interviews, the four high

school counselor interviews were conducted in person, were digitally audio-recorded and transcribed, while the fifth interview with the district level higher education counselor was conducted over the phone. The latter interview was transcribed as close to verbatim as possible while it occurred. All additional data was reviewed and compared to student data in order to corroborate, elaborate, and illuminate students' narratives of their college choice experience (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

Therefore, the following sections in this chapter provide a discussion of key findings, implications for research, theory, policy, and practice, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

Discussion of Key Findings

As previously noted, analyses revealed seven salient identities that were influential in Mexican American students' college choice process. These identities included: generational college status, sibling identity, academic identity, class, racial/ethnic identity, co-curricular identity, and a regional, or South Texas Border, identity. Not all of these identities were salient for all students, however, the notion of "intersectionality" was supported, as students' multiple identities simultaneously coexisted in the midst of their college choice process (Anzaldúa, 1987; Davis, 2008; Knudsen, 2006; Pérez, 1999; Sandoval, 2000). In Chapter 4, these identities were individually described in detail and instances in which these identities were explicitly noted in combination were cited. Noteworthy within these findings were the complex variations in generational college status, particularly among non first-generation college students, and the emergence of a co-curricular identity and regional identity.

In this study, there were several non-first generation college students whose college choice experience was counter to that found in previous research. While the tendency has been to appropriate greater focus on first-generation college students (Choy, 2001; Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Sáenz et al., 2007; Terenzini et al., 1996, Tym et al., 2004) because of the increased challenges that these students face in access, choice, and outcomes in postsecondary education compared to their peers, findings from this study suggest there is a greater complexity to the distinctions made between first-generation college students and their non first-generation peers, and among non first-generation college students themselves. Specifically, there was a difference in the quality and quantity of college knowledge and assistance accessed for non first-generation college students whose parents had obtained their college degrees in the U.S. and those whose parents had obtained their degrees in another country. Those students whose parents had obtained their postsecondary education in Mexico, for instance, noted their parents' limited ability to assist them in navigating the college choice process because of their lack of familiarity with the higher education system in the U.S. Some of these same students also indicated that because at least one of their parents continued to work in Mexico, their family was strained financially. This posed an additional challenge to accessing a higher education. Thus, the notion that non first-generation college students are not of low-income status and/or do not face as many financial obstacles in accessing a higher education as their first-generation peers is challenged. Efforts to identify such distinctions among non-first generation college students must therefore be made, and warrant further investigation.

The influence of a co-curricular and regional identity in the college choice process of participants was also significant, as neither have been noted in previous college choice research. Such indicates the possibility of other social identities that may be influential in the college choice process of students in general, and that of Mexican American students in particular. Thus, identifying the intersecting social identities that were salient within the college choice process of Mexican American students in Chapter 4 was the first step in answering research question number one: How does the intersectionality of Mexican American students' social identities shape their college choice?

Understanding how the intersectionality of students' multiple identities shaped their college choice experience in general and more specifically, influenced their college aspirations and their access to college support, information, and assistance through their social networks was more complex in nature. In order to do this, it was necessary to take into account the environment, or spaces, that students traversed on a daily basis. Data indicated that students accessed the social capital necessary to navigate the college choice process within four main spaces, which included students': cultural/familial space, community space, school space (including both K-12 and higher education), and cyberspace. As such, Chapters 5-9 are devoted to these spaces, in this respective order.

Within students' cultural/familial space, the intersectionality of generational college status, income, and regional identity was most prominent in shaping students' access to social capital. In keeping with previous research (Ceja, 2001, 2006; Rosas & Hamrick, 2002; Tornatsky et al., 2002), parents were found to provide less tangible college knowledge and assistance, in both quantity and quality, compared to siblings, but

were able to provide abundant emotional support for students' college aspirations. This finding was regardless of generational college status. Greater detail was found in regards to the manner in which Mexican American parents transmitted support and expectations for college. This was through *consejos* (words/narratives of wisdom) and *testimonios* (testimonials) that were founded on *respeto* (respect), *confianza* (trust), and *buen ejemplos* (good examples), all findings consistent with the work of Stanton-Salazar (2001).

Another significant aspect to note within students' cultural/familial space was the anxiety that was present in students' decision to begin college at a local/regional institution or a university outside of South Texas. Strongly influenced by students' value of *familismo* and students' and their communities' perceptions of local/regional institutions as being of a lesser quality than institutions outside of South Texas, this tension was situated at the intersection of students' racial/ethnic identity and regional identity. A similar tension was noted in the work of Rosas and Hamrick (2002) and Ceja (2001). Rosas and Hamrick (2002) noted that Mexican American students often navigated their college choice process amidst conflicting cultural values such as *familismo* and individualism. In turn, Ceja (2001) also found that most of the Chicanas in his study faced similar tensions that focused on family wanting students to attend universities that were close to home. What resulted for a majority of the students interviewed in this study was a compromise, where students decided to attend a local/regional university for a year or two and then transfer to a university outside the region.

In Chapter 6, the social capital available to students in their community space was discussed. Students' social networks in this space consisted of "weak ties" (Granovetter, 1973), and were noted less often and deemed less influential than students' family members or school personnel. Of particular significance was the degree to which students' racial/ethnic and regional identities were evoked within this space, as students confronted negative racial/ethnic stereotypes as well as pessimistic opinions about the local/regional institutions many were planning on attending. In college choice research race/ethnicity has been noted as influential (Hurtado et al., 1996; Hamrick & Stage, 2004; McDonough & Antonio, 1996; Kim, 2004; Paasi, 2003; Perna, 2000), although regional identity has not.

Within the school realm, students' narratives revealed tracking issues (Oaks, 1982, 1985; Oakes & Guiton, 1995), where students were tracked into high or low tracks based on academic ability. However, data also indicated that access to information regarding advanced placement and dual enrollment courses played a role in tracking. For instance, some students were eligible to take advanced courses and were informed of the opportunity to do so by school personnel, thus benefiting from tracking. Other students, however, were not informed of the opportunity to enroll in advanced courses as early as they could have been although they were eligible. In other cases, students were informed of these courses and were interested in them, but were not academically eligible to enroll.

The demographics of the student body and of school personnel at students' respective schools were also important to consider in light of these tracking issues. While tracking has been noted for negatively impacting low-income and racial/ethnic minority

students (Oaks, 1982, 1985; Oakes & Guiton, 1995) to a greater degree than other students, the majority of students in South Texas are both racial/ethnic minorities and of low-income status. Additionally, the majority of school personnel at students' high schools are Latina/o, indicating a racial/ethnic match that could be assumed to lend itself to a greater awareness of students' cultural needs on the part of school staff. However, students' narratives indicate that generally this assumption is wrong, and institutional forces prevailed. Tracking was still evident, and students did not indicate additional opportunities to access college knowledge and assistance from school personnel in general based on racial/ethnic matching between students and educators. Teachers of higher track courses and school personnel, such as co-curricular sponsors, who had built meaningful relationships with students built on *respeto* (respect) and *confianza* (trust) did individually assist students with their college choice process and integrate college knowledge into the curriculum to a greater degree, although such instances were noted as exceptions. In turn, counselors were particularly deemed unavailable (McDonough, 2005; Vela-Gude et al., 2009) to assist with the college choice process on an individual basis, but were noted for providing general college information either through classroom presentations, printed materials, or electronic communication.

Peers were also noted as sources of support and to a lesser degree tangible college knowledge, within students' school space. Students' narratives in this regard suggested a level of community uplifting, in which students did not necessarily compete with each other for college knowledge to the extent that they did not help each other succeed. On the contrary, students appeared to discuss their college aspirations with their friends and

classmates often in a non-competitive, informal way that allowed for mutual support and the transmission of college knowledge. This finding suggests a sense of community building among students in South Texas, which is supported by the work of Guajardo & Guajardo (2004) who chronicled the history of such efforts in the region.

Overall however, when directly asked whether students deemed their schools equitable in providing college information and assistance to all students, they said "yes." This was a surprising finding given the challenges and inequities that were often implicit and at times explicit in students' narratives. Only a handful of students voiced their concerns regarding some of the inequities they saw in this regard. Quite a few students did, however, contradict themselves when answering this question if probed further. It was as if students had never taken the chance to reflect on this issue and were uncertain how to answer. Students seemed particularly reluctant to speak of their schools negatively and instead focused on the will of each student to achieve his or her own goal of attending college despite any challenges in accessing college knowledge and assistance at school. These responses were deemed indicative of the U.S. education system's efforts to foster an image where students are rewarded based on individual merit.

Less surprising, given the increased use of technology over the last several decades, was the fact that the Internet was the main source of college knowledge and assistance for a majority of students. Unlike noted challenges or tensions faced in other spaces, however, students failed to mention any similar issues within the realm of cyberspace. However, given that this study did not go into depth regarding specific

challenges within any given space and instead relied on such issues to emerge within students' shared stories, it is possible that students confronted obstacles in obtaining college information or assistance via the Internet that were not divulged.

Implications for Research, Theory, Policy and Practice

Based on the findings from this study, this section focuses on research, theory, and policy implications, as well as suggestions for practice.

Research and theory. As far as general college choice research and theory is concerned, this study's findings support those of Hurtado et al. (1996) and Perna's (2000) who suggested that Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) traditional college choice model does not necessarily fully explain the college choice process of racial/ethnic minorities. Specifically, findings indicate that traditional stage and comprehensive models that attempt to generalize all students' college choice processes by simply noting various factors that shape this experience in a linear fashion do not sufficiently reflect the complexity and multi-dimensional nature of this phenomenon, particularly for Mexican American students.

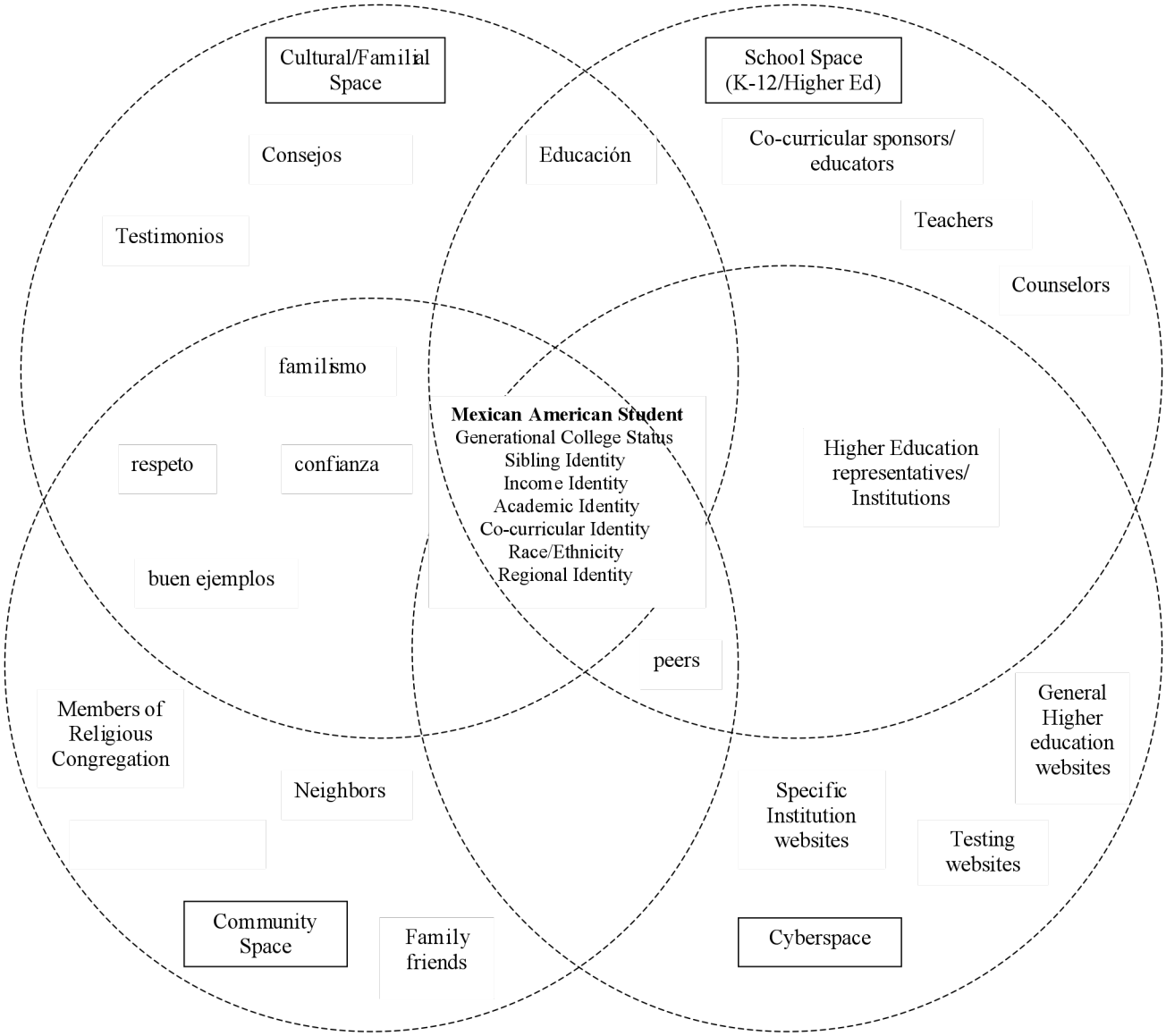
Taking this into account, a specific critique was made in Chapter 2 in regards to current conceptual frameworks used to investigate the college choice process of Mexican American students. A suggestion was made to adopt other frameworks than those already utilized in previous studies in an attempt provide a more detailed understanding of Latina/o/Mexican American college choice. In response, this study adopted a hybrid Chicana feminist and social capital framework which revealed a multifaceted negotiation

where not only external factors or students' general backgrounds were considered in the shaping of students' college choice process, but students' social identities and culturally unique characteristics of transmitting college knowledge and support as well.

In Figure 9.1 that follows, a model of the college choice process of the Mexican American students in this study if offered. The student is at the core, with the social identities that were most salient among students included. The student is also nestled within the four predominant figurative and literal spaces that he/she simultaneously occupied while navigating the college choice process: the cultural/familial space, community space, school space, and cyberspace. Overlapping dashed circles delineate these spaces to imply their permeable nature and to visually represent the way students occupied and maneuvered within one or all spaces simultaneously. Within each space are the individuals, institutions and/or entities that represent students' social networks. As evident, some social networks exist in more than one space. Also included are specific characteristics of Mexican American communities' ways of knowing and transmitting knowledge such as through *consejos*, or narrative storytelling (Delgado-Gaitan, 1994; Fránquiz & Salazar, 2004; Valdés, 1996; Villenas, et al., 2006), *testimonios*, or testimonials (Villenas, et al., 2006), and *buen ejemplos*, or good examples (Fránquiz & Salazar, 2004). The contexts in which relationships were formed in Mexican American communities through *respeto*, or respect (Fránquiz & Salazar, 2004; Valdés, 1996), and *confianza*, or mutual trust (Fránquiz & Salazar, 2004; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2003; Vélez-Ibañez & Greenberg, 1992) are also included, as are the concepts of *educación* (Auerbach, 2006; Reese et al., 1995; Valdés, 1995) and *familismo*,

or familism (Garzón, 2003; Valenzuela & Dornbusch, 1994). Like students' social networks, students' culturally specific characteristics are placed in the space(s) deemed most appropriate and consistent with student data. Overall, this model attempts to capture the complexity and fluidity of the college choice experience for the Mexican American students in this study.

FIGURE 9.1 MEXICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS' COLLEGE CHOICE PROCESS USING A HYBRID SOCIAL CAPITAL AND CHICANA FEMINIST FRAMEWORK



Taking this model into account, utilizing a theoretical framework that is more critical and culturally relevant in nature when exploring the means by which racial/ethnic minority students experience their college choice process can be more useful than utilizing a framework that does not account for such distinctions. Similarly, adopting a framework that also accurately represents the complex nature of this non-linear process would be ideal. Future studies that do not utilize such frameworks run the risk of overlooking the influence of students' culture, family, and community, areas deemed significant in the context of this study, and oversimplifying an experience that is multifaceted and chaotic at times, as real life can be. Such studies would provide an incomplete picture of the college choice process for racial/ethnic minority students, in particular.

Findings from this study also address the other critique made of Latina/o and Mexican American-focused college choice research. It was noted that current discourse and studies on Latina/o/Mexican American college choice is primarily being driven by research(ers) in a certain geographic region, namely California and the Midwest. The need to do research with Latina/os and/or Mexican Americans in other regions was suggested as necessary given the heterogeneity of these populations (Zavella, 1991). Conducting this research in South Texas was a way to address this gap in the literature and proved beneficial as it uncovered regional influences, at both the local and state level, in Mexican American students' college choice process. The model offered also provides room for such heterogeneity, as Mexican Americans in another region may have varying

social identities that are salient in their college choice process or other social networks or culturally unique characteristics that can be considered.

Policy. Several findings from this study can also be useful for improving policy at various levels that seek to help Mexican American students navigate the college choice process and access the necessary college knowledge, support and assistance to obtain a postsecondary education. For instance, whether on a national or state level, Mexican American students, as well as all other students would benefit from the integration of college knowledge into high school and even middle school curriculum. The fact that there lacked an allotted time during students' school day to focus on college aspirations, plans, or seek college information or assistance from knowledgeable school personnel such as teachers or counselors denotes an incongruity between the college readiness goals outlined in Texas' *Closing the Gaps by 2015* initiative and the means by which Texas' schools are actually structured and attempt to create a college-going culture (Closing the Gaps, 2000). Some schools in the state, or nation, may accommodate for such a time to integrate college knowledge, as in the case of schools structured into small learning communities (Oxley, 2007) or those that have adopted programs such as Achievement Via Individual Determination (AVID) where students have access to college knowledge and tutors through an elective course (Santiago & Brown, 2004). However, there lacks a uniform policy across, and often within, school districts to structure schools in this manner.

Additionally, legislators and higher education institutions in Texas should be more cognizant of the impact of Texas' Top 10% Plan for those students who are not

deemed as such, in particular, and for Texas' high school contexts in general. Historically speaking, Texas' Top 10% Plan arose in response to *Hopwood v. Texas*, the case that challenged affirmative action in college admissions. As such, the plan was created to help ensure access to Texas' top tier universities for students from underrepresented communities in the state (Holley & Spencer, 1999; Horn & Flores, 2003; Tienda, Leicht, Sullivan, Maltese, & Lloyd, 2003). This study's findings, however, prove what is perhaps an unintentional effect. Specifically, a perception emerged that students in the top 10% of their class were provided with greater access to college information and assistance within the school context. This perception allowed for an undercurrent of resentment on the part of students who were not in the top 10% of their class. Furthermore, if students' perceptions are in fact true, the means by which the top 10% policy plays itself out within high schools indicates an inequality in the dissemination of college knowledge and assistance. As such, state policy that specifically addresses this barrier for students who are not in the top 10% of their class can be implemented.

Another aspect that deserves greater attention from policy makers in Texas, and entities such as The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board and higher education institutions, are the regional influences on Mexican American students' college choice processes. If such organizations are truly interested in increasing Latina/o college-going rates in Texas then greater investments are needed in the form of monetary resources and in the commitment to improving the infrastructure of regional/local universities in the South Texas Border region, as well as the entire Texas Border where large numbers of Latina/os reside. This study's findings indicate that a majority of students start their

college education at these institutions, yet still maintain a perception that these universities are of a lesser quality than those outside South Texas. And while suggested policy changes will not necessarily improve such perceptions in the short term, increased investments in these universities will be a first step in changing this mindset. Such investments would also acknowledge the assets within this region, and ultimately South Texas Border residents.

At the local/regional level, students' narratives indicate that greater uniformity is needed in publicizing and disseminating college information. As such, policies can be put into place to ensure that all high schools within the Villa Verde Independent School District (VVISD) do so. Current district policies that unintentionally exclude some students from attending college events and presentations, such as the University Day, perhaps because of logistics, must also be improved. Furthermore, if the integration of college knowledge cannot be ensured through national or state policies, then perhaps such can be ensured at the district level. This could be done by specifically structuring schools in a way that allows for such practices, as through small learning communities (Oxley, 2007), by incorporating a study hall or homeroom period, or adopting a program such as AVID (Santiago & Brown, 2004) where through an elective course students are afforded the opportunity to discuss goals and options after high school. In this respect, there would be allotted time to invite guests such as high school counselors, higher education representatives, or college students, who could come speak to students about the college choice process. Students could also utilize such a time to visit individually

with counselors, research postsecondary institutions, and work on college essays, for instance.

Findings from this study also support policy efforts that help clarify the role of and enhance the quality of services provided by guidance counselors within high schools in general, and Texas high schools in particular. Given students' shared stories, it is recommended that every high school in Texas, particularly those whose student bodies are comprised of predominantly low-income students and/or students from underrepresented minority groups, be provided a designated higher education counselor. In addition to this, it is recommended that school counselors' caseloads be reduced so that counselors may actually be accessible to students and their various needs. The latter suggestion, however, would require that high schools hire additional counselors, which could be problematic given that counselors are often considered dispensable support staff, particularly in times of financial crisis (McDonough, 2005).

Efforts to integrate Mexican American families to a greater degree in the college choice process of students can also be realized through policy at the local level. Latina/o parents, in particular, are often noted by school personnel as not being sufficiently "involved" in the schooling of their children, in the traditional sense, because parents may not necessarily attend parent-teacher conferences or open houses, especially as students matriculate through middle and high school (Zárate, 2007). As such, districts can mandate that college information be disseminated and college presentations held as early as elementary school in order to begin building relationships with families that center around college-going and are built on *respeto* (respect) and *confianza* (trust). Promising

programs that do integrate families in students' schooling practices in general, and the college choice process in particular, include the former Futures project in Los Angeles (Auerbach 2001, 2002) and the existing Llano Grande Center for research and development (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2002), which is located in the South Texas Border region.

Additionally, if engaging parents is considered problematic as students get older, then the VVISD can implement a policy to set-up informational college booths at events where parents are sure to be present, such as sporting events, academic recognition ceremonies, and graduation ceremonies. Given the strong influence that parents and family has on Mexican American students' college choice process, it behooves the VVISD to create policy aimed at integrating families into the schooling experiences of students, and college choice process in particular, as much as possible.

Practice. What then can actually be done in practice to help Mexican American students in South Texas navigate the college choice process and access college knowledge and support? Answering this involves the consideration of multiple stakeholders, some of which have been previously noted: higher education institutions, the VVISD and its personnel, the Villa Verde community at large, and students and their families.

Higher education institutions. First of all, higher education institutions outside of the South Texas Border region who are interested in recruiting in the area need to be aware of the unique college choice process of Mexican American students. It is crucial to recognize that students were often willing, and often aspired, to attend higher education

institutions outside of the region, but settled on starting at the local/regional institution primarily based on parents' aspirations and expectations for them. Thus, if higher education institutions outside the region wish to recruit students from South Texas this must be taken into account. Furthermore, efforts must be made by such institutions to reach out to parents in order to gain their *confianza* (trust) and respeto (respect) so that parents may be more apt to support students' specific college aspirations to attend a university outside of South Texas. To do this, higher education institutions can offer a greater number of campus visits to students that include family members. This way parents, in particular, can see for themselves where their child might be attending. Such an opportunity could help put parents' minds at ease and give them a chance to ask any questions of staff at the institution firsthand. Although if given this opportunity, higher education institutions must also ensure that staff is available who speak Spanish, as some parents may feel more comfortable in doing so.

Additionally, when considering the suggestion made to hire additional counselors in high schools, it is possible that collaborative efforts between higher education institutions and high schools can yield some solutions. For example, higher education institutions could make college admissions counselors available to high schools on a regular basis so that they may help train and work with high school counselors more closely to ensure high school counselors are equipped with current and accurate college information. Similarly, these college admissions counselors can work directly with students and their families within the high school setting; an environment that is more familiar to students and their parents.

At Fuente High School, efforts to incorporate such practices were evident. For instance, in speaking with the two contact counselors Ms. Carson and Ms. Davila, they indicated that a new partnership between the local/regional university and Fuente allowed for recent high school graduates who were currently enrolled at the local/regional university to meet individually with high school seniors during the school day to discuss students' college plans. On more than one occasion while conducting my participant observations in the counselor's office at Fuente, several of these college students came in and called students out of class for this purpose. It is unknown, however, how these college students who are acting as mentors and/or counselors are trained, what their visits with students actually entail or how often they meet with students. This collaborative effort, however, does indicate a step to improve college readiness efforts and provide assistance to counselors in helping disseminate college information and assistance.

The Villa Verde independent school district. The VVISD and its educators can also employ a number of practices to help their Mexican American students successfully navigate the college choice process. For instance, efforts should be made to diminish the sense of inequality and inequity that students expressed in regards to variations between advanced placement and dual enrollment teachers' expectations and those of their counterparts, the variations in rigor in advanced placement and dual enrollment courses versus regular classes, and the perceived privileges that students in the top 10% receive when compared to non top 10% students. To do this, high school administrators, teachers, counselors and all other school personnel can commit to creating a college-going culture (Holland & Farmer-Hinton, 2009; McClafferty, McDonough, & Nuñez, 2009). Research

by McClafferty et al. (2009) can be utilized to help in this process. In their work with the Creating a College Culture project, McClafferty et al. (2009) identified nine principals that can be implemented. Some of these principals reflect several suggestions already made. They include: college talk, clear expectations, information and resources, a comprehensive counseling model, college-focused testing and curricula, faculty involvement, family involvement, college and university partnerships, and articulation between counselors and teachers at all school levels.

Additionally, the VVISD and its educators should adopt regular practices that enable students and their families to provide feedback about how college information is being disseminated, how college events and presentations are organized, and in general how schools are helping students prepare for college and navigate the college choice process. Without such feedback, the district is likely unaware of the effectiveness of their practices. It is important to note, however, that it is unknown if such practices are currently in place. However, students' comments suggest that they are not.

The Villa Verde community. It is also recommended that community leaders and educators in South Texas, in particular, recognize that they may be perpetuating the negative sentiments that students expressed regarding local/regional institutions and their own South Texas community. It is imperative that educators, in particular, understand how perpetuating such views can influence students' own self-esteems and their college aspirations. While many educators in the region are Latina/o, particularly of Mexican descent, it cannot be assumed that their racial/ethnic identity and their postsecondary education automatically provides them with the necessary tools to be culturally sensitive

to Mexican American students, to utilize culturally relevant pedagogy, or to be critically consciousness in their day to day lives. As racial/ethnic minorities who have been educated in the same education system that continues to perpetuate institutional racism and is fraught with systemic inequalities, educators in South Texas must interrogate their own beliefs about their local/regional institutions, their community, and see how they too have adopted some of the inequitable practices of the greater U.S. schooling system. In practice then, efforts to combat such sentiments would require dialogue about the topic particularly among educators, community leaders, local/regional universities, and students and their families. Such dialogue could take place in the form of town hall meetings in community centers, at schools, and/or with the assistance of local organizations and churches.

Students and families. Students can also continue to exert their agency and draw motivation from any obstacles they face in trying to navigate their college choice process. They can also make their sentiments regarding any inequalities they perceive within their school and community space known to school and community leaders. While students seemed genuinely concerned about some of the inequities they were aware of within these spaces, they did not indicate that they had made their contempt known to any adults. Students' families in particular, can continue to support their children's college aspirations and seek out school personnel or other individuals in their social networks for assistance with students' college choice process.

Recommendations for Future Research

Given this study's findings, limitations and delimitations, there are several suggestions for future research. First, this study solely focused on exploring the college choice process of Mexican American students primarily based on student interviews. Future studies could include interviews with individuals in students' social networks, such as teachers, parents and siblings, as well as higher education representatives in order to gain a broader understanding of students' college choice process.

Second, additional studies are needed to explore the within group differences of Latina/o students' college choice process. This study focused on Mexican American students, particularly from the South Texas Border, in part to the growing size of the Mexican American community within this region, the state, and within the greater Latina/o population. However, other subpopulations within the Latina/o community are facing similar issues with college access and matriculation that are worthy of further study.

Additionally, findings from this study indicate distinctions among Mexican American students who are of non first-generation college status that particularly highlight barriers that some of these students face in accessing a higher education. As ample research focuses on first-generation college students (Choy, 2001; Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Sáenz et al., 2007; Terenzini et al., 1996, Tym et al., 2004), it would be beneficial to further explore the variability among non-first generation college students in general, and those of Mexican descent in particular, if some of them are

facing challenges in navigating the college choice process that are similar to their first-generation peers.

Finally, future college choice studies with students from other underrepresented communities in particular, such as African Americans or Native Americans, should attempt to utilize college choice models and theoretical frameworks that are critical and culturally relevant in nature, as well as multifaceted and reflective of the complex nature of the college choice process. Doing so might provide a deeper understanding of the college choice process of these students that validates their cultural backgrounds and takes into account the influence of social power structures on the college choice experience.

APPENDIX A: Student Participant Questionnaire

Name: _____ Age _____ Sex_____ GPA _____

Email_____ Phone/Cell #_____ Top 10%: Yes / No

Best way to reach you (ex. Email, Facebook) _____

Race/Ethnicity_____ Country where you were born _____

Country where parents were born: mother_____ father_____

Are you or one of your siblings the first in your family to go to college? (Circle) Yes / No

Language(s) you speak: _____

Language(s) you prefer to speak at home: _____ at school: _____

What religion, if any, are you or your family a member of _____

Who is the closest person you know who has a college degree? _____

Family Yearly Income (Circle One)

Under $15,000 $15,000-24,999 $25,000-34,999 $35,000-49,999

$50,000-74,999 $75,000-99,000 $100,000 and over

Please fill out the following chart regarding your family/individuals you live with

Individual's Name	Relation (ex. Mother)	Age	Job or School (if student)	Education (Check boxes if some or all completed)			
				Elem.	Middle	High S.	College

APPENDIX B: Individual Student Demographic Data

	Gender	Age	School	Top 10%	Country of birth		1st gen. Immig.	1st gen. College	Lang.	Relig.
					Mother	Father				
Jasmin	Female	17	Fuente	No	Mexico	Mexico	Yes	Yes	English Spanish	Catholic
Maritza	Female	17	Fuente	No	Mexico	Mexico	Yes	No	English Spanish	Catholic
Geneva	Female	18	Fuente	No	US	US	No	No	English	Catholic
Selena	Female	17	Fuente	No	Mexico	Mexico	Yes	Yes	English Spanish	No response
Alejandra	Female	18	Fuente	No	US	Mexico	Yes	No	English Spanish	Christian
Henry	Male	17	Fuente	No	US	US	No	No	English Spanish	Catholic
Cristian	Male	17	Fuente	No	Mexico	No response	Yes	Yes	English Spanish	Catholic
Charlie	Male	17	Fuente	No	Mexico	Mexico	Yes	No	English Spanish	Catholic
Eddie	Male	17	Fuente	No	Mexico	Mexico	Yes	Yes	English Spanish	No response
Steven	Male	17	Fuente	Yes	US	US	No	Yes	English	Catholic
Cristina	Female	17	Paloma	No	US	US	No	Yes	English Spanish French	Catholic
Tatiana	Female	17	Paloma	Yes	Mexico	Mexico	Yes	Yes	English Spanish	Catholic
Zulema	Female	17	Paloma	Yes	Mexico	Mexico	Yes	Yes	English Spanish	Baptist
Rocio	Female	17	Paloma	No	US	US	No	Yes	English Spanish	Catholic
Karina	Female	18	Paloma	No	US	US	No	Yes	English Spanish	Catholic
Beto	Male	17	Paloma	Yes	Mexico	Mexico	Yes	Yes	English Spanish	Catholic
Paulo	Male	17	Paloma	Yes	Mexico	Mexico	Yes	No	English Spanish	Catholic
Fernando	Male	18	Paloma	Yes	US	Mexico	No	Yes	English Spanish	Christian
Tony	Male	18	Paloma	No	Mexico	Mexico	Yes	No	English Spanish	No response
Sergio	Male	18	Paloma	Yes	Mexico	No response	Yes	No	English Spanish	No response

Note. Immig. = Immigrant; Lang. = Language; Relig. = Religion. Income not included due to an overwhelming lack of reporting of this data by students.

APPENDIX C: Student Interview Script

Interview 1: Student's life history in the context of the college choice process and details of the college choice process

Welcoming Comments

Thank you for coming today. Before we begin, I want to reintroduce myself and tell you about my research study. My name is Melissa Martinez, and I am a graduate student at The University of Texas at Austin. The purpose of my study is to understand how Mexican American students from this area arrive at the decision to go to college after high school and how they plan to reach this goal. I will hopefully interview you two times on this topic. Today is the first interview.

You can share whatever you wish with me and are free to choose not to participate in all or any part of this study. If you would rather not respond to a particular question, simply say, "I would rather not answer." At any time you can excuse yourself without any consequences.

Now I want to remind you that by participating in this study you are giving permission to be tape recorded during the interview(s). In order to protect your real name and identification, I will transcribe our conversation(s) by inserting a pseudonym, or fake name, for you.

Do you have any questions before we start?

Opening Question

1. Can you tell me about your plans when you finish high school?

Key Questions

College Aspirations, Educational Goals and Expectations

2. Is going to college a personal goal?
    a. (Probe) What are some personal reasons for wanting to go?
3. How did you decide you wanted to go to college after graduating from high school?
    a. (Probe) When did you realize you wanted to attend college after high school?
4. Was there anyone in particular who influenced this decision?
    a. (Probe) Your parents, teachers, extended family members?
5. Was there an expectation set by anyone for you to go to college?
    a. (Probe) How did this person(s) let you know they expected this of you?
6. If no one had influenced/urged you to go to college, do you think you would have still wanted to go and why?

Source(s) of Information/Support

7. What are you doing or have you done to prepare to go to college after graduating from high school?
    a. (Probe) When did you start preparing to go to college?
8. What type of specific information do you feel you need/needed to reach this goal?
    a. (Probe) Is/was this information available to you?
9. Can you describe the kind of information the school provides you?
    a. Is the information the school provides available to all students?
10. Where do/did you get the most information about college?
11. Can you describe other ways that others (teachers, family, friends, community) assist/support you in reaching your goal to attend college after high school?
    a. (Probe) For example, does/did someone regularly give you advice/*consejos* about going to college?
12. Can you tell me about any challenges that you have encountered in your preparations or your ability to access college information?
13. What do you consider the most useful information or support you have received in helping you plan and reach your goal of attending college after high school? And why?

Concluding Question

14. Is there anything else you want to share about your plans to go to college after high school?

Interview 2: The meaning of the college choice process to the student while accounting for social identities and socio-cultural characteristics

Welcoming Comments

Once again, thank you for meeting me for our last conversation. In the last interview I asked you more specific questions about how you arrived at your decision to go to college after high school and how you were planning to reach this goal. Today, I want to give you a chance to reflect on your previous answers and to ask you about how you think your background influenced your plans and preparations. If you don't have any questions, I will start.

Key Questions

1. How would you describe yourself?
    a. (Probe) As a male/female, a top ten percent student, etc.?
2. How do you think your background/characteristics influences/influenced your decision and planning to go to college after high school?
    a. (Probe) How do you think your being a male/female, Mexican American, or your being the first in your family to go to college, or your family's income, for instance, influenced your decision and planning?

b. (Probe) How did your background/characteristics make your decision to go to college and planning to reach this goal easier/harder?

3. What recommendations do you have for students who are trying to decide whether to go to college and/or are planning to reach this goal?

Concluding Question

4. Is there anything else you want to share about your plans to go to college after high school?

APPENDIX D: Counselor Interview Script

Welcoming Comments

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my study. Before we begin, I want to (re)introduce myself and tell you about my research study. My name is Melissa Martinez, and I am a graduate student at The University of Texas at Austin. The purpose of my study is to understand how Mexican American students from this area arrive at the decision to go to college, and how they plan to reach this goal.

You can share whatever you wish with me and are free to choose not to participate in all or any part of this study. If you would rather not respond to a particular question, simply say, "I would rather not answer." At any time you can excuse yourself without any consequences.

I want to remind you that by participating in this study you are giving permission to be tape recorded during the interview(s). In order to protect your real name and identification, I will transcribe our conversation(s) by inserting a pseudonym, or fake name, for you.

Do you have any questions before we start?

Opening Question

1. What is your name, and briefly describe your position at this school?

Key Questions

2. What do you expect students to do when they finish high school?
    a. In your opinion, do you feel the school expects students to attend college?
3. What role do you feel you play in students' college choice process/decision to attend college?
4. How do you assist students in the college choice process? (aspirations, search, choice)
    a. What kind of information do you provide students to help them with their college choice process?
5. Are there other individuals you refer students to for help with the college choice process?
6. In your opinion, do you feel all students at this school have an equal opportunity to attend college?
7. Can you tell me about any challenges you have seen students encounter in being able to attain their goal of attending college?
8. How do you think students' background/characteristics (ex. gender, class, ethnicity) influence their decision and ability to attend college?

Closing Question

9. Is there anything else you would like to share about your role in the college choice process of students?

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VITA

Melissa Ann Martinez was born in Brownsville, Texas on April 2, 1977. Upon graduating from Homer Hanna High School in Brownsville, Texas in May of 1995, she began her postsecondary education at The University of Texas at Austin. After the fall semester of 1996, she transferred to The University of Texas at Brownsville, where she completed her B.A. in Psychology in May of 1998. She returned to Austin after this, having obtained employment with the Texas Department of Protective and Regulatory Services as an intake specialist where she remained for approximately a year. During this time, she also began working on her alternative certification to become a bilingual elementary school teacher. Upon completing this certification in 1999, she began teaching as a bilingual Pre-Kindergarten teacher at Blanton elementary in Austin, Texas. She taught for two years, and then returned to Brownsville, Texas to attend The University of Texas at Brownsville for graduate school.

Melissa began working on her master's degree in counseling and guidance in the fall of 2001 and completed this degree in December of 2002. Deciding to return to Austin once again, she taught as a bilingual first grade teacher from August of 2003 to May of 2004 at T.A. Brown elementary and then obtained a school counseling position at Andrews elementary where she remained from August of 2004 to May of 2007. In August of 2006, Melissa began pursuing her doctoral degree in Higher Education Administration at the University of Texas at Austin full-time while school counseling part-time. After completing the 2006-2007 school year as a school counselor, Melissa obtained a part-time graduate research assistant position with the Division of Diversity

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Publications and Presentations

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