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# Understanding issues of college persistence for undocumented Mexican immigrant women from the new Latino Diaspora: a case study

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**Understanding issues of college persistence for undocumented Mexican immigrant  
women from the new Latino Diaspora: A case study**

by

**Susana Maria Muñoz**

A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

Major: Education (Educational Leadership)

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2008

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DEDICATION

For my children

Julisa Lupe Maria Muñoz  
&  
Mirely Nicolasa Addy Muñoz

Being your mom is my favorite job in the world.

I hope my accomplishments inspire you to reach your own life goals.

To my husband, Ed

You inspire me every day.

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## ABSTRACT

National data suggest that Latina immigrant women fare better educationally than their nonimmigrant counterparts in bachelor degree attainment, but does not account for how immigration status impacts college persistence. Using a borderlands theoretical framework, this study examines factors associated with college persistence among a sample of undocumented Mexican immigrant women from a small rural community in the Rocky Mountain region. Chicana feminist epistemological techniques are used to analyze data collected from in-depth interviews and field observations. In addition, a *trenzas de identidades múltiples* (braids of multiple identities) perspective was used helped conceptualize and categorize persistence factors surrounding and intersecting with culture, family, educational resources, and immigrant experiences; six themes emerged from this study: (a) support and challenges from their home system; (b) unraveling the notions of dual socialization; (c) microaggressions against newcomers; (d) learning and unlearning from the language acquisition process; (e) dilemmas, stressors, and motivation associated with undocumented status; and (f) creating successful academic spaces and social networks in college. Recommendations for K-12 administrators, Latino/a community members, higher education, and policy are discussed as well as recommendations for future study.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

*Education has a profound impact on both the individual and society at large, and it is one of the surest ways to increase one's social economic levels and overcome the barriers of poverty and derived social conditions.*

Swail, Redd, & Perna, 2003

In 2002, the U.S. Census (Ramirez & de la Cruz, 2003) reported that 40.2% of the total Hispanic population, roughly 15 million people, were foreign born. The majority of this foreign born population entered the United States between 1990 and 2002. The Census Bureau also stated that, although U.S. citizenship was awarded to the majority of the Hispanic immigrants who arrived before 1970 (73.3%), only 7.3% of the immigrants who arrived in the United States between 1990 and 2002 were granted citizenship despite the large influx of immigrants during that period.

With a population of 44.3 million, Hispanics continue to be the largest minority group in the United States and are by average the youngest population according to the national standard (Bernstein, 2007). Hispanics of Mexican descent are the largest Latino group (66.9%) in the United States, but account for the least number of bachelor degrees per capita (7.6%) compared to Puerto Ricans (14.0%), Central and South Americans (17.3%), and Cubans (18.6%; U.S. Census Bureau, 2002). The most problematic statistic is the high school graduation rates for Hispanics, which is 57.0% compared to 88.7% of non-Hispanic Whites (Ramirez & de la Cruz, 2003). Among high school graduates, enrollment in college has increased for Hispanics in the last 20 years. In 1980, the college enrollment for Hispanics was 4% compared to 10% in 2000. However, Hispanics who are U.S. citizens have a higher likelihood of attending college than the general Hispanic population (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003).

The Pew Hispanic Center (Lowell & Suro, 2002) claimed that despite Latino immigrants lagging behind native Latinos, the gap between these two groups is expected to narrow in the future. Female immigrants educated both abroad and in the United States have made remarkable educational strides in the last 30 years. Although Latina immigrants educated in the United States have decreased in the primary and secondary levels since 1970, the most significant gains were made through college education attainment which increased from 47% in 1970 to 54% in 2000. Lowell and Suro predicted that slow improvements among native Latinos and the increased distribution of immigrant Latinos across America will cause the educational gap to close between these two groups in the future.

Still, the growing number of both native and immigrant Latinos, coupled with their lagging educational attainment, has serious societal implications. Although Latin American immigrants represent more than half of the immigrant population in the United States, this immigrant group is the least likely to attain a high school or a college education (Larsen, 2004). Vernez and Mizell (2001) identified the benefits of doubling the rate of Hispanics earning a bachelor's degree, which include the "reduction in public expenditures on welfare, health, and law enforcement programs, increases in federal, state, and local taxes, increases in personal disposable income, and decreases in educational and income disparities between racial/ethnic groups" (p. 16). The revenue acquired by doubling the graduation rates for Hispanics would total \$13 billion (Vernez & Mizell). Raising public awareness of the low education attainment among Latinas/os is no longer enough; action is needed.

Therefore, the lack of representation of Latinas/os in all facets of education warrants a deeper analysis of college persistence for this group. Given the heterogeneity of Latinas/os,

this study will investigate issues of college persistence specifically for *Mexicana*<sup>1</sup> immigrants from a rural geographical area.

### Problem

As of March 2005, the Current Population Survey reported that approximately 37 million foreign-born immigrants are living in the United States. From that population, 11.1 million are undocumented, and 56% of those undocumented individuals arrived from Mexico (Passel, 2006). From the total undocumented population, children account for 1.8 million or 15%; many of which have resided in the United States for the majority of their lives (R. G. Gonzales, 2007; Passel). As such, immigrants and their children are expected to represent the majority of the labor force between 2010 and 2030. However, future trends suggest that the occupations most in demand will require an associate's degree or above. As such, investing in the educational attainment of Latino immigrants and their children is important for economic and social purposes (R. G. Gonzales).

In addition, the majority of the educational research on Latina/o immigrants is centered on the K-12 experience (Gonzalez-Saray, Plata, Garcia, Torres, & Urrieta, 2003; Macedo & Bartolomé, 1986; Olsen, 1997). The K-12 issues of Latina/o immigrants stem from lack of efficient bilingual education programs, segregation of immigrant children in the schools, and low academic expectations of immigrant children (Valverde, 2006). Persistence and retention studies have centered on experiences of Latina/o students without much regard to their immigration status or geographical location. This study strives to broaden the scope of retention by focusing on the experiences of Mexican immigrant college women from

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<sup>1</sup> The term *Mexicana* is Spanish for a Mexican female.

Elksville,<sup>2</sup> Wyoming. Given the influx of immigration in rural regions, this research will provide institutions and legislators guidance in addressing the leaking educational pipeline in higher education. More importantly, the landscape of Latinas/os in the United States has changed drastically over the years. For example, Mexican immigrants are increasingly settling in communities where little to no Latina/o presence has been established. The term “New Latino Diaspora” (Hamann, Worthan, & Murillo, 2002) was coined to describe this group, the members of which “face more insistent questions about who they are, who they seek to be and what accommodations they merit—questions that are asked both by themselves and by others” (Hamann et al., p. 1). The state of Wyoming is no exception.

Although the majority of literature on Latina persistence focuses on states with a substantial Latina/o population, my research offers a different geographical perspective and also strives to produce greater depth in persistence research and analysis by employing socio-cultural theories.

### Purpose

The purpose of this case study is to understand issues of college persistence for undocumented Mexican immigrant women who reside in a New Latino Diaspora site. To my knowledge, no study has specifically addressed college persistence issues for Mexican immigrant women. Furthermore, no persistence studies have used culturally based theoretical models to guide their studies.

### Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to understand the college experiences and issues of persistence for undocumented Mexican-born college women from Elksville. The following

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<sup>2</sup> Pseudonym.

research questions will guide and inform this study:

1. How do cultural, family, prior schooling, and immigration experiences influence college persistence among undocumented *Mexicana* immigrant students?
2. What factors are associated with the college persistence of undocumented *Mexicana* students?

### Rationale

My personal and professional experiences in higher education prompted my interest in this study. For instance, most of my higher education experience is rooted in recruitment and retention of ethnic minority students. While working in the Office of Minority Student Affairs at Iowa State University (ISU), I witnessed firsthand the struggles of newcomer students from small towns near Ames, Iowa. One student in particular applied to ISU, but because she was undocumented she could not receive any state or federal aid. It was a great loss for ISU but she was admitted with a full scholarship to a private elite institution in the east coast. Being so far away from her family and friends, I often wondered how she coped with the stresses of university life.

Most recently, I worked as Retention Specialist for Student Support Services, which is a federally funded TRiO program at the University of Wyoming. The main scope of my position was to provide academic, personal, social, and financial counseling to first generation and low income students. I received a phone call from a friend who inquired about our services on behalf of a student. This student was an immigrant from Mexico, the first in her family to attend college, and considered low income status based on her family income and number of individuals in her household. Although she had an academic need to be in our program, her undocumented immigration status prohibited her from qualifying for our

assistance. I cringed at the thought of this student leaving the university because she was denied proper services due to her immigrant status. These two experiences solidified my assumption that universities virtually ignore the needs of this specific group.

Personally, I was born in Mexico and arrived in the United State at age 6. I feel that my immigrant experiences provide me with a greater understanding and insight into the experiences of my participants. I also have a strong sense of nationalism towards my state in Mexico as well as the United States. Having allegiance towards two countries provides an interesting dynamic on how I identify culturally. When I am in Mexico, I am constantly reminded of my American citizenship and status, and while living in the United States I am frequently aware of my Mexican identity, thus I strive to reconcile my allegiance to two countries that have differing cultural contexts and perceptions.

Finally, this study is important for several key reasons. One, higher education will witness an increase in immigrant students in the near future. Understanding issues of college persistence for Mexican immigrant women will assist colleges and universities in tailoring their services to better serve this group. Second, studying immigrant populations from a rural geographic area will aid other states with similar demographics in creating or modifying college preparation programs. Third, focusing this study on how family, culture, prior schooling, and immigration influences college experience will help advance persistence studies. Lastly, looking at race, class, and gender as part of the analysis will also enhance the understanding of how students of culture navigate their college experiences.

#### Significance of Study

The issue of immigration continues to be a national debate among policymakers and educators alike. The national agenda includes the DREAM (Development, Relief and

Education for Alien Minors) Act, which will grant undocumented immigrant children in-state tuition status and a 6-year conditional residence status for eligible individuals. Nationally, increasing numbers of Latinas/os are residing in communities having little experience with Latinas/os; this warrants a deeper look into the success and barriers associated with persistence issues. This study helps inform similar states, such as North Carolina, Maine, and Georgia, which are experiencing a growing influx of newcomers in their communities. In addition, my study provides a cultural perspective for investigating retention of Latina/o college students, as I employ a Chicana/o Studies perspective in the study of retention models. I achieve this goal by asking my participants about their family, culture, prior schooling, and immigration experiences. To my knowledge, no study has explored college persistence issues for undocumented Mexican immigrant women from a cultural standpoint.

### Theoretical Perspective

Researching Mexican-born college women's persistence in college should be approached with a multidimensional analytic gaze. The theoretical repertoire in this study stems from Chicana feminist epistemologist and cultural-centered retention models. The incorporation of the following analytic lenses sheds a deeper understanding of how identity and culture is central to how *Mexicanas* negotiate their college worlds.

This research study is grounded by Gloria Anzaldúa's (1987) borderland theory, Dolores Delgado-Bernal's (1998) Chicana feminist epistemology, and *trenzas de idenitdades múltiples* (braids of multiple identities) from Francisca Gonzalez's (1999) research. These conceptual frameworks place culture and identity at the root of my analytic gaze. I chose Anzaldúa's borderland theory because it depicts the experiences of *Mexicanas/Chicanas*, which describes them as living two or more consciousnesses that often conflict with one

another—a “cultural collision” (p. 78). This mere attribute constitutes the development of “*la conciencia mestiza*,” which is a product of how *Mexicana/Chicanas* navigate multiple identities that form their own consciousness. For students of color, attending a predominately White institution may mean having to change their identities in order to “fit in.” Anzaldúa spoke of these cultural changes and the need to

feel competent enough on the outside and secure enough on the inside to live life on my own. Yet in leaving home I did not lose touch with my origins because *lo mexicano* is in my system. I am a turtle; wherever I go I carry “home” on my back. (p. 21)

The borderlands is not just a line that divides two countries, but is also the two or more identities that *Mexicanas/Chicanas* often have to juggle in many different settings. One scholar’s (Beltran, 2004) notion of Chicana “hybridity” illustrates the fluidity of identities that are neither compartmentalized nor autonomous, but rather are mutually dependant on one another and on one’s life and cultural history. This fluidity can be seen as a continuum that evolves beyond dualistic thinking. Borderland theory allows *Chicanas* to access their knowledge of self, to build bridges between identities that often intersect with issues of class, race, and gender. Anzaldúa’s (1987) distinguished poetic tales challenge *Chicanas* to develop their critical senses and to reinterpret and deconstruct our identities, to shape and mold them as our own rather than accept ourselves through the eyes of the dominant culture and its colonial legacy. In essence, borderland theory creates a “space” to grapple with our sense of self and the complexity of our multiple identities in an affirmative manner.

The other framework, from Delgado-Bernal (1998), emphasizes the use of our *Chicana* experiences, histories, and socializations as part of our research methodology. She

called upon the idea of “cultural intuition” as a gift from which I, a *Mexicana/Chicana* researcher, can derive meaning from the stories of my *Mexicana* participants because of the four components: life experiences, existing literature, professional experiences, and analytical research. In addition, this notion of *trenzas de identidades múltiples* (braids of multiple identities) provides a conceptual framework through which to interrogate the intersections of identities such as languages, behaviors, expectations, values, histories, and individual/group experience(s) in order to produce counterstories of cultural knowledge (F. E. Gonzalez, 1999).

Finally, although Tinto’s (1975, 1987, 1993) persistence theory contains little relevance to the experiences of ethnic minority students, many scholars (Attinasi & Nora, 1992; Hernandez, 2000; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Longerbeam, Sedlacek, & Alatorre, 2004; Nora, 1987; Yosso, 2006) have provided more insight into persistence issues for Latina/o college students. This dissertation study focuses on Tara Yosso’s (2006) work on critical race counterstories to depict the experiences of Chicana/o undergraduate students, which states,

Tinto’s approach is limited by its focus on White students. When we shift the research lens to focus on Chicanas/os, we find that instead of the stages of separation, transition, and incorporation, Chicanas/os tend to experience stages of culture shock, community building and critical navigation between multiple worlds. (p. 124)

Hence, this study explores these themes associated with persistence but places issues of multiple identities and prior knowledge at the core of the Chicana/o experience in the university.

### Tentative Presuppositions

I identified three assumptions before entering into this study. The first assumption is that immigration status for the participants presents a stressful barrier while in college. These students may experience isolation because of lack of specialized assistance. Furthermore, family and peers of similar cultural background act as the primary support system for these students. The second assumption is that their prior schooling background in both the United States and in Mexico assisted with the transition to college. Attending college is similar to learning the ins and outs of another culture; therefore, the lessons learned from transitioning into a new culture when arriving into the United States helped these students with their transition and success in college. Finally, the third assumption is that growing up in a rural community with little Latino presence provides them experience with living in an Anglo-dominated culture. Thus, these participants have developed the navigational skills needed to function and even succeed while existing between dominant and minority cultures. In addition, the resources available in this community also assisted with their transition and persistence in college.

### Context of Study

This study takes place at the University of Wyoming and in Elksville, Wyoming, a New Latino Diaspora site. The population of Elksville is 20,000, and Latinas/os make up approximately 3,000 residents. This county has witnessed a 400% increase among the Latina/o population since 1990 (Brenner, 2006). Interestingly, the county where Elksville is located was ranked the wealthiest in the nation in 2002, with an adjusted household gross income of \$107,696 (“Wyoming’s Teton,” 2004).

The University of Wyoming is located in Laramie, which is approximately 383 miles from Elksville. In 2005, the University of Wyoming's on-campus undergraduate enrollment totaled 9,510. Ethnic minority students made up about 7.8% of the total student population and approximately 3.1% were Hispanic or Chicano (*Fact Book*, 2006).

### Ethnic Labels

Ethnic labels have been a contentious topic for many Latinas/os and other ethnic minority groups. However, no one can underestimate the power of “names” and their ability to uplift or degrade. It is also important to recognize that ethnic labels are socially constructed and reflective of one's lived experiences (Alcoff, 2005). Equally significant was the complexity and heterogeneity associated ethnic labels. Grsofoguel (2004) argued that ethnic groups received by the host society impacts whether they are negatively or positively “racialized” (p. 317) by society. In other words, for immigrants, their acceptance by society is often dictated by global, national, and state policies. In any case, immigrants are not a homogenous group and depending on their “class origin, educational backgrounds, the political economy of the city in which they live in, and the broad context of incorporation to the new society” (Grsofoguel, p. 316) are all relevant factors that contribute to whether or not “they” belong in U.S. society. Take for the example of the immigration of Cubans in the United States. Their migration process was viewed positively (fleeing of the Castro regime) and perhaps their acceptance by U.S. society is one reason why Cuban Americans are perceived as the most successful Latino ethnic group.

This study used terminology such as Hispanic, Latina/o, Chicana/o, mestiza, and immigrant. The definitions below are offered not to define the identity of individuals, but to provide an understanding of the origins and meaning behind each term.

**Hispanic:** As Gimenez (1997) noted, this label is a generic umbrella term coined by U.S.

census officials in the wake of 1960s civil protest in order to categorize individuals who could trace their ancestry from Spanish-speaking countries. Although the term “Hispanic” became necessary in order to determine how affirmative action policies and programs could best be implemented, this term ignores the varied historical, social, economic, and political experiences of Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and other Central and South American peoples in the United States.

**Latina/o:** Hayes-Baustista and Chapa (1987) argued that the term “Hispanic” characterizes

one’s experience as a European experience with minimal difficulty in acculturation and integration into U.S. society. They argue for the use of the term “Latino” which gives more emphasis to the indigenous roots of “Hispanics,” and correctly characterizes their U.S. experience as one deeply rooted in U.S. policies with the overall effect of social, economic, and political exploitation of Latin American peoples and resources. They also argued that the use of “Latino” instead of “Hispanic” allows for the development of a more relevant collective memory and history for members of this group, which in turn leads to a strong sense of self and group pride.

**Chicana/o:** The definition used in this research are people who are of Mexican heritage born

either in the United States or in Mexico and who understand and appreciate the political significance of Chicanos (Munoz, 1989). Individuals of Latino descent who recognize the struggles and are active in the community in order to make changes for the betterment of our future children consider themselves Chicanos. The issues and

dilemmas that Chicanos face are most likely the same concerns that all Latinos encounter as well.

**Mestiza:** Beltran (2004) defined this term as “the particular mixture of Indian, black, Spanish that produces Mexican ethnicity and identity” (p. 595).

**Immigrants:** For this study, immigrants constitute individuals who were born outside the United States but have experienced at least 3 years of secondary schooling in the United States.

### Summary

In this study, I investigated college persistence issues for undocumented Mexican immigrant women. Borderland theory, Chicana epistemology, and *trenzas de mestizaje* (braids of multiple identities) were used as the theoretical perspectives that guided this study. Furthermore, I used Yosso’s (2006) stages of passage to depict college persistence in a more inclusive manner.

Chapter 2 provides an overview of literature on persistence theories, Latina/o college students and Latina/o immigrants in higher education. The first section of the literature critiques Tinto’s (1987, 1993) persistence theory and its implications for minority students in general and Latinas/os in particular. I also discuss gender issues and institutional factors and their influence on persistence for Latinas. The second section focuses on immigration and its implications for higher education looking in particular at the concept of the New Latino Diaspora and the K-12 challenges brought about by this Diaspora. Second, I explain the past and current immigration policies and their impact on higher education. Lastly, I discuss issues facing immigrants and Latina/o immigrants in higher education.

In Chapter 3, I describe in detail the methodological approach used in this study, as well as the philosophical assumptions, research approach, participants, data collection and data analysis procedures, trustworthiness criteria, delimitations, and limitations.

Chapter 4 gives a general overview of the Elksville community and its resources dedicated to assisting the Latino immigrant population. It also includes the profiles of the four women who participated in this study. These profiles provide a deeper understanding of how the participants in this study were able to access college as well as their immigration backgrounds.

The six themes that were significant in college persistence of the women in this study are discussed in Chapter 5. These themes include (a) support and challenges from their home system; (b) unraveling the notions of dual socialization; (c) microaggressions against newcomers; (d) learning and unlearning from the language acquisition process; (e) dilemmas, stressors, and motivation associated with undocumented status; and (f) creating successful academic spaces and social networks in college. The findings present the participant voices along with my interjections of analysis.

In Chapter 6, I intertwine the findings from the study with the related literature and in relation to Yosso's (2006) theoretical model for Chicana/o Undergraduate Stages of Passage. Building upon Yosso's scholarship, a new conceptual model is introduced. In this chapter, I also discuss implications and recommendations for K-12 educators, higher education administrators, community advocacy groups, and policy makers as they continue their work to make college education more accessible for undocumented Mexican immigrants. Finally, I offer recommendations for future research and recount my growth and challenges throughout this research journey.

## CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter discusses the literature associated with how both native and immigrant Mexican/Latina women persist in college. For this study, I organized the literature review into two sections. The first section focuses on college persistence issues. I examine the literature about the theoretical foundations of persistence theory, themes associated with college persistence, and critiques of past persistence research, which will result in an overview of minority and Latina/o persistence literature. The second section will focus on the educational experiences of immigrant students, specifically Latinas/os. This section will also specifically address the influences of immigration status, culture, gender, and language on higher education attainment.

### Persistence Theories

The evolution of persistence theory can be traced back to the early 1970's. Although Vincent Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993) is widely cited for his persistence theory development, his theoretical model was influenced by the work of William Spady (1970) and Alexander Astin (1975). Spady was one of the first scholars to develop a theoretical model of student attrition based on Durkhiem's work on suicide (Metz, 2004). In essence, Durkhiem's (cited in Metz) study of why individuals commit suicide resulted in the notion that a "person's inability to become integrated into the community membership and subsequent failure to do so could be rooted in either an intellectual or a social phenomenon" (p. 192). Spady concluded that the decision process to leave college is complex involving a variety of variables including family, educational background, academic potential, institutional congruence, friendship support, intellectual development, grade performance, social integration, satisfaction, and

institutional commitment. On the other hand, Astin's (1975) longitudinal study of college persistence was significantly affected by environmental factors associated with the level of student involvement during the undergraduate experience. In other words, the more energy students expend by becoming more involved in campus activities the higher the likelihood of those students persisting in college. To further explain the concept of involvement, Astin (1984) identified the following:

1. Involvement refers to the investment of physical and psychological energy in various objects. The objects may be highly generalized (the student experience) or highly specific (preparing for a chemistry examination).
2. Regardless of its object, involvement occurs along a continuum; that is, different students manifest different degrees of involvement in a given object, and the same student manifest different degrees of involvement in different objects at different times.
3. Involvement has both quantitative and qualitative features. The extent of a student's involvement in academic work, for instance, can be measured quantitatively (whether the student reviews and comprehends reading assignments or simply stares at the textbook and daydreams).
4. The amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational program is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that program.
5. The effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement. (p. 519)

In addition to these postulates, Astin (1984) also identified other factors associated with student involvement. For instance, students who live in the residence halls are able to frequently interact with peers, residence hall staff, and faculty. Also, students who live in the residence halls are more likely to participate in student organizations and athletics and are generally more satisfied with their college experience. More importantly, the residence halls provide a social haven for students to develop peer groups and other social networks important to persistence.

Spady (1970) and Astin (1975) both provided a foundation for other researchers to investigate the persistence and departure phenomenon on college campuses. In particular, Tinto (1975) was able to develop a theoretical framework based on this previous research. The following section will provide an overview of Tinto's (1975) theoretical persistence model.

#### Tinto's Persistence Model

Tinto (1987, 1993) identified six major characteristics in his student integration model. This model proposes that students arrive at college with attributes reflective of their family upbringing such as level of family support and educational level of family members. In addition, students bring to their college experiences an array of skills and abilities that can contribute to their level of commitment to their education and level of preparation for academic rigor (Swail, Redd, & Perna, 2003). While in college, students and the institution play an important role in facilitating academic and social experiences that integrate them into the institutional communities. Essentially, the degree to which the student integrates into the academic and social systems dictates the student's commitment to graduating from college (Swail et al.). Often the student's choice of departure centers on the lack of institutional "fit"

within the institution. In other words, a student may integrate into the academic and social systems of an institution only to find out that the institution may not be a good “match” for the student’s needs and abilities (Tinto, 1993).

Tinto (1988) also grounded his research in VanGennep’s rites of passage study into tribal communities. VanGennep “argued that the process of transmission of relationships between succeeding group was marked by three distinct phases or stages, each with its own specialized ceremonies and rituals” (Tinto, 1988, p. 440). Tinto incorporated the three stages of separation, transition, and incorporation into his original theory of persistence. The separation phase prompts students to disassociate themselves from their previous communities such as high school friends, community members, and families, which assumes that students who completely disassociate with their past lives are more than likely to integrate into the university community (Tinto, 1988). The transition phase is the period of adjustment for student in his/her new environment. Students test their coping skills as they endure the stressful demands of college life. However, the more socially and academically integrated students become, the more likely they are to network and utilize resources that will assist them in stress management (Tinto, 1988). Interestingly, Tinto (1988) also suggested that “persons of minority backgrounds and/or from very poor families, older adults, and persons from very small rural communities” (p. 445) are more likely to have problems of transition than students who have family members who have experienced college. Finally, the incorporation phase includes adopting new behaviors and establishing membership within the university community. In turn, students change themselves in order to adapt to their new environment while maintaining academic and social connections (Tinto, 1988).

It is imperative to note that Tinto (1993) himself admitted that his persistence model is not perfect and challenges other scholars to modify, add, and clarify his current work. The next section will discuss the critiques of Tinto's (1993) persistence model, which will lead into an explanation of minority student persistence.

### Persistence of Minority Students

Over the years, Tinto's (1987, 1993) persistence model has been critiqued by many in the field of higher education. The themes associated with these critiques are: (a) the misapplication of Tinto's (1987, 1993) notion of "rites of passage" to minority populations and (b) the usage of the term "integration" and "separation" and its negative connotations when applied to minority groups.

Tierney (1992) stated that the word "ritual" is used in Tinto's (1987, 1993) persistence model without regard to the implications of culture. In the traditional sense, rites of passage are an important step in one's culture in that it signifies a milestone in one's life. Tierney (1992) noted that, "the assumption is that a uniform set of values and attitudes remain in an institution and that it is the individual's task to adapt to the system" (Tierney, 1992, p. 607). The problem with this viewpoint, however, is the meaning and experiences of rituals and rites of passages are not the same in every culture. For instance, Tinto (1987, 1993) surmised that dropouts occur when individuals simply choose not to continue through the rites of passage (Tierney, 1992). However, Tierney (1992) noted that in many cultures, "choice does not exist about whether to undergo the ritual; one simply partakes of it" (p. 609). Finally, Tierney (1992) argued that research on minority college persistence, particularly among Native Americans, should be conceptualized as a collective process rather

than an individualistic one. More importantly, one's cultural attributes and assets should also be central to the study of persistence (Tierney, 1992).

Another terminology complaint of Tinto's (1987, 1993) persistence theory is the usage of integration and separation. The notion of integration is problematic because of the underlying meaning. Researchers (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Rendon, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000) argued that the term "integration" assumes that in order to be successful in college, minority students have to surrender their culture in order to be part the mainstream community. In fact, Tierney's (1992) study of retention issues with the Native American population portrays Tinto's (1987, 1993) model as harmful. For native students, "if people lose their identity, then many of them will not succeed" (p. 4). However, Tinto (1993) did consider these criticisms and changed the terminology from integration to "membership." Because the concept of membership was not adequately defined and still does not represent the experiences of minority students, Hurtado and Carter developed the sense of belonging model that specifically addressed the activities and levels of participation that assisted Latino students in their college transition. Additionally, recent research suggests adopting the concept of "dual socialization—where individuals both develop and sustain membership in new and old cultures" (Rendon et al., p. 139). Dual socialization allows minority students to maintain their individualities without having to modify their cultural beliefs in order to "adapt" or "fit in" with the campus culture. In essence, because the concept of dual socialization supports incorporating a student's past upbringing into his/her new college environment, Tinto's (1987, 1993) concept of separation contradicts these prevalent findings.

The concept of separation is inconsistent when researching diverse student populations. As stated earlier, the separation stage encourages students to disassociate

themselves from past communities. Tinto (1987, 1993) believed that students can be successful only if they leave behind their family and community values and adopt the institutional values (Rendon et al., 2000). Rendon et al. adopted the concept of biculturalism to explain how students navigate their native (minority culture) and the college world (majority culture). They cited Valentine's ethnographic research on African Americans which suggested that "people learn and practice both the mainstream culture and ethnic cultures at the same time" (p. 134). Tinto's (1987, 1993) separation concept creates a hierarchical stance, which assumes the majority culture takes precedence over the minority culture. Rather than separating, minority students learn to operate within a multiple communities without compromising their values and assets rooted in their families' and past communities. Finally, Guiffrida (2006) asserted that home social systems or cultural connections to past and present communities help facilitate persistence in college. As such, her findings concluded that minority students thrive in communal environments that promote relationship building with people of similar backgrounds rather than taking an individualist approach to persistence, which recognizes the college student's need for extrinsic rewards. Guiffrida suggested advancing Tinto's (1987, 1993) theory by "recognizing the degree to which (a) student motivational orientation impacts college and precollege commitment toward academic success and persistence; and (b) both home social systems (i.e., teachers, parents, friends, etc.) and college systems (i.e., peers, faculty, staff) shape and fulfill students' salient needs" (p. 460). Thus, for minority students, past relationships help them maintain a healthy sense of self and provide for a supportive network while in college.

Tara Yosso (2006) also critiqued Tinto's (1987, 1993) rites of passage and offered another perspective on college persistence for Chicana/o students, which includes culture

shock, community building, and critical navigation of multiple worlds. Through critical race counterstories, Yosso (2006) reflected on her students' stories of alienation, isolation, and discrimination as they were introduced to college life. In order to deal with the issue of culture shock Chicana/o students rely on, and gain strength from, their communities and families. She acknowledged that Tinto's (1987, 1993) separation stage would have a negative effect on Chicana/o students when faced with the adversities of college life. However, building a sense of community enables students to create academic and social spaces that "foster our learning at the university and nurture a supportive environment where our experiences are validated and viewed as important knowledge" (Yosso, 2006, p. 120). The counterspaces can be in the form of study groups where students from social groups can develop into academic support groups; a center where students receive tutoring or assistance with academic skills; or in the form of student organizations that enable students to give back to their communities. Interestingly, Yosso (2006) posed the question of "whether the counterspaces we create on campus always provide safe spaces for Chicanas/os" (p. 121). This statement speaks to the vast diversity among Chicanas/os in regards to phenotype, language, socioeconomic status, immigration status, gender, and sexual orientation. Lastly, critical navigation between multiple worlds depicts how students incorporate their experiences and values into the university community. Yosso (2006) was strategic about using the term navigate rather than negotiate. Negotiating assumes that students have to compromise part of themselves in order to fit into and be accepted by the university community, whereas navigating portrays students as the "drivers" of their own destinies. They have the choice to decide how they want to mold the university in a way that will fit their needs.

Yosso (2006) presented a different perspective on college persistence that is more attuned to the experiences of students of color. This study takes into account the work previous persistence research, but uses Yosso's (2006) model of Chicana/o undergraduate stages of passage as the primary source that guided the data collection. An illustration of her model is shown in Figure 2.1.



Figure 2.1. A model of Chicana/o undergraduate “Stages of Passage”

In sum, the research on minority student persistence implies that cultural implications should be considered. Although Tinto (1987, 1993) offered a general concept for persistence of students, the “one size fits all” notion presents challenges for underrepresented students in college environments. In the next section, I focus on college persistence issues specifically for Latinas/os.

#### Latinas/os and College Persistence

Anzaldúa (1987) described the *la nueva mestiza* as one who “copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance from ambiguity. She learns to be an Indian in Mexican culture, to be Mexican from an Anglo point of view. She learns to juggle cultures” (p. 629). In essence, Latinas in college are straddling two or more cultures as they navigate the “bigness” and unfamiliarity of the university setting. In this section, I will discuss the implications of family and gender roles of Latina college women.

Latino/a students often face many of the challenges that other minority groups confront, but there are also other barriers to their success. One study (Longerbeam et al., 2004) examined work/school conflicts among Latinos/as and found that, in the majority of cases, Latino/a students are often forced to work long hours due to family and/or personal financial responsibilities, which ultimately subtracts from their success in education. Consistent with other findings, Latinos/as tend to stress more about issues related to finance, academic imperfections, and family obligations than non-Latinos/as. Apparent in these studies is the understanding that family is a steady focal point for Latino/a college students. Current studies (Hernandez, 2000, 2002; Hernandez & Lopez, 2004) on Latino/a college student retention suggest that families are mechanisms for support and encouragement throughout students' college experiences. On the other hand, families can also place a sense of obligation or heightened expectations on students to succeed in college. In other words, for many first generation (first U.S.-born] Latino/a students failing is not an option because parents entering into the country from Mexico or other countries come with a predisposition that their hard labor in a new country will provide their children a better, more fruitful life. This is the "debt" that is often repaid by first generation Latinos/as while in college; a college diploma is often the only acceptable gift (Torres, 2003). Moreover, gender is another important issue when discussing college persistence.

### *Gender Issues*

Although Latinas outnumber Latino men in college degree attainment they face gender inequalities and cultural norms that position women as subordinates to men. One researcher (Gandara, 1995) reported that encouragement from mothers was an important factor for Mexican American women to stay in college. Interestingly, many mothers would

often defend the educational aspirations of their daughters from extended family members. In fact, one mother defined success for her daughter as being “totally independent of a male in life . . . to remain single, to be financially independent, and to have a profession” (p. 95). This describes how mothers have deeply reflected on their own position as women and hope their daughters do not repeat the same cycle of socialization (Harro, 2000). Although parents provide a support system for Latina college students, their college trials and tribulations are often not understood by parents. Additionally, parents often want to apply the same household restrictions and obligations while Latinos/as attend college (Torres, 2003). This often leaves students with the major task of balancing their educational endeavors with family and cultural commitments.

Other challenges for Latina college students include breaking away from traditional roles for women in the Latino culture. One life history study (K. P. Gonzalez, Jovel, & Stoner, 2004) found Latinas experiencing mixed emotions with their decision to attend college. On one hand, students indicated excitement about their newfound independence. On the other hand, their parents were also happy about their daughter’s opportunity but often felt scared or unsure about their daughter moving outside the family home (K. P. Gonzalez et al.). In addition, many Latinas in this study felt the absence of their cultural familiarities on campus was more challenging than the act of leaving home (K. P. Gonzalez et al.). Interestingly, the struggle of being away from home is an issue with which Latinas grapple on an ongoing basis; even after college graduation the decision of returning home is once again discussed among parents and family members as students consider graduate school and job opportunities that may take them further away from home (K. P. Gonzalez et al.).

Understanding that Latinas make collective rather than individualistic decisions is crucial for student personal administrators.

Additional research (Zalaquett, 2005) has suggested that Latinas succeed in college by valuing their education, having a sense of responsibility to obtain their degree because of parental sacrifices, developing relationships with other peers, and mentoring from faculty and staff members. To illustrate this point, one Latina college student recollected her first year in college as “an educational catastrophe” (Orozco, 2003, p. 130). Her grades were indicative of her poor college preparation in conjunction with the lack of minority representation and the chilly campus climate. Like many first-generation students, she felt isolated and alienated. Even though her parents were supportive and encouraging, she described family and school as “two separate entities; like water and oil, they never mixed—they seemed to repel one another” (p. 131). For this Latina, her parents were unable to provide her the type of support most college educated parents provide their children. Her parents could also not relate to the emotional struggles of balancing school with family time. Ultimately, her decision to stay in school was because of her sense of responsibility to her family and her desire to be a role model for her younger siblings. In the end, she found her niche at her institution through undergraduate research and her Latina sorority membership (Orozco).

I use this literature and the sense of belonging theory to understand the academic and social components of persistence. The next section will describe the institutional climate and factors associated with retention of Latina students.

### *Institutional Factors*

Institutions that do not make campus diversity a priority often results in perpetuating a chilly environment for diverse students (Hurtado, 1992). For Latinos, research (Hurtado &

Carter, 1997) emphasizes the importance of the first-year experience as determinants of sense of belonging. Students navigate this sense of belonging by “getting to know and scaling down” (Attinasi, 1989, p. 247) the large environment of an institution. “Getting to know” refers to strategies employed by the students to increase their familiarity with the campus geographies. Students who are just arriving on campus often utilize their more seasoned peers to assist with the campus exploration. “Scaling down” allows the student to find his or her own niche or comfortable environment within the larger scale of the university. Students find their own group of friends and take ownership of a small piece of the campus.

On an institutional level, Latina college students also experience institutional marginalization (Rodriguez, Guido-DiBrito, Torres, & Talbot, 2000) while in college. Essentially, Latinas often feel like outsiders who do not fit into the mainstream campus culture. As a numerical minority, Latinas struggle not only with cultural barriers but with gender-based barriers that are often internalized (Rodriguez et al.). According to one study (Rodriguez et al.), the ways to ensure the success of Latina students include adequate financial aid, academic support systems, social and cultural support systems, and a campus environment that appreciates the contributions of Latinas.

Lastly, the issue of cultural congruity (Gloria & Castellanos, 2003) is also significant to campus climate. To what degree do Latinas, and students of color in general, have to change themselves culturally in order to fit into the mainstream culture on a college campus? For Latinas/os and other minority groups, if their culture is not reflected within faculty and staff representation, the curriculum inside the classroom, and campus aesthetics, they will start to question their own cultural values in order to fit into the norm of the larger campus structure. “As such, educational integration often tantamount to cultural cleansing as students

are expected to strip away their own values and culture, allowing for the status quo of the university culture and environment” (Gloria & Catellanos, p. 82). The literature presented in this section explains the many perceptions of Tinto’s (1987, 1993) persistence theories and their implications for minority students. Gender and institutional factors for Latina students are also presented. The next section focuses specifically on the experiences of Latina/o immigrants.

### Latina/o Immigrants and Education

The topic of immigration continues to dominate much of the U.S. political agenda. This section will provide a general explanation of the challenges for Latinas/os in the educational system. First, I will discuss the main issues regarding K-12 schooling for Latina/o immigrants living in New Latino Diaspora sites. Second, I will explain how cultural capital can be a way to address the challenges faced by educators in the K-12 system. The rationale for discussing K-12 experiences in higher education research is that many Latina/o students internalize the negative messages about their culture, their language, and their abilities as learners. These experiences transcend into their college experiences. Finally, the next portion of this section will provide a brief overview of past and present immigration policies affecting Latina/o immigrants and challenges for Latina/o immigrants in higher education.

### New Latino Diaspora

As stated earlier, the New Latino Diaspora describes those locales that are experiencing an influx of Latina/o newcomers and are unaccustomed to any “new” minority groups in the community. One researcher (Cantu, 1995) described newcomer immigrants as being “peripheral” (outsiders) to the community despite their economic contributions that

benefit employers and community members. In hindsight, states have accepted illegal immigration for capital purposes but have yet to facilitate safe and conducive social relationships among newcomers. In another study, Dalla and Christensen (2005) observed that social relationships between immigrants and Whites are occurring within the younger generation, noting, “The children’s relationships may be the key to alleviating future tensions between both groups” (p. 34). However, the interactions between immigrants and Whites need to be positive ones in order for community building to occur.

Further, in a comprehensive immigration report in rural settings, Jensen (2006) forecasted immigrants increasingly settling in more rural locations rather than urban areas. The findings for this research also concluded,

Rural immigrants are more likely to be Hispanic (and of Mexican origin in particular); they are less well-educated; they are more likely to be poor, but when poor, less likely to receive Food Stamps; they are more likely to be married; more likely to be working, but also underemployed; more likely to own their own home; and they may be in better health and more likely to have access to health insurance.

Yet, the perceptions of this influx of immigrants by community members are mixed. The 20-60-20 rule (Butler-Flora & Maldonado, 2006; Grey & Woodrick, 2005; Jensen, 2006) suggests that 20 percent of the community believe that immigrants are positive contributors to the community infrastructure, 60 percent are indifferent about the impacts of newcomer immigration, and 20 percent have negative perceptions of newcomer immigrants. These negative perceptions often suggest the increase in immigration is accompanied by higher crime rates. However, immigrants in new destinations also experience discrimination. For example, local businesses that provide employment opportunities for newcomers rarely

consider the additional social and educational services needed for the Latino newcomers. This act of needing “more” services often creates a perception of resentment among community members. With that resentment often come acts of exploitation, such as landlords overcharging or requiring additional stipulations for housing accommodations, or employers threatening deportation or withholding compensation if newcomers seek medical insurance or payment for work related injuries (Hamann et al., 2002).

*K-12 Experiences of Latinas/os in the New Diaspora Site*

In any case, the presence of a small Latina/o community can lead to a considerable amount of isolation. For school-aged children, this isolation may often lead to questioning their cultural identity and to the internalization of other people’s negative perceptions about themselves and their culture. One ethnographic case study (Worthan, 2002) of a rural town in New England with a community of 200 Latinos examined the gender difference in school success. The major findings in this study explored the issue of cultural identity. For Latinos, issues of cultural identity are seen as an “either/or.” Either you completely assimilate into mainstream culture or resist conformity. They also found themselves identifying more with working class Mexicans rather than white collar workers. In turn, Latinas found success in accommodating strategies rather than assimilating. Hence, they were more successful in balancing their home world and school world and they conformed in school only when they perceived it would enable them to become more successful (Wortham).

Another qualitative study examined future educational outcomes for new Latinas/os from six different counties (both rural and urban) in Georgia and revealed six major problems for Latinas/os in the school system (Bohon, Macpherson, & Atilas, 2005). The six major findings include the following:

- Among parents, there seems to be a lack of understanding of the U.S. school system. Although there are special programs in some schools that orientate parents and students to the new school system, the problem is in the actual enrollment of students. Often, parents will not know how to enroll their children in school or which documents may be required. Even the notion of providing documentation to enroll their children in school may steer them away because of the fear of revealing their own immigration status. Additionally, parents with the lowest educational backgrounds may also believe that tuition and books will be charged to the family thus insinuating the cost of school will be a financial burden on the family.
- Due to the low participation level of Latino/a parents in the schools, there is a common perception that parents of Latino/a students do not care about education. In fact, education is a strong value for Latina/o parents. The language barrier is a common dilemma for many parents.
- Immigrants who are more transient tend to discourage their children from attending school because they do not find it a necessity. Many times the teachers will use college as an incentive for finishing high school, but that does not work if students know that they will return to their country of origin before they reach this point.
- Schools vary in resources and support for students with limited English proficiency. For instance, the lack of certified bilingual instructors or Latina/o instructors adds to the inefficiency of these support programs. Parents also witness discrimination with their children in schools.
- Many Latina/o students have low aspirations and do not believe they can achieve their goals. Even when Latinas/os finish all the basic requirements for high school

graduation, the state of Georgia mandates a written English exam, which is seen as a barrier for many Latinas/os. In addition, some students have internalized gender roles which limit their future options. Bohon et al. found that it was difficult to retain both males and females in school. Even when Latinas presented themselves as potential college students, family obligations took precedence over their educational goals.

- Finally, accessing a college education is a common barrier because of lack of knowledge on the school counselor's part and ineligibility for federal grants and loan for students (Bohon et al.). The section on Latino immigrants and higher education will discuss these barriers in detail.

These findings question how schools can address the needs of Latina/o students and illustrate how communities can begin to address some of these shortcomings.

The challenges for Latinas/os in the educational system within New Diaspora sites are similar to those in urban areas. Often those challenges begin with a school curriculum that does not represent the students' abilities (Gibson, 2002). More importantly, the curriculum does not value the assets that Latina/o students bring in terms of cultural capital. Yosso (2005) used critical race theory to examine how "community cultural wealth is an array of knowledge skills, abilities, and contact possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist macro and micro forms of oppression" (Yosso, 2005, p. 77). The following are forms of cultural capital:

1. Aspirational capital refers to the hopes and dreams that Latina/o students harbor despite their current situation. Parents will also have high expectations of their children.

2. Linguistic capital reflects on the benefits of speaking more than one language. Children develop intellectual and social skills based on their experiences as translators or cultural brokers.
3. Familial capital allows children to gain a sense of community by accessing many unofficial role models, informal teachings, and resources present in immediate families and extended families.
4. Social capital can provide emotional support to navigate through societal institutions. This can be identifying with a community agency or person who assists students with educational achievement.
5. Navigational capital is the ability to maneuver through hegemonic institutions that often create stressful events for students. This concept is referred as academic invulnerability. Usually key support people within these institutions support students and help them overcome stressful events.
6. Resistance capital is cultivated when students learn to challenge the inequities that are present in their communities and societal institutions (Yosso, 2005).

These notions of capital do not necessarily operate systematically or linearly. They represent the many forms of knowledge Latina/o students possess that can be further enhanced by teachers and community members once these students experience their first schooling contact. The next section will discuss past and present immigration policies and their implications for higher education.

#### Immigration Policies and Implications for Higher Education

In 1982, the Supreme Court decision in *Plyler vs. Doe* granted undocumented students the right to public education in the K-12 system and tried to diminish the differential

treatment of undocumented and documented school age children. Interestingly, in many cases families had both documented and undocumented children in the same family (Contreras, 2002). Four years later, Congress passed an amnesty program that legalized 2.8 million undocumented immigrants. Unfortunately, in 1996 the exclusionary policies of the “Illegal” Immigration Reform Act and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) Section 505 banned undocumented immigrants from receiving preferential treatment on in-state residency when trying to access higher education (Oliveres, 2006). In other words, undocumented students who have resided and graduated from high school in the same state may be charged out-of-state tuition by some institutions. According to the American Association of State Colleges and Universities ([AASCU], 2005), 10 states have passed legislation allowing in-state rates for undocumented immigrants. These states include Washington, California, Utah, New Mexico, Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Illinois, New York, and Nebraska. Typically all states require:

- Residence in the state for certain number of years,
- Graduation from a state high school,
- Acceptance to a college or university, and
- Submission of an affidavit stating they will file for legal residency (§ 2).

Although supporters believe this legislation will provide more economic development and encourage more Latino youth to pursue a postsecondary education, opponents think providing in-state tuition benefits to undocumented immigrants will increase the influx of immigrants to the United States. Opponents also perceive the in-state tuition benefits as taking opportunities from students who are legal U.S. citizens (AASCU, 2005). In fact, a Kansas lawsuit prompted by 24 out-of-state students argued that they were “denied the same

residency-based benefits that the state is offering to undocumented immigrants, therefore violating federal law” (§ 5). However, states are not violating federal law as long as they offer the same benefits to U.S. citizens who share similar circumstances (National Immigration Law Center, 2006). In the Kansas case, the courts sided with the state and upheld their in-state tuition policies.

The perception of taking resources away from students who are already U.S. citizens is fueled by anti-immigration agendas prominent across the nation. In reality, only a small number of undocumented students will qualify for in-state tuition benefits. The National Immigration Law Center (2006) stated,

less than 2 percent of this year’s graduation class are undocumented immigrants, and only a fraction of these will attend college even if they are able to pay the in-state rate. In most states, we are only talking about only a few dozen or a few hundred particularly talented students. (p. 3)

Although students do receive in-state tuition, financing the costs of higher education continues to be another barrier as undocumented immigrants do not qualify for federal aid and in some cases state aid.

Another important piece of legislation is the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act (DREAM Act), which was introduced in the U.S. Senate in November 2005 by Senator Orrin Hatch and Senator Richard Durbin (“Students Fasting,” 2007). If passed, it would offer conditional legal status to undocumented youth that meet the following criteria:

- Entry into the United States before age 16,
- Continuous presence in the United State for 5 years prior to the bill’s enactment,

- Receipt of a high school diploma or its equivalent (i.e., a GED), and
- Demonstration of good moral character (Migration Policy Institute [MPI], 2006, p. 2).

According to the Migration Policy Institute (MPI, 2006), approximately 310,000 youth are available for college or military enrollment, but only about 270,000 would meet the qualifications. If students choose the college path, they would be eligible for in-state tuition, and some student loans but not Pell grants. If individuals decide to join the military they would receive the same benefits as U.S. citizens such as funding for college tuition and additional job training. Military individuals may also benefit from expedited citizenship and possible path to citizenship for immediate family members.

The DREAM Act was absorbed into the U.S. Senate's comprehensive immigration reform plan, which on June 28, 2007, was voted down 53 to 47 on the Senate floor (U.S. Senate, 2007). Opponents of the DREAM Act stated that any type of legalization is a form of amnesty and rewards to those who have broken the law. To many students, the DREAM Act is an opportunity for a better life. The failure of immigration reform policies has prompted California college students to join together and stage a fasting demonstration in protest of the lack of immediate action ("Students fasting," 2007). The next section will focus on the college experiences of Latina/o immigrant students.

#### Latina/o Immigrants and Other Immigrants in Higher Education

In this section I discuss how Latina/o immigrants fare in higher education compared to other immigrant populations and native Latinas/os. Next, I explain the retention barriers and academic and social obstacles for immigrants. Lastly, I examine college experiences of undocumented Mexican students.

The existing literature specifically on Latina/o immigrants in higher education is scarce. Many researchers (Gray, Rolph, & Melamid, 1996; Szelenyi & Chang, 2002; Vernez & Abrahamse, 1996) have discussed immigrant students in general terms and occasionally have teased out relevant findings for Latinas/os. Vernez and Abrahamse used the High School and Beyond dataset to examine immigrants in the 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades in 1980 with some U.S. schooling. One interesting finding noted that Latina/o natives and immigrants are 10% more likely than other immigrant and native groups to attend a community college (see Table 2.1). Interestingly, Latinas/os are the least represented group for 4 year college attendance, and immigrant Latinas/os are more likely than native Latinas/os to attend both 2-year and 4- year institutions. The researchers did not make note of the reason behind this difference but one can speculate that Latina/o immigrants have greater aspirations to transfer to a 4-year institution than their native counterparts. Other significant findings were that both native and immigrant Latinas/os “scored the lowest of any racial/ethnic group on nearly all indicators of course-taking, educational expectations, and college going considered”

Table 2.1. *Distribution of Immigrants and Natives by Type of College Attended and Race/Ethnicity*

College type	Ethnic groups									
	All		Asian		Black		Hispanic		White	
	N	I	N	I	N	I	N	I	N	I
2-year college	35	38	38	31	36	40	51	48	32	33
4-year college	49	43	42	44	49	48	36	29	51	51
Both 2- and 4-year colleges	16	18	20	25	15	12	13	23	13	17

*Note.* N = non-immigrants, I = immigrants; Source: Vernez & Abrahamse, 1996, p. 41.

(Vernez & Abrahamse, p. 65). More so, immigration status of Latinas/os had a positive influence on persistence in college. Latina/o immigrants were “11 percent more likely, respectively, to persevere in college than natives of the same racial/ethnic background” (p. 51). This study concluded that factors such as income level, individual aspirations, and educational background of parents are barriers for educational attainment. These researchers suggested that providing more financial resources and parental outreach before and during college attendance are ways in which Latinas/os can increase their educational attainment.

Once in college Latina/o immigrants face a number of academic and social barriers that may hinder success. One mixed method study (Gray et al., 1996) entailed the examination of 14 institutions (4-year and 2-year colleges) in Florida, California, Illinois, New York, and New Jersey. The information gathered from faculty, administrators, and students addressed immigration in general terms, but these findings are certainly relevant for Latinas/os.

#### *Academic Barriers*

Gray et al. (1996) examined two major barriers for immigrants: language barriers and different learning styles. Addressing the issue of language proficiency for immigrant students is a priority for retention and academic success. However, some faculty in this study used practices of discrimination to “weed out” those who were not English proficient. For example, one professor, as a “safety” precaution for his laboratory course, administered an English test to make sure all students could understand instructions. Another professor announced in class that English proficiency was instrumental for success in the class. However, the typical response for low language proficiency was to merely ignore mistakes and errors made by students (Gray et al.).

In addition, some immigrant students found it hard to adjust to the testing and learning style in the classroom. For instance, students who are used to memorizing facts and content may not be comfortable with in-class participation and/or applying critical thinking skills. The latter may be a high expectation from faculty members. Also, in many cases immigrants were unfamiliar with the multiple choice format and often failed timed exams because of their limited English proficiency (Gray et al., 1996). Interestingly, the majority of the respondents in this study did not perceive immigrants as a disadvantaged population. In fact, the California respondents felt “immigrants from Mexico or Latin America were better prepared and achieved higher levels in college than did second generation or later Chicanos (Gray et al., p. 65). The overall perception of success among immigrants in higher education are based on three main factors: (a) foreign schools were often perceived as more rigorous than U.S. schools, therefore education abroad was highly revered; (b) academic support from family members and other networks who offer assistance and counsel; and (c) a sense of aspiration for achieving a college degree (Gray et al.). Again, these are general assumptions about all immigrant groups.

### *Social Barriers*

Gray et al.’s (1996) study also addressed the barriers of participating in extracurricular activities and using campus services for immigrant students. Some immigrants may have family or work obligations that leave little time for other activities, whereas in some cases organized participation is not a common cultural practice and some families encourage informal interactions with individuals or entities that resemble their own cultural background (Gray et al.). Furthermore, this study revealed the general perception that immigrant students are less likely than nonimmigrant students to be involved with

extracurricular activities. In any case, immigrant students will more than likely confine their extracurricular participation to groups and individuals who share the same ethnicity (Gray et al.). Additionally, using campus resources and services is perceived as a high need for immigrant students. An institutional response for generating more participation among immigrant students is to provide programs (orientation, career counseling, and psychological counseling) in the language that is dominant in that particular region. In many instances, institutions noted that finding qualified individuals to fill these special positions was cumbersome. In any case, immigrant students are usually expected to use the existing services designed for native or first generation students or offices targeting ethnic minority populations (Gray et al.).

Finally, throughout this study respondents stated that specific services that target immigrant populations in higher education were unnecessary. The needs of immigrants were seen as no different than other disadvantaged groups, and reluctant administrators were concerned about further “balkanization” (Gray et al., 1996, p. 89) on campus. In essence, institutions are still unclear about how much programmatic, policy, and fiscal responsibility should be applied to this group. Gray et al.’s final recommendation stated that more data collection is needed by institutions on immigrant student “enrollment and retention in college, attitudinal and needs assessment studies and evaluations of student outcomes and the effectiveness of remedial and ESL programs” (p. 105). This study provided some insights into the academic and social issues facing immigrants in higher education. The next section discusses college experiences of undocumented female immigrants.

Two research studies (Abrego, 2006; Rangel, 2001) were instrumental in guiding this research. Yolanda Rangel’s case study analysis of six undocumented Mexican women

transitioning into the California college system provided contextual narratives that humanized the research of Mexican immigrant women. Although this study focused on access and transitional issues for Mexican immigrant women, it did highlight some important college persistence issues. The two major themes that will be discussed are: fear of citizenship status disclosure and financial aid constraints.

It is evident that students in this study had to carefully navigate the college system more so than other college students. The question of legal citizenship started during the application process when student were asked of their U.S. citizenship. The disclosure of their illegal status came with the harsh reality of deportation. Often students were troubled about which university administrator they could trust or confide in about their illegal status. In some instances, undocumented students were unable to take advantage of the many opportunities afforded to other students. Studying abroad or interning aboard offers college students with global perspective and career marketability, yet undocumented students are unable to partake in such important programs. This study also revealed how students deliberately choose their level of participation. For instance, Maria was politically active in her community and with an activist organization on campus, MEChA (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán). Yet she avoided any activities that required a police presence for fear of being deported.

Limited financial resources for undocumented students are another hardship experienced by undocumented students. As stated earlier, federal loans and grants are not awarded to students without legal residency. Therefore, students in this study were reliant on family contributions and private scholarships. Even on-campus work requires legal status; some students informally gained employment through private employers who were

compassionate toward undocumented college students. Finally, some students in this study had the additional pressure of providing fiscal support to family members while attending college.

Leisy Abrego's (2006) ethnographic study with two immigrant rights organizations and her volunteer work at a local high school in Los Angeles concluded that, upon high school graduation, many undocumented youths find it difficult to deal with the economic and legal limitations brought on by their immigration status. The youths in her study indicated that much of their upbringing and values were intertwined with their experiences in the United States; however, their undocumented status caused frustration and discouragement that they could not continue their education. Abrego cited Portes and associates' work on segmented assimilation framework, which focused on specific structures that prohibit full reception into U.S. society because of "racial stratification, spatial segregation, and government policies" (p. 226). She reiterated that without "legitimate structural paths" (p. 226) undocumented youth will continue to be uncertain about their future opportunities despite their high academic achievements.

The path to a college education for undocumented and documented immigrants is filled with many obstacles and emotional hardships. On the other hand, their resiliency and motivation is a fundamental strength that assists them to succeed.

### Summary

This chapter provided a review of the literature pertaining to persistence theories and their implications for higher education. Tara Yosso's (2006) model of Chicana/o undergraduate stages of passage was discussed and was used as the primary model to guide this research study. In addition, the literature on Latinas/os college persistence revealed that

family, gender roles, and institutional factors were important determiners of persistence. The literature review also discussed issues and challenges for Latinas/os from New Latino Diaspora sites and provided an overview of Yosso's (2005) cultural capital as a means to empower student in this educational setting. Finally, immigration policies and immigrant college experiences was also a focal point in this research.

However, given the number of resources dedicated to college persistence issues and immigrants in higher education, none addressed the college experiences of undocumented immigrant women from a New Latino Diaspora site. Based on the growing number of undocumented immigrant students in our educational system, it is imperative to understand how institutions can recruit, retain, and graduate these students from college. Therefore, the focus of this study was to understand college persistence issues for undocumented Mexican college women.

In Chapter 3, I describe in detail the methodological approach used in this study, philosophical assumptions, research approach, participants, data collection procedures, data analysis procedures, trustworthiness criteria, delimitations, and limitations.

### CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

This purpose of this study was to understand college persistence issues for undocumented Mexican immigrant women. This chapter provides information on the methodological approach, philosophical assumptions of this study, the research approach, information on participants, data collection and analysis procedures, trustworthiness criteria, and the delimitations and limitations of this study. Upon receiving approval for my topic, applications to conduct research involving human subjects were submitted to the Office of Research Compliance at Iowa State University and the Office of Research and Economic Development at the University of Wyoming. I received approval for this study on April 11, 2007, from the University of Wyoming and from Iowa State University on May 20, 2007.

#### Methodological Approach

This study used qualitative methodologies in order to capture the voices and experiences of individuals and how they are impacted by the world around them (Merriam & Associates, 2002). Creswell (1998) defined qualitative research as

an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting. (p. 3)

Although there are many types of qualitative research, all qualitative researchers attempt to investigate and understand how individuals make meaning or sense from their experiences, use themselves as instruments for collecting and analyzing data, apply an inductive process in which themes, concepts, and theories emerge from the data collection, and write vivid

descriptions to develop images that convey who and what was studied (Merriam & Associates).

For this study, I employed a critical qualitative approach to look at the intersectionality of race, ethnicity, gender, and class as well as how power and privilege impact Mexican immigrant women in college. Paulo Freire, the author of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1993), is often cited for his critical inquiry work. He evoked the idea of developing a critical consciousness that helps individuals realize the hegemonic systems that control all facets of existence. However, developing this critical consciousness requires individuals to reflect deeply upon the relationship between themselves and the world, which can lead into transformation or action. In particular, Kincheloe and McLaren (cited in Crotty, 1998) explained several assumptions when employing a critical qualitative stance:

- All thought is fundamentally mediated by power relations that are social in nature and historically constituted;
- facts can never be isolated from the domain of values or removed from ideological inscriptions;
- the relationship between concept and object, and between signifier and signified, is never stable and is often mediated by the social relations of capitalist production and consumption;
- language is central to the formation of subjectivity, that is both conscious and unconscious awareness;
- certain groups in any society are privileged over others, constituting an oppression that is most forceful when subordinates accept their social status as natural, necessary, or inevitable;

- oppression has many faces, and concern for only one form of oppression at the expense of others can be counterproductive because of the connections between them;
- mainstream research practices are generally implicated, albeit often unwittingly, in the reproduction of systems of class, race, and gender oppression. (pp. 157-158)

In this study, I constructed questions and analyses to address issues of social justice for four undocumented Mexican immigrant college women. Furthermore, race, class, and gender were explored when discussing issues of college persistence.

#### Philosophical Assumptions

As noted in Chapter 1, I used borderland theory, Chicana epistemology, and multiple braids of identity to guide the philosophical assumptions in this study. Anzaldúa (1987) spoke of the struggles of negotiating different cultures that are filled with contradictions and confusion. As Beltran (2004) pointed out:

Beyond geography, a Chicano confronts internalized borders as he or she is made to feel like “a Mexican among Americans and an American among Mexicans.”

Chicanos develop a border *language*—one that is neither Spanish nor English but a hybrid, a new language. And finally, Chicanos are a border race—the bastard offspring of Spanish colonialism and Indian subjugation. (p. 596)

In a sense, Chicanas are never fully at “home” living in two or more cultures. Hence, *mestizaje* emerges as a new identity. Three main characteristics of *mestiza* identity have been identified (Vera & de los Santos, 2005). One, individuals must learn to be adaptable in different settings. Often, Chicanas/os learn how to speak in ways that fit a particular environment and that become second nature. Two, Chicanas form resiliency during the

process of negotiating and renegotiating their *mestiza* identity after new knowledge about history, culture, and society is gained. And finally, Chicanas develop a political consciousness that stems from inequities viewed in society. It is important to not only be aware of societal oppression but also consciously work against oppression (Vera & de los Santos). Borderland theory (Anzaldúa, 1998) was also used in developing interview questions for this study.

Chicana epistemology (Delgado-Benal, 1998) centers this research within my own cultural intuition. In other words, my immigration, family, and college experiences assisted in providing meaning to the data. Chicana epistemology acknowledges prior knowledge as part of the research process. I established my interview and research question through prevalent literature along with my cultural intuition.

Finally, *trenzas de identidades multiples* (braids of multiple identities; F. E. Gonzalez, 1999) was used in this study to learn how participants experience college in ways that may validate or invalidate their language, culture, gender, class, and immigration status. Moreover, what are the complexities associated with college persistence in terms of how the participants view the institution and how the institution views them as students? Braids of multiple identities assisted in the analysis portion of this research as I attempted to weave the participants' multiple identities in the college persistence process.

#### Research Approach

In order to understand the college persistence experiences of undocumented Mexican immigrant women from Elksville, who had attended the University of Wyoming, a case study research approach was employed. There are several characteristics that are featured in case study practices. One, a case study can be an individual or group of students, schools, or

program under investigation (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 2005). Second, a case study is bounded by systems, time, and place (Creswell, 1998; Merriam; Stake). In this study, I investigated the college experiences of undocumented Mexican immigrant women at the University of Wyoming for 6 months. In addition, I provided a contextual background of Elksville in order to illustrate how the community impacts college access and persistence. Third, a case study provides multiple data collection sources that can provide a detailed description of the context of study (Creswell, 1998; Merriam; Stake). Interviews, community informants, document review, and a focus group were utilized in this study. Finally, a descriptive account of the research setting is most appropriate for a case study approach (Creswell, 1998; Merriam; Stake). I provided a descriptive narrative of Elksville and the participants to illustrate the context of this research. This case study research also had two overlying intents: instrumental and interpretive.

The main interest in this study was to investigate issues of college persistence for undocumented Mexican immigrant women to better inform higher education administrators, educators, and policy makers. I used an instrumental case study “to provide insight into an issue or to redraw a generalization” (Stake, 2006, p. 445). The case study still honors the voices and stories of the participants but their stories will help develop changes and policies in higher education to better meet the needs of these students. For example, Asmussen and Creswell (1995) used instrumental case study in their investigation of the campus response to a student gunman in order to better inform practice and policy. They concluded, “We have the impression that, as a result of this case study, campus personnel see the interrelatedness and the large number of units that may be involved in a single incident” (p. 589).

Finally, I used an interpretive approach to case study, which allowed me to “develop conceptual categories or to illustrate, support, or challenge theoretical assumptions held prior to data gathering” (Merriam, 1998, p. 38). In addition to the rich description of this case study, I conceptualized how the emerging themes from this study will add to the existing persistence theories.

### Participants

During the spring of 2007, I solicited participation from four *Mexicanas* immigrants from Elksville who were attending the University of Wyoming. At that time I did not know the immigration status of my participants, and after my research was completed I learned that all my participants were undocumented Mexican immigrant college students. Further, given that the country of origin does not appear on the University of Wyoming college application, I used snowball sampling in which I asked one participant to identify others who met the criteria of this study. Through an e-mail message I briefly informed them of my study and asked to meet individually with them to further discuss my data collection plans. A copy of the sent e-mail is located in Appendix A. It is also important to note that one of my participants was a University of Wyoming graduate at the time of my study and another was attending the University of Wyoming when she agreed to participate in this study but was academically dismissed and was attending the local community college during my research process.

### Data Collection Procedures

Consistent with case study research, Stouffer (cited in Stake, 2005) suggested collecting data from the actions and inner workings of the case itself, which also includes examining historical, economic, political, legal, and aesthetic contexts; physical nature;

similar cases; and identifying informants that can provide a better insight into the case study. Given that I investigated college persistence issues for undocumented *Mexicana* college immigrants from a New Diaspora site, my participants were a major source of my data collection. Additionally, to further enhance my knowledge of my case, I identified two informants from the Elksville community who were able to provide historical and policy-relevant information about immigrant college women and issues of college access. The data collection procedures in this study included 16 interviews, one focus group, informal contact with the participants, and document collection.

### *Interviews*

I used interviews to determine the views and beliefs of the participants (Patton, 1990). The interview process involved “an informal, interactive process and utilize[d] open-ended questions” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 114). The purpose of the interview was focused not only on how individuals live life but also what specific activities the individuals engage in (Fontana & Frey, 2005). Although gaining a large amount of information in a relatively short amount of time is an advantage of using interviews, some limitations of interviews include the participants’ comfort level and their willingness to share personal information (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). Hence, gaining trust and establishing rapport was paramount to this study, particularly because the topic of immigration is a contentious one. I tried to establish trust and rapport in a couple of ways. One, I had periodic informal meetings with my participants to “check in.” This helped me gauge how they felt the research process was going and to discuss any happenings in our lives. Two, Patti Lather’s (1986) discussion on reciprocity provides a data collection strategy that can aid in breaking down barriers between the researcher and the participants. Essentially, I included reciprocity in my research design as a

way to give voice to my participants. For example, researchers Kushner and Norris (cited in Lather, 1986) coined the term “collaborative theorizing” (p. 264) in which the participants and the researcher negotiate the meanings, descriptions, and interpretations of the data collection. This collaboration “gives participants the dignity of contributing to theorizing about their worlds” (p. 264). This activity was practiced throughout most of the individual interviews but was most prevalent during the focus group interview, which took place at the end of the data collection process.

The type of interview questions that was used in this study is also important to consider. I used semi-structured questions during my interview process. Semi-structured questions and topics are flexible and do not need to be asked in any particular order. This type of questioning allows for the researcher to respond with another question or to probe in order to gain a better perspective of the participant’s worldviews (Merriam, 1998). Another interview strategy to consider is piloting the interview questions with others in order to receive feedback to revise or rework questions (Merriam). In this study, I elicited feedback from an undergraduate student who was not involved in my research study but had experience with qualitative research. In addition to the comments received from my committee members, I asked my peer debriefer, Juan Guardia, who had experience in recruitment and retention for students of color, to review my questions for meaning, clarity, and content. My interview guide can be found in Appendix B.

During the interview process, I used creative interview techniques that helped the discussion of the interview flow better (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). Creative interviewing is “moving past the mere words and sentences exchanged in the interview process” (p. 119). This was achieved by my own willingness to share experiences and feelings as well. In turn,

the participants felt more comfortable, enabling them to share more in reciprocation. For example, during the interviews I would share my own prior schooling experiences, and I felt they sensed a degree of solidarity with me. Although our conversations drifted from the list of questions we had conversational exchanges that put my participants at ease, and we both were able to learn more about one another during this process. This technique also coincides with the Chicana epistemology lenses. My interviews focused on five topical areas: family, culture, schooling, immigration, and college experiences. I conducted 16 total individual interviews during my data collection process. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes. The family and culture topic was combined into one interview. I also learned that many of these topics intersected with one another. For instance, prior schooling revealed issues of family and immigration.

### *Focus Group*

A focus group was another data collection method that was used in this study. The advantage of focus groups is that the stimulation of ideas by others may help an individual formulate his/her own worldview (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). Additionally, the researcher is also able to steer and guide the question toward her/his interests during the focus group interview. However, when the focus group is too tailored it can influence the participants' views and thus shut out possibilities for contrasting viewpoints (Morgan, 1997). The purpose of my focus group was to brainstorm and theorize the major themes that emerged from my initial analysis. This coincides with the reciprocity strategy that I mentioned earlier in this section.

The focus group took place, in a study room at the public library in Elksville. Before the focus group began, the participants and I discussed issues of confidentiality and

respecting the views of others. I also asked the participants what they needed in order for them to feel comfortable with the focus group process. Many of them reiterated the concept of respecting one another. I conducted a preliminary analysis of the transcriptions and brought general categories to the focus group for discussion. Each category was written on a large, brightly colored note card and placed at the center of a round table. Additionally, subcategories were on the back of each card to stimulate discussions. I merely asked the participants to tell me an experience or story about these subcategories, and most importantly, I asked if they agreed or disagreed. The point of the discussion was not to reach consensus but rather gain a deeper understanding of the main topics that were discussed during the individual interviews. The focus group lasted 3 hours and was audio taped.

#### *Document Collection*

Throughout the study, I collected documents and resources that pertained to immigrant college student issues and events that affect the immigrant population in Elksville. I collected newspaper articles from the Internet, community organization artifacts, the University of Wyoming admission applications and policies, and federal and state policies affecting access to higher education for immigrant students. These documents allowed me to review the materials in a systematic manner and search for patterns (Marshall & Rossman, 1995).

#### *Informants*

Finally, an informant “is a guide and translator of cultural mores and, at times, of jargon or language” (Fontana & Frey, 2005, p. 707). Typically, an informant is someone who can provide access to the group that is being studied. In my case, the community informants were individuals who could provide me a broad contextual background of this study. I

located two informants from the Elksville community who were connected with immigrant youth or immigration services. I met with one informant, Rosa,<sup>3</sup> twice for about 60 to 90 minutes on each visit and with Manuel for approximately 60 minutes. The visits with the informants were informal and not audio taped, although I did take notes during our visits and reflected on my visits in my journal. I also kept in touch with both of them via e-mail if I had any questions or needed clarification on our conversations. The conversations and information that were provided by the community informants is highlighted in Chapter 4. Table 3.1 depicts the schedule that I followed for the data collection process.

Table 3.1. *Data Collection Process*

Data Method	Constructs	Means	Completion
1 <sup>st</sup> round of individual interviews	Family Culture	Audio taped	June 2007
Community informant meeting	Community	Note-taking	June 2007
2 <sup>nd</sup> round of individual interviews	Schooling	Audio taped	September 2007
Community informant meeting	Community	Note taking	September 2007
3 <sup>rd</sup> round of individual interviews	Immigration	Audio taped	October 2007
4 <sup>rd</sup> round of individuals interviews	College experiences	Audio taped	November 2007
Focus group	All emergent themes	Audio taped	November 2007

<sup>3</sup> All names used throughout the text are pseudonyms.

In my study, data collection and data analysis were conducted simultaneously. As I collected data from interviews, ideas and themes emerged which led me to refine and reconfigure my future questions for the following interviews. The next section discusses the steps and processes I used in my data analysis.

### Data Analysis Procedures

The data analysis process is the stage in which the researcher makes sense out of the data collection (Merriam, 1998). For case study, Stake (cited in Creswell, 1998) delineated four forms of data analysis: *categorical aggregation* reviews the data for emerging meanings, *direct interpretation* breaks apart and puts back together the pieces of a single instance to find different meanings, *patterns* looks for correlations or patterns between categories to merge or condense into fewer categories, and *naturalistic generalizations* interprets and understands the case study based on the major themes. Creswell (1998) added, as another form of data analysis, *description*, which provides a visualization of the setting, participants, and context to the readers.

I transcribed all my interviews verbatim and typed all my observations. After reading each interview and field observation, I jotted notes, questions, and interpretations in the margins. Merriam (1998) encouraged “having a conversation with the data” (p. 181) by asking oneself what is missing, what is surprising, and so on. After this procedure, I used a color coding system to categorize the data.

### Trustworthiness Criteria

The topic of validity is important to consider when conducting qualitative research. This section discusses the issues of credibility, which examines the findings and the interpretation by the researcher; transferability, which questions if the findings can be used in

another setting; dependability, which asks if the findings can stand the test of time; and confirmability, which inquires if the findings are representative of the participants rather than the bias and prejudice of the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I provide a brief description of each construct and demonstrate how trustworthiness was achieved in this study.

According to Marshall and Rossman (1995), achieving credibility is “to demonstrate that the inquiry was conducted in such a manner as to ensure that the subject was accurately identified and described” (p. 143). In order to provide an in-depth description of the research context, I had prolonged engagement with my participants and used triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checks. A prolonged study is when the “researcher develops an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study and can convey detail about the site and the people that lends credibility to the narrative account” (Creswell, 2003, p. 196). I made three separate visits to Elksville, which totaled 10 days. My research was also conducted from June 2007 until November 2007, which was a sufficient amount of time to understand the culture of both the participants and the community. Triangulation was used by using different methods of data collection. One-on-one interviews, as well as a focus group, were used. In addition, community informants played a role in gathering information about the immigration climate in Elksville, and documents from immigration policies, newspapers, and university admissions materials assisted with document analysis. A peer debriefer is an individual who probes the accuracy of the data collection and analysis process (Creswell, 2003). I drew on the expertise of Juan Guardia, a former classmate who is versed in qualitative research and knowledgeable in the areas of Latina/o student retention, as a resource person during my data collection and data analysis process. Lastly, member checking is another strategy I used throughout this study. After each interview I gave the

participants their transcriptions to be reviewed. I also asked additional questions or asked for clarification of their transcriptions. Further, I talked with each participant about the findings, and I had them verify my interpretations of themes in order to capture their accurate perceptions (Merriam & Associates, 2002).

Transferability is the “applicability of one’s set of findings to another context [and] rests more with the investigator who would make that transfer than with the original investigator” (Marshall & Rossman, 1995, p. 143). However, generalizability is often viewed as problematic in qualitative research. As such, future researchers can use the theoretical frameworks of this study and well as the rich descriptions in order to inform their decision of transferability (Marshall & Rossman). I tried to make my findings and data collection procedures as detailed as possible so that others could gain insight from my study in order to influence future research procedures.

Dependability refers to the consistency of results with the data collected (Merriam & Associates, 2002). In other words, are findings in this study appropriate given the method of data collection? Dependability also suggests that changes in research design or in the conditions of the data collection setting may occur (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). Given these parameters, I used an audit trail, which documents my research decisions and explains how my findings were derived. In addition, I consulted with my faculty advisor on a regular basis to discuss changes that impacted my study. For instance, when changes occurred with my participants, I contacted my faculty advisor immediately to seek consultation.

Essentially, confirmability can be achieved if the findings can be confirmed by someone other than the researcher. Along with the audit trail, which consists of raw data, I utilized data reduction and analysis, data reconstruction, methodological decisions, and any

materials related to research biases and presumptions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I maintained a research journal throughout the entire research process in order to document my reflections, questions, and changes in my research journey. I also utilized two faculty readers, who were outside of my discipline of study, to read my dissertation. I also met with these individuals on an on-going basis to talk about my research and to use them as sounding boards for research ideas and potential themes.

### Researcher Ethics

Merriam (1998) argued that, although ethical guidelines inform researchers, the actions of researchers in response to an ethical dilemma most likely represent their own values and beliefs. At best, researchers need to be aware of their own worldviews when confronted with these issues. In this study, informed consent, anonymity, and acknowledgement of the researcher's insider/outsider status assisted in maintaining integrity throughout this study.

First, I reviewed the consent form with the participants and solicited questions or concerns they may have about the study. A copy of the participant consent form is located in Appendix C. Second, pseudonyms were chosen by the participants, and Elksville was used as the pseudonym for the participants' hometown in Wyoming. The institutional site is named (the University of Wyoming) because it is the only 4-year institution in the state. Third, it is imperative that my own positionality be stated within this research study in terms of my insider/outsider status and the issues and concerns associated with researching one's own community. The impact of my insider/outsider status on my findings and conclusions is discussed in the final chapter of this dissertation.

*Insider/Outsider Status*

Prior to this study, I knew two of my four participants from a year-long leadership seminar I helped facilitate. Although we had a good deal of interaction among each other, I would not describe our relationships as close. However, their previous interaction with me may have contributed (positively or negatively) to our interview process. Another insider status I had is my personal immigrant experiences. Even though my experiences and those of the participants may vastly differ, we shared a common language and country of origin. Thus, conversations around cultural nuances assisted with establishing trust and rapport with the participants. My outsider stances include my stepfather's educational background, making me not a first-generation college student in my family. Furthermore, my mother's marriage to my stepfather (a U.S. citizen) granted her and her children legal citizenship.

## Delimitations

There are two major delimitations in this study. One, this study took place in the state of Wyoming, with Elksville and the University of Wyoming being the major sites. Finally, the topic of this study focuses only on the experiences on Mexican immigrant women. Although beneficial to persistence studies, Latino men are not discussed in this study. Gender roles may be different yet equally complex for Latino men.

## Limitations

Although the conclusions and recommendations of this study help inform rural communities with immigrant populations, generalizing these findings to all foreign-born immigrants would be problematic. Furthermore, stories of undocumented Mexican immigrants who graduated from the Elksville high school but did not attend college would be beneficial to investigate but will not be addressed in this study.

### Summary

The purpose of this study is to understand college persistence issues for undocumented Mexican immigrant women from a New Diaspora site. This chapter provided the methodological framework that was used in this study. Specifically, the guiding characteristics and principles of a qualitative research study were presented in order to lay the foundation for this study, including the philosophical assumptions, the research approach, participants, data collection procedures, data analysis procedures, trustworthiness criteria, delimitations, and limitations. The next chapter provides an overview of the community and participants.

## CHAPTER 4 COMMUNITY AND PARTICIPANT PROFILES

This chapter captures perceptions, attitudes, and background of Elksville. I used my own personal reflections as well as stories, facts, and opinions from informal contacts with community informants. In addition, brief profiles on the participants in this study are provided in order to gain a deeper understanding of each individual.

### Elksville, Wyoming

Surrounded by scenic mountain terrain, I found myself engrossed in the beauty of this small resort town in Wyoming. As I drove into town, I noticed the aspen trees and newly built log cabins that adorned the majestic hills on my right side and the whitewater stream that flowed along my left side. I thought to myself, “It’s no wonder that people pay millions of dollars to seek refuge in this reclusive location”; it was absolutely breath taking. However, behind the affluence of this picture perfect community lies another community hidden behind the shadows of this tourist town.

The influx of immigrants started nearly 10 years ago when tourism and construction industries needed laborers. The majority of the Mexican immigrant residents come from the state of Tlaxcala which borders the states of Mexico and Puebla. Typically, families already living in Elksville would inform their friends and extended family members about the work opportunities available in the town. Sometimes, the companies hiring undocumented individuals would grant them temporary visas to work, or individuals would use fake Social Security numbers to gain employment. No matter what their citizenship status, the majority of immigrants in Elksville do pay taxes. As duly noted by one of the community informants,

“At the beginning of 2002 we helped file about 40 tax return and this past year we filed about 200” (Field notes, p. 19).

Elksville is unique in that it has numerous resources available in the community for newcomers. One example is the Latino Resource Center. This center is highly accessible for the immigrant population and offers free financial consultations, math and science tutoring programs for at-risk Latino kids and monthly forums that educate the community and immigrant population about services and issues important to their daily lives. Interestingly, a cooking class is offered to Mexican immigrant women. Initially I was critical of this program as it seemed to promote the domestication of females, but after speaking with the community informant I learned that this cooking class provided a forum for women to discuss issues of domestic abuse, finances, and children in an environment and context in which they feel safe. This resource center seems to be the central hub for the Latino community. Located close to the downtown area, this office provides a plethora of information when clients first enter the establishment. One wall contained approximately 30 brochures about the many resources available in the community, which were not all Latino-based programs. Information regarding women’s issues, child development, legal issues, and sustainability and conservation groups were all in Spanish. During my visit, I was greeted in Spanish and asked by the director of the center to wait in a conference room. At that point, the director was explaining to a young woman the different taxes that her employer and government take out of her monthly check. I waited for about 5 minutes, and the apologetic director asked if I could speak with the assistant director of the center instead. I gladly accepted seeing that she was trying to assist someone about their life circumstances and noticed that a family of four had just walked in with questions of their own. The individual who assisted me, Manuel, was

helpful and gave additional insight to the immigrant community. The conversation was professional, and little personal information was exchanged. However, I learned that Manuel was college educated and hails from Peru. He arrived in Elksville one summer to work in the tourist industry and stayed in the country after developing a relationship with an American citizen, whom he later married. During our conversation I noticed that Manuel was slightly pessimistic about the prospect of encouraging undocumented immigrant students to attend college because of the bleak job outlook once they graduate. He mentioned that the only way proper documentation can be obtained is if the individual goes back to Mexico and applies for proper documentation and enters the country legally or if one has a sponsor (an employer) who can assist them in gaining legal status. In the back of my mind I knew this was the reality that undocumented college students faced once they graduated, but part of me did not want to believe their limited options. I left my visit feeling helpless and a bit defeated by the immigration plight.

My second visit that day was to speak with Rosa, who worked for the county's adult literacy program. This program houses the *La Puerta Abierta* (the Open Door) project, which provides the following services:

- Amistades: An after-school program for students in grades 1-5 for integration into existing programs, homework help, and academic and cultural activities;
- Parent Program: Parents learn English advocacy, financial literacy, computer skills, and leadership in order to help them navigate school culture; and
- Gateway Program: Prepares families for existing services and refers them to the appropriate available services (Brochure, ¶ 2).

The purpose of the program is to empower families to access the many resources available in the community and to become active participants in their children's education. It is important to mention that this program is funded by a state grant through the Wyoming Department of Education. Interestingly, Rosa expressed that finding grant money was a difficult process for the county due to the high income levels, which that prevents them from looking into Title 1 grant funding.

During my visit of this particular program, I first noticed the adequate facilities. The children's library contained many bilingual books, cultural artifacts, and learning materials. The room was nicely decorated with drawings from the children who utilize the space. Conference rooms with round tables, a chalk board, and world maps seemed like a comfortable environment for adults and children to gather and learn. The most prized possession was a media-ready room, which contained televisions and about 18 laptops for students to practice their literacy techniques and for adults to learn computer skills. This literacy program just moved into this brand new facility, which was donated by a sponsor in town, in the current year. Conveniently located near the high school and junior high school, this project provides opportunities for immigrant families who want to achieve their personal and educational goals. During my visit with Rosa, I found her to be an exceptional human being. Originally from Ecuador, she was college educated in the United States and also developed a relationship with an American citizen whom she later married. The participants in this study often mentioned her guidance. Elena expressed that Rosa was the most influential in getting her prepared for college and described her as:

really out-going, and she understands what you are going through because she went to college. She knows what it's like, and she would talk about her experiences when she

was in college so it was easier to talk to her about things or ask her questions about college.

Ana Mari also mentioned that Rosa assisted her with scholarship applications and essays. I personally felt a connection with Rosa right away. She reminded me of one of my cousins in Mexico whom I always called first when I arrived in town—always enthusiastic to hear from you and the first to suggest plans to meet to chat. I automatically sensed she loves working with young people and young people are drawn by her openness and her humor. She greets people with an overjoyed smile and often gives her students affectionate hugs. She often asks her students about home life and values the education that occurs both inside and outside the schools. Our visits were informal, and we spent a good portion of our time talking about our families and personal background.

It is important to note that Rosa initially worked for the College Prep Program, which is housed in the community library, before working with La Puerta Abierta. The library is located approximately seven blocks from the high school and near an apartment complex in which many newcomers lived. It was Rosa's work in the College Prep Program that prepared the participants the most for college. According to Rosa, the College Prep Program is geared for high school juniors and seniors to help them with college preparation. Currently, two staff members administer this program, one of whom is of Latina descent. Many of the participants in this study spoke of using the College Prep Program to access information about colleges and the college entrance exams. One essential component of this program is the assistance with scholarship applications. All the participants were receiving or had received scholarships from Elksville community donors. Rosa indicated that \$50,000 of scholarship money is available for local students.

Interestingly, the community library has a division solely for Latino Services. According to the bilingual website, library materials and newspapers are available in Spanish for the community. Besides these resources, the Latino Services division of the library also sponsors events for the Latino community and has a committee of youth to help with the planning and programming of these events. This is one way the library tries to engage youth in community service projects, which in turn is a helpful qualification for scholarships.

Another noticeable trait of Elksville was the apparent ambience of affluence. Manuel described this town as not having a middle class; one is either wealthy or part of the working class community. This was evident when he disclosed that the average cost of a house in Elksville was \$1.2 million. Furthermore, over 200 nonprofit organizations exist for a town of 13,000 to support causes such as the arts, culture, and children. Nonprofits also offer wealthy individuals a system through which to donate their finances for tax purposes. Despite the apparent structural class discrepancies, Elksville was described as a welcoming community for newcomers. Manuel attributed this welcoming atmosphere to the high educational levels of the individuals who reside in Elksville. Additionally, many community members are well travelled and seem to have an appreciation of culture. However, cultural appreciation was certainly tested by a highly emotional incident.

During the summer of 2005, two undocumented immigrants were charged with raping and sexually assaulting two women who were of Caucasian descent. This was a tragic incident that heightened the emotional intensity of illegal immigration. Although one of the community informants expressed that the general Elksville community did not blame the Mexican immigrant community for this incident, Elena, a participant in this study, acknowledged that racism did exist after that incident:

I feel that most Americans think that Mexicans are bad; for instance, if one Mexican does something bad, [Americans] automatically think that all Mexicans are like that. I don't like it when they do that because not all Mexicans are the same way. I feel that it's the same thing because when an American does something bad, like rape, murder or anything like that; I don't think Americans are all the same. I notice this happening when there was a rape reported in Elksville.

Elena felt the backlash imposed by this incident. During an informal discussion with Patricia, a researcher who was conducting interviews with parents and students about their school experiences in Elksville as her post-doctoral project, she described the injustices inflicted upon immigrants who were residing in one particular apartment complex, the one close to the library previously referred to. She mentioned that the landlord would check the apartments every month to see if they were kept clean, even checking behind the refrigerators.

Additionally, residents were also required to clean all the oil spills in the parking lot on a weekly basis. It is not certain that these degrading demands came as a result of the rape incident, but the immigrant population did not question these demands because it could have led to negative consequences. Currently, the two Mexican immigrants have pled guilty to their crimes and could face up to 50 years in prison for the sexual assaults. The next section highlights the school system for immigrants in Elksville.

During our conversation, Rosa informed me that schools in Elksville do not take the initiative to do more for the immigrant community. This was evident when I noticed that the majority of the services and resources for students are available outside of school doors. She noted that the English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers are overstretched in their positions, and the regular counselors in the high school are disconnected from immigrant

students and do not make cultivating these relationships with these students a priority. Like many schools across the nation, school bureaucracy is one of the main barriers for educational attainment of Mexican immigrants. The school district has the capacity and the financial means to be creative and resourceful, but despite the large influx of immigrant students, school officials do not view this community as a priority. According to Rosa, the immigrant students in Elksville are driven, have family support, and are resourceful. When teachers have low expectation of immigrant students, those students consider themselves less important. Some students do not have goals because no one talks about how they can achieve more. This statement will be more evident when reading the findings chapter of this dissertation. The next section of this chapter will focus on the profiles of the participants that were involved in this study.

### *Las Mujeres*

*Las mujeres* is Spanish for “the women.” Although I use the term “participants” to describe these individuals, the term *las mujeres* is a term that resonated with me, so *las mujeres* is that term used to identify these women as a group in this study. Table 4.1 is an alphabetical list of *las mujeres* according to their pseudonym, and background information, which consists of their ages, year in school, major, age when they arrived in the United States, parents’ occupation, state of origin, and number of siblings. Each individual profile highlights life in their native town, parental transition into the United States, prior schooling, and access to college information.

Table 4.1. *Las Mujeres*

Pseudonym	Age	Class year	Major	Age arrived in the United States	Parents' occupation	State of origin	Number of siblings
Ana Mari	20	Soph.	Business	12	Father: Restaurant cook Mother: Restaurant worker & house cleaning for private houses	San Simon, Tlaxcala, Mexico	1 brother: age 18
Elena	20	Soph.	Undeclared	7	Father: Construction Mother: Housekeeping for a hotel	Irapuato, Guanajuato, Mexico	2 brothers: ages 19, 15 1 sister: age 17
Sofi	21	Junior	Business	15	Father: Construction Mother: Housekeeping for a hotel	Hueyotlipan, Tlaxcala, Mexico	1 brother: age 17 1 sister: age 8
Valería	23	College grad	Political science/ Pre-law	15	Mother: Housecleaning for private houses	Hueyotlipan, Tlaxcala, Mexico	2 sisters: ages 19, 18

*Ana Mari*

Ana Mari describes herself as out-going person who likes meeting new people and learning new things. She is a *trabajadora* (a hard worker), an individual who likes to work and keep busy at all times. Her work ethic stems from her parents ambition for a better life in the United States. Ana Mari is from San Simeon, Mexico, a small, working class, rural town that is a bit underdeveloped but has continued to make infrastructure improvement over the years. Ana Mari's grandmother keeps her family informed through pictures and videos that she sends on a periodic basis. The decision to move to the United States came out of security.

Ana Mari's father and uncles were working for a company in town and making relatively good money. Unfortunately, kidnappings of employees were a dangerous reality of that company, and Ana Mari's parents determined that something had to change.

Yes my uncles got kidnapped for a couple of days, so my dad said that he better not keep doing this even though it was a pretty good job because they made good money, but after they kidnapped two of my uncles he decided to quit . So, that's why he tried to look for another job [in Mexico], but they wouldn't pay the same amount.

This incident prompted one of her uncles to move to Elksville and work in the construction industry. Later, this uncle informed Ana Mari's family about the opportunities and encouraged others to join him. Ana Mari's father moved to Elksville and worked in the restaurant industry for 2 years before he went back to Mexico to bring Ana Mari's mother into the United States. Ana Mari and her brother stayed in Mexico with their grandmother for 2 more years before her parents were able to bring them to the United States. When her parents first moved to the United States they experienced economic stress.

When I got here they already had a job and a place to live so it wasn't really a struggle, but when my mom and my dad came together for the first time she told me it was really stressful because they didn't have a place to live, and they had to go to Idaho to work instead of being in Elksville because they didn't have enough money to pay for rent. Elksville is really expensive so they'd have enough money to have a house so it was really stressful for them, but when we came here they had a job and a place to live. After 6 months [living in Idaho] they went back to Elksville and they challenged themselves because they were by themselves and they did not know the language and they had to look for a job. You know you use the language for

everything and if you don't know it can be stressful if you don't know how to express yourself so it was kind of hard for them, plus they didn't have transportation so they would be walking all the time. They started from the very low point to where they are right now.

When Ana Mari first arrived to Elksville she first noticed the low number of Mexicans attending her schools and the lack of substantial resources for ESL learners. She actually did not find her ESL experience useful and noted that her friends who were further along in their English acquisition played an important role in her own language skills.

Basically I learned English on my own. I remember [my friends] said to me, "We know it's hard for you but you just have to learn it. If you keep speaking Spanish then you are not going to get anything." So I remember that they said they were not going to talk to me in Spanish anymore, and I had to explain myself in English, and that's the only way you are going to learn. I felt frustrated because I didn't know too much; then I had to explain myself with what little I knew. But I think it really helped me little bit more.

Interestingly, Ana Mari's friends were knowledgeable enough to know what she needed to acquire English language skills. When she first entered school, the ESL classes did not teach her English but, in fact, provided translation assistance for homework. As Ana Mari progressed in her schooling she noticed a larger influx of newcomer students attending ESL classes, which created a division among students who had English acquisition skills and those who did not.

Well, since more immigrants started arriving, we knew that we were all in this together, not in age, but the fact we were all in the United States we were the ones

that had the most years here. So, [the newcomers] would be like, “Oh just because you already know English and you were here longer than then me, you are more than me.” But we weren’t like that! Because we know how it feels when you get here and you don’t understand and you don’t know anybody. We knew. But they didn’t think the same way. We were like, “Whatever, we were not going to pay attention to you guys if you want us to fight you.”

It almost seems as though acquiring English language skills equates with being less Mexican or conforming to the American culture. As she reflected on her past schooling, Ana Mari’s only regretted not taking harder classes in high school or classes that would better prepare her for college. Not surprisingly, Ana Mari was not placed on the college track while in high school. In fact, her guidance counselor did not mention college to her. Many counselors in her school would refer the Mexican students to the ESL teachers for assistance, and often the ESL teachers didn’t have knowledge about college. During the last couple of years in high school, Patricia, who was conducting research in her school, offered tremendous assistance to all the *mujeres* in this study. Patricia was a bilingual, Mexican American female who resided in Laramie, Wyoming, but spent a significant amount of time collecting data in the school district. Patricia befriended these students and assisted them in their educational endeavors. Patricia also asked to see their school records and handed them college applications to fill out. Once Patricia noticed that the courses these students were taking were not helpful for college preparation, she informed the students and they immediately took action and changed their schedules. Sadly, access to college information and applications came from individuals outside of the school. Rosa and Patricia were the ones who informed Ana Mari about the college and scholarship application process.

Patricia asked if we were planning to go to college and where we were thinking of going, so we told her that we kind of want to go but we didn't know too much about those things. *So nos empeso ayudar* [she started to help us] and opened the door for us. *Y despues* [And then] Rosa *empeso el programa de college prep* [started the College Prep Program] and how to get the scholarships from Elksville. It was my junior year *que empese saber de todo eso* [that I started to know more about these things]. So, I started telling my parents. Sometimes I get home *comemos y me preguntan como estuvo la escuela* [we eat and they ask me how school went]; I told them *ya se que si yo quiero ir al universidad y ya se como* [I know want to attend college and I now know how to do it]. I was so excited.

Ana Mari's family was close-knit and supportive of her college decision. Initially, Ana Mari thought the cost of attending college was going to be a hindrance on her family's finances, but her dad put her at ease about the cost and reassured her that her college education was possible. Ana Mari thought about waiting a year before attending college in order to save money, but her father advised against this because she would get used to making and having money which, in her father's mind, might have lowered her motivation to go to college in the future. Though her immigration status prevented Ana Mari from applying for federal aid, through private scholarships and with assistance from her parents, she was able to finance her college education.

Elksville really helped us because there are a lot of rich families and they don't really ask you for Social Security number or they give you a packet of scholarships and then it's all the requirements. Sometimes they ask you if you want to be a nurse—this scholarship is specifically for those whoever want to become a nurse, but there is a lot

of scholarships that don't really care what your major is. They just ask you for a four page essay to explain why you deserve to get this scholarship or what are your goals in your future or how do you see yourself.

Ana Mari was financing her college education through private scholarships, and her parents were contributing over half the funding for her education. This is not surprising; Ana Mari's parents valued education even though they both had little formal education. The message that her parents projected to her was "get your education so you can do better than us. Education is the only way to succeed in life." Thus, family played an important role in getting Ana Mari to attend college.

### *Elena*

Elena describes herself as nice, loving, and a good listener. She prefers to listen to others rather than talk and often she will not talk unless she is asked to do so. During our interview conversations she was much more analytical than the other students. I could sense that she needed more time and reflection to ponder answers to my questions. The follow-up questions provided her an opportunity to express herself through writing, which seemed like a more appropriate method for Elena to express herself. Of the group, Elena was the youngest to arrive in the United States. Her family resided on a ranch in Irapuato, Guanajuato, Mexico, which is a small rural town located 1 hour away from Mexico City. Elena's dad worked outside of town and found jobs in bigger cities hours away from the home while her mom stayed at home. Elena enjoyed the fact that both sets of grandparents and other relatives lived close by, so having a sense of family was a big part of her upbringing. Elena's dad soon decided that he wanted a better future for his kids and thought

moving to the United States would bring Elena and her siblings better opportunities. He used his networks with other friends to find a place to live in the United States.

Well, he left his house when he was 15 just to work and get money for his family to help out. While he was working he made some friends and he came over here with them. He went to California for a while; he was living there then he met other friends and he moved to Idaho. Then from there he and his friends would come to Elksville to visit because his friends had friends here [in Elksville]. He liked it because there were a lot of jobs, and they offered him a job so he stayed, but he was lonely because there weren't that many Mexican immigrants in Elksville during that time.

Her mom stayed behind with the rest of the family while Elena's dad moved to the United States. Soon after Elena's grandparents passed away, her mom decided it was time to reunite the family in the Elksville with her dad, 'who had found work on a ranch where he was able to live rent-free with his family. Elena discussed some of the economical stress that her parents endured when they first arrived:

We were a big family, and for my dad just to be working it was kind of hard having one parent working, and we had a lot of expenses. Basically we had to start from scratch because we didn't bring any of our clothes and a lot of that stuff. We couldn't bring our whole house over here so it was kind of hard but we made it through. My mom didn't work until two years after we arrived. She got a job working as a housekeeper.

Elena also mentioned that her family was one of the first Mexican immigrant families to arrive in Elksville. When she entered school her parents were told by the teachers that, because she did not know the language, she had to repeat the first grade, even though she had

completed first grade in Mexico. When Elena entered first grade in the United States there were no ESL programs or Spanish speaking teachers, so Elena attended regular classes and learned English on her own. She expressed that it was difficult learning without any type of support but later admitted that she learned to pick up on the language quickly in order to survive in her school environment. However, when ESL instruction was introduced into her school curriculum, Elena's teachers encouraged her to enroll in order to get extra help with her reading abilities. She needed ESL for only 1 year and enrolled in regular classes after that.

Another interesting fact about Elena's prior schooling experience is that she had more American friends than Mexican friends. This was due to the fact that she arrived in the United States at a younger age, and not many Mexican immigrants had moved into the community, although she was the only Mexican immigrant student for a short period of time.

I felt kind of weird at first because I was the only brown person there. The good thing was that the other students liked me, and I don't think that they saw me as a colored person. I made lots of friends; of course they were all American. So, when Mexicans started coming to my school I made friends with them, but I still had my American friends. Later on, Mexicans would make fun of me because they would say that I was a little American because I always hung out with Americans. I wasn't going to lose my friends because of [the newcomers]. Even though I had Mexican friends I still had my American friends, and sometimes we would all hang out together.

Elena's sentiments are very telling. Arriving at a younger age and when the immigration influx was smaller allowed Elena to make friends freely. It wasn't until more Mexican immigrants arrived in her school that her own community pointed out that she was more

American than Mexican not only because of the duration of her stay in the United States but also because of her choice of friends. In retrospect, she felt that she could be both American and Mexican.

The thought of going to college entered Elena's mind much earlier than the other group members. While in middle school one of her teachers indicated that her grades were good and she had the potential of attending college, but Elena was unsure. It was during her junior and senior year that she started to think more seriously about the possibility of attending college but found the process of finding information about college relatively difficult.

The process I went through when finding information about college was hard because my parents didn't go to college, and no one ever told me about how college was or how it all worked. Rosa from the library was a life-saver for me because she was someone I could ask for help and someone I could look up to. She helped me so much because she knew how to help us and if she didn't know she would find out for us. She went to college herself so she knew what was going on unlike my parents who didn't have the opportunity to go. She helped me with finding scholarships, filling up the applications, and paperwork. I found scholarships on-line and in some of the scholarship packets that were given to me by Rosa.

Again, the majority of the information about college was accessed through a community member. Elena's family was supportive of her decision to attend college and encouraged her to pursue her education. Financing college also fell to her family because of her immigration status. Elena was able to get assistance from the ranch owners who told Elena and her dad that they would pay for some of her expenses if she wanted to attend college. Interestingly,

such employers sometimes offer to help with their employees college expenses as a way of thanking them for their work. In many ways, for Elena, the transition to the United States was easier because of her age, even though she faced the issue of being too American for her Mexican friends and balancing two cultures she felt very much a part of.

### *Sofi*

Sofi describes herself as a fun and outgoing person with certain groups. She explained that she acts shy at times when she does not know the individual or group. One of the qualities that I appreciated about Sofi was her openness and her willingness to share. I had the opportunity to drive her home to Elksville during one of my site visits, and she was open about who she was and what she wanted to do in life. I sensed that she wanted to do great things in life but was unsure about her current major or what the future had in store for her. Sofi hails from Hueyotlipan, Tlaxcala, Mexico, and she liked the closeness that existed in her Mexican community. Since the majority of her family lived in Hueyotlipan family gatherings on weekends and for special occasions were common. This was something that Sofi missed most about her community in Mexico. While living in Mexico, Sofi's father worked in Mexico City as a security guard and came home to be with the family only during the weekends. She described her family's economic situation as bad while in Mexico. Buying meat was considered a luxury and one that her family rarely enjoyed. It was their bad economic situation that prompted Sofi's father to leave Mexico for the United States. Her dad's second cousins were already living in Idaho where they were furnished with a place to live in return for working in the potato fields. Sofi's relatives were able to gain legal status through the Immigration Reform & Control Act of 1986, but her dad had left for Mexico that

year to prepare his family to move to the United States unaware of the amnesty visas that were given out during that time:

When my dad came in 1990 or 1986, I don't remember which time, [my relatives] came too and that was during the time that they were giving papers [green cards] I think it was the amnesty program and my dad left just as they were giving those out because all my cousins and my uncles got green cards through the program, so they are legalized. If my dad would have stayed one more month we would have gotten it.

It was sad [laugh].

Life would have certainly been different had Sofi's dad stayed a month longer, but nonetheless, her whole family moving to the United States created a better life for the children. Unfortunately, Sofi's family's desire for a better life was faced with economic struggles upon arrival.

When we first came we didn't have a house to live in so we stayed with my cousin, and there was 10 people living in the same place, in a 2 bedroom apartment. So my whole family lived in one room. It was two families and my cousin and his friend, but my cousin didn't stay for that long and he eventually moved out. Then my dad he didn't find a job until December so we didn't have enough money. We moved in the month of July so he had a job but not a steady job until December, and that's when he found that company and worked there for a long time.

These struggles are not uncommon for many immigrant families, but living in a high priced community such as Elksville begs the question of how immigrants can survive financially when many middle class individuals are unable to afford the cost of living.

Aside from her family's financial difficulties, Sofi was also faced with transitioning into a new school environment. Fortunately, a friend from her hometown, Valeria (one of the participants in this study), helped her with her first day of classes:

*No conocía a nadie. Yo recuerdo que yo había conocido a Valeria y su hermana antes en México. Entonce era Valeria que me ayudó un poco porque yo no entendí nada de inglés. Pues, no conocí las otras chicas hispanas. Entonces me sentí un poco incomoda. Pero el primer día de clases recuerdo que llegue a la escuela y Valeria fue la que me llevó a la oficina para ayudarme a traer mi schedule y enseñarme donde estaban las clases y todo eso. Luego me incluyó con su hermana para que ella me ayudara porque su hermana es en el mismo grado que yo.*

I didn't know anyone. I remember that I had met Natalie and her sister before in Mexico. So, it was Natalie that helped me a little because I didn't understand any English. Well, I didn't know any other Hispanic girls. So I felt a little uncomfortable. But on my first day of classes I remember that I arrived at school and Valeria was the one who took me to the office to help me get my schedule and to teach me where the classes were and all that. Later, she introduced me to her sister so that she could help me too because her sister was in the same grade as me.

Valeria and Sofi attended the same middle school and went through first communion classes together while in Mexico as well.

Learning the language was another barrier that confronted Sofi. Although a translator was provided she did not understand what teachers were saying during class. Other Latino students came to her aid when she needed assistance, but Sofi mentioned that she did not learn much English while in high school. Sofi was often afraid to speak with American

students while in high school because she thought they would laugh at her accent. She also noted that the communication between American students and Mexicans did not exist. Interestingly, the school assigned her classes that she excels in such as Art, ESL, Physical Education, and Computers. Sofi also made the observation that her schooling experiences while in Mexico were much stricter than in the United States, and that she was a better student in Mexico.

*Sí, era muy buena estudiante en México. Por lo mismo de que los maestros son muy estrictos y tienes que cargar las porque si no habían otras. Por eso era muy buena estudiante en México. Cuando llegué aquí como los maestros son más flexibles no me tomaban mucha importancia. Lo dejaba para despues, para mañana, siempre para mañana. Entonces, no fui buena estudiante aquí. Y me arrepiento porque no me ayudó mucho para la Universidad*

Yes, I was a good student in Mexico. Because the teachers were so strict, you had to pay attention and try. There was no other choice. Because of this I was a good student in Mexico. When I got here, since the teachers were more flexible I didn't really pay attention or try. I would leave it for the next day, always until tomorrow. So I wasn't a good student here. And now I regret it because it didn't help me at the university.

Sofi always wanted to go to college and her family certainly supported her college aspirations, but finding information was a challenge. In fact, Sofi was ready to go back to Mexico for college because she thought students needed a Social Security number to attend college. It was not until she met Patricia that she learned that attending college in the United States was a possibility. Patricia also turned out to be the most influential individual who assisted Sofi in applying for college.

*Pienso que Patricia. Porque ella decía bueno especial a mi me decía que puedo yo entrar a la universidad. Entonces yo decía “ok voy a llenar la aplicación.” Y ella me decía llena la ahorita. Y después, la mandamos ahorita. Y yo decía “voy a mandarla después” y ella me decían no. Ahorita la mandamos y me habló “hiciste eso y eso” para que hice mis cosas a tiempo. Y también otra de las personas fue Maria.. Yo verla para que me ayuda con mis essays para las becas y me acuerdo que dos o tres veces a la semana. Y estaba allí tres horas o cuatro horas con ella escribiendo mis essays y me las corrigía. Estabamos trabajando como dos semanas. Para eso. Muy fuerte.*

I think it was Patricia. Because she said, especially for me, she said I could get into the university. So I said, “Okay I will fill out the application.” And she said “Fill it out now.” And then we’ll send it. And I said “I will send it later,” and she said, “No, we’ll send it now,” and she told me what to do to get things in on time. And also the other person was Maria [a staff person who worked for Latino Services at the library]. I saw her to get help with my essays for my scholarships, and I know I was there two or three times a week. And I was there three or four hours writing my essays and she corrected them. We were working for two weeks. It was hard.

Consistent with the other participants, Sofi’s idea of attending college was supported by individuals outside the school. Despite facing financial and cultural barriers, Sofi was determined to succeed and obtain a professional career. This was a goal that she set for herself at a young age, and her family also has been supportive of her college endeavors. Even through their financial hardships, Sofi’s family was continuing to finance over half of her college expenses. They were doing this because they believed in her abilities and that her

education would provide her better life opportunities. The previous year, she had been placed on academic suspension for low grades at the University of Wyoming. Currently, she was attending the community college in town, was doing better academically, and was hoping to return to the University of Wyoming the following fall.

### *Valeria*

Valeria considers herself ambitious and independent. She comes from a family of all women and I believe this gives her considerable strength to pursue her goals. She grew up in Hueyotlipan, Tlaxcala, Mexico, which is about 2½ hours away from Mexico City. Although she thought that town, which has a population of about 12,000 people, was too small, she liked the tranquil feel of living in a small-town environment. At the same time, she enjoyed the extracurricular activities outside of school. Her involvement in sports and Ballet Folklórico allowed her to visit neighboring towns, which she thoroughly enjoyed. It is also important to mention that during her initial high school years she participated in history forums in which students spoke in a public setting and debated about Mexican national events. She attributed her confidence to partaking in this experience.

The reason behind moving to the United States was most telling. Rather than indicating financial insecurities, Valeria mentioned the Mexican peso crisis of 1994 led to her family's relocation. The mere fact that she was able to pinpoint the national event that led to unemployment and economic strife in Mexico is an indication of not only her intelligence but her critical thinking mode. Unlike the other participants, it was Valeria's mother who first ventured to the United States despite that fact that she was married to Valeria's stepfather. Her mom left her three daughters to be raised by their maternal grandparents for about a year and a half. Valeria's mom decided to relocate to Elksville because she had a brother who was

already residing in that community. She worked at local restaurants and grocery stores and saved enough money to bring her three daughters to the United States. The transition for Valeria was more difficult scholastically than economically.

Well, at the very beginning it wasn't so much economic stress because we didn't have a lot but we had enough to survive. My mom was working two jobs so it was hard for her. My stepfather had a job or two so it wasn't as bad economically as [when] we were in Mexico. We did have a hard time in school for me and my sisters. It was difficult to get used to it and the transition for me was very difficult. I was very excited to go to school in this country and, to be honest, it has always been a dream of mine to come to the United States and go to school so I was excited about that part. I was also frustrated because I had to learn a new language and a new culture and new things so it was difficult at the beginning.

Valeria spoke about her frustration in learning the English language considering that she spent the majority of her schooling in Mexico. Like other participants, the ESL program did not help much, and for Valeria it was being in regular classes that provided her the most help in learning the language. Interestingly, she was able to continue her school involvement through a global connections club during her first year of high school.

I got involved with this global connections club, which is a group of students that gather together and they talk about global issues and that's how I got to go to New York to the U.N .my first year and got the experience a little bit more about U.S. politics and global politics, which was what I was interested in. So that helped; I got to meet other students other than Hispanic or Mexican [and] I had to practice my English all the time with them because they didn't know Spanish, [and] even if they

did I wanted to practice English so that held me a lot to catch up with the language and school.

Valeria also mentioned the fact that she had more American friends than Mexican friends. It was not necessarily ethnicity that determined her circle of friends but rather who was interested in staying in school and learning. Additionally, there were a greater number of American students than Mexican students.

What helped Valeria develop a strong motivation for education and learning was her mother's influence during her formative years:

She would always tell me, "It's not a problem if you don't go to school, you'll just end up doing what I'm doing right now; that's what you're going to end up doing and if that's what you want then it's fine with me. I'm not going to be the one that going to be suffering all the time," because she had a very hard time. She would always tell me that I have options, and "if there's one thing I can give you is the opportunity to go to school; you take it or leave it and it's your choice." I always wanted to go to school; I was interested in learning and because we had a very hard time growing up I knew I didn't want to end up like my mom. I didn't want that kind of life; I wanted something different. I think I always feared that I was going to end up being dependent on a man. I didn't want that to happen to me and if I wanted to be independent I knew I had to do something different not to end up as a housewife, and it's not that being a housewife there's nothing wrong with that, it's good if that's who you are and you enjoy it, but I wanted to do something else and I knew one way I could do it once if I became educated and went to school and got a career.

Being raised by a single mom certainly impacted Valeria's motivation to continue her schooling. Unlike the other participants, parental support was not an option for her. Although her mom was supportive of her college choice, assisting with any college expenses was not realistic considering that her mom had two other daughters to support. Fortunately, Valeria was able to find a sponsor through Patricia, and this individual agreed to pay for all of Valeria's college expenses and living expenses.

I think when I truly believed that I could go to college was the day that my friend Patricia introduced me [to] a person who had agreed to pay for my college education. . . . I knew there had to be a way because she said that she had agreed to pay for my college education, and it doesn't matter if you don't get accepted at a public college because she can help you get into a private school if that's the case, so that was a big difference for me in that demand I felt like I'm going to go it doesn't matter where, and that was right after I finished high school that she told me that.

During our conversations, I found it interesting that Valeria was particularly careful not to reveal the identity of her sponsor. I speculate that the sponsor does not want to be identified and perhaps, that was the agreement that was made between her and Valeria. Nevertheless, the generosity of this sponsor helped Valeria finance her entire college experience, and no financial burden was placed on Valeria's family. In the spring of 2007, Valeria proudly earned her bachelor's of arts degree in political science from the University of Wyoming. However, she still is not able to reap the benefits of her college education. She continues to work at a ranch helping in the kitchen and babysitting while volunteering at an immigration law office. Her dream of becoming a lawyer herself is overshadowed by her immigration status.

### Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to provide a glimpse into the community, social structures, and biographical backgrounds of the lives of *las mujeres*. Their lives in Mexico were presented to provide a general sense of the why their families moved to the United States. All the women and their families moved to the United States for economic reasons and because of the demand of low skilled employment in the United States. I also found it interesting that their family members had established networks of family members or friends who helped them transition into the United States. Another interesting similarity was that at least one parent was gone for a long period of time, leaving the children to be raised by one parent or a grandparent. I often wonder if these participants learned about resiliency through the actions of their parents. Coming to another country is no small feat. Perhaps, *las mujeres* witnessed first-hand how to survive in new and unfamiliar areas by watching their parents prevail in a new community.

Chapter 5 presents the finding from this study. The six themes that emerged from this study include: (a) support and challenges from their home system; (b) unraveling the notions of dual socialization; (c) microaggressions against newcomers; (d) learning and unlearning from the language acquisition process; (e) dilemmas, stressors, and motivation associated with undocumented status; and (f) creating successful academic spaces and social networks in college.

## CHAPTER 5 FINDINGS

This chapter presents this research study's findings, which originate from the transcribed interviews of four Mexican immigrant women. The research questions guiding this study are: (a) How do cultural, family, schooling, and immigration experiences influence college persistence among *Mexicana* immigrant students; and (b) what factors are associated with the college persistence of *Mexicana* students? After thorough data analysis and organization of the data by commonalities, six themes emerged: (a) support and challenges from their home system; (b) unraveling the notions of dual socialization; (c) microaggressions against newcomers; (d) learning and unlearning from the language acquisition process; (e) dilemmas, stressors, and motivation associated with undocumented status; and (f) creating successful academic spaces and social networks in college. Additionally, supporting topics are presented within each theme to provide deeper insight into the themes. During this research process I used Yosso's (2006) stages of Chicano/a college persistence, which includes culture shock, community building, and navigating multiple worlds. I will discuss the implications of these stages on the findings in Chapter 6.

### Theme 1: Support and Challenges from their Home System

*Las mujeres* in this study revealed that parental support was an important support system for them while in college. During the data analysis process four supporting topics materialized that further enhanced the richness of the main theme: family providing emotional support and advice, parents' role in the schooling process, parents serving as a motivating factor for students, and students upholding family responsibilities.

The discussion of parents was an emotional process for the women. At times the

students' eyes would get watery or their voices would crack when speaking about the role parents played in their college and schooling experiences. Even though their parents did not have high levels of formal education, they were able to provide advice and support for their daughters during their college experiences.

For Ana Mari, both her mom and dad indicated that her education was a way to advance professionally. However, Ana Mari's mother and grandmother advocated her educational pursuit as a means for independence from men:

Well, my dad always told me that since he didn't have the opportunity to go [to school] he wanted me to have the opportunity so I can advance and not be in the same position that he is in right now. My mom says the same thing but she also tells me that if I have a career, I'll be more independent when I get married. Because you know how Mexican culture is like, *el hombre mantiene la mujer* [the man controls the woman], and my mom doesn't really like that so she always tells me I can be more independent once I marry and have a better life. My grandma tells me *que no quiere que estoy dependiente a un hombre que sea yo misma* [I don't want you to be dependent on a man, that I can be myself] and things like that.

What is significant about this statement is that Ana Mari indicated that she would be able to be "herself" if she is college educated. I sensed that Ana Mari's mother and grandmother had perhaps, grappled with their own positionality as Mexican females and concluded that Ana Mari would have more choices and more voice in her partnership with a man because of her education.

The other women made it clear that their mothers played a more important role than their fathers in supporting them. Sofi made an interesting differentiation between the types of support that she gained from her mother and father.

Sofi: *Mi papa solo me dice que estudie y que hecharon las, pero nunca me pregunta “Cómo vas en escuela, cuáles son tus calificaciones?” Solo me dice que hechara, pero no me pregunta cosas de la escuela.* [My father just says, “Study, do well.” He never asks me, “How are things going in school,” or “What are your grades?” He only tells me to do well; he doesn’t ask me things about school.]

Susana: *¿Y porque piensas que es así?* [Why do you think that is?]

Sofi: *Um porque no hay mucha comunicación entre él y yo. Entonces, no se da. Si estamos hablando por teléfono me dices necesitas hablar con tu mamá.* [Because there is not a lot of communication between him and me. So, it just doesn’t happen. When we talk on the phone, he tells me to talk about these things with my mother.]

Susana: *¿Y tu mamá que hace?* [And what does your mother do?]

Sofi: *Ella habla, siempre me está preguntando cosas como “Estás yendo a las clases, estás comiendo bien para que puede seguir estudiando?” Cosas así.* [My mother is always asking “How are you doing, are classes going well, are you eating well so that you can continue studying?” Things like that.]

This is not to indicate that Sofi’s father was disinterested in her education, but rather he was unable to relate to her experiences while in college and, therefore, unable to advise her beyond telling her to study hard. Her mom was in the same position, but because of their close relationship she was able to provide additional emotional support by simply asking her questions about school despite her inability to relate to her experiences. Valeria’s mom

provided her emotional support as well. However, Valeria did not get specific with her mom about her college experiences because of her inability to relate to them

She would ask me about school and how school was going and things like that but I don't think that she could really relate to what I was going through so I didn't talk to her much about it, and it was a little bit difficult for awhile because I was going through an experience that first of all, none of my relatives have a college degree, so I had no one to relate to anyone close to me, and then it was a different country and a different language, and I didn't talk too much about my college experience to my mom, and it was more like "school is going well," "I have a lot of exams" or very general things and nothing very specific

Even though all the participants mentioned language and lack of understanding of the U.S. school system was a barrier to parental involvement in school, all their parents were clearly interested and involved to a certain degree. For instance, Elena and Ana Mari's dads were the most involved with teacher conferences and school visits because they had the most English proficiency. It is also important to point out that, even though parents could not be involved with volunteer opportunities within the school or assist with homework and school assignments, they were able to provide moral support and stay engaged in their childrens' schooling through conversations at home. It is also imperative to point out that some parents were active volunteers in the school setting in Mexico. Valeria's mom's school involvement while in Mexico is an excellent example.

My mom was really, really important in my early years of school because I remember her telling me that even if I was sick I was going to go to school. There was no excuse for me to skip school. So that was pretty important, and I think the early years of my

education were really important, and those were the years where she really tried to push me to go to school and get involved in school and things like that. And later on she didn't continue to be that way it was because I had already learned that from her. Yea, we had no excuse to skip school. And after school, I remember she would sit with us and read to us or make us do our homework or do extra work on the weekends. In those years I had a stepfather so she had time to spend with us and that's what she would do. She would go to lunch break with us and we would have lunch and we'd come back and do homework or do things related to school. I was in *Ballet Folklorico* [cultural dance troop] in Mexico, and my other two sisters were involved in sports, so we did afterschool activities, which are healthy things that helped you.

Elena had similar experiences in which her mom was more involved in Mexico, but she mentioned that her dad was always the one that took the leadership role in the family's schooling while in the United States. In fact, her dad applied some suggestions for learning in the home that had been given by teachers.

For me, my mom was more involved in Mexico because my dad was not there so she had the responsibility of taking us to school even though I only went for a couple of years. When we moved here my dad knew the system more and he was more involved than my mom; he basically took over the role that my mom had because he knew how everything worked here. He has always been more involved with our school than my mom. I remember he used to go to [the] parent teacher conference and they would give him ideas about flash cards and all this stuff, and he would help us after school because he kind of knew a little bit of English. He taught my brother how

to learn the number 7; he took forever to learn it so I remember he would study with him and help him. After they know that you are learning and they know you can handle it on your own, they backed off a little. It's hard because you are used to them helping you at least as much as they can; all the sudden when you know the language they let you be on your own.

What is interesting about this example is that, culturally, it may be the female's role to tend to the schooling of children. In this case, because Elena's dad had more knowledge about the U.S. system, he had assumed the schooling responsibilities for the children. Although the issue of language is perceived as an obstacle for parents, they continue to be engaged and active in all schooling endeavors by questioning what their student learned. At the same time they want to instill a sense of independence by letting the student be on their own as soon as they are proficient enough in English.

During the focus group discussion the women talked about how parents of immigrant children do want to get more involved in their kids schools, but perhaps they do not feel supported. Although the schools are able to provide translators for parents when they are able to attend parent teacher conferences, the *mujeres* noted that their community school needs to do more for parents in order to provide a more comfortable environment for them. It is evident that the schools are providing translator assistance, but they are not making personal connections and cultivating relationships with immigrant parents. The *mujeres* also gave a comparative example of how their parents were more involved in their school in Mexico, not just because they knew the language, but also because they thought the teachers were more encouraging of parents to get involved. Although some mentioned that the Elksville high school does have a parents committee for parents to participate in, the majority of the women

were not aware of such organization. Valeria remembered her mom being involved with her activities in Mexico but mentioned the language as a factor while in the United States:

When we came to Elksville it was different because of the language barrier, and she did not know anyone so we kind of learned the language, and we got used to it. My mom was not very involved anymore because of [language] so we had to find our own ways to get used to it.

Valeria mentioned that her mom was able to devote time to her school activities while in Mexico. My assumption is that Valeria's mom was working more while living in the United States and was unable to provide personal attention to her learning, but certainly was continuing to provide support in her activities. The women also mentioned that many of the parents in the Elksville community were involved in supporting their child's sporting activities, but Elena saw differences between supporting involvement in sports and being able to help out with a child's homework. This was the discussion during the focus group.

Elena: The thing about sports is that you don't really need to know the language. You just go and support your kid and say it in whatever language you know.

Ana Mari: Like your mom will go and cheer in Spanish

Elena: So it's kind of different being involved in sports than in education. My brother is involved in sports and my parents go and support him, but when it comes to school, they are kind of like, what should I do?

Sofi: The language has a lot to do with it because I bet if parents knew the language they would help them.

Elena: That's how my mom is, my brother is like [to his parents], "You need to go to my baseball meeting for parents," but then they are like, "Why should we go if we are

not going to understand anything that they are talking about?” Even though they know the rules of the sport and everything they are still not going to understand a lot of what they are talking about if they don’t know the language. So, that’s why they don’t really go and support them in that way, but they do go with them to the games. In this instance, *las mujeres* believe that the language was the main reason why parents were not involved in school functions, but not participating does not equate to not caring about education or not having high standards for their student. When asked if their parents are currently learning the language all said, “No.” Elena mentioned that that her parents thought that they were too old to learn, whereas Sofi stated that they had little formal education so learning English in a formal setting was daunting for them. In essence, parents and other family members were viewed as assets to these students. The next section discusses how parents serve as motivating factors for the students.

Listening to the immigration stories of these women, many of them mentioned that coming to the United States for a better life and for more opportunities were common reasons for leaving their native country. Pursuing a college education was one way these women helped to fulfill the dreams of their parents. For Sofi, the fact she was one of the first people in her family to attend college was a motivating factor for her to finish.

*Una de las cosas es que yo quiero seguir estudiando. No importa si fuera aquí o en México. Porque quiero tener un carrera entonces es fue un motivo también. Y pues también mi papá siempre, en toda mi familia sólo hay una persona que tiene carrera. Y las demás han estudiado, pera saquen de la mitad. Nunca han terminado. Entonces mi papá me está poniendo todo en mi, me da la confianza para que yo la terminé. Él está orgulloso de mi, pienso. [Well, one of the things is that I wanted to continue*

studying. It didn't matter if it was in Mexico or here. Because I wanted to complete my studies and have a career, so that was motivation as well. And well, with my dad always. In my whole family there is only one person who has completed their degree and has a profession. And the others who have studied, they fell to the side. None had finished their studies. So my dad is telling me all this, and I think that he is proud of me and gives me the confidence that I could finish.]

In another interview, Sofi also mentioned that she is the trailblazer for the rest of her family and often her extended family members would refer to her academic achievements as a way to motivate younger cousins and siblings. Although, she considered this an enormous amount of pressure, she also gained motivation being a role model for others.

Often, parents' lifestyle or students wanting something more for themselves also became a motivating factor. Valeria's mom left pursuing educational endeavors completely up to her:

She would always tell me it's not a problem if you don't go to school; "you'll just end up doing what I'm doing right now. That's what you're going to end up doing and if that's what you want then it's fine with me; I'm not going to be the one that is going to be suffering all the time," because she had a very hard time she would always tell me that I have options and if there's one thing I can give you is the opportunity to go to school; you take it or leave it and it's your choice. I always wanted to go to school; I was interested in learning and because we had a very hard time growing up I knew I didn't want to end up like my mom. I didn't want that kind of life; I wanted something different. I think I always feared that I was going to end up being dependent on a man. I didn't want that to happen to me; it's, oh, if I wanted to be

independent I knew I had to do something different not to end up as a housewife, and it's not that being a housewife, there's nothing wrong with that; it's good if that's who you are and you enjoy it, but I wanted to do something else, and I knew one way I could do it once if I became educated and went to school and got a career.

I think witnessing her mom's struggles as a single mom gave her unprecedented insight into what kinds of options are available for women without formal education. Her determination to be independent was a prevalent factor in her pursuit of higher education. The fact that she feared being dependent on a man had a profound impact on how she viewed her educational attainment.

Both Elena and Ana Mari's parents informed them that they wanted more for their children. In Ana Mari's case, her parents felt that education was one way in which she would be able to have a better life for herself:

They would always tell me that they wanted to offer my brother and me a better lifestyle or better *educacion* [education] for us, and I would see how they would have to work, and my mom would say, "*Vayas bien en la escuela para que no seas como nosotros, trabajando* [do well in school so you don't become like us, working] all the time," and things like plus *no nos dejaban a trabajar para estar* [they didn't let us work so we can] just focus on school. It won't be good for me or them *que me vaya mal en las escuela* [if I do poorly in school]; I'm not doing anything besides school. I think my parents motivated me. Plus they always tell me *el beneficio es para tí no es para nosotros* [the benefits are for you and not for us].

Even though Ana Mari's parents acknowledged that she would be the sole benefactor of her education, she knew that her education is a means to assist her parents with not only their finances but in quality of life.

Another interesting topic is the fact that some of the women were the only translators for their parents, which can be a stressful predicament, especially as full-time college students. This is the only time when family can place unintentional stress on the students while in college. Ana Mari described the many tasks that she performed for her parents:

I talk to them every day; sometimes I schedule doctor's appointments for them. My mom just had eye surgery, and she has to go into the doctor to check if everything is going good. So I kind of want to be there because it's really important for her to understand everything, but right now my brother does translate for her, but he just tells me that everything is fine and not to worry about anything. He doesn't really explain to her the details, so she kind of stresses out about that part. If they need me to call for anything they just give me the number and I then call my parents back to tell them what they had said. Since I've got to college and started learning the language more and I was helping my parents doing everything. It's like if I was my dad's assistant because I know everything. When my dad pays the bills for the electricity or the cable, I know when things are due and how to do it. If people ask me about last month's financial situation, I can answer them and I can deal with it because I know everything regarding my parents' finances. I know what's going on and I can solve the situation.

I was amazed how much Ana Mari was doing for her family because of her English language abilities. This is a good example of how her bilingual abilities have become not only an asset

for her family but also a necessity. However, with this responsibility came a certain level of stress, as she noted:

There are days that you get a lot of homework and it has to get done, but then my parents are like, “We need this,” or my dad needs a letter for the insurance and he asked me to do it today and mail it for tomorrow, but then I have a lot of homework. I guess I have to do it for him because it’s for my whole family so I’ll just do it. They depend on me because of the language and sometimes it gets really stressful; I don’t want them to worry about things that I can solve, but I’m not there to help them.

In this particular situation she had no choice but to assume the responsibility of making sure her family was taken care of. What is interesting to me is that she was learning some important life skills while managing her family’s finances and being an interpreter for her family. Because of these experiences, she probably will be more prepared for life after graduation than most undergraduate students. Another example is when her parents went to the bank to apply for a loan and she negotiated for a lower interest rate for them. She saw this as an important asset to have, as she explained, “Since my parents were dependent on me I had to learn these things so my parents, and family can benefit; [banks] can take a lot of money from you if you don’t know or pay attention to what they’re telling you.”

Sofi experienced the same expectation from her family but really wanted her 17-year-old brother to help out more with the family. One of the challenges was helping her little sister with her homework; she stated:

My brother is helping her but sometimes he doesn’t want to do it so she has to find another way. With my little sister’s homework, [the teachers] used to put the directions in Spanish and English so my mom could help her, but now, since she is in

the third grade, all of it is in English. So, my mom can't help her to do the homework so it's really hard for her. Sometimes it's hard for me to be here, like the other day my brother lost his cell phone and he called to ask me if I could call the phone company for him. I don't have time! I tell him, "You have to do it and you have to learn how to do it!!" So, they [family] are dependent on me to do all this stuff.

I could tell that Sofi was extremely frustrated with her brother for not picking up the slack more at home, especially given that she was balancing her school work with her family responsibilities and she knew that her brother was perfectly capable of assuming more responsibility but was choosing not to do so. Perhaps one of the reasons Sofi's brother and family were continuing to rely on her for translations is because they were viewing her as the most proficient in English among her family members and her family may not have understood the demands and rigor of college life. Consequently, Sofi often was worrying about how her presence in college was affecting her family unit, which put additional stress on her.

Some of the other women talked about how focusing on their studies helped them deal with the stressors of missing home. Valeria dealt with her loneliness on her own but was careful not to worry her mom:

Even though I missed my family, I missed my sisters, and I missed my community, but I'm going to school and when I'm in school I have to stay focused. I did have moments during the weekends when I had time to cry or time to talk with my family and tell them how I was doing. I always tried not to tell them how lonely I was feeling or how difficult school was for me because I didn't want them to worry too much and I knew what I was going through was normal because I was in college. So,

I dealt with it that way . . . not to worry people about what I was going through. For me, I knew it was going to be difficult and I had to deal with it. . . . I didn't want people to feel pity for me; that wasn't the way we were raised. So, that's how we dealt with our stress.

I feel as though that these women were carrying a heavy emotional load on their shoulders while in college. They were the trailblazers for their families; they had to set the example in an environment that was completely unknown to them and to their families. The home system in this study emerged as a prominent theme, which illustrates how it can play a positive role in college persistence. Even when parents do not have English proficiency, they understand and advocate for educational opportunities, and the women view their encouragement as motivation to succeed. Yet, the family still utilizes their English expertise in many instances, and perhaps this is one way students are honing their navigational and linguistic skills. Coincidentally, these *mujeres* were the oldest among their siblings, and from a cultural standpoint, the oldest sibling has to be the most responsible in order to set the example for the other siblings in the household. However, they could not escape the enormous amount of pressure that they endured not only as first generation students but also as immigrant women who wanted to dispel the myths and stereotypes to their peers. The next theme discusses the many cultural nuances associated with incorporating two different cultures in their daily lives.

#### Theme 2: Unraveling the Notions of Dual Socialization

The *mujeres* in this study vibrantly discussed their pride for their Mexican identity at the same time they admitted that they were also influenced by the American culture. But by adoption of some of the American traits often comes with criticism from their own

community. The topics that support this theme are the complexities associated with living in two different worlds; their perceptions of U.S.-born Mexicans; and how their experiences with race, class, and gender are intellectualized through their prior experiences in Mexico. What was evident from these women was that culture was an important part of their lives, particularly being able to speak their native language. Interestingly, when discussing Anzaldúa's (1987) notion of borderland theory and the idea of living in two different worlds, all of the women agreed with this concept but acknowledged there are no longer two different cultures. By learning a new culture, they are combining both to make their own kind of culture. Valeria's comments show the challenges associated with combining two cultures:

I think it's difficult when you have both cultures and you try to mix them up, especially in Elksville because we are all first generation immigrants. Our parents lived and grew up in Mexico so they have that Mexican mentality, and if they see you acting too American they are going to notice that even if you are not aware of that or realize that you are doing it because it comes out naturally for you, and sometimes that they don't realize that it is different for them than it is for you because you are living in it, you are growing up with it, and they had a different experience, and at the same for American society criticizes you for being too Mexican even if you lived your entire life in the U.S. How can you be too Mexican? Well, you have that heritage and you have the right to express and live your Mexican heritage if you want to. You don't have to erase it.

Valeria talked about being criticized for often being too Mexican or too American for particular groups. Because Elena arrived in the United States at a young age and her family

was one of the first to arrive in Elksville, the majority of her friends were American. When other Mexican families started to arrive she was criticized by her own community:

I made lots of friends and of course they were all American, and when the Mexicans started coming to my school I made friends with them, but I still had my American friends. Later on, the Mexicans would make fun of me because they would say that I am “little American” because I always hung out with Americans.

This was especially hard for Elena because she felt like she had to choose between her culture and the loyal and familiar friends she had all her life. When Ana Mari’s extended family members arrived from Mexico, they were quick to point out her “Americanness” to her: “You’re more like the Americans now by the way you are dressing or hanging out with your friends.” Often, buying into the American pop culture communicates to relatives that these students have lost their Mexican identity.

Some of the women also mentioned that speaking English with siblings while at home was not appropriate, and they also worried about speaking Spanish when non-Spanish speakers were present. Nonetheless, many of the women discussed “cultural rules.” Elena gave us an example:

I am reminded of my culture on a daily basis because there are lots of cultural norms that I need to follow, but it’s hard when you have friends from different cultures. But like me, I was raised in two different cultures and it’s hard because you need to remember which culture you can do things in and which one you are not allowed to do. I personally like both cultures because they teach me the similarities and differences that each cultures shares.

I was taken aback by Elena's use of the word "allowed." It's as though there are a different set of rules for different settings and people. Elena's notion of not being permitted to use her culture signifies that she has had to suppress part of herself in some occasions. Ana Mari talked about this challenge as well:

Sometimes, because I haven't seen a big population [of Mexicans] in school so you don't feel free to do the same things you would do if you were in Mexico. Or express yourself like you want to because you don't know how people are going to react. It's hard to be yourself. Being with your family is going to be different than being in school. . . . In your family you share the same culture and you know what's wrong and what's right, but when you go to the university . . . you don't know if they are going to think . . . "Oh, she not doing something right," or "That's not appropriate."

In this instance Ana Mari was worried about the reactions of others, and again, this example goes back to the notion that these women often have to suppress who they are for the sake of fitting in. This is probably not done cognitively, but I would suspect that this is a coping mechanism for being unsure about which cultural rule to employ. Ana Mari had a nice statement that summarizes this section.

It's like that quote that I really like: "Live the life you love and love the life you live."

I pick a little bit from both cultures and I do whatever I like from the Mexican culture and American culture. I pick something from each and make my own culture.

In the next section, I discuss the women's perceptions about U.S.-born Mexican Americans as well as their comparative analysis on how they view race, class, and gender.

During our conversations many of the women expressed that their cultural identity has played an important role in their lives. However, upon their arrival in the United States

they witnessed difference among newcomers and U.S.-born Mexican. The main difference that they mentioned was that U.S.-born Mexicans had more opportunities in terms of scholarships and other benefits that come with having a Social Security number. Sofi noticed cultural differences, stating,

I'm not sure but I know one thing is that [U.S.-born Mexicans] have more opportunities than us since they were born here. I feel the culture is a little bit different even though they have taken a lot of culture from Mexico but they change it a little bit.

Interestingly, incorporation of their American experiences is what they themselves have done, too. But all of them sensed a cultural difference because they had the comparative knowledge of being in both countries and knowing about the lifestyle they left behind in Mexico. Valeria went as far as to state that U.S.-born Mexicans did not know their culture as well as native Mexicans and often accepted social stereotypes about Mexicans; she stated:

There's a big difference. I was born in Mexico and I went to school there and lived a good part of my life there. When I came to the U.S., I knew where I came from and I knew what my culture was about and I had an identity. This is something that U.S.-born Mexicans are not aware of because they don't learn it in school and I did. They don't get the education about their culture in school; in fact, from what I saw they only learned the negative aspects of being Mexican and they have a tendency to feel uncomfortable with the stereotypes. Therefore, they try to avoid being associated with being Mexican, and I think it's because the lack of information. They often accept these negative stereotypes which are biased and diminishing at times.

In general, Valeria and other were surprised to learn about the poor image U.S. society had of Mexicans in general. This was extremely frustrating for Valeria because she did not want to associate herself with these negative stereotypes despite the fact she shared cultural commonalities with U.S.-born Mexicans. Although she made it a point not to generalize her statement to all Mexicans she talked about an experience that made her think back to her original statement.

I'm not saying that everyone is like that. This is what I have observed from Mexicans who were born here. One way or another, they have this negative image of being Mexican and they try not to identify with their group. I remember that I overheard an individual who was Mexican and he was called a Mexican . . . and he said, "I'm not Mexican, I'm Spanish," which wasn't the case but for some reason if they are called Spanish it seems as though it's better because they are from Spain then being from Mexico . . . even though their family is from Mexico. So, I think it's just silly and very sad . . . if he would have known the richness of the culture and the richness of being Mexican, they you wouldn't want to be called Spanish. But because of all this negativity that exists by identifying as Mexican I think a lot of people decide to go that way. . . . It's just a lack of identity that they experience.

In many ways I concur with some of statements, because I too experienced a similar instance while working at the University of Wyoming. At the same time, I have learned that Wyoming has a rich history of Mexican and Spanish migration and many of the Mexican Americans living in Wyoming are fourth or fifth generation. Also, many of the Mexicans who reside in Wyoming originate from Northern New Mexico, the inhabitants of which have historically regarded themselves as descendents from Spain. Other topics that came up with

this issue was the fact that the United States puts a lot of emphasis on skin color, which is something that they were not accustomed to while living in Mexico. Though Valeria acknowledged some commonalities between U.S.-born Mexicans and newcomers, she was also frustrated by the constant labeling of the ethnic groups:

I think we share some of the injustices or discrimination, and it's most related to skin color. Mexicans who are light skin or White don't have to deal with that issue as much as dark-skinned Mexicans. In this country, there is a lot of emphasis on skin color that it drives me crazy when I first got here; I can't stand it. They had African American, Mexican American, and Native American. Maybe this is because I come from a homogenous society, but I see that they are all American; why are there groups designated for African Americans, Native Americans, and Mexican Americans? Why are there labels for everyone? I just couldn't understand it but that's just the way it is here.

Additionally, I was surprised to learn that class and gender was not a factor in their college experiences. Equally important was the fact that the participants did not see the intersections between race, class, and gender in Mexico but stated that class and gender differences were much more distinguished in Mexican society. As Sofi commented:

Sofi; *En México, la distingue a la gente que tiene más dinero porque hay un quebaja muy feo, si me entiendes.* [In Mexico, they distinguish the people who have more money, there's a very bad quebaja, do you understand?]

Susana: *¿Qué es?* [What's that?]

Sofi: *Es un sentido muy mal, que no tienes dinero. Pero aquí, todos se ven iguales.* [A bad sense, that's given when you don't have money. But here, everyone is seen as equal.]

Her statement was surprising, especially when she indicated that everyone is seen as equal. When I asked her to explain, she stated that in Mexico if you wore old clothing to school, people would talk badly about you, whereas in Elksville, you could live in an apartment or wear pajamas to school and no one would care. Clearly, class differences exist in society, and perhaps the differential treatment among social classes in Mexico is more visible, and maybe Sofi sensed more equity because the differential treatment is not overt. The denial of racism in Mexico is considered the norm and “to voice concerns is deemed unpatriotic” (Vigil & Lopez, 2004, p. 65). It is also important to note that both the U.S. and Mexico operate under different frames of reference when discussing the issue of race. (Ansell, 2006; Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Sue, 2007; Vigil & Lopez, 2004). In addition, their dual frame of reference may or may not make the women in this study perceive they are treated in the United States better or as well as can be expected because of the economic conditions in Mexico (Waldinger & Lichter, 2003)

In the same sense, opportunities for women in Mexico are not as vast as in the United States, and although all of the women expressed that they did not face many challenges as females in college, they did acknowledge a facet of gender role inequality in their families. During the focus group discussion this ended up being a contentious topic, and all of them agreed that their educational pursuit was because their parents did not buy into the notion that women should not be educated. Thus, many of them concluded that their family beliefs and

background resulted in their opportunity to obtain an education. Here is how Ana Mari described it:

I think it depends on your parents' background. If they are thinking in the "old time" culture from Mexico where they think education is not for women and it's only for men. Even if you want to go to school you are still not going to have the opportunity because your parents are telling you that education is only for men. I notice that for all of us here [at this table] our parents feel that school is important to you and education is a big important value in your life. So, it depends on your family background and beliefs are when you see the difference between men and women. If your family focuses on men, as some people do, then you get screwed.

Many of the women talked about how they were struggling with gender equity in their home and noticed that their gender role may be incongruent with their beliefs. However, many of the women felt like they making strides in their home with their own families. Elena was one of the passionate ones in this conversation as she detailed talks that she has had with her parents:

I talk to both at the same time. When they are both together that's when I tell them. I tell them that I don't agree that you guys let my brothers just leave like that and [when] I just leave like that, I have to tell them where I am going, what I am going to do, who I am going to be with. For my brother, right now, he just leaves without any questions asked of him. And he can do whatever and who knows what he is doing. And he can get to home at whatever time and me, I have to be home at a certain time. I notice sometimes with my parents when my dad gets home and he is sitting at the couch and he wants a glass of water and he asks my mom, my sister, or me to get it

for him. I've told my brothers that because our dad does it that he has to do it too. We are kids [and] you can get yourself your own water; God gave you legs so you can get up and get it yourself. Just because I am the girl doesn't mean that I have to do it, and I understand and my parents understand, but I've noticed that every time the girls have to wash the dishes and the guys, all they do is sit and eat. They don't even help with anything. I told my parents that was not right, that they have to learn to do stuff. My dad understood and he would like tell them that it's their turn to wash the dishes and even though they did not like it they actually did it. I tried to enforce this with my parents just because I was girl and they grew up having the girls do everything that I was going to be like that. They understand but that's how our culture is, that girls do everything when it comes to household stuff.

It is important to note that this was one of the first times that I witnessed Elena being so outspoken about a topic. Her quiet demeanor diminished seeing that this topic was clearly frustrating for her. What was also telling about this conversation was Sofi's body language.

As the women discussed how they challenged their parents about equal freedoms and the traditional gender roles in the home, Sofi was visibly uncomfortable with this topic because her experiences at home were different than the others:

I have a lot of differences. My brother is not old enough to go to all the [dances] but he gets to go, so sometimes I get mad because I would tell my dad, I'll be right back, and for me I have to ask for permission. So every time I come home I have to ask for permission to go out, and I have to be right back. Here my dad is so strict so I don't do anything. When I get home [to Elksville], here I just stay with them and I don't

even argue with them. My dad doesn't know anything that I do over there [in college]; he thinks that I am a good girl but my mom she knows.

Although Sofi was clearly frustrated with her situation, she felt powerless to change the gender dynamics in her home. The ideology of gender is constructed by the behaviors displayed by the participants. Often women have to transgress away from their traditional gender roles in order to uphold values and beliefs that important to them (Baker, 2004). For these women, challenging or not challenging traditional gender roles were ways of accommodating their viewpoints within their families.

What was also strange for the women was the cultural changes that occurred between home and college. As Valeria explained:

That's very strange when you go to college and you can go wherever you want to go and be as late as you want to be, and then you come home and I have to be home at a certain time [laughter]. And it felt strange to go back and forth and feel the change.

This theme illustrates the many intricate aspects of dual socialization. These women want to maintain their cultural heritage and at the same time they are acquiring some American attributes as well, which are often unwelcome in their own homes and circle of friends. These stories and experiences illustrate how much their worldview is influenced by their own experiences while in Mexico. The next theme presents microaggressions against newcomers.

### Theme 3: Microaggressions Against Newcomers

Microaggressions are "subtle insults (verbal, nonverbal and/or visual) directed at people of color often automatically or unconsciously" (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000, p. 60). During our conversations about racism, all the women acknowledged that they had seen

discrimination happen to others but claimed that they had never personally experienced it. Although they may not have experienced overt forms of racism, through some of their stories that they shared, many of them have experienced covert forms of racism during their prior schooling and college experiences as well as while living within in the Elksville community. Sofi and I discussed her experiences in high school when she first arrived in the United States. She stated:

Sofi: *Sí, algunos estudiantes americanos no estaban bonitas pero a mi un poco me molestaban. Entonces. . .* [Yeah, there were some American students who were not so nice but for me they did bug me a little. So. . .]

Susana: *¿Tratates de hablar con ellos, los americanos?* [Did you try to speak to them, the American students?]

Sofi: Uh huh

Susana: *¿Qué te dijeron?* [What did they say to you?]

Sofi: *Pues no me han dicho nada pero, sólo nos pasaron como no estuvieron allí, como invisibles. No hablan.* [Well, they didn't really say anything, but they just kind of ignored us, like you're not there, like we were invisible. They wouldn't speak to us.]

I feel these kinds of subtle actions are often more hurtful than the overt actions. I also noticed she talked about being invisible to the American students, which is extremely sad because the term invisible means nonexistent, as if they were made to feel unvalued by others just by their mere presence in school. Curious about this statement I asked why she thought American students would ignore the Mexican students, and her response was, "I think they felt we were invading their place." Her choosing the term "invading" is telling. In my

opinion, nothing positive comes from this term and I sensed that Sofi had already concluded that her presence in her school was causing friction and was not welcomed.

All of the students claimed that they had some pretty good teachers that were committed to their learning. However, there were a couple of teachers who helped only if the students were putting in the effort; as Sofi stated:

*De los maestros, habia algunos que cuando estás un poco negro, tienes que sacar buenas notas y pues trataron de ayudarte. Pero cuando no nos tomaba importancia. Es como que no existiamos.* [With the teachers, there were some that would see that you were darker [referring to skin color], you had to get good grades and they would try to help you. But if not, then you didn't matter. It was like we didn't exist.]

So, if a student was not excelling in school, then teachers did not want to put any effort into that student. It seems to me that the students who may not be doing well in school could be the result of modeling the teacher's actions.

Some of the women commented that teachers had lower expectations for them upon their arrival. Ana Mari and Sofi commented on how their schooling in the United States compared to their schooling experiences while in Mexico. Sofi said:

I remember in school [in Mexico] you needed to bring this homework on time or it has to be clean and you have to write it so they can understand. . . . In the school that I went in Mexico they focused on students, and the teacher that I had really put her effort into her teaching and she really liked what she was doing. I learned a lot from her. I think it depends on the teachers too.

Sofi added to her comment:

[Mexican schools] make you work, because I remember I had to work really hard on homework, but here I didn't care, the teachers were like, "Yeah you can turn it in later." So I was like, "Well, I'm not going to do it." In Mexico I had to do it because it was expected.

It was interesting to hear that some of the women thought it was not on purpose that teachers had lower expectations from students. At times, a couple of the women would rationalize the teachers' actions by stating that maybe the teachers thought that maybe it would be too much for the students or because the students didn't know the language they wanted them to have an easier time academically because of the language transition. However, Valeria was quick to point out, [The teachers] think they are helping you but they are contributing to your image as a learner." Her statement is so telling because the women's images as learners transcended into their college experiences, and so one way or another, low expectations from teachers had a lasting effect on students.

Interestingly, when we talked about their experiences as numerical minority students on the University of Wyoming campus many of women discussed how weird it was to be the only student of color in a class. Elena commented about when she was most conscious about her ethnicity on campus:

In class, because there is not that many people to relate to. My feelings about being the only one in my class is that I feel Mexican. I feel like everyone looks at me in a weird way. I dislike it in a way because I have no one to relate to. Sometimes I feel that I need someone who shares my culture and is more like me in my classes.

What is most significant is that the other women were conscious of their ethnicity when they were among other Mexicans or participating in cultural activities that celebrate the Mexican

culture. I found this to be interesting because I expected them to concur with Elena's response, but the majority of the women felt themselves when they were able to express their culture openly. Perhaps another theory could be that Elena had the most experience in the United States and it had become second nature to be cognizant of her culture when there was no one to share her culture.

Another form of microaggression was how the women's experiences in the Elksville community reflected on their class status in covert ways. It is important to state that these experiences were perceived as positive for Ana Mari, and through my critical analysis I found them to contain hints of microaggressions. In a conversation that occurred when I made the comment that she lived in one of the wealthiest counties in the United States, Ana Mari said:

Yeah, Elksville is a rich town and we get so many celebrity people here. My mom cleans these huge houses by herself *de la gente rica* [for rich people], and they are pretty nice. During the summer sometimes I go with her and help her out, and they are really nice, and they have never said anything bad, and they even tell us there's the kitchen you can help yourself for a drink of anything if you are hungry.

Sometimes they say they are going to vacation and ask whether we are going to come by and clean the house. It is an old lady and she would tell us to come and eat breakfast because the food is going to get bad and things like that. My mom would be like, "I'm never going to take like anything," or she'll say, "*lo quiero al rato*" [I'll have some later], you know. She will get like a glass of water or a water bottle. They are pretty nice, and they would ask me if I was in high school because they would say

that I look so young, and I would say that I'm in college, and sometimes they would tell me their experiences in college. They are nice people.

I really grappled with this statement because it signified to me that people from the upper class have not seen the privilege that they have and it's as though the rich people are happy with immigrants as long as they are doing work that no one else will do, which perpetuates this social institution of classism. On the other hand, I honor Ana Mari's voice in this matter and can see how their genuineness can communicate acceptance.

During my visits to Elksville, I noticed that all the housekeeping staff at my hotel, the cooks at the restaurants, and the individuals who were building houses were Mexican immigrants. When I told Ana Mari about this observation she commented:

A lot of people see us like that. Even the owner at the restaurant where I work at, he hires only Mexicans for the kitchen and for dishwasher jobs. You don't see *Americanos* in the back, and he says, "Americans are lazy, and that they don't like to work as much as you guys do because Americans want to get huge pay checks. . . . That's why I love you guys [Mexican immigrants] because you guys do all the hard jobs for us." I'm just like OK. He kind of makes you feel better somehow. At that restaurant I'm the only Mexican waitress and host; I'm the only one; me and my brother, and he works as a waiter. But besides us, it's all American—the owner, and the *meseros* [wait staff]. Sometimes it's kind of weird because you go in the back in the kitchen and you see *todo Mexicano, la musica, hablan y estan alli cotorreando* [all Mexicans, the music, the talking, and gossiping], and *vas para el frente* [you go to the front] and you're like, "Whoa . . . I'm the only Mexican hanging out."

The comment made by the restaurant owner may have seemed like a complement, but unbeknownst to Ana Mari, he was insinuating that Mexicans deserve only low-paying occupations and continues to profit based on this assumption. Maldonado's research (2006) discussed how Latino/a workers are often described as having a better work ethic than Whites normalizes the notion that Latino/a immigrants can exclusively be suited for manual labor. In others words, the strong work ethic displayed by Latino/a immigrants becomes a justification of why they are not recruited for managerial jobs. I think Ana Mari did see social class differences but she had not yet intellectualized how class was impacting her positionality in the scheme of things.

Another example of microaggression is the constant questions that are fielded by newcomer students regarding their status. For Sofi, her accent was a contested topic for her, and she was often questioned about her origins.

Yeah, one time in this class they asked me, "Where are you from," so I said, "From Elksville," but they know that I have an accent so they are like, "No you're not from Elksville," so I tell them that I'm originally from Mexico but my family moved here when I was 15 and that's why I live in Elksville. I don't go further than that; I just stop there. But some people, they want to know everything so I tell them that I'm an international student so they stop asking.

Sofi had to be careful about how much to divulge to others, and because of her accent, individuals tended to question her presence on the college campus and assumed that she could not be from the United States. I shared with Sofi that when I disclose to people that I am originally from Mexico they are shocked by the fact that I am able to speak English so well.

Additionally, silence and fear were common factors expressed by the women about their abilities to express themselves verbally. When controversial topics would arise they wanted to say something but were afraid of retaliation, as Ana Mari discussed:

I took my political science class and they talked about immigrants and immigration. It was a huge class and sometimes I wouldn't feel comfortable. In my English class, which was a smaller class, they would talk about [immigration issues] and I was freaking out. I probably turned red and I didn't feel comfortable and you cannot argue with them because it's only you against 20 more people. I'm better off not saying anything and letting them express themselves.

Everyone agreed that there had been times in which they disagreed or wanted to express their own viewpoints but simply could not; as Valeria concurred: "You disagree but you don't know how to express that when you know you are going to be receiving so many answers and questions against you." Sofi experienced this issue as well:

The other day I was in my accounting class and we were given examples of illegal immigrants working here. I was really mad but I couldn't say anything. Yeah, I cannot express myself. I have it all in my mind and when I go to say it my mind goes blank. I'm like forget it, never mind, I don't have opinion. That happens to me a lot.

I feel that some of their inability to express themselves stemmed from lack of prior opportunities to practice and hone their public speaking skill while in high school, but all of them feared that the topic of immigration would expose their status if they chose to be part of the discussion or that the retaliation would be too hard to handle because immigration is not just a topic for them—it was who they are and the life that they were living. The next section

presents the challenges of learning English and how that transcended into their college experiences.

#### Theme 4: Learning and Unlearning from the Language Acquisition Process

The fourth emergent theme in this research is the issue of language acquisition prior to college and how that experience transcended into their college learning. All of the women concluded that their ESL experiences while in high school were a waste of time because teachers would translate rather than teach them the course content. Many of them also claimed that the program was not well organized and it served as a pipeline for all newcomers regardless of their English acquisition skills. For example, Elena, who was in regular English classes all through elementary and middle school, was offered ESL in high school. She enrolled in the class thinking it would help with homework, but here is what she found:

I took ESL with them because supposedly it was a new class, they just started it, it was a place where you can do your homework, and they can help you with your homework. I felt it wasn't helping because the ESL teachers didn't know what was going on in our regular classes so they couldn't help as much. You were supposed to go there and do homework, but they also gave you other homework. Instead of helping you with homework they gave you more homework, which was a waste of time, like vocabulary words that you already knew . . . Also when I was in ESL I would end up translating for other students or helping them more than the teacher was.

Elena also discussed that her younger brother was also encouraged by counselors to enroll in ESL despite his 8 years of schooling without ESL support. As she predicted, Elena's brother

ended up translating for other students and, thus, wasting his time in ESL. What is most telling is that Elena's brother was scared to speak up about his ESL experiences with his counselors, as Elena recalled:

I told him to tell the counselor that you don't want to take ESL anymore. He said he didn't want to because he was scared because they told him to take it. "If you want I will go and talk with them because you are wasting your time there." He didn't want to disagree with the teacher because teachers are teachers, and they are supposed to know what they are doing.

The issue of whether it was the school's or student's responsibility to determine what was best for the student was a highly debated subject between Ana Mari and Valeria during the focus group discussion. Valeria thought that ESL should be used as a stepping stone during the first year as a newcomer; after that, it should be up to the student to advocate for him/herself. Ana Mari, though, argued that it was difficult to advocate for yourself when you are learning the language and it is even scarier to question the advice of someone who is in a position of power. Here was the conversation that occurred that sparked some high emotions:

Valeria: I think first semester it can be helpful to take ESL in order to get to know the school or the professors. After the first semester it is your responsibility to figure out that ESL is not going to help you, so you as student have to do it. The strength has to come from the student.

Ana Mari: Weren't you led to believe that taking more ESL classes is going to help you in the long run and it didn't?

Valeria: It helps when you take regular English courses.

Elena: It does because I took regular English courses for the whole school year and it helped.

Valeria: Yes, this is something that you realized and they are not going to tell you, you only have to take ESL classes for one semester because you just came here and you don't know anything. They don't tell you that because they have ESL that they feel that is where you belong even if you don't. Also, you are experiencing the American culture. I remember when I came here for the first time and I saw this kid talking in front of the professor because he had done something wrong and the professor called this student out on it and the student got really upset and started to defend himself, I was very surprised about the way he spoke to the professor. You learn that it's okay to do that, you have the right to speak your own mind, and during the first semester you realize that you can make decisions on your own. Especially because you know that you are a newcomer and you have to work harder than the ones that are already here—you have to put in 200% because you are working twice as hard as the rest of the students who were born here. A lot of times what happens is that you give 50% of your work when you are a newcomer so it has to come from you.

Ana Mari: I understand what you are saying but once you get here and you don't know the language they directly take you to the ESL program and you think, "Oh they know what is best for me," and they know that they are going to put you in ESL because they tell you that it's for you to learn English and blah blah blah. But you don't know how they manage that program.

Valeria: But if you don't realize it the first semester or don't realize it at all.

Ana Mari: But not everyone is as strong as you or as open as you because they are scared. They are scared to go talk with the counselors because you don't know how to express yourself and you don't know what to tell them.

Valeria: By one year you should know how to speak English.

Ana Mari: Not everyone has the same capacity as you to learn. You took one semester of ESL and you were able to express yourself completely.

Valeria: By that time you can make a conversation by that time even if you don't say it right.

Ana Mari: Well, I was feeling scared and everyone feels scared. I'm not as intelligent as Elena or you ,and not everyone thinks the same way.

I sensed a bit of tension in the room during this conversation. On one hand, Valeria had developed a high degree of self-confidence during her schooling in Mexico, and that transcended into her U.S. schooling experiences. I also feel that being able to advocate for herself comes from her independence traits that were cultivated in her family structure. On the other hand, for Ana Mari there is a real sense of fear when questioning individuals of authority, and being able to express one's wants and needs in another language is difficult and stressful. My heart sank, when I heard the words "not everyone is as strong as you" from Ana Mari because I do believe that Ana Mari possesses inner strength and wisdom and somewhere along the line she had been led to view her language abilities as a deficit rather than an asset.

What was most problematic about the ESL program is that these students were typecast. Often, ESL students would not take the college prep courses required for college entry, and the advisors who served the ESL population were the ESL instructors, who often

did not have the resources or information about college access. When asked what these women would do over in their high school experiences there was a unanimous consensus that they would not have enrolled in ESL classes or they would have taken more challenging courses that would have assisted them during their college transition. Often, these counselors are focused on graduating students from high school rather than encouraging them to enroll in pre-college courses.

Sofi, who was enrolled in ESL all 4 years of high school, wished that she was encouraged to enroll in more math and English course rather than take art or textile courses. Almost all of the women felt that their prior schooling experiences did not prepare them for college. For Valeria, the fact that instructors in high school had lower expectations followed her in college:

Because of the lower expectations that I had during high school, usually when I get papers in high school my professors they wouldn't correct my grammar and my sentence structure. . . . I don't know how they were grading it but it wasn't right. I realize that I would plagiarize in high school and my professors wouldn't tell me to cite my sources. When I arrive in college there was a lot of writing and I realized that citing your sources was a huge deal because if I do not do it in college I'm going to get kicked out of school. I didn't realize that the writing was a big part for me and it was very difficult for me. So, I went to the writing center at UW and they taught me how to write papers more or less. . . . I found out when I got to college that my English wasn't at the level it needed to be.

Again, because Valeria's academic ability was not held to the same standard as other students, she arrived in college to find out that she was not at the same level as other students and had to utilize the resources available to catch up.

Ana Mari also expressed frustration with her writing abilities upon arriving at college as a direct result of lax high school expectations:

Sometimes, for my English class it was hard. I understood what my essay was about and the idea, but once I have to put it in the format, explaining and making paragraphs it was hard because I could explain myself in a big paragraph in Spanish if I think about it but sometimes in English I have hard time because I repeat myself so many times. I don't really know how to use different words or those types of words, so Elena would help me a lot on those. In college, they expect big papers to be more formal and critical. I have a hard time doing that sometimes because I know my ideas and everything but I really don't know how to express them. If I only had a teacher back in high school who taught me to how to add expression in my papers I would be doing a better job. That's one of my big challenges that I have right now.

In Sofi's case, her college experiences helped her acquire more English fluency; however, during her first semester in college she was apprehensive to participate in class because she was self-conscious about her accent:

The first year that I came [to the university] I wasn't involved with a lot of people. I just talked with my friend Susana, and I only met people that Susana introduced me to, but I didn't get too involved with other people. At the beginning I was shy because I thought they were going to laugh at my accent so I really didn't really talk . . . not even in class. We had this seminar class, and we are supposed to talk a lot and read

the books and then talk about them. I didn't like to talk so the teachers knew that I was shy or I wasn't comfortable talking, so they didn't ask me a lot even though it was required for me to talk.

What is interesting about Sofi's experience is that her nonparticipation could have been misconstrued as not being engaged in the class discussion or unpreparedness to discuss the assignments.

All these women felt like they were "funneled" into the ESL program without any regard for their English proficiency. More importantly, the school did not consider these students to be college material and, thus, never suggested college preparatory courses that would have enhanced their college transition. Finally, these students have learned and experienced thrill more as learners in the college setting than in their high school experiences. The next theme discusses the experiences around their immigration status while in college.

#### Theme 5: Dilemmas, Stressors, and Motivation Associated with Undocumented Status

The discussion surrounding the topic of immigration was complex. Although, I never asked the immigration status of these women, all of them disclosed in our conversations that they were undocumented. Through some of their body language and the meekness in their voices it was apparent that some of the women were hesitant about talking to me about their immigration status. I also experienced some anxiety myself because I feared this topic would shut down our conversations, and I also did not know if I had gained their trust enough for them to be open with me about this topic. Some of the topics that were discussed within this theme were the missed opportunities because of status, how they navigated questions associated with their status, how their immigration status was a motivating factor to persist in

college, how they dealt with the stress associated with their immigration status, and their opinions about immigration policies.

The two main opportunities that the women felt they were missing out on because of their immigration status were financial aid and internships. During our conversations, I learned that the parents of these students were paying well over half of their college expenses each year even though they had obtained local scholarships. Ana Mari knew that not having a Social Security number would prevent her from receiving federal aid and other scholarships; she stated:

When you try to apply for any scholarship the first question they ask you is for a Social Security number, so if you don't have one, even though you have pretty good grades or you have a good GPA, it's not going to help you at all and you won't get the money.

One of the opportunities that she spoke about is the Wyoming Hathaway scholarship, which is a need-based and merit-based scholarship that is available to all Wyoming high school graduates. Unfortunately, eligibility for this award requires legal residence in the state, and a Social Security number is requested on the scholarship applications. Even more tragic is the fact that their parents all filed and paid federal taxes.

Internship opportunities and finding employment were also issues for most of the women. Sofi, a business major, would have really liked to do an internship in the tourism and travel industry but was unable to pursue this opportunity because of her immigration status. She also talked about wanting to get a job on campus; she explained her experience:

I just make up a number and in some places they don't ask for enough information.

But here in the school [UW] I remember I dropped my application off at the Human

Resource building but they ask me to go back to make sure all my paperwork was in order . . . I don't know if it was because they heard my accent or I don't know. I didn't return because I knew I was going to get into trouble.

Sofi indicated the job outlook after graduation may appear bleak because of her immigration status.

As a recent college graduate, Valeria was currently having the worst time with not being able to find a job, and she attested that her immigration status was continuing to be a stressor in her life. She explained:

Because I am unable to get a job and that's the most frustrating part of all. Yeah, I am not going to be here [in the U.S.] if I can't work so I think I've decided to go to law school, finish, and go back to Mexico because I am not going to be here if I can't work. That's a very stressful situation. It's all so frustrated.

In fact, all of the women stated that if job opportunities were not available in the United States the option of working in Mexico would be considered. However, obtaining their college degrees in the United States was also an incentive for them and gave them a sense of strength. Ana Mari pointed out:

It pushes me to keep doing what I'm doing and forces me to fight for it. After you get done with college you can fight for getting your Social Security number or get legal and get more benefits after that.

Sofi felt the same way, and she felt that being in college was one way she could help dispel the myths about undocumented immigrants.

Right now we have a lot of troubles since we are illegal immigrants so I just want to finish school and see what is going to happen. Either getting a job here or going back

to Mexico, but with my degree so people can see that I am here for a reason not just because I wanted to come to work or *invadir* [invade] their space. So, having my degree will help with my immigration status.

In essence, all of the women agreed with providing educational opportunities for undocumented immigrants in the United States, and although they understood the complexities associated with illegal immigration, they all acknowledged that economically the United States needs immigrants. Additionally, when discussing the DREAM Act with the participants all of them also agreed that undocumented immigrants should have the right to obtain an education. As Valeria eloquently stated

I don't know all the details about the Dream Act but I think there should be a way for students who came here at a young age and have lived here almost their entire lives to be able to go to school, have a career, and stay here. They were not brought here by their own will. These are children who were brought here by their parents, who were underage, and therefore are not considered adults, and they didn't have an option to come here. If they want to continue to go to school and get a career, then why not? I don't think it's going to harm the country and I don't see how that's going to have a negative impact on the country. . . . The more educated your population is the better our society will be. It's better to have immigrants in school rather than in jail.

These women saw education as a benefit to society, and they were often frustrated by the fact that they had spent a great deal of time in the United States, had attended and graduated from a U.S. high school, but were not able to advantage of federal aid programs such as Pell grants. Further, even if they were attending college there was no guarantee that a job would be waiting on the horizon.

After hearing some of the many challenges that these women were facing on a daily basis I began to wonder how they coped with the stress associated with their status. Valeria had some profound thoughts about how she was dealing with stress:

It's very difficult. Even before going to college it was very difficult for me, and I've always had difficult moments, like I just can't stand being like this [undocumented] anymore. What keeps me going is that I want to become as educated as I can possibly be, and I feel fortunate because I have somebody who is willing to finance my dream, and that's what keeps me going. It's something that I feel is very personal, and I don't like sharing it with anyone, not even my boyfriend. Discussing my feelings about these issues is not something that I like to talk about because it's very difficult for me to deal with and stressful. This is so hard and live with every single day, and I try to go to counseling for it but I felt so strange. I went to the counseling center and even though I had other things going on in my life, I just went to counseling because I needed to say these things out loud about how frustrated I felt being in the position that I am right now, and I was SO frustrated because I couldn't tell my counselor; we talked about family issues, issues with my boyfriend but I just couldn't say it, I couldn't tell him the real reason I went to counseling, and it's something that is very personal to me, and at the same time it's very frustrating because there is nothing I can do.

Even when Valeria attended a counseling session, which was in her hometown and not on campus, she was unable to disclose her true feelings about her own immigration status. During this conversation, I sensed a great deal of helplessness and frustration particularly

because Valeria had excelled in so many areas of her life, yet she felt “stuck” and unable to demonstrate her true potential to society.

These women carefully navigated to whom they disclosed their status. Many of them explained that they had to have a considerable amount of trust for that individual for them to discuss their undocumented immigrant status. That being said, the discussion about their immigration status created some anxiety within myself because I knew that the women had to trust me before they would allow themselves to talk openly about their status with me. In fact, Elena did not voluntarily divulge her status until the focus group discussion. Hence, this is the reason why her voice was silent during this topic. Even during the focus group discussion it was evident by the long silent pause that preceded this issue that the topic of immigration continues to be difficult to discuss openly, even among other undocumented immigrants.

As the discussion began, Ana Mari informed me that Patricia, the woman who helped her apply to the university, told them that they should never under any circumstances reveal their status to others. Patricia also provided them a name of a resource person in the Multicultural Affairs Office who knew about their immigration status, and they felt comfortable telling her things related to their immigration status. What was most telling is what Sofi said afterward regarding disclosing her status:

Sometimes I feel ashamed too when I talk about my immigration status. I just ignore the whole topic in general. When I know the person it's different; I can talk to them about it but I don't like to talk about, and I just keep it to myself, and if I have to deal with it I'll just lie.

Interestingly everyone around the table agreed that lying was a common practice and the easiest thing to do when asked about their immigration status. I was equally surprised at the fact that Sofi felt ashamed to talk about her status. I felt sad that our society has made Sofi feel that something is wrong with her because of how immigrants are portrayed. Yet, Sofi is outspoken and knows how to navigate the system to get what she wants. When she looked into attending the community college here is what she experienced:

Like when I applied to the community college they asked me if I was an international student, I told them, “No.” Then they asked me what my status is and I didn’t say anything. I told them, “Here you have to accept me because in the book [college catalog] you don’t have to be anything.” I told them, “I don’t have a Social Security number so you can think whatever.”

The women were also knowledgeable about how to navigate the question about whether or not they had a Social Security number while on campus. Knowing that their university student identification number was adequate information for many offices on campus, they never had to divulge their status. However, upon their arrival on campus Elena and Ana Mari were getting their student ID picture taken when they were asked for a Social Security number. Here’s what Ana Mari had to say:

It was just me and Elena. Then they [orientation staff] were like, “Are you international students?” I was like yeah [laughter]. We knew that we can’t say that [our immigration status] to everybody so they sent us to the international office and they told us so many things to do, that we needed our passports [laughter about passports]. Then I was answering her questions and said we didn’t bring our passports with us. We didn’t know we had to bring your ID. I was like. ”Oh my God.” I

remembered [a multicultural affairs staff person], and I wanted to find someone who could help us. I didn't know the school very well so we were in Knight Hall, and we didn't know where we were. . . . Elena was really scared and she didn't say anything. Elena explained her silence: "I knew that I would end up telling them so I kept quiet. . . . We have to lie—that's the only way." Ana Mari continued with her story:

So we learned about international student services, and they would ask us, "You guys are from Mexico. What is your name?" and they just kept asking more questions, and it was so funny but we were scared. It was just us [Elena and me] and that day we tried to call Sofi and another friend but nobody was home. We were so scared so we found [a multicultural staff person] and we ended up in her office.

Although they all found humor in this situation their fear was very real. This was also the moment that I learned about Elena's immigration status.

Elena was able to conceal her immigration status well because she arrived at a younger age, as she detailed:

For me, it was kind of different. I started first grade and went to school with everyone. I knew everyone. I guess they thought that I was born here and that I was from here. So, I didn't know anything back then, but throughout school new Mexicans that would come and the students would think that they are illegal because they were just coming in and they weren't here the whole time here. They would never think that about me because I grew up with them.

The individuals with whom Elena grew up never questioned her immigration status because she had always attended school with them in addition to the fact that she speaks English fluently and with little detection of any accent.

Some of the women's fear stemmed from reactions from individuals regarding illegal immigration, but none of them feared deportation. As Valeria stated:

I don't fear anymore because I don't have to; I have my career already and I can go back to Mexico and do my masters there. I know I will have support. I'm confident about my future because of the person that was able to support my education. I don't fear anymore because I have my college degree and the worst that can happen is that I go back to Mexico and do my masters and that's not really a bad situation. I'm not losing anything, and I've gained a lot already by being here and being able to take advantage of being here.

It was also interesting how some of the women used humor to deal with the stress of their immigration experiences. Ana Mari wished that she could obtain her driver's license, which prompted a surprised look on my face. I told her that I distinctly remember her driving herself to the focus group. She explained:

Well, you can drive but you get clever and you duck [laughter all around]. Like we make fun of those things that could happen to us. We're like, "It's just like a free trip back home." We learned that from Carlos Mencia [a Mexican comedian]. Sometimes you don't have to feel so stressed all the time and think it's so difficult. You have to find humor.

Humor became the highlight of the focus group. Though they knew their status was a serious topic they relished in the fact that they could laugh about some of their experiences. At one point, Ana Mari was poking fun at Elena because Vice President Dick Cheney was a frequent visitor to the ranch where her family resides. I could see Elena rolling her eyes as Ana Mari excitedly explained that Elena has autographed pictures of him and President Bush

all over her house. Elena quipped about selling the pictures on EBay® to pay for her college tuition. As Ana Mari continued to portray Elena and the president as intimate friends she ended the conversation with an offer, “If you need to give a message to Cheney give it to Elena and she’ll make sure he’ll get the message [laughter].” Through all the stress regarding their immigration status it is humbling that these women are able to find a bit of humor in this matter. What is most amazing about their perspectives is they knew that life in the United States has no guarantees yet they were resilient and wanted to continue their educational journey in spite of the odds. The next theme discusses how these students endure academically and socially in college.

#### Theme 6: Creating Successful Academic Spaces and Social Networks in College

As stated previously, for these women, the lax high school preparation did not provide them with the academic foundation needed to succeed in college. Not only should they have taken college preparatory courses, but they eventually found out that assistance was needed with studying and note taking. The section highlights their college experiences inside the classroom, establishment of a social network, and their future outlook.

In addition to not feeling confident about their communication skills, many of the women had opinions about the teaching style of their professors. Sofi, who at that time was at the local community college, noticed a big difference in the teaching. She compared her experiences at the University of Wyoming with those at the community college:

At the beginning of my freshman year, I did really well so I was proud. I thought I couldn’t do it and it was those seminars that helped me a lot too. But it got harder and harder. . . . Right now, at LCCC I am doing really well. I guess it’s the way that they teach at the community college that is much better for me. It’s really different. They

don't go deeply into the content, they just tell you the basic stuff that you need to know. My teacher would give us examples and applies it to the real world so I understand much better than before. I don't know why they have a different teaching system at UW. Also, accounting has a lot of equations. They make us memorize the equations at UW and sometimes I couldn't memorize all of them, and at LCCC they allow you to have a 3x5 note card to put the equations on it.

Her first year at the University of Wyoming went really well, and she attributed her success to the freshman seminars because they discussed topics and issues that freshman students were facing.

At that particular time, Sofi was thriving in the community college setting because the content was related back to real world situations. She also liked the personal attention from her faculty members and the smaller class size at the community college. She hoped to return to the University of Wyoming and felt that she would be a better student because of the confidence she was gaining in her community college experiences. One topic of importance was how Sofi was academically dismissed. She felt that her advisor provided her advice only on what classes to take rather than how to improve her study skills, so she tried to pull her low grades up by herself but continued to take 16 to 18 credits. She explained:

When I went to talk with my academic advisor she never told me that I was taking a lot of credits. When I signed up for my classes my advisor didn't say anything about the amount of credits. When I turned in my class schedule sheet to the secretary she was the one that said, "That's a lot of credits," but that's it; she didn't advise me to go back and tell my advisor that it was a lot. The secretary just told me that I need to work hard.

This whole scenario is difficult to analyze because I want to believe that her academic dismissal was not intentional. Having many years of academic counseling experience, I find it difficult to understand why the advisor did not suggest to Sofi that she take less credit hours or better yet, take a couple of her prerequisites at the community college level to bring some her grades up.

The topic of social networking varied among the women. When Valeria and Sofi first arrived at college they were involved with a program called “La Junta.” This program, housed in the Admissions Office, had a group of students of color help out with college visits and recruitment. The former director of this program was instrumental in helping to recruit Valeria and Sofi, and both women arrived at campus wanting to assist with the recruiting efforts of students of color to campus. Valeria explained her experiences:

Well, at the time, [an admissions staff member] was supervising La Junta at the time.

They did recruitment for minority students, and I was very interested in all the information that she presented in Elksville and to tell the students and professors and the community about the opportunities and help that they could receive at UW.

Because I never had the resources or information while I was in high school, I wanted to bring that to the schools in Elksville. That’s why La Junta was a big part of my activities; also she was also a really good resource for the community in Elksville; she did a great job giving others information about UW and that’s why I kept being part of La Junta.

It was interesting to learn these women’s feelings associated with getting involved with student organizations. During the focus group discussion some of them mentioned that their involvement on campus helped them feel part of the institution. They were also

pleasantly surprised that the institution actively promoted diversity on campus. Here is what the conversation entailed:

Ana Mari: For me it really helped that I got involved in different organizations. It wasn't in my plans to get involved in groups once I got to college.

Elena: Even though they say it's a good thing. I was scared to just go and get involved.

Susana: Why were you scared?

Elena: I don't know.

Valeria: Just because we sometimes have that mentality that we are different. And here in Elkville the fact that we are different is not necessarily positive, but in college it's the opposite because there is an interest for having people who are different who have something else to contribute.

Ana Mari: It's a multicultural thing.

Valeria: The school does a really good job of trying to embrace cultural diversity.

Ana Mari: It really helps you because it makes you feel more comfortable in a way.

Elena: You fit in more and you make friends, it really helped me.

Ana Mari: At first, I was kind of scared. I don't know how to explain the fear that I had. I didn't know why but I was scared. [A campus administrator] was the one who said you gotta do this and he told me to bring a friend, so I was like, "Elena come with me," and we pulled our other friend so we were the three always together. If something happens to one person, then it's going to happen to the three of us.

Elena: You don't feel as bad because you have two other people who you can relate to.

Sofi: I felt by myself.

Susana: How did you feel or get connected?

Sofi: I didn't go to those meetings because I didn't feel comfortable. I just met friends. I had social interaction with friends outside of school groups.

Susana: Do you feel like you fit in school?

Sofi: No, I don't know why. I don't feel comfortable going to those meetings at school. I felt stressed in those groups and I didn't want to go there.

Elena: that's kind of how I felt at first because we didn't go to Mecha as much or any of that. But the more that we got involved it was because of the friend that we made. She brought us in and told us it was fine and you realize that it's a group. At first you think that everyone here knows what they are doing and they know each other so we didn't really fit in and the more you get to know them the more you feel comfortable saying what you want to say.

Ana Mari: You have to give them a chance for other people to get to know about you so you can know them. We were like that the first time, I don't like this girl. I don't want to go because they are doing this and everyone is laughing and we just sit there, scared and we don't say what we think. Then they started to ask if we agree or disagree.

Elena: the more you get into it the more you feel comfortable with the group.

Sofi did not feel comfortable with many of the groups on campus and, thus, she did not participate much with campus organizations. However, she had developed a social network with other international students. When asked why she liked socializing with her international group she explained, "One of the things that I have noticed is our accents. It's

fun to hear other accents and it's probably fun for them to hear mine. Also, they respect their cultures a lot more, like in Mexico." Perhaps, Sofi gained a sense of validation of her accent and culture by being around others who shared these characteristics.

Besides social networks, the women also mentioned that key faculty and staff members were integral in helping them identify resources. Interestingly, Valeria also mentioned that she met a family, through her financial sponsor, who also provided her support:

Well, they were very nice and kind, and they gave me their phone number in case I needed to call somebody for a ride because I didn't have a car, if I felt lonely, or if I wanted to eat at their house instead of eating at Washakie.

I thought that it was a smart idea to have a community resource person at her disposal. The women also discussed that they did access the resources on campus but the one on-campus resource that is vital for honing academic skills, Student Success Services, was not used. Because this is a federally funded program, they were not eligible to apply despite the fact that they would have met the first generation and low income criteria.

Finally the concept of pursuing an "empty dream" was something that was commonly discussed among my own circle of colleagues and friends in student affairs. They would not encourage undocumented students to pursue higher education because they could not promise them job opportunities afterwards. As I posed the same question to these women, they were adamant that they were better off more educated:

Valeria: I think it's also because nobody is going to take away your education or career, and whether you stay or leave, it will benefit you for the rest of your life, and

it doesn't affect your immigration status. It is something positive if you want to stay in this country.

Ana Mari: Then you can keep fighting for more rights. It doesn't affect you calling you illegal but you don't want to be one for the rest of your life. I try not to mix my education with my status. They are related but I put a line between those two. One is one thing and the other is another thing.

Elena: Nobody can take away what you learn from you.

Valeria: Your education is valid here as well as other countries.

Listening to the voices of these women, they have gained strength from attending college. They viewed their college education as a means to not only give more assistance to their families but also set an example for their younger siblings and cousins. According to their perspective, resiliency is required to succeed and strength is what they will gain from their college experiences.

### Summary

In this chapter the findings resonate with the stories and experiences from four Mexican immigrant women in college. The six major themes that emerged from this study are: (a) support and challenges from their home system; (b) unraveling the notions of dual socialization; (c) microaggressions against newcomers; (d) learning and unlearning from the language acquisition process; (e) dilemmas, stressors, and motivation associated with undocumented status; and (f) creating successful academic spaces and social networks in college. Collectively, these themes provide a deep understanding of how undocumented immigrants navigate their way through the educational, social, and political systems, which gives the study of college persistence greater depth.

Through the many in-depth conversations, both individually and collectively, I was able to understand how culture, family, schooling, and immigration experiences influence college persistence among *Mexicana* immigrant students. Moreover, I was also able to identify the factors are associated with the college persistence of *Mexicana* students.

Chapter 6 includes the findings from the study and provides connections to the related literature. The chapter also includes a discussion of implications for student affairs professionals, such as deans of students, campus psychologists, and campus diversity professionals, as they advise and/or work with the newcomer population on their respective campuses. Finally, I describe my personal reflections regarding my journey as a researcher.

CHAPTER 6  
DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS,  
AND PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

This chapter presents a discussion of the findings that emerged from the two original research questions guiding this study: (a) How do culture, family, schooling, and immigration experiences influence college persistence among undocumented *Mexicana* immigrant students and (b) What factors are associated with the college persistence of undocumented *Mexicana* immigrant students? First, the discussion focuses on the six emergent themes from this study within the context of the existing literature. Second, Yosso's (2006) theoretical model, which guided this study, is reviewed and revised to illustrate the findings from this study. Third, implications and recommendations for K-12 school personnel, parents, student affairs professionals, and policy makers are made. Finally, future directions for this research are suggested as well as a personal account for my growth as a researcher.

The six themes that emerged from this study are: (a) support and challenges from their home system, (b) unraveling the notions of dual socialization, (c) microaggressions against newcomers, (d) learning and unlearning from the language acquisition process, (e) dilemmas, stressors, and motivation associated with undocumented status, and (f) creating successful academic spaces and social networks in college. In the following section is the discussion of the six themes within the context of the literature, the voices from the participants, and my own interpretations.

## Overview of the Findings in Relation to the Existing Literature

### *Support and Challenges from their Home System*

The importance of family in college persistence was a prevalent factor for these women. In accordance with much of the literature (Hernandez, 2000, 2002; Hernandez & Lopez, 2004; Longerbeam et al., 2004; Orozco, 2003; Torres, 2003; Zalaquett, 2005), despite the fact their parents were unable to relate to the students' college experiences, they were able to provide emotional support and motivation. In Chapter 5, I described the support given by parents to the students along with some of the challenges associated with being first generation college students and maintaining family obligations. For parents, providing words of encouragement or moral support was what these women needed. Sofi's parents may not have known what questions to ask regarding her college experiences, and so her dad was more inclined to tell her to "do well" or "study hard" without giving her specific directions. At the same time, knowing that her mom had limited knowledge of college, Valeria's conversations regarding her studies and college life were kept general. She mentioned that she "had no one to relate to" about her college experiences among her family members. The first generation experiences of these women mirrored Orozco's (2003) experiences as she described her family and school as "two separate entities; like water and oil, they never mixed—they seemed to repel one another" (p. 131). However, the life experiences of the parents mentioned in this study cannot be underestimated. As noted in Chapter 4, despite their limited formal education and English abilities, the parents arrived in the United States with tenacity and the desire to make their lives better for the children. Although it was never verbalized by the participants, the fact that their parents were able to survive and navigate

unfamiliar territories while in the United States exemplifies the same personal resiliency that is needed in college persistence.

Moreover, the support that was given to the students by family members often stemmed from the desire for a better life for their children. Torres (2003) discussed that many immigrant parents come to the United States wanting a better life for their children. Ana Mari illustrated this sentiment when she explained that her dad wanted her to obtain her college degree because he was never given the opportunity to do so. She also witnessed how hard her parents worked to provide a better lifestyle for her and her brother. The message that she received growing up was “*vayas bien en la escuela para que no seas como nosotros, tabajando*” [do well in school so you don’t become like us, working]. Parents were instrumental in providing motivation for these students and, clearly, education was valued in these families. This example dispels the myth that Latino immigrants do not value education, which is also confirmed in previous research (Bohon et al., 2005).

Gandara’s (1995) study echoed how mothers in particular seem to want their daughters to be independent. This was evident for both Ana Mari and Valeria. Ana Mari said that her mom informed her that she “can be more independent” and “have a better life” if she had a college degree. In addition, I believe by witnessing the struggles of her single mom, Valeria’s goal for independence was more of a necessity rather than an option. Interestingly, Valeria’s mom used her own life as an example of the limited life options one has without a college degree. Valeria used her mom’s life experiences as motivation, but it also brought her fear of being dependant on a man or end up being a housewife as she remarked, “I wanted to do something else and I knew one way I could do it if I became educated and went to school

and got a career.” In essence, having independence, financial freedoms, and a career were important elements for the women in this study.

The issue of language was central in this theme. As stated in the literature, language is viewed as a barrier for parents when interacting with school activities (Bohon et al., 2005). For the women in this study, school involvement was a common practice for their parents while living in Mexico. Upon their arrival in the United States, parental involvement with school activities dwindled due to the language barrier. Interestingly, Elena’s and Sofi’s fathers were the ones who played a prominent role in their children’s education while in the United States because their English abilities were more advanced. Other than attending sporting events and parent/teacher conferences, there was not a distinct connection between the parents and Elksville High School. As mentioned in Chapter 4, all the women received little to no guidance on the college application process from their high school teachers and counselors. The community resources that cater to Latina/o immigrants were instrumental in providing these women support through their college access experiences. The disconnect between parents and the high school was partially due to the language barrier but mostly related to the lack of relationship building between parents and teachers.

Yosso (2005) alluded to linguistic capital as the ability to speak more than one language and acting as translators and cultural brokers for others. The women in this study utilized their linguistic capital to assist their families. Ana Mari revealed that she made doctor appointments for her mom, and she described herself as her “dad’s assistant” because she knew the details associated with her families’ finances given that she was no longer living at home. The literature (Longerbeam et al., 2004) noted family obligations as a stress factor but did not mention the details of this construct. In this study, linguistic capital was an

important commodity for the family. The women felt stress as they navigated their own academics with the demands of their family members. However, the women in this study never referred to their family obligations as a barrier to their college persistence. Although it was a stressful, they understood their linguistic capital was a benefit for the family; as Ana Mari noted, “I don’t want them to worry about things that I can solve.”

#### *Unraveling the Notions of Dual Socialization*

For the women in my study, the process of dual socialization was complex. Rather than juggling two cultures, Ana Mari explained, “I pick something from each and make my own culture.” Ana Mari’s example illustrates the production of a cultural hybrid (Beltran, 2004)—it is neither Mexican nor American but a new culture. The blending of two cultures does not insinuate equilibrium between the two; rather, it was evident that one culture was used more than the other depending on the situation. Thus, these women often felt like they could not be “themselves” while in college particularly because they worried about the reactions of “others.” In fact, when I asked Sofi what recommendations she would make to the President of the University of Wyoming she struggled to answer this question as she explained, “I don’t know how the president looks at immigrants because he might think that immigrants are bad or he might support them”; meaning, her presence on campus was politicized by the highly debated immigration issues. It was saddening to learn that Sofi silenced her opinions and viewpoints based on the political views of others.

At the same time, because these women were adopting some of the American traits, parents, family members, and friends were quick to point out those differences. Valeria discussed these challenges stating,

It's difficult because in American culture if you try to be too Mexican then it's hard to get along with people. And when you are with Mexican people and you're being too American you get criticized so you have to balance it because you get criticized on both sides if you are being too American or too Mexican.

In essence, this balancing act was exhausting, and there seemed to be a constant navigation in regards to the usage and expression of their cultural selves. The literature explained that many Latinas are successful in developing accommodation strategies rather than assimilating into the mainstream culture (Wortham, 2002). These accommodation strategies could be construed as navigational skills (Yosso, 2005) that help students juggle two different cultures (Anzaldúa, 1987; Rendon et al., 2000).

Another interesting finding is that these women do see themselves as different from other U.S. born Latinas/os. Some pointed out that the citizenship status of native-Latinas/os offered them more benefits, whereas others expressed that the cultural identity of U.S.-born Latinos had been somewhat diluted with "Americaness." Additionally, some of the women were also annoyed by the negative portrayal of Mexican immigrants in U.S. society as well as the perception that the United States places too much focus on race and skin color. In Chapter 5, Valeria pointed out, "There is a lot of emphasis on skin color and that drives me crazy." The viewpoints of these women stemmed from their own experiences in Mexico. The literature (Ansell, 2006; Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Sue, 2007; Vigil & Lopez, 2004; Waldinger & Lichter, 2003) confirms this experience as a dual frame of reference. The women in this study perceive their environment as either positive or negative because of their experiences while in Mexico. For example, the women in this study expressed that differentiation between race, class and gender was more omnipresent in Mexico than in the United States.

They also indicated that they had more power in deciding their life choices in the United States regardless of their immigration status. Their perception of race, class and gender discrimination in the United States was influenced by how the social construction of class and gender are played out in Mexican society. Ana Mari was able to rationalize why the differentiation was so prominent in Mexico.

Right now that I am taking Women Studies and it changes how you see things. Like if you really look closely it's not only the Mexican culture that men are independent and women are dependent. It's just that women in the U.S. have these feminist thoughts. In Mexico, they have the same thing, they have the feminist thinking but they don't really do it because they are scared or it's because our culture has been following this and we don't do it the right way or the way my mom has been doing it. An American woman is like, I'm going to do it and I'm going to be independent and its going to be like that no matter who likes it. Here it's more encouraged in Mexico if you force this thinking you are breaking the rules and you are not going to be accepted in society.

When looking closely at Ana Mari's statement, one finds that she was constantly navigating the traditional Mexican roles while developing her own sense of self; as a Mexican female immigrant living in the United States.

Finally, despite the fact these women felt like they had more freedoms in the United States, they still were struggling with challenging traditional female roles with family members. As stated in Chapter 5, Elena often fought with her parents about how the household chores would be specifically the female's responsibility. In this case, Valeria was the only one who felt equity in her household due to the lack of male presence within her immediate family. On the other hand, Sofi was the only one who was visibly uncomfortable

about topic and merely said, “In my house the men rule. That’s all I have to say about that.” This contested conversation authenticated much of the literature on gender (Gandara, 1995; K. P. Gonzalez et al., 2004). By following traditional female roles while gaining a sense of independence through college attendance exemplified Anzaldúa’s (1987) description of *la nueva mestiza*. Baker’s (2004) notion of gender ideology was also prevalent for these women as they create their own notion of *mujerista* (womenhood) based on their own set of values and experiences. In other words, these women received contradicting messages from their families: be an independent woman in college but follow traditional female roles at home.

#### *Microaggressions Against Newcomers*

These women in this study experienced microaggressions from students and teachers in high school, in their community, and in college. However, these students did not view the actions of covert racism as such. It was my analytical gaze that named these instances as microaggression, not the participants. The literature (Solorzano et al., 2000) stated that microaggression incidents happen inside and outside classroom settings. For Elena, she was more aware of her ethnicity when she was the only student of color in her class. She felt “everyone looks at me in a weird way.” This example depicts Elena as an “outsider” (Rodriguez et al., 2000). Even if Elena never classified herself as an “outsider,” the mere fact that she felt “strange” as the numerical minority in her classroom insinuates cultural incongruity (Gloria & Castellanos, 2003) with the University of Wyoming. The research of Solorzano and associates illustrated that if more African Americans were in the classroom perhaps underrepresented students would feel more comfortable and confident using their voices.

Other instances of microaggressions include the questioning of their presence, as if their cultural heritage communicated to others that they did not belong. For instance, Sofi stated that on many occasions that she was afraid to use her voice in the classroom because of her accent. Oftentimes she was mistaken for an international student, and she struggled with how to answer questions about where she was from. She commented:

Well, so many times they ask me if I'm an international student and I tell them, "No," but sometimes they realize that I am an immigrant because I have an accent. I feel bad and I tell them I am an international student because I don't want them to ask me questions like how did you get here and all that stuff. So, that's a big issue, I don't know how to answer if I'm a citizen or immigrant or international student. It's really hard.

What was also challenging for the students were the classroom discussions about immigration. Even when they so badly wanted to express their opinions on this topic, these women often stayed silent because they were afraid of retaliation from students who did not agree with immigration rights. Sofi affirmed this statement when asked why she felt students would respond negatively towards her.

*Porque cuando dicen inmigrantes, se refieren a mexicanos. No se refieren a gente de muchos paises. Entonces yo soy mexicana y como ellos se refieren a inmigrantes a mexicanos hay muchos que no lo veen bien. Que veen racismo. Más bien hay racism.*  
 [Because when they say immigrants they are referring to Mexicans. It doesn't refer to people from many places, so I am Mexican and so referred to as an immigrant and there are many who don't see them as a good thing. There is racism.]

Although they never expressed that they experienced microaggression in social settings while in college, covert discrimination was experienced while in high school and in their community. From Sofi's point of view, there was an apparent division between the American students and Mexican students in her high school. What is interesting is the sense that Sofi had about how she felt "invisible" among American students in her high school, as though she did not exist. I imagine that these unspoken, inactive modes of discrimination perpetuated self-doubt and a negative self-image for these women in this study. Ana Mari's stories about her community depicted seemingly positive interaction that contained underlying tones of microaggressions. One story is about an older lady who hired Ana Mari's mom to clean her house, who treated her mom nicely; as she described: "Sometimes they say they are going to vacation and ask whether we are going to come by and clean the house." The other story illustrates Ana Mari's interactions with the restaurant owner for whom she worked as he alluded, "I love you guys [Mexican immigrants] because you do all the hard jobs for us." Maldonado (2006) research directly speaks to this reference. She emphasized that placing validation on Mexican immigrants based on their positionality as workers or laborers only perpetuates the cycle of oppression for Mexican immigrants. Ana Mari's employer only values Mexican immigrants if they are working as cooks or kitchen help staff and the notion that they are "hard workers" helps individuals in positions of power rationalize their hiring decisions.

#### *Learning and Unlearning from the Language Acquisition Process*

As Valverde (2006) indicated, the lack of efficient bilingual education programs, segregation of immigrant children in the schools, and low academic expectations of immigrant children have a lasting effect. It was clear that Elksville High School was

scrambling for appropriate ways to deal with the influx of immigrants in their school system. Due to the lack of proper training in areas of bilingual education or ESL, teachers resorted to lowering their academic expectations for the students in this study. In addition, these women and other newcomer students were type cast into the ESL program without much regard to their English abilities. It was surprising to learn that Elena was offered ESL in high school even though she had been enrolled in regular classes since elementary school. Elena described her ESL experience as a “waste of time” and she “would end up translating for other students.”

The question of whether the student or the teacher determined what was best for the student was highly contested in this study. Valeria adamantly argued that as newcomers one has to fend for oneself, noting, “You have to put in 200% because you are working twice as hard as the rest of the students that were born here.” On the other hand, Ana Mari’s experiences with ESL instruction were vastly different. Although she agreed that the ESL program was a waste of her time she grappled with her own ability to communicate her concerns in a language that she was learning. She expressed that she felt scared as she commented how others share her feelings. “They are scared to go talk with the counselors because you don’t know how to express yourself and you don’t know what to tell them.” My impression was that Valeria gained a substantial amount of confidence during her prior schooling experiences in Mexico, where she was involved in public speaking and debate forums. The other women felt it was the teacher’s job to know what is best for the student. This sentiment also stemmed from their prior schooling experiences in Mexico, where the decisions made by teachers were rarely questioned.

Lower expectations were another negative experience that these women experienced. While in high school, many of the participants expressed that teachers gave them opportunities to turn in their homework late as a way to ease academic pressure. As Valeria surmised and was noted in chapter 5, teachers “think they are helping students, but in reality they are contributing to a student’s negative self-image as a learner.” Valeria remembered an incident during her freshman year in college.

I was taking Non-Western Political Cultures and when had to write a paper and I said to the TA that English was not my native language so she said, “Oh, you could write it in Spanish if you want to” well, I didn’t like that!! I felt that the expectations were lowered for me and I didn’t want that to happen to me. It was the same in high school because I had that happen to me there too. They were like, “Well, you don’t have to learn all of this you can just do this instead,” and I never liked that. I wanted to be at the same expectations as everyone else.

These lower expectations were experienced both at the high school and college level. What is vital is how these negative experiences in high school transcended into academic underpreparedness for these women. Many of the students arrived at college to find their writing and oral communication skills were not at the college level. These women wished that more attention had been given to such skills while they were in high school. Ana Mari expressed, “If I only had a teacher back in high school who taught me how to add expression in my papers.” As such, the students in this study found it difficult to express themselves in class discussions and in class assignments. Sofi was the only one who mentioned that she stayed quiet in the classroom because she thought everyone would laugh at her accent. As referred to in Chapter 5, Sofi’s silence can be misconstrued as unengagement in class

discussion when in actuality Sofi was uncomfortable expressing herself in the classroom setting. I believe the difficulty they experienced with written and verbal expression originated in their prior schooling experiences in the United States where they were not challenged academically nor encouraged to participate in the classroom. The women used silence as a way to avoid any attention being brought to their accents and perceived academic inefficiencies. As these students persisted in college they had to unlearn the damage their prior schooling had imposed on their personal image as learners.

*Dilemmas, Stressors, and Motivation Associated with Undocumented Status*

These findings confirm much of Abrego's (2006) and Rangel's (2001) research. The lack of financial aid and internship opportunities and the anxiety about divulging their immigration status to university officials continued to be stress factors for these women. Although Valeria was able to find sponsorship for her college education, the remaining women relied on local scholarships and family contributions to finance their college expenses. Some of them stated they felt a twinge of guilt having their parents pay for their college education. As Ana Mari conveyed, "You get sad because your parents are going to keep paying school for you instead of saving them some money." Elena and Sofi also discussed how their college expenses were placing financial stress on their families as well.

In addition, locating individuals on campus with whom they could be open about their status was difficult. In many instances, they were afraid to talk to counselors about their status because they were afraid of the reactions. Sofi shared her feelings about trusting others with her immigration status:

Yea, it's scary because if some people realize that I'm an immigrant they will say, "You don't deserve the opportunities that you have here," so something like that.

Some people are like that, they don't like the immigrants and they say a lot of negative things about immigrants.

Though Valeria indicated she was afraid to speak to the counselor about her status mainly because she was unsure about the counselor's stance on immigration, she refused to live in fear of the repercussions associated with her undocumented status:

I don't fear anymore because I have my college degree and the worst that can happen is that I go back to Mexico and do my masters and that's not really a bad situation. I'm not losing anything, and I've gained a lot already by being here.

What the literature has not addressed are the challenges associated with how women deal with these stressors while in college. Ana Mari detailed how she dealt with the stress, "When it gets really stressful sometimes I just cry because I don't know what to do and it's kind of like a release." It was evident the women in this study did not talk about their immigrant status to anyone. Even more telling was the fact that Elena never disclosed her immigration status to me during our individual interviews. It was during the focus group that she finally revealed her immigration status to me. In her case, since she arrived in the United States at a young age, many assumed that she was a U.S. citizen. For Elena, the revelation of her immigration status was kept a secret until trust was formed.

Finally, their immigration status was a motivating factor for them to persist in college. Because of the uncertainty of their futures, these women felt that a college education was a way to gain strength and confidence to fight for their legalization.

#### *Creating Successful Academic Spaces and Social Networks in College*

It was unfortunate that Sofi was academically dismissed from the University of Wyoming; however, at the community college level she seemed to be gaining more

confidence in herself and in her academic abilities because of the smaller class size and the personal attention given to her by faculty and staff. Sofi also mentioned the differences in teaching style explaining, “My teacher would give us examples and applies it to the real work so I understand much better than before.” Her statement exemplifies the use of kinesthetic learning as her preferred learning style. For the other women, resources such as the Writing Center were helpful, but I am left with a sense that more needs to be done in this area in order to improve their study skills. Ana Mari shared a story with me in which she went to apply for the Student Success Services program, which falls under the TRiO umbrella, but because they require a Social Security number and one must qualify for federal aid to be admitted into the program, she was unable to qualify for these services. Last semester was particularly hard for Ana Mari; she reflected on her academics:

I feel bad about my semester since my teachers are not explaining to me or teaching me in a way that I can understand the content. I think my grades are not going to be that good and I might lose my scholarship because of my GPA so it brings me down. Sometimes I get depressed and I just want to get rid of these feelings and I don't want to deal with any problems related to school work and stuff. I'm still here.

Ana Mari did take advantage of the free tutoring services offered by the Office of Multicultural Affairs, but I was astonished to learn that no Biology tutors were available for her. In general, all of the participants utilized the Office of Multicultural Affairs as their main resource.

Creating social networks differed for many of the women in this study. Frankly, many of them entered the university not planning to be involved in student activities for fear that it would take away from their academic studies. In essence, both Sofi and Valeria decided to be

involved with recruitment activities because such activities were directly linked to recruiting students from their hometown. Elena and Ana Mari participated in the Multicultural Student Leadership Initiative, which teaches students about resources and pairs them with faculty mentors. It took much encouragement from key staff members for them to get involved. What is most interesting is that the process of getting involved heightened their anxiety level. Astin (1975) discussed the action of involvement as “second nature” without much regard to the anxiety that is associated with it, even in groups with U.S.-born Mexicans. When probed about why some of them felt scared about campus involvement, according to Valeria’s statement in Chapter 5, it’s because they were seen as different in Elksville, and different wasn’t necessarily positive from their standpoint. On the other hand, in college being different can be seen as positive “because there is an interest for having people who are different who have something else to contribute.”

For Sofi, having a social network of international friends provided a safe space for her because many of her international friends were also familiar with adjusting to a new country and using another language. This is not to assume that Latinos/as are not sensitive to these issues; rather, Sofi related better with individuals who had lived abroad and spoke with accents.

During our conversations, the notion of creating successful academic spaces centered around knowing resources and recognizing their learning styles. Sofi thought that she was able to handle the academic rigor of her course load without assistance revealing, “I thought that I could do it on my own so I tried to do it by myself but that didn’t work in the end”. Academically, Sofi realized her shortcomings as a student and her experiences at the local community college have taught her many new lessons.

Before I didn't really go back and look at my notes. I just looked at the terms in the book and on the test the teachers would put questions related to the lecture that they give so I was lost because I only knew the terms and their meaning. I didn't know how to relate them. Now, I go through everything from the notes from class and use the book if I need it. So, it's going much better.

As stated before, the women in this study felt like campus involvement was not a high priority for them because of the time it took away from their studies. In my opinion, these women were accustomed to the negativity associated with their immigration status such that putting themselves in unfamiliar social networks opened the door for judgment against them. By staying silent and not bringing attention to themselves, they felt safe because their anonymity precluded questions about who they were, where they came from, and how they got here. Once they got past these initial feelings, many of them found their social networks within student organizations helpful to their college persistence. However, key staff and faculty members needed to identify these students as assets.

#### Summary of Study

The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of college persistence issues for undocumented Mexican female immigrants. The participants in this study all hailed from Elksville, Wyoming, and attended the University of Wyoming. This study employed Chicana epistemology and *trezas de mestizaje* (braids of multiple identities) and took place from June 2007 to November 2007. Data were collected through four individual interviews with each participant, one focus group, community informants, and document collection. All of the individual interviews and the focus group were audio taped and

transcribed; I analyzed the transcripts. The research questions guiding this study will now be addressed.

*How Does Culture, Family, Prior Schooling, and Immigration Experiences Influence College Persistence Among Mexicana Immigrant Students?*

The participants in this study indicated that culture and family had a positive influence in their college persistence. They indicated that they gained strength from their cultural identity and their families provided support and encouragement throughout their college experiences. However, these participants could not sever their family obligations and responsibilities while in college, which made their college experiences challenging; but not once did these participants state that these family obligations were considered a barrier. Additionally, prior schooling and immigration experiences were seen as both positive and negative influences in their college persistence. The women agreed that the inefficient management of the ESL programs in their prior school, coupled with the low expectations of their academic abilities, were experiences that did not assist in their transition to college. They were also conscious of their own language acquisition shortcomings, which transcended into their college experience. Even though I sensed these women had a good command of the English language, their prior schooling experience had conditioned them to view themselves as inadequate; which was something that they were unlearning while in college. However, these participants found the resources for Latinas/os in the community, along with key community members, to be instrumental in their access to college and during their college transition. Finally, their immigration experiences gave these women a sense of purpose. They knew their parents brought them to the United States for a better life and more opportunities, and this fueled their personal motivation to persist in college. On the other

hand, their undocumented status was a stress factor for them because they often could not discuss these issues with others unless trust was established. These women were unable to participate in study abroad or internship opportunities, and not qualifying for federal financial aid placed a considerable amount of emotional strain and guilt on them because their parents were forced to finance the majority of their college education.

*What Factors are Associated with the College Persistence of Mexicana Immigrant Students?*

The notion of microaggressions and the process of campus involvement were additional factors associated with college persistence for the women in this study. They indicated that many times their ethnicities or immigration status were questioned, particularly in a situation where a Social Security number was needed. Often the women lied about their status in order for the questioning to cease. This was a stressful situation for these women, but concealing their status was important to them. For many college students the act of campus involvement is something that is approached fearlessly. The women in this study did not become involved in campus activities until a key staff person sought them out and persuaded them to join a group or cause. Even so, the act of campus involvement could be stressful because it was something completely new; these women were also afraid that involvement in campus organizations would take time away from their studies. Although after joining a group they found it helpful, many thought it was difficult to maintain participation as their workload and academic rigor increased.

*Theoretical Discussion*

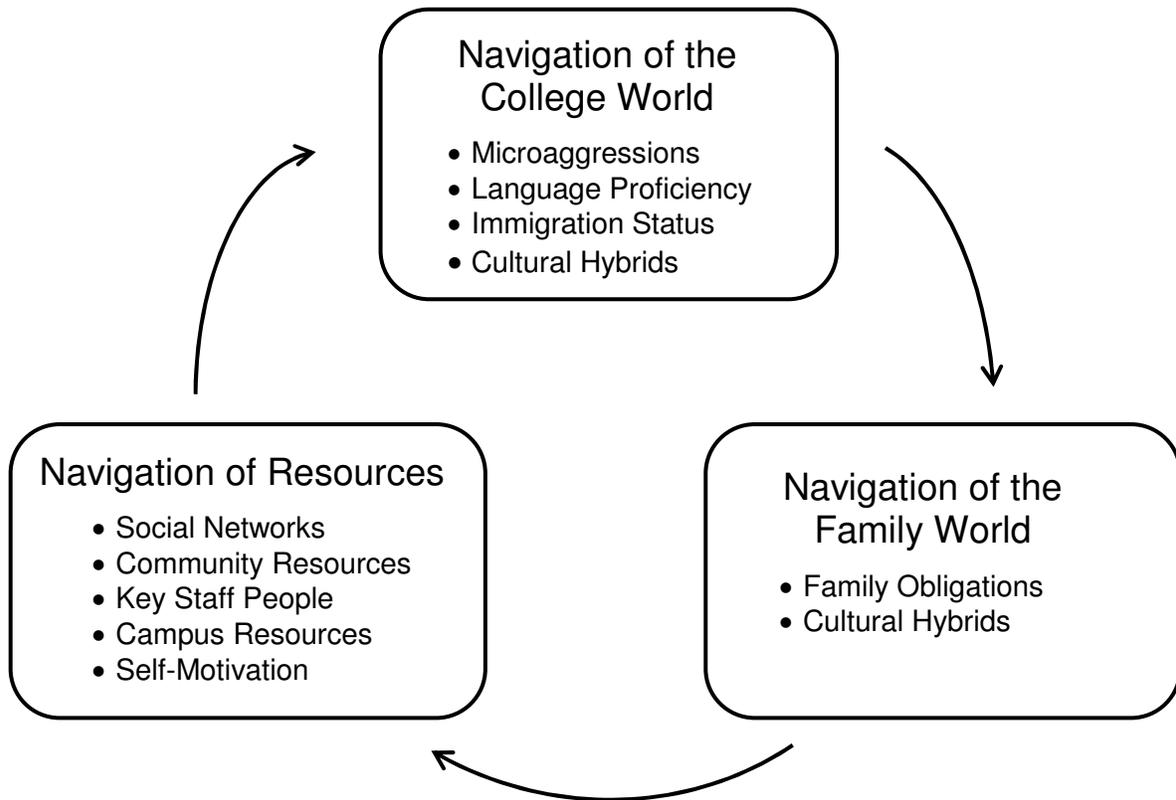
Yosso's (2006) work on Chicano/a student persistence depicted three different phases: culture shock, building community, and critical navigation of multiple worlds. One of the student participants in Yosso's (2006) study offered her analysis of how Chicano/a

students navigate culture shock. Culture shock by her definition includes instances of microaggressions or the constant questioning of whether Chicanos belong on campus, being the only person of color in a class, and the low representations of faculty and staff of color on campus. The women in this study reported culture shock by virtue of being a numerical minority in the classroom and by the constant questioning of who they were. However, the term “culture shock” does not seem appropriate for their experiences. Coming into a new country and learning a new language and system was considered a major culture shock in their minds, whereas transitioning into college was a constant navigation of the unexpected challenges. However, navigating these challenges can lead to feelings of isolation, alienation, and discrimination if community-building does not occur. As previously noted, community-building was, at times, a difficult process for these undocumented Mexican female immigrants. Some were afraid of the reactions or judgment they might receive from others because of their status; for others, academics took priority over social networks, and social interactions were viewed as a bonus rather than a necessity for college persistence. The women in this study illustrated that families, past communities, and safe academic and social spaces were their greatest means of support.

Yosso’s (2006) research also found that surviving and succeeding on college campuses requires students to have a heightened sense of critical navigation between multiple worlds, which is not to say students have to assimilate into White culture but rather strive to keep their own culture while trying to live in a hegemonic university system. Yosso (2006) did not insinuate that college does not change students, but rather that students have a choice as to how they want to live and grow from their experiences at the university. There are multiple avenues for cultural and individual growth at the university, and students have

agency to determine those avenues that best serve their own personal as well as familial goals. Further, I would argue that critical navigation between multiple worlds is a constant process for students of color at predominately White colleges.

Yosso's (2006) stages of Chicano/a student persistence provides the foundation of how culture is central to college experiences. However, after much reflection and analysis of the stories from the women in this study, I would encourage scholars to view student persistence for underrepresented populations as a constant navigation rather than as a progression of stages. The concept of navigation was borrowed from Yosso's (2005) work on cultural capital, which depicted navigational skills as students' ability to maneuver hegemonic institutions while identifying key resources and people who help to overcome stressful events on campus. Her study concluded that these women navigated their college and family worlds while accessing the resources for support and guidance. The college world included issues of their language proficiency, microaggressions, immigration status, and cultural hybrids. Cultural hybrid was discussed in Chapter 5 as the combination of a new culture. Cultural hybrids was noted in the family world because these women expressed that their "new culture" was also navigated at home in addition to their family obligations. The resources that were used to gain support were social networks, community resources, family members, key staff people, campus resources, and their own self-motivation. Figure 6.1 incorporates Yosso's (2006) concepts of Chicano/a stages of persistence with my findings from this study.



*Figure 6.1.* A conceptual model for college persistence factors for undocumented Mexican immigrant women

### Limitations and Strengths

As stated in chapter 1, the conclusions and recommendations would help inform rural communities with immigrant populations. Unfortunately, these findings cannot be generalized and do not speak to the experiences of all foreign-born undocumented Mexican immigrants. In addition, the stories and voices of these four women do not account for the experiences of Mexican male immigrants from the same town.

Another limitation includes the participant selection. At the beginning of this study I had selected four participants who were all attending the University of Wyoming. When I started the interviewing process I learned that one of my initial participants did not want to

participate in my study any longer for personal reasons, and Sofi informed me that she was attending the local community college because of her academic suspension. I then was able to locate an individual, Valeria, who recently graduated from the University of Wyoming. Although the participants did not meet my initial criteria, their experiences were equally vital to my research.

The strengths of the study include the rich stories from the participants. For the most part, I felt my insider status was beneficial. The participants were comfortable and candid with me about their experiences. In addition, I was familiar with the University of Wyoming campus setting so I was able to probe about specific places and organizations on campus.

#### Implications for Practice

The findings in this study can better inform K-12 educators, higher education administrators, community advocacy groups, and policy makers on the college experiences of undocumented Mexican female immigrants. K-12 administrators should take note of the negative ESL experiences and how those carryover into college. In the higher education environment, the stressors associated with immigration status, along with family obligations, illustrate how these college students are constantly navigating multiple worlds. More importantly, the voices in this study help to better inform admissions and financial aid policies. From a community advocacy standpoint, the College Prep Program and the Latino Resource Center are often the first stop for seeking support and finding resources for college access. These findings shed light on how important these community entities are to accessing college resources and, more importantly, in seeking funding from local community donors. Over the years, the DREAM Act has been stalled in legislative sessions by individuals who claim that this action would grant amnesty to undocumented students. These findings

highlight the internal resiliency, determination, and motivation of students who are uncertain about their future prospects yet seek out higher education opportunities to better themselves, their families, and their communities. Lastly, this research study speaks to many audiences. The dissemination of these findings resonates with not only with policy makers but with other undocumented students who wish to pursue higher education. I plan to make my research findings accessible to individuals with limited English proficiency by creating a document in Spanish. It is important to disseminate this information to the Elksville community as well as other new Diaspora sites in hopes of guiding and empowering teachers, students, and parents.

The following are suggested actions that school, community, and government entities can take to advance the educational aspirations of immigrants.

#### Recommendations for K-12 Administrators

Transitioning into college from high school should be more seamless. Hence, it is no longer ideal to introduce the notion of college to underrepresented populations while in high school. Rather, the possibilities of college attendance should be discussed and discovered by parents and students during the K-5 stage. By developing an authentic and visionary school, community, and university partnership, students, parents, community members, and university administrators can be working together on college access efforts. Valeria also suggested the following:

Maybe what would be helpful is more information about scholarships and more outreach for students in Elksville. When I was in high school and I wanted to go to college, there wasn't anyone that was talking to the Hispanic community in Elksville.

No one was really talking about bringing the programs to Elksville targeting the Hispanic community and I think the school wasn't really doing anything at the time. It is vital that more information about college be disseminated to parents and students. Equally important is to have information, resources, and formal college presentations in Spanish so parents feel comfortable with engaging in discussion. The school should also consider creative ways in which parent, student, and teacher interactions can occur. These findings show that merely translating information into Spanish, though helpful, is not enough to actively engage parents in school activities. Facilitating relationships with parents should be a priority. For the Elksville school system in particular, coordinating teachers' site visits to Tlaxcala, Mexico (where the majority of the town's population originates from) would aid teachers in better understanding their students' culture and upbringing. More importantly, giving teachers an inside glimpse of the Mexican school system may potentially enhance their rapport with incoming students and gain insightful information in order to build on the assets students bring into the U.S. school system.

In addition, a deeper look into the ESL curriculum and system is warranted. The students overwhelming stated that the ESL system in their school failed them. The question that remains is why the ESL program failed and how can the program better prepared ESL students for college. The only viable alternative for improving the ESL program is to provide the necessary training to teachers that teach these courses as well as making ESL a priority within the school district.

#### Recommendations for Wyoming Latino/a Community Members

The Latina/o community has done a phenomenal job with gaining resources for the newcomer community in Elksville. One recommendation would be to strengthen the existing

programs in the community as well as to continue programming initiatives for parents and students regarding college access. One suggestion would be to build partnerships with the surrounding community colleges and the University of Wyoming as well as to network with the Coalition for Wyoming Latinos.

#### Recommendations for the University of Wyoming

Colleges and universities should make recruitment and retention a clear partnership rather than viewing them as two separate operations. The students in this study mentioned a highly compassionate admissions counselor who helped them find resources and support for their college dreams. This individual was also instrumental in their retention as she encouraged the women to assist with college visits to their hometown. Unfortunately, this individual is no longer at the university, but she continues to be regarded as an individual who assisted in the college transition for these, as well as many other students. I recommend that the University of Wyoming facilitate relationships with school and community members. The “drive-in” presentation method of recruitment is no longer effective for students of color. College recruitment for newcomer immigrants requires relationship-building with the schools, families, and community. In addition, students need to be aware of retention resources before they enter the university. Elena and Ana Mari were involved in a first-year leadership experience by happenstance. Newcomer immigrants should have the names and contact information of a resource person and all the programming initiatives for incoming freshman.

Given that immigration status can be a major barrier for these students, and Social Security numbers are used as identifying information, the use of the Social Security numbers should not be required for the application nor for any scholarship applications. Another

potential barrier is the on-line application. When I tried to apply on-line as a potential student, the system would not let me proceed without indicating my Social Security number. In fact, I applied to several other institutions with the same result. In addition, the college application question regarding U.S. citizenship needs to be revisited. I realize that this is an important question and it should not be omitted. However, when we ask undocumented students to leave this question blank we are potentially compromising the students' ethics given that their signature certifies that the information given is accurate.

Financial aid is a tremendous need for these students. However, when undocumented students see a Social Security number is required they automatically take themselves out of contention for the award. The Wyoming Hathaway scholarship is offered to all Wyoming high school graduates, and university officials should influence the state legislature to open this scholarship award to undocumented students. Ana Mari also recommended that some of the university discretionary funding sources could assist them.

I know the money comes to the university. . . . I know some of it comes from the government, but if it comes from other sources I don't think they should be asking for Social Security numbers. If you have good grades they just give you \$500. Once you are in college, \$500 is really helpful—even just \$100. I think that would be only thing that I would suggest.

Student services should consider the needs of undocumented students. It is unfortunate that these students are unable to participate in TRiO programs such as Student Support Services, because they would qualify under the low-income and first-generation requirements. Having worked in a Student Support Services program, I know the more intrusive approach of advising, as well as the skill building lessons in time management, note

taking, and test taking skills, can be effective in student retention. The university could provide similar retention services that could potentially be housed in the Office of Multicultural Affairs.

Hiring individuals with Spanish proficiency and an understanding of Latino/a culture at the University of Wyoming would be beneficial in offices such as the Writing Center, the Counseling Center, and the Career Services Center. This would assist Mexican immigrant students in feeling more comfortable with expressing themselves to others concerning their writing abilities, the stress factors associated with their status, and how to navigate their status with potential employers.

#### Recommendations for Policy

The DREAM Act is one of the most important pieces of legislation regarding immigration: It could provide undocumented immigrants the ability to achieve their college dreams while gaining a pathway to citizenship. This bill would provide a rapidly growing population the chance to increase their social and economic mobility. In addition, the Wyoming state legislature should consider adding its name to the list of states that offer in-state tuition for undocumented students. The question that needs to be asked is how we can separate issues of immigration politics from access to post-secondary education. The *Plyler v. Doe* court case reminds us that undocumented immigrants cannot be denied free education. In higher education, admission policies cannot bar undocumented immigrants from applying for admission. However, it is difficult for students from a limited income background to finance college without federal aid. This dissertation began with the quote, “Education has a profound impact on both the individual and society at large, and it is one of the surest ways to increase one’s social economic levels and overcome the barriers of poverty and derived

social conditions” (Swail, Redd, & Perna, 2003, p .4); the DREAM Act can assist. The only barrier to the DREAM Act is the negative sentiments associated with immigration.

#### Recommendations for Future Study

By examining college persistence of undocumented Mexican female immigrants, this study contributes to the gap of the scholarly literature within college persistence studies. This study also has the potential of opening many other research opportunities within this area. For instance, this study did not address the experiences of undocumented Mexican men. Looking at the gender differentiation between these two groups should be a necessary next step. Also, during my research process, I discovered that many undocumented Mexican immigrants from Elksville chose to attend community college rather than attend the University of Wyoming. The factors associated with this decision and the successes and challenges associated with community college attendance for this population all merit further investigation.

Research should also be conducted at other newcomer sites. For example, similar studies can be done in other states such as Idaho, Washington, and Nevada. In addition, looking at the college experiences of undocumented Asian students should also be considered. Finally, future research studies should examine college experiences of undocumented immigrants enrolled in graduate or professional schools.

#### Personal Reflections

During my research journey, I learned as much about myself as I did about my dissertation topic. Initially, I thought that investigating Mexican female immigrants would be a “walk in the park,” and because of my own immigration experience, the connection between these women and me would be instant. I was utterly wrong. Although I worked hard

to gain rapport with my participants, I quickly learned that rapport does not equal trust and trust is not readily handed out; it must be earned. Elena made me realize that just because I was Latina and from Mexico did not mean that she was willing to share her immigration status with me. As a researcher, she taught me that my insider status will not always benefit me and cultivating authentic relationships takes time and patience.

Throughout this process, I became more cognizant of my privileges, particularly my U.S. citizenship. As a Mexican immigrant, I did encounter issues with my own language acquisition, microaggressions, and juggling my own two cultures; but I never once thought about my citizenship and all the benefits it afforded me. The mere fact that the majority of my college education was financed through student loans is one example of how my privilege has benefited me and lifestyle. While conducting my research, I did stumble upon my own privileges on many occasions. For example, I never thought about issues of transportation for my participants. I never knew that they did not have driver's licenses. And when they accompanied me on a trip from the university to their hometown, given my innate nature to drive 10 miles over the speed limit, I never once thought about how scary a traffic violation and the presence of police officers could be for them.

I also struggled with interjecting my own voice into the stories of these women given that I wanted to keep the authenticity of my participant voices. During the analysis, I often questioned my own conclusions and speculations seeing as the participants may not have "named" their experiences as such but I interpreted their experiences from my own perceptions. I also kept in mind the age of these students and that they had yet to really intellectualize their own oppression. I recalled that I did not intellectualize my own oppression until I was working on my Master's degree in a course about student development

theory. That was the first time that I critically reflected on my own schooling and socialization.

For the women in this study, their motivation to persist in college stemmed from their internal strength, which they have honed through their life experiences. Witnessing the sacrifices made by their parents, these students were determined to succeed in every possible way. Obtaining a college degree was one way to honor the sacrifices made by parents, but more importantly, they viewed a college education as a pathway to gaining legal status or perhaps developing the confidence and communication skills needed to defend their own human rights. In any case, college persistence was not a choice but an obligation to their families and their community and to prove that immigrants coming to the United States want to become contributing citizens.

I also sensed that maybe this research experience was therapeutic for my participants. I could tell that each of them was ready to tell their story and perhaps the interviews provided a “release” for them as they detailed their challenges, accomplishments, and hopes. Part of me did not want the data collection to end because it was also my way of providing them with information or resources that would assist them in their college journey. As researchers, we do not anticipate in our research plans how our participants touch our own lives and enter our hearts. I will always wonder about these four women and plan to continue researching the college-going experiences of these four women.

As I end my parting thoughts on my research, I am angered to learn that the North Carolina community college system is under attack by the state’s attorney general for admitting undocumented immigrants. Racism and xenophobia continues to breed deep into American society. As we teeter on a potential economic recession in the United States, I am

reminded of the Mexican Repatriation Act of the 1930s, which unequivocally blamed the Great Depression on legal, U.S.-born Mexican Americans and deported them back to Mexico—a country that was unfamiliar to most of them. In my humble opinion, given that the undocumented workers in our country have helped sustain our economic viability, why not honor them and their families by passing the DREAM Act and making college accessible and possible for their children? It is not only humane to do so but our future depends on educating our fastest growing population.

APPENDIX A  
E-MAIL TO PARTICIPANTS

**From:** Susana Maria Munoz  
**Sent:** Friday, March 02, 2007 3:14 PM  
**To:**  
**Subject:** Mexicana study

I hope this email finds you well. My name is Susana M. Munoz and I am a doctoral student in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at Iowa State University, but I have been living and working in Laramie, Wyoming for the past three years. For my dissertation study, I am interested in understanding the experiences (successes & struggles) of foreign-born Mexicana college students specifically from Jackson, Wyoming.

I myself am originally from Yucatan, Mexico and so my passion for this topic stems from my personal experiences. My study will take place during the Fall 2007 semester. I would like to meet with you in person to discuss in detail what my research would entail. If you are interested please send me an email with some available times to meet next week. I look forward to hearing from you.

Susana Muñoz

## APPENDIX B INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

### Interview Questions

I'm going to ask you a few questions regarding your family and culture to gauge how they have influenced your college experiences.

#### **Family**

1. How would you describe your family?
2. What are your family beliefs about education?
3. In your upbringing what specific things did your family do to help you in your schooling?
4. Which family members have been most influential or supportive in your college journey?
5. If you can, in detail, tell me about your family's reaction when you announced that you wanted to go to college?
6. How do you describe your college experiences to your family?
7. What do your family members know about your college experiences so far? What is something that your parents don't know about in college?
8. Have any of your family members visited the University of Wyoming? What were their first impressions? If they haven't visited, what are the barriers that prevent them from visiting?
9. What role do you play in your family?
10. What roles do the women in your family play? Men? Children? Elders?
11. Discuss the challenges of living away from your family (for you and your family members).

#### **Culture**

1. How do you identify yourself? (Hispanic, Mexican, Latina...etc) Why this and not others?
2. What does it mean for you to be a Mexicana?
3. What are some positive perceptions of your culture that you see?
4. What are some negative perceptions of your culture that you see?
5. Tell me a story about a time that you felt "Mexican" on campus?
6. Do you gain strength from your culture? If so, how?
7. Do you perceive your culture as a barrier or a benefit at UW?
8. How does culture play a role in your college experiences?
9. Gloria Anzaldua describes Chicanas as straddling two worlds...from your experiences do you agree with this notion?
10. When and where are you most comfortable talking about your culture on campus?  
When and where are you least comfortable talking about your culture on campus?

#### **Schooling**

1. How long did you attend school in Mexico? What differences did you see in US schools and Mexican schools

2. Describe your first day of school in the U.S.
3. Do you feel you were put into the appropriate grade level?
4. What method did the schools use to teach you English?
5. What helped you adjust to your new school?
6. What did you enjoy most about your school?
7. What did you least enjoy about your school?
8. How would you rate your parents involvement with your school activities?
9. What motivated you to do well in school?
10. How were you treated at school by teachers and other students?
11. Tell me a story when you first learned you could go to college?
12. Did your prior schooling prepare you for college? If so, how? If not, who/what helped?
13. Tell me a story of an individual who was most influential in getting you prepared for college?
14. If you could do your schooling over again what would you change or do differently?

### **Immigration**

1. Describe your native town in Mexico.
2. What did you like most about your town? Least?
3. Why did you and your family move to the US?
4. Describe an event that made you realize that you were no longer in Mexico anymore?
5. In your opinion, how are Mexicans immigrants different than US born Mexicans? How are they alike?
6. What are the challenges that you have experienced in college as a Mexican immigrant? As a female in college?
7. Did your family experience any stress when they first arrived to the U.S. If so, how did they deal with their challenges? Do they still experience these stressors? If so, how do you deal with family stress while in college?
8. What lessons from your immigration experiences do you apply in college or as a college student?
9. Discuss the Dream Act legislation. What are your thoughts about this policy?
10. If you could meet with the president of UW, what do you want him to know about Mexican immigrant students? What suggestions would you give him about how to better support your needs at UW?

### **College Experiences**

1. How would you describe your college experience? (Probe both academic and social experiences)
2. What were your greatest fears about coming to college? How did you overcome those fears?
3. Was there ever a time when you wanted or thought about dropping out from college? If yes, could you expand?

4. What have been your greatest challenges in college? What was your most negative experience in the classroom and outside the classroom?
5. What have been the greatest triumphs or accomplishments of your college experience? What are you most proud of?
6. To summarize, can you list those things that stand out as the most influential to your staying in school?
7. Is there anything that you would like to add? Is there anything that you feel I should have asked you?

APPENDIX C  
INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

**Title of Study:** **Understanding Issues of Persistence for Mexican Immigrant College Women**

**Investigators:** Susana M. Munoz (BA, MS) will be responsible for contacting and obtaining all information from participants, including informed consent forms.

This is a research study. Please take your time in deciding if you would like to participate. Please feel free to ask questions at any time.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The purpose of this study is to understand the college-going experiences and issues of persistence for Mexican born college women from Jackson, Wyoming. As a college student from this area you are being invited to participate in this study because your opinions, stories, and experiences will be a valuable resource to the University of Wyoming and to other states with similar backgrounds.

### **DESCRIPTION OF PROCEDURES**

If you agree to participate in this study, your participation will last from September 2007 until January 2008 and will consist of participation in three interviews, a focus group, and observation during your classes. During the study you may expect the following study procedures to be followed:

- The first round of interviews will center on issues of family and culture. The second round of interviews will center on issues of prior schooling and your immigration experiences.
- Additionally, I will conduct observations of you for one full day. Essentially, if it all possible and appropriate, I will accompany you to your classes and other activities related to your college experiences.
- During the third round of interviews, we will discuss themes derived from the observations and I will ask questions regarding the college environment.
- Lastly, I will bring all my participants together for a focus group interview. This interview will center on all the emergent themes from all prior interviews.
- The anticipated length for all interviews will be approximately 90 minutes.

During all interviews, I will be asking a series of open-ended questions which will be tape recorded. Please know that these tape recordings will be erased and destroyed one year after the research project is finished.

## **RISKS**

While participating in this study there are minimal risks to you. It is possible that you may feel uncomfortable discussing your immigration experiences. You have the option of not answering or skipping any questions during the interview process.

## **BENEFITS**

If you decide to participate in this study there may be no direct benefit to you. A benefit is defined as a “desired outcome or advantage. It is hoped that the information gained in this study will benefit society by providing valuable information about the experiences of Mexican immigrants in college.

## **COSTS AND COMPENSATION**

You will not have any costs from participating in this study. You will not be compensated for participating in this study

## **PARTICIPANT RIGHTS**

**Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or leave the study at any time. If you decide to not participate in the study or leave the study early, it will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled**

## **CONFIDENTIALITY**

The consent forms used in this study will be kept separate from other data. The names associated with the participants or any other identifying information will not be included in this study. Records identifying participants will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by applicable laws and regulations and will not be made publicly available. However, federal government regulatory agencies, auditing departments of Iowa State University, and the Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves human subject research studies) may inspect and/or copy my records for quality assurance and data analysis. These records may contain private information.

To ensure confidentiality to the extent permitted by law, the following measures will be taken if the results are published, your identity will remain confidential. Interviews will be tape recorded to foster accuracy in data analysis. Your name will not be used and the town where you are from will be changed to a pseudonym. All transcripts will be checked by the participant to ensure accurate presentation. Susana Munoz will be the only person to have

access to study records, which will be kept password protected on my personal computer. In addition, audiotape and observation notes and non-written materials will be stored by Susana Munoz in a locked cabinet for 3 years and will then be destroyed.

**QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS**

You are encouraged to ask questions at any time during this study.

- For further information about the study contact myself, Susana Munoz at 307-399-1174 or my major professor, Dr. Larry Ebbers at 515-294-8067.
- If you have any questions about the rights of research subjects or research-related injury, please contact the IRB Administrator, (515) 294-4566, [IRB@iastate.edu](mailto:IRB@iastate.edu), or Director, (515) 294-3115, Office of Research Assurances, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa 50011.

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**PARTICIPANT SIGNATURE**

Your signature indicates that you voluntarily agree to participate in this study, that the study has been explained to you, that you have been given the time to read the document and that your questions have been satisfactorily answered. You will receive a copy of the written informed consent prior to your participation in the study.

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

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Participant’s Signature)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

**INVESTIGATOR STATEMENT**

I certify that the participant has been given adequate time to read and learn about the study and all of their questions have been answered. It is my opinion that the participant understands the purpose, risks, benefits and the procedures that will be followed in this study and has voluntarily agreed to participate.

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature of Person Obtaining  
Informed Consent)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

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