Beyond College Enrollment: The Experiences and Strategies of Academically Successful First Generation Latinas

Jeanette Arellano Cano
Dr. Julie Lopez Figueroa, faculty mentor

ABSTRACT

The Latino population in the United States has grown dramatically, except on college campuses. Only eleven percent of Latinos over the age of 25 hold a college or graduate degree; the majority of these degree holders are females (NCES 2010). While the Latino population is the largest growing population in the United States, Latino enrollment in college is among the lowest of most racial/ethnic groups in the United States. This statistic is cause for concern. The disproportionate number of Latinos in higher education, and the fact that Latinas are a majority within that minority, informs the researcher’s two-fold purpose: 1) to examine the defining educational experiences of Latinas in higher education, and 2) to examine the strategies these women use in order to succeed academically while maintaining their ethnic identity. In order to answer the research question, the researcher first examined the history of Latinos in education in an attempt to find the root cause of the Latino crisis in higher education.

In 1848, the United States and Mexico signed the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. The treaty ended the Mexican-American War and legally stipulated that the Mexicans living within the newly annexed territories of the Southwest were to be incorporated into the United States and considered “White” by law (Menchaca 1999). Within a year, the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was violated, which ignited a process of racialization. Mexicans began to live within a social structure that popularized the belief that Mexicans were inferior to Whites. Mexicans were labeled as “Others” and treated as less than human (Menchaca 1999). Through the process of racial formation (Omi and Winant 1994), the U.S. government set into motion an institutionalized legacy of discrimination against Mexicans and all people who were labeled as ‘Other’ (Menchaca 1999). To this day, discrimination permeates popular consciousness and U.S. practices towards Latinos, specifically Mexicans which can be seen through subtractive schooling practices and other forms of dealing with the “Mexican Problem.”
Although “subtractive schooling,” (a term coined by Angela Valenzuela in 1999), is a modern concept, its practice first began for Mexican children after 1848 with the expansion of Catholic schools in the Southwest. The main goal of these schools was to remove “ignorance” through education (San Miguel 1999). The slow resolve to the “Mexican Problem” (Gonzalez 1999) created national concern given a new formation of the United States that demanded a unified sense of what it meant to be a citizen within its new borders. In this regard, Americanizing students (San Miguel 1999) overshadowed Catholic conversion. During the 1880s and 1890s, Mexican children in rural and urban areas attended segregated schools; this educational policy imposed learning conditions that suppressed learning. The public discourse that Mexicans were inferior to Whites (San Miguel 1999) was now being expressed through public action. English-only policies and other subtractive schooling practices were defining aspects of schooling development during this time period, especially with support from social scientists who embraced the doctrine of racial distribution of intelligence (Gonzalez 1999; San Miguel 1999).

According to Gonzalez (1999), the inferiority of Mexicans and Mexican children was further developed by social scientists such as William James, Lewis Terman, Henry Goddard, and E.L. Thorndike, who embraced the doctrine of racial distribution of intelligence, and believed that intelligence, was inherited. Therefore, the IQ test scientifically legitimized unequal outcomes and social inequalities, such as the belief that Mexican children had defective or inferior brains (Gonzalez 1999). As long as cultural deficit thinking continues to serve as a useful reference to explain Latino achievement, historical perceptions and the practices that originated from those perceptions will continue having long term impacts on Latinos today. Certainly, there were important educational strides, but considering the disproportionate representation of students to the number of college age individuals of Latino descent leads to the realization, that the educational system needs to be repaired.

Latino enrollment in higher education increased between 1980 and 2000, but completion and enrollment rate remains proportionally lower in comparison to White and African American students (Nevarez 2001; Chiang et al. 2004; Figueroa 2006). In fact, Latinos only receive 12 percent of college degrees, a number much lower than the 67 percent attained by Whites (NCES 2010). The lack of Latinos in higher education causes concern not only because the Latino population is the largest growing minority group in the United States, but because Latinos continue to have the largest dropout rate from high school and they remain underrepresented in institutions of higher education (Garcia 2001; Figueroa 2006).
Although Latinos in general continue to be underrepresented in institutions of higher education, Latinas are making some educational gains by entering college and completing their degrees at a higher rate than Latino males (Figueroa 2006), which makes Latinas a majority within a minority. The success of first generation Latinas is significant because most do not have parental guidance or assistance in admission and retention strategies (Achor and Morales 1990; Gandara 1995). This research seeks to contribute to the body of knowledge by building upon prior research through an exploration of the experiences and strategies of first generation Latina college students who academically succeed while maintaining their ethnic identity. This researcher will attempt to answer the following question: What experiences and specific strategies do first generation Latinas at California State University Sacramento use in order to academically succeed while maintaining their ethnic identity?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic success is not mediated solely by skill mastery but is rather, a social experience (Rendon 2006). Stanton-Salazar and Delpit (1995) affirm that academic success is equally informed by the degree to which all students are able to decode expected behaviors. The literature on campus climate reinforces the idea that academic success is a contextualized activity that is mediated by a student’s race, class, and gender (Hurtado et al. 1997; Sue 2004; Sue 2005; Garcia and Figueroa 2006).

College Climate: Educational Politics that Mediate Achievement

The history of institutional racism in higher education has deep roots and connections to societal beliefs that have been left unexamined and unquestioned (Sue 2004; Sue 2005). Institutional racism is invisible and silent in nature, which indicates that its ideologies are normative and function as a default standard (Sue 2005). More specifically, institutional racism is a social system that omits people of color while giving advantage to privileged members of society (Sue 2005; Garcia and Figueroa 2006). The current use of biased admission criteria in higher education is an example of institutional racism, which affects college access for Latinos (Sedlacek and Brooks 1976; Vasquez 1982; Sue 2004; Sue 2005).

College access and educational expectations have caused a decline of Latino students in institutions of higher education. In fact, the pattern of college access and choice among Latinos remain unchanged since the 1970s (Hurtado et al. 1997). Also, Latino students (who have the lowest expectations regarding degree attainment) are less likely to enroll in college immediately after high school, and tend to apply to fewer colleges when
compared to other students (Hurtado et al. 1997). Although Latino students do face challenges entering institutions of higher education, students of color in general are entering institutions of higher education at record numbers when compared to previous years (Dey and Hurtado 1995). The changing demographics of higher education are not only in the type of students attending college, but also in institutional missions and policies (Dey and Hurtado 1995). The representation of ethnic minority groups and other non-traditional students has increased among first time entrants to four-year colleges and universities, but Latinos have experienced a decline in the rate of college participation (Dey and Hurtado 1995). Due to the increase in students of color in general, and decline of enrollment among Latinos, many administrators in institutions of higher education have worked together to promote racial and ethnic diversity on college campuses.

Issues regarding campus racial climate can be used to enhance educational policy, practice, and progress in educating diverse students (Hurtado et al. 1998). Segregation had historically been the culture of higher education, and many college campuses sustain long-standing, often unrecognized, benefits for particular student groups (Hurtado et al. 1998; Sue 2005; Garcia and Figueroa 2006). Therefore, the success of creating supportive campus environments often depends on an institution’s initial response to the entrance of students of color (Hurtado et al. 1998). Increasing the structural diversity of an institution is an important initial step towards improving climate, because college campuses with high proportions of White students provide limited opportunities for interaction across race/ethnicity barriers, which, in turn, limits student learning experiences with socially and culturally diverse groups (Hurtado et al. 1998; Gurin et al. 2002). Therefore, one important and crucial step toward improving campus climate and increasing diversity is to increase the representation of people of color (Hurtado et al. 1998).

The educational and social benefits of racial diversity in higher education positively affect all students that attend a diverse college or university. However, simply attending a diverse college or university does not guarantee a meaningful inter-group interaction (Gurin et al. 2002). Frequency and quality of informal interaction with diverse peers and classroom diversity is of true importance (Terenzini et al. 2001; Gurin et al. 2002). The effects of diversity include increased academic skills, citizenship engagement, racial and cultural understanding, and judgment of compatibility among different groups in democracy (Terenzini et al. 2001; Gurin et al. 2002). Racial and ethnic diversity is crucial to student development in higher education.
Therefore, the lack of diversity in institutions of higher education and in the classroom can affect the interaction Latinas have with their professors.

**Teacher and Student Interaction**

The number of Latino faculty in higher education increased dramatically between 1979 and 1989, but the number remains small compared to White and non-Latino faculty (Verdugo 1995). Also, underrepresented faculty members have not kept pace with the increase of underrepresented students entering institutions of higher education. This lack of balance creates a challenge for Latino faculty members who mentor and help Latino students in their academic engagement (Montero-Siebirth 1996; Rinn 1997; Hurtado et al. 1999). Therefore, increasing the number of Latino faculty members is necessary for the academic achievement of Latina students.

For Latino students, Latino faculty members are especially significant because of the similar class and cultural background (Loo and Rolison 1986). For this reason, researchers established that having Latino faculty in powerful positions would positively influence Latino students and assist in alleviating the challenge of retaining Latino students (Norman and Norman 1995; Verdugo 1995). Unfortunately, Latino faculty members often lack the institutional power and status that would enable them to fill such positions (Sedlacek and Brooks 1976; Verdugo 1995). Also, the under-representation of Latina faculty members minimizes accessibility of mentors for Latina students (Castellanos 1996). However, it is also necessary for instructors to stop gendered schooling practices because of the negative effects they have on the academic achievement of Latina students.

**Gendered Schooling in Education**

Gendered schooling refers to practices used by educators that create an imbalance of attention, support and expectations between male and female students. In the K-12 system, female students can suffer from the “disappearing syndrome” in which the voices of female students are less likely to be heard in science, history and math classes; because their voices are not heard, female students participate less and receive a second class education (Canada and Pringle 1995; Sadker et al. 2000). There is a relationship between academic achievement and self-esteem. The imbalance of attention in the classroom, therefore, causes female students to end up with lower self-esteem and consequently with lower academic achievement (Sadker et al. 2000). Unfortunately, gendered schooling practices affect Latinas in the K-12 system and also at the undergraduate and graduate level.

The differential treatment of women in college continues to exist partially because many teachers are not conscious about gender inequities in the classroom (Tettegah 1996; McGlynn 1997). Gendered schooling at the
undergraduate and graduate level can be seen by the fact that one-half of students in any given classroom are silent and two thirds of those students are female, which indicates that gendered schooling causes an impact in learning and self esteem, since participation enhances both variables (Hurtado 1994; Sadker et al. 2000). Also, students who experience the classroom environment as less than hospitable tend to participate less in classroom discussion. Therefore, gendered schooling along with poor college climate can lead to poor student engagement and response (McGlynn 1997).

**Student Engagement and Response**

Latino students also deal with multiple levels of discrimination and racism that affects their academic engagement (Cuadraz 1992). These experiences have negative effects on their academic engagement and response. For example, Latino students deal with differential treatment and stereotyping by fellow students, faculty members, campus police, teaching assistants, administrators, and staff (Cuadraz 1992; Castellanos 1996; Suarez-Balcazar et al. 2003). Also, discrimination on college campuses has increased over the years and, as a consequence, it not only affects the adjustment and persistence of Latino students but it also creates feelings of alienation, intimidation, segregation, and isolation (Hurtado 1994; Gonzalez 2002; Suarez-Balcazar et al. 2003). The experiences of Latino students are important because their educational beliefs are influenced by their educational experiences. Also, those beliefs in turn affect the students’ attitudes towards the college and their intentions to leave or stay (Eimers and Pike 1997). In fact, Latino students are more likely to drop out than their non-minority counterparts (Eimers and Pike 1997; Saunders and Serna 2004). It is important to understand that the experiences of Latino college students strongly stem from academic theories and perspectives on student achievement.

**Perspectives and Theories on Achievement**

According to Ogbu (1992), the degree of trust in a relationship with White Americans and with educational institutions is important and necessary in trying to understand the behaviors, decisions, and attitudes that minority students have towards schooling and achievement. Ogbu (1992) explains that “involuntary minorities” (i.e., people who unwillingly migrated to the U.S. and were oppressed and discriminated against) such as Latinos endorse academic success as a means of getting ahead, but they are still skeptical about their likelihood of advancing in society. Although Ogbu makes important points regarding minorities and education, his research does not look at the institutional and structural history of discrimination that affects the way Latino students view schools and themselves.
Meritocracy in higher education is based on the belief that ability, effort, and success are all interrelated (Sue 2004). Therefore, administrators internalize the idea that if students drop out it is because the students did not try hard enough. Merit creates the illusion that everyone encounters the same problems in life and everyone comes from the same caliber of schools (Sue 2004). Therefore, the playing field is level and merit is all that is needed to succeed in institutions of higher education. The problem with merit is that it denies the reality of the lives students of color have lived, and the unsupportive and poor schools that they have attended (Sue 2004). Merit-based systems blame the individual student for dropping out instead of looking at the real problem of student retention.

The Cultural Deficit model explains that cultural values, as transmitted to the family, are dysfunctional, and are therefore the reason for low educational and occupational attainment among minorities (Solorzano 1997). This model also examines the “deficiencies” in the social structure of minority families such as large, disorganized, female-headed families, Spanish speaking, and patriarchal or matriarchal family structures (Solorzano 1997). The cultural deficit model blames the individual and the culture of Latino students. However, research shows a positive correlation between the Latino culture and the academic success of Latino students (Vasquez 1982; Trueba 1988).

The role of culture is an important factor in school achievement for Latino students, not only at the collective (ethnic group) level, but also at the individual level, in part because intellectual development is socially and culturally based (Trueba 1988). Parental involvement and support, optimistic outlook, drive to succeed, ethnicity as a source of strength/pride, and role models/mentors are also important factors that contribute to the success of Latino students in higher education (Casas and Ponterotto 1984; Arellano and Padilla 1996; Wortham 2002; Chiang et al. 2004). The emotional support of friends and family has a positive effect on the persistence of Latinas in higher education (Casas and Ponterotto 1984; Cabrera et al. 1993; Castellanos 1996; Nora et al. 1996; Garcia 2001; Gonzalez 2002). For many Latinas, family and (more specifically) emotional parental support influences them to pursue a doctorate degree (Gandara 1982; Achor and Morales 1990). Since Latinas in doctorate programs have to deal with overcoming the assumptions of others about themselves, Latinas find fellow Latinas to help support them emotionally (Cuadraz 1992). The importance of culture and the positive correlation between culture and academic achievement have enabled researchers to derive the theory of Resistance with Accommodation among Latinas.
Resistance with Accommodation is common in school settings where Latino students continue to struggle to identify and deal with others’ identification of them in a culturally alien setting, such as schools (Wortham 2002). In Wortham’s case study, the Latino adolescents faced and struggled with the choice to adapt to mainstream Anglo values embodied in school practices (assimilation) and maintaining their identities as Mexicans (2002). By conforming to mainstream Anglo expectations, Latino students were seen as “White” but Wortham explains that many Latino students conformed to mainstream expectations enough to do well in school, but they also preserved their own cultural identities (accommodation without assimilation) (Vasquez 1982; Achor and Morales 1990; Wortham 2002). This form of Resistance with Accommodation was found more common among Latinas than Latino males (Wortham 2002), which partially explains why there are more Latinas entering and graduating from institutions of higher education.

Scholars argue that students who succeed in higher education do so because they have assimilated to the dominant norms and values, yet Latino students have constructed paths through the terrain of discrimination and prejudice they have encountered in schools, and they continue to identify as Latina/o (Barajas and Pierce 2001). Latinas maintain positive definitions of themselves and they have supportive relationships with other Latinas. This responsive action can be explained by cultural democracy, which maintains that identification with one’s ethnic group is a necessary ingredient of academic success, and psychological adjustment is known as a method of persistence in higher education (Vasquez 1982). In fact, first generation Latina college students in particular protect themselves against crippling effects of being a triple minority (Latina, female, first generation college students) by establishing a sense of pride in their origins, history, and group identity, as well as in their abilities (Vasquez 1982; Hurtado 1994). The fact that Latinos tend to befriend fellow Latino students has caused some scholars to argue that Latinos are self-segregating.

The tendency for students of color to self-segregate from a university’s predominantly white student body into their own respective racial groups is known as “racial balkanization,” which has shown positive outcomes for Latinos (Villalpando 2003). Same-race peer group affiliations for students of color have post-college outcomes that benefit them in important ways (Villalpando 2003). For instance, the Chicana/o peer group’s cultural resources and assets may influence the success of fellow Chicana/o students by mitigating isolation, marginalization and racism that Chicana/os face in higher education (Villalpando 2003). Also, informal and formal student organizations bring together Chicana/o college students who share similar values, interests, and who can offer support and validation (Hurtado 1998;
Villalpando 2003). Therefore, while white students interpret ethnic group clustering as racial segregation, minority students view this behavior as a method of cultural support within a larger unsupportive environment (Hurtado 1998). Latino students also turn to friends and family for emotional support as a method of persisting in higher education.

The literature explains how college climate, teacher-student interaction, gendered schooling, student engagement, and theories on academic achievement intertwine and affect the status and experiences of Latinas in higher education. However, the literature is lacking research that specifically deals with current data on first generation Latina college students and an examination of the strategies used in order to academically succeed while maintaining an ethnic identity.

**METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of this study is two-fold: 1) to explore the experiences of first generation Latina students at California State University, Sacramento (Sacramento State), and 2) to examine the strategies that first generation Latinas at Sacramento State use in order to academically succeed while maintaining their ethnic identity. The goal is to provide current knowledge to previous research regarding the college experience of Latinas and to provide a framework for future policy implications in academia. The study focuses on first generation Latinas, their background/demographics, family-community cultural wealth, and college. This study’s intent was exploratory. This researcher used a qualitative method approach to answer the research question: What are the experiences and strategies that first generation Latina college students in order to academically succeed while maintain an ethnic identity?

The researcher combined data collected from six student interviews and current graduation rates to unpack experiences of academically successful Latinas who have maintained their ethnic identity. In fact, according to Robert C. Bogdan and Sari Knopp Biklen (1998), “If you want to understand how people make sense about their world, we have to bring to light the meaning making process that shapes how people uses language to speak, describe, and engage the world around them.” Therefore, in order to analyze the experiences of Latinas in higher education, the researcher needs to get close to the research participants, to hear them talk and observe them in their day to day lives (Bogdan and Biklen 1998). For this reason, the researcher found it most appropriate to conduct interviews with research participants.
**Research Design**

Originally, the researcher intended to interview between five to ten first generation Latinas. The participants in this study are Sacramento State junior and senior standing students who self-identify as Latina. In order to graduate from college, students must be able to maintain the university standard GPA. Therefore, it was important to interview Latina students who were close to graduating because it demonstrated that that they have been able to academically succeed. Latina participants were also required to be first generation college students. First generation Latina students are important to document because their success is significant as most have no prior knowledge of the college experience. Also, they do not have the advantage of parental guidance when it comes to assistance in admission and retention strategies.

All of the participants in this study were between the ages of 21-28, and were raised in the United States. A few participants were born in a Latin American country but only remember living in the United States. All participants read and signed the consent to participate form.

**Data Collection**

Participants were interviewed for approximately one to two hours, and interviews were audio recorded for accuracy. Interviews took place at a time, location, and date where participants felt more comfortable. See the Appendix for further details that were given throughout the research participant consent form.

**Interview Process**

At the time of the interview, brief introductions were not needed because the researcher knew all the participants through previous encounters. However, in order to remove any form of nervousness or fear, the researcher and the participant spent nearly an hour having an informal and untaped conversation. Participants were also reminded of their rights and signed the consent to participate form. At this point the participants either decided on a Pseudonym or the researcher designated one for them. After the interview was completed, the interview was transcribed. After transcription was completed interviews were decoded and themes were found. Pseudonyms were given to all participants in order to protect their identities.

**Research Question and Guiding Questions**

Each of the questions used in the interviews explored a different phase of the participant’s life and experiences. The first section dealt with questions regarding the participant’s background and demographics. Questions included date of birth, place of birth, and parent’s educational level. The
second section dealt with questions regarding the participant’s teachers, schooling experiences and parental involvement in their educational growth. The third section had questions that allowed participants to explain and explore their college experience from their first day on campus to present feelings about the university. Participants were volunteers and were not paid for participation. This researcher personally conducted every phase of the interview.

Data Analysis
After each interview was completed, the interview was transcribed manually. Once all interviews were transcribed, they were reviewed and noted. After reviewing, the researcher contacted participants if there were any questions regarding accuracy. Once this was completed, the researcher began the coding process. Coding was done in order to identify themes, recurring ideas, language, and patterns of belief. It was through this coding process that the researcher came to the findings. In the coding process the researcher found recurring themes that dealt with resources and structural support and how they affected the participant’s educational experience. It was also through the coding process that the commonality of ESL placement was found, along with role of parents, college as a living idea, college transition, and the role of ethnic studies.

FINDINGS
Findings show that the amount of resources and structural support that first generation Latina college students received directly affected the amount of guidance that they received and inevitably their college experience. Comparing participants who attended public schools with those participants that attended charter schools, participants who attended charter schools for high school had a higher level of guidance and resources. In fact, Eva Rodriguez, a senior Sociology major with Salvadorian parents, described the charter school she attended in the following way.

ER: When I went to an open Charter school in L.A. we had two teachers to a class, so they would split up the class. There wouldn’t be more than thirty students so there would be fifteen students max per teacher.

First generation Latina college students who attended public schools in California had a different perspective regarding their public kindergarten through 12th grade education and what it provided them with. Danielle Esquivido, a senior Anthropology and Ethnic Studies major, explains her perception of her K-12 teachers.
DE: My elementary school teachers were like its environment… ghetto. I did not receive a good education and was not prepared for college. I had very few good teachers, most were just trying to pump you out. They didn’t care.

Cristina Rocha, a senior Psychology and Ethnic Studies major explains how and when she first realized what little her public K-12 education had provided her with.

CR: My last math class was geometry but I didn’t know how I had gotten there. I mean they just kept passing me even if I didn’t know anything. I didn’t think anything about it until I went to City College and took the entrance exam and was placed in Pre-Algebra. Pre-Algebra was the last class I took in middle school, so the last time I had a good quality education was in middle school.

It is visible through these three interviews that first generation Latina college students have different educational experiences and perceptions regarding their K-12 education. Some attended charter schools, which are known to be significantly better equipped and provide more attention to students than California public schools. The lack of attention that students receive in CA public schools due to the overcrowding of students in classes may have a direct effect on where participants were placed and how long it took for them to get out.

From ESL to GATE

The respondents bring to light the lack of resources and structural support that was denied to them in their K-12 education. Findings show that first generation Latina college students were commonly placed in ESL (English as a second language) programs simply because Spanish was their native language. Feelings of frustration, confusion and anger surfaced during the interview as participants explained that it was only because of their parents and teachers that they were able to get placed out of the ESL program. Lily Cruz, a senior Ethnic Studies major and Cristina Rocha share their personal struggle in ESL classes and when they finally placed out.

LC: I had been there [ESL classes] since kindergarten and I wasn’t able to get out of it until the fourth grade but it was only because of the interaction I had with my teacher in the third grade. I felt like I was stupid. I actually talked to my mom and I didn’t feel like I belonged there.
CR: In middle school I was placed in ESL because I spoke Spanish at home with my parents. The teacher I had for ESL had taught my mom like 14 years before me. She recognized me and my mom so she helped me test out of it and I actually ended up placing in GATE [Gifted and Talented Education]. At the time I didn’t think I was smart so when I was placed in GATE I was shocked.

The research participants bring to light the issues and feelings they held while being placed in ESL classes. It also shows that both parents and teachers play an important role in assisting and providing research participants with resources and guidance in order to help them test out of ESL classes. It is here that research participants first explain the vital role of parents.

Role of Parents
The role of parents (and the level of resources, structural support and guidance that they are able to assist their children with) is reflected in the experiences that first generation Latina college students faced in kindergarten through college. Findings showed that parents played a positive and supportive role in their child’s educational life and goals, whether through financial means, emotional means or both. Parents also interacted with teachers, but most participants explained that due to their parents’ low educational attainment (all received education in another country) there was a point where parents could no longer help them with their school work. Even though parents were unable to help their children with homework they still supported them as much as they could with their educational goals. Maribel Gonzalez, a senior Ethnic Studies major and Lily Cruz explain their parent’s involvement below.

MG: They were always there emotionally but after a while they couldn’t help us with homework.

LC: It was a foreign territory to him.

It is here that participants explain from their own viewpoints what it was like for their parents to help them with homework. They also share the real reason why so many Latino parents do not help their children with homework, and that is because they simply cannot. There is either a language, or educational barrier but it is not because Latino parents do not value education. In fact, most participants shared the fact that they grew up thinking about college.

College as a Living Idea
The idea of college was present for most of the participants, and it was usually older family members who introduced them and persuaded them
to attend college after high school. Participants explained that they were striving for an undergraduate degree in order to help their community by going back and being role models and to be able to help their families and for themselves. It is important to understand that the availability of resources, structural support and guidance did not only affect first generation Latina college students in the K-12 systems, but it also affected their college experience.

MG: *My teachers would mention it (college) but it was basically my brother because I saw him go through it so I was like oh I have to do this.*

Mari Barrera, a senior double major in Art and Ethnic Studies explains her personal reasons that she is striving for an undergraduate degree:

MB: *So I want to do it for me but at the same time I want to do it because I think that there is an under representation of Chicanos and Mexican people, and people from Latin America. It's not until somebody within our own community that you feel comfortable going out and seeking information and I wish I would have had somebody there. I hope kids can see me and be like her, this crazy girl did it so why can’t I?*

Although research participants are first generation college students, they were not the first in their family to attend an institution of higher education. Seeing a family member attend an institution of higher education influenced the participant’s decision to attend higher education. Therefore, older siblings and family members paved the path to higher education for younger family members. This is another way that parents and family provide resources and structural support. However, most research participants expressed that they had a tough college transition.

**College Transition**

For the Latina college students in this study, their K-12 education did not adequately prepare them for college, so their college transition was less than pleasurable. The participants expressed feelings of inferiority and isolation when they first came to college. It was only after they met other Latina classmates and teachers that their college experience started to feel more positive. Clubs, organizations, programs and classes all assisted the participants in ensuring that they felt like they were part of the campus. Although many of the students reported having a positive college experience, findings also showed that they continued to feel the pressures of assimilation. The pressures of assimilation are then counteracted by the strategies used in order to academically succeed while maintaining an ethnic identity. The
strategies that were used were joining social, cultural and academic clubs. Other strategies were being involved in program like E.O.P. (Educational Opportunity Program), C.A.M.P. (College Assistance Migrant Program), and the Ronald E. McNair Post-Baccalaureate Scholars Program. Following are some of the participant’s comments regarding their feelings when they first arrived at the university.

MB: I felt very secluded, especially in the Art department, being that I was like the only Mexican.

LC: You feel lonely and like you don’t belong. I mean being here on campus you do feel different.

Although research participants attended both charter and CA public schools, they all felt unprepared for college which affected their college transition. Mari helps to explain how feeling unprepared added negativity to her college transition because she also felt alone in the university. Lily further spoke about feeling alone and like an outsider because she looked different than most of the people around her. These negative feelings were counteracted by taking courses on race and ethnicity which were mostly found in the Ethnic Studies department.

**Role of Ethnic Studies**
Participants expressed that Ethnic Studies is more than just a major. It is a department that allowed the participants to attain an undergraduate degree while also positively reinforcing their Latino culture and history. The participants explained that it was in college that they found their roots and found more reason to identify as Latina. Also, several participants explained that campus programs like C.A.M.P, E.O.P., the Ronald E. McNair Post-Baccalaureate Scholars Program, cultural clubs, social and professional organizations, and relationships with professors were all strategies that they used in order to academically succeed while maintaining their ethnic identity. Below are some of the participants’ responses.

DE: Being involved in EOP, McNair, Anthropology club E.S.S.A. and E.N.I.T. all helped me succeed academically and maintain my ethnic identity. They extremely helped me because if I didn’t have ENIT and Ethnic Studies I think I would go mad.

MB: I felt very dumb because I wondered why I didn’t know so much. But when I took La Mujer Chicana I was like. “Damn I’m at home.”
Danielle first reinforces how being involved in cultural, social, and academic clubs were all strategies that she used in order to academically survive and succeed while maintaining her ethnic identity. Danielle explains the role these different organizations played in her survival in higher education. Mari not only explains the feelings she first held when she began her undergraduate career but she also expresses the feelings she held when she first found ethnic studies. The Ethnic Studies department was a home for many students, where they were able to interact with other students and faculty that looked like them and understood their struggle.

**DISCUSSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

Reflecting on the experiences shared by participants, the majority believed that Latino faculty members positively influence first generation Latina college students (Verdugo 1995). Since the literature suggests that Latino faculty played an important role in the academic lives of first generation Latina college students, it is crucial that the number of Latino faculty members be increased in all college and university campuses. In fact, participants expressed that Latino faculty members assisted them in their personal and academic goals. In her interview, Lily Cruz spoke about her experiences with Latino faculty members:

*LC: I have met two amazing Latino professors here and keeping in touch with them has truly helped me. They're the ones who first led me to consider graduate school. They helped me with the application process and wrote letters of recommendation for me. I know I can count on them and they have always been there for me.*

Therefore the increase of Latino faculty members may create a positive relationship between Latina students and college campuses and strong student engagement and response.

The feelings of alienation, difficulty in academic adjustment, and pressures to assimilate are all counteracted by parental support, cultural democracy, and self-preservation. The participants in this study, along with results from other scholars’ research suggest that academic adjustment in college can make the college transition difficult (Hurtado 1996). The challenges that first generation Latina college students face because of the difficulty in academic adjustment tends to bring about feelings of alienation (Hurtado 1994; Gonzalez 2002; Suarez-Balcazar et al. 200_)

Findings showed that parental involvement and support, along with using ethnicity as a source of strength and pride are all strategies used in order to counteract pressures of assimilation and difficulty with academic adjustment.
(Casas and Ponterotto 1984; Arellano and Padilla 1996; Wortham 2002; Chiang et al. 2004). First generation Latina college students also continued to identify as Latina throughout their college years (Barajas and Pierce 2001), and actually explained that maintaining their ethnic identity was needed in order for them to academically succeed (Vasquez 1982). First generation Latina college students were able to maintain their ethnic identity by befriending fellow Latinas, i.e., self-preservation (Villalpando 2003) and by being involved in social and professional organizations, which assist in providing validation (Hurtado et al. 1998; Villalpando 2003).

FUTURE RESEARCH
Future research would broaden the research question and attempt to find information that includes first generation Latino males, their experiences and how they are able to succeed while maintaining an ethnic identity. This researcher would examine the differences and similarities between different ethnic groups by conducting a multi-ethnic cross-examination in terms of college attendance, attainment, preparation, choice, access, and level of self-preservation.

CONCLUSION
This study aimed to examine the experiences and strategies of first generation Latina college students in terms of academic success and maintenance of ethnic identity. The researcher found that there are many variables that can positively and negatively affect the experiences of first generation Latina college students. First generation Latina college students continue to experience feelings of alienation and pressures to assimilate. These experiences are counteracted by involvement in social and professional organizations, cultural clubs, relationships with faculty, specific courses, and majoring in Ethnic Studies.

Proposition 209 passed in 1996, ending affirmative action in higher education. What policy makers must take into consideration when writing and supporting such polices and propositions is that Proposition 209 has negatively affected Latinas in higher education. This is not because Latinas are no longer given a “free card” into higher education but because universities are not looking at admissions criteria through a holistic approach. Instead they believe meritocracy has become the culture of higher education. This has created an even poorer college climate. Policy makers must stop to look at and consider the real side effects of policies. They must also strive to be ethnically and culturally aware of the issues that surround Latinas in higher education.
Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

April 15, 2011

Dear Participants,

My name is Jeanette Arellano Cano, and I am currently an undergraduate student at California State University, Sacramento, majoring in Ethnic Studies. I will be conducting a qualitative research study and invite you to participate, due to the fact that you self-identify as a first generation Latina college student. The purpose of this research project is two-fold: a) to explore the experiences of first generation Latina college students, b) explore the methods used by first generation Latina college students in order to academically succeed while maintaining an ethnic identity.

Upon agreement to participate in this research study, the following will occur:

- Participant will be contacted via email or by phone to set up interview date, time and location.
- Interview will take place at a time and location that is most convenient to the participant.
- Interview will last approximately 1-2 hours.
- The interview will be audio-taped to ensure accuracy in reporting the participant’s statements.
- Researcher and participant will engage in debriefing in order to discuss any questions or concerns the participants might have about the study.
- If anything is unclear a follow up interview will be necessary, but it will not last more than one hour.
- Transcription of interview will occur followed by destroying recordings.
- Coding and analysis of interviews.
- Submit findings and destroy remaining participant information such as coding of interview transcripts.

Questions regarding background/demographics, family and college experience address the main themes of the questions. All participants will receive a copy of the interview questions prior to the scheduled interview.

Participating in the research study will cause a potential loss of privacy and emotional distress, which will be minimized by keeping all research data in a cabinet inside the researcher’s room, which will always be locked. Although interview questions might cause discomfort and/or emotional distress, participants may skip any questions they prefer not to answer or stop the interview at any time for any. After the interview participants should contact Psychological Counseling Services, in regards to any concerns related to the
topics in the interview. All transcribed data and audio files will be kept in a password-protected program that will only be accessible to the researcher. The recordings will be destroyed soon as they have been transcribed. With participant consent, the researcher would like to keep the participants contact information for a maximum of six months to conduct follow-up interviews if additional clarification is required. If permission is not given to keep personal contact information of participants, the information given by the participant will be destroyed after transcription is completed, which will be no longer than six months.

In order to ensure confidentiality, all research data will be kept in a password protected program and locked in a secure location. The researcher and faculty mentor will be the only individuals with access to the research data. If clarity is needed, the researcher will contact the participant to ensure that all information on the final research paper is accurate. There will be no compensation for your participation in this research project. The participant’s involvement will be of no cost to them. Participation is this research study is voluntary and highly appreciated. Participants have the right to refuse to answer any question or choose to stop the interview at any time. Pseudonyms will be used in any reports or publications. You may choose a pseudonym for yourself or otherwise the researcher will designate one for you.

If the participant has any questions, or concerns regarding the process and progress of the research study, they will be able to email the researcher at jarellano.cano@gmail.com or the researcher’s faculty sponsor at Figueroa@csus.edu to ask questions or set up a preferable time to meet in person.

**Consent to Keep Contact Information**

_____ I give Jeanette Arellano Cano the permission to keep my contact information and contact me again in the future (within six months) for a follow-up interview if it is needed.

_____ I do not give Jeanette Arellano Cano permission to keep my contact information or to contact me in the future for a follow-up interview if it is needed.

**Sign to confirm that you agree to participate in this research study**

__________________________________  ____________
Signature of Participant     Date

__________________________________  ____________
Signature of Researcher     Date
REFERENCES


