A CASE STUDY ON FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE PROGRAMS AND THE IMPORTANCE OF SENSE OF BELONGING FOR LATINX STUDENTS

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Latinx students who are first-generation college students face a plethora of barriers when transitioning from high school to college. For example, some students experience a lack of sense of belonging to a campus community, cannot afford to continue their studies, and need guidance on how to be successful in college. First-year support programs can help aid students as they transition. Many of these programs reside in colleges/universities that are low-staffed and have limited funding. Students who are part of first-year programs look to the program to help fill in the gap so they can be successful and complete their college degree. This gap includes college readiness, critical thinking skills, self-advocacy, social skills, and connection to college community. All these components aid in student success so they are confident in making decisions academically and personally. Success means more than just good grades. It involves students taking care of their overall well-being with an approach to health and development. Student use campus resources to support their needs through academic, social, emotional, and financial.

This case study used the culturally engaging campus environments model to explore how participating in a first-year program at a state university contributes to sense of belonging for successful transition to college, experiences of Latinx students as they transition from high
school to college, and what support first-year programs offer students. Findings from this study discuss how first-year programs are essential to student’s overall success and college completion. Student experiences show how each student navigated challenges with the support from LSP. Students discussed how LSP helped them gain confidence to complete college and graduate. The LSP director and staff shared different strategies they used to address student needs. One-way LSP addressed these needs was through the seminar class in which different offices at MWHSI presented on resources and ways to support students as they transition. Recommendations from this study include areas of improvement for first-year programs to continue successfully assisting students.

*Keywords*: Latinx students, first-generation, first year support programs
A CASE STUDY ON FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE PROGRAMS AND THE IMPORTANCE OF SENSE OF BELONGING FOR LATINX STUDENTS

BY

JAVIER AQUINO
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A DISSERTATION OF PRACTICE SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE
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DEPARTMENT OF COUNSELING AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Doctoral Director:
Jacqueline Mac
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Thank you to my friends and family who have supported me throughout this entire dissertation journey. As a first-generation Latino student, it was only a dream of mine to obtain a Doctoral degree. I am thankful to all my undergraduate/graduate professors who encouragement me and challenge me to keep going even when it gets difficult. I began my doctoral journey in the beginning of a global pandemic and manage to stay healthy, work full time, and endure the loss of my father to cancer. All these challenges help made me a better leader to stay focus even when there are many unknows.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my father who passed away a year into the EdD program. My father’s work ethic inspired me to begin my doctoral journey and I’m thrilled to complete this degree in his honor.
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CHAPTER 1

DISSERTATION OF PRACTICE RESEARCH PROPOSAL

Since 2020, the Hispanic population in the United States reached 62.1 million accounting for 19% of all U.S. residents and making it the nation’s second largest racial group (Funk & Lopez, 2022). According to U.S. Census and 2015 American Community Survey data, Hispanic or Latino students from rural areas experience the lowest high school and bachelor’s degree attainment rates among all other rural ethnic and racial groups (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). Nine percent of rural Latinos held a bachelor’s degree or higher, but 30% of this population held a high school diploma or equivalent. Latinx students are increasingly engaging in the college search (Mora, 2022); however, they are underrepresented in higher education and earn degrees at lower rates than other ethnic and racial groups (Adelman, 2002; National Center for Education Statistics, 2023).

In 2020, 21.8% of U.S. undergraduate college students were Latino, the second largest ethnic group enrolled at the undergraduate level. The number of Latino college students is increasing overall, but these students continue to be overrepresented in community colleges and underrepresented in 4-year institutions (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2018). With the increase of Latinx students in college, there is a need for additional Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI) in the United States. HSIs are defined in federal law as an accredited, degree-granting,
public or private nonprofit institution of higher education with 25% or more total undergraduate Hispanic or Latino full-time equivalent student enrollment (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2018). About 75% of all Latinx undergraduate students attend a Hispanic serving institution (Mazyck, 2014). HSI’s can receive federal funding support from the Department of Education through competitive institutional grants, which is used to serve students from all ethnicities through various support programs and scholarships.

Marlow et al. (2020) stated 44% of Latinx students who attend college are first-generation college students and many come from low-income families. These students face a plethora of barriers when they transition from high school to college. The most common barriers for this population is a lack of academic resources, family considerations, and individual factors such as a not feeling sense of belonging to a college campus. Academic resources refer to the understanding of student support groups, faculty mentorship, and knowledge of research skills. Familial considerations include low income, immigrant status, and language creating an initial barrier in the overall students’ academic achievement. A sense of belonging is important to students, which provides support/guidance so they can feel welcomed and are included in the campus environment. Additionally, students need mentors to guide them through the first years of college. There is a lot to learn about college and having a mentor can help assist students in understanding various offices and their function at any given college/university. Mentors helping Latinx students help them adjust to college life, encourage involvement in student activities and organizations. This encourages the mentee to learn from experiences the mentor has went through thus providing an example for the mentee to learn from. Moreover, students can receive encouragement and academic help from their mentors.
First-year programs have played an important role in supporting Latinx students transition from high school to college (Hunter, 2006). Research on first-year programs has expanded considerably over the years, providing substantial evidence persistence and degree attainment has increased as first-year programs have been implemented (Hunter, 2006). Evidence also suggests first-year programs have benefits for students, irrespective of differences in gender, ethnicity, age, and major (Excelencia in Education, 2020). First-year programs encourage additional positive outcomes, including increased student–faculty interaction, increased involvement in cocurricular activities, and increased academic satisfaction. The overall purpose of first-year programs is to aid students by providing holistic advising, leadership skills, and academic success (Hunter, 2006).

Established in the late 1970s, Latinx Success Program, LSP (pseudonym) at Mid-West Hispanic Serving Institution, MWHSI (pseudonym) was designed to assist Latinx first-year students with their transition to college. MWHSI is a public university and HSI located in the northside of Chicago. The student body consist of 37% of Latinx students according to the Fall 2020 enrollment data. LSP supports the academic, professional, and personal growth of students during their first 2 years of college while they decide on an academic major. The program has existed for several decades, but there has not been student outcome data showing how the program supports first-year Latinx student’s transition to college. I am interested in how MWHSI supports these students with the various barriers they encounter such as financial, personal, and academic challenges. Thus, the purpose of this qualitative study is to understand how a first-year student support program, LSP, contributes to the experience of Latinx students as they transition
from high school to college and their involvement with first year programs. The guiding research questions for this study are:

1. How does participating in LSP contribute to sense of belonging for a successful transition to college?
2. What are the experiences of Latinx students as they transition from high school to college?
3. What culturally relevant and culturally responsive support does LSP offer their students?

Providing students with specialized academic, counseling, and mentoring support can facilitate the socialization process and enhance the student transition and completion of their first year. The results of this study presented college administrators qualitative data on the support Latinx students need to be successful in college.

**Definitions of Terms**

The following is a list of terms to provide common language and understanding of the researcher’s perspective and, unless indicated otherwise, how terminology is used throughout the dissertation.

*Hispanic/Latino* is an ethnic identity category defined as “Hispanic or Latino: Persons of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture, regardless of race” (Rodriguez, 2017, p.20). Hispanic and Latino are not used by all persons nor are they used interchangeably by members within the Hispanic/Latino community, but are used in this study due to the ethnicity reporting required by the university. I use the term scholars refer to in their work, but otherwise I use Hispanic/Latino. Scholars have had discussions about the
differences and similarities of the term Hispanic/Latino and interested readers can read those sources (Marrow, 2003; Rodriguez, 2017).

_Latinx_ is a term used to identify a group to describe individuals in the United States who have Latin American roots. This term is intended to be gender-inclusive for anyone of Latin-American descent who does not identify within a gender binary. Moreover, there are various forms of understanding and (mis)using of the term _Latinx_. The term Latinx has created (dis)comfort, ambiguity, and disingenuous arguments related to language, grammar, phonetics, religion, and identity politics (Salinas & Lozano, 2019). Moreover, the Latinx term allows people to ask questions about gender, language, and inclusion (Salinas, 2019).

_First-generation_ is a term used to describe a student whose parent(s) did not complete a 4-year college or university degree. This also includes the parent of the student may completed some college but did not earn a degree from a 4-year college or university. In this case the student is still considered first-generation.

_Sense of belonging_ is a sense of being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by others in the academic classroom and of feeling oneself to be an important part of the life and activity of the class. Students’ sense of belonging has been identified as a potential lever to promote success, engagement, and well-being in college (Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

**Literature Review**

Students first in their family to pursue college may experience difficulty transitioning from high school to college. These difficulties include feeling a sense of belonging to a college campus, building personal and academic relationships with both students and faculty, understanding of how to navigate one’s personal life as a young adult, and steering important
decisions in college such as choosing a major and overall finances. Some of these challenges contribute to a delayed entry into college and sometimes minimizes the chances first-generation students will ever attend (Chen, 2005; Choy et al., 2000). With these difficulties, this leads to low college completion rates among first-generation college students who are Latinx. This brings out a significant concern because demographically these students will soon represent 54% of low completion by 2042 (Fry & Lopez, 2012). When students transition from high school to college, many factors contribute to the overall college experience and can affect their ability to graduate. There are multiple stressors involved in adapting to a new environment, learning new courses, facing new challenges, and developing new relationships. This literature review discusses first-generation and Latinx students’ transition to college, sense of belonging among Latinx students, the purpose and effectiveness of first-year experience programs, and the unique contexts of HSIs.

**Transition to College**

The transition to college is particularly challenging for many students because it involves simultaneous changes in lifestyle, routines, responsibilities, and, often, geographical relocation (Dyson & Renk, 2006). Furthermore, first-year college students often experience doubts about their academic abilities and social acceptance, along with changes in their academic and social self-concepts (Dyson & Renk, 2006; Pittman & Richmond, 2008). When students move away from home to attend school, they lose connections to family, friends, peer groups, favorite activities, and social support networks. Many students may feel a sense of homesickness due to finding themselves in a new and unfamiliar environment (Pittman & Richmond, 2008). Students experience difficulties, if unresolved, can lead to homesickness, depression, and dissatisfaction with their decision to attend college (Vershuur et al., 2004).
As college enrollment is projected to continue to grow (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017), the number of first-generation students attending college may be greater today than ever before. First-generation students often receive less encouragement and assistance regarding academic achievement and may feel less competent in handling academic challenges in college (Pascarella et al., 2004). The need for community is essential for first-generation students so they can receive support to be successful in college. Establishing connections are critical to a successful transition to college, and even more for first generation students. These connections allow the student to feel connected to a group of students who are then able to provide encouragement when facing academic challenges. Moreover, students begin to feel a sense of belonging to a college campus/community.

There are a variety of factors influencing the college-choice process and how successful students are when transitioning from high school to college. The most important factor in determining student success, regardless of their ethnicity, making the transition from high school to college is the “academic intensity and quality of one’s high school curriculum” (Adelman, 2002, p. 40). Research has shown Latino students tend to graduate from high schools without resources adequately preparing them for college-level work. Latino students are largely first-generation and confront an increasing barrier to complete a college degree because they are disproportionately represented among first-generation college-goers and more likely to combine work and school, often taking on family responsibilities while enrolled (Swail et al., 2004; Tienda, 2009).

To make a successful transition from high school to college students need to take “classes that ask more of them, rather than less of them in writing, research, and other key skill areas”
(Conley, 2008, p. 5). Students need to acquire early in their educational journey the knowledge, cognitive skills, and habits of mind essential to postsecondary success (Conley, 2005). With these skills, students can be successful as they start their journey in college. Academically and socially involved Latino students experience a smoother transition to college and are more likely to return for their sophomore year (Tinto, 2008).

**Sense of Belonging**

A sense of belonging reflects the feeling one fits in, belongs to, or is a member of the academic community in question. Viewing oneself as being accepted within a discipline rather than on its fringes is a sense of belonging. This validates one’s personal belief your presence and contributions within the academic community demonstrate your value as an accepted member (Trujillo & Tanne, 2014).

Sense of belonging on college and university campuses plays a critical role in retaining all students at a given institution (Braskamp et al., 2015; Soria & Stebleton, 2013). The development of a sense of belonging is particularly important for underserved, marginalized, and underrepresented student populations because they encounter a higher number of roadblocks and greater levels of systemic discrimination than their more privileged peers (Soria & Stebleton, 2013; Tovar & Simon, 2010). When students sense they do not belong or they have been rejected by members of the campus community, this can affect their ability to adjust to the academic and social challenges of college life. Both explicit and implied community and structural biases can generate and reinforce beliefs of who does and does not belong on campus (Soria & Stebleton, 2013). Students who feel their belonging needs are met by their institution are much more likely
to feel at home and valued at their institution and thus form a stronger and committed bond to said institution (Schreiner, 2013; Tovar & Simon, 2010).

A student’s precollege characteristics, background traits, and upbringing can serve a significant role in the decision to enroll in a college or university, to become academically and socially involved at that college or university, and ultimately to commit to earning a degree from their college or university (Hausmann et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2012). Social class and socioeconomic background, in particular, are related to a student’s formation of a sense of belonging in college, which can predict their adjustment to their new environment, perception of quality of social and academic experiences at their institution, and academic achievement (Soria & Stebleton, 2013). Students who enter a college or university can mark a difficult period of insecurity and instability for first-year students, particularly first-generation Latinx students. During this time, many first-year students move away from home to pursue higher education and are often separated from their families and their known support networks (O’Keeffe, 2013).

The effects of campus racial climates are another element directly impacting Latinx students. The current literature on students’ perceptions of the college environment has shown the institutional climate for diversity having a considerable impact on students’ academic and social lives (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). According to Smedley et al. (1993)’s study, including Chicano and other Latino students, scholars reported students on predominantly White campuses face specific stresses that exhibit considerable psychological sensitivity to the campus social climate, including interpersonal tensions with White students and faculty (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Due to this, Latinx students can feel alone and may end up going through their college journey lacking a connection to the college campus. When a student perceives and feels a sense
of belonging to their campus community, the greater the likelihood of their success as a student (Stebleton et al., 2014). There is evidence first year programs can be particularly important at helping students, including Latino students, increase their sense of belonging in college (Johnson et al., 2007).

**First-Year Experience Programs**

The first year of college is the foundation upon which students’ entire educational experience is constructed. Because of the importance of the first year, many colleges and universities have implemented first-year experience programs to support students transition to college (Hunter, 2006; Messineo, 2012). First-year experience programs tend to include new-student orientation, welcome week, and first-year seminars. Moreover, these programs facilitate students’ transition to college and build their skill and character development to help them successfully navigate their college experience (Hunter, 2006). The first year is a key time to introduce students to critical issues, encourage value exploration, examine identity, develop civic responsibility, and deal with diversity (Goodman & Pascarella, 2006; Hunter 2006).

The popularity of first-year programming has ebbed and flowed from its inception in the 1920s through numerous iterations in the 1960s (Hunter, 2006). The introduction of University101 at the University of South Carolina in 1972 is widely considered the starting point for first-year seminars and programs. As a result, many institutions across the nation have implemented their own version of first-year programs to assist students in transitioning from high school to college.

Institutions achieving excellence in first-year student success employ a wide variety of initiatives. Programs and initiatives commonly considered to be a part of an institution’s first-
year experience efforts include, but are certainly not limited to, recruitment and admissions efforts; new student orientation programs; welcome week activities, rituals, and traditions; first-year, summer, or common reading programs and first-year seminars (Clark & Cundiff, 2011; Hunter, 2006). All of these initiatives are organized to encourage students to enroll in a first-year program so they can gain the skills to be successful in their college journey. Student learning and success is a campus wide responsibility. The days of leaving students’ intellectual development to the faculty and everything else to student affairs offices is long past (Clark & Cundiff, 2011; Goodman & Pascarella, 2006).

Institutions across all sectors of higher education are looking to increase student success by focusing on first year programs to increase student retention (Hunter, 2006; Messineo, 2012). The fierce competition among institutions to admit students has caused admission offices to communicate with prospective students frequently to help aid students in their decision-making process. Student involvement and connections to the campus community are factors positively correlated with retention, so institutional initiatives are being created to increase student involvement and enhance feelings of community on campus (Messineo, 2012). This ties in the sense of belonging to the importance of first year programs to retain students in college.

**HSI**

HSIs represent a unique group of minority-serving institutions. Unlike historically Black colleges and universities or Tribal colleges and universities with specific missions to serve Black and Indigenous students respectively, HSIs are typically defined by the percentage of Hispanic students enrolled in the general student body. In 2020, the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities lists 313 institutions as part of its advocacy membership with an estimated 539 HSIs
overall. HSIs represent approximately 17% of universities, enrolling over 1.3 million Latinx students (Excelencia in Education, 2020). As the enrollment of Latinx students remains concentrated in certain geographic locations, the number of HSIs continues to grow across the country.

One approach to promote success of students enrolled in HSIs is to establish and promote student affairs–academic affairs partnerships. Collaborations between these two divisions can help foster a holistic learning environment, promote seamless college transitions, improve the academic and social environment, and enhance students’ overall college experiences (Frost et al., 2010; Nesheim et al., 2007). New tailored programs and initiatives in both academic and student affairs are critical to promote Latinx students access and growth in academics.

Characteristics of influential programs at HSIs cultivating an environment conducive to Latinx student retention and degree attainment include faculty–student mentorship (Estepp et al., 2016), culturally relevant courses (Garcia & Okhidoi, 2015), and programs fostering a sense of belonging (Maestas et al., 2007). Retention and degree completion are directly related to institutional contexts, and having a Latinx faculty mentor on campus can be a boon for Latinx students when navigating the realm of higher education (Crisp, 2011). Faculty mentoring of undergraduate students plays an important role in student retention and overall student success (Crisp, 2011; Estepp et al., 2016). Further, understanding students’ social and cultural needs and obstacles may be easier if faculty share similar cultural backgrounds with their mentees. A sense of belonging is a basic human need influencing thoughts, emotions, and behaviors (Strayhorn, 2012). HSI campus programs instilling a sense of belonging in Latinx students are paramount to student retention and success (Maestas et al., 2007).
Conceptual Framework

The theoretical framework guiding this research was Museus’s (2014) culturally engaging campus environments (CECE) model. The CECE model is a conceptual model outlining the elements of campus environments necessary for students, especially those from marginalized backgrounds, to thrive in college and explains how those environments positively affect student outcomes in higher education. The CECE model is comprised of nine indicators split into two categories. The first category, cultural relevance, is comprised of five indicators: cultural familiarity, culturally relevant knowledge, cultural community service, cultural validation, meaningful cross-cultural engagement. The second category, cultural responsiveness, is comprised of four indicators: collectivist cultural orientations, humanized educational environments, proactive philosophies, and holistic support.

This framework was used to inform the interviews of first-generation Latinx as they transition from high school to college and their experience with first-year programs and to guide data analysis. Other studies have also used CECE to examine campus environments at minority serving institutions, including HSIs (Garcia, 2016; Museus et al., 2018).

Research Design

This study used a constructionist perspective (Crotty, 1998) to understand the transition process for Latino/a students in college and their overall experience with first-year programs. Constructionism emphasizes providing opportunities to students for making their own judgments and interpretations of the situations they come across based on their prior knowledge and experience (Pascale, 2011). According to Pascale (2011), constructionism describes the process
by which people assign meaning to their world. All reality “is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction and between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context” (Crotty, 1998, p. 25).

This study used a qualitative case study methodological approach. A case study is an intensive analysis of an individual unit, such as a person or community, stressing developmental factors in relation to environment (Jones et al., 2006). Case study research is often used in educational settings as the environment occurring on college campus represent what a case study is (Jones et al., 2014). Qualitative case studies in particular provide researchers the opportunity to explore issues through variety of perspectives, allowing the phenomenon to be understood more deeply (Baxter & Jack, 2008). As such, this design is suitable because of a focus on Latino students and their transition to college within a particular first year program at a particular institution; both of these programmatic and institutional contexts are important factors shaping these students’ experiences.

This intrinsic case study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) took place at MWHSI, an HSI institution in the city of Chicago. Within this case study, the focus was to learn about Latino/a student’s experience as they transition to college and their personal encounter within a specific first-year program, LSP. I used the CECE framework to understand how students’ experiences with LSP supported their transition. I also want to see how external influences such as family, finances, and employment influence students’ sense of belonging, academic disposition (self-efficacy, motivation, intent to persist), and academic performance in their transition from high school to college. This section outlines the epistemological and methodological approach to the study, followed by a discussion of the methods, data collection, and data analysis. There was also
attention given to defining the research site and participants and an explanation of the standards employed to ensure quality.

Description of the Case

Founded in 1867, MWHSI has a rich tradition of educational innovation and prides itself on preparing teachers and administrators who make a difference in Chicago. The tradition continues to this day and has expanded to include an array of academic disciplines, allowing the University to embrace fully the community in which it resides. Diversity is an important factor in the character of MWHSI and in the social fabric of its student body. MWHSI has an enrollment of more than 7,000 students; African American, Latino/a, Asian, and Native American students represent roughly 60% of the student body. Of the 7,000, 1,351 or 38% are Latino/a and represent the biggest percentage of students at MWHSI.

LSP is an academic support services program historically and continuing to serve Latino students who demonstrate academic potential and may not meet the general University admissions requirements. LSP is a University admitting body, responsible for recruiting and admitting students. Students entering the university through general admissions may have opted into LSP. Students in this program were given a 2-year adjustment period to meet university academic requirements. They had to actively participate in the assistance programs provided and show evidence of academic progress. Students received guidance and support from a bilingual and biculturalt academic advisor until the requirements to declare a major are met.

The mission of LSP is to increase Latina/o student access to and success in higher education at MWHSI. The program does this through a holistic and culturally relevant approach to enhance student learning, intercultural competencies and leadership development through
excellent programs and services that create a strong university support network for Latino students transitioning to, and within, MWHSI. In addition, the program offers integral information about transitioning and excelling in college via 3-credit academic transition courses taught by LSP advisors. These courses complemented the program’s objectives to provide personal and academic support services designed to increase scholastic achievement, persistence toward graduation, and community building at MWHSI. LSP staff is comprised of one director and two program specialists.

**Data Collection**

For this qualitative study, I used multiple methods of data collection (Merriam & Tisdall, 2015; Yin, 2014). First, I collected data through (a) interviews with students from LSP, (b) interviews with staff and the director who were crucial to the development of students in the program, (c) observations of the seminar class to measure its effectiveness, and (d) publicly available document related to LSP.

**Student Participants and Recruitment**

I selected student participants in my study based on the following criteria: (a) Latinx and first-generation and (b) currently enrolled in LSP (Patton, 2002). By selecting participants based on these criteria, I identified participants who could best inform the research study, increasing my understanding of their lived experiences. This study sought to include between 15–20 participants so I could have a mixed amount of freshman and sophomore students to interview. I preferred to interview 15–20 students to assist in gathering the information needed to identify
themes based on their experience with their transition to college and overall knowledge with first year programs (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

I recruited participants via emails (see Appendix A) and the mentioning of my study in the seminar class by LSP staff member in hopes of reaching as many participants as possible. The recruitment instruments provided a brief description of the study, eligibility requirements, and what participating entails. A flyer was shared with the students in the seminar class so they can complete a brief survey if they are interested in participating in the study. The interest form gathered the demographics of the student such as race, gender, income, current age, and whether they are first-generation (see Appendix B). This information was used to clearly show the makeup of these students. I monitored who signed up, as I wanted to get a variety of students with different demographics listed. The students were incentivized with a $15 amazon gift card for their time in the study, supplied by me.

**Student Interviews**

I interviewed six students. This sample size allowed me to gain an understanding of the depths and richness of the students’ stories (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As Patton (2015) described, interviewing allows the researcher to “enter another person’s perspective” (p. 426). The interviews were semi-structured and I talked with students about their journey from the transition from high school to college. These questions were reflective and focus on how students have evolved and made meaning from their transition from high school and experience with first year programs. This allowed me to assess how first-year Latino/a student’s transition and what support they received from first-year programs.
The interview data collected were recorded and transcribed. The files were password protected and student information kept anonymous. Moreover, I wrote researcher memos after each interview to attempt to gather themes from each conversation.

**Staff Interviews**

I interviewed the two advisors and the director of LSP for 60 minutes in person. In addition to talking to students, I interviewed the staff to learn about their perspective and experiences working with students in the program. I explored how the students’ needs have change overtime and what services does the program offer so students are successful. Moreover, I wanted to investigate what worked and what improvements the program needed to aid the students in a smooth transition to college from the staffs’ perspective. Interviews were also be recorded and transcribed.

**Observations and Document Collection**

Observations in qualitative case study research brings richness to the overall data collected (Merriam & Tisdall, 2015). Observations are different from interviews as they take place in the natural space in the moment (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Merriam & Tisdall, 2015). Observations can be useful for triangulating the information and data gathered through the interviews, documents, and increase the trustworthiness of the study (Hancock et al., 2017; Merriam & Tisdall, 2015). I observed the seminar course all LSP students took during the first 2 years of the program. This allowed me as the researcher to see how students are engaging with the curriculum and how the instructor is connecting with the class. Through my observations, I saw if/how students were using the space and any interactions they might have had with other
students or the instructor of the course. If there was anything else occurring during my observations, I was also sure to note my observation. The type of documents I was looking to gather were the course syllabus of the seminar class and any marketing resources providing academic support to students. Both the syllabus and the marketing materials helped me access what types of resources LSP is providing. Moreover, I looked on the LSP website to see what list of resources are available to prospective students.

Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed. I examined the transcripts, documents, and observation notes to develop common themes, patterns, and categories (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Data analysis took place in six steps:

1. reading the full transcription;
2. creating preliminary meaning units;
3. noting final meaning units;
4. situating the meaning units into the participant’s narratives;
5. creating general narratives from the situated meaning units; and
6. noting a general description of the students’ experience.

A meaning unit is determined whenever the researcher experiences a transition in meaning of the phenomenon when they reread the description from the beginning of the text (Merriam, 2009). The meaning units within the narrative are noted so the data can be dealt with in manageable portions.

The data analysis process began with me reading the full text of the interview transcriptions—this was done fully understand the participants’ stories and experiences with the
students studied (Merriam, 2009). For this study, I read the transcriptions to see and understand Latino/a student’s experience when transitioning to college and first year programs. These findings were explored throughout the student’s narratives and explored the similarities of what Latino students encounter. I highlighted anything describing a specific phenomenon such as a word, phrase, or sentence to identify common meaning units on the transcript. I also used the CECE indicators to inform my coding.

The next step was to connect the preliminary meaning units into final themes (Merriam, 2009). This intentionally connected similar meaning units into broader themes that explain Latino/a student’s experience when transitioning to college and first year programs. These meaning units were also informed by the CECE model. Next, I created situated narratives, which Merriam (2009) outlined by stating, “This is a basic summary of the psychologically relevant aspects of this particular person’s experience” (p. 120). These reiterated the stories from the participants and highlighted the themes through direct quotes from the transcriptions. From my interaction with the students and reviewing the transcript, I listed common words or phrases among all my interviews. From this list, I created a description of the students’ experience based on all the interviews I conducted. I compared students’ experiences and stories with themes generated from staff interviews and observations.

Criteria for Quality

To ensure and increase trustworthiness of this study, I use three strategies. They were member-checking, triangulation, and peer examination. Member-checking is an important component of qualitative research study as it ensures all participants experiences and thoughts are accurately reflected in the findings (Merriam & Tisdall, 2015). The participants received the
transcripts along with the themes so they can provide me with feedback and add any additional thoughts. I gave the participants the option to meet with me via Zoom or submit their response in an e-mail.

Second, I triangulated student interview data with data collected through faculty/staff interviews, document analysis, and observations data to corroborate findings through different perspectives. Triangulation is used to increase the credibility and dependability of the data collected and analyzed (Merriam & Tisdall, 2015). Lastly, I used peer examination (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Merriam & Tisdall, 2015). As I gathered my findings, I returned to the staff at LSP to comment on the findings and identify any gaps or areas that may need further explanation. Moreover, I asked to my dissertation chair and committee to ensure my findings are appropriate.

**Researcher Positionality**

As a first-generation college student, middle-class man, and of Latino descent, years of lived experiences, identity, and philosophical beliefs have formed me. During my undergraduate years at MWHSI, I sought out to find who I am and what can I contribute to society. When I entered my master’s program, I was able to identify I would engage in qualitative research with first-generation Latino college students being my area of focus. As Milner (2007) outlined, “People of color historically have been misrepresented, exploited, silenced, and taken for granted in education research” (p. 388). My goal is to conduct a case study at MWHSI. Through my study, I identified the lack of resources and barriers Latino/a students endure to determine the success of first-year programs such as LSP.
My experiences as a child shaped my biases, perspectives, and scholarship. I am Puerto Rican, and I was born and raised in the city of Chicago. I grew up in a middle-class home where my father and mother worked full-time jobs to support my brother and me. I was fortunate to have parents encouraging me to attend school and wanted to see my brother and I graduate from college. During my undergraduate years, many of my classmates did not have the structure I had growing up and struggled to stay on top of their studies and were often dismissed or left the university. This left me wondering why these students left and what can higher education faculty/administration do to provide support to these students.

As a researcher and practitioner, my goal is to educate, support, and encourage the next generation of first-generation Latino college students. I would love to create new or modify current freshman college programs focusing on the student’s overall development. This includes financial literacy, mental health, managing life stressors, and academics. I believe my purpose in higher education is to help others find their potential and continue to identify areas that need improvement. At the end of my career, I want to make sure I leave a legacy that helped first-generation Latino students be successful and achieve their goals.

**Limitations**

I have discussed the strengths of my research in this proposal, but there are limitations to all research. My intent is to learn about how Latino/a student’s transition to college and their experience with first-year programs. Nevertheless, it challenging to recruit students willing to discuss their personal experiences. As indicated in the literature review, Latino/a students face a plethora of issues when they transition to college, as they can be the first ones to attend. Due to
this, some students may be embarrassed or afraid to share their story and may not be likely to join this study.

There are limitations conducting a case study. Case study attempts to provide an in-depth study on one person, group, or event. In a case study, nearly every aspect of the subject’s life and history is analyzed to seek patterns and causes of behavior (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). This study only focuses on one higher education institution at a Hispanic Serving Institution in a rural area of Chicago. Furthermore, I am looking at first- and second-year students who are more than able to recall their first-year program experience, but I am unable to speak about the long-term impact of their participation.

Conclusion

This chapter outlined what I wanted to complete for my doctoral dissertation. I discussed the issues Latino/a students endure during transition from high school to college and their personal experience with first-year programs. I examined relevant literature about first-year college students, first-year Latino/a student’s, first-year programs, and explain the function of a HSIs. I presented the theoretical framework guiding this research—Museus’s (2014) CECE model. This framework further pinpoints Latino/a transition to college and experience with first-year programs.
CHAPTER 2
A CASE STUDY ON FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE PROGRAMS AND THE IMPORTANCE OF SENSE OF BELONGING FOR LATINX STUDENTS

Since 2020, the Hispanic population in the United States reached 62.1 million, accounting for 19% of all U.S. residents and making it the nation’s second largest racial group (Funk & Lopez, 2022). In 2020, over 20% of U.S. undergraduate college students were Latino, the second largest ethnic group enrolled at the undergraduate level (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2018). Latino students are increasingly engaging in the college search (Mora, 2022); however, they are underrepresented in higher education and earn degrees at lower rates than other ethnic and racial groups (Adelman, 2002; National Center for Education Statistics, 2023).

Forty-four percent of Latinx students who attend college are first-generation college students and many come from low-income families (Marlow et al., 2020). These students face a plethora of barriers when they transition from high school to college. The most common barriers for this population is a lack of academic resources, family considerations, and individual factors such as a not feeling sense of belonging to a college campus. Academic resources refer to the understanding of student support groups, faculty mentorship, and knowledge of research skills. Familial considerations include low income, immigrant status, and language that create an initial barrier in the overall students’ academic achievement (Hausmann et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2012).
A sense of belonging is important to students which provides support/guidance so they can feel welcomed and are included in the campus environment (Trujillo & Tanne, 2014). Additionally, students need mentors to guide them through the first years of college. There is a lot to learn about college and having a mentor can help assist students in understanding various offices and their function at any given college/university. Mentors for Latinx students help them adjust to college life, encourage involvement in student activities and organizations (Braskamp et al., 2015; Soria & Stebleton, 2013). This encourages the mentee to learn from experiences the mentor has went through thus providing an example for the mentee to learn from. Moreover, students can receive encouragement and academic help from their mentors.

First-year programs have played an important role in supporting Latinx students transition from high school to college (Hunter, 2006). The body of research on first-year programs has expanded considerably over the years, providing substantial evidence persistence and degree attainment has increased as first-year programs have been implemented (Hunter, 2006). Evidence also suggests first-year programs have benefits for students, irrespective of differences in gender, ethnicity, age, and major (Excelencia in Education, 2020). First-year programs encourage additional positive outcomes, including increased student–faculty interaction, increased involvement in cocurricular activities, and increased academic satisfaction. The overall purpose of first-year programs is to aid students by providing holistic advising, leadership skills, and academic success (Hunter, 2006).

With the increase of Latinx students enrolling in postsecondary education, there has also been an increase in Hispanic serving institutions (HSIs). HSIs are defined in federal law as an accredited, degree-granting, public or private nonprofit institution of higher education with 25%
or more total undergraduate Hispanic or Latino full-time equivalent student enrollment (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2018). About 75% of all Latinx undergraduate students attend an HSI (Mazyck, 2014). HSIs can receive federal funding support from the Department of Education through competitive institutional grants, which are used to serve students from all ethnicities through various support programs and scholarships. Some of these support programs include first-year programs (Musoba & Placide, 2013) and mentoring programs (Castro Samayoa, 2018) supporting Latinx students and help foster a sense of belonging (Arroyo & Santiago, 2023).

I established pseudonyms for the institution used in this study. Established in the late 1970s, LSP at MWHSI was designed to assist Latinx first-year students with their transition to college. MWHSI is a public university and HSI located in Chicago. The student body consisted of 37% of Latinx students according to the Fall 2020 enrollment data. LSP supported the academic, professional, and personal growth of students during their first 2 years of college while they decided on an academic major. Although the program has been in existence for several decades, there has not been sufficient student outcome data showing how the program supports first-year Latinx student’s transition to college.

The purpose of this case study was to understand how a first-year student support program, LSA, contributes to the experience of Latinx students as they transition from high school to college and their involvement with first-year programs. I used the culturally engaging campus environments (CECE) model (Museus, 2014) to guide this study. Museus (2014) asserted creation of CECE at specific institutions results in a greater sense of belonging, increased self-efficacy, stronger academic motivation, intent to persist, higher academic
performance and ultimately increased likelihood of completion. Specifically, this study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. How does participating in LSP contribute to a sense of belonging for a successful transition to college?

2. What are the experiences of Latinx students as they transition from high school to college?

3. What culturally relevant and culturally responsive support does LSP offer their students?

Providing students with specialized academic, counseling, and mentoring support can facilitate the socialization process and enhance the student transition and completion of their first year. The results of this study conveyed how first-year program are essential in the transition for first-generation Latino students.

**Definitions of Terms**

The following is a list of terms to provide common language and understanding of the researcher’s perspective and, unless indicated otherwise, how terminology was used throughout the dissertation.

*Hispanic/Latino* is an ethnic identity category defined as “Hispanic or Latino: Persons of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture, regardless of race” (Rodriguez, 2017). Hispanic and Latino are not used by all persons, nor are they used interchangeably by members within the Hispanic/Latino community but are used in this study due to the ethnicity reporting required by the university. I used the term scholars in their work, but otherwise I used Hispanic/Latino. Scholars have had discussions about the differences and
similarities of the term Hispanic/Latino and interested readers can read those sources (Marrow, 2003; Rodriguez, 2017).

**Latinx** is a term used to identify a group to describe individuals in the United States who have Latin American roots. This term is intended to be gender-inclusive for anyone of Latin-American descent who does not identify within a gender binary. Moreover, there are various forms of understanding and (mis)using of the term Latinx. The term Latinx has created (dis)comfort, ambiguity, and disingenuous arguments related to language, grammar, phonetics, religion, and identity politics (Salinas & Lozano, 2019). Moreover, the Latinx term allows people to ask questions about gender, language, and inclusion (Salinas, 2019).

**First-generation** is a term used to describe a student whose parent(s) did not complete a 4-year college or university degree. This also includes the parent of the student may completed some college but did not earn a degree from a 4-year college or university. In this case, the student is still considered first-generation.

**Sense of belonging** is a sense of being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by others in the academic classroom and of feeling oneself to be an important part of the life and activity of the class. Students’ sense of belonging has been identified as a potential lever to promote success, engagement, and well-being in college (Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

### Review of Relevant Literature

Students who are first in their family to pursue college experience difficulty transitioning from high school to college. These difficulties include not experiencing a sense of belonging to a college campus, having challenges related to building personal and academic relationships with both students and faculty, needing to understand how to navigate one’s personal life as a young
adult, and figuring out how to steer all the important decisions in college such as choosing a major and overall finances. Some of these difficulties contribute to a delayed entry into college and sometimes minimizes the chances first generation students ever attend (Chen, 2005; Choy et al., 2000). Further, some of the lowest college completion rates are among Latino first-generation college students (Fry & Lopez, 2012). When students transition from high school to college, many factors contribute to the overall college experience and can affect their ability to graduate. There are multiple stressors involved in adapting to a new environment, learning new courses, facing new challenges, and developing new relationships. This literature review discusses the transition to college, sense of belonging, first-year program experience programs, and HSIs.

**Transition to College**

The transition to college is particularly challenging for many students because it involves simultaneous changes in lifestyle, routines, responsibilities, and, often, geographical relocation (Dyson & Renk, 2006). Furthermore, first-year college students often experience doubts about their academic abilities and social acceptance, along with changes in their academic and social self-concepts (Dyson & Renk, 2006; Pittman & Richmond, 2008). When students move away from home to attend school, they lose connections to family, friends, peer groups, favorite activities, and social support networks. Many students may feel a sense of homesickness due to finding themselves in a new and unfamiliar environment (Pittman & Richmond, 2008). Students experience difficulties that, if unresolved, can lead to homesickness, depression, and dissatisfaction with their decision to attend college (Vershuur et al., 2004).
As college enrollment is projected to continue to grow (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017), the number of first-generation students attending college may be greater now than ever before. First-generation students often receive less encouragement and assistance regarding academic achievement and may feel less competent in handling academic challenges in college (Pascarella et al., 2004). The need for community is essential for first-generation students so they can receive support to be successful in college. Establishing connections are critical to a successful transition to college, and even more for first-generation students. These connections allow the student to feel connected to a group of students who are then able to provide encouragement when facing academic challenges. Moreover, students begin to feel a sense of belonging to a college campus/community.

There are a variety of factors that influence the college-choice process and how successful students are when transitioning from high school to college. The most important factor in determining successful student, regardless of their ethnicity, in making the transition from high school to college is the “academic intensity and quality of one’s high school curriculum” (Adelman, 2002, p. 40). Research has shown Latino students tend to graduate from high schools not resourced to adequately prepare them for college-level work. Latino students are largely first-generation and confront an increasing barrier to complete a college degree because they are disproportionately represented among first-generation college-goers and more likely to combine work and school, often taking on family responsibilities while enrolled (Swail et al., 2004; Tienda, 2009).

To make a successful transition from high school to college students need to take “classes that ask more of them, rather than less of them in writing, research, and other key skill areas”
(Conley, 2008, p. 5). Students need to acquire early in their educational journey the knowledge, cognitive skills, and habits of mind essential to postsecondary success. With these skills, students can be successful as they start their journey in college. Latino students who are academically and socially involved experience a smoother transition to college and are more likely to return for their sophomore year (Tinto, 2008).

**Sense of Belonging**

A sense of belonging reflects the feeling one fits in, belongs to, or is a member of the academic community in question. Viewing oneself as being accepted within a discipline rather than on its fringes is a sense of belonging. It validates one’s personal belief that your presence and contributions within the academic community demonstrate your value as an accepted member (Trujillo & Tanne, 2014).

The literature has defined a sense of belonging as being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by others in the academic classroom and of feeling oneself to be an important part of the life and activity of the class. Students’ sense of belonging has been identified as a potential lever to promote success, engagement, and well-being in college (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). A sense of belonging reflects the feeling one fits in, belongs to, or is a member of the academic community in question. Viewing oneself as being accepted within a discipline rather than on its fringes is a sense of belonging. It validates one’s personal belief that their presence and contributions in the academic community demonstrate their value as an accepted member (Trujillo & Tanne, 2014).

Sense of belonging on college and university campuses plays a critical role in retaining all students at a given institution (Braskamp et al., 2015; Soria & Stebleton, 2013). The
development of a sense of belonging is particularly important for underserved, marginalized, and underrepresented student populations because they encounter a higher number of roadblocks and greater levels of systemic discrimination than their more privileged peers (Soria & Stebleton, 2013; Tovar & Simon, 2010). When students sense they do not belong or they have been rejected by members of the campus community, it can affect their ability to adjust to the academic and social challenges of college life. Both explicit and implied community and structural biases can generate and reinforce beliefs of who does and does not belong on campus (Soria & Stebleton, 2013). Students who feel their need for belonging is met by their institution are much more likely to feel at home and valued at their institution and thus form a stronger and committed bond to said institution (Schreiner, 2013; Tovar & Simon, 2010).

A student’s precollege characteristics, background traits, and upbringing can serve a significant role in the decision to enroll in a college or university, to become academically and socially involved at college or university, and ultimately to commit to earning a degree from their college or university (Hausmann et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2012). Social class and socioeconomic background, in particular, are related to a student’s formation of a sense of belonging in college, which can predict their adjustment to their new environment, perception of quality of social and academic experiences at their institution, and academic achievement (Soria & Stebleton, 2013). Students who enter a college or university can mark a difficult period of insecurity and instability for first-year students, particularly first-generation Latino students. During this time, many first-year students move away from home to pursue higher education and are often separated from their families and their known support networks (O’Keeffe, 2013).
The effect of campus racial climates is another element that directly impacts Latino students. The current literature on students’ perceptions of the college environment has shown the institutional climate for diversity can have a considerable impact on students’ academic and social lives (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). According to Smedley et al.’s (1993) study, which included Chicano and other Latino students, scholars reported students on predominantly White campuses face specific stresses that exhibit considerable psychological sensitivity to the campus social climate, including interpersonal tensions with White students and faculty (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). As such, Latino students can feel alone and may end up going through their college journey lacking a connection to the college campus. When a student perceives and feels a sense of belonging to their campus community, the greater the likelihood of their success as a student at that campus (Stebleton et al., 2014). Evidence has shown first-year programs can be particularly important at helping students, including Latino students, increase their sense of belonging in college (Johnson et al., 2007).

**First-Year Program Experience Programs**

The first year of college is the foundation upon which students’ entire educational experience is constructed. Because of the importance of the first year, many colleges and universities have implemented first-year experience programs to support students transition to college (Hunter, 2006; Messineo, 2012). First-year experience programs tend to include new-student orientation, welcome week, and first-year seminars. Moreover, these programs facilitate student transition to college and build their skill and character development to help them successfully navigate their college experience (Hunter, 2006). The first year is an important time
to introduce students to critical issues, encourage value exploration, examine identity, develop civic responsibility, and deal with diversity (Goodman & Pascarella, 2006; Hunter 2006).

The popularity of first-year programming has ebbed and flowed from its inception in the 1920s through numerous iterations in the 1960s (Hunter, 2006). The introduction of University 101 at the University of South Carolina in 1972 has been widely considered the starting point for first-year seminars and programs. As a result, many institutions across the nation have implemented their own version of first-year programs to assist students in transitioning from high school to college.

Institutions that achieve excellence in first-year student success employ a wide variety of initiatives. Programs and initiatives commonly considered to be a part of an institution’s first-year experience efforts include, but are certainly not limited to, recruitment and admissions efforts; new student orientation programs; welcome week activities, rituals, and traditions; first-year, summer, or common reading programs and first-year seminars (Clark & Cundiff, 2011; Hunter, 2006). All of these initiatives are organized to encourage students to enroll in a first-year program so they can gain the skills to be successful in their college journey. Student learning and success is a campus wide responsibility. The days of leaving students’ intellectual development to the faculty and everything else to student affairs offices is long past (Clark & Cundiff, 2011; Goodman & Pascarella, 2006).

Institutions across all sectors of higher education are looking to increase student success by focusing on first-year programs to increase student retention (Hunter, 2006; & Messineo, 2012). The fierce competition among institutions to admit students has caused admission offices to communicate with prospective students frequently to help aid students in their decision-
making process. Student involvement and connections to the campus community are factors positively correlated with retention, so institutional initiatives are being created to increase student involvement and enhance feelings of community on campus (Messineo, 2012). Thus, ties in the sense of belonging to the importance of first year programs to retain students in college.

### Theoretical Framework

I employed Museus’s (2014) CECE model as the theoretical framework for this study. The CECE model outlines the elements of campus environments necessary for students, especially those from marginalized backgrounds, to thrive in college and explains how those environments positively affect student outcomes in higher education. The main point of the CECE model is to show students need a sense of belonging and a positive environment to excel in college. The model also accounts for precollege inputs, such as demographic factors (e.g., race, socioeconomic status), academic dispositions (e.g., academic motivation, academic self-efficacy), and academic preparation that may shape students’ matriculation into and journey through college.

The CECE model is comprised of nine indicators split into two categories (Museus, 2014). The first category, cultural relevance, is comprised of five indicators: cultural familiarity, culturally relevant knowledge, cultural community service, cultural validation, meaningful cross-cultural engagement. The second category, cultural responsiveness, is comprised of four indicators: collectivist cultural orientations, humanized educational environments, proactive philosophies, and holistic support. The support these students need is an outlet where they can express their frustrations and seek the help in relation to college assignments and everyday life.
The support from a program at the college and mentors such as professors or staff can aid the student to be successful as they journey through college.

Other studies have also used CECE to examine campus environments at minority serving institutions, including HSIs (García, 2016; Museus et al., 2018). The CECE model was a right fit for this study as I looked at students’ experiences both external (family influences and finances) and internal factors (sense of belonging and academic performance). As students transition to college they come from different backgrounds and need a place to connect with others. This speaks to campuses having spaces dedicated specifically for diverse students and opportunities to connect with peers, staff and faculty who share a common background. LSP at MWHSI provided this for students. For the purposes of this study, I focused primarily on five of the nine indicators—cultural familiarity, culturally relevant knowledge, culturally validating environments, humanized environments, and holistic support. These indicators guided interview questions and provide a grounding for discussing findings and recommendations.

**Methodology**

In this study, I used a qualitative case study methodological approach. A case study is an intensive analysis of an individual unit, such as a person or community, stressing developmental factors in relation to environment (Jones et al., 2006). Qualitative case studies in particular provide researchers the opportunity to explore issues through variety of perspectives, allowing the phenomenon to be understood more deeply (Baxter & Jack, 2008). As such, this design was suitable because of a focus on Latino students and their transition to college within a particular first-year program at a particular institution; both of these programmatic and institutional contexts are important factors shaping these students’ experiences. Next, I describe the research
site and participants and discuss how I collected and analyzed data. I then explain how I ensured research quality and share my positionality.

**Research Site and Participants**

Founded in 1867, MWHSI has had a rich tradition of educational innovation and prides itself on preparing teachers and administrators who make a difference in Chicago. That tradition has continued and expanded to include an array of academic disciplines, allowing the University to embrace fully the community in which it resides. Diversity has been an important factor in the character of MWHSI and in the social fabric of its student body. In 2023, MWHSI had an enrollment of more than 7,000 students; African American, Latino/a, Asian, and Native American students represented roughly 60% of the student body. Of the 7,000, 1,351 or 38% were Latino/a and represent the biggest percentage of students at MWHSI. The school received its federal designation as a HSI in 1997. It has been the longest-standing 4-year public HSI in the Midwest. The HSI funding went to create student facing programs to aid students in tutoring, create student community clubs, and support students who are facing financial hardships. In 2015, MWHSI experienced a budget deficit impacting employees and leading to layoffs. A restructure of departments and combining of programs were done to address the budget issues along with furloughs.

LSP is an academic support services program historically and continually serving Latino students who demonstrate academic potential and may not meet the general University admissions requirements. LSP is also a university-admitting body, responsible for recruiting and admitting students. Students entering the university through general admissions may opt into LSP. Students in this program are given a 2-year adjustment period to meet university academic
requirements. They must actively participate in the assistance programs provided and show evidence of academic progress. Students receive guidance and support from a bilingual and bicultural academic advisor until the requirements to declare a major are met.

The mission of LSP is to increase Latino student access to and success in higher education at MWHSI. The program does this through a holistic and culturally relevant approach to enhance student learning, intercultural competencies and leadership development through excellent programs and services that create a strong university support network for Latino students transitioning to, and within, MWHSI. In addition, the program offers integral information about transitioning and excelling in college, via 3-credit academic transition courses taught by LSP advisors. These courses complement the program’s objectives to provide personal and academic support services designed to increase scholastic achievement, persistence toward graduation, and community building at MWHSI. These seminar courses require students to complete a personal journal reflection, academic planning, and spring semester schedule, a PowerPoint based on the student’s personal journey in education, and a final paper based on their overall reflection from their first semester in college and LSP.

At the time of this study, LSP was comprised of one director and two program specialists. Evelyn and Suyapa were program specialists and had a direct connection to LSP. Both were alumni from LSP and went through the same experienced as students currently in the program. Evelyn and Suyapa both held a master’s degree and were first-generation college students. They understood the different obstacles students face as they transition from high school to college. Moreover, Evelyn and Suyapa were Latina so they were aware of the Latino culture and can meet the needs of students.
The director of the program, Angelica, attended another state university in Illinois and was part of a first-year experience program where she was a first-generation Latina student. Angelica faced many challenges as an immigrant child and persevered to complete a PhD. Angelica was a role model to students and encourage students to go after their dreams. The program has experienced hardships due MWHSI budget issues. LSP has lost employees and funding that has affected their overall operation. The recruiter from LSP was not replaced after the person in the position resigned, which left all the recruitment efforts to the director and two staff members. Normally a program of seven employees, the staff was now three.

**Student Participants and Recruitment**

I selected student participants based on the criteria students self-identified as Latino and first-generation and were currently enrolled in LSP (Patton, 2002). I recruited participants via emails sent by LSP staff and the mentioning of my study in the seminar class by a LSP staff member in hopes of reaching as many participants as possible. The recruitment instruments provided a brief description of the study, eligibility requirements, and what participating entails. I also presented my research to the seminar class and invited students to ask me any questions they had about me or the research. Once I addressed questions, I displayed a QR code so students could complete the interest form. The interest form gathered the demographics of the student such as race, gender, income, current age, and whether they are first-generation. I contacted interested students and setup an in-person or remote interview. The students were incentivized with a $15 amazon gift card for their time in the study. Out of the 13 students who expressed interest, six students participated in this study (see Table 1). All students I interviewed are freshman, first-generation, and come from lower class socioeconomic status.
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<td>Diana</td>
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<td>Lower Class</td>
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**Data Collection and Analysis**

Data were collected through multiple methods (Merriam & Tisdall, 2015; Yin, 2014). First, I conducted semi-structured interviews with two staff members and the director of LSP (see Table 2) and six students from the program. Participants completed a 60-minute interview. For the staff interviews, there were nine questions and one of those questions is around the mission, purpose, and goals of the program (see Appendix C). Students was asked 13 questions about their experience with the transition from high school to college and how LSP helped with that transition (see Appendix D). All interviews were recorded and transcribed using digital technology; transcripts were reviewed and edited to ensure accuracy.

Second, I conducted observations. Observations in qualitative case study research brings richness to the overall data collected (Merriam & Tisdall, 2015), and would be useful for
triangulating the information and data gathered through the interviews, documents, and increase the trustworthiness of the study (Hancock et al., 2017; Merriam & Tisdall, 2015). I observed the seminar course that all LSP students take the first 2 years of the program during week 5 of the semester. This allowed me to see how students are engaging with the curriculum and how the instructor is connecting with the class. Specifically, I paid attention to students’ body language in class, the layout of the classroom, the content the instructor presented, the instructor’s body language, and the interactions students had with each other and the instructor.

Finally, I reviewed documents related to LSP (Merriam & Tisdall, 2015; Yin, 2014). Specifically, the documents I looked at was the course syllabus of the seminar class and the marketing recourses that included academic support to students. Both the syllabus and the marketing materials helped me access what types of resources LSP provided. Moreover, I looked at LSP’s website to see what list of resources were available to prospective students. The director of the program shared with me the LSP Seminar 1 course syllabus.

I began the data analysis process with reading the full text of the interview transcriptions to fully understand the participants’ stories and experiences with the students studied (Merriam, 2009). For this study, I have the transcriptions to see and understand Latino student’s experience when transitioning to college and first-year programs. These findings have been explored throughout the student’s narratives and has displayed the similarities of what Latino students encounter. I highlighted anything that describes a specific phenomenon such as a word, phrase, or sentence to identify common meaning units on the transcript. I used the CECE indicators to inform my coding.
I then connected the preliminary meaning units into final themes (Merriam, 2009). This intentionally connected similar meaning units into broader themes that explain Latino student’s experience when transitioning to college and first-year programs. These meaning units was informed by the CECE model. Next, I created situated narratives, which Merriam (2009) outlined by stating, “This is a basic summary of the psychologically relevant aspects of this particular person’s experience” (p. 200). This reiterated the stories from the participants and highlighted the themes through direct quotes from the transcriptions. From my interaction with the students and reviewing the transcript, I listed common words or phrases among all my interviews. From this list, I then created a description of the students’ experience based on all the interviews I conducted. I compared students’ experiences and stories with themes generated from staff interviews and observations.

Table 2
Staff Participant Demographics

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Participant pseudonym</th>
<th>Job title</th>
<th>Years Worked at MWHSI</th>
<th>First-Generation Student</th>
<th>Attend a first-year experienced program</th>
<th>Alumni of LSP</th>
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Quality and Trustworthiness

I used three strategies to ensure quality and trustworthiness. First, I conducted member checks. Member-checking is an important component of qualitative research study as it ensures
all participants experiences and thoughts are accurately reflected in the findings (Merriam & Tisdall, 2015). Specifically, I used a real-time AI transcription service that recorded each interview and then transcribed the recordings to a word document. I triangulated the student interview data with data collected through staff interviews and documents. In the findings, I present the findings from students and staff together under each theme. Triangulation was used to increase the credibility and dependability of the data collected and analyzed (Merriam & Tisdall, 2015). Lastly, I prioritized consistency throughout the coding process, with participants’ stories, to ensure quality and trustworthiness as I co-constructed and re-storied as the researcher.

**Limitations**

There were a number of notable limitations within this study. I was only able to recruit six participants who were all first-year students. I was unable to recruit sophomore students in LSP. Though the research was done through a theoretical lens of CECE, there may be increased value in the findings from students in LSP who were in their 2nd year at MWHSI. Another limitation of this study was the research took place in the first month of the semester for these students, so future researchers should consider a longer participant observation. Lastly, research completed for this study was done less than 2 years of the COVID-19 global pandemic which impacted students’ feeling, reflections, and mental health.

**Researcher Positionality**

As a first-generation college student, middle-class male of Latino descent, years of lived experiences, identity, and philosophical beliefs have formed me. During my undergraduate years at MWHSI, I sought out to find who I was and what could I contribute to society. When I entered
my master’s program, I was able to identify I would engage in qualitative research with first-generation Latino college students being my area of focus. As a Latino, I could relate and understand the many barriers students face as they transition from high school to college. I hold many of the same identities as my participants and connect with students at MWHSI on a familiar level. As an alumnus of MWHSI, I have engaged with students in my classmates that have experienced similar obstacles as participants in this study. As a previous student and now as an employee, I understand the student body at MWHSI, and I feel comfortable engaging with participants hearing their stories/experiences.

**Findings**

Participants talked about three core experiences related to the high school to college transition. These experiences include having varied college preparation experiences, choosing a college based on affordability, and navigating loneliness and isolation. Participants also described four ways LSP staff provided culturally relevant and culturally responsive support that contributed to their sense of belonging on campus. Specifically, LSP staff saw students as complex and holistic human beings, recognized embedded key information and campus resources into a seminar course, provided proactive and holistic support to students through required advising, and offered opportunities to building meaningful connections among students in the seminar class and across campus. In this section, I first discuss the students’ high school to college transition experiences and then how LSP provided relevant and responsive support to students. I bring together students and staff participants’ perspectives throughout my discussion of findings.
Experiences Transitioning From High School to College

Participants described three experiences related to their transition from high school to college: experienced different levels of college preparation, chose an affordable college option, and experienced loneliness and isolation.

Varied College Preparation Experiences

First, participants described a variety of experiences related to college preparation, related to academic preparedness and how to navigate college. LSP staff described the college preparedness of LSP students. In meeting with the Angelica, Director of LSP, she explained how students who first join the program are not college ready. Angelica stated:

One of the barriers that I’ve seen is academic preparedness. That is one of the big pieces big themes that I experienced myself. Students are not as well prepared for college and they get very discouraged because they find out they have to take developmental classes. So many of the students need to take two semesters or more of developmental reading, writing, and math classes.

Angelica described students often get stuck in these developmental classes, learning material that should have been taught in high school.

Michelle and Melissa, students of LSP, felt prepared for college because they participated in a college readiness seminar class before attending MWHSI. Within this seminar class, teachers gave presentations on how to apply for college, the Free Application for Federal Student Aid application (FAFSA), and how to be successful in college. Some of these tips include the following: read the syllabus, take good notes, find a study partner, become aware of your distractions, get involved within the college community, and always ask questions. Michelle described the seminar she took. Michelle stated:
We had a seminar, and for the half of the year, it would mainly focus on like, college stuff, which was like college applications, statement of goals, and we also went on some college tours. The other half of the year, the seminar class was structured in working on our FAFSA, looking at possible career paths, and we also had group discussions about college and were able to ask any questions.

Later, Michelle shared how valuable the seminar class was for her and how it helped Michelle in preparing for college. Michelle stated, “This seminar helped me as I started at University L. I felt more confident on my first day at MWHSI”.

Melissa participated in a summer transition program (STP) at MWHSI, in which students are allowed to take two courses over the summer for 6 weeks and get college credit. Melissa talked about how within the class they covered material from the course, but they focused heavily on how to be successful in college. The professors had previous students from STP give presentations on ways to take good notes in class, time management, and how to manage your personal life and school expectations. Melissa noted these presentations helped her realize she needs help with time management. Melissa described her experience, “I was part of the summer transition program here at MWHSI and it helped me take two courses and familiar myself with the campus and all the services that MWHSI provides to students.”

Both Melissa and Michelle were the only participants in this study in the summer transition program. They described the useful content covered in these precollege college readiness programs and these programs increased their familiarity with what to expect in college and possible resources on campus and supported their confidence in being college students.

However, other than Melissa and Michelle, no other student participated in a precollege preparation program. College was mentioned a lot in high school, but little to no attention was
given to prepare them for college. Attention was focused primarily on applying to college. Joana, student of LSP, described how her high school approached college. Joana stated:

During my senior year, we talked about college and my school counselor helped me with the application process, but that is it. I did not have the opportunity to have conversations about how college would be like and what to expect.

Joana’s limited experience was similar to what other students experienced. Milo, student of LSP, described the experiences of anxiety and uncertainty related to college. Milo discussed:

When I was in high school, we talked about college and they did help us by making sure we apply to the college we were interested in, but that’s it. I did not have much direction on how college would be like or what I needed to do to better prepare myself. I was very nervous and felt disconnect when I started to visit colleges around the city. I did have some excitement, but at the same time I was experiencing anxiety and was uncertain on what is next.

Although he maintained his excitement to attend college, Milo, similar to other students in this study, wished his high school did more to prepare him, especially what he should expect in college.

**Chose an Affordable College**

Students in the study all had a concern about how they would afford college. Most prevalently, these students were nervous when they started to look at colleges while in high school due to the fact they come from low-income socioeconomic backgrounds. The students were aware of their situation, and many had doubts whether if college was an option for them. Melissa, student of LSP, shared how she wanted to attend another University, but the tuition per semester is what made her look at other options:

I selected MWHSI, because honestly, it was the cheapest option I had. I was planning on going to [another school] for an animation program. But unfortunately, I couldn’t, because it was very expensive. And I honestly my family could not afford it. However, University L, I was able to go for my first year completely free, because my scholarships
paid for everything. So that’s good. And honestly, I have the dream of becoming an illustrator character design working in the art industry.

Nancy, student of LSP, shared why she selected MWHSI and how this decision has helped her financially:

MWHSI is so affordable and my financial aid package helped me pay for most of my tuition. I was unable to attend any other college as I do not have the funds nor does my parents can afford to pay for my college. I am the first in my family to attend college so the whole tuition thing is new to me.

Like other participants, Milo, student of LSP, also shared his struggle with paying for college:

I come from a family that is low income so finding a college that I can afford was challenging as I don’t have a lot of money. My parents can’t afford to pay for my whole tuition so when I was looking at colleges in high school I knew I could not afford any private college or tuition that is high. When I came across MWHSI, I found out that it’s a state university and the tuition was lower than the other colleges I had looked at.

Milo quickly learned because of his socioeconomic status he was limited on the colleges he can apply to. This was also the case with Neida, who said:

I learned about University L from my coworker. Her daughter went to University L and she told me that they helped her a lot in Program P at University L. I wasn’t considering like universities because I didn’t really have like the grades or you know my family didn’t have the money to go to a four-year university. My financial aid package is what is helping me pay for college.

While talking with participants, their families cannot support them while in college, so they are alone. All students work part-time jobs and work an average of 10–20 hours per week. The earnings these students make is not enough to help with their tuition. All participants of the study noted they quickly learned how expensive college can be and if it was not for the Pell Grant, some said there not sure if college would be an option for them. Of the students interviewed, they all discussed the financial state of their families and were concern of attending college would put the entire family in a hardship. Overall, after talking to each participant the stressors
of paying for college is an ongoing stressor for these students and hope they can complete their studies at MWHSI.

**Felt Loneliness and Isolated**

Many participants described the need for connection with their classmates, institution, and within MWHSI. Moreover, all the students I talked with all want a connection with classmates as they did back in high school. Nancy, student of LSP, described the loneliness she encountered during her transition, as she said:

> The feeling of being alone is what shocked me the most. When I graduated from high school that is when it hit me that now I’m an adult and it’s me attending college alone. I was used to all my friends being around me during my high school years. I felt as if I did not belong, no one tells you about the loneliness one feels when they enter college.

Nancy was used to the structure of high school, going from class to class with friends and knowing what each year entailed. She was accustomed to having the support from her classmates to navigate high school and when she started at MWHSI, she quickly noticed she was completely on her own. Nancy also noted the high school she attended did not prepare her for college. While meeting with the staff of LSP, students lack a sense of community to MWHSI and within the program. Angelica, Director of LSP, expressed her concern about students not being connected. Angelica stated:

> So post COVID a lot of our students have a lot of anxiety and depression. They’re checking out, they’re not being responsive, you know, and sometimes early on. We’re trying to see how we’re going to leverage resources, how are we going to try to work together to try to support the students early on because typically, after their first big assignment that they perceive as a big assignment in class. That’s when they check out and stop coming to class or not communicating. They get worried, I guess, like, what are they going to say if they didn’t do it? It’s like this life or death type of thing for them. They don’t realize We’re transitioning you, you can we can work it out. They get scared and they go hide out.
Since the COVID-19 global pandemic, many students grew accustomed to being alone at home on a computer taking classes and lost the skill for human interaction. This loss has caused many of Program P students to easily fall into depression and have high amounts of anxiety.

**Providing Culturally Relevant and Responsive Supports**

LSP staff understood their student population well; all three staff members identified with their students or had similar experiences with their students. As such, the staff provided supports in four culturally relevant and responsive ways to support students’ sense of belonging during their transition to college. Even so, LSP staff also discussed how challenges remain to better support students. Where applicable, these challenges are included in discussion.

**Recognizing Students as Complex and Holistic Human Beings**

LSP staff recognized students in their program as individuals with complex lives and backgrounds. All three staff members discussed their students with nuance. For example, Evelyn, staff of LSP, talked about how MWHSI students have significantly different experiences than other students at MWHSI. Evelyn stated:

> Our students coming from difficult situations, neighborhoods, family upbringing. They’re not your typically 18 year old that, you know, breezed through elementary in high school, and had parental support throughout the entire process, and then go to college with parents that went to college, right? Those are not our students; our students live in like bullet prone areas.

The staff understood these students navigated traumas and all are enduring some level of financial stress. Evelyn discussed these barriers. Evelyn stated:

> But some of those barriers are trauma. I’ve seen students come in, that have experienced sexual assault or homelessness in the foster care system. Just, I mean, run the gamut of so
many challenges that students come in with, and I can’t even pinpoint to what is the most prevalent, right and so for all of them, finances are a barrier. Every single one of them. These barriers add complexity to how LSP could support students with limited institutional resources. Angelica and her staff each taught a seminar class in which LSP students are enrolled. The staff were able to connect with students in a smaller setting. Within the seminar, students submitted journal entries where they wrote about their educational journey and express the challenges and success they experienced. This was an opportunity for the staff to see where the students were and what resources LSP could provide them.

The seminar course appeared to be explicitly designed to advance specific learning outcomes, beyond accessing necessary resources and supports for the college transition. For example, the syllabus provided the following course description: “This course focuses on developing students’ self-awareness/self-assessment, promote a better understanding and appreciation for education, cultural, and cultivate and enhancing students’ learning organization and critical thinking skills.” Example guest lectures focused on topics such as the history of education in the city and how that shaped Latino college students’ experiences, the history of Latinx students in higher education, and an introduction to HSI. These scaffolded lectures offer LSP students the opportunity to learn more about the history and contemporary contexts shaping Latino students’ education and to connect their experiences with these contexts.

**Information and Resources Embedded in Program Structure**

Students were required to take a seminar class, where, in addition to developing skills, such as critical thinking and self-awareness skills, students were proactively exposed to resources and were encouraged to seek help from different areas of MWHSI. Throughout the
semester, guest speakers and workshops from resource areas such as the student counseling center, tutoring services, and financial aid, attended the seminar class to share important information with students. The seminar course was also structured in a way that provided resources and assignments in a “just in time” fashion. For example, students were required to complete a spring semester planning assignment due a few weeks before they were able to register for classes.

In addition to the seminar class, the staff of LSP offered a scholarship students could apply for to help offset college expenses. The scholarship had limited funding and on average helps around three to four students per semester. Currently, an endowment was being created for LSP by the educational leadership program, higher education concentration at MWHSI to provide additional financial resources for students in LSP. The creation of this endowment was an assignment for students in the educational leadership master’s program in which they were tasked to create a scholarship assisting first-generation college students. The graduate students felt led to help LSP as many of them identified with the students in the program. The students launched a fundraising event in 2023 to start the endowment. Angelica was thrilled to have the endowment created so they can help more students who struggle to pay their tuition. This was an amazing opportunity where LSP can reach many students as possible within the constraints of the available funding in the endowment.

**Proactive and Holistic Support Through Required Advising**

LSP staff understood students’ experiences and how those experiences may impact students’ ability or capacity to do well in school. For example, Angelica, Director of LSP, described, “Our students work too many hours. Not all of them, but when they start with us in
the fall many are looking for jobs if they do not already have one. “Many of these students who work on average 20 hours per week. Angelica further noted, “We’ve seen it over and over, students work too many hours and lose sight of their studies. When they are in probation, they’ll finally reduce their load or we try to tell them before they lose their financial aid.” In this example, Angelica described a clear tie between doing well academically and working to pay for school.

Understanding this type of connection has led the staff to proactively check in with students multiple times during the first semester. The check-ins were required the first year of the program to make sure students were on target. Moreover, these check-in sessions were a way staff could help students avoid certain challenges. Angelica discussed how these check-in meetings allowed the staff to be proactive. Angelica stated:

The fall semester we check in with our students. We have like this whole series of questions that we ask, how far is your commute because you know, that’s going to be one of the challenges if they live in hour and a half away and then the winter comes and they don’t feel as motivated to keep commuting because it takes them 2, 3 hours to get here in the winter. We advise the students to be aware of the classes they are registering for.

Through these check-in sessions, the staff in LSP noticed many students do not advocate for themselves and struggle with balancing work and school which has caused many students to be placed on academic probation. Angelica described the challenges she has observed. Angelica stated:

Our students won’t go to tutoring. It’s very hard for them. Right. It’s very hard for them to feel like they should go ask for help. That’s been one of the biggest challenges I have seen. And we’re trying to see how we can find ways to bring these resources to them. When they realize that students may be experiencing trouble, staff proactively advise them to seek help or access resources to avoid more dire consequences, such as losing financial aid.
Staff build meaningful relationships with students during these check-ins. Michelle, student of LSP, shared:

Since I began the program, I feel connected. What helped was the connection that was established during the summer with my LSP advisor. I am really connected to my advisor in Program P, she has helped me understand the importance of picking the correct general education courses that will connect with my major.

For Michelle, these meetings extended from the initial encounter with her LSP advisor but also helped her feel connected to the program.

Opportunity to Build Meaningful Connections in Seminar Class and Across Campus

A significant support LSP offered was an opportunity to build meaningful relationships among students within the program and across campus. LSP students had access to a peer mentor who has gone through the program. Moreover, at the beginning of the seminar class, a team building exercise was used to get students involved and build connection. All of these efforts were made so students can find a sense of community to their classmates and University. Milo, student of LSP, explained how helpful LSP has been. Milo stated:

Yeah, I feel like it’s helping me and feel like this program has been very like inclusive and inviting just overall like it any anyone should like join this program because it just opens your eyes to a bunch of things that we didn’t even learn in high school.

In addition to covering material he wished he learned before college, Milo also mentioned the inclusivity and inviting environment in LSP that helped him. Participants are thankful to be a part of MWHSI and in LSP.

Overall, all participants were drawn to LSP due to their interaction with the director and staff. They welcomed the students and provided the students with a sense they will be taken care at LSP. Participants ensure students they are going to help them every step of the way as they
transition to LSP. Other students discussed how LSP helped them develop meaningful
relationships with other students in the program and how that extends to relationships with others
outside of the program. Melissa, student of LSP, spoke about her classmates in the seminar class
and how they kept one another accountable. Melissa stated:

Well, I really get the support from my friends most of the time in LSP. And I like to think
I’m the most proactive in my group of friends. With my friend in my English class I will
tell her like, remember, we have two passages to read. And the essays due on this certain
date. And she will obviously take note of it, or anything like that. And then with another
colleague in my Japanese class I will remind him to do his homework. So, reminding
them kind of helps me feel reminded. I enjoy the community I am building within my
classes.

In this quote, Melissa also talked about the community she was finding at MWHSI and how it
was helping her to connect with other students and she was now interested in the various clubs at
MWHSI. At first, Melissa was nervous about starting college as she was all alone and did not
know anyone. She was longing for community and was happy she found it in MWHSI within
LSP.

For some students, their connections in LSP was one facet of their support network.
Nancy, student of LSP, described some meaningful relationships across campus and outside of
school. Nancy stated:

I met a MWHSI senior at the summer orientation that I kept in touch with, and she has
generously took her time and answered my questions and showed me around the
university. The advice I got from everyone at the university, family, and coworkers has
helped me feel more secure. I am more confident that I’m in college.

The connection Nancy had with the peer from MWHSI helped her formalize herself with the
institution along with LSP. As I talked with Nancy, she was able to relate to the peer as she
herself was a first-generation student and they both experienced similar challenges. Nancy also
noted she received additional support from her family and coworkers. Nancy stated:
My colleagues at work, along with my mom and dad, has helped me with this transition. My colleagues at work has shared with me apps and websites to order affordable textbooks and has shared ways to organize myself so I can turn assignments on time. I am so fortunate to have the support system I have as this helped with my anxiety.

With the help from her family and coworkers, Nancy had a positive transition to college and feels connected to her community. Despite efforts to reach out to and connect with students, Angelica and the LSP staff were finding students were still struggling to connect and are looking for new ways to engage students. Angelica saw students “check out” or otherwise not respond to check-in requests before the COVID-19 global pandemic, but it has increased drastically once students returned to campus. Angelica also mentioned, “It’s hard to bring the students back after they have checked out and we have experienced that a lot this past year.” Getting students to engage back in the program and with MWHSI has been an ongoing issue for Angelica and her staff.

**Discussion**

Overall, this case study showed participants shared common yet different experiences as they transition from high school to college (Dyson & Renk, 2006). One of the common experiences was the lack of knowledge these students knew about college. The variation of experiences was how much exposure to knowledge about applying to and navigating college participants had. Most participants described having no other programmatic support aside from participating in LSP. High school participants attended promoted college and helped with the admission process but lacked foundational college knowledge which resulted in students having to deal with high amounts of anxiety. Few participants also had the opportunity to participate in a precollege seminar at their high schools focused on college preparation.
In this study, some students also participated in a summer transition program (STP) at MWHSI. Within STP students participated in interactive and fun activities to help connect with other new students and prepare them for college life. These activities helped students create new friendships and learn from one another in and outside of the classroom. STP helped students build confidence by participating in college life and academics during the summer. The one downfall was STP was limited by funding from MWHSI, so not all new students in LSP could take advantage of this opportunity. As such, the students who did not participate in STP or receive support from their high school in their transition to college described experiencing many challenges.

The few students who participated in a precollege seminar hosted by their high school, the STP, and LSP were the only ones to describe their feelings of confidence starting and navigating college. Taken together, this finding adds to the literature that perhaps a trio of transition programs including a precollege seminar, a summer transition program, and a first-year experience program could together ease the transition from high school to college for first-generation Latino students.

Findings from this study also add to the current literature by shedding light on how limited institutional funding can prohibit students from attending a program showed to assist students personally and academically and staff who work to support students. The limited funding for a STP and the inconsistent and lack of institutional funding for LSP limits the number of students served. This lack of institutional support is also forcing staff to seek out philanthropic opportunities to support their students. Existing literature on transition programs has rarely discussed these institutional challenges. Findings from this study also highlight how a
targeted, first-year experience program is structured in ways to support first-generation Latino students.

LSP creates a sense of belonging through the seminar class with scaffolded learning and university resources, and one on one academic advising. Although, the seminar class and advising is used by LSP to foster a sense of belonging, there can be additional efforts made at the beginning of the program so students feel included. This finding adds to the literature of first-year experience programs as it describes how LSP can build a sense of belonging for first-generation Latino students by thinking outside the box to assist the students of this generation.

Although this study did not set out to examine the impact of the COVID-19 global pandemic, findings also shed light on how first-year, first-generation Latino students were impacted by the COVID-19 global pandemic due to the timing of this project. LSP staff described worsened isolation and mental health among the recent cohort of students and their desires to better reach these students. This finding suggests a sense of belonging may look different for students impacted by the pandemic and may require different resources.

Findings from this study also add to existing literature about how a sense of belonging can be fostered in first-year experience programs. Sense of belonging validates one’s belief of being accepted, valued, and included by others in any settings especially the classroom (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). To be included and known is a basic human need. While talking with students in this study, it was evident there was a need to feel welcomed to a classroom and create connection with other students. Some of the students in this study shared how the connection they once had with friends in high school was lost as they transition to college. Because of this, students feel disconnected from their peers in the classroom and at LSP.
As I talked with LSP staff, they were aware of the struggles students face in finding a sense of belonging. The staff embodied CECE indicators as they supported LSP students, especially culturally responsive indicators. The staff were proactive as they met the students where they were and found ways to best serve student needs. This was done by creating a space for students on their one-on-one check-ins with the staff and in the seminar class. A great amount of time was devoted in talking with students to ensure they were given the resources needed to feel supported and included in the program and MWHSI. The program embodied these characteristics to create an environment that supported first-year Latino students. This type of support was not seen in first-year experience programs/sense of belonging literature. The literature has not discussed being culturally relevant or responsive within support program to create a sense of belonging for Latino students.

**Future Research**

For future research, a study can be done to look at students who are not part of a first-year experience program to see what resources and support they receive as they transition to college. Future studies should also include students beyond their first year to understand the lasting influence of first-year experience and other transition programs. Other studies might consider different types of institutions, including non-HSIs and institutions differently resourced than MWHSI. A program evaluation of LSP at MWHSI can be helpful to assess program effectiveness, and highlight methods of program improvement. This evaluation can be used to see what additional resources such as staffing can be added to serve more students. Affording college has been one of the ongoing issues in higher education; students have found it difficult to pay their tuition at MWHSI each year. A case study conducted with MWHSI faculty, staff, and
administration can be done to identify recommendations for ways the university can provide tuition assistance to students who are lower income and increase enrollment retention rates.

**Implications for Practice**

Because sense of belonging has a critical role in retaining students at a given institution (Braskamp et al., 2015; Soria & Stebleton, 2013), it is important for folks in academia to revisit how intuitions are continuing creating a sense of belonging for students. Resources such campus centers, student activities, and faculty engagement with students needs to be a priority of university agents. Creating a sense of belonging for students does not only lay in the hands of faculty, but the whole university community. The development of a sense of belonging is particularly important for underserved, marginalized, and underrepresented student populations because they encounter a higher number of roadblocks and greater levels of systemic discrimination (Soria & Stebleton, 2013; Tovar & Simon, 2010). This study confirms sense of belonging does matter to students and its part of their success in college. Below is a list of recommendations to enhance a sense of belonging for Latinx students:

- Bring Latin Field Experts into Classrooms to enrich students’ learning experiences
- Celebrate Cultural Identities of Latinx Students by allowing the classroom to become a space for students to express their cultural identities
- Educators can prioritize communication and engagement with students to keep an open connection with students so they feel included and heard
- Administrators need to fully fund programs such as LSP so there are sufficient staff to meet the needs of students
- Additional scholarships need to be available to students attending HSIs to encourage students to attend college

Preparing students for college goes beyond having students attend freshman orientation over the summer. As outlined in this study, many students are not prepared for college. Students
find transitioning to college challenging as it involves simultaneous changes in lifestyle, routines, responsibilities, and, often, geographical relocation (Dyson & Renk, 2006). Universities need to be on the same page to prepare students in their transition to college. One way to address this issue is to continue communications with students and offer resources such as workshops, student success departments, tutoring, staff/faculty mentoring program, and student events. All these efforts help aid students to gain new friendships, sharpen academic skills, promote self-awareness, advocate for oneself, and causes the student to be successful in college.

**Conclusion**

Overall, the findings from this study reinforced the need for first-year experience programs to aid students in their transition to college. Fostering a sense of belonging for students in their transition to college is essential to student’s success. In this study, LSP was limited in funding and staff, which impacted students and the future of the program. University agents must proactively prioritize hiring, and retaining, LSP staff and students to continue the longevity of this program. LSP has been active for more than 50 years and has helped many Latino students succeed in college. This study also confirmed how every student goes through a transition period into college and what intuitions can do to help these students have a smooth transition possible
CHAPTER 3
SCHOLARLY REFLECTION

The journey of pursuing a doctorate was always a desire of mine, but I knew the degree would be challenging to complete. Many times, I considered if I could do it. In Spring 2019, I found out I could complete my doctorate degree with tuition assistance from my Civil Service waiver, in which I was only responsible for paying fees and not tuition. This opportunity opened my eyes, and I thought, “who knows when I will ever get this chance again.” So, I took a chance and applied to the EdD program for the Fall 2020 cohort. Little did I realize the world would encounter a global pandemic. With the uncertainty of the world and its condition, I started at Northern Illinois University (NIU) with other brave students who decided not to drop out, but instead persevere and pursue completing our doctorate.

As I started the EdD program, I confronted imposter syndrome many times within the 1st year. I often asked myself if my writing was at the level required of a doctoral student. This only went away as I entered the 2nd year of the program. Moreover, the ongoing pandemic and the loss of my father due to pancreatic cancer took a toll on my mental health. There were many times I thought, why not give up and be happy with what I have already accomplished? However, I am a fighter, and what I do best is to keep showing up and lean on my classmates and professors to carry me through difficult times. I regained my focus in Fall 2021 and decided to continue in the program.
In the second year of the program, I began to look into my research topic and see what resonated with me. During my undergraduate years, I attended a state Hispanic Serving Institution where many of my classmates at the time struggled as they transitioned to college. The students did not have the general knowledge of college and needed direction on how to navigate college and desperately needed a support system to assist them as they transition from high school to college. Many of my fellow students in class came from lower-income families, and some were undocumented, which added a layer of difficulty as they attended college. As I entered the EdD program at NIU, I knew I wanted to learn more about Latinx student struggles as they transition from high school to college. Moreover, I wanted to know how MWHSI supported students with whom I once took classes.

As a first-generation college student, I resonated with some of my classmates’ struggles as they transition to college. I was fortunate to attend a summer transition college program at MWHSI, which helped me get situated in college, but not all students have the opportunity I had. LSP at MWHSI quickly stood out to me as it assisted Latinx students in the transition from high school to college and provides institutional support for students. This program is doing great work to help students, and thus felt the best students to interview.

I was unsure how to proceed as I began to think more about my project. It was not until I took the qualitative class that I understood qualitative research and made the decision my project would best fit under this type of research. From here on, my critical qualitative case study, interviewing current students and staff of LSP took off. In the writing proposal course, I was able to put together all the components of my proposal and aimed to defend my proposal in the 1st semester of dissertation hours. Putting together a proposal for my qualitative case study was
difficult as no research is perfect, but I wanted to make sure I had a robust project. I was then reinsured by my Chair, Dr. Mac, I was going to be fine and needed to move forward. I did just that.

After writing my first chapter and making the required edits, I successfully defended my proposal in April 2023. I received institutional review board (IRB) approval and started to recruit students from LSP (see Appendix E). The director of the program invited me to the seminar class so I could present my research to students, and I was able to get 13 students to agree to an interview. Out of the 13 students, I interviewed six students, five women and one man. All the students I talked with were first-year students from public high schools in the city. As I dove deep into interviewing students, my main concern was to make sure I was able to properly get across the students’ experience. I wanted to ensure their voice and experience was displayed in a way that readers can understand how the transition from high school to college affects how successful students are in college.

Upon completing my data collection, I could not secure the 15–20 participants as presented in my proposal. I was concerned the interviews I did conduct would not be sufficient to complete my dissertation. After multiple attempts to recruit more students to my study, I was unsuccessful. I was reassured by my chair, Dr. Mac, I can move forward and continue with writing Chapter 2 with the data I have collected. I learned from the process of research is not perfect, and sometimes what people set out to do can change. As a researcher, one has to be willing to alter their study and work with what they have. I appreciated all the participants and am thankful for the personal stories and experiences the students shared.
The most significant problem during my research was my inability to recruit sophomore students in LSP. I was only able to talk with one male student. I would have preferred to talk with sophomore students and more male students in LSP. This would have allowed me to see how much the students have grown from Year 1 to Year 2. Moreover, I would have liked to see how the first year went for students who were now in the second year of college. This would have been rich data as I could see how students learned from their seminar class in the program and what other resources these students took advantage of in their learning. The interviews I conducted were limited as they only captured first-year students in college for a month or so. If I had interviewed the students at the end of the semester, I believe the data may have contained more robust information I could have used in this dissertation. Due to my timeline of graduating in May 2024, I had to interview students from mid-September to the end of October 2023.

If I could do this study again, I would do some elements differently. Most importantly, I would have interviewed the students at the end of a semester or best at the end of the academic year. I would present my presentation more than once in the seminar class for student attention, potentially sparking their interest to sign up for an interview time with me. In retrospect, I believe creating focus groups may have encouraged the students to open up more because they would have other classmates in the group with the same experience. From this focus group, I think I would collect more robust data I could present in the findings section of this dissertation. Other than these two items, I would not change anything else. I am very proud of this study, the students who participated, the way I persevered through from the loss of my father, what I learned about being a researcher, and how this research is being applied to my professional practice.
The ability to apply my research to my professional role was one of the most motivating and rewarding factors of this dissertation process. At the time of this writing, I worked at a public HSI university in Chicago in the position of graduate school specialist in the Graduate College. In a student facing role, I helped students in violation of graduate policies, graduation requirements, and academic standing, which included probation and academically dismissal from the university. When I meet with students, I get to understand the hardships these students encountered while attending graduate school. My job is to work with the students and develop a graduate academic progress plan (GAP plan) for student readmittance to the university. As I work with students on the GAP plan, I get to understand why these students failed their courses and what resources and or lack of direction was missing that led them to be dismissed.

During this process, I learned Latino students have faced a plethora of challenges when attending college. Because of these challenges, Latino students need help to stay the course and complete their degree. Because I work at an HSI and am Latino myself, I am encouraged to see more people from my community attend college and fight against the societal stigma Latino/a are known for. When I began my EdD program at NIU, I knew my dissertation would concern Latino/a students. As I continued to brainstorm, I quickly thought of LSP at MWHSI. LSP has been at MWHSI for more than 50 years and is a crucial program aiding in Latino/a transition to college the first 2 years of college.

In my current role in the Graduate College at MWHSI, my research directly connected to my professional work. In my role, I have worked with advisors and students from various graduate programs where I could encourage them to engage with undergraduate Latino students
to create a peer mentor relationship. This has allowed student connection to the college community and reach out for help when needed. MWHSI has a higher education master’s program with a sole purpose to prepare leaders in higher education who will create changes responsive to the educational needs of Latinx students and a diverse college population. In December 2023, students in this program hosted a fundraiser for students in LSP to help raise money for their scholarship that benefits LSP students only. I appreciate this effort from these students as they give back to students who desperately need it.

This research has made me a better advocate for student voices and needs at MWHSI. As a future administrator, I intend to always lend an ear to students so I can continue to learn from them and see what else the institution can do to provide the best support possible. During this process, what I took away from the interviews with the students was the determination all students had to attend college and graduate. They all were nervous about starting college, but they put aside those feelings, took the bull by the horns, and tried it. It is the responsibility of the staff and faculty to cheer these students on and provide as much support and resources as possible so they can be successful. This dissertation and its application have allowed me to renew my vocational calling to serve others as best I can through practice and research.

**Application to Research**

Prior to this doctoral journey, I did not do any formal research or write a journal article. Since completing my master’s degree, I have a goal of one day becoming a dean or vice president of student affairs as I enjoy working with and serving students. I knew a doctoral degree would be one of the requirements for this type of position, so after taking a 3-year break after my master’s degree, I started the EdD program at the end of my 20s and at the start of a
global pandemic. Because I had not been in school for a few years, imposter syndrome showed up as I knew a doctoral degree require the completion of a dissertation. I questioned if I had the academic skills required to complete this degree. I was so insecure I did not tell many people I was enrolled in an EdD program. My thought process at the time was if I am not successful in the first year of this program I am going to withdraw. What kept me going in this program was the wonderful faculty and my colleagues who encouraged me and provided support when I needed it the most.

Early in the program, I was encouraged by the faculty to start thinking about my project and to align my coursework assignments to my project. This was one of the most amazing pieces of advice I received. As I did this, I was able to identify quickly what I wanted to do and tailor each assignment to my dissertation, which helped me get feedback. As I continued through course work, research involved a series of decisions that could be difficult. Since this was my first time constructing a project in this depth, I was overwhelmed at first. However, this faded away as the faculty taught us to break down our proposal section by section. By doing this, I was able to focus my time one section at a time as to not get overwhelmed. As I went through this process, I learned research takes time and is not perfect. In my proposal, I set out to interview 15–20 students, but in the end, I was only able to get six students. At first, I felt defeated, but I was reminded by my chair collecting data is challenging and not all studies obtain the optimal number of participants.

Once I collected the data, the joys of identifying themes and sub themes challenged my critical thinking skills. I am thankful for my chair, who helped me through this process. Because I was deep into the data, I overlooked some themes my chair helped me recognize. Also, looking
over the recording of my participants and applying them to the themes early on helped me in the writing of the findings section of the dissertation, this was a recommendation from my chair, and I am thankful for this. Another challenge was writing to convey the point, keeping the findings section in an acceptable word count, and relating to the literature review. This was an iterative process which at times I wanted to run away, but I stuck it out. Now writing this reflection, I am sure it could still be tweaked, and it most definitely will be if I go down the path of attempting to publish.

Initially, I was not interested in publishing content from Chapter 2 and only focused on completing my EdD. After talking with students and hearing their stories, I feel the need and responsibility to make these students voices heard and one way is to publish my work. It would be an honor to add to the current literature about first-generation Latino students and their experiences with the transition from high school to college. When I first started the EdD program, I was not confident I would have a publishable paper. However, I have gained the confidence in my work to share with the world what students have generously shared with me: their experiences. I plan to publish after I take a well-deserved break and graduate.

**Conclusion**

The last 3 years have been the most challenging of my life and this experience resulted in the most growth personally and academically. Through this doctoral journey, I have learned I can preserve through hard times and complete the assignment. From the loss of my father during my first year of the program to having many moments of insecurities, I am so proud of myself for staying the course and finishing. Furthermore, I am so please to be a first-generation Latino in my family to now be called Dr. Aquino. To me, the value is more than the title, as through this
work I intend to encourage other Latinos to pursue their dreams. This was a dream years ago to complete a doctorate degree. Now I have stood the test of the dissertation process and can say, I did it.
REFERENCES

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APPENDIX A

RECRUITMENT LETTER
Dear Student,

My name is Javier Aquino and I am a doctoral student at Northern Illinois University in the Department of Counseling and Higher Education. I have received approval to conduct a qualitative research study for the completion of my doctoral dissertation in the area of higher education administration. My hope is learn from your personal story about your experiences as a Latinx student in higher education. I am writing to invite you to be a participant in this research study.

Participation in this research is strictly voluntary. If you agree to participate in one interview about your personal educational journey, each will interview will last approximately 60-90 minutes. The interview will be conducted via Zoom and/or in-person. You reserve the right to decline participation in this study at any given time for any reason. As a token of my appreciation of participating in this study, I will provide a $15 Amazon e-gift card at the end of the interview.

If you have any questions about this invitation and your possible participation in this research, you can reach me at XXXXXXX or you may also contact my dissertation chair, Dr. Jacqueline Mac at XXXXXXXX.

Best,
Javier Aquino
Javier Aquino, M.A.
Doctoral Candidate, Northern Illinois University
APPENDIX B

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION
Research Title: Latino student transition to college: Assessing difficulties and opportunities to be successful in college

Directions: Please respond to each item by checking or filling in the answer

1. Gender
   a. Male
   b. Female
2. Age:_______
3. Did you attend a ___ Public School ___ Private School
4. How did you hear about XXXXXX? (short answer)
5. Do you consider yourself a first-generation college student: Yes__ No__
6. What is your current academic standing? New/Freshmen __ Continuing__
7. Where were you born? _______________
8. Ethnicity: Please circle one
   a. Hispanic (Spaniard)
   b. Cuban-American
   c. South-American
   d. Central American
   e. Puerto Rican – American
   f. Mexican
   g. Mexican-American
9. Where were your parents born?
   a. Mother: ____________
   b. Father: ____________
10. What is your parents’ level of education?
    a. Mother: ____________
    b. Father: ____________
11. Are you the first in your family to attend college? Yes___ No___
12. What is your socioeconomic status? Please circle one
    a. Lower class
    b. Middle class
    c. Upper class
13. Are you currently working: Full-time___ Part-time___ Unemployed___
14. Who do you live with? Please circle one
    a. Parents
    b. Single Parent
    c. Extended Family
    d. Friends
    e. Roommates
    f. Alone
APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL – STAFF QUESTIONS
Date: TBD
Place: [Redacted]
Interviewer: Javier Aquino, Doctoral Candidate, Northern Illinois University

Script

Hello and welcome. Thank you for taking the time to join me in a discussion about your experience with [Redacted] students. I have a list of questions which are all open-ended so feel free to answer however you please. There are no right or wrong answers. I am audio recording this session so I don’t miss any of your comments. I want to remind you that no names will be included in any part of my dissertation and your comments are confidential. The interview will take approximately 60-90 minutes from the beginning to end.

1. Introductory:
   a. Tell me about yourself and [Redacted]?

2. What is your role in [Redacted]?
   a. What is your experience of students in [Redacted] transiting from high school to college?

3. How does [Redacted] contribute to a sense of belonging here at [Redacted]?

4. What culturally relevant and culturally responsive support does [Redacted] offer students?

5. In your current role, what do you feel is missing from the program?

6. At this time, what areas of the program are you looking to revamp?

7. How successful is the program in keeping its focused on the objective to enhance students' scholastic achievement and ensure students persistence to graduation?

8. How does the program assist students with hardships whether it be personal or academic?

9. Is there anything else you would like to share?
Date: TBD  
Place: XXXXXXXX  
Interviewer: Javier Aquino, Doctoral Candidate, Northern Illinois University

**Script**  
Hello and welcome. Thank you for taking the time to join me in a discussion about your experiences navigating your transition from high school to XXXXXXXXXX. My name is Javier Aquino, and I am a Doctoral Candidate in the Department of Counseling and Higher Education at Northern Illinois University.  
You were invited to this interview because you are part of the XXXXX and identify as Latinx. You were refereed to me by one of your academic advisors in XXXXXX.  
I have a list of questions which are all open-ended so feel free to answer however you please. There are no right or wrong answers. I am audio recording this session so I don’t miss any of your comments. I want to remind you that no names will be included in any part of my Dissertation and your comments are confidential. The interview will take approximately ninety (90) minutes from the beginning to end.

1. **Introductory:**  
   a. Tell me about yourself and why you selected to attend XXXX?  
   b. Why did you decide to be a part of XXXXXX?  
2. **When you think of your future, what are your hopes and dreams?**  
3. **Share with me a story or a memory of how your family talked about college or helped you be successful in college.**  
   a. What are your family’s expectations of you as you get your degree?  
4. **Now that you’re in college, how is the transition from high school to college going for you?**  
   a. What challenges are you currently facing at this time with this transition?  
5. **How has your social network (family and friends) helped you succeed in this transition from high school to college?**  
6. **As a XXXXXXXX student, what has been your experience thus far in the program?**  
   a. How did you feel when you began the program?  
   b. What have you learned so far?  
   c. In what ways did XXXXXXX program benefit you as a first-generation college student?  
   d. Has XXXXX met your academic/personal goals?  
   e. Do you feel a sense of belonging in XXXXXX and at XXXXXXX?  
   f. Do you have any recommendations of improvement for XXXXXXX?  
   g. Is there anything else you would like to share?

Thank you for sharing your story and reflections with me. Those are all the questions I have for you. I appreciate the time you took today to talk with me about your journey from high school to college. As a token of my appreciation, and recognition of the value of your time, here is a $15 gift card for you.
APPENDIX E

IRB REVIEW APPROVAL
Approval Notice

Initial Review
12-Jun-2023

TO: Javier Aquino
Counseling and Higher Education

RE: Protocol # HS23-0472 “Latino student transition to college: Assessing difficulties and opportunities to be successful in college”

In a preliminary review, the Initial Submission of the above named research protocol was determined to meet the definition of human subjects research according to the federal regulations. The submission was then reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board through the expedited review process [45 CFR 46.110(b)(1) category 6, 7] under Member Review procedures on 12-Jun-2023. Please note the following information about your approved research protocol:

**Protocol Approval period:** 12-Jun-2023 - 11-Jun-2024

It is important for you to note that as an investigator conducting research that involves human participants, you are responsible for ensuring that this project has current IRB approval at all times. If your project will continue beyond the above date, or if you intend to make modifications to the study, you will need additional approval and should contact the Office of Research Compliance, Integrity, and Safety for assistance. In addition, you are required to promptly report to the IRB any injuries or other unanticipated problems or risks to subjects or others.

Please note that the IRB has the prerogative and authority to ask further questions, seek additional information, require further modifications, or monitor the conduct of your research and the consent process.

**Informed Consent:**
Unless you have been approved for a waiver of the written signature of informed consent, this notice includes a date-stamped copy of the approved consent form for your use. NIU policy requires that informed consent documents given to subjects participating in non-exempt research bear the approval stamp of the NIU IRB. This stamped document is the only consent form that may be photocopied for distribution to study participants.
If consent for the study is being given by proxy (guardian, etc.), it is your responsibility to document the authority of that person to consent for the subject. Also, the committee recommends that you include an acknowledgment by the subject, or the subject's representative, that he or she has received a copy of the consent form.

You are responsible for retaining the signed consent forms obtained from your subjects for a minimum of three years after the study is concluded.

**Continuing Review:**
Continuing review of the project, conducted at least annually, will be necessary until data collection is complete and you no longer retain any identifiers that could link the subjects to the data collected. Please remember to use your protocol number (HS23-0472) on any documents or correspondence with the IRB concerning your research protocol.

Closing the Study:

Please note that a final report submission should be created in the record in lieu of an annual continuation form if data collection has ended and the data are free of identifiers. The final report is a separate submission form in the list of options in the InfoEd record, and it may be submitted prior to the annual review deadline.

With all of this said, the IRB extends best wishes for success in your research endeavors!

Please see the RIPS website for guidance on the impact of COVID-19 on research (including face-to-face data collection) https://www.niu.edu/divresearch/covid/index.shtml