Hearing Their Voices: The Educational Experiences and Journey of Latina Doctoral Graduates

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ABSTRACT

HEARING THEIR VOICES: THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES AND JOURNEY OF LATINA DOCTORAL GRADUATES

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Northern Illinois University, 2020
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This research explored the educational journey and experiences of Latina women and their persistence in higher education while seeking to earn a doctorate. While studies have been dedicated to identifying reasons for the low graduation rates of Latino students, this study focused on the persistence of Latinas in achieving their goal of higher education, specifically at the graduate level. A narrative research study method was used through semi-structured interviews that provided a portrait of factors that led to their success. The study examined the ways in which the Latina students persisted and whether their pathways are consistent with models of persistence and how internal and external factors influenced their goals. The findings from this present study offer guidance for ways institutions of higher education might better support Latina persistence and help others to achieve these positive outcomes. Critical race theory (CRT) and Latino critical race theory (LatCrit) were used to better understand the internal and external factors that impacted the successful Latina doctoral graduate.

Keywords: Latina, doctoral recipients, Critical race theory, LatCrit
HEARING THEIR VOICES: THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES AND JOURNEY
OF LATINA DOCTORAL GRADUATES

BY

MARY ANN GUILLEN
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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
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FOR THE DEGREE
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

DEPARTMENT OF COUNSELING AND HIGHER EDUCATION
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There have been many individuals who have helped me emotionally through this journey, family and friends who have been patient in my pursuits. Janet, Ana, Heather, Tiffany, Debbie, Cecil, Terrance, SBC Best-Teas and the great hermanas in the Latinas Completing Doctoral Degrees (LCDD) Facebook group, who were my cheerleaders on staying the course and telling me, “Get it done, Mary. Si se puede.” Thank you to all the individuals who believed in me and assisted my completion of this journey.
DEDICATION

To my mother, Guadalupe G. Guillen, aka Al, who has always been my biggest cheerleader throughout my life. From the moment I was born prematurely and given the Last Rites you have always encouraged me to fight and reach for the sky and not let obstacles and my self-doubts stop me. You always had more faith in me than I had in myself. Both our names should be on this paper because you have walked through every aspect of this experience with me. You stayed up with me late at night and kept encouraging me to push on and get it done, even when I wanted to quit. Thanks Mom, I love and cherish you.

I also dedicate this to the loved ones I have lost during this journey: Tom, Tim, Jimi and my dear Maryam always encouraged me on my path through the years. But especially to my two brothers, Ray and Anthony, both passed within the past three years during this journey, one lived to see me defend and complete my degree. I am so grateful that he was able to celebrate with me. I know that they were proud of me and were cheering me on, especially during the trying times. This is a family achievement.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Once social change begins; it cannot be reversed. You cannot un-educate the person who has learned to read. You cannot humiliate the person who feels pride. You cannot oppress the people who are not afraid anymore. (Chavez, 1984)

“Take Home Economics and typing so you can find a job after high school. You will just get married and have kids, so have employment skills until you get married.” These were the messages burned into my mind by school counselors. Perhaps they meant well by not encouraging me to reach too high. The messages that I did not belong, and I was not worthy or smart enough to be in that class stayed with me as a result of the advice given by school counselors throughout my educational journey.

Being a first-generation Latina in higher education was a lonely path to follow. These messages haunted me throughout high school, college, and into the Ed.D. program. Some of these messages came from family members as well; they would ask why I kept going to school and when I would finish. As I interviewed the participants in this study, I could see myself in many of their stories and what they had to overcome to achieve their degrees. Their story is my story and I see the need for all of us to be heard.

Latina/os are the largest growing population in the United States and are projected to outnumber other racial groups by 24% by the year 2050 (Fry, 2011; Murillo, Vilenas, Galvan, Munoz, Martinez, & Machado-Casas, 2010). The Latino population obtains the lowest percentages of doctoral degrees at most institutions in the United States (Cavazos, 2016; Yasso
& Solorzano, 2006). Many institutions of higher education in the United States struggle to recruit and retain Latino students in their programs (Cavazos, 2016). Institutions reported that educational and policy makers should focus not only on increasing degree completion rates but also on understanding how the experiences of Latino students can help redefine pedagogical and institutional practices. Although a clear road map toward academic success might not exist, there is evidence that there are barriers to obtaining an advanced degree (Cavazos, 2016).

According to the National Science Foundation (2015), the number of doctoral recipients from minority groups has increased to about 40% of all graduate students, over the past 20 years, the number of Hispanic or Latino doctoral recipients has doubled. In 2017, the number of doctoral degrees earned by women increased by about 58% and has continued to climb for the past 10 years (Council of Graduate Schools, 2018). These statistics may suggest that education has become increasingly diverse for many women in the United States. These assumptions, however, overlook the experiences during degree attainment of many underrepresented doctoral students who endure unique issues and barriers as they navigate during the graduate experience. Many minority students experience prejudice, discrimination, isolation, and racism (Gildersleeve, Croom, & Vazquez, 2011).

Women of color, Latina students in particular, continue to lag behind other populations in obtaining doctorate degrees, which has limited their full participation in many fields (Aleman, 2018; Ingle, 2000). Although there has been an increase in research regarding Latina graduate students (Castellanos, Gloria, & Kamimura, 2005; Murillo et al., 2010; Ruiz, 2013), it does not sufficiently examine the multiple barriers many of these women face when they become involved in the pursuit of a doctoral degree. The educational field lacks a comprehensive picture of the overall impact of various challenges to educational attainment; therefore, this study sought
to contribute to the literature by examining the experiences of Latina doctoral students and their doctorate degree attainment.

For minority students, there has been improvement in representation in higher education. According to information from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2017), many minority students are earning doctoral degrees. However, while student enrollment and successful degree attainment have increased within the Latino population, Latina women still significantly fall behind other groups of students in the attainment of a degree (Ennis, Rios-Vargas, & Albert, 2011). When comparing the growing Latino population with the White population with respect to degree attainment, there is a lack of qualified individuals with a doctorate to be representative of the largest growing population in the United States (Murillo et al., 2010).

It is important to address the socially constructed inequities that continue to affect Latina women who attend graduate school (Aleman, 2018). Researchers have noted several deterrents that hinder Latinas from attending graduate school, such as first-generation status (Ennis et al., 2011), discrimination (Aleman, 2018), and financial issues (Gildersleeves et al., 2011). It is also important to understand that some Latinas are caught in a cycle of determining how to face and balance demands in life, which makes it harder to complete their graduate degrees (Council of Graduate Schools, 2018). However, many of these individuals manage to overcome challenges and achieve a doctorate despite the barriers and obstacles against them. Therefore, an examination of the influences that contribute to the success of Latina students completing their doctoral degrees is justified and will add to the literature and contribute to the success rates of Latinas in higher education.
Background

The United States Census (2010) predicted that the Latino/Hispanic population would become one of the fastest growing minority populations in the United States. For example, the state of Illinois predicted the growth of the Latino/Hispanic population to increase of 32.5% by the year 2020 (U.S. Census, 2010). The Latino population is expected to add more to the makeup of the United States than all other ethnic groups combined (U.S. Census, 2010). Unfortunately, Latinos have historically dropped out of school at a higher rate than any other racial/ethnic group in the United States (McFarland, Cui, & Stark, 2018). Fields (2008) was one of the first to examine the Latino educational pipeline and described it as narrow, leaking, and needing repair in preparing high school students to attend college (Fields, 2008). Since then, many researchers have examined the educational experiences of Latinos; however, the reality is that they are still a marginalized population within the education field (Serrata, 2016). The Latino/a student largely attends segregated, poorly maintained educational facilities. These elementary and secondary schools often have poorly trained teachers who are rarely bilingual or inadequately trained to work with the Latino population (Yasso & Solorazano, 2006). Additionally, Latino/a students are tracked and placed into remedial classes, excluding them from the college pipeline opportunities (Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009). For the Latino students who can navigate through the educational pipeline and gain access to higher education, the attrition rate is still extremely high (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Ruiz, 2013). According to Yasso and Solorzano (2006), the institutional and structural biases in education follow Latino/a students through high school and into higher education. By the time their peers reach graduate school, very few Latino/a students make the journey with them.
Further projections that may affect the educational field for Latinos were noted by the National Center for Education Statistics in 2017. The NCES identified that enrollment has been increasing for all ethnic groups from two-year to advanced-degree-granting institutions in the United States. Overall, in 2015, 63% of college students were White, 14% were Black, 12% were Hispanic, 7% were Asian/Pacific Islander, 1% were American Indian/Alaska Native, and 3% were nonresident alien students (Aud et al. 2010; NCES, 2017). The implications of this statistics are that there will be fewer Hispanics who will be able to take leadership positions due the low enrollment of this group in advanced degree programs in the United States.

The increasing number of Latinos as a general student population indicates that there is a greater number of students attaining an education. Considering gender differences, even when Latinas earn better grades in college, their persistence to graduation is lower than their male counterparts (Aud et al. 2010; Braxton, 2000; Gloria, 1997; Ruiz, 2013). However, future projections contradict Gloria’s (1997) premise that men are overshadowing women when it comes to completing a degree. Recently, the number of doctoral degrees earned by Latino men versus Latina women has been steadily declining (Lafortune, Figueroa, & Saenz, 2016; NCES, 2017; Saenz & Ponjaun, 2009). Based on the U.S. Department of Education Projections of Education Statistics to 2020 (Hussar & Bailey, 2011b), there will be a larger increase in women completing their degrees. For example, from fall 2008 to fall 2009, the projections showed 28% of women would graduate with an associate degree as compared to 23% of men. Likewise, 24% of women would graduate with a bachelor’s degree from fall 2008 to fall 2009 as compared to 18% of men. In addition, it was reported by the U.S. Department of Education (2017) that 59% of women completed a master’s degree and 60% completed doctorates in the years of 2009 to 2017.
From academic years 2000 to 2010, the number of doctorate degrees conferred increased by 30% at public institutions from 60,700 to 78,800 degrees, by 32% at private nonprofit institutions (57,000 to 75,200 degrees), and by over 300% at private for-profit institutions (from 1,100 to 4,600 degrees). In 2009–10, public institutions awarded 50% of all doctorate degrees, private nonprofit institutions awarded 47%, and private for-profit institutions awarded 3% (Hussar & Bailey, 2011b). While for-profit institutions may be understood to provide opportunity to a variety of diverse learners, importantly, the graduation rate at these institutions is low and debt is high for the students (Barefoot, 2004; The Slate Group, 2017).

While colleges and universities around the country are becoming increasingly more diverse, the data on national retention rates indicate that institutions continue to have difficulty retaining students despite all the initiatives that have been implemented over the last 10 years. In fact, the attrition rate for Latinas is still extremely high compared to other marginalized groups and the dominant population (Castellanos et al., 2006; Murillo et al., 2010). Research has shown that Latinas have high educational aspirations; however, in many cases, educational institutions have stymied their goals (Murillo et al., 2010). This is a concern considering the projections by the U.S. Census. The representation of a fast-growing Latino population in the country could be diminished in the educational field.

The plight of many Latinas obtaining a doctorate degrees still a concern, even though a call to action was presented in the article, “The U.S. Female Educational Pipeline by Race: 2000” showing that among 100 Latinas who begin elementary school, a little more than half will graduate from high school, 11 will receive a college degree, and less than one of the original 100 will complete a doctoral degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). To contextualize this finding, the same report indicated that among 100 women in other racial and ethnic categories, 0.3% African
American, 0.4% Native American, 0.6% White and 1.4% Asian American females would
comeplete a doctoral degree. To fully understand the underrepresentation of Latinas in higher
education, it is important to examine their trajectories throughout the educational pipeline from
kindergarten to college graduation (Ruiz, 2013; Watford, Rivas, Burciaga, & Solorzano, 2006).

As noted in Still Falling Through the Cracks: Revisiting the Latina/o Education Pipeline,
some gains have been made in all five main racial/ethnic groups. Latinas/os have made some
important gains in the attainment of doctoral degrees during the past decade. The percentage of
doctorates conferred grew substantially between 2000, when only 0.4 percent of Latina/os gained
a doctorate degree (Perez-Huber et al, 2015), and 2012, when 3 % earned a doctorate. This is
still far below doctoral degree attainment compared to the other racial/ethnic groups (Perez-
Huber et al., 2015).

The educational field has not always performed well in educating adult students who are
outside of the mainstream in the general population. One of the causal factors in the past has
been that many individuals in the field of graduate education have been from cultures other than
Latino. While there are many who may define themselves as marginalized by society, the field of
higher education focuses its attention with matters of race, class, and gender as well as how
society uses these factors to determine who is on the fringes or limits of society (Darling-
Hammond, 2010; Ruiz, 2013).

Many female doctoral students experience gender microaggressions while going through
the male-dominated higher education system, which warrants closer exploration. While
examining the experiences of female doctoral students, one cannot discount the intersection of
gender, race, and socioeconomic identities and how these multiple dominations may affect and
influence the educational experiences of female doctorate students (Aleman, 2018).
Statement of the Problem

Although there has been an increase in the number of doctorate degrees awarded at universities in the United States, many minority groups fall behind White students in their quest to obtain a doctorate degree (Castellanos et al., 2006; Murillo et al., 2010). Latina graduate students attained the lowest number of degrees as compared to White, African American, and Asian women (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Researchers noted that some Latina doctoral students share many of the common struggles as other women and minority doctoral students, but the cultural expectations associated with their decision to obtain a doctoral degree is sometimes related to racial, ethnic, and gender biases with obtaining a degree due to American educational values (Murillo et al., 2010). Many of these students may seek to achieve the highest pinnacle of education in obtaining a doctorate degree (Nettles & Millett, 2006).

Latino doctoral student attrition in the United States has reached alarming proportions, with reported rates of approximately 50% across disciplines (Nettles & Millett, 2006). A reason Latino/a doctoral graduates are somewhat rare is attributed to barriers such as poor writing skills, lack of family support, and lack of universities providing mentoring programs for this group of students (Nettles & Millett, 2006).

Increasing the number of college graduates is more than an educational issue for graduate students; it is a key social issue, as “a college-educated population results in pivotal benefits to society” (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2004, p. 1). Castellanos et al. (2006), in referencing the 2002 Survey of Earned Doctorates, noted that 61% of doctorate recipients were White, 20% were Asian, and Latinos and African Americans were both at 5%.

Degree attainment by the different race and ethnic groups should be proportional to their
representation in society. However, the pool of Latina/o doctorates has remained notably small in comparison to the rapid growth of the general Latina/o population (Council of Graduate Schools, 2018), although there has been an increase in Latinas’ earned doctorates from 2000 at 4.9% to 2010 at 5.9% (Castellanos et al., 2006). Because of the lower numbers being admitted to graduate degree programs and attrition, as few as one in 100 Latina will obtain a doctorate (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007).

Many issues hinder an individual’s pursuit and eventual attainment of a doctorate: distance, expense, and time, as well as disconnect from the institution, faculty, and resources available to a student. Several of the internal factors are self-doubt about whether this decision fits the need for career pursuits, personal sacrifices by the family, and self-worth (Castellanos et al., 2006). However, as research has indicated, without a higher education, marginalized students will continue to fall further behind other populations, which will result in disadvantages in financial and professional endeavors (Castellanos et al., 2006). Thus, there is a need for more research to identify specific barriers and to come to know more about strategies to overcome these barriers to obtain a doctorate degree as well as to identify reasons some students drop out of the doctorate degree program.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore Latina doctoral students’ sources of motivation, academic experiences, supports, and barriers in their graduate studies as they earned doctoral degrees. By exploring their experiences, this study also addressed the social and environmental factors that affected their experiences. Understanding the aspects of student experience through a doctoral program is worth studying for two reasons. First, college doctoral
degrees are increasingly seen as the gateway to full participation in the American workforce and society (Castellanos et al., 2006; Crabtree, Sapp, & Licona, 2009; Hesse-Biber & Carter, 2005). Gaining an understanding of the motivating factors that contribute to persistence with these barriers is important to help future generations achieve completion of graduate degrees and help institutions learn from these factors to assist future students to complete graduate degrees.

Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative study was to describe and explore the experiences of Latinas who have completed doctorate and their perceptions of their pursuit to complete the doctorate degree. The guiding research questions for this study were:

1. How do successful Latinas identify and overcome barriers in their journey of obtaining a doctoral degree?
2. What are the perceptions of Latinas in relation to supports they received in their journey in obtaining their doctoral degree?
3. What are the perceptions of Latinas in relation to motivational factors in their journey obtaining a doctoral degree?

The findings from this study indicated that the Latina students felt that encouragement for the participants to pursue their doctorate degrees came mostly from family, friends, and supportive communities. These resources reduced the fear and anxieties they faced in their decisions to pursue their doctoral education. The support helped alleviate self-doubts, feelings of inadequacies and negative messages the participants may have been given regarding their capabilities in attending higher education and seeking a doctorate degree.
Significance of the Study

This study is particularly important for college leaders who face higher rates of student enrollment and low rates of student persistence at the graduate level in earning doctorate degree (Barefoot, 2004; Delgado, et al., 2006; Fernandez, 2008; Kasworm, 2003; Philibert, Allen, & Elleven, 2008). Studies on academic progress of Latinas are imperative, as this population is the largest growing ethnic minority group in the country. Therefore, the success of this ethnic group is fundamental to the overall economic well-being of this population and country.

To more fully understand persistence among Latinas, it is essential to give a voice to their lived experience in the educational system; however, Latinas are rarely heard in dialogues about their lives (Aleman 2018). For this reason, qualitative interviews were chosen for the research method of this study. Qualitative research “consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible” (Lincoln, 2005, p. 3) and help researchers “hear silenced voices” (Creswell, 2017, p. 40), so it is the ideal methodology for research that focuses on the lived experience of Latina students in college.

This study provides insight into Latina graduates’ understanding of their experiences and identity as a Latina doctoral completer. Findings from this study can show prospective Latina students how to negotiate their journey and lead to the development of institutional initiatives aimed at increasing the presence and success of degree attainment of Latinas in higher education.

Overview of the Methodology

This study used a qualitative interpretative research design (Stake, 2005). A qualitative design provides researchers with a framework to study and strive to make sense of human
experiences (Creswell, 2017). Listening to the stories of the challenges they overcame to successfully earn a doctoral degree provides a voice to the participants in this study and information for institutions to enhance their understanding of the needs of future students. Research that seeks to understand the meaning or nature of experience of persons in this study lends itself to a qualitative approach.

Definitions of Terms

The following definitions outline the commonly used terms the reader will find in this study. There continues to be a quandary when referring to people who represent the Latina/o ethnicity. For this purpose, the terms that reference the participants in this study are defined.

Attrition: Failed re-enrollment of a student in consecutive academic terms. This term is also known as “dropout,” which can imply that leaving higher education is solely the individual’s fault when institutional factors may also be at play.

Barrier: A barrier is “something immaterial that impedes or separates (Castellanos & Jones, 2003).

Chicana/o Student: In this study, Chicana/o is a term employed to represent Mexican American students. The term reflects one’s dual cultural identities, historical constructions, and the political struggles for social equity (Castellanos & Jones, 2003).

Completion: In reference to doctoral pursuit, according to Nettles and Millet (2006), degree completion is “the most important accomplishment on the field of doctoral education” (p. 38).

Culturally Relevant: A relative and contextually based form of teaching that meets three criteria: 1) must develop a student academically, 2) must value and nurture cultural competencies and
capital, and 3) must develop a student’s critical consciousness or ability to critique personal, social and political systems that impact their lives and communities (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

**Doctoral Student:** Any graduate student who has been enrolled in a doctoral program in the United States.

**Hispanic:** A person is considered Hispanic if s/he identifies ancestry as Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central or South American or other Spanish origin or culture regardless of race (Suarez-Orozco & Paez, 2009). This is viewed as an ethnic label rather than a racial one and has been used as a label of convenience to identify groups of individuals. It has been viewed as a less than favorable term (U. S. Census Bureau, 2010). For the purpose of this study, the term “Hispanic” is used when utilized by quoted references and resources.

**Intersectionality (or Intersectionalism):** study of intersections between forms or systems of oppression, domination or discrimination. An example is Black feminism, which argues that the experience of being a Black woman cannot be understood in terms of being Black and of being a woman considered independently, but must include the interactions that frequently reinforce each other.

**Latino/a:** A cultural category that has no specific racial significance. Latinos are White, Black, Indigenous, and every possible combination (Suarez-Orozco & Paez, 2009). The term “Latino” also lacks the specificity regarding national origin such as Irish American or Italian American would convey. Latinos are descended from numerous countries such as Mexico, Colombia, and Puerto Rico. Latino signifies both genders (male and female). For the purpose of this study, the term Latina is employed to signify a woman who considers herself to be of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Dominican, Central American, or South American descent.
Latinx: This term recently has been emerging since 2014 on the internet and social media sites as a gender-neutral label for Latino/as and Latin@. This term has been used in the higher education arena. (Salinas & Lozano, 2017).

Motivation: Not only “the act or process of motivating” but also “the condition of being motivated,” motivational processes “account for a student being interested” and the “willingness to engage in and persist at a task” (Wolters, 2003, p. 190).

Persistence: Persistence literally is “the action of fact of persisting.” In the context of this study, persistence is associated with the degree completion or the successful fulfillment of the doctoral program requirements.

Resiliency: Students who are able to adapt to and negotiate their environment to successfully overcome educational challenges (Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2000).

Organization of Document

This dissertation is divided into five chapters. Chapter 1 establishes the background and purpose of the study as well as presents the research questions, overview of the methodology, and definition of terms. Chapter 2 presents a comprehensive review of the literature on this topic, including a discussion of the foundation of critical race theory (CRT) and Latino critical race theory (LatCrit). Chapter 3 describes the research design, including how the participants in this study were selected, the data collection and analysis processes, my biases, and the interview guide as well as establishment of the trustworthiness, delimitations, and limitations of the study. Chapter 4 presents the findings and demographic descriptions of the participants. The final chapter discusses the findings from the study in relation to the literature review; the implications and recommendations for policy, practice, and future research are discussed.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The Latina population is the largest growing population of graduate students in the United States and is projected to outnumber other racial groups within graduate education (Murillo et al., 2010). Although there has been an increase in Latinas earning doctorates from 2000 at 4.9% to 2010 at 5.9%, apart from Native American women, Latinas continue to have the lowest percentage of female-earned doctorates in the United States (Castellanos et al; 2006, U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Although a clear roadmap toward academic success might not exist, there is evidence that there are barriers to obtaining an advanced degree (Cavazos, 2016). This chapter reviews literature in the following areas: history of education, school environments, and women in United States; Latinas and education, family influence, critical race theory, and Latina/o critical race theory; and Latinas in graduate programs, transformation, and persistence.

History of Marginalized Populations Within the Education System

Before consideration of a college degree, students must first apply and be admitted to college, which is based on academic achievement while attending grades K-12. After World War II, the use of standardized testing was expanded in the schools to also cover language and aptitude tests, and the academics replaced it with one based on cultural attributes and behaviors. Marginalized students in high school have traditionally underperformed on standardized tests compared to their White counterparts (Gollnick & Chinn, 2006). These test scores were then
used to classify children into one of four categories: educationally mentally retarded (EMR), slow, regular, or gifted. Due to low test scores, most of the Latino children were placed in the classification of either EMR or slow. With these types of classifications, the students were then tracked into slow-learning or non-academic classes. Once Latino children were classified in this manner, they were systematically placed in developmentally appropriate instructional groups, classes, or curricular tracks. These curricular tracks were comprised of other children with similar abilities. At the elementary level, Latino children were mostly assigned to slow learning or non-academic classes, most of which were either vocational or general education courses (Garza, et al., 2006; Murillo et al., 2010; Yasso & Solorzano, 2006).

Prior to the Civil War, primarily White male students populated colleges and universities. This practice continued throughout the twentieth century when most colleges and universities systematically excluded most marginalized individuals from the admissions process (Anderson, 2002). The *Mendez v. Westminster School District* case was heard before the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals in 1947, which overturned a very common practice in California of having separate and inferior “Mexican Schools” (Saenz, 2004). *Mendez* was a precedent-setting court case that opened avenues for the *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* case to be heard by the Supreme Court seven years later. *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* in 1954 reversed the Court’s 1896 decision to *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which legalized the segregation of school systems yet required that they be equal in service and quality. The *Plessy* case set the standard for almost six decades, which allowed states to establish separate facilities, including schools for non-Whites as long as they were equal to White facilities (Gold, 2005). The *Brown* case ruling declared segregated public schools were not equal in terms of education for Blacks and Whites. *Brown* as well as *Mendez v. Westminster School District* allowed many new
opportunities for students of color that had not existed previously (Bell, 1980, 2004; Tozar, 2009).

Challenges to Success in Education

In the current competitive atmosphere of admissions and numbers of students applying for college, lower SAT scores place marginalized students at a disadvantage for admission to the more prestigious schools. This also affects the preparedness of a minority student to complete a college degree. Tests such as the SAT have been viewed as providing evidence of performance and learning and as an aid for predicting deficits in a student’s learning process. Testing has shown that girls usually test better in reading and writing, and males perform better in math (Chapman, Laird, & Kewal-Remaini, 2010; Gollnick & Chinn, 2006).

Based on the funneling aspects of education, the number of students who achieve acceptance narrows as they strive for higher education, and the pool of minorities shrinks as they strive for an advanced degree (Murillo, 2010). In comparing the majority U.S. racial/ethnic and gender groups of Native American, African American, Asian American and White peers, the Hispanic student shows the lowest levels of educational attainment. The example offered in Murillo et al. (2010) shows that from the sample of 100 Hispanic students in elementary school, 54 females and 51 males will graduate from high school, and 11 females and 10 males will complete a baccalaureate degree. However, only four Latinas and three Latinos will earn a graduate degree, and ultimately, 0.3% of Latinas and 0.4% of Latinos will complete a doctorate degree. This is in comparison to White students completing a doctorate degree: 0.6% females and 1.4% males. Throughout all five groups (Chicana/os, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Dominicans, Salvadorian), women were less likely to complete a doctorate compared to their male
counterparts. Until that point, women usually had higher graduation rates than the male students (Gandara, 1982; Murillo et. al., 2010).

Researchers noted that when compared to race, individuals from non-White groups are more likely to be from first-generation families (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2012; Gardner & Holley, 2011; National Science Foundation, 2012). Researchers noted that comparing the doctoral completion rates of racial groups, disparities become clearer. Ampaw and Jaeger (2012) noted that in 2010, 32% of all doctoral recipients reported being first-generation students, meaning that their parents did not complete an undergraduate degree. While completion rates for all students may be lower than optimal, the problem of failure to complete is notably more serious among students from underrepresented populations both women and minorities (Council of Graduate Schools, 2018; Kuh et al, 2007). These disparities are more salient among students of color in STEM disciplines, where there has been significant national attention to increase the retention and success rates of these groups (National Science Foundation, 2012; Spino, 2016). Many first-generation doctoral students are more likely to be students of color and to be more highly concentrated in applied academic fields such as education and engineering (National Science Foundation, 2010;2012).

Other issues for many first-generation and women students relate to financial support and understanding how to manage financial demands. Research has shown that first-generation doctoral students tend to have higher debt loads than their non-first-generation peers (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2012; Elliott & Friedline, 2012). Researchers found that first-generation doctoral recipients were more likely to seek their own resources as their primary source of support as opposed to non-first-generation students. These non-first-generation students were more likely to hold graduate teaching or research assistantships or grants and fellowships to finance their
graduate education (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2012; Elliott & Friedline, 2012). Further, African Americans and Latino Americans were more likely than Asians and Whites to have higher level of education-related debt upon graduation (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2012; Perna, 2000).

Class is another issue discussed by Ogbu (1994), who examined the immigrant who did well in school compared to non-immigrant minorities who were not doing as well. Ogbu discussed why middle-class African American students seemed to continue to fall behind Whites and made the shift of focus from race to class and how social standing can affect students. This applies to Latino students as well. For example, asking parents to meet in the afternoon for a parent-teacher conference could put undue strain on the economics of the family. The reluctance to attend could be viewed by the educator as not being invested, involved, or caring about the student’s progress in school. An educator could view these examples as the cause of the student’s performance in school, blaming the family unit instead of looking into the institution’s responsibility for the student’s success (Gollnick & Chinn, 2006; Spino, 2016).

While critical theorists such as Freire (1995) and hooks (1984) have brought inequities based on economics and class to higher education’s attention, feminist scholars have placed gender, and gender as it intersects with race and class, in the forefront of critical analysis. Although all versions of feminist theory are concerned with the status of women worldwide, theorists differ among themselves on two counts: how the problem is framed and what needs to be done to change the status of women (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). These authors as well as others recognize that women of color are the only members of society who can suffer from all three categories of race, gender and class; for example, a woman who is also a “woman of color” can be born into a perceived lower class family and, therefore, feel the powerlessness and oppression on all three fronts (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Padilla, 1997).
Latinos and Education

Latinos have become the largest minority group in the United States, and the Census Bureau (2010) projects that the Hispanic population will continue to grow more than any other group well into the middle of the century. The most recent census data indicate a 54% increase in the Latino population (U.S. Census, 2010). In addition to the Latina/o population growth, there have been increases in access to education and power; however, there still is significant underrepresentation in higher education (San Miguel & Donato, 2010). The gains made in educational access and achievement are not proportional to the large population increase (Villalba, Gonzales, Hines, & Borders, 2014). That has both immediate and long-term implications for higher education (Educating the Largest Minority Group, 2003).

Within the Latino origin groups, substantial diversity exists. The U.S. Census (2010) broke down the demographics of the label Hispanic or Latino. The subgroups were as follows: Chicana/o, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Dominican, and Salvadorian by ethnicity and gender. Chicana/o is the largest of the five subgroups, comprising 9% of the total U.S. population and 66% of the Latina/o population. Puerto Ricans comprise 9%, Cubans are 4%, Central Americans 8%, and other Latina/os are 13% of the overall Latina/o population. In comparing Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and South American, and Central Americans, individuals of Mexican descent have the lowest college completion rates (Aguirre & Martinez, 1993) and Cubans the highest college completion rates. Much of this has been attributed to the immigration and socioeconomic differences upon arrival in the United States. Considering gender differences, even when Latinas earn better grades in college, their persistence to graduation is lower than their male counterparts (Gloria, 1997, Gloria Holguin, 2005).
Research has shown that Latinas have high educational aspirations; however, educational institutions have stymied these goals (Lorber, 2010; Murillo, et. al., 2010). While colleges and universities around the country are becoming increasingly more diverse, data on national retention rates indicate that institutions are not using effective strategies to retain students despite all the initiatives that have been implemented over the last 10 years. In fact, the attrition rate for Latina/os is still extremely high compared to other marginalized students and the dominant population (Castellanos et al., 2006; Gordon, 2015; Stanton-Salazar & Dormbusch, 1995). The demographics of the Latina/o population in the United States are diverse, and the median age is younger (26.8 years old) than non-Latina/o Whites (39.7 years). Latina students are challenged with limited financial resources, inadequate public education systems, and institutional and personal discrimination, yet there are those who are able to negotiate their way in the unfamiliar and culturally hostile atmospheres of institutions of higher education (Castellanos et al., 2006; Marcelo & Paez, 2008; Spino, 2016; Swail, Redd & Perna, 2003).

Latinas have made some gains in educational attainment. In 1992-93, only 811 Latinos received a doctorate degree. Of this total, 436 were awarded to men and 378 to women (Council of Graduate Schools, 2018). Although Latinas have closed the gap between themselves and their male counterparts in the number of both bachelor’s and master’s degrees awarded at the national level, they have not closed the gap between themselves and all other women nor between themselves and male Latinos at the highest levels of education. In fact, Latino men earned more doctoral degrees than Latinas in 1995. Latinos were also more likely than Latinas to achieve full professor status during the 1995-1996 academic years (Council of Graduate Schools, 2018; Marin & Marin, 1991).
Although some strides have been made since 1995, the percentages of successful completion are still very low. Percentages are as follows: Chicanas at 0.2 and Salvadorans 0.1 are the least likely to achieve a doctorate; Puerto Rican and Dominican women were the next group at 0.3 (Murillo et al., 2010). The highest success rate, although still woefully low, was Cuban women at 1.2. These numbers did not change very much from the 2000 U.S Census that indicated 0.3% of Latinas graduated with a doctorate degree (Castellanos et. al., 2006).

Employment Rates for Women and Latinas

Professional segregation and wage discrimination can affect women throughout their lives when there are limited opportunities. Women have been placed in a limited range of occupations traditionally considered appropriate for them and earn less in salaries than of men employed in comparable occupations (Ingle, 2000). For minority women it is extreme; 41% of African American women working in service occupations are employed as house cleaners, welfare service aides, cleaners, or nurse’s aides. For Latinas, employment segregation has meant disproportionate employment in low-level factory jobs in some of the industries hardest hit by the current downturn in the economy. Attainment of higher education is important for poor and working-class Latinos, as a college degree is often perceived as a necessary means for securing a good-paying job (Hesse-Biber & Carter, 2005). The social and economic ramifications for Latino families earning less money can influence future generations. A college degree can enhance the income level of Latinos to secure higher paying jobs in the workforce.
Latino Culture

Latinos tend to be more traditional than other ethnic groups when dealing with families. They identify with their immediate and extended families; men are expected to work while the women care for the children. Children are typically the focus in the household where the demands and needs of the family and the extended family take precedence over the needs and desires of an individual and is referred to as familismo (Castellanos et al., 2006; Gutierrez, Yeakly & Ortega, 2000; Murillo et al., 2010). The term “familismo” or “familialism” refers to family closeness and loyalty (Castellanos et al., 2006; Murillo et al., 2010), which is a Mexican value that is consistently identified throughout studies. Latinos also like to keep physically and emotionally close with family members and, generally, those who are the oldest receive the most respect (Niemann & Romero, 1999). In a study conducted by Vasti Torres in 2002 and 2003 of 83 Latino students on the familial influences while in college reflected the importance of family. An example would be a statement by a female study participant on what her mother said to her: “The only way you are moving out of this house is when you are married” (Torres, 2004, p. 458).

The literature indicated that traditional Latino families place a strong importance on the extended family, gender roles, age-based authority, and pride within the Latino community and culture (Murillo et al., 2010; Martinez et al., 2012). However, Latino groups tend to place little value on independence, achievement, and deferred gratification (Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000). It is important, however, to recognize that these cultural attributes are tendencies, not absolutes, and not rigidly fixed to any one individual, family or Latino group (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007; Murillo et al., 2010). A higher education can assist Latino groups to place more value on the
importance the rewards a higher education can have in increasing their living standards. This can help the individual and society at large (McDonough & Luna, 1997).

Latinas may also experience the Latin culture as a patriarchal type of culture that has expectations for its women. The notion of ‘familismo’ – a strong identification with and attachment to their nuclear and extended family” (Suarez-Orozco & Paez, 2009, p. 450) is viewed as one of the most important culture-specific values of Hispanics. It is also interwoven with male authority that dominates the family unit and culture (Martinez et al., 2012; Suarez-Orozco & Paez, 2009, p. 450). Parents want better for their children, but they feel the need to keep Latinas close to home and are hesitant in letting them move away (Gonzales et al., 2004). This is a two-edged sword for the young women seeking an education. They have great support from family; however, they may also experience guilt for desiring to leave home. The mixed message is that the Latina will not be able to care for herself if she is away from family: “Who will take care of you?” It is difficult for parents and family to believe that the young women are capable of self-care (Gonzales et al., 2004). Gonzalez’s study did provide hope for women wanting to attend college away from home, which was an understanding that their daughters would be provided a support system by the institutions. Easing parents worries about their children is a necessity to alleviate stressors such as guilt, homesickness and loneliness that the student may experience in leaving home and going to a new environment.

Latino men and women generally have traditional role expectations; the man is expected to support the family while the woman cares for the family needs (Castellanos., 2006; Gutierrez, Yeakly & Ortega, 2000; Murillo et al., 2010). It is expected that men will generally assist in the financial support of their families as soon as they are capable. Hernandez and Morales (1999) indicated that men and women in Latino homes “live in separate worlds,” each living their roles
as unevenly dispersed yet accepting this dispersal in distinct ways (p. 46). Women, because of their responsibilities in caring for family matters, are usually the main support in the family and tend to maintain the ties with parents, children and extended family members. (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007; Gutierrez, Yeakly & Ortega, 2000; Murillo et al., 2010).

Latinas tend to have difficulty in attending higher education and adjusting to college life as a result of the traditional gender roles. When Latinas do well in school, they may have mixed feelings in the expected responsibilities placed on them by family members. The Latina may also feel guilt for having continued with their education, when so many of their counterparts have dropped out or failed in school (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007; Medina & Luna, 2000; Murillo et al., 2010). Additional issues occur when the male figure in the Latina’s life disapproves of her seeking an education. As noted by Ginorio and Huston (2000). The Latina may feel pressures from a significant other that makes it difficult to attend college. The male may not want her to be more educated than himself and may feel threatened by that prospect. Fellow Latinas may also put pressure on a peer seeking an education by their perception that becoming educated will result in that Latina losing her cultural identity and taking on the attributes of a White person.

The Latino community is an extension of the family unit, as the network of peers and extended relatives are part of close relationships. The Latino community carries a value in the sense of identity and commitment to collectives and groups, rather than the individual. The community focuses on group harmony that embraces conformity, mutual empathy, and willing collectiveness to sacrifice for the welfare of the group. This mindset is referred to as *simpatia* or *simpatico*, which emphasizes the need for behaviors that promote pleasant and nonconflicting social relationships (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007; Gutierrez, Yeakly & Ortega, 2000).
Given an individual’s pre-entry attributes, goals and commitments, Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993) concluded that the greater a student’s integration into the academic and social systems of college, the greater the likelihood of persistence. Many marginalized students, especially women, may see the institution as male centered, which can result in culture clash (Allen, Dean, & Bracken, 2008). Factors that have helped Latinas in higher education are that they planned for an education while still in K-12 with the support of family and mentors, so they were able to choose the better schools to attend (Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Suarez-Orozco & Paez, 2009). Other factors that provide strength to persist toward a higher degree are a strong spiritual belief as well as acceptance of life’s adversities and coping with those adversities (Suarez-Orozco & Paez, 2009).

Many factors that impact persistence among students are at times beyond the control of colleges and universities. However, a better understanding of the challenges faced by marginalized students may inform new and more effective academic support efforts to increase the prospect of persistence to graduation. General research (e.g., Astin, 1965; Pascarella, 1980; Spady, 1970) has developed foundational theories regarding persistence and departure in college. Astin’s (1965) study stressed the importance of pre-entry characteristics (e.g., race, gender, and grade point average, socioeconomic characteristics, and parental education attainment). After Astin’s study and ensuing recommendations to explore pre-entry characteristics, future studies by Pascarella, Spady, and Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993, 2012) emphasized the importance of the social and academic integration into the college culture as important components for persistence. As Tinto (1993) noted:

Not all persons are identical, nor are all institutions alike in their structure and student bodies. Although it is obvious that all students must attend to the same general set of
problems in seeking to persist until degree completion, not all enter with the same sets of
skills and dispositions, nor experience higher education in the same manner. (p. 82)

This makes sense, as programs are highly structured in the coursework stage and less structured
in the dissertation stage.

Tinto (1975) built further on Spady’s (1971) ideas of both social and academic
integration. Tinto asserted that a student enters college with the pre-entry attributes of family and
community background, skills and abilities, and pre-college schooling. The student also enters
college with intentions and levels of commitments to the institution and to personal goals, which
are both influenced by the pre-entry attributes. The institution has academic and social systems
composed of formal (academic performance and social activities) and informal (interactions with
faculty, staff, and peer groups) experiences, and the student has both positive and negative
experiences within these systems (Elkins, Braxton & James, 2000). These experiences serve to
strengthen or weaken students’ intentions and commitments, leading to the decision either to
remain or to withdraw from the institution. Given an individual’s pre-entry attributes, goals and
commitments, Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993) concluded that the greater a student’s integration into
the academic and social systems of college, the greater the likelihood of persistence.

Although Tinto (1993) gave a standard framework for future research, Tinto (1988)
admitted that his model was limited to a residential college setting, although he believed it could
be applied to non-residential institutions (Tinto, 1988, 1993). He proposed that for nontraditional
students, the external community plays a pivotal role in persistence (Tinto, 1993). The relative
importance of external influences for nontraditional students is a major disconnect between
Tinto’s model and research involving nontraditional students on community college campuses.

Tinto’s (1975, 1987, 1993) statement that social integration is a larger influence on persistence is
also viewed as controversial and conflicts with Spady’s findings in his 1965 study at the University of Chicago (Spady, 1971). Research involving the importance of social versus academic integration suggests the relative importance of each construct may depend on the characteristics of the students and the institutions being studied.

Drawing from the work of Astin (1970a, 1970b), Spady (1970), and Tinto (1975), Pascarella (1985) created a longitudinal model that focused on student–faculty informal interactions. Pascarella suggested that institutional environments could alter the strong relationship between a student’s college success and his or her prior achievement by increasing the informal non-class academic contact a student has with faculty. Pascarella theorized that the quality, quantity, and type of contact affects other persistence predictors: satisfaction, development, aspirations, and integration. He stated that the most successful interactions appeared to be non-class extensions of the formal academic programs and presented this conceptual model in a path analysis design to help researchers analyze the strength of causal factors contained in the model. Pascarella (1985) later expanded his model by theorizing that student development is influenced by five sets of variables: a student’s background and pre-college traits, a college’s structural and organizational features, a college’s environment, the frequency and content of a student’s interactions with faculty and peers, and the student’s quality of effort. In relating these factors, he further hypothesized that the pre-college experiences and characteristics interact with the college’s structure to shape the college’s environment. He proposed that these three factors of pre-entry characteristics (the college structure and the college environment) influence the student’s interaction with faculty and peers. In return, the interaction combines with the institutional environment and the pre-college characteristics to affect the student’s quality of effort.
Pascarella (1985) suggested that the interactions, the pre-college traits, and the quality of effort directly influence the student’s development. Although Pascarella’s 1980 model and the 1985 simplification of the model were based on previous theories, they did not include the longitudinal paths of Tinto’s (1975) model. Pascarella’s model expanded on some of Tinto’s components, but it did not include environmental factors occurring outside the campus after the student enters college. An advantage of the model is that it hints at the quantification of academic and social integration as informal and formal contact with students and faculty.

Guiffrida (2006) challenged Tinto’s (1993) ideas that a student must separate from home cultures and norms and must integrate into the new culture of the college. Guiffrida argued that the transition model for college campuses was harmful to minority groups with strong cultural heritages. Based on a literature review of theories and models that attempted to explain student departure, Guiffrida made modifications to Tinto’s theory of individual departure to make the model more applicable to minority students. One change is that Guiffrida removed the word “integration”, which he argued meant abandoning the former culture and accepting the dominant college culture, and substituted the word “connection”, which he suggested meant accepting both cultures. Guiffrida also added the role of home culture to the model because of the importance of maintaining the culture provided by family and other members of the home community to help the student deal with the challenges of the new college community. Guiffrida suggested that institutions might retain more minority students when they value and encourage the diversity among students rather than expect them to integrate into the majority culture.

Guiffrida (2006) made several other changes to Tinto’s (1993) model to refine the theory to apply to culturally diverse students. He added cultural norms and values, both individual and collective, to pre-entry attributes. Although Tinto discussed this factor in his 1987 and 1993
books, it was not actually part of his model. Guiffrida added motivational orientation (extrinsic and intrinsic) and external commitments to the first goals and commitment. To the experiences while at college, Guiffrida added home social systems of family and friends, which also led to social connection (as opposed to Tinto’s social integration). To the second goals and commitment, Guiffrida also added motivational orientation and external commitments.

Recognizing the extent to which student motivational orientation impacts college and the pre-college environment, Guiffrida (2006) placed a great deal of importance on motivation. He also suggested that it is sometimes difficult to differentiate between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, stating that home culture often strongly affects extrinsic motivation. For example, a student may attain a high GPA to fulfill a personal goal or to achieve financial awards. Since extrinsic motivation is a product of both home and at-college systems, Guiffrida theorized that by creating diverse socialization experiences that provide a multicultural environment, an institution may increase commitment and integration and, in the process, retention. Guiffrida suggested that to improve retention rates, colleges must find educationally sound ways to ensure that campus environments reflect the norms and values of a wider variety of students, especially those who are underrepresented. A significance of Guiffrida’s model is that it recognizes students from cultures different than the college may not separate from their home cultures but may instead either combine the cultures or participate in the culture surrounding the student at any particular situation (Merriweather Hunn, 2008; Milem & Berger, 1997).

Although each of these adaptations was designed to relate to different populations, the models have common components. Each began with pre-entry characteristics, as suggested by Astin (1970a, 1997), which either directly or indirectly affect persistence. Most models related to traditional residential institutions emphasize institutional commitment, organizational attributes,
and social integration, but the models for nontraditional populations emphasized academic and environmental factors. Guiffrida’s (2006) model continued Tinto’s social theme but referred to socialization as making a connection with the college environment rather than integrating into it. These models can be relevant for a study of marginalized students who persist through graduate school and complete a doctoral degree.

The problem of Latino underrepresentation in doctoral programs continues to be an important issue for the Latino community. Castellanos, Gloria, and Kamimura (2006) discuss the current state of Latinos in the educational system from the social, psychological, and cultural perspectives that challenge Latino students who pursue a doctoral degree. The researchers argue that structural barriers interact with cultural differences to obstruct the Latina/o’s path to a doctorate. The challenges to completing a doctoral degree begin early and persist.

Women Working Toward Completing a Doctoral Degree

The enrollment of females in doctoral programs has increased over the past decade. Women represented 36% of students entering science and engineering programs in the 1990, 42% in the 2000, and 44% in 2006 (National Science Foundation, 2012). The increase illustrates positive gains for women in enrollment in doctoral programs; however, researchers are concerned about the completion of women in science and engineering fields as compared to their male counterparts (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2012). Women at the doctoral level are increasing their presence in the sciences but are not yet on par with their male counterparts. In 2008, 41% of doctoral degree recipients in the sciences and engineering fields were women as compared to 36% in 2000 and 30% in 1994 (National Science Foundation, 2012). These higher numbers of female doctoral recipients in psychology and other social sciences fields (such as these physical
sciences, life sciences, and social sciences) are all in one group, where women represent 70% and 49%, respectively, of the doctoral student population (National Science Foundation, 2012).

Improving the graduation rate for women in science, engineering, mathematics, and other fields of study is not only a social justice issue, but it is an economic issue (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2012). The United States continues to underproduce science and engineering graduates in an age when these degrees are in demand to meet the global needs of our society. The National Science Foundation and the National Academy of Sciences have been charged with keeping the United States at the leading edge of discovery in areas from astronomy to geology to zoology (National Science Foundation, 2010, 2012).

Women pursuing graduate degrees represent one of the fastest growing segments of the college population, and as of 2001, one out of six women of color who earned baccalaureate degrees was a re-entry student (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2007). Factors that might contribute to a Latina persisting to finish a degree were discussed in Torres’s (2003) study that examined the ethnic identity development of 10 Latino college students (3 Mexican, 1 Puerto Rican, 1 Cuban, 1 Venezuelan, 1 El Salvadorian, 1 Guatemalan, 1 Nicaraguan, and 1 Colombian). Torres found that the participants in her study, regardless whether they identified as White, bicultural, or Latino, did not appear to have negative views about their Latino background. Instead, they positively talked about their Latino ethnicity and discussed culturally harmonious activities, including speaking Spanish at home and participating in Latino social functions. This suggested that the ethnic group of Latina/o college students might be a source of strength that plays a critical role in their persistence in college (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2007). Specifically, the pride that Latinos have in the Spanish language, cultural practices, and other traditions (Torres, 2003) may play an important role in countering the negative stereotypes the dominant culture poses for
Latinos who plan to negotiate the college setting. However, many marginalized students, especially women, may see the institution as male centered, which could result in culture clash (Allen, Dean, & Braken, 2008) and Latinas needing to negotiate to persist toward their goal by keeping their ethnic identity (Torres, 2003, 2004).

Carter, Blumenstein, and Cook (2013) conducted a study on the challenges for women in doctoral studies. The study also looked at doctoral attrition and gender equity. The research methods included assembling data and insights from a counselor of doctoral students, endorsed by doctoral advising experience. The researchers reviewed data from 1,436 counseling appointments for 92 female and 36 male students at the university over a period of two years. The results indicated that cultural expectations regarding women’s passivity, family nurturance, and at least symbolic subordination to male authority can cause tensions between women’s social relationships and academic performance, which values assertiveness, clear communication and confident management of power relationships. Carter et al., (2013) noted several conflicts between the female roles of the social sphere and the academic arena that problematize the identity transition of the doctoral candidate from student to independent researcher.

Latinas in Graduate Programs

Researchers noted that by the time many Latina/o students managed to survive high school and have been admitted to college, they often perceive it is too late to get back on track to complete a higher education in the same time period as their non-Latino peers (Holley & Joseph, 2013). Holley and Joseph (2013) reported that once at a college or university, many Latino students face challenges that require more effort to stay on par with their non-Latino counterparts. Holley and Joseph noted that on their path to earning a college degree, many Latino
students face an uphill struggle every step of the way and even more so for those seeking a graduate degree in many of the STEM programs.

Holley and Joseph (2013) reported that data on Latino students in higher education make it clear that not all of them have positive experiences while in college. Many students often function within an education environment that does not support them. Many face language barriers, poor curricula, low expectations, a lack of role models, and other such hurdles to overcome. It should be noted that not all Latina students are instilled with the same sense of personal agency to enable them to overcome many systemic problems in higher education, which often include racist and sexist macroaggressions. Not all Latino students have someone encouraging them to succeed and daring them to try new things and test new ideas. Researchers noted that it should be the role of the university and university professors to encourage their personal agency and drive and nurture them and encourage them to use their inner motivation to succeed (Holley & Joseph, 2013). Usually Latino students do not come from families where advanced degrees are expected or anticipated. Explaining to family and friends that they will leave their current job to return to school can prove to be difficult. Therefore, many Latino/a students face the challenge of explaining to a family member to look beyond the present and focus on the future, that an advance degree will change their lives after obtaining it (Holley & Joseph, 2013). Research that does explore the lived experiences of women pursuing doctorates reveals more instances of stress, gender bias and role conflict, marginalization and isolation in academia (Brown & Watson, 2010).

The Thomas Rivera Policy Institute (2008) reported that Latino students’ success in obtaining a doctoral degree in STEM fields largely depends on their experiences in the home with their family and in the school and at the university with their teachers and professors. The
authors noted that help is needed on all fronts to enable Latino students to be successful in school and earn a doctorate degree in many of the STEM fields. There is a need for motivation to pursue careers in mathematics and in the STEM fields. Further, more opportunities should be provided for Latinas to advance their education within their own communities. The issue of access to quality and excellent education remains critical for the Latino population who are visible within the college and university community and increasing the number of Latinas who are successful in many graduate fields in higher education (Holley & Joseph, 2013; Thomas Rivera Policy Institute, 2008).

The Hispanic Border Leadership Institute (HBLI, 2018) noted that due to the low representations of Latinos with doctorate degrees, the HBLI program funds and supports the mission to increase the number of Latino students in doctorate programs. The goal of the program is to provide financial assistance, emotional support, moral support, mentorship, and technical assistance to be successful in a doctorate program (HBLI, 2018). Internal factors that contribute to success in the program are sometimes harder to identify or qualify. Many Latino doctorate students have different interests, strengths, and personal responsibilities that affect their success rates (HBLI, 2018).

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is grounded in critical race theory (CRT), in particular, Latina/o critical race theory (LatCrit). CRT is an intellectual movement from critical legal studies in the U. S. law schools in the 1980s. Legal scholars like Derrick Bell, Alan Freedman, and Richard Delgado found that progress came to a standstill and covert forms of racism were on the rise (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; McCoy & Rodricks, 2015). In its original
form, CRT examined the intersection of race, law, and power (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995; Lynn & Dixson, 2013). CRT puts race at the center of critical analysis (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) and allows researchers to examine the social construction of race and racism (Ladson-Billings, 1998), which draws from many disciplines (Ladson-Billings, 2003).

CRT was used to theorize, examine, and challenge the explicit and implicit aspects that race and racism impact on social structures, practices, and discourses (Bell, 1995; Lynn & Dixson, 2013).

CRT in educational research centers on the ways race, class, gender, sexuality and other forms of oppression manifest in the educational experiences of people of color. Latina/o critical race theory (LatCrit) was born from CRT, builds further on the commitment in social justice, but is based on a Latina/o consciousness (Elenes & Delgado Bernal, 2010). Similar to CRT, LatCrit is based on the assumptions that race matters, racism is common, and it is seen as normal (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Saenz & Ponjujan, 2009). LatCrit further argues that public institutions operate under White middle-class norms, traditions, and history, resulting in marginalizing people of color (Bernal, & Villalpando, 2002; Johnson & Martinez, 1999). LatCrit scholars are careful to clarify that this is not an attempt to essentialize all Latina/o experiences, which are unique and multidimensional, with multiple intersectionalities of race, class, and gender (Elenes & Delgado Bernal, 2010). CRT/LatCrit in education are discourses that center on the experiences of people of color to foster value in their experiences in their own voices as sources of knowledge and a basis of theory (Elenes & Delgado Bernal, 2010).

Experiential knowledge and the lived experiences are of great importance in LatCrit and emphasize the need for voices to be heard through storytelling (and counter-storytelling) as a valid and preferred methodology (Elenes & Delgado Bernal, 2010; Whitman, 2016).
views these types of exchanges as a way to expose inequalities and challenge traditional worldviews of Latina/o experience (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Whitman, 2016).

**Critical Race Theory/ Latina/o Critical Race Theory**

CRT has aspects drawn from many disciplines such as women’s studies, law, education, anthropology, sociology, and political science, which can examine how race, class, and gender intersect (Delgado Bernal, 2002). CRT entered the field of education in the 1990s (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and has been mostly used in qualitative research to challenge the subtle and overt forms of racism when dealing with students of color (Yasso, Parker, Solorzano & Lynn, 2004). In the 1970s and 1980s, CRT was used as a framework to explore the issues of race and racism as an explanatory variable for understanding enrollment behavior and the experiences of students of color (Girves & Wemmerus, 1988).

This framework was used to develop a model for studying students of color that focuses on strengths rather than deficits (Girves & Wemmerus, 1988). The foundation of CRT is to eliminate racial oppression as a bigger goal to eradicate all forms of oppression (Lynn & Dixson, n.d.). Although the focus was first on the African American plight, CRT has branched to include other marginalized populations such as Latino groups. LatCrit has served to further apply CRT to issues of immigration, language and nationality; various components of CRT are used as a tool to uncover and analyze the pervasiveness of racism and injustice in society (Parker & Lynn, 2002).

The creation and development of LatCrit initially was a critical response to the over-reliance on the Black-White paradigm of race work within the CRT tradition, which appeared to make the discussion related to race and racism as only related to Whites and Blacks (Parker & Lynn, 2002; Yosso, 2002). As the development of LatCrit evolved, an expansion of the
intersectionality of oppression came to the forefront. Scholars began to theorize about the issues relevant to the lives of Latina/os as it related to class, race, gender, sexual orientation, immigration status, language, religion, etc., and how these issues are interrelated. With the reliance of intersectionality of oppression, scholars engaged in exploration of various but distinct issues of oppression serve to subordinate diverse Latina/os groups differently, but also how these issues subordinate various other ethnic groups differently (Perea, 1997).

Although CRT and LatCrit rely on the major premises discussed, this study implemented ways in which both race and gender mediated educational experiences for Latino graduate students. The LatCrit theory was used in analyzing the data in providing a framework that was used to theorize and examine the ways in which the Latino women felt about their doctoral experiences. The LatCrit theory also was used to show the impact of the Latino doctorate students’ perceptions and experiences on the educational structures, processes, and how those experiences affected completing their doctorate degrees.

Conclusion

Despite the personal, cultural, environmental, and financial obstacles Latinas encounter in their educational quests, there are students who will achieve academically. As this review has presented, the numbers are small in comparison to other student populations and need to be increased to keep with the changing demographics of the United States. Although there has been a fair amount of research, there are sufficient gaps in the literature to necessitate more exploration of the personal, cultural, and environmental variables that positively or negatively impact Latinas’ decisions to remain in college.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

As the Latino population continues to grow in the United States, institutions of higher education must understand the factors that contribute to student educational attainment and doctoral degree success. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the motivational experiences, supports, and barriers of Latinas who have attained doctoral degrees. In this study, I examined the types of supports and barriers Latinas experienced and how they overcame the barriers in the academic process of obtaining a doctorate degree. This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do successful Latinas identify barriers and overcome barriers in their journey of obtaining a doctorate degree?

2. What are the perceptions of Latinas in relation to supports they received in their journey in obtaining their doctorate degree?

3. What are the perceptions of Latinas in relation to motivational factors in their journey in obtaining their doctorate degree?

This chapter provides an overview of the research design and methodology as well as the assumptions and biases that challenged the researcher. A discussion of the participants, methods of data collection, data analysis procedures, and trustworthiness are also presented. The chapter concludes with a presentation of the delimitations and the limitations of this study.
Rationale for Qualitative Research

Maxwell (2005) notes that qualitative studies are especially suited to do the following: a) understand the meaning for participants in the study of the events, situations, and actions they are involved with and of the accounts that they give of their lives and experiences; b) understand the particular context within which the participants act and the influence that this context has on their actions; c) identify unanticipated phenomena and influences; d) understand the process by which events and actions take place; and e) develop causal explanations (p. 22). Research that seeks to understand the meaning or nature of experience of persons in this study lends itself to a qualitative approach. Therefore, the qualitative design of this study provided me with a framework to make sense of the human experiences (Creswell, 2017). Listening to the stories of the challenges they overcame to successfully earn a doctoral degree provided a voice to the participants and provides information for institutions to enhance their understanding of the needs of future students.

Human participants are usually purposively selected based on characteristics in qualitative research (Patton, 2002, p. 13), which increases the likelihood that the results will meet the research goals. Participants are often studied in the field (Creswell, 2017) at selected sites to “generate new understandings” (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 4). Qualitative data are collected in a variety of ways: interview, focus group, direct observation (Patten, 2002, p. 29). Qualitative studies employ procedures consistent with qualitative assumptions (Creswell, 2017, p. 5) in ways that support context sensitivity, empathetic neutrality, and inductive analysis. Inductive analysis entails gathering information, asking questions, forming categories, seeking patterns or theories, and perhaps developing new theories (Creswell, 2017; Weiss, 1994).
Research Design

To address the research questions in this study, a narrative research study method was used to seek the perceptions of participants’ educational experiences and uncover differing points of view among the subjects who participated (Crotty, 2015; Creswell, 2017; Stake, 2005). The narrative study method also provided the researcher with a level of detail that may not be readily uncovered through other means and provided a base on which further ideas can be tested through quantitative means (Yin, 2012). Narrative research is a form of qualitative research that has been used in many studies. Creswell (2017) stated, “In education narrative studies typically do not involve the account of an entire life but instead focus on an episode or event in the individual’s life” (p. 514). “These stories provided the raw data for analysis as the participants retell the story based on narrative elements” (p. 515). As researcher I retold the stories and identified themes that emerged from this study.

Research Procedures

Narrative research is the form of qualitative research used in this study. Creswell (2008) described narrative research as being used when an individual wishes to tell their story and the researcher wants to tell their story.

Participants

The 15 participants for the research were recruited from among Latina graduates who had been enrolled in and graduated from various doctoral programs at a state or private university. Participants for this study were of Latina origin, but due to the migration and immigration
patterns, the representation was primarily from the subgroup of Mexican American descent (U.S. Census, 2010). Participants for this research were gathered through a variety of methods. Initially, I advertised for participants with flyers and an announcement in pertinent organizations. Faculty members were asked for referrals of former Latina students who had graduated with a doctorate. Additional recruitment was sought from members of the Latinas Completing Doctoral Degrees (LCDD) Facebook Group, a professional network space for Latina doctoral students, created in 2013. Lastly, snowball sampling was utilized by asking participants to recommend the study to their friends who were Latina female doctoral graduates (Creswell, 2008). Snowballing is viewed as purposive and nonrandom, but not “accidental or haphazard,” and allows the researcher to narrow the scope to the theoretical framework of the research (Creswell, 2017). The snowballing approach has been shown to be successful in identifying and recruiting “hard-to-reach” populations that may be necessary for a study (Creswell, 2017).

Demographics of the Participants

The participants in this study were 15 women who met the criteria of having completed a doctorate degree, were over 25 years of age, and self-identified as Latina/Hispanic. Participants for this study were of Latina origin; however, due to the migration/immigration patterns, the participants (11 of the 15) were primarily of Mexican American descent (U.S Census, 2010). Twelve of the 15 participants identified as first-generation college students and were the first individuals who had attended college in their families.

Participants for this research project completed their doctoral programs at universities across the United States. Participation for this study was sought through a variety of methods. First, I advertised for participants with flyers and an announcement in relevant organizations,
such as Latino Centers or Latino/a Resource Centers. Faculty members at universities were asked for referrals of former Latina students who had graduated with doctorates. Additional recruitment sought members of the Latinas Completing Doctoral Degrees (LCDD) Facebook Group, a professional network space for Latina doctoral students, created in 2013. Lastly, I used snowball sampling (Creswell, 2017) by asking participants to recommend the study to their friends who fit the study criteria for participation. Table 1 provides the participants’ demographic information.

Table 1
Demographics of the Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Name</th>
<th>Degree and Year</th>
<th>Prior education</th>
<th>Self-Identified</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Consuelo</td>
<td>Ed.D.-2013</td>
<td>1st-generation student</td>
<td>Mexican American</td>
<td>Parents-Chilean, Mexican</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>Parents-Mexico</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>Ph.D.-2016</td>
<td>1st-generation student</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>Parents-Guatemala</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janet</td>
<td>Ph.D.-2018</td>
<td>1st-generation student</td>
<td>Latina Mexican</td>
<td>Parents-Mexican</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roberta</td>
<td>Ph.D.-2019</td>
<td>College-educated parents</td>
<td>Cisgender Latina</td>
<td>Mexican</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carmen</td>
<td>Ed.D.-2018</td>
<td>1st-generation student</td>
<td>Tejana Chicana, Latina</td>
<td>Mexican American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gloria</td>
<td>Ph.D.-2017</td>
<td>1st-generation student</td>
<td>Mexican American</td>
<td>Parents-Mexican</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erica</td>
<td>Ph. D.-2015</td>
<td>1st-generation student</td>
<td>Latina, Cuban-American</td>
<td>Parents-Cuban</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table continued on next page
Table cont. from previous page

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Degree</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Parental Background</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Diana</td>
<td>Ed. D.</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>1st-generation student</td>
<td>Mexican American</td>
<td>Parents-Mexican</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julia</td>
<td>Ed.D.</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>1st. generation student</td>
<td>Mexican</td>
<td>Parents-Mexican</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Margarita</td>
<td>Ed.D.</td>
<td>1992</td>
<td>College-educated parents</td>
<td>American</td>
<td>Parents-Venezuelan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sofia</td>
<td>Ph.D.</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>1st-generation student</td>
<td>Chicana</td>
<td>Parents-Mexican</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ivonne</td>
<td>Ed.D.</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>1st-generation student</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>Parents-Guatemalan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frida</td>
<td>Ph.D.</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>1st-generation student</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>Parents-Mexican/Iranian</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Collection Procedures

I used a qualitative interviewing process as the main tool for collecting data for this study. Creswell (2017) contends this approach is used with nonstandard, semi-structured, and open-ended questions. Therefore, a semi-structured interview protocol was developed to engage the participants in the interview process (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). This provided me some control over the questions and flow of the interview but still allowed for spontaneity and pursuit of unexpected directions suggested by the participant (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 Latinas who had successfully completed doctorate degrees. The goal of the interviews was to explore the motivational experiences, supports, and barriers of Latinas who earned a doctoral degree. The interviews were conducted face-to-face or over the phone based on location of the participants, and each interview process lasted approximately 55 to 75 minutes. The interviews were recorded with a digital recorder. All interviews were transcribed using the website Rev.com and put into a word processing program.
The interview process was divided into three parts: introduction, knowledge sharing, and conclusion. In the first phase, the participants were introduced to me and provided further information on the purpose of the study, the goals of the study, and informing the participants that the interview would be recorded. This allowed me time to encourage the participant to relax and to establish proper rapport with the participant. The participants could ask questions or voice concerns about the study before the session began. The participants were provided the informed consent form to sign before the interview process began. The informed consent explained the purpose of the study, the study procedure, the risks and benefits of the study, and a guarantee that the participants could stop participating in the study at any time (see Appendix D).

In the second phase, I encouraged participants to share their perceptions using semi-structured, open-ended interview questions. I used questions to encourage the participants to share their perceptions of their journey to earning a doctorate degree. Each participant was informed the interview would be recorded and then transcribed by Rev.com. I concluded this phase by briefly summarizing the subject. I also gave each participant the opportunity to provide any additional information to make sure all points were covered in the interview process. The collected data were coded for patterns, themes, and suggested findings. A follow-up interview was provided when necessary to clarify any responses after transcriptions were reviewed as needed. I also used notes taken during and after the interviews to serve as an additional form of validation by allowing better triangulation of data through multiple sources of evidence (Bogden & Biklen, 2007; Maxwell, 2005).
Data Analysis

Constant comparison analysis was used to analyze the data in this study. Constant comparison analysis creates a systematic theory based on observations in the study (Creswell, 2017). After transcriptions of the interviews were completed, I began working with the texts to code the data (Saldaña, 2016). Coding began by first organizing the “data into broader themes and issues” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 96). Both organizational and substantive categories were used for this study. Organizational categories “are broad areas or issues that you establish prior to your interview or observations, or that could usually have been anticipated” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 97). The organizational categories were directly related to my research questions.

After the data were transcribed into a detailed text format. I transported the data into Atlas ti, a qualitative analysis software program. The use of a computerized software helped improve the accuracy and standardization and gave me greater flexibility in revising the data analysis process. After this process, I listened to the recordings for voice inflection and read the interview texts to identify organizational categories and then read them again to begin open coding (Maxwell, 2005). These open codes allowed me to arrange my data into substantive categories. Substantive categories are developed by analysis of the participants’ descriptions of their experiences and are primarily descriptive; in a broad sense, that includes “descriptions of participants’ concepts and beliefs: they stay close to the data categorized, and don’t inherently imply a more abstract theory” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 97). Using this method of coding allowed the analysis to be situated in the literature, as is appropriate for a basic qualitative study (Merriam, 2009). After this process, the data were further coded into themes/nodes. Each node was identified as a container to gather related data in one place so I could identify emerging patterns
and themes in the study. Finally, reports were created to explore the progress of the data to import in this study.

Trustworthiness

I employed several strategies to assure the trustworthiness of the findings. Creswell (2008) highlighted the concepts for trustworthiness in qualitative research: credibility, dependability, and confirmability to maintain rigor and quality standards in qualitative studies.

The concept of credibility was applied in this research study through member checking. The technique of member checking was used to improve the credibility and accuracy of the participant data collected in the study (Merriam, 2009). Each of the participants was provided a copy of the transcribed interview and asked to review the document for accuracy. In addition, participants were provided a copy of the interview data to help me to identify areas that may have been misinterpreted.

The second concept is dependability. Creswell (2017) noted that dependability refers to the utilization of an audit trail in the study. An audit is defined as a transparent description of the research steps taken from the beginning of the research study to the development of reporting the findings (Creswell, 2017). This was achieved by retaining notes with the data, audio recordings, and transcriptions of the interviews.

The final concept in qualitative research is confirmability. Creswell (2017) defined confirmability as how the findings in a research study support the data being collected. This concept was achieved through reflecting on the methodology used in the study and the supervision of my dissertation committee.
This study has several delimitations, as all research is likely to have. The first delimitation is the sample of 15 participants from several universities, which is not representative of the stories of all Latina doctoral graduates’ academic experiences. However, Yin (2012) noted that one way to improve the outcomes in qualitative research is to provide thick and rich descriptions of the findings.

I interviewed the 15 Latinas from various locations in the United States. Many of the participants attended state universities, but several attended private institutions. The term “Latino/a” tends to incorporate the ethnic populations from most countries in Central and South America, but many of the participants were predominantly of Mexican American descent. This small representation of other Latino ethnicities may have impacted the study results due to lack of diversity.

Lastly, acknowledging my own personal experiences as a Latina of Mexican descent working in higher education was important to avert possible biases. I focused on the answers given by the participants and tried not to ask leading questions, although I could relate to many of their responses. Conducting semi-structured interviews allowed me to be flexible when the participant provided information useful to the study, but my protocol also assisted me in not letting the interview veer off into different tangents that were not relevant to the findings of this study. The open coding also assisted in keeping the focus and maintaining the accuracy of the findings. Further, the findings of this study may improve understanding of the journey of Latinas in earning doctorate degrees.
I first used a manual approach for coding hard copies of the interviews by use of pencil and highlighting. I then used Atlas.ti 7 (Scientific Software Development, 2017) to help analyze the data, which allowed me to electronically scan texts for recurring terms/codes to search for patterns and themes. The themes were then reorganized to form the identified thematic labels for the data analysis for the study. The coded data identified using the Atlas.ti 7 program were reviewed to ensure accurate representation and understanding of the phenomenon being studied. The categories of themes were used to establish the patterns and themes of the study. Finally, vague thematic descriptions were condensed and presented in more descriptive terms.

Positionality Statement

It is necessary for researchers to identify possible biases, as their positionality can alter results if not properly addressed (Creswell, 2017). I am a Latina who is interested in the need to increase the number of Latinas earning doctorate degrees. For the past 15 years, I served as a clinical coordinator for outpatient counseling services for a mental health and substance abuse agency. My current position has been as an adjunct faculty member at a local community college for the past 20 years. I teach counselor education and criminal justice courses to students seeking a two-year degree or seeking to transfer.

As an educator, I have become aware of the increasing numbers of Latino/a students attending my institution. I have seen that many have become disillusioned and left their education. I have also seen many further their educational goals. I am aware that my own experiences have impacted on how I interact with my students and understood these same feelings while interviewing the participants of my study. My experiences have given me an empathy and understanding to encourage my students to push forward and not be discouraged by
the barriers they may feel. Interviewing the participants for this study was a moving experience; I felt moved to tears as I heard the poignant stories of their highs and lows. I found myself having a difficult time remaining objective and not interjecting too much of myself in their stories.

My positionality provides me with a personal familiarity and a strong connection to this study. As a Latina, I have struggled at various points in my educational pipeline experiences. Even in kindergarten, I was given the message that I could not learn. I was put in a corner and just told to draw and color until my mother challenged the teacher to put me into activities and teach me to read and write. My mother was instrumental in helping me learn these skills and encouraged me to reach for the impossible and make it possible. There were many challenges and experiences I encountered as a result of being a first-generation student and lacking the knowledge of how to seek higher education and funding – added to the societal expectations of being poor and a woman of Mexican American descent. I will never forget being told by the high school counselor that I would never go to college and that I should take home economics and typing. I suppose she meant well in her advice to learn a skill that would enable me to find work.

My high school was a blue-collar working-class environment, comprised of predominantly White students, military children from the nearby naval base, and African American and Latino students. Funding for college preparatory classes was limited and very few minority students were being placed in the advanced classes, as many had dropped out by then or were in the vocational training programs. Only a few African American students were in college prep courses. With my mom’s and a teacher’s help I was able to be enrolled in the college prep courses and was the only Latina in all of them.

My parents insisted on our staying in school and getting an education. They both had difficult and dangerous factory jobs and limited education. My parents wanted my siblings and
me to have better opportunities in life, which they felt an education would provide. My mom was my strongest advocate in pursuing my goal of going to college. It was not easy, with no money and little encouragement from my school; every accomplishment was a testament to the strong women in my family. From my maternal grandmother, who had to hide from the marauders in Mexico as a child, coming to the United States to work as a migrant worker and being dumped in Wisconsin when she refused to put her mark “X” to agree to indenture her children to the farmers, my mom was brought up in the Depression era to be a traditional Mexican American daughter. Yet eventually she found the strength to fight for her children to have a better life. I am striving on the shoulders of all the strong and determined women who preceded me.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the motivational experiences, supports, and barriers of Latinas who have attained doctoral degrees. In this study, I examined the types of supports and barriers Latinas may experience and how they overcame the barriers in the academic process of obtaining a doctorate degree. To address the research questions in this study, a basic interpretivist study method was used to seek the perceptions of participants’ educational experiences and uncover differing points of view among the subjects who participated. The 15 participants for the research were recruited from among Latina graduates who had been enrolled in and graduated from various doctoral programs at a state or private university. Participants for this study were of Latina origin, but due to the migration and immigration patterns, the representation was primarily from the subgroup of Mexican American descent. I used a qualitative interviewing process as the main tool for collecting data for this study. A semi-structured interview protocol was developed to engage the participants in the
interview process. Constant comparisons were used to analyze the data in this study. Constant comparison creates a systematic theory based on observations in the study. Chapter 4 will discuss the results for this study.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore Latina students’ motivational experiences, supports, and barriers they experienced during their graduate studies as they earned doctoral degrees. By exploring their experiences, this study addressed the social and environmental factors in the experiences of Latina doctoral students. Increasingly, doctoral degrees are seen as the gateway to full participation in the American workforce and society (Castellanos et al., 2006; Hesse-Biber & Carter, 2005). Gaining an understanding of the motivating factors that contributed to the persistence and barriers Latina doctoral students experienced can help future generations to complete graduate degrees and institutions to help future students’ complete graduate degrees.

This chapter presents the 15 Latina participants’ stories about their personal and educational lived experiences. Hearing their rich stories through the semi-structured narrative reveals their complex experiences and how these experiences influenced personal, professional and academic decisions and success. Critical race theory (CRT) and Latino critical race theory (LatCrit) were used as the theoretical frameworks to analyze these women’s narratives.

Findings of the Study and Emergent Themes

During the interview process, each participant was asked the following questions: a) What made you decide to pursue your doctoral degree and why? b) What type of support did
you have while you were in your doctoral program?  
c) As you think about your experiences during your doctoral program, what were the barriers and/or obstacles you experienced?  
d) As you think about our last conversation, are there things you would like to add?  
e) What motivated you through your travels in education?  
f) What advice would you give others in your situation who are pursuing their doctorate?  
g) During your doctoral program, what do you think really helped you finish your degree?  
h) What do you think are essential things institutions and academic programs should do to help support a student with similar experiences as you?

The data analysis process generated several findings critical to the research questions, namely: a) inspiration and support by family and friends to pursuing a doctoral degree, b) lack of guidance towards completing the dissertation, c) lack of Latino doctoral degree attainment, and d) assistance needed in conducting research and writing requirements in the program. Below, each finding is presented along with participant voices describing their experiences within their doctoral programs.

Family and Friends as Support and Inspiration

The first theme that emerged from this project centered on how participants were inspired to get their doctoral degree and supported by a variety of different networks. Some participants indicated that family and friends played an important and integral role in inspiring the Latina students to enroll in and complete their doctorate program. Others shared that they found support from co-workers, their community, and even social media groups.

For example, Josefina discussed that her father was very active in inspiring her to further her education and obtain her doctorate. She expressed,
I think I was fortunate to have my father, who braved a very trying time in the ‘60s and ‘70s to even be a college student who emigrated from Mexico. He inspired me to continue my education to obtain a doctorate degree. He became a teacher and, so, I just saw his work ethic. I remember, in high school, asking, “Okay, well what degree do you get first? What comes next?”

For Josefina, her educational journey was inspired by her father whom she felt “braved” the educational system in the 1960s and 1970s. She noted how Mexicans were not encouraged to attend higher education. In the state that she grew up in, the educational system viewed it unthinkable for Mexicans to be “smart” enough to go to school. She admired her father for the obstacles of prejudice that he had to overcome to get an education. Josefina felt that if her father could reach his goals that she would be able to do the same.

Roberta noted that her mother was very inspiring in her decision to enroll in a doctorate program even though she was a single parent. She stated,

My mom was going to make sure that it happened, and I knew that. Because I had a little girl and for the most part, I was a single parent, I knew that. It started out to just hurry up and finish my BA degree, get a job. But then, at some point towards the end of my senior year, I learned about graduate school. My mom moved with me to help take care of my daughter, so I could finish my doctorate. My family, my mom was such a big support. She didn’t write the dissertation, she didn’t take the classes, but she knew about everything that was going on in the classes and she made sure I wrote. She was along for the ride for sure.

Roberta found this to be a strong support that alleviated many of the stressors she had been experiencing as a single parent. Roberta had a strong support system from her mom. She knew the sacrifices her mom was willing to make for her to reach her goal of degree attainment. The unconditional love, encouragement and support from her mom gave her the courage to finish her degree.

Ivonne explained that even when she hit roadblocks in her studies, she had the support of her family and an older friend with whom she attended her master’s program. She discussed how
her friend encouraged her to seek a doctorate degree and helped her overcome her self-doubts.

She also described how frustrated she had been on failing on her first exam attempt and how her family kept her on track:

After I failed, I worked with my brother who’s an attorney. He’s like oh my god this grammar is horrible! It’s your grammar, he’s like did you write this last minute? And I was like um---- and he’s like, so you deserved not to pass. He’s like if you didn’t put the effort in, and in my family it’s always like if you don’t put the effort in you can’t complain, you know? And when I told my husband I’m like I want to quit, and he goes sorry in this household we don’t quit. He’s like I don’t quit, your daughter doesn’t quit, you don’t quit, so we can’t quit. He’s like so you’re going to have to find another way. I’m like but I didn’t pass, he’s like but you have another opportunity. I said well what if I don’t pass? And he’s like well we won’t know until you do it. I passed the next time and fell in love with the work. My husband encouraged me to go with my classmates and study with them. I would be with them on Sundays and he would text me to see when I was coming home? So, I left and went home, and he stated he was just wondering what time I was coming home not to leave the group. I was oh, okay then and would stay with the group after that.

Ivonne noted her brother’s support and her husband’s encouragement for her to go back to school and to complete her degree. Ivonne had many self-doubts in her abilities in writing and being capable of pursuing a doctorate degree. Although she wanted to give up, the support she received from family and her friend stopped her self-talk about being incapable of doing the work. This was a common theme with many of the participants of this study; their self-doubts and negative feelings of being capable were offset by their families’ and friends’ support and encouragement.

Ivonne’s situation of being inspired to pursue a doctorate program was done through the encouragement of a friend. Similarly, Consuelo shared that her friend and supervisor took an interest in her and pushed her to enroll in a doctorate program:

A friend, a fellow Mexicana, who was getting her Ph.D. in educational technology at New Mexico State. Would ask me what it is that ... What did I want to do? I said, “Well, I wanted to be a teacher forever, but that pulled up into administration.” She said, “You know, you need to go and get your doctorate.” As a Mexicana, it doesn’t matter how
many degrees you have and what position you have. When you’re at home, you’re still cooking and cleaning and you’re still taking care of your family. I felt that gender role. She kept pushing and then our superintendent had a meeting with me. I can’t remember what the circumstances were, but he had asked me to meet. He was brand new in the district and we had a conversation. My dad grew up in a time where he went to segregated schools in California and they weren’t allowed to speak Spanish. He always used to say, “At the end of the day, they may call you Dr. Wetback, but they still can’t take away all your education.”

Some women may feel that they cannot pursue a doctoral degree because of their gender.

Consuelo’s own inner voice was repeating messages she had heard while growing up that a Mexican woman is responsible in caring for the family and education might not be attainable. She had to overcome those beliefs to seek a doctoral degree. Consuelo began thinking that she had nothing to lose and applied to a doctoral program. She came to see that the external factors of work and family had impacted her GPA, which did not represent her actual abilities to seek a doctoral degree. She was very grateful to her friend and the superintendent who reminded her of her father’s words in helping her see she had the ability to seek a higher degree regardless of her race and gender.

Gloria first wanted to become a paralegal but was inspired to pursue a doctorate due to being encouraged by a friend. Gloria reported,

Initially, I was thinking of becoming a paralegal and getting the credentials as a paralegal. But I think one of my classes had a female lawyer who was the instructor. So, then I thought, oh, well maybe I want to be a lawyer. Through that process, you start hearing about transfers and you’re just like what? People are transferring. So, I just learned. And I became a little proactive on my own, met with counselors who had good reputations of helping students transfer. And then, I learned about the transfer process. I am glad that my friend talked me into pursuing a doctoral degree.

Gloria, while on her educational path, began to realize that she had many more options then she initially thought. She was a first-generation student who started her education at a community college and had no knowledge of the transferring process. She did not think long range about the
possibility of furthering her education past the community college level. As she became more exposed to other options by her professors and other students, she came to realize that she could transfer to another college to continue her education, but she had to learn how to negotiate the educational process since she was the first one in her family who had proceeded past high school.

   Diana explained the encouragement she received when she offered,

   I received encouragement to pursue a doctoral degree from both my friends and several family members. They always impressed on me the need to advance my level of education by obtaining a doctoral degree. I am glad that I listened to them.

For Diana, both family and friends encouraged her to pursue and complete her doctoral degree. She stated that she was glad that she listened to them.

   Carmen also spoke about her friends’ support as she went through the doctorate program and about how instrumental they were in her succeeding,

   It was a lonely process while in my program, no one else had an understanding in my community and my family, so I felt I was kind of isolated. However, my support mechanism outside of academia was wonderful. I had my high school counselor, and I started working at the current high school where I work at the moment, I started my program. And my coworkers, my counseling team, my students, their parents, my parents, my family, my extended community, like my neighbors.

Importantly, Carmen found support outside of her educational world that helped support her and inspire her to complete her degree.

   Many of the Latinas reported that in addition to emotional and social support they received from their families and friends. They also felt encouraged by supporters just being there when they needed someone to talk to, when they were down, and/or wanted to quit their journey in obtaining their doctoral degree. Erica reported that going through the doctorate program was “a family affair” when she shared,
As far as outside my advisor, it seems like that’s the only person that I’ve talked about, but initially I didn’t really have that much support from family. They did not understand what higher education all was about; however, they were very proud and supportive of me throughout the dissertation process. To me it was a family affair.

She explained that her family evolved in their support and felt very proud of her accomplishment at the end of her doctorate program.

For some of the participants, the community also provided a support mechanism while navigating the educational process to achieve their goal of a doctoral degree. Janet stated,

I received support from my friends in the program and friends in my community. They always encouraged me to continue the process. There were times I wanted to give up when writing the dissertation, but they stayed on me to complete the programs. I am happy that I listened to them.

Josefina expressed how a community on social media was a useful outlet to commune with fellow Latinas seeking or having completed a doctoral degree. This was representative of the camaraderie of the 12 of 15 participants who were part of the LCDD forum. Josefina explained,

I really didn’t find any actual support until coming across social media outlets, like Facebook, where different doctoral groups existed such as LCDD. So, I’d watched one group, when I joined, was probably at 4,000 people, has had 11,000 doctoral scholars at this point. So, it’s just been interesting to see the population grow. I consider these people to be my friends because they are going through the same things and situations.

Encouragement for the participants to pursue their doctoral degrees came mostly from family, friends, and supportive communities. These resources reduced the fear and anxieties they faced in their decisions to pursue their doctoral education. The support helped alleviate self-doubts, feelings of inadequacies and negative messages the participants may have been given regarding their capabilities in attending higher education and seeking a doctoral degree.
Barriers to Completing the Doctoral Degree

Each of the 15 participants provided unique perceptions and experiences regarding completing their doctorate journey, including the barriers they faced during their time in the doctorate program. These barriers included how no one looked like them in the programs as well as coping with finding funding, their qualifying exams, personal issues, and guidance in completing the dissertation process. The last barrier was the emotional and physical toll working on a doctoral degree had on their life.

Lack of Representation

Some of the participants noted that a barrier for them was the lack of representation of someone in the program who looked like them due to being Latino in the doctorate program. Specifically, participants shared that they struggled because they did not see themselves represented in their faculty and in their curriculum. Consuelo shared,

Honestly, I would say a lot of the barriers and obstacles were internal. I didn’t know anybody that had ever had this much education, so I never saw anyone that looked like me, for sure. I didn’t think it was for me. Going through the process, I felt like ... They talk about imposter syndrome. I still go through that now, but I did feel out of place when we would have meetings. Twice a year, they would bring us all together for intensives. You look around and you’re like, “Okay. Well, there’s three black ladies. There’s a couple of African American gentlemen and me.”

As stated by Consuelo, she felt out of place at some of the meetings. Some of the participants felt it would have been nice to have someone in the doctorate program who shared their cultural experiences and someone to lean on in time of need and to just listen to their concerns. Consuelo’s narrative was representative of how several of the participants felt regarding a lack of connection with the other students and professors.
In addition, Freida discussed how she wished that there was a better representation within the students in her classes. She shared,

I liked my program of study, but it would have been nice to see someone in the program that was Latino and looked like me. The programs were mostly white students and I felt out of place most of the time, but I can say that I made it through the program.

Consuelo and Freida both felt out of place due to the programs being mostly White students. The disconnect and feeling of isolation made the doctoral experience difficult and made them self-reliant in their studies.

In addition to noting that there was no one who looked like her in her doctoral program, Gloria noted there was little inclusion of race and ethnicity in the curriculum of her program. She contended,

What was lacking, though, was there weren’t people of color or there weren’t enough people who were teaching courses that mattered, to me, that is. There wasn’t anything on race and ethnicity, there wasn’t ... you know, it’s education, you would think that something ... that’s the first thing that they want to talk about. Diversity in schooling. But that was largely missing. And, my department, even though it’s education, there is no higher education focus regarding race and ethnicity.

Frieda addressed the issue of institutions lacking diversity in staff and faculty and how it can impact students of color:

I think honestly, more diverse faculty and staff, and if that’s not the case, more training for them on diversity and inclusion. More understanding of the dynamics of people of color and what they come with into the classroom. It became more and more apparent that higher ed is not designed for people of color, by nature, so we have to create our own spaces and our own demands. Slowly but surely it seems like academia is about to be catching on, but there’s still a long way to go.

Like Gloria, Freida shared that a barrier for her was the lack of diversity of the faculty and staff working in her program, although she also felt that people of color are slowly increasing in higher education. Consuelo, Frieda and Gloria felt a lack of community at their respective institutions and agreed that life would have been easier if they had felt a connection to their peers
and the university. It required them to gain a sense of self-reliance and seek support elsewhere.

Diversity in the educators and students would have made several of the participants feel comfortable and included in the process of their doctorate.

**Financial Barriers**

Several of the participants in the study mentioned the need for more levels of financial support for Latina students to pursue and complete a doctoral degree. Maria noted the struggle she faced with paying for her doctoral degree:

Some of the stuff I dealt with were I think not being experienced by other people. But one of the main ones with that, of course coming from a first generation in the valley where people just don’t have money like that, and then having really the salary of a schoolteacher for so long, I did not have money to go to school and to continue. So, my solution for my undergrad and my master’s program was taking out student loans. I did not come into my program funded and I didn’t understand what that meant until more recently, even after graduating, because the financial aspect of it will now pretty much cripple me the rest of my life.

Maria expressed despair that was noted by the participants on how student debt would cripple many of their dreams for the future. Several questioned the merits of seeking their doctoral degree, as several had stated it was hard to get into academia as a woman of color.

Some of the participants stated that their respective university should provide more funding and resources for Latino students to pursue a doctoral degree. Janet shared similar sentiments regarding funding for education. Like Maria, she shared that she too had to take out student loans. She said

I feel that there is a lack of resources for Latino students in many doctoral programs across the United states. Also, I feel that there should be more funding for students. I had to take out several student loans to complete my degree, but I feel it was worth it. Being funded would have been a big help, my husband and I are still struggling and probably will be for a long time.
Janet expressed a common theme in how student debt has created hardships that could have been avoided if the institutions had provided better resources in the process of getting funded without so much debt.

Delores added, “Funding for the doctorate program is a barrier for many students due to coming from families with very little money. More programs should fund students even if they go part time to make sure that there is diversity in their programs.” Janet agreed,

Funding is a big one. I don’t know how I would have done it without those scholarships. To this day, my parents don’t really know what a Ph.D. is about and what it cost. They know that my students call me Dr. and stuff, but I don’t think they know what all of that entails, and they were very supportive of my going for the degrees. But for myself, I know I wouldn’t want to go to them and like say, “Mom, Dad, could you support me financially, or am I going to have to go take out some loans?” And I wanted to kind of do it on my own, which I did, but I would have really, really struggled if I didn’t have those scholarships and tuition, in-state tuition and fee waivers for Ph.D. students in wildlife science. So, I think all of that really, really helped financially.

Janet was able to find funding for a doctorate in a specialized discipline. She had to be a strong self-advocate due to lack of financial support. She felt that without her acquiring the funding through various sources it never would have happened. She expressed how it shouldn’t be this difficult for someone to seek an education and could see this as a deterrent.

Consuelo discussed how she grew up poor and both her parents had passed away and left debt rather than inheritances. She explained the stress she and her husband felt due to both having student loans that they are paying back:

I would say that the external obstacle was financial. It’s expensive. You’re just getting by. We both have student loans. The thought of incurring additional debt I think was a stressor. I actually think it was an obstacle. It was a barrier that we got through, but I still think about that every month when I write the damn check, that I got myself in debt. Am I ever actually going to pay it off? Personally, I’m like, “No, I can die and those … are never going to get their money. Oh well.” But financial, for sure.
Consuelo represents how debt can cause stress in the day-to-day issues. Culturally, debt is not an acceptable premise. It angers her that she is in this position and that there had not been better funding offered through the institutions that she could have applied for.

Several of the participants suggested universities should provide Latino students funding to continue their doctorate studies over the summer, that way they can complete the programs in a timely manner. Roberta stated,

I think that first and foremost is looking at funding and not just something for your program professional development funding. If you can’t afford to go to a conference you can’t afford to network and all of a sudden, you’re easily forgotten. It shouldn’t be about who has the best opportunities to go. Also, summer funding. Watching out for summer funding because if it’s up to the program sometimes they leave, they’ll leave minorities they’ll leave women of color behind.

Similarly, Julia stated:

I think funding is an issue for many students. I live with my parents and what I manage financially I had saved. Some people don’t have that kind of an option. Students sometimes tend to live above our means or not within our means. Because I had not accrued debt, as I had mentioned, my employer had paid for my master’s degree, so I didn’t have tuition debt or student loans, so I was able to manage.

Julia was an anomaly in that she had good funding to further her education. She noted that this is not the norm for most students and that it would have been difficult for her to achieve her goal of a doctorate if she had not been funded. Students struggle and don’t fully realize the ramifications of students loans until much later. Financing is needed throughout the educational process, whether for tuition but also for conferences in order to network and cultivate possible career advancement.

Maria, Janet, Delores, Consuelo, Julia, and Roberta considered not attending a doctoral program due to the daunting amount of money that it would entail. Several discussed the issues of not knowing how to go about seeking funding and what was available to apply for funding.
Most of the participants were first-generation students and had to seek out resources and ask for assistance that could be overwhelming and deter seeking a degree. This might have been a frustrating experience, but it also made them more self-reliant and focused in their pursuits of an education.

Qualifying Exams

Another barrier to completing their doctoral degrees, as stated by many of the participants, was the qualifying exam students must take after completing all their course work. This can be a hard task for many Latino students who have English as a second language. Many of the participants stated that the college or university needed to provide more help for Latino students to prepare for these exams. Sofia stated,

Okay, so, yes, there were definitely plenty. At the University ... I don’t know, maybe ... I don’t know who to blame. Maybe ... I’m sure I’m partially to blame for this, because I signed up for all the qualifying courses, like, all three courses that year that we were going to be ... that the qualifying exam was going to be based on. But I really, really struggled in one or two of those three courses that first semester.

Sofia said she also struggled with several of her courses the first semester in her doctorate program. This experience fed her self-doubts and made her question her ability to be in a doctoral program.

Diana also discussed struggling with writing when she shared,

I will say because I’m an English speaker language learner, the writing part always has been my challenge. I had to study a lot to be able to do my work well, writing I don’t think is one of my strengths, so I had to work really hard to make sure I’m presenting the message or my thoughts the way I want it to be presented. I also have a very good friend who helped me a lot through my dissertation phase, especially that writing was correct, who was always helping me. So, if I had to say what will be my obstacle, that would be the writing part.

Diana had a friend who helped her get through the doctorate program by assisting her
with her English grammar. She realized that this was a deficit in her skills and she had to have someone critique her work to appropriately express herself.

Finally, Julia stated,

Comprehensive exams are very intensive, and they are like mini-dissertations in many ways, in which you’d really have to think critically. You have to be able to do your counseling literature review. I was working full time, so it was difficult for me to pass my doctoral comprehensive examination all in one shot. That was a challenge and it was not unusual for that program. Many students did not complete the entire comprehensive exam.

As stated by Julia, a barrier for her was having to work full time while obtaining her doctoral degree. She finally came to a point in her studies where she decided she had to step away from her full-time employment and focus completely on her exam.

Dissertation Process

Another barrier expressed by the Latinas was that some universities do not provide enough guidance on ways to complete the dissertation process after completing their core courses. For instance, Frieda stated,

There should be more guidance from the programs chair and other professors in completing the dissertation. I spend an entire semester trying to figure out what I needed to do as far as completing my dissertation. My chair went on vacation in the middle of the semester and I was stuck not knowing what to do while he was gone.

Similarly, Carmen stated,

I felt that I did not belong in the program due to my language barrier and writing skills. I feel that the university should provide more guidance with completing the dissertation. I was lost most of the time until one professor took me in and explained the entire process. I was very happy that she helped me to understand the dissertation process.

As detailed by Carmen, a barrier to her was being able to understand the professors due to a language barrier and her writing skills with completing the dissertation until a professor took her
under her the wing and explained the process in a way that she understood. Without that assistance, Carmen felt she might have fallen through the cracks and not finished her dissertation.

Josefina shared that she was also lost in the process:

There’s many times in that four-year process that, for myself, questioned, “Do I belong here? What am I doing?” Quitting came up at least three different times. It wasn’t an easy endeavor at all. And, it’s just about being resilient. So, on my own I had to reach out and find a methodologist to assist me, in addition to an APA editor. So, I knew, at one point, kind of just hit a wall, and I couldn’t look at my draft anymore and I needed sets of fresh eyes.

Josefina voiced a barrier for her was the feeling that she did not belong in the program and she felt like quitting. Also, she initially lacked the methodology and APA skills to complete the dissertation but was able to get someone to help in these areas. It also showed her that she had to be her own advocate by seeking resources on her own, which assisted her in overcoming the feelings of inadequacy.

Finally, Freida stated,

I had a good program, and the cohort had a diverse student composition, but the professors were mostly White, and they tried to understand our perspective, but it wasn’t always successful. My motivation to complete my doctorate was to represent Latino people in the program. We need more people of color and Latinos to complete doctoral degrees to aid others to do the same so that we can increase the Latino population with this type of degree. They can make a difference in the community.

Freida seemed to feel comfortable with her peers but noticed the great cultural and ethnic disparity between the students and the professors. This, Frieda felt, impacted an understanding of what the students were dealing with the writing process and their pursuit of a doctorate.

Frieda, Carmen, and Josephina discussed how the lack of support and guidance from the professors and institution had been a barrier to degree completion. They discussed how they had to become self-reliant and overcome their self-doubts to accomplish their goal of doctoral degree
attainment. They all agreed that having had some form of guidance would have alleviated the stressors they experienced while floundering in the dissertation process for their degree completion.

**Personal Issues**

Another barrier participant identified to completing their doctorate was the emotional and physical demands of being in a stressful program and how life events often made that stress and workload more difficult. Several participants discussed going through pregnancy, divorce, and emotional breakdowns along with self-doubt while pursuing their degrees.

Gloria discussed the difficulties she had when she moved to another country and had a baby:

> When I got married and had a baby and then my husband says I have this opportunity to move overseas, abroad for some time, it halted everything and so my timeline was paused for a while. I was trying to write, and my dissertation was what I was working on when I had my baby, so I was putting the baby down and then staying up until 3 or 4 in the morning to write, that was just chaos. Up at all hours of the night, taking care of her. No support here, so I didn’t have family or babysitters to lean on, to help with the baby.

With little to no support, Gloria had to stay up late at night to complete her assignments and finally obtain her doctoral degree. She discussed how exhausted she had been and how alone this experience had been while in the midst of working on her dissertation.

Maria added how she coped with the stressors of having a baby while in the program:

> I was newly married. I’m a little bit older as a student, so I’m not traditional, so a lot of things were happening. So that took me a good solid year if not longer to figure out. So, lots of barriers. Other things happened later on that also kept making it difficult. I had a child in the middle of my program. I didn’t think I could ever have a child. So that took its own toll. And so just other things like that started happening also. There was no doubt. I almost quit, and not just quit as, “I’m just going to take time off,” but I almost quit completely multiple times, but in very stressful and serious situations. It wasn’t just, “Oh, you’ll be okay. Just take a weekend off.” My husband saw me for the whole first year of
my marriage just in a state of mental health that was just not okay, and then I had a baby, so then he got to see me be a mother and a Ph.D. student. And something had to give. The stress on Maria’s marriage was difficult, and she and her husband had to come to an understanding about how to cope with the demands of the marriage, a new baby and being a doctoral student. She was able to obtain her doctoral degree despite the many barriers she experienced.

Josifina also discussed her self-doubts and how she contemplated quitting at various times of her program: “I mean, I think it’s fair to say, ‘imposter syndrome’. There’s many times in that four-year process that, for myself, questioned, ‘Do I belong here? What am I doing?’ Quitting came up at least three different times. It wasn’t an easy endeavor at all. And, it’s just about being resilient.” Josifina expressed a common feeling amongst the participants, a feeling of not belonging and not being good enough. Without role models that looked like her it was hard to feel as if she belonged.

Consuelo added to the feelings of inadequacy in being in a doctoral program:

Honestly, I would say a lot of the barriers and obstacles were internal. I didn’t know anybody that had ever had this much education, so I never saw anyone that looked like me, for sure. I didn’t think it was for me. Going through the process, I felt like ... They talk about imposter syndrome. I still go through that now, but I did feel out of place when we would have ... Twice a year, they would bring us all together for intensives. You look around and you’re like, “Okay. Well, there’s three black ladies. There’s a couple of African American gentlemen and me. I think feeling that, feeling like you don’t belong, like it isn’t for you.

Consuelo did not have any role models in her life who had any advanced degrees, much less a doctorate, which fed into her own self-doubts of belonging and having the imposter syndrome.

Dolores added to the feeling of self-doubt in her pursuit of a doctorate when she shared,

I got my master’s in 2000, and I went back to get my doctorate in 2012, so it was 12 years later, and not being in school for a long time, you forget how it is to write, and working on the kind of writing that we do, I think a doctoral degree changes your way of thinking, and it really turns you inside-out. For the first class that I took, it was more self-
doubt. I remember being in a fetal position, in the bathroom, just thinking and saying, “I can’t do this,” and then I was like, “I need to take a nap,” and I took a nap. My husband woke me up, and he was wearing a USC shirt, and the first thing I saw was USC, and I was just like, “No.”

Dolores showed that self-doubt was an issue due to being out of school for a long time, but she also noted that a doctoral degree changed her way of thinking and things have turned out well for her in life. It took her literally picking herself off the floor to refocus and realize that she had to work hard to regain her writing skills after the 12-year lapse of time and stifle her self-doubts to achieve her goals of a doctorate.

Roberta discussed the emotional and physical toll seeking and obtaining her doctoral degree cost her:

I wish I had taken care of myself. I wish I had taken better care of myself health wise. I was so concerned about gaining weight and not having that dissertation baby weight is what it was called. I tried everything to not gain it and I was still gaining it and I wasn’t sleeping I wasn’t eating correctly. I was working out but I was burning the candle at both ends and it just, I mean quite frankly by the time I got done I felt like a shell of myself. Emotionally drained, physically done. People now don’t understand when I say I’m still recovering. They’re like it’s been a year girl you should be recovered by now. Emotionally yes, mentally I’m getting there, physically its work.

Roberta felt that she is still recovering from the mental and physical toll on her life while obtaining her doctoral degree.

Erica stated how difficult her program had been as a result of sexual assault, a substance-abusing spouse, and the deep depression she experienced from the incident and how it impacted her ability to focus on her studies:

So, I had a lot of barriers and obstacles during my Doctoral program. Like I said my husband was a drug addict and actually the night before we got married during our bachelorette party I was actually sexually assaulted by a groomsman. It was like a nightmare scenario, but we didn’t have a lot of money and my ex-husband was like, “Well we can’t afford to do this another time so let’s still get married,” even though I was really traumatized. I was raped, I got married then of course I couldn’t really deal with reality. This was over winter break. You know I just got my grades in on three different
classes I was teaching. Excited about this event in my life and it turned into a nightmare so of course I was really depressed and hallucinating, delusions and those kinds of psychotic features and so I was Baker-Acted, which in Florida that’s what we call our involuntary hospitalization. I was hospitalized at that time and given medication and therapy and treatment for PTSD and despite this experience I continued. I even taught in the next semester. I needed a little bit of extra time, but I continued and still struggling with the treatment for that traumatic experience. I divorced my husband due to his continued usage and that relieved some of the stress. So that’s a major obstacle and even though I said my advisor was extremely supportive she kind of had a tough love approach. She knew about the sexual assault, but she said “I believe in you. You don’t need to take time off. You can continue. you can still teach,” and I followed her lead, but it might have been better for me to take some time off after that happened. So, I was kind of mad at her at that time. I wish I could have advocated for myself a little better.

Erica reported that although she had these issues, she was able to stay focused and earn her doctorate. She needed to take the time to address her mental health issues and then refocus on her degree.

Seeking a doctoral degree can be an extremely difficult time for many students. Although all the participants were able to overcome these barriers, it took a toll, and several are still dealing with the aftermath of completing their program. Most have financial obligations, have strained relationships, and have had emotional and physical repercussions from their time in a doctoral program. They all persisted despite these obstacles; most stated it was because of their inner strength, stubbornness and the support from loved ones. Many attributed it to their heritage and the sacrifices made by their families. Consuelo exemplified what many of the participants expressed:

We have to be fearless. Her [mom] parents came from Peru. If our parents came to this country without language, without money, without resources, without social capital and they were so fearless and somehow made it happen, then what makes us who were born here, who have the social capital, who have the language, who understand the system afraid to be successful? You can’t quit because so many people behind you need you to be successful. I don’t know if it’s cultural for us, but when one of us makes it, we all make it.
Consuelo, Gloria, Erica, Maria, Josephina, Dolores, and Roberta highlighted the toll that seeking a doctorate had on their lives, but they also were able to discuss how they needed to rely on themselves to accomplish their goals to degree attainment.

Lack of Guidance for Latinas in the Doctorate Programs

The participants contended that college and university administrators play an important role in improving retention of Latina doctorate students by providing a nurturing environment for learning. This includes allowing spaces for Latina students to foster their own learning by being supported in environments in which students are validated and acknowledged. Furthermore, they noted the institutions should provide students with an overview of the dissertation process as well as adequate academic support groups and mentoring services for students.

Maria noted that her program could benefit from an overview of the dissertation process to help students stay focused on assignments in the program. Maria stated,

Well, one of the things that’s really interesting and I’ve seen through the years is that my program was not designed well with some of these infrastructures in place that I’ve noticed in other programs through the years, a lot of programming in terms of both bringing your Ph.D. students together and your master’s students together to lay out some of those general expectations that happen in a program that your care may not specifically be good at showing you, right, or telling you about, showing you how to align yourself with your research or with your teaching in a way that maybe isn’t happening in your program.

Maria really brought home the need to bring students together to have a camaraderie and to share the experience of graduate school. She felt it would help in working through the process. Her view was that institutions do not do this effectively and that it is a disservice to the student.

Similarly, Erica stated,

I feel that more schools and programs need to provide students with an overview of what is expected for their program. This can be done when students come in the program so
they can know what is ahead and there are no surprises along the way. The goal should be to give students as much information as possible to make their life better and they can complete their dissertation in a timely manner.

Erica felt that there was a lack of information to students concerning assignments and the dissertation process.

Some of the participants noted they would have liked more help with their research and writing their dissertation and felt the university programs should have provided them with the help they needed. They believed this service would have helped them complete their dissertation and graduate in a timely manner. Ivonne stated,

I feel that there needs to be more support to students with their research and writing their dissertation. Many of the courses I took in my program did not align with my dissertation. Also, there needs to be a course on APA writing. We had a writing center but there needs to be more resources for doctoral students in the writing center.

Ivonne would like to have seen more support for making sure her dissertation used the proper APA format. She felt that institutions providing more resources for doctoral students would have aided the process for degree completion.

In addition, Sofia stated,

I think universities should provide more support for students with their writing skills. Many Latino students had to learn English due to coming from other places, so there should be more emphasis on helping them improve their research and writing skills in the program before they start the dissertation process.

Sofia stated universities should provide more support in research and writing skills for Latinos due to their lack of speaking English as a first language. English as a second language poses specific issues that additional writing assistance could have improved in the dissertation process.

Similarly, Gloria stated,

I think ... every university preaches diversity efforts and the importance of diversity. But I think for the most part, it’s bullshit. Yeah. And I think they leave it on the students to kind of find those counter spaces on their own. But if you’re a grad student, for the most
part, your kind of independently working on your own. Also, there should be more help for students with their research and writing skills before they start the dissertation.

Gloria shared how many universities want diversity in their student body, but they need to provide more support with helping students with their research and writing skills. She felt that touting diversity was all lip service, but not much was provided by her institution. These groups can help students who are having problems with someone to share their thoughts. Gloria seemed to express a common feeling that institutions stated that they were all inclusive, but it really wasn’t the case. The assistance for women of color was not readily available and it was a sink or swim environment.

As stated by Sofia, her university should have provided mentors and support groups for students. These support groups should meet to encourage students and to determine student needs while in the programs. She further stated that this is not a common situation to have a support group yet the need to be able to talk to someone and feel a connection with someone is important.

As stated by Erica, her university did not provide enough support to her while in the doctorate program. She sought out her friend who was working on a different program to help support her and keep her accountable. Erica additionally stated,

I just thought of something for the last question and then I’ll answer this one. Also having that study buddy. My best friend who met me at the library and having that social connection or accountability really helped me finish at the end. But what institutions or programs should do to support students with similar experiences, that’s a good question.

Some of the participants felt that the university should have provided more mentoring services for Latino students. Consuelo stated,

I would say two things in particular. Having a strong mentor, number one. Number two, actually having a program that understood that the hard part starts when you finish your coursework and start writing. Having a built-in system at the university that had checks at
certain points. I have many friends that have gone through many different programs and they’re left on their own.

Consuelo noted how the university should provide checkpoints at certain parts of the program to make sure that students are doing the work at an adequate level. She discussed how this support might have aided friends of hers to complete the doctoral program. Having a mentor or support system is integral to stay focused towards degree completion.

Similarly, Josefina stated,

So, that’s the first time I wanted to quit, because I had no idea what I was lacking in order to get my proposal approved until I hired a dissertation coach and it kind of illuminated the path and helped me understand what was going on, what it meant to write something in alignment. And, so, reaching out and being able to ask for help was essential.

Josefina stated how she wanted to quit the program due to not getting her dissertation proposal approval but also for not knowing how to go about the process. She had to hire a dissertation coach to help her get through the program. Josefina learned that she had to go outside of the institution and ask for help to achieve her goals. She discussed how this should have been incorporated in the services provided by the institution. If Josefina had not sought out the outside help, she might not have completed her dissertation.

Many of the participants provided examples of how the institution was lacking in providing an environment that would foster successful completion of a doctoral degree. They gave suggestions on how the institution might provide resources that might assist Latinas in writing and negotiating the dissertation process.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore Latina students’ motivational experiences, supports, and barriers they experienced through their graduate studies as they
earned a doctoral degree. The findings from this study indicate that the Latinas students felt that encouragement for the participants to pursue their doctoral degree came mostly from family, friends, and supportive communities. These resources reduced the fear and anxieties they faced in their decisions to pursue their doctoral education. The support helped alleviate self-doubts, feelings of inadequacies and negative messages the participants may have been given regarding their capabilities in attending higher education and seeking a doctoral degree.

In response to the interview questions that dealt with barriers to completing their doctoral degrees, the Latina students provided various explanations concerning barriers to obtaining their doctoral degree. Each of the 15 participants provided unique perceptions and experiences regarding completing their doctorate journey, including the barriers they faced during their time in the doctorate program. These barriers included how no one looked like them in the programs as well as coping with finding funding, their qualifying exams, personal issues, and guidance in completing the dissertation process.

Many of the participants had the support of family and friends during their pursuit of the doctoral degree. This afforded them an outlet of support that assisted them during times of difficulty in their program. Twelve of the 15 participants connected with other Latina doctoral students virtually from their membership in the Latinas Completing Doctoral Degrees (LCDD) Facebook group. This group was an empowering site that gave aid in trying times during their pursuit of their degrees and many continued to be involved after their degree attainment. All the participants who are members of LCDD virtually celebrate each member’s milestones overcome during their process towards completion.

The Latinas in this study felt that the university programs and services had a high impact on their doctorate experiences. According to the narrative in this study, the university
environment and student support programs and services helped establish a community for students in their programs. Also, services like peer networks made up of students from diverse background aided them in their quest to obtain their degrees. When these resources are lacking, as noted by many of the participants, it makes the process much more difficult and necessitates seeking these resources outside of the institution. These relationships helped give many of the Latina students confidence and optimism needed to overcome uncertainty and negative experiences in order to complete their doctoral degrees. Many have taken part in meeting for dinner in various locations across several states. The emotional support, although provided virtually, was significant in their ability to remain engaged, overcome self-doubts, feelings of the “imposter syndrome “ and completing the doctoral program. To many of the LCDD members it has become another family that provides support because they have had similar experiences in their journey towards doctoral degree attainment.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore Latina students’ academic motivational experiences, supports, and barriers they experience through their graduate studies and the doctoral process. By exploring their experiences, this study has also addressed the social and environmental factors that affect the experiences of Latina doctoral students through their journey to degree attainment.

Chapter 5 provides a brief summary of the problem and purpose of the study and conceptual framework. It then focuses on a discussion of research findings, pertinent literature, and the implications these findings have for practice within higher education institutions. Finally, this chapter concludes with recommendations for future research and the conclusion on the doctoral experiences of Latina women obtaining their doctoral degrees.

Overview of the Study

Latinas currently obtain the lowest number of doctoral degrees when compared to their White, African American, and Asian American women counterparts (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017; Seidman, 2012). Many issues hinder an individual’s pursuit and eventual attainment of a doctorate: distance, expense, and time, as well as disconnect from the institution, faculty, and resources available to a student. Several of the internal factors are self-doubt of whether this decision fits the needs for career pursuits, personal sacrifices by the family,
and self-worth (Castellanos et al., 2006). However, as the research has indicated, without a higher education the marginalized student will continue to fall further behind other populations, which will result in disadvantages in financial and professional endeavors (Spino 2016). Thus, there is a need for more research in this area to identify specific barriers and to come to know more about strategies to overcome these barriers to obtain a doctoral degree, as well as to identify reasons of why others may drop out of the doctoral degree program.

Understanding the aspects of student experience through a doctoral program is worth studying for two reasons. College doctoral degrees are increasingly seen as the gateway to full participation in the American workforce and society (Reddick, Griffin, Cherwitz, Cérda-Pražák, & Bunch, 2012; Spino 2016). Gaining an understanding of the motivating factors that contribute to persistence with these barriers is important to help future generations achieve completion of graduate degrees and help institutions learn from these factors to assist future students to complete graduate degrees.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is grounded on the critical race theory (CRT)/Latina/o critical race theory (LatCrit). Critical Race Theory (CRT) is an intellectual movement rooted from critical legal studies in the U. S. law schools in the 1980’s. CRT was used to theorize, examine and challenge the explicit and implicit aspects that race and racism impact social structures, practices and discourses (Bell, 1995; Lynn & Dixson, 2013). CRT in educational research centers the ways race, class, gender, sexuality and other forms of oppression manifest in the educational experiences of people of color. Latina/o critical race theory (LatCrit) was born from CRT and builds further on the commitment in social justice but is based on a
Latina/o consciousness (Elenes & Delgado Bernal, 2010). Similar to CRT, LatCrit is based on the assumptions that race matters, racism is common and is seen as normal. LatCrit scholars are careful to clarify that this is not an attempt to essentialize all Latina/o experiences, which are unique and multidimensional, with multiple intersectionalities of race, class, gender (Elenes & Delgado Bernal, 2010). CRT and LatCrit in education are discourses that center on the experiences of people of color to foster value on their experiences in their own voices as sources of knowledge and a basis of theory (Elenes & Delgado Bernal, 2010). I used the CRT/LatCrit to analyze the data pertaining to Latinas’ journey in obtaining their doctoral degrees.

Discussion of Findings

The following section discusses the findings of this study within the context of existing literature on Latina doctoral students. In this study, I found three predominant themes with subsections in the data analysis. These themes are as follows: (a) family and friends support and inspiration, (b) barriers to completing the doctoral degree, and (c) lack of guidance for Latinas in doctorate programs.

Family and Friends Support and Inspiration

One finding that emerged from this study is that participants received support and inspiration from a variety of different communities, such as family and friends, as well as groups on social media. These levels of support were shared through participants’ narratives and touched upon how support was provided through a variety of means. The data indicated that family and friends played an important and integral role in inspiring the Latina students to enroll
in and complete the doctorate program. Some participants expressed how they were fortunate to have a father who encouraged them to apply and to complete their doctoral degree.

In addition, some participants noted that their mother was very inspiring in their decision to enroll in a doctoral program even though some were single parents when she offered. Other participants found this support not only helped inspire them, but it also alleviated many of the stressors they experienced. Another participant explained that even when she hit roadblocks in her studies, she had the support of her family and an older friend. Some participants expressed how their friends encouraged them to seek a doctoral degree and helped them overcome self-doubts in their quest for obtaining a doctoral degree. These experiences showed that the Latinas relied on their families and friends for support in obtaining their doctoral degrees.

Several of the Latina doctorate students sought support from Latina groups on Facebook. The LCDD group was instrumental for many of the participants. They not only gained support and assistance in how to approach their studies, they found support when writing their dissertations. They were able to get advice for other aspects in their lives. Many of the participants shared research approaches, editors, transcription services and even how to defend their dissertation. They have also given advice on self-care, dealing with family issues, seeking employment in academia and available grants. The emotional support was imperative for many of the participants who did not have family members nearby or did not understand the demands of seeking a doctorate.

Some of the participants stated that they had many self-doubts in their abilities in writing and being capable of pursuing a doctoral degree. Although they wanted to give up, the support they received from family and friends stopped the self-talk about being incapable of doing the work. This was a common theme with many of the participants of this study; their self-doubts
and negative feelings of being capable were offset by their families’ and friends’ support and encouragement. Some of the participants expressed how they received encouragement to pursue a doctoral degree from both friends and several family members. Thus, participants discussed the critical role of the support they received from their respective networks.

Many of these Latina doctorates had to rely on outside help from family and friends to complete their doctorate programs. Many of their friends and families provided the necessary support for them to complete their programs. The Latinas reported that several of their doctorate programs did not offer much support in the form of moral support from faculty and staff. The lack of support from universities can cause many Latinas to drop out of their doctorate programs due to feeling lonely and family pressures. The institutions did not provide support for these Latino women while they were completing their doctorate programs. Institutions have continually viewed family and outside support as unimportant; however, people of color rely on this connection.

CRT pays close attention to the relationship between students and their family members and their outside communities. Institutions need to validate this relationship as it has been shown that students with this type of connection thrive in their education. Institutions that ignore the necessity of the outside connections may have to deal with students who have difficulty in adapting in the educational institution, homesickness, time management issues, and racism (Gokhan, 2014).

One of the most influential scholars in the field of CRT (Gokhan, 2014) in academic classes of reading, mathematics, and language arts reported that students of color usually feel as if their culture, experience, language, and history are not valued at many White universities or even omitted in formal educational settings. That is why their knowledge of subject matters is
not seen as valid, which is based on the European Anglo-Saxon culture. Hurtado (1992) noted that the Latino students who dealt effectively with these problems and issues were students from strong families and who also obtained moral support from their friends. Gokhan (2014) noted that educational leaders at universities should work closely with Latino students to better understand their voices instead of labeling them as invalid. Also, researchers noted that many educational leaders do not pay enough attention to racism at their universities (Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000; Gokhan, 2014)

Encouragement for the participants to pursue their doctoral degree came mostly from family, friends, and supportive communities. These resources reduced the fear and anxieties they faced in their decisions to pursue their doctoral education. The support helped alleviate self-doubts, feelings of inadequacies and negative messages the participants may have been given regarding their capabilities in attending higher education and seeking a doctoral degree. The literature indicated that traditional Latino families place a strong importance on the extended family, gender roles, age-based authority, and pride within the Latino community and culture (Murillo et al., 2010). However, Latino groups tend to place little value on independence, achievement, and deferred gratification (Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000).

It is important, however, to recognize that these cultural attributes are tendencies, not absolutes, and not rigidly fixed to any one individual, family or Latino group (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007). A higher education can assist Latino groups to place more value on the importance and the rewards of higher education in increasing their living standards. This can help the individual and society at large. Researchers such as Villalba, Gonzales, Hines, and Borders (2014) reported that parental involvement across all race/ethnicities and socioeconomic groups is a more powerful predictor of students’ educational expectations that parents’
educational level and student academic achievement. Latina/o student’s parental involvement in post-secondary education is critical since these students cite their parents as their most important source of support and say their parents play a significant role in motivating them to complete their college education.

**Barriers to Completing the Doctoral Degree**

Each of the 15 participants provided unique perceptions and experiences regarding completing their doctorate journey, including the barriers they faced during their time in their doctoral program. These barriers included how no one looked like them in the programs as well as coping with finding funding, their qualifying exams, personal issues, and guidance in completing the dissertation process. The last barrier was the emotional and physical toll working on a doctoral degree had on their lives.

**Lack of Representation**

One primary finding that emerged within the barriers was the lack of representation of Latino/s students in their doctorate programs. Some of the participants noted that a barrier for them was the lack of representation of someone in the program who looked like them due to being a Latina in the doctorate program. Participants discussed how they felt about a lack of representation within their classes and programs regarding their classmates. Some of the participants expressed that they did not have anyone who looked like them in their program in pursuing their degree. Other participants shared frustration when they did not find themselves reflected in course curricula. They noted the fact that they were the only Latino in the entire
program: it would have been nice to see another student or even a professor who looked like them in the program.

This lack of representation, while frustrating for participants, has great implications for these women within their doctoral education. In not seeing themselves reflected within their faculty, their course curricula, and their peers, these participants had no role models or messages of belonging. Role models play an important part in our everyday lives, especially at colleges and universities. They can guide us through the education system by providing experiences that Latino and other minorities can emulate. As they witness and admire the success of role models, they can see part of themselves represented in the role model (Luna, Evans, & Davis, 2015; Toiflson & Pereira, 2016). Many of the Latinas missed out on role models at their respective universities to emulate and to model their educational lives as a result of few Latino professors in their doctorate programs. In addition, the lack of representation of Latino students and professors gave them the message that they are unimportant in the program (Toiflson & Pereira, 2016). This shows how power, privilege, and a lack of representation all culminate in higher education for Latinas. These women were given messages that they should not be there through the exclusion of their gender and ethnicity. The LatCrit theory demonstrated how race and racism explicitly and implicitly impact the educational structures, processes, and discourses that affect Latinas (Niemann & Romero, 2000; Torres, 2004).

Financial Barriers

Some Latina doctorate students had financial barriers in completing their doctoral degree. Several of the participants in the study mentioned the need for more levels of financial support for Latina students to pursue and complete a doctoral degree. Some of the participants stated that
their respective university should provide more funding and resources for Latina students to pursue a doctoral degree. Others expressed that they would have liked more help in funding their degree programs. Some participants noted that they had to take out student loans for their programs. Some students noted that funding for the doctorate program is a barrier for many students due to coming from families with very little money and resources. More programs should fund students even if they go part time to make sure that there is diversity in their programs.

The implication for the lack of financial support for these Latinas while in the doctoral program was that there would be a smaller number of Latinas receiving doctoral degrees in the future. Also, there would be smaller numbers of college and university professors for future Latino/as attending graduate schools in the United States. Many of these Latinas had very limited help from the university in finding funds to continue their education, so they relied on word of mouth and social media for help in finding funding to complete their doctoral degrees. In addition, several of the Latinas noted that the universities did not offer programs with financial support to complete their doctoral degrees.

Researchers have noted that some Latina doctoral students share many of the common struggles as other women and minority doctorate students; the cultural expectations associated with their decision to obtain a doctoral degree is sometimes related to racial, ethnic and gender biases with obtaining a degree due to American educational values (Murillo et al., 2010). A reason why Latino/a doctoral graduates are somewhat rare is attributed to the barriers such as poor writing skills, lack of family support, and lack of universities providing mentoring programs for this group of students (Nettles & Millett, 2006). Latino doctoral student attrition in
the United States has historically been in alarming proportions, with reported rates of approximately 50% across disciplines (Nettles & Millett, 2006).

Researchers have noted that there are two main things that students think about when entering a doctoral program: the cost of the program and whether they can support themselves while in the doctorate program (Gardner & Holley, 2011; Laufer & Gorup, 2019). Research has shown that students decide about doctoral degree enrollment based on an assessment of the benefits and cost of enrollment (Laufer & Gorup, 2019). Laufer and Gorup (2019) reported that enrollment is negatively affected by tuition cost, especially among minority students. Many students look at programs with the lowest cost for attending a university to obtain their graduate degree (Gardner & Holley, 2011). Given the increase in the number of Latina/o college students, it is imperative that institutions of higher education provide financial support and create a more inclusive environment for these students. The LatCrit theory is a useful theoretical approach for investigating problems and issues that Latino doctorate students face as they move through their journey to the doctoral degree (Robertson, Bravo, & Chaney, 2014).

Qualifying Exams

A barrier to completing their doctoral degree, completing the qualifying exam was a challenge for several of the Latina doctoral students after completing their course work. This is a hard task for many Latina students who have English as a second language. Several of the participants noted that they had some problems with the qualifying exam after completing their course work in their doctoral program. Several of the students were considered as English Language Learners (ELL), or individuals whose first language is different than English. This made it hard for many of the doctorate students to read and understand English in an academic
setting. In addition, several of the participants reported ELL writing skills were a challenge to them completing their qualifying exams. Others noted that they had to study a lot to be able to do their work well; writing was not a strong point for many Latino students in the program. In addition, several of the participants stated that the college or university needed to provide more help for Latino students to prepare for these exams.

Usually Latina students do not come from families where advanced degrees are expected or anticipated. Qualifying exams may unfairly disadvantage first-generation, ELL students. Higher education institutions do not need to use qualifying exams as there are other methods for qualifying exams such as portfolios which students display what they have learned in their course work. It is a choice for institutions to use qualifying exams for students at the end of their courses. These high-stakes assessments unfairly disadvantage ELL and first-generation doctorate students of color. These programs are engaging in norms of Whiteness. Gokhan (2014) noted that the claim of the CRT is that Whites in the United States society still wield an inordinate amount of social and political power as well as have access to influence of American education with resources in contrast to non-White people. Moreover, Whites use these resources to support a social hierarchy built on the ideology of white supremacy. These Latina doctoral students pressed forward even though there were several disadvantages to them, such as high-stakes assessment and the lack of support from their respective institutions in higher education. The LatCrit theory noted the challenges that dominates the norms within the educational system with respect to Latino students in their journey in obtaining advanced degrees. LatCrit was useful because it extends the discussion of race beyond the traditional conversations of Latino students in graduate school (Robertson et al., 2014).
A barrier expressed by the Latinas was that some universities do not provide enough guidance on ways to complete the dissertation process after completing their core courses. The course work was the first phase of the doctoral process, but writing the dissertation was the second phase of the doctoral progress. Several of the students expressed that they did not receive enough guidance from the university and from the dissertation committee on the dissertation process. In addition, several of the participants reported that they should have received more guidance from the program chair and other professors in completing the dissertation. I spent an entire semester trying to figure out what I needed to do as far as completing my dissertation. There should be more guidance from the program chair and other professors in completing the dissertation.

Another barrier for some students was the ability to understand the professors due to a language barrier and writing skills with completing the dissertation until a professor took her under the wing and explained the process in a way that she understood. Other students in the program felt that they did not belong in the program due to a language barrier and writing skills. They also noted that the university should provide more guidance for completing the dissertation. Without that assistance, some of the doctorate students felt they might have fallen through the cracks and not finished their dissertations.

Although these Latinas were able to complete their doctoral degrees, there were several Latinas in past years who did not complete their doctoral degrees for various reasons. This could be due to some of the Latinas not being given enough guidance in completing their dissertations due to language and writing issues. Also, this might be the result of many universities not
providing enough support for these Latinas or making sure they understand the dissertation process. Similarly, by universities not providing mentoring programs, some ELL students lacked an understanding of the dissertation process. In addition, many of these Latina doctoral students had to navigate the doctoral process on their own because the universities did not provide the necessary support for them in completing their doctoral degree.

Emotional and Physical Demands

A barrier to completing their doctorate was the emotional and physical demands of being in a stressful program. Several participants discussed going through pregnancy, divorce and emotional breakdowns along with self-doubt while pursuing their degree. Pursuing a doctoral degree can be an extremely difficult time for many students. Although all the participants were able to overcome these barriers, it took a toll on them, and several of them noted that they were still dealing with the negative aftermath of completing their programs. Some participants felt that having a strong mentor was something they needed to make things easier going through the doctoral program and actually having a program that understood that the hard part starts when you finish your course work and start writing. Most had financial obligations, strained relationships, and emotional and physical repercussions from their time in a doctoral program. They all persisted despite these obstacles – most stated it was because of their inner strength, stubbornness and the support from loved ones. Many attributed it to their heritage and the sacrifices made by their families.

Researchers such as Spaulding and Rockinson-Szapkin (2012) noted that the doctoral journey can be a lonely, stressful, and challenging process. Some of the experiences that can be anticipated in the successful pursuit of a doctoral degree are the need to sacrifice some of the
comforts in life for a while, intervening life experiences, and the dissertation challenges of completing that process. It takes persistence and motivation to complete the doctoral degree. Yet, the stress and barriers these participants faced are different than students from privileged backgrounds. While graduate school is hard for everyone, because of the lack of representation, the racist and sexist barriers these women faced, was harder for them and they were forced to come up with more nuanced coping strategies in order to finish. Many felt the “otherness” of not really belonging or being worthy to be in a doctorate program. Many expressed self-doubts of and at times embraced the “imposter syndrome.” (Clance & Imes, 1978). Clance and Imes (1978) reported that imposter syndrome is a phenomenon where high-achieving students feel they are undeserving of their achievements. Internalizing these feelings may cause them to draw a conclusion that they do not belong in the academy or in their program.

Many of the participants discussed these feelings in the social media group LCDD, knowing that the group members have felt these emotions at periods of time while seeking a doctorate. They stated that it gave them comfort to discuss these feelings with the group instead of with family and friends who did not understand what it felt like to be in a graduate program. They stated they felt safe and not judged by the group members and were given support and encouragement to continue. “Empowered” was a key expression after the support they felt from the women who were from a similar background and culture; they were Hermanas, or sister’s in their struggle.

Recommendations for Practices

The findings from this study provide several recommendations to help support Latina students’ academic experiences in their graduate studies and how they attained a doctoral degree.
This study is particularly important for college leaders who face higher rates of student enrollment and low rates of student persistence at the graduate level in earning their doctoral degree (Holley & Joseph, 2013; Kasworm, 2003; Philibert, Allen, & Elleven, 2008). The practices on academic progress of Latinas are imperative, as this population is the largest growing ethnic minority group in the country, and many will attend graduate school. Therefore, the success of this ethnic group is fundamental to the overall economic well-being of this population and country.

In response to the interview questions on the lack of guidance for Latinas in the doctoral program, this research study found that the participants contended that colleges and university administrators play an important role in improving retention of Latina doctoral students by providing a nurturing environment for learning. This includes allowing spaces for Latina students to foster their own learning by being supported in environments in which students are validated and acknowledged. Furthermore, they noted the institutions should provide students with an overview of the dissertation process as well as adequate academic support groups and mentoring services for students (Goodchild & Miller, 1997; Harris, Sellers, & Clerge, 2017).

Some of the participants noted they would have liked more help with their research and writing their dissertation and felt the university programs should have provided them with the help they needed. They believed this service would have helped them complete their dissertation and graduate in a timely manner. In addition, some Latinas felt that some courses they took in their program did not align with the dissertation process. Also, others felt that there needed to be a course in APA writing since they had to format their final dissertation in APA format. Further, many of the Latinas felt that the institutions need to provide more resources for doctoral student to aid in the degree completion (Marina & Ross, 2016).
Latina students struggle in their doctorate programs in terms of race, class, gender, and other forms of oppression manifest in the educational experiences of these students (Gokham, 2014). It is important for the university and faculty members to recognize the cultural obligations of the Latina students in the program and to refrain from judging a Latina doctoral student’s decision to take care of family members while pursuing their doctoral degree. The faculty members should uphold their high academic standards while encouraging and showing empathy with the Latina doctorate student and seeking ways they can support them in their quest in obtaining their doctoral degree. The university should look for ways to seek the strengths of the Latina doctorate students such as honoring family and incorporate them into the student’s advisement and classroom practices while they are in the program (Holley & Joseph, 2013). This could be an important recruitment tool for the university.

The university should make the Latina doctoral students aware of any resources and other organizations on campus and connected to the campus that can support the Latina doctorate to join a Latina professional organization in order to show a sense of belonging. Some of these organizations include the National Latina/o Psychological Association, American Association of Hispanics in Higher Education, Latino Social Workers Organization, and Society of Hispanic Professional Engineers (Thompson, 2018). Many of these organizations charge a fee to join the organization; therefore, the university should provide a small grant for doctorate students to pay for the membership associated with some of these organizations. The doctoral student should be allowed to present or interact with other Latina/o scholars in their field and in turn, share their experiences with students in their department or at the college at large. These types of associations may provide a network of mentorships and future career opportunities. Programs must develop mentoring programs to help students find strategies for high-stakes testing and
qualifying exams (Thompson, 2018). Programs must clearly outline the dissertation process, which can also be done in the mentoring programs (Harris, Sellers, & Clerge, 2017).

The student needs to discuss the necessary sacrifice with their friends and family before pursuing the doctoral degree. In addition, the student needs to seek out family and friends who will support them in their doctoral journey. Also, the college and universities should provide a support system for the new doctorate students with more advanced students in the program in order for the new student to feel a sense of belonging in the program (Harris et al., 2017). Hence, there should be a candid conversation in the family or their support system in working toward a common goal of seeing the doctorate student complete the doctorate process. The doctoral student needs to make sure to find balance in their responsibilities associated with personal life and completing their doctoral degree (Spauding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). This study indicates that the institutional environment is not as inviting as it could be. It would be necessary to explore what institutions are doing to make a Latina feel part of the institution. This might assist the planning and implementing of future campus development for inclusion.

**Increase Faculty and Doctorate Student Interactions**

There is a need for the faculty at the university to establish rapport with Latina doctoral student is so they will feel welcome and feel part of the university. Researchers noted that establishing peer support networks influences satisfaction and persistence at the university level (Gurung & Prieto, 2009; Ledesma & Calderson, 2015). The use of workshops that would allow for interaction between faculty and students would be a useful tool for engagement and interaction. Graduate school orientation that includes involvement by family members, students
and faculty would be useful in engaging the family members and assuring them of a safe environment for their daughter at the university.

Recommendations for Future Research

This qualitative study explored Latina students’ academic motivational experiences, supports, and barriers they experienced through their graduate studies and how they attained a doctoral degree. By exploring their experiences, this study has also addressed the social and environmental factors that affect the experiences of Latina doctoral students through their journey to degree attainment. More research is needed to further understand the academic motivational experiences, supports, and barriers Latina students experienced in going through their graduate studies and how they attained a doctoral degree. Recommendations for future research as follows.

Latina/os are the largest growing population in the United States and are projected to outnumber other racial groups by 24% by the year 2050 (Fry, 2002; 2011; Ledesma & Calderson, 2015). The Latino population obtains the lowest percentages of doctoral degrees at most institutions in the United States (Ledesma & Calderson, 2015). There is a need to increase the representation of Latina/os in obtaining doctoral degrees. This study was conducted with participants of Latina origin, and due to the migration and immigration patterns, it is realized that the representation was primarily from the subgroup of Mexican American descent (U.S Census, 2010). Future research should be conducted with Latinas from a mixture of other American descents. This may yield different results as to their views of pursuing and obtaining a doctoral degree.
Thus, there is a need for more research in this area to identify specific barriers and to come to know more about strategies to overcome these barriers to obtain a doctoral degree, as well as to identify reasons why others may drop out of the doctoral degree program. Future research should be conducted on specific barriers and what strategies Latina doctorate students used to overcome the specific barriers to obtain their doctoral degrees. This research should aid future Latina doctoral students to use specific strategies to overcome barriers in order to obtain their doctoral degrees.

According to the NCES, Latinos made up 11% of the United States males graduating from college with a bachelor’s degree in 2015. Latinas made up about 12% of the United States-born females graduating with a bachelor’s degree. Olive (2014) reported that Latinos accounted for 7% of men and women earning doctoral degrees. For Latino women this was lower than White, African American and Asian women. Future research should be conducted to explore the academic experiences of Latino male doctoral students and compare their experiences with Latina doctoral students.

The Latinas in the study expressed the fact that no one in the program looked like them among other students and faculty teaching in the program. Future research should be conducted at various universities to determine how many Latina/o faculty members there are at various colleges and universities who are granting doctoral degrees. This research could be important for Latino women and men in picking a college or university to pursue their doctoral degree.

Further study would be in exploring how first-generation Latina’s issues may be addressed to facilitate better success. This study consisted of primarily first-generation Latina who exhibited distinctive issues on negotiating the graduate school experience, such as financial aid, scholarships, and study assistance. Further research would focus on the inherent problems
that first-generation students go through. Eliminating these barriers would potentially assist in raising the graduation rates in the Latino population.

An area that was touched on in this study was the use of social media for a support system. Further study is indicated in exploring how social media sites and forums such as the LCDD could be used as a support system. LCDD has only been in existence since 2013, so little information is in existing literature on how this type of media might be useful for a student.

Conclusions

The findings from this study add to the current body of literature on exploring Latina students’ academic motivational experiences, supports, and barriers they experience through their graduate studies and how they attained a doctoral degree. By exploring their experiences, this study has also addressed the social and environmental factors that affect the experiences of Latina doctoral students through their journey to degree attainment. This study endeavored to understand and to share the stories and experiences of Latina doctoral students’ journeys through their doctoral degree programs in order to bring awareness to college faculty and college administration in higher education to bring necessary positive changes to make their experiences more positive in completing their degrees. These changes may require institutional and curriculum changes to bring about academic success for Latina doctoral students across colleges and universities in the United States.

Finally, it is with gratitude to the 15 wonderful women who shared their stories with me and allowed me to give them voice in this study. They shared their doubts, heartache, sacrifices and insecurities. I felt the pain they went through to achieve their degrees. I related to all the emotions that they went through, the feelings of not belonging, being accepted or feeling smart
enough to be in a program. These women put everything into achieving their goals. They
overcame the self-doubts, family demands, institutional bias and lack of support. As one
participant noted, how could she not finish her degree? Her family and ancestors had sacrificed
and overcome so much more than she ever would experience. Their successes were a testament
to the strength given to them by their families. Meeting these women gave me the strength to tell
their stories as well as mine.
REFERENCES


National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education. (2004). Public attitudes on higher education, Las Angeles, CA.


National Science Foundation. (2012). Examining the ethics of humanitarian service-learning programs in institutions of higher education. Washington, DC.


APPENDIX A

IRB APPROVAL
Exempt Determination

26-Mar-2019
Mary Ann Guillen
Counseling, Adult and Higher Education

RE: Protocol # HS19-0087 “Hearing their voices: The educational experiences and journey of Latina doctoral graduates”

Dear Mary Ann Guillen,

Your application for institutional review of research involving human subjects was reviewed by Institutional Review Board #1 on 26-Mar-2019 and it was determined that it meets the criteria for exemption.

Although this research is exempt, you have responsibilities for the ethical conduct of the research and must comply with the following:

Amendments: You are responsible for reporting any amendments or changes to your research protocol that may affect the determination of exemption and/or the specific category. This may result in your research no longer being eligible for the exemption that has been granted.

Record Keeping: You are responsible for maintaining a copy of all research related records in a secure location, in the event future verification is necessary. At a minimum these documents include: the research protocol, all questionnaires, survey instruments, interview questions and/or data collection instruments associated with this research protocol, recruiting or advertising materials, any consent forms or information sheets given to participants, all correspondence to or from the IRB, and any other pertinent documents.

Please include the protocol number (HS19-0087) on any documents or correspondence sent to the IRB about this study.

If you have questions or need additional information, please contact the Office of Research Compliance, Integrity, and Safety at 815-753-8588.
APPENDIX B

RECRUITMENT LETTER
Dear Faculty/Staff member:

I am currently a doctoral candidate completing my research project to fulfill my requirements for the dissertation process at Northern Illinois University in the Department of Counseling, Adult and Higher Education. I would appreciate your assistance with my research project designed to explore Latina students’ academic motivational experiences, supports, and barriers they experience through their graduate studies and how they attained a doctoral degree. By exploring their experiences, this study will also address the social and environmental factors that affect the experiences of Latina doctoral students through their journey to degree attainment. Consequently, I am requesting your assistance in recruiting eligible candidates to participate in this research project.

The criteria for the participant to be part of the study is as follows: The participant must be of Latino/Hispanic descent, Female, over 25 years of age and have completed a doctoral degree such as a Ph.D. or Ed.D. Participants will be required to participate in an individual interview that will consist of a 60-minute audio recorded interview. This interview will be conducted in person, or via Skype or phone. Participants will be emailed an informed consent form prior to the interview and it is to be signed and emailed back to me. Confidentiality will be strictly maintained of the participant’s information. This research has been reviewed by the Northern Illinois University, Office of Research Compliance in Dekalb, IL (815)753-8588.

Thank you in advance on any assistance that your office may provide. I will be in contact to clarify any questions that may arise. If there are any questions feel free in contacting me or my dissertation chair (Dr. Kathryn S. Jaekel, Ph.D, at kjaekel@niu.edu).

Sincerely,
Mary Ann Guillen
Research contact person/Doctoral Candidate
Northern Illinois University
Email: Z054621@students.niu.edu
Title of Study: Hearing Their Voices: The Educational Experiences and Journey of Latina Doctoral Graduates

Investigator: Mary Ann Guillen, M.A. Doctoral Student, Department of Counseling, Adult & Higher Education

This form describes a research project. It has information to help you decide whether or not you wish to participate. Research studies include only people who choose to take part—your participation is completely voluntary. Please discuss any questions you have about the study or about this form with the project staff before deciding to participate.

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to explore Latina students’ academic motivational experiences, supports, and barriers they experience through their graduate studies and how they attained a doctoral degree. By exploring their experiences, this study will also address the social and environmental factors that affect the experiences of Latina doctoral students through their journey to degree attainment.

Description of Procedures

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to complete one-hour long interview and participate in one follow up interview for clarification as needed. The interviews will take place in a mutually agreed upon location, time, and will be recorded. If a face to face interview is not feasible other options may be implemented. Participants’ information and identities will not be released. Interview questions will focus on the participants’ intersections of Latina experiences in their academic experiences that has led to obtaining a doctoral degree as related to race and/or ethnicity and gender.

Risks or Discomforts

Importantly, you may feel uncomfortable at times discussing your experiences. As such, you can stop participation at any time and there will be no penalty.

Benefits

If you decide to participate in this study, there may be no direct benefit to you, however, findings from this project will provide valuable information in further understanding the academic experiences of Latina doctoral students and how this may assist future Latina doctoral students.

Costs and Compensation

There are no costs or compensations for this study.
Participant Rights

Participating in this study is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part in the study or to stop participating at any time, for any reason, without penalty or negative consequences. There will be no negative consequences academically if you choose not to participate. Your choice of whether or not to participate will have no impact on you.

If you have any questions about the rights of research subjects or research-related injury, please contact the Research Compliance and Integrity Office at Northern Illinois University (815) 753-8588

Confidentiality

Records identifying participants will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by applicable laws and regulations and will not be made publicly available.

To ensure confidentiality to the extent permitted by law, the following measures will be taken: all information collected will be stored on a password-protected computer. The computer will be kept in a locked desk inside a locked office.

Audio Record Consent:

A digital recorder will be used to record the interviews. Participants will be identified by a pseudonym (alias). Audio files will be kept confidential on a separate, password protected file. This file will be stored in a locked file cabinet in the personal possession of the researcher until the study is completed. After the research is completed, the audio files, transcripts and print materials will be destroyed.

Questions

You are encouraged to ask questions at any time during this study. For further information about the study, you may contact Mary Ann Guillen or faculty supervisor, Dr. Kathryn Jaekel

Consent and Authorization Provisions

Your signature indicates that you voluntarily agree to participate in this study, that the study has been explained to you, that you have been given the time to read the document, that you are 18 years or older, and that your questions have been satisfactorily answered. You will receive a copy of the written informed consent prior to your participation in the study.

1. Your signature below indicates agreement to participate in this study.

Participant’s Name (printed)__________________________________________________________________________

Participant’s Signature__________________________________________________________________________ Date
2. Your signature below indicates agreement that your interviews will be audio recorded.

Participant’s Signature  Date
APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL
Hearing Their Voices: The Educational Experiences and Journey of Latina Doctoral Graduates

Interview 1

Part 1: Review Informed Consent document
1. Provide students the informed consent document (via email) prior to meeting
2. During the meeting, discuss and review the informed consent document and clarify any questions that may arise
3. Collect signed informed consent document

Part 2: Open Ended-Discussion Questions Themes and Representative Questions

A. Background and Educational Experiences Questions
1. Can you tell me about yourself (how you identify, about your family, where you grew up and where you went to school? Have any other family members attended higher education?)
2. What made you decide to pursue your doctoral degree and why?
3. What type of support did you have while you were in your doctoral program?
4. As you think about your experiences during your doctoral program, what were barriers and/or obstacles you experienced?

B. Educational experiences questions
1. As you think about our last conversation, are there things you would like to add?
2. What motivated you through your travels in education?
3. What advice would you give others in your situation who are pursuing their doctorate?
4. During your doctoral program, what were things that you think really helped you finish your degree?
5. What do you think are essential things that institutions and academic programs should do to help support a student with similar experiences as you?