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# El Éxito de Mamá e Hija: Uplifting and Valuing the Assets Latinas Bring to Higher Education and Beyond

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**El Éxito de Mamá e Hija: Uplifting and Valuing the Assets Latinas Bring to Higher  
Education and Beyond**

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Prepared for the Degree of

**Master of Arts in Higher Education Leadership**

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## Acknowledgments

*Comunidad* - to the scholars before me, thank you for viewing our Latinx culture full of wealth and brilliance. Thank you for naming institutional barriers such as racism and patriarchal structures that challenge and limit opportunities for first-generation Latinx families in higher education. And how despite those barriers *ay fortaleza*, and we use it as motivation to succeed. It is soul healing to find scholars alike.

To my family - I appreciate you and thank you for cheering me on and believing in me throughout my educational journey.

Mama, *le eche ganas y todo salió más que bien*, gracias por todo tu apoyo y consejos.

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## Abstract

A central Latinx cultural value is *familismo*, which involves dedication to family and seeking the family's advice for important decisions, such as educational goals. According to Chicana feminism, familismo framework, there is a gap between the values of Latinx families and higher education which tends to reward independence. This gap leaves many first-generation college (FGC) Latinx students feeling like their culture is excluded from their college experience. In my study, I examined how Latina immigrant mothers and FGC daughters have navigated educational barriers utilizing familismo and other cultural capital. I identified what prompted their resiliency to distinguish ways to create retention-focused support systems for first-generation Latinx families (FGLF). The study was guided by the following questions: What is the relationship between Latina immigrant mothers and their daughters' educational journey? What are the barriers and successes in the student's academic journey? How would FGLF like to be included in higher education? Using a mixed-method approach of questionnaires, interviews, and a *platica* (focus group), I found parents of FGC Latinas wanted to be included in their daughters' education by connecting their Latinx identity to college programs. My findings can inform college initiatives and best practices to increase retention and foster a culture that welcomes FGLF into the higher education system.

*Keywords:* Latinas in college, first-generation college students, familismo, cultural relevancy, resiliency, retention, institutional barriers.

## **El Éxito de Mamá e Hija: Uplifting and Valuing the Assets Latinas Bring to Higher Education and Beyond**

### **Introduction**

Education is something my parents have always valued, although neither had the opportunity to graduate from high school. I am a daughter of Mexican immigrants whose parents worked as migrant farmworkers in Napa, California, upon arriving in the United States. As a first-generation student, I normalized some educational challenges I experienced, such as overcrowded classrooms, meeting with my counselor for minutes out of the year, and the language barrier that prevented my parents from accessing school resources to ensure I was on track. I attended predominantly Latinx and Asian, low-income public schools in San Jose, California. Although San Jose is at the heart of the tech industry, there are large educational disparities among zip codes. My dream was to graduate high school and attend my local community college because that was the expectation set for me by my school.

As I reflect on the barriers I experienced in my educational journey, I also think about what made me successful. Although my parents were not at the dinner table helping me with homework because they worked multiple jobs and the material was out of their scope of knowledge, their sacrifices and hard work ethic molded my values. I was reminded having an education would open up job opportunities not as physically laborious as their roles. Regardless of her limited knowledge of the college pipeline, my mother had hopes and dreams of her children becoming successful college graduates. Being low income presented many financial challenges, so my mom became creative and resourceful. She would tell me not to worry about the cost of school supplies, school trips, or expenses. She would find a way to pay for them because she did not want me to feel a financial burden; she would remind me my role was to go

to school and do my best. Upon reflection, I realized what a privilege it was to have such supportive parents who tried to shelter me from knowing and feeling the challenges that come with being low income. When I transferred from community college to the University of California, Davis, she was both proud and scared for me to be on my own. I would go home over weekends, and she would provide me with groceries and meals to take back. When I would call amidst a panic attack and too stressed because of a final, she would say, “echale ganas y todo va estar bien,” which means to give it my all, and everything will be fine. My mother may not have had a formal college education to ensure I had the same opportunities and resources. Still, she provided me with invaluable traits, such as showing care for others, humility, and a hard work ethic have contributed to my successful academic journey. My mother’s relentless advocacy and resiliency toward ensuring my educational needs were met is something I sought to understand and have her know she is a part of the success.

As I became aware of systemic racism and elitism in higher education, I discovered my story, and my community’s story of being excluded from accessing higher education was not by chance, but due to the oppressive educational system, one that excludes those who do not fit the mold. After all, higher education was created for elite white males and has in the last decade emphasized creating environments for inclusion, although first-generation low-income students of color have attended postsecondary education for more than a century. Yet best practices for inclusion are still being researched and strategized, leaving my FGC students in the shadows to navigate on their own.

Fortunately, I have had my cultural and familial support to provide me with care and guidance to overcome such barriers. So now, as a higher education professional, I am dedicated to making higher education include the voices of those identities not recognized in higher

education. I am committed to paying forward my mentorships by helping other students and promoting educational justice for all. As a Latina, first-generation, low-income, transfer student, I wish to continue promoting this targeted student population in higher education by ensuring there are culturally responsive resources available to support their educational journey.

Current university practices focus on the individual student, however a central Latinx cultural value is *familismo*, which involves dedication to family and seeking the family's advice for important decisions, such as educational goals. This gap leaves many first-generation college (FGC) Latinx students feeling like their culture is excluded from their college experience. There is an opportunity to create culturally responsive initiatives for FGC students and their families to promote increased retention and foster belonging on college campuses for this group of students (Carrillo & Dean, 2018). Through my research, I examined how Latina moms and first-generation daughters have navigated some higher education barriers and used those findings to identify ways to create an inclusionary environment for first-generation Latinas in college. One goal of my action research was to ensure moms are aware of their efforts in the success of their daughters' educational journey and how their experiences can inform programming to create a culture that welcomes first-generation families into the higher education system. In the mixed-methods study, I interviewed groups of mothers and undergraduate and graduate-level daughters and held a *platica* (focus group) for them to share their ideas, experiences, stories, and build community. *Platicas* are Chicana/Latina feminist methods of strategic data collection, and theorization, where dialogue between researcher and participants is more personal and connected to cultural knowledge and lived experiences (Fierros, C., & Delgado Bernal, D., 2016). The *platica* objective is to empower participants by ensuring their voices are recognized and valued by intentionally creating a space that makes them feel welcomed, respects their language, and



values their epistemic wisdom. The aim is to have daughters and mothers heal from the barriers in their education while forming community leadership and mentorships in the platicas. I wanted to discover what key contributors impacted success in students' academic journeys and what opportunities for expansion can be implemented in colleges to ensure first-generation, low-income Latinas are set up for success. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What is the relationship between Latina immigrant mothers and their daughters' educational journey?
2. What are some key factors that contribute to the success of Latinas in higher education?
3. How can these findings inform higher education to create support systems for this target group in retention efforts?

### **Literature Review**

My literature review examines the current societal sentiments of FGC Latinas and their effect on their higher education. Additionally, I will discuss how familismo plays a role in Latinx families and its educational impacts.

### **FGC Latina Experience**

The FGC Latina experience intertwines with Chicana feminism, as it provides a lens of the intersections of race, culture, and gender and how society's racist and patriarchal culture influences how Latinas navigate their day-to-day lives (Bernal et al., 2017). The usage of the word *Chicana*, or women and girls of Mexican descent born in the United States, will be interchangeable with Latina/x, as Mexico is a country within Latin America. I want to make note the Latinx group represents a variety of national, ethnic, racial, social, and class backgrounds. Latinx communities vary in immigration and citizenship statuses and speak different languages

and dialects. For my research, 8 of 10 participants identified as Mexican-American whose first spoken language was Spanish; however, as not all identify as Mexican-American, I will utilize Latina and/or Latinx when discussing the participants racial background.

Utilizing Chicana feminism as the theoretical framework, I will briefly examine barriers researchers have found contributing to lower enrollment and graduation of Latinas in higher education, such as cultural gender and social expectations, lower socioeconomic status, first-generation, and bi-national identity.

### ***Cultural and Gender Roles for Latinas***

Cultural roles for Latinas are commonly grounded in gendered women roles. Nieto (1974) described Chicana roles as women who must be par excellence as mother and wife to gain fulfillment. Chicana feminism confronts sexist and racist oppression and delves deeper into cultural, gendered norms within the Latinx community (Carrillo & Dean, 2018). Traditional stereotypes distort images of Chicanas as submissive, docile, and only bearing children, contributing to the negative societal image of Latinas (Roth, 2007). Gender and cultural roles for Latinas play a role in how higher education systems stigmatize Latina students. The notions of low educational achievement and attainment for Latina students perpetuate stereotypes and create internal feelings of “not being enough” or “not fitting in” (Valderas, 2015, p. 22). There is a need to analyze how family backgrounds, school practices, male privilege, and class and ethnic discrimination shape Chicanas’ educational experiences and choices (Córdova, 1998). First-generation Latinas can navigate complex situations, from working to assisting parents in mobilizing resources to interpret languages and information that create capital specific to the Latina experience. These elements of acquiring navigational capital to support their family is

something then transferred when students enter higher education and have to navigate for themselves.

### ***First-Generation, Bi-National Identity, and its Impact on Education***

First-generation Latinas experience anti-immigrant sentiments throughout their lives; according to Rodriguez et al. (2000), the “illegals” or “aliens” rhetoric creates an “othering” effect on their identity (p. 514). Othering is a long-lived process of duality between balancing both American and Latinx identities. The education system views Latinas as a problem for not sharing similar cultural capital as other students with knowledge of American norms. Another component of the college pathway gap for first-generation Latinas is school systems’ inability to create accessibility for families who do not speak English as their first language (Chlup et al., 2018). Chlup et al. (2018) interviewed immigrant mothers who shared how “the schools do not get information to them. There is a barrier between families that only speak Spanish and an education system that allows a lot of information to remain un-accessed” (p. 30). There is a disconnect between schools that leaves mothers actively trying to be involved feeling less than and unable to access critical information. School systems are not looking at the advantage of student skills and culture (Chlup et al., 2018). Evidence from this study supports the importance of including mothers and providing accessibility to all families, which can include simple actions like language translation.

### ***Financial Circumstances***

Coming from a lower socioeconomic background negatively affects Latinx students in their educational journey, both in preparation to enter college and during their college experience (Rodriguez et al., 2000). Attending racially segregated and poorly funded schools can lead to low achievement, high drop-out rates, and inadequate college preparation for Latinx students

(Rodriguez et al., 2000). Latinx students who succeed in entering higher education are then confronted with barriers, such as not knowing how to apply for financial aid or how to pay for college. While in college, financial concerns and stress increase; Rodriguez et al., (2000) found “concerns include, debt incurred by loans, lack of money for bills and personal expenses, hours spent on outside employment, and uncertainty of receiving financial aid” (p. 517). These moments of confusion and stress for students can create isolation, feelings of inferiority to their peers, and poor learning outcomes while in college (Walton & Cohen, 2007). Ong et al. (2006) found three cultural resources, such as ethnic identity, family interdependence, and parental support-were hypothesized as protective factors that modify the effects of socioeconomic disadvantage in a positive direction. There is a gap in providing financial support in the forms of knowledge, scholarships, grants, and financial advising for first-generation Latinx students.

### **Familismo and Educational Impacts**

Studies of Familismo have been mainly researched within behavioral science and psychology (Niemeyer et al., 2009). The term familismo is used for Latina/os and or Hispanic communities without identification to specific ethnic groups and is characterized as a core value of Latinx families, which includes feelings of attachment, loyalty to and responsibility towards family and extended family (Gonzales, 2019). Familismo is passed through generations and can increase self-esteem and reduce assimilation pressures (Consoli & Llamas, 2013). Gonzales (2019) wrote, “Among adolescents, familismo has been found to be a significant source of inspiration during adversity, a contributor to academic motivation and self-esteem, and encourages the desire to repay parents for sacrifices made in immigrating to the United States” (p. 939). FGC students develop strength and resilience through their motivation and drive from the acknowledgment of the sacrifices of their parents and their privilege of having the

opportunity to pursue a college degree. FGC students tend to build community with folks on campus and off with those that can help guide them, while respecting their cultural values, similar to those bonds of familismo.

### ***Latina Mother-Daughter Access Educational Opportunities***

Active participation is defined as mothers who were involved and engaged in their daughters' educational experiences (Valderas, 2015). Latina mothers play an instrumental role in their daughters' educational journey. Overcoming barriers, active participating Latina mothers are committed to ensuring their daughters succeed. Valderas (2015) wrote how Latina students who succeed academically value the “the rich epistemologies that are passed from these mothers to their young daughters come in the forms of advice, anecdotal narratives, and personal testimonies that transcend into consejos, cuentos, and testimonios” (p. 1). These consejos, cuentos, and testimonios, which translates to advice, stories, and testimonies, come with messaging that disrupts cultural and gender norms, such as how Latina students should go to college to have better job opportunities than their mothers or marry later in life after completing their college degree (Valderas, 2015). Shared experiences of mother and daughter shape Latina students' values and goals, and they continue to maintain strong familial obligations while in college. Institutions should begin to include Latina experiences as support tools to guide higher education programming and promote inclusion and retention of Latinas (Chlup et al., 2018).

### **Context**

The U.S. Census Bureau (2018) estimates Latino/as are the fastest-growing racial minority in the United States. However, the higher education system shows racial disparities in enrollment and graduation. Latinx students make up 46% of all community college enrollment, yet they have the lowest transfer rates into 4-year universities than other racial minorities

(Krogstad, 2016). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2017), the gap for Latinas is even wider; only 10% of Latinas between the ages of 18 and 29 hold bachelor's degrees. First-generation, low-income students have higher chances of not completing a post-secondary education (RTI International, 2019). Retention of first-generation Latinx students in higher education has been unsuccessful when compared to other racial student populations (Gonzalez, 2020). Numerous researchers have investigated barriers to success for Latina students in higher education, yet there is seldom an examination of what makes Latina students successful in their educational journey. Parental involvement, across all race and socioeconomic groups, is a more powerful predictor of students' educational expectations than parents' educational level and student academic achievement (Bergerson, 2009), with current college planning assistance for parents often treated as "add ons" rather than a central focus of student preparation (Yamamura et al., 2010). Researchers have found encouragement and support from mother-daughter relationships in Latinx households can surpass students' barriers to success in their education (Bernal et al., 2017). There is a large amount of literature focusing on barriers that prevent Latinas from entering higher education and limited information on examining how first-generation Latina mother-daughter relationships overcome barriers to academic success.

Numerous research pinpoints obstacles that prevent or challenge Latinas from entering higher education; I examined a few that were part of my experiences, such as societal stigma, bi-national identity, and financial hardships. Current variables that predict academic performance are connected to high academic motivation, supportive academic environments, sense of school belonging and positive praise of competence (Niemeyer et al., 2009). My research findings can serve to add to the literature review to be inclusive of my participants' experiences. Solutions to remedy this retention gap include incorporating Latinas' cultural capital; higher education

institutions fail to bridge cultural inclusion of Latinas into programming, partly because there is still a need to discover what type of support contributes to Latina success in higher education. Identifying key contributors to their success and how Latina students want to receive care and cultural inclusion can create opportunities in their higher education journey. Through the descriptive qualitative study, I interviewed groups of mothers and first-generation undergraduate and graduate-level daughters in platicas to share their experiences navigating the school system and building community. Research shows student peer groups can increase retention and provide welcoming environments (Lopez, 2016). A critical examination of both barriers and aids of resiliency from the Latina experience is required knowledge to inform an inclusive campus environment. I hope to discover how trauma and resiliency have impacted students' academic journey and what opportunities for growth should be implemented in colleges to ensure that first-generation low-income Latinas are set up for success.

There is a need to identify how and what cultural capital Latina students bring to higher education to identify best practices and provide culturally responsive support for them. Latinas must be included in conversations of education transformation, seen as leaders, and have their experience viewed as assets to close achievement gaps and increase retention. Researchers have found encouragement and support from mother-daughter relationships in Latinx households can surpass students' barriers to success in their education (Valderas, 2015). I will examine how Latina mother-daughter relationships can help students overcome barriers to academic success and aim to discover how institutions can continue to support Latinas in culturally relevant ways that align with meeting their needs and respect their whole being, family included.

## **Methodology I**

My methodologies align with my epistemological stance, as I recognize wisdom and lessons can come from storytelling, as well as anecdotal and lived experiences. My target population are first-generation Latinas and immigrant mothers who have cultural knowledge that might not align with traditional academic information but is just as rich and important to note. I ensured my participants felt this project belongs to them, starting with my mother, who is my co-researcher and who supported me in ensuring I engaged respectfully with the other mother participants.

In this mixed-methods study, using the O'Leary (2017) action research model as my methodological approach, I utilized questionnaires, interviews, and *platica* to engage with 10 participants: five pairs of mothers and daughters. O'Leary's action research model allows for the researcher to improve organizational behavior and education structures in research to incorporate participant voices into the research design using a simple approach of observation, reflection, planning, and action for research cycles (O'Leary, 2017). I conducted a *platica* guided by thematic questions that include barriers, successes, and identification of how participants would like to access higher education. All data collected is anonymous. I collected data regarding how first-generation Latina mother-daughter dynamics can create a successful pathway into higher education while closely analyzing the cultural capital in the success. I explored opportunities for growth to implement in higher education to ensure first-generation low-income Latinas are set up for success with this information.

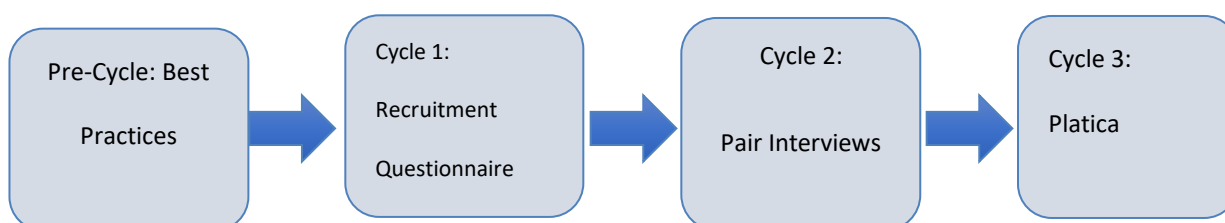
My research is participatory research for what could have been the first time immigrant mothers were invited to share their experiences navigating school systems for their daughters and have their voices heard, validated, and empowered. I worked to ensure that mothers who are



English language learners were supplied with bilingual Spanish material to ensure they were informed and included throughout the processes. All documents such as consent, recruitment, surveys, and questions for the platica are translated into Spanish both verbally and written.

## Figure 1

### *Research Cycles*



*Note.* Figure 1 lists the abbreviated cycles for my research.

- Pre-Cycle: I talked with my mother about best practices for approaching mothers about the research topic. I wanted to be thoughtful and intentional with how I communicated and gathered data. The pre-cycle conversation informed topics for assessment in Cycle 1.
- Cycle 1: I created an assessment for recruiting students to see the range of experience in relation to the topic, the relationship between daughter and mother, and the intentional recruitment of first-generation Latina experiences. This informed a purposeful selection of five pairs of mother-daughter participants for Cycle 2 of interviews.
- Cycle 2: I interviewed mother-daughter pairs with my co-researcher to address research questions. Small group interviews included discussion around their barriers and points of access and success in education. I gathered data through field notes and began to code themes to present to a large platica consisting of all 5 pairs of participants in Cycle 3.

- Cycle 3: I conducted a platica with all five pairs of mother-daughter participants in which the group engaged in dialogue discussing how they would like to see themselves and the Latinx community connected to higher education. The platica ended with a pinning ceremony, where daughters expressed their gratitude and appreciation for their mothers and gifted them a pin.

## **Methodology II**

Using O’Leary’s (2017) model for action research, the following section will provide an overview of each cycle’s action, observation, reflection, and planning for the next cycle in reference to my study.

### **Pre-Cycle: Best Practices for Engaging With FGCF**

Prior to formally beginning this research, I immersed myself in the existing literature on the experiences of FGC Latinx families, with particular emphasis on access and resilience in higher education. In addition to literature, I sought out help from my mother and co-researcher, Eli, as together we have navigated the higher education systems as an FGC Latinx family. I decided having Eli as my co-researcher would help with the intentional and respectful engagement with mothers who share an immigrant identity. I worked with Eli to co-create the platica questions to ensure I was sensitive and attentive to the needs and concerns of my participants. I built rapport with the participants by being vulnerable and transparent by sharing Eli’s and my experiences with education and recognizing that this research is to create inclusive spaces for our Latinas on campuses. The cycles were done in a culturally inclusive form, with music, Mexican food, and ended with a pinning ceremony where mothers were presented with pins by their daughters to show appreciation and love for their unconditional support.

### **Observations and Critical Reflection**

My pre-cycle was scheduled conversations with my mother and a few impromptu meetings, as we found ourselves discussing the research during family visits. It highlighted how much my mother wanted to “hacer lo bien,” meaning do it right so that our participants felt our research had meaning and purpose. I felt joy seeing how much my mother valued her role in the research and wanting to ensure that other mothers did not feel intimidated by some of the sensitive memories that would come up with discussing the challenges of being immigrants and supporting their children in an education system where they did not understand the language.

### **Planning for the Next Cycle**

I work for a department who employs 55 federal work study students, and from my department’s Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Hiring Tool I discovered that 88% of the student employees are women of color, particularly 66% identify as Latinx/a/o. After receiving my supervisor’s approval and support, to collect participants, I emailed all student employees using the departments list-serv. In the email I explained my study and requested interested participants to email me. I overstated the purpose of building bridges between first generation families and higher education, and how this would be an opportunity to express their gratitude to their mothers/maternal figures.

### **Cycle 1: Recruitment Questionnaire**

An online questionnaire was used to ensure participants and their mothers/maternal figures were eligible to participate in the study (See Appendix A). The questionnaire contained a total of sixteen questions and consisted of demographic, quantitative, and qualitative questions. Student participants had to identify as Latinx/a/o, attend a 4-year institution, be at least 18 years old, be a first-generation college student, have an active mother or maternal figure in their educational journey, and have their mother/maternal figure able to attend virtual mother-daughter interviews

and the in-person group platica. All participants were provided with a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality.

### **Observation**

Participants consisted of a sample of five Latina students, either undergraduate or graduate students from the same institution and their five mother or maternal figures (10 Latinas total). All student participants are first-generation college students, students who are the first in their families to attend college, and who are children of immigrants. Mother participants were immigrants from Mexico and El Salvador; see Table 1 for full demographic details of participants. Mother-daughter participants were scheduled for an interview, the second cycle of my research, if they met the criteria.

**Table 1**

*Participant Characteristics*

Participant *Pseudonym	Gender	Ethnicity	Undergraduate /Graduate Student	First Generation College Student?	Active mother or a maternal figure in your life?
Candy	Female	Mexican	Undergraduate	yes	yes
Lisette	Female	Mexican	Undergraduate	yes	yes
Laurena	Female	Mexican	Graduate	yes	yes
Veronica	Female	Mexican/Salvadorian	Undergraduate	yes	yes
Daniela	Female	Mexican	Graduate	yes	yes

From the questionnaire, 60% of participants feel strongly connected to their Latinx culture, 40% said they felt connected to their culture, and none indicated they felt disconnected (see Table 2). In relation to the question, do you see your ethnic identity represented in higher

education? 60% of participants answered somewhat disagree, while 20% answered neither agree nor disagree. However, when asked if participants saw opportunities to increase cultural inclusion in higher education, 80% answered strongly agree and 20% answered they agree. When asked if they believed their culture has made them resilient, 60% strongly agreed and 40% stated they agreed. There is an overall consensus for this group of FGC Latinas that they are connected to their cultural identity, they see gaps in their higher education institution to promote inclusion of their cultural identity, and they have used their resilience as navigational capital.

**Table 2**

*Questionnaire Responses*

#	Field	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
1	Do you consider yourself having familial support in navigating higher education?	60.00%	40.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
2	Do you consider yourself having community support in navigating higher education?	40.00%	20.00%	20.00%	20.00%	0.00%
3	Would you say part of your educational success has to do with your support from the mother-daughter relationship?	80.00%	20.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
4	Do you consider yourself connected to your culture?	60.00%	40.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
5	Do you see your ethnic identity represented in higher education?	20.00%	0.00%	20.00%	60.00%	0.00%
6	Do you believe your culture has made you resilient?	60.00%	40.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
7	Do you hold wisdom from your culture that is at times dismissed in higher education?	40.00%	40.00%	20.00%	0.00%	0.00%
8	Do you see opportunities to increase cultural inclusion in higher education?	80.00%	20.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%

**Critical Reflection**

I believe because I was able to use my departments email list, who include federal work-study students it increased my opportunity of connecting with first generation Latinas for this research. It made me curious as to the existing student pockets of first generation college

students in other departments, centers, and offices and if there is an opportunity to include their values into programming. In addition, the questionnaire pointed out the limited participation due to research cycles requiring mothers and daughters to be a part of an in-person platica in San Diego, California, and as many students live away from parents during college, this restricted participation. In addition, I failed to account for the location of my study and its relation to the immigrant/undocumented experience of immigrant mothers. My platica took place at the University of San Diego, and in order to enter San Diego from Northern California, folks have to pass by the San Clemente border patrol station. For many undocumented folks, border patrol stations can represent fear and the ability to be deported. Other potential barriers to participation for those living outside of San Diego County included the accessibility of transportation and the ability to take time off of work.

### **Planning for the Next Cycle**

This group of participants identified as FGC Latinas, and they noted bonds to their cultural identity, and they see opportunities for higher education to promote inclusion of their Latinx identity. For the next cycle, I chose to delve deeper into what it meant to be a first generation Latinx student from their perspective, who they considered community, and what their perspective was on the existing support services offered by their respective institutions. And I planned to ask questions relating to what they considered resilience and what constituted navigational capital to them.

### **Cycle 2: Mother-Daughter Interviews**

For my second cycle, my co-researcher and I conducted virtual interviews with mother-daughter pairs to address the research questions. In total, we held five virtual mother-daughter pair interviews, including discussion around their dynamic as mother-daughter and barriers and

points of access and success into education. The five pairs were students who participated in the questionnaire and who agreed to participate in Cycles 2 and 3 with their mothers/maternal figures. Cycle 2 consisted of a series of nine questions (see Appendix B) and were answered by each mother-daughter pair in semi-structured interview practice to allow for authentic storytelling and co-creation. All interviews were scheduled for an hour, and most ran over time. The data were then transcribed, coded, and analyzed for themes.

### **Observation From Each Interview**

Three themes emerged from the interviews were (1) having a parent who aspired for their child to enter college, and who supported them as best as they could; (2) having a mentor, in the form of an older sibling, neighbor, coach, or teacher who viewed them as capable of entering college and helped with the college application process; (3) forming self actualization and leadership, where they understood their responsibility was to share their learning of being first-gen with their family, neighbors, and community.

The stories shared in the five mother-daughter pair interviews all discussed their students' educational journey from kindergarten to their current university class standing, and most of the memories shared were challenges they experienced applying and staying on course to meet 4-year institution requirements. Each mother-daughter pair interview highlighted their resilience in finding opportunities to access higher education for their FGC student. Mothers/maternal figures attended PTA programs, made an effort to talk to their child's teachers despite language barriers, and found peers amongst other mothers who were active on their school campus in efforts to ensure their student would have access to all the resources available. All mothers mentioned having experienced exclusion from the schooling system, and yet, they found avenues to ensure their student would not fall behind. Four student participants attended private schools and charter

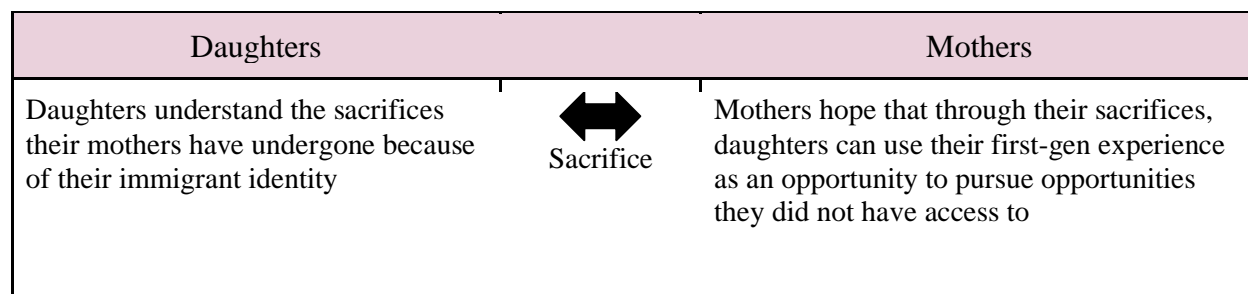
schools whose mission was to have students attend college post-graduation, which helped students meet the college requirements when applying to colleges.

### Critical Reflection

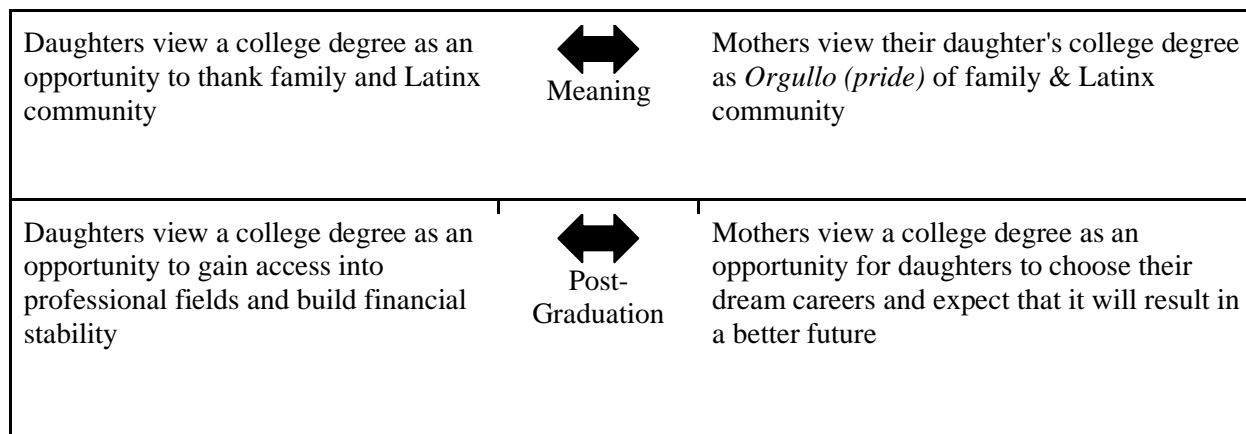
Amongst my participants who were immigrant mothers, there were themes of hopes and expectations that their daughters would be more educationally prepared, hold professional jobs, and have financial security with a college degree. There was a common expression said by 3 of the mothers: “I hope my daughter is better than me and can achieve her dreams.” In turn, the daughters of these participants had an understanding of the barriers and challenges their immigrant mothers encountered to be able to provide them with the ability to attend a 4-year university. Daughter participants all expressed gratitude for their mother’s efforts in supporting them during their educational journey and held goals of graduating college to ensure the struggles were worth the sacrifices. The motives for the 5 first-generation Latinas in the research pursuing higher education are based on reciprocal dynamics and values in a mother-daughter relationship (see Figure 2).

### Figure 2

#### *Mother-Daughter Interviews - Reciprocal Dynamics and Values*







*Note.* This figure shows the three themes that emerged from the interviews and side by side are the interpretations of the theme from the mothers and daughters' perspective.

### **Planning for the Next Cycle**

Since my last cycle would be the first time all 10 of my participants were going to be in community together, I wanted to ensure I incorporated some of those elements they wished they had in their educational journey into my platica. I focused on hosting the platica on the university campus, specifically a cross-cultural center where murals and paintings reflect diversity and inclusion (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3***Platica Space*

*Note.* A photograph of the physical space where my platica was conducted.

### **Cycle 3: Platica/Focus Group & Pinning Ceremony**

The last cycle of my research was a platica where all mother-daughter groups were invited onto campus to continue the conversation around barriers and access, but more importantly to hear how the group would like to be included in higher education. As participants arrived, I had popular Latinx songs playing in the background, from all countries and generations; I greeted them in Spanish and offered them a light lunch as we waited for everyone to arrive. I organized the tables in rounds so it would create an inviting space where all participants could share and erase the idea of a “head speaker.” Along with the tables, I placed journals and pens for participants to write down thoughts and ideas if they wished. In the center of the tables, I placed a wooden jewelry box with hand-painted flowers and an engraving of Morelia, Mexico, which is where my parents grew up, and I had a traditional Mexican aluminum pot with a flower design (see Figure 3). I shared with my participants these items were gifts from my mother and father, and ones I cherish because of their cultural significance and telling symbols. I placed Mexican candy around the tables for people to eat and have a reminder of home. I was very intentional about creating an inviting space, one that showed appreciation and included the Latinx culture. I understood for some of my mother/maternal figures, this would be the first time they would be invited onto campus, and I wanted to ensure it was one where they felt welcomed and celebrated.

#### **Observation**

I started with the opening question to the Student/Daughter participants, *What does being first-gen Latina mean to you?* (see Appendix C for full questions of platica). Themes that emerged from this question expressed viewing higher education as an opportunity and having to “work hard” and “figure it out” on their own, while having mother and familial support to

motivate them to complete their degree. There was a note isolation and frustration due to the gap of not feeling supported by the higher education system.

Laurena said, “It’s a privilege to have this opportunity - without my parents' support I would not have been able to achieve what I have - and it is difficult to navigate - what forms do I have to complete? Who do I talk to?”

Lisette said, “I know I have my mother’s support more than anyone and the support and my family, but I feel lonely - and alone on figuring out the process.”

Some participants noted power and privilege in having an opportunity to access higher education, and a sense of responsibility to share this “insider knowledge” of navigating higher with other family and friends who might be in FGC students in the future.

Daniela said, “To be Latina and first-gen - there's a lot of power - to be the first to break these barriers together with my family to ultimately create paths for other students who share my experiences.”

Candy said, “But when we know - and learn how institutions operate it's something we want to share with family, my cousins, and loved ones. It's infuriating that no one tries to help you or acknowledge the university admitted me to it yet there's not a resource available to help me navigate. “

A constant theme throughout the dialogue was this awareness of their mothers and family’s support and sacrifices to be able to access and have the opportunity to attend university. It echoes the values of familismo and viewing their educational journey not just for themselves as a student but a decision for the family.

Veronica said, “I view it as a responsibility for me and my family and all the sacrifices my parents have made for me. School is something that is important to me and for myself - it's a positive responsibility.”

Mothers in the group noted their involvement in their daughter's education from K-12 grade as exclusive, the language barrier being the main issue, yet it did not stop these mother participants from being involved in PTA meetings, going on school trips, and attending school events. These mothers noted discrimination amongst school counselors and still found a community of parents or teachers who were bilingual where they were able to check in on their daughter's educational progress. I asked mother participants how they would like to be involved in their daughter's higher education experience, and one mother responded with “do they have parent committees on campus? How can we get involved?” There was an overall eagerness to have the opportunity to be invited on to university campus and be a part of their daughters educational journey. The mother participants recognized that not all parents can or want to be involved, but if there could be an established pathway that speaks to the Latinx culture, it could be a great start to increase parental participation of FGLF, and it would have to be intentional and create environments where Spanish translation is available. Mother participants suggested tours of campus in Spanish, and having an orientation specifically designed for FGLF. One mother participant said, “I know many students who are unsure of majors and how it can impact their careers post graduation - and there is a need to link students and parents to career counseling to have an understanding of their options.” Other orientation topics they would like to have covered include financial aid and loan options, choosing majors, and how university schedules and operations differ from high school. Daniela advocated, “there's a need to have

representation - to have financial aid folks with shared identities of first-generation, Latinx and speaking Spanish. To be able to connect to my mom and family and the process of university.”

One mother participant suggested a “Family Day” outside of orientation where FGLF are invited onto campus to remain involved in their students' education and can be used to grow younger siblings' college aspirations. Mother participants emphasized the need in including elements of the Latinx culture and values of education from university staff and administration in all programming for FGLF. A student participant described their disconnect during an event targeted to the Latinx community: “I participated in an event during my undergraduate and it was grandiose. They tried to speak in Spanish but none of the facilitators spoke about the culture and experience of Latino families.” It is key for university staff and administration to have an understanding of the FGLF and questions FGLF will have. In addition to ensuring Spanish translation and incorporating elements of the culture are included there is a need for staff and administration to understand this populations needs from an asset-based perspective. Viewing strong family ties from a perspective of respect and understanding can create an inviting environment between universities and FGLF. Another participant suggested a Latinx graduation in Spanish and English to commemorate the accomplishment of our community.

Mother and daughter participants agreed that there is a need to have an orientation and workshops available to FGLF that address their specific needs. They would like to see an increase of representation of university faculty, staff, and administration who have FGLF knowledge.

Amongst the student participants there were themes of leadership development that occurred out of need to navigate the current higher education system because of their FGC identity. One student participant said, “I am breaking barriers - I tell other Latinas [to] fight for

what you want - I know what I say has value and my education has allowed me to grow both professionally and personally, it's helped me find my strength, voice and power.”

### **Critical Reflection**

My platica shed light not only on the lived experiences of Latinx FGC families and how they navigated higher education, but also illuminated their leadership development and addressed how they would like to be served by higher education institutions. Navigational assets for FGC Latinas are centered around identity and making meaning of higher education, building a supportive community, and leadership development (see Table 3 for details). These students developed strength and resiliency, with their resiliency directed by their motivation and from the acknowledgment of their privilege of being able to access postsecondary education and from acknowledgement of their immigrant parent's sacrifices. The participants built community on campus and off-campus with folks who respected their cultural identity and values. Similar to familismo, students are practicing being there for each other and helping one another with those they hold close to their community (Gonzales, 2019). Participants developed their leadership in the university because of their need to endlessly advocate for themselves, and they gained critical lenses for naming exclusive higher education systems. Students developed their identity and leadership by knowing their story and ensuring success in their academic experience because they recognize that graduation is not simply a win for themselves but their roots and community.

**Table 3**

*Navigational Assets for FGC Latinas*

Identity & Making Meaning of Higher Education	Built Supportive Community	Leadership Development
Reflection of upbringing (such as income, parents' jobs, educational journey) in	Engage with peers who share similar cultural and/or first-gen identity	Contact and ask questions to financial aid, academic advisor, study abroad, and related

comparison to peers		departments to ensure ability to study at respective university
Notice othering and be reminded of Latinx culture	Engage with staff who have knowledge of first-gen experience	Connect with professors/TAs during office hours
Understanding that this opportunity is not just theirs but of their Family & Latinx community too	Talk to family and friends about first-gen experience	Development of empowerment and self-actualization while also critical of barriers due to FGC identity
Understanding parents sacrifices to have opportunity	Find spaces on campus that reflect their cultural and/or first-gen identity and are welcoming (clubs, mentors, affinity spaces)	Development of resilience and strength to remain determined to complete degree

*Note.* This figure encapsulates experiences and process making by participants, which they used to navigate their higher education.

### **Study Limitations**

While this study gathers new data on the FGC experience, specifically by viewing all participants with assets and cultural wealth as they navigate higher education, there were limitations in assessing the entire scope of the experience. The research study had limited participation due to research cycles requiring mothers and daughters to be a part of an in-person *platica* in San Diego, California, as many students live away from parents during college this restricted participation. In addition, transportation, and for some taking time off of work was not accessible for those who lived outside of San Diego County.

Four of the five student participants attended private schools and/or charter schools with missions of ensuring students were college-bound, and yet these FGC students encountered many barriers and remain to have questions about navigating higher education. I am curious as to where this leaves students who attend public school and/or limited exposure to post-secondary opportunities. If retention of our most resilient students who navigated pathways still present challenges, how will higher education meet the needs of students who may need more support?



This study examined the Latina FGC experience and the support of their mothers in their educational journey, and it was done with intentionality as the majority of Latinx FGC students identify as women. However, the Latinx identity is not a monolith and I understand there is need to further examine the different ethnicities that fall within Latinx community to have a clear understanding of cultural relevancy when applying it to retention efforts. In addition, there is great need to continue to research the Latinx community from a more expansive lens, one that includes the intersections of identities like, gender, sexual orientation, ability, income, immigration status, and other identities to have a full assessment of data available to create inclusive and intentional retention practices. Equally the support in my study is examined from a maternal figure and it limits the definition of support to family. There is a need to have a better assessment of student and family demographics in order to create more informative best practices for all Latinx FGC students and their families.

### **Summary of Major Findings**

Utilizing a mixed-method approach of questionnaires, interviews, and a platica, I found parents of FGC Latina students wanted to be included and have intentional pathways of connecting their Latinx identity to programming and at their university at large. The most significant need is to create bridges for first-generation families to learn about the U.S. higher education system and culture through bilingual English-Spanish orientation and ongoing workshops. The themes discussed necessary to support First Generation Latinx families include:

- The college application process.
- Financial aid - loans and scholarship opportunities.
- Choosing majors/minors.
- Post-graduation career opportunities.

- Destigmatizing the deficit lens of being first-generation by universities faculty/staff.
- Increasing representation of faculty/staff who have cultural knowledge about the first-generation Latinx experience.
- Mentorship opportunities with faculty
- Increasing social network in universities
- Applying to pursue postgraduate degrees

My findings can inform university initiatives and best practices to increase retention and foster a culture that welcomes first-generation Latinx families into the higher education system. My participants echoed wanting their Latinx culture represented on their college campus. Culture can be represented through language, food, holidays, speaking to values of the Latinx. Inclusive language came up as a significant barrier for FGLF to be involved in their child's higher education. There is a need to be taught by Latinx FGC professionals and who can speak to the FGC experience, one that recognizes the assets and wealth that exists within the Latinx community. In addition, the navigational assets FGC Latinas are centered around identity and making meaning of higher education, building a supportive community, and leadership development (see Table 3 for details).

### **Recommendations**

Higher education institutions are charged with supporting their students' academic success so all those admitted are able to graduate from their respective institutions. However, there is a need to create practices that increase the likelihood of graduation and retention for specific student populations, especially those who are at risk of higher levels of attrition. Thus, understanding the needs and motivation of the different student populations is key when it comes to programming and forming a sense of belonging. My findings illuminate the power of co-

creation amongst the FGLF group, thus, having an informed assessment of how FGC Latinx students and families would like to be included in postsecondary education can result in an increased sense of belonging on college campuses. The initial assessment can help inform the development of workshops and a curriculum that speaks to FGC students, ultimately creating a culture that welcomes first-generation Latinx families into the higher education system.

By understanding the FGC Latinx student experience using a familismo framework can help staff and faculty incorporate and enhance programming, such as having a first-generation orientation in multiple languages which can draw in students. Hosting workshops where parents receive a description of the college experience and student expectations can help families feel more comfortable and increase multigenerational access to college. There is a need to have an increased representation by professionals and faculty who look like FGC Latinx students and who can speak to the FGC experience. Higher education institutions can also work on forming strong relationships amongst FGC students and faculty.

### **Personal Growth and Reflection**

Having the ability to be in community and share stories with other FGC Latinas and their mothers was life-giving. The experience has allowed me to grow my practices when working with FGC students. What seems so simple, like including cultural components of music and language, can create an inviting space where those who are traditionally excluded can have their voice heard and empowered. This research also highlighted the importance of curating student support services that speak to the students' identities. The U.S. higher education system needs reform to retain and create a space of thriving for its diverse students. By considering the values of Latinx students such as familismo and bridging it with the U.S. higher education system,

students will feel more supported and increase overall retention. There is a great need to co-create and assess how universities can be more inclusive of their student population.

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## Appendix A:

### Cycle 1: Questionnaire

1. Are you an undergraduate or graduate student?
2. What is your gender?
3. What is your ethnic identity?
4. What is your racial identity?
5. Do you identify with Latina/Latinx?
6. Do you identify as a first-generation college student?
7. Is your mother or a maternal figure in your life?
8. Is your mother or a maternal figure located in San Diego County? Part of the study includes an in-person gathering, (if San Diego County COVID protocols permit gatherings) thus participants will need to be San Diego County residents.

Rate your level of agreement with each question:

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Do you consider yourself having familial support in navigating higher education?					
Do you consider yourself having community support in navigating higher education?					
Would you say part of your educational success has to do with your support from the mother-daughter relationship?					
Do you consider yourself connected to your culture?					
Do you see your ethnic identity represented in higher education?					
Do you believe your culture has made you resilient?					
Do you hold wisdom from your culture					



that is dismissed in higher education?					
Do you see opportunities to increase cultural inclusion in higher education?					

## Appendix B

### Cycle 2: Mother Daughter Interviews

#### Student/Daughter Questions:

1. Think about your path to college: how did you get here? *Pensando en tu camino a la universidad: ¿cómo llegaste aquí?*
2. Reflecting on your university experience, what are/were some challenges you encountered being first-generation? *Reflexionando sobre su experiencia universitaria, ¿cuáles son / fueron algunos de los desafíos que encontró siendo la primera generación?*
3. What are some values or pieces of wisdom that you grew up with, in reference to education and who did you learn them from? *¿Cuáles son algunos de los valores o piezas de sabiduría en los que creció en referencia a la educación? ¿y de quién los aprendió?*
4. During your time at university who do you call family and community? *¿Durante tu experiencia universitaria a quién llamas familia y comunidad?*
5. What are opportunities you see to better support Latinas in higher education? *¿Cuáles son las oportunidades que ve para apoyar mejor a las latinas en la educación superior?*

#### Questions for Mother:

1. How has your mother-daughter relationship shaped the student's educational journey? *¿Cómo ha apoyado a su hija en su trayectoria educativa?*
2. What are some barriers you see Latinas face in education? *¿Cuáles son algunas de las barreras que uste a enfrentado en la educación de su hija?*
3. How would you like universities to create support systems for Latinas? *¿Cómo le gustaría que las universidades crearan programas de apoyo para las latinas como su hija?*

#### Student/Daughter Closing Question:

1. When you think about your future self, who do you see? *Cuando piensas en tu yo futuro, ¿a quién ves?*

## Appendix C

### Cycle 3: Pláticas de Mama y Hija Guiding Questions

#### Student/Daughter Question:

1. What does being first-gen Latina mean to you?

#### Question for Mother:

2. What does it mean to have your daughter be first gen college graduates?

#### Student/Daughter Question:

3. What support did you receive from your mom in your educational journey?

3a. Is there nonmaterial support you received?

4. How would you like to see your culture incorporated into your school?

5. How would you like our Latinx culture to be celebrated on campus?

6. What would help you thrive on campus?

8. What do you think are some questions immigrant parents have about the higher education system?

9. As a first generation Latina how has your experience in higher education been different than your white counterparts?

#### Questions for Mother:

10. What do you think would increase involvement of other mothers/fathers to be supportive of their children's education?

*¿Como piensan que se puede ingresar el apoyo de otras mamás/papás para sus hijos en la educación?*

12. What would you like to see for you to feel invited/included in your daughter 's college?

*¿Qué quisiera ver para usted sentir se invitada/incluida en la universidad de su hija?*

13. What parts of your culture would you like the university to know about?

*¿Qué parte de su cultura quisiera que la universidad supiera de ustedes?*