THE LATINX STUDENT EXPERIENCE AT AN ELITE COLLEGE IN TEXAS

by

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Abstract

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Increased enrollment of Latinx students in college has led to reshaping the landscape of American higher education, diversifying college enrollment and degree completion. This qualitative study explored the lived experience of Latinx graduates from the same elite Texas college, so we can better understand how high-achieving, under-represented students successfully navigated a college environment historically attended by high-achieving students from upper socio-economic backgrounds. Jalomo and Rendón’s (2004) three critical processes for students in transition provided the framework. Participants engaged in semi-structured interviews to share their experience of transitioning to campus (separation), feeling of validation in college (validation), and description of the
college experience (involvement). Findings from this study revealed factors that impacted college choice, experiences with separating from family/friends, validating and invalidating experiences in college, and various activities in which students engaged. This study illuminates the experiences of high-achieving Latinx students attend an elite institution and recommends ways to foster a supportive and inclusive campus environment for underrepresented students.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

Education is the great equalizer of society, breaking down the barrier between affluent students and their less well-off classmates (Fulwood, 2012). Attaining a college education is often equated with opportunity for advancement and success, a way into the middle-class; therefore, higher education is valued as a means to a better life (Gándara, 1986; Minikel-Lacocque, 2015; Zambone & Alicea-Saez, 2003). For many, earning a college degree is necessary for better job opportunities, financial stability, and social mobility (Carnevale et al., 2013; Gándara, 1986; Gándara & Contreras, 2009). One group that has seized higher education opportunities are Hispanics1; this population segment is the largest and most rapidly growing group in the country (Flores, 2017; Gándara & Contreras, 2009).

The college enrollment rates of Latinx students has increased in congruence with the changing demographics in the United States (Flores, 2017; NCES, 2016, 2018; Mortenson, 2011; Pew Hispanic Center, 2012; Stavans, 2006). A report by the National Center for Education Statistics (2018) compared

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1 For this study, the terms Hispanic, Chicano, Chicana, Latino, Latina, and Latinx are used throughout the narrative. Hispanic/Latino/Latina/Chicano/Chicana refers to people living in the United States of Mexican or Latin American descent and of Spanish-speaking heritage (Bordes & Arredondo, 2005). Latino is the masculine pronoun and Latina is the feminine pronoun. Latinx is a gender-neutral term used in lieu of Latino/Latina. In the literature review, the terms used reflect how the researchers referred to the population in their published work.
enrollment rates and noted Hispanic young adults experienced the largest enrollment spike, increasing 17 percentage points, whereas Whites went up 3 points and Blacks went up 6 points.

Increased enrollment of Latinx students in college has led to reshaping the landscape of American higher education, diversifying college enrollment and degree completion. Over a 20-year period (from 1995 to 2015), the percentage of Hispanics graduating with an associate’s degree (ages 25-29) increased from 13% to 26%, and bachelor’s degree completion went from 9% to 16% (NCES, 2016, p. 38-39). While degree completion rates may be on the rise for Hispanic students, they still lag behind their classmates (Gándara & Contreras, 2009). Specifically, from 1995 and 2015, there was a 5% difference in degree completion rates between Black and Hispanic graduates and a 27% difference between White and Hispanic graduates (NCES, 2016). Thus, even though there have been improved outcomes, Latinx students still lag behind their white peers.

In an attempt to explain the reasons for low graduation rates, there has been considerable research on Latinx college students. Much of that work has focused on the reasons behind their limited academic success (Becerra, 2010; Cerna et al., 2009; Fischer, 2007; Fry, 2002; Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Gonzalez-Barrera & Lopez, 2013; Harper, 2007, 2010; Hurtado, 1994; Hurtado &

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2 The National Center for Education Statistics 2016 data is the most recent available, since the NCES 2018 report did not address these issues.

Further, high-achieving Latinx students tend to enroll in less selective public institutions to remain close to family and friends (Carnevale & Rose, 2004; Fry, 2002). This decision has been identified as “undermatching,” where a student chooses to attend a less selective college than what is possible based on their academic credentials (Fosnacht, 2014; Hoxby & Avery, 2012). This choice may have unexpected negative ramifications on the students’ futures, because less selective schools have lower graduation rates (Bowen & Bok, 1998; Bowen et al., 2009; Carnevale & Rose, 2004; Carnevale & Strohl, 2010; National Center for Education Statistics, 2012a, 2014, 2016, 2018; Pew Hispanic Center, 2008).

A report by the National Center for Education Statistics compared the bachelor’s degree completion rates among post-secondary institutions. Public,
four-year institutions with open admissions\(^3\) had a six-year graduation rate of 32%; whereas highly selective public, four-year schools (i.e., with a less than 25% acceptance rate) had a six-year graduation rate of 88% (NCES, 2018, p. 203). The data in Figure 1 represent the graduation rate of first-time, full-time bachelor’s degree-seeking students who completed their degree from their initial institution within six years (NCES, 2018, p. 201).

Figure 1

Graduation Rate for First-Time, Full-Time Bachelor’s Degree-Seeking Students


\(^3\) For the study, open admissions or open access refers to a college admission policy whereby the school will accept any student who applies (NCES, 2018, p. 339)
The figure suggests that students who attend more selective institutions are more likely to earn a bachelor’s degree. However, attending elite institutions is not without challenges for students from underrepresented backgrounds. When students from low socio-economic (SES) households attend highly selective institutions, they notice the class differences (e.g., social and cultural capital, socioeconomic class) between themselves and their more affluent classmates, which can affect their persistence (Aries, 2008; Aries & Seider, 2005; Fulwood, 2012; Lee & Kramer, 2013). More specifically, Latinx students may experience financial stress to the point that they separate themselves from their more financially secure classmates (Kuh et al., 2006; McLoughlin, 2012). Another potential challenge for Latinx students at elite schools includes overcoming “minority status stress” (Lopez, 2005, p. 335), the inability to find membership in the culture/subculture (Kuh & Love, 2000), which may occur because they are attending predominantly White institutions (Gloria & Segura-Herrera, 2004; Lopez, 2005; Navarrette, 1993; Rivas-Drake & Mooney, 2009), leading to further social isolation (Lewis et al., 2000; Lopez, 2013; Museus & Quaye, 2009).

Most research has focused on the experience of Latinx students in less selective institutions. At present, only about 8% of Latinx students enroll in highly selective institutions (e.g., elite, top tier, highly selective institutions, Ivy league) (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013; Kim et al., 2014). However, several highly selective and elite universities have begun to recruit and enroll more low-income
and first-generation, high-achieving students in an effort to diversity their student population (Cooper, 2011; Hoxby & Turner, 2019; Lee, 2016; Leonhardt, 2004, 2011; McLoughlin, 2012; Nadworny, 2018; Pérez-Peña, 2013; Valbrun, 2014; Zweifler, 2013), which makes it important to explore and understand their experiences to ensure these students succeed. Therefore, the study sought to understand the experiences of recent graduates from an elite institution in Texas. Texas was selected because of the high number of Hispanic/Latinx people in the state’s population. In 2018, Texas was home to 10 U.S. counties with the highest number of Hispanic residents (Schaeffer, 2019). Therefore, these students’ experiences in Texas will help illuminate the national demographic shifts as well as those in the state.

Statement of the Problem

Even though Latinx students are attending college in higher numbers, they are underrepresented in completion of baccalaureate degrees (Becerra, 2010; Gándara & Contreras, 2009; National Center for Education Statistics, 2012a, 2014, 2016, 2018; Pew Hispanic Center, 2012; Stavans, 2006). Research has identified factors that affect their success. For instance, Latinx students experience financial concerns (Fry, 2002; Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Kuh et al., 2006; McLoughlin, 2012; National Center for Education Statistics, 2012b), being academically underprepared (Boden, 2011; Pell Institute, 2006), racism (Gloria & Segura-Herrera, 2004; Lopez, 2005; Navarrette, 1993; Rivas-Drake & Mooney,
2009), and challenges socially integrating into campus life (Kuh et al., 2006; Kuh & Love, 2000; Lewis et al., 2000; Lopez, 2013; McLoughlin, 2012; Museus, 2008; Museus & Quaye, 2009). There is evidence that low-income students and first-generation students share similar characteristics with many Latinx students, including struggling when attending elite institutions (Gloria & Segura-Herrera, 2004; Kim et al., 2014; Lopez, 2005).

Despite the growing body of research on Latinx college students, there is a gap in the literature when looking at their experiences while attending elite post-secondary institutions. Much of the literature is set in two- and four-year public institutions (Fry, 2002; Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Gloria & Castellanos, 2012; Gonzalez, 2002; Hurtado, 1994; Jalomo & Rendón, 2004; NCES, 2018, 2020; Pell Institute, 2006; Pew Hispanic Center, 2008; Yang et al., 2009) and four-year elites that are not located in Texas (Aries, 2008; Minikel-Lacoque, 2015; Rivas-Drake & Mooney, 2009). Also, researchers predominately applied quantitative methodology to address their research questions (Hurtado, 1994; Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005; Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Kuh et al., 2006; Lopez, 2005, 2013; Rivas-Drake & Mooney, 2009; Taggart & Crisp, 2011). Further, the limited qualitative research that has been conducted has used a deficit approach, focusing on the challenges and failures of Latinx students (Becerra, 2010; Boden, 2011; Cerna et al., 2009; Fischer, 2007; Gonzalez-Barrera & Lopez, 2013; Lee, 2016; Kim et al., 2014; Navarrette, 1993; Nora & Crisp, 2009; Núñez & Curcario-
Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of recent Latinx college graduates whose academic ability earned them entrance to an elite college in Texas. This investigation into their lived experiences graduating from the same elite Texas university offered the opportunity to better understand how high-achieving, under-represented students navigated a college environment historically attended by high-achieving students from upper socio-economic backgrounds.

Orienting Theoretical Framework

Jalomo and Rendón (2004) provided the framework to explore and understand the experiences of Latinx students at a highly selective institution. This theory has three critical processes (i.e., separation, validation, and involvement) and extends Rendón’s Validation Theory. The following is a brief outline of the framework.

Separation is a critical period for first-generation, low-SES, and other at-risk students of color when they physically leave their families for college. College choice is included as a part of the separation process because making the decision to attend college includes the possibility of moving away and breaking away from cultural traditions. Jalomo and Rendón (2004) argue that traditional
and non-traditional students experience this change very differently. Whereas traditional students perceive moving away from home and going to college as a rite of passage, non-traditional students are uneasy to “move away from the everyday realities they are familiar with to join the new world of college” (Jalomo & Rendón, 2004, p. 38). For them, attending college is actually a break from the norm and separating from family and close friends can be a traumatic process.

Validation is based on the earlier works of Rendón (1994) and speaks to an “enabling, confirming, and supportive process that fosters academic and interpersonal development” (Rendón, 1994, p. 44). Specifically, it refers to the interactions between Latinx students and in-class (e.g., faculty, peer tutors, teaching assistants) and out-of-class (e.g., faculty, peers, resident advisors) agents who support and foster academic and personal development. Both in- and out-of-class contacts occur when faculty, coaches, or peers, for example, affirm the students’ capabilities and efforts (Jalomo & Rendón, 2004).

The final process, involvement, explores the student’s level of engagement with the campus. It includes making connections and getting involved with the academic, personal, and social life at college. These connections extend beyond racial/ethnic subgroup or subcultures and encompass engaging with the larger campus community. Through this type of involvement, students are more likely to persist. This theoretical lens provides a framework to
better understand the college experiences of high-achieving Latinx students at a private, elite college in Texas.

**Research Questions**

This study explored the Latinx student experience at an elite institution in Texas; the following three research questions relate to Jalomo and Rendón’s (2004) framework:

1. How do recently graduated Latinx students from an elite Texas institution describe their transition to campus? (separation)
2. How do recently graduated Latinx students from an elite Texas institution describe their feeling of validation in college? (validation)
3. How do recently graduated Latinx students from an elite institution describe their college experiences? (involvement/activities)

**Position of the Researcher**

My interest in this study is two-fold: personal and professional. My personal interest stems from my experience as a first-generation student from a low-SES household. I remember that I had to cope with separating from my family, moving over 500 miles away from home. During college I balanced jobs and involvement in student organizations. After about eight weeks into my first fall semester, I remember how much I missed my home and family. I struggled to navigate the college environment and make friends. I had to find new ways to cope with being far away from home/family for longer periods of time than I was
acquainted. Since my freshman year of high school, I had only been away from home for brief periods of time for summer camps. Through perseverance, determination, and support from family, friends, staff, and faculty, I was able to succeed in college, graduate, and pursue two post-baccalaureate degrees. Yet, those tough memories of my college journey stay with me.

As a higher education professional, I am motivated by students who are determined and driven to attend a university whose environment is likely to be different than their life back home. In my professional career, I have served as a mentor, academic coach, and administrator of academic support programs. I continue to work with students from populations who historically have low college completion rates (e.g., ethnic/racial minorities, first-generation college students, students with disabilities, students from low-income households, etc.). When I work one-on-one with them, I learn the academic and personal challenges that they encounter through their years in college. It leads me to wonder why students continue to face the same obstacles as I did as a student. Therefore, it is of personal and professional interest to explore the college experience of Latinx students attending an elite college in Texas.

**Significance of the Study**

The results of this study are significant for four primary reasons. They: 1) inform the work of practitioners at the campus; 2) present implications for campus policies; 3) contribute to the gap in research by examining the Latinx experience
at an elite college in Texas; and 4) provide an opportunity to hear the voices of these students describing their experiences. The participants offered insights into how they navigated their way through the separation and involvement processes, which exposed the sources of their challenges and strengths as college students at this elite school. Furthermore, the students described and reacted to (in)validating actions and campus policies, which can inform teaching practices, advising, and other important interactions with this population. Overall, findings from this study inform campus personnel about fostering a supportive and inclusive campus culture for underrepresented students.

**Summary**

Previous research on Latinx students used deficit models in their approach to research, which focused on what led to a student’s failure and did not consider how students use different skills and resources to earn a post-secondary degree (Becerra, 2010; Boden, 2011; Cerna et al., 2009; Fischer, 2007; Gonzalez-Barrera & Lopez, 2013; Lee, 2016; Kim et al., 2014; Navarrette, 1993; Nora & Crisp, 2009; Núñez & Currcaro-Alamin, 1998; Pew Hispanic Center, 2012; Rendón, 1994; Zambone & Alicea-Saez, 2003). The study is relevant because it explores the challenges and strengths of Latinx students attending an elite college in Texas. These students are part of a large and growing population in the state as well as the country, so exploring their experiences at one Texas elite institution may prove helpful to educators at other institutions in the United States.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

This chapter summarizes relevant research related to Hispanic students in higher education. It includes a summary on college choice, racial and ethnic minority persistence, Hispanic/Latinx college students, first-generation students, low-income students at highly selective colleges, and Hispanic/Latinx students at highly selective colleges. The chapter concludes with an overview of the theoretical framework of this study.

College Choice

Hossler and Gallagher (1987) developed a three-stage model that students go through to make their college choice decision. The phases are: 1) predisposition (decision to attend/not attend college); search (act of gathering information by the student about colleges and/or universities), and 3) choice (the decision to enroll in college). The researchers identified factors in each stage that influence students’ selection of a specific institution. In the first stage, predisposition, Hossler and Gallagher found the socio-economic status (SES) and parental support played an important role in students’ decisions; therefore, high-SES students were more likely to attend college than low-SES. The researchers noted that during the search phase, students of color, students from low-SES households, and first-generation students were more likely to rely on high school counselors for information; so much so, that the students’ dependence on the high
school counselor could make the difference on whether they attended college or not. Hossler and Gallager admitted that the choice stage was difficult to study because it was unknown how many applications an individual student submitted; therefore they posit that financial aid was the most influential factor in students’ choice decision (except students from high-SES backgrounds).

Radford’s (2013) research extended Hossler and Gallagher’s seminal work by exploring what 900 valedictorians from five states considered when making their college choice decisions. She found that many of the high-SES students attended prestigious colleges, but the valedictorians of low-SES families did not. This phenomenon is referred to as “undermatching” – not enrolling in highly selective institutions even though students have the qualifications to do so. Radford found the high-SES families were engaged in their children’s’ college choice process and understood the importance and value of gaining admission to attend an elite school. However, the parents of the low-SES valedictorians were not involved in the decision, which she surmised helped explain why these students were more likely to decline admission to prestigious schools because of the cost of attendance and lack of knowledge about financial aid options. Therefore, she concluded that the underrepresentation of low-SES valedictorians attending selective colleges was the result of self-selection and not college admission decisions (Radford, 2013). It is important to note that other researchers (e.g., Fosnacht, 2014; Hoxby & Avery, 2012) also found that high-achieving
students from underrepresented backgrounds were more likely to attend less-selective colleges. Her research also recognized that students’ choice of a highly selective institution increased the likelihood that they would graduate and go on to earn advanced degrees, greater earnings, and occupational prestige.

Taggart and Crisp (2011) looked specifically at the choice process for Hispanic students using data from the Educational Longitudinal Study (N=2,210). Their findings provided additional context regarding these students’ college choice decisions noting that access to college information had an impact on their decision to enroll in higher education, and enrollment in AP courses increased their odds of attending a four-year rather than a two-year institution. Their findings also suggest that Hispanic high school students who experienced a racially hostile or prejudiced environment were more likely to enroll in community college. Furthermore, the researchers found that Hispanic students’ college behaviors may be affected differently due to experiences with peers, teachers, and administrators. Racial tension with peers (e.g., feeling put down by peers or stigma from racial/ethnic group) was found to impact Latinx student college behaviors; however the data were less clear on the impact of the relationship with teachers and administrators (Taggart & Smith, 2011). The researchers recommended additional research to better understand the specific sources of discrimination that may impact college-going behaviors.
Racial and Ethnic Minority Student Persistence

Research suggests racial/ethnic minority students have lower persistence and graduation rates (Gándara & Contreras, 2009; NCES, 2016, 2018), one explanation is a minority student’s inability to find membership in the cultures and subcultures on predominately White institutions (PWI) (Kuh & Love, 2000; Museus, 2008). When students do not feel they belong on a campus, this is referred to as cultural dissonance. Cultural dissonance describes the tension students feel when they are immersed in a culture that is different than their own (Museus, 2008) and the pressure to acclimate to the dominate culture (Museus, 2008, Museus & Quaye, 2009). These stressors can have negative effects.

Other researchers came to similar conclusions. For example, Kuh and Love (2000) examined student departure and concluded that students who come from cultures outside the dominant group must acclimate to the dominant culture or find membership in one or more subcultures if they are to succeed. After interviewing 75 students (African American, Asian American, Latino/a, and Native American) attending a PWI, Lewis et al. (2000) found that students from minority groups felt marginalized and struggled with the perception of not being smart enough to attend (i.e., worthy of admission) a prestigious college. As a result, they experienced pressure to prove themselves to their peers and faculty (Fischer, 2010; Lewis et al., 2000). These findings reinforce the notion that an
institutions’ culture and subcultures can be critical in minority student adjustment and membership on the campus.

Museus’ (2008) work offered strategies for success for underrepresented students attending PWIs. He conducted a qualitative study at a PWI where he examined the experiences of 24 undergraduate students (12 Asian Americans and 12 Black) and found that their involvement in ethnic student organizations facilitated their transition and adjustment to the campus. Participants reported that ethnic student organizations functioned as a space that provided cultural familiarity (i.e., connection to peers of similar background), cultural expression and advocacy (i.e., a place to express their own ethnic identities and advocate for their ethnic communities), and cultural validation (i.e., acceptance by their racial/ethnic peers) (Museus, 2008; Museus & Quaye, 2009). Museus’ findings suggest that cultural/ethnic student organizations are critical sources of support for Black and Asian students at PWI’s.

Museus and Quaye (2009) also noted that influential relationships with in-and-out-of-class agents. There was additional value if the agents came from similar cultural backgrounds as the students. In these cases, the agents also helped to validate underrepresented students’ traditional culture and identity (Museus & Quaye, 2009). Thus, campus agents and cultural organizations can play key roles in underrepresented students’ success.
Experiences of Hispanic/Latinx College Students

Much of the research on Hispanic students’ post-secondary transitions has focused on a variety of challenges they face during their adjustment to college. These issues include overcoming racism and tension from the campus culture (Gonzalez, 2002; Hurtado, 1994; Kuh & Love, 2000; Lopez, 2005; Museus & Quaye, 2009), seeking help for issues related to transitioning into the college (Fischer, 2010; Kuh et al., 2006; Jalomo & Rendón, 2004; Rendón, 1994; Rivas-Drake & Mooney, 2009; Zalaquett, 2005), integrating socially with peers (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012; Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005; Yang et al. 2009), and coping with financial stress (Cabrera & Padilla, 2004; Pell Institute, 2006; Yang et al., 2009; Zalaquett, 2005).

A seminal quantitative study by Hurtado (1994) explored how high-achieving Latino students perceived the receptivity of their campuses. She surveyed 859 sophomores and juniors attending over 224 institutions nationwide. The main objective of this multi-institutional study was to identify areas for institutional improvement to help inform administrators about campus climate issues that Latino students faced. Hurtado reported student backgrounds, college characteristics, general campus climate, and student behaviors as key determinants of campus climate factors. She found that college selectivity is associated with Latino students’ perceptions of campus racial/ethnic tensions. In other words, the more selective the campus, the more unwelcoming it felt to the
Latino students. She noted that these negative emotions tended to grow stronger over time reporting that Latino students at predominantly White campuses continued to struggle beyond their first year with racial/ethnic tensions and experiences of discrimination. Further, Latino students attending elite institutions reported they did not feel as though they “fit in” (Hurtado, 1994, p. 31) and that non-Latino peers viewed them as special admits, despite strong academic achievement that gained them admission into the selective colleges. Additionally, two-thirds of respondents felt that their peers knew little about Hispanic culture, which was associated with Latino students’ perceptions of discrimination on campus.

These views of campus climate played a key role in the students’ adjustment to an institution. Gonzalez (2002) identified three elements of the campus culture that influenced Chicano student success. These were: the social world (racial and ethnic makeup of students, staff, and faculty), the physical world (buildings, sculptures, and physical symbols like flyers and posters), and the epistemological world (exchange of knowledge in social spaces). A combination of these cultural systems conveyed messages of unimportance and exclusion to Hispanic students at a PWI.

Other researchers also explored how the campus environment affected Hispanic student success. Jalomo and Rendon (2004) found that if Latino students perceived they were less worthy at predominantly White campuses environments,
they might choose not to interact with faculty or use campus services (Jalomo & Rendón, 2004). Thus, when students encounter challenges associated with the institutional climate, they may feel they have nowhere to turn for help during the transition to college. Kuh et al. (2006) also found that an institution’s campus environment and norms may lead Latino students to experience difficulty transitioning to a campus. As a result, they may feel lonely and perceive campus officials (e.g., faculty, staff, etc.) are disinterested in their well-being. The researchers noted this feeling was exacerbated by the fact that underrepresented students already had to manage conflicting pressures to succeed academically and family perceptions that they were rejecting cultural values and norms. As a result, family can be the cause of stress for the student, often influencing how they spend their time and requiring them to return home frequently (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012); therefore making it difficult for the student to take advantage of their colleges’ resources for learning and personal development (Kuh et al., 2006).

Fischer (2010) examined the long-term effects of stereotype threat and campus climate on the academic and social experiences for minorities at elite institutions. Using a sample of approximately 4,000 freshmen from 28 selective colleges from the National Longitudinal Survey of Freshmen (NLSF, from the fall 1999, spring 2000, and fall 2000 semesters), Fischer reported that African-American and Hispanic students had lower GPAs than their White counterparts. The findings supported previous findings that Black and Hispanic students
experienced intense feelings and self-imposed pressure to perform well in their coursework due to the fear of being labeled and seen as intellectually inferior. Fischer’s research confirmed Hurtado’s (1994) and Lopez’s (2005) findings on the academic pressure experienced by minority students. After accounting for socio-economic status and academic preparation for college, Fischer (2010) concluded that stereotypes and campus racial climate can have a negative impact on student success, particularly among Hispanic and African-American students attending highly selective institutions.

However, Rivas-Drake and Mooney (2009) noted that not all students responded in the same way to these environments. The researchers used an existing data set (National Longitudinal Survey of Freshmen) to understand how Latino students attending several highly selective colleges adapted during their college transition. They argued that Latino students adopted one of three profiles (i.e., assimilation, accommodation, and/or resistance) as they navigated college. Students who assimilated did not believe that minority status affected their opportunity; they were likely to have one parent who attended college, came from financially secure families, and made better grades. Students who accommodated understood that unequal opportunities can be overcome with effort; they also were strategic at navigating structures, seeking academic support services and help from professors and staff. The last group were the resisters, who perceived racial inequality on the campus and were vocal about on-campus discrimination and
prejudice. Being race-conscience, resisters were likely to engage on campus by seeking out opportunities to build a supportive network from their peer group. The findings contributed to the conversation about how students in transition perceived their minority status and interacted within the campus climate, for instance assimilators and accommodators connected with faculty and staff (Yang et al., 2009) while resisters sought peers for support (Lopez, 2005; Museus, 2008; Museus & Quaye, 2009; Zalaquett, 2005).

Many researchers noted specific sources of cultural support that aided students in navigating the campus culture when they felt racial tensions. Lopez (2005) found that participants attending a private, elite college responded to racism by creating a Latino sociocultural group where they connected with their peers and sought each other as a source of support. Zalaquett (2005) also reported that peers played a critical role in student success. Zalaquett (2005) interviewed 12 students in the Latino scholarship program from a large urban university. The researcher identified that interpersonal relationships with friends, family, and their communities (i.e., members form the community and scholarship support) were valuable to the student’s persistence.

Jalomo and Rendon (2004), Rendon (1994), Yang et al. (2009), and others found that if students were validated by campus personnel, they were more likely to have a supportive and successful college experience. For instance, Yang and associates (2009) surveyed 170 Hispanic/Latino students at a single campus and
found that students who sought help from support offices (e.g., academic support, counseling, social support) when they felt lonely increased their self-confidence. Thus, this research suggests that even though students may succeed in gaining entrance into college, supports are necessary to address challenges they face once enrolled.

In addition to taking advantage of campus resources, another common concern among Latino college students was financial support (Cabrera & Padilla, 2004; Pell Institute, 2006; Yang et al., 2009; Zalaquett, 2005). Financial concerns are important regardless of the college setting (i.e., two-year or four-year), but they increase when Hispanic students attend a university. Students, specifically from first-generation families, experience financial challenges and struggle to pay for college as a result of tuition increases, stagnant grant aid, and high costs of books and transportation (Hurtado, 1994; Pell Institute, 2006; Yang et al., 2009). The rise in tuition and decrease in financial aid has led to many first-generation students opting to work rather than take out loans while in college. For those students who do try to work while attending school, it is increasingly difficult to focus their attention on coursework and seek out campus resources with the limited time available (Jalomo & Rendón, 2004; Pell Institute, 2006). This reality may help explain why first-generation students are less likely to graduate college than other sub-groups (Becerra, 2010; Fry, 2002; Gloria & Castellanos, 2021; Kuh, et al., 2006; Pell Institute, 2006; Yang et al., 2009).
In summary, most of the research on the college choice decision-making processes (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Radford, 2013; Taggart & Crisp, 2011) does not focus on Latinx students, instead it focuses broadly on the factors that impact college choice and college pathways for high-achieving students who undermatch. Further, the literature on Hispanic students’ post-secondary transitions is limited by focusing primarily on challenges these students face during their adjustment to college such as overcoming campus tensions (Gonzalez, 2002; Hurtado, 1994; Lopez, 2005; Museus & Quaye, 2009), seeking help for issues related to transitioning into the college (Fischer, 2010; Kuh et al., 2006; Jalomo & Rendón, 2004; Rendón, 1994; Rivas-Drake & Mooney, 2009 Zalaquett, 2005), integrating socially with peers (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012; Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005; Yang et al., 2009), and coping with financial stress (Cabrera & Padilla, 2004; Pell Institute, 2006).

**First-Generation Hispanic/Latinx College Students**

Academic preparedness for college is a common challenge for first-generation (i.e., first in the family to attend college and complete a bachelor’s degree) and Hispanic/Latino students. Research suggests that Hispanic students are often the first in their families to attend and complete college (Arellano & Padilla, 1996, Núñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Gloria & Castellanos, 2012; Pell Institute, 2006). Further, they are more likely to be female and come from lower-income households than students whose parent(s) have college degrees (Pell
Institute, 2006). Therefore, the issues shared by Latinx students are also likely to be first in their family to attend college.

In the 2006 Pell Institute report, *What Works for First-Generation College Students*, researchers interviewed 135 students attending either a two-year or four-year institution who were recent alumni from the Texas TRIO precollege programs (i.e., Upward Bound and Talent Search). The study was designed to ascertain what challenges do first-generation students encounter during their transition to college; these included adapting to college rigor, acclimating to college environment, preparation of parents on dealing with issues that arise from their students, and managing the financial aspects of college (Pell Institute, 2006). First-generation students were more challenged staying in college than getting in, mostly due to being under-prepared for college-level work due to the lack of rigor in high school (Pell Institute, 2006). Additional research has identified other reasons first-generation college students do not complete their degree, departing because they can no longer afford to continue (Becerra, 2010; Fry, 2002), injury or illness; and class availability or scheduling conflicts (Kim et al., 2014; Redford & Hoyer, 2017, p. 24). Adjusting to the college environment can cause first-generation students’ anxiety. However, students who have prior experience in pre-college programs and who are socialized with peers from diverse backgrounds (e.g., different family and cultural background) tend to adjust to college better (Pell Institute, 2006).
Despite facing challenges, first-generation Latino students perceive pursuing an education and achieving a career as a means to honor their parents and help their siblings (Zalaquett, 2005). Nevertheless, family can be the cause of stress by requiring the student to return home frequently, which pulls them away from connecting with the campus community (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012). Gloria and Castellanos (2012) interviewed seven Latina students, two Latina/o student service personnel, and one non-Latina/o mental health professional/staffer to explore the college educational and coping experiences for first-generation Latinas. The researchers found that Latina students relied on their families as the primary means of physical, emotional, and social support; however, that support could hinder the student’s ability to connect with others on campus (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012). As a result, first-generation Latinx college students were less likely to persist in college than their continuing4-generation peers (Cataldi et al., 2018; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Redford & Hoyer, 2017).

**Low-Income Students at Highly Selective Institutions**

Other relevant research on highly selective institutions focuses on students from low socio-economic (SES) backgrounds. Most research compares students in aggregate by income levels and not racial/ethnic characteristics; however,

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4 Continuing-generation college student refers to a student who is enrolled in college and who has at least one parent with a bachelor’s degree or a higher level of education attainment.
many Latinx students fall within the low SES group (Aries & Seider, 2005; Leonhardt, 2004, 2011; McLoughlin, 2012; Nadworny, 2018; Zweifler, 2013). The following studies examine the personal and emotional adjustments that students from low income backgrounds experience in comparison to other groups.

Aries and Seider (2005) interviewed 30 White, low-income students for the purpose of exploring the role college plays in influencing class-based identity, and the awareness of disparity of wealth among students. The researchers interviewed half of the students from a state college and the remaining half from an elite college. They reported that low-SES students from the elite school felt they lacked cultural and economic capital in comparison to their middle- and upper-class peers. For instance, low-income students noticed the difference in financial resources (i.e., economic capital) compared to their affluent counterparts almost immediately upon arrival to an elite campus (Aries & Seider, 2005). Some students recognized they lacked the same possessions as their affluent peers, such as large televisions, lavish dorm furnishings, and designer clothes, as well as the ability to eat meals off campus at expensive restaurants and travel out-of-the-country during breaks. Contrary to the elite school, low-SES students at the state school reported greater homogeneity among peers and affluent student possessions were less apparent. Differences in the findings from the students at elite versus less-selective colleges provide an understanding for how low-income students perceive class-based identity.
With limited research on low-SES students and their racial/ethnic characteristics, Aries’ (2008) research offers insight into the first-year experience of White and Black students from differing SES backgrounds. Aries recruited 52 freshmen at Amherst College, a private elite college in the northeast, to see how intersectionality of race, parental education, and SES affected their college experience. Her findings were similar to a previous study (Aries & Seider, 2005) where students from different social classes faced disparities because of wealth and privilege. Students from low-income backgrounds learned to cope with the class-based disparity, something that they observed as early as moving on to campus. Affluent students stood out because of their possessions (electronics, clothes, cars) and spending habits. As a result, low-income students experienced feelings of inadequacy, inferiority, and intimidation; they also felt their background made it difficult to connect to their wealthy peers (Aries, 2008).

More recently, McLoughlin (2012) took a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of 20 low-SES students attending an elite university. McLoughlin investigated whether their transition experience was similar to that of their middle-and higher-income peers. His findings support existing research (Aries, 2008; Aries & Seider, 2005) that low-SES students at elite colleges recognized the wealth of their peers (i.e., personal finances and relationships with money). However, in contrast to Jalomo and Rendon’s (2004) work, McLoughlin found that these differences did not impact how low-SES students connected with
their peers or their willingness to seek support and campus resources. Further, the study found that low-income students had equivalent graduation rates, time spent on degree, participation in student groups, and overall feelings of positive experiences compared to their higher income peers. As a result of their student success and completion rates, McLoughlin challenged the notion that low-income students struggle in elite environments and recommended further research of this phenomenon.

Nevertheless, most research contended that low-income students have to find support as they learn to navigate elite campuses. Lee and Kramer (2013) found that attending a highly selective institution affected low-income students’ interactions with family and friends back home while they faced pressure to acclimate to a dominate culture in college. The researchers found that non-elite students, unlike their higher-SES peers, struggled to maintain strong ties back home, and seemed to feel disconnected both on campus and back home. This tension may be explained by the fact that these students also underwent the “process of learning elite mannerisms, behaviors and rules of the game” to succeed on campus (Lee & Kramer, 2013, p. 18). As a result, they became aliens in both worlds and struggled to “fit in” among their peers in college and their friends and family back home. The researchers found this disconnection was true equally for Black, Hispanic, and White students.
In sum, the college experiences of low-SES students attending elite colleges were similar to research that looked at students by racial/ethnic background (Hurtado, 1994; Lopez, 2005; Museus, 2008; Museus & Quaye, 2009). Fulwood (2012) explained that “less-affluent students often walk on campus feeling out of place, harboring attitudes that hamper their early ease and adjustment to college life; such feelings aren’t shared by their wealthier classmates” (p. 16). The income background of students can affect how they experience college resulting in feeling unaccepted on campus as they transition at an elite school college (Aries, 2008; Aries & Seider, 2005; Lee & Kramer, 2013).

**Hispanic/Latinx Students at Highly Selective Institutions**

The following is an overview of the limited research regarding the experiences of Hispanic students at elite colleges that led them to successfully complete their baccalaureate degree. Most of these studies approached the topic from a deficit perspective (Cabrera & Padilla, 2004; Lopez, 2005, 2013; Navarrette, 1993). However, Gándara (1995) was an exception.

Over 25 years ago, Gándara (1995) researched Chicano/Latino professionals who chose education as a vehicle for social and economic mobility or personal fulfillment. This seminal study explored the achievement behaviors of 50 Latino, first-generation college students, who overcame barriers to education and had achieved terminal degrees (i.e., J.D., M.D., or Ph.D.) from selective institutions. She found most of the parents of the participants instilled the
importance of and a value for education to motivate their children to have better opportunities in the future, which is a trait that was perceived to be restricted to the middle and upper classes. One limitation for her research is the accuracy of information, because the participants had to recall their college experiences. The students attended college between the 1960’s to 1970’s and the study was being conducted in the mid-1990’s, so some were discussing incidents that occurred 20-30 years before. Gándara noted it was also challenging recruiting participants, because so few Latinos had earned advanced degrees at that time. Nevertheless, in the end, her study offers a positive approach in exploring the Hispanic/Latinx college experience at elite colleges.

In contrast to Gándara’s (1995) research, most studies found Latino students were more likely to face blocked opportunities and other disparities based on their racial/ethnic backgrounds (e.g., Cabrera & Padilla, 2004; Lopez, 2005; Navarrette, 1993). Some of these differences included: the loss of their cultural identity as Hispanic/Latino at a predominately White school (PWI) (Cabrera & Padilla, 2004; Navarrette, 1993), perceived prejudices that reinforced feelings of inequality and race-related stress (Lopez, 2005), and challenges transitioning to a PWI (Kim et al., 2014; Lopez, 2013).

Navarrette (1993) offered one of the earliest first-hand accounts of his experience attending an elite school. In his book, he discussed feeling alienation, loneliness, and guilt during his academic journey at Harvard. He found he
struggled maintaining his cultural identity, specifically the loss of the Spanish language, as a Latino student in a predominately White (upper-class) culture. Strong familial connections with his parents and siblings and relationships with his community back home helped him at times when he navigated between the two differing spaces, Harvard and his home.

About 10 years later, Cabrera and Padilla (2004) examined the experiences of two Latino students (one male, one female) at an elite college to understand how they overcame barriers they encountered. The researchers posited that when successful Latino students match with a prestigious school, challenges do not disappear. The participants had to overcome issues related to poverty, learning English, lack of peer support, racism, and feelings of alienation (Cabrera & Padilla, 2004). Other researchers’ findings align with Navarette’s experience of low-income students who attend elite colleges. They concluded that Hispanic students must find strategies to cope with challenges in their life as well as difficulties in navigating college by taking advantage of social networks (Lopez, 2013, Zalaquett, 2005) campus resources (Rivas-Drake & Mooney, 2009; Yang et al., 2009), and familial support (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012).

Latinx students experience the greatest amount of stress during the first months of the college transition as they integrate into a new and unfamiliar environment. In an effort to understand the race-related psychosocial stress students encounter and the ways they cope, Lopez (2005) surveyed Latino
students from the entering freshmen class at an elite institution. The first survey, administered at the start of their first year (n=73, 42% return rate), revealed that students were affected by achievement stress because of the challenging curriculum while experiencing pressure by members in the Latino community to maintain their cultural identity (i.e., pressure to be loyal to race, not “act White”). The second survey was administered in the Spring 2001 semester and yielded 95 responses (55% return rate). The students still felt stress, but it shifted from what they imposed on themselves and what they perceived from the Latino community to changes they sensed in the campus culture. For example, these students noted they felt others at the college expected poor performance because of racist attitudes. These attitudes had not been as noticeable upon entrance. As a result, over time, the Latino students turned to their Latino peers as a support network.

Building on his previous research regarding race-related psychosocial stress, Lopez (2013) explored the Latino transition at an elite PWI by looking at assimilation into the campus’ culture. Lopez found that students previous academic experiences impacted their transition to college. He noted that Latino students from a racially homogeneous high school experienced more stress in the first months than the students who had more exposure to White students prior to

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5 Lopez (2005) study site was a highly selective private university on the West Coast of the United States; undergraduate student body consists of approximately 6,000 students.
matriculation. Once on campus, these students also had more interaction with non-Latino students. These findings suggest that precollege experiences from racially homogeneous high schools’ matter in impacting the degrees of stress.

Kim et al. (2014) examined patterns of college engagement and outcomes of Latino undergraduate students attending public, selective universities. The researchers used data from the University of California system, which is considered a highly selective university system; the sample size included 74,410 students. These researchers conducted data analysis using Astin’s (1993) Input-Environment-Outcomes (I-E-O) model; they looked at in- and out-of-class experiences, work, and the role of diversity. The results indicated that Latino students spent more out-of-class time by themselves, with family, or religious or community activities compared to their peers from other racial groups. Latino students had lower levels of academic involvement (i.e., student-faculty interaction in-and-out of class) than Asian American and White peers. Further, Latino students did not report a high level for sense of belonging, their levels trailed behind White students but were not as low as African-American and Asian American students (Kim et al., 2006). The researchers suggested that diverse groups at college do not experience college the same way, similar to Jalomo and Rendón’s (2004) suggestion that the transition to college is not the same for all students.
The first part of the literature review has provided background on college choice, a summary of Hispanic students and subpopulations (e.g., first-generation and low-income students) in four-year public colleges, as well as Hispanic/Latinx students at highly selective, elite schools. Based on existing research, we know that Hispanic students encounter several challenges that affect their persistence and degree completion. Relevant themes are based on the intersection of the college experiences for Hispanic, first-generation, and low-income college students. However, as more underrepresented students attend elite colleges, further research is needed to explore Hispanic students’ experiences in highly selective, elite institutions. The next section introduces Jalomo and Rendon’s (2004) validation framework.

**Theoretical Framework**

This section of the literature review provides an introduction to the theory, which is an extension of Rendon’s Validation Theory (1994). Jalomo and Rendón’s (2004) framework includes three critical processes for college success: 1) separation, 2) validation, and 3) involvement. The framework provides a holistic approach for exploring the transition to college for non-traditional students (e.g., low-income, first-generation, Hispanic/Latinx, etc.).

**Separation**

Tinto’s theory of departure (1993) advocates that students should make a complete separation from family and friends to be able to fully integrate into
college, which is needed to be successful. Other researchers have supported this view (e.g., Kalsner & Pistole, 2003), yet there are other studies that have noted the importance of maintaining these key relationships particularly for students of color (Cabrera et al., 1999; Mattanah et al., 2004). Jalomo and Rendón’s (2004) framework offers a more nuanced view that the disconnection leads to benefits and challenges for Latino students. They note that traditional college students come from families where going to college is a normal rite of passage (Jalomo & Rendón, 2004). For them, separation is expected and less challenging. Whereas nontraditional students are unsure or uneasy about beginning college because they are, in essence, breaking family traditions and their life in college will separate them from their families and communities. Consequently, nontraditional students are challenged to live in multiple worlds while they learn the values, traditions, and norms of the college environment, which is vastly different from their home life and community (Jalomo & Rendón, 2004). Entering an unfamiliar environment may cause racial stress because Latino students are social integrating into a foreign space with pressure to assimilate (Lopez, 2013). Further, the separation process finds Latino reforming their identity as they acclimate to the campus culture (Oseguera, Locks, & Vega, 2009; Rendón & Munoz, 2011).

Existing research suggests that the first few months of the Latino/a students’ transition to college life, whether moving away from or living at home, can be stressful and present challenges (Lopez, 2014). Since there are few elite
post-secondary institutions, most Latino students have to move away from home and relocate to attend college. Some Latino students move away from majority minority high schools (racially homogenous communities) to predominately White environments and in these instances, students are likely to experience a greater degree of stress during the first months of transitioning to campus (Lopez, 2013). Jalomo and Rendón’s framework considers all the accompanying hardships that students may face when working through the separation phase. As Latino students experience reconfiguration of family and friend relationships, they begin to alter existing relationships and add new ones (Saunders & Serna, 2004).

Jalomo and Rendón described this reconfiguration of relationships in two subparts, external and internal. Examples of “external separation” include geographic relocation and separation from family and friends; therefore, leaving behind the reality they have known to join the new world of college. “Internal separation” occurs on the inside of the student; here the student reforms their identity and redefines their sense of self. Thus, the changing circumstances lead to internal changes in the individual.

Validation

All college students bring their individual life experiences as they arrive on campus for the first time. Unfortunately, many students of color not only enter college with a history of invalidated experiences, but they are likely to continue to encounter these experiences as they pursue higher education. Validation of their
unique cultural backgrounds by institutional representatives can reduce a student’s self-doubt and encourage their success (Jalomo & Rendón, 2004). A few examples of invalidating experiences include telling students they are going to fail, discounting their past and cultural experiences, and treating them as incompetent. On the other hand, validating experiences can occur in- and out-of-class. For instance, a faculty member who meets with students in-and-out of class can have a positive effect on a student by affirming experiences that encourage students to do their best (Jalomo & Rendón, 2004). Validation can be powerful for Latino students and result in providing motivation and reassurance during the college transition.

**Involvement**

Campus social integration is important in a student’s decision to stay at a campus; therefore, involvement in social activities is key in positively affecting student persistence (Otero et al., 2007). Within Jalomo and Rendón’s (2004) framework, involvement is not the sole responsibility of the student, similar to validation; it requires that institutional agents take action to engage the students.

Elements of involvement include activities and programs that bring students together so that they are exposed to different cultures that help to establish friendships and networks (Jalomo & Rendón, 2004). Facilitators of involvement can include faculty, tutors, support service staff, peers, lab assistants, and residential staff. Other examples of involvement include special programs
focused on Latino culture, as well as opportunities for in-and-out-of-class interactions among students, faculty, and mentors either through group work or one-on-one meetings. Racial and ethnic organizations provide a place for Latino students to connect with peers based on their similar cultural background. Finding ways to make cultural connections helps to foster a venue where students feel connected to like-minded peers on campus (Museus, 2008; Museus & Quaye, 2009).

In summary, Jalomo and Rendón’s (2004) framework is intended to provide the elements that help students of color in their transition to college. The main components of the model (separation, validation, and involvement) may be useful in understanding how students navigate an institution from the first year through graduation. Typically, the model has been applied to Latino students attending large public institutions and not elites. The current study is unique in applying the framework to understand the college experiences of Hispanic students who attended a highly selective, elite college.

Conclusion

The empirical work presented in this literature review demonstrates part of the known research in the college selection (Hossler & Gallager, 1987; Radford, 2013, Taggart & Crisp, 2011), racial/ethnic student persistence (Kuh & Love, 2000, Museus, 2008, Musues & Quaye, 2009), experiences for Hispanic/Latino college students (Fischer, 2010; Gonzalez, 2002; Hurtado, 1994; Jalomo &
Rendón, 2004; Lopez, 2005; Kuh et al., 2006; Rendón, 1994; Rivas-Drake & Mooney, 2009; Yang et al., 2009; Zalaquett, 2005), first-generation college students (Cabrera & Padilla, 2004; Gloria & Castellanos, 2012; Núñez & Currcaro-Alamin, 1998; Pell Institute, 2006), and low-income students at highly selective institutions (Aries, 2008; Aries & Seider, 2005; Fischer, 2010; Fulwood, 2012; Lee & Kramer, 2013; McLoughlin, 2012). This section also illustrates the gap in the literature related to Hispanic/Latino students at highly selective universities. Literature on this topic is scarce with few recent studies that explore the personal experiences of Latino/Hispanic students at elite universities (Cabrera & Padilla, 2004; Lopez, 2014; Navarrette, 1993). This study used Jalomo and Rendon’s (2004) framework (i.e., separation, validation, and involvement) to understand Latino student experiences at an elite institution.
Chapter 3

Methods

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of recent Latinx graduates, who attended an elite college in Texas (ECIT), to gain a deeper understanding of how they navigated an institution historically attended by students from upper socio-economic, college-going backgrounds. Participants were given the opportunity to reflect and describe feelings and perceptions of their lives as college students attending ECIT.

The study addressed the following three research questions:

1. How do recently graduated Latinx students from an elite Texas institution describe their transition to campus? (separation)

2. How do recently graduated Latinx students from an elite Texas institution describe their feeling of validation in college? (validation)

3. How do recently graduated Latinx students from an elite institution describe their college experience? (involvement)

The next sections detail the a) research design, b) site, c) data collection d) participant recruitment and selection, e) data analysis, f) ethical considerations, g) strategies to ensure trustworthiness, and h) limitations.

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Research Design

In the current study, I used a qualitative research approach to understand how Latinx students persist and graduate from an elite college in Texas. Qualitative research methodology allowed me to explore the student experience through an anti-deficit\(^7\) perspective (Harper, 2010) to understand how the students navigated an elite post-secondary institution. Interviews with participants can “empower individuals to share their stories” (Creswell, 2013, p. 48) and provide deep, rich data (Babbie, 2004; Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Gall et al., 2007; Maxwell, 2013). The data analysis provided significant findings for advancing our understanding of the Latinx experience attending an elite college in Texas.

Site Selection

The site for this research study was a private, not-for-profit, 4-year university referred to with the pseudonym, Elite College in Texas or ECIT. This university is considered elite because of the reputation and institutional characteristics that parallel Ivy league schools, which are among the most prestigious and highly selective\(^8\) universities in the world. ECIT, like Ivy league

\(^7\) For this study, anti-deficit approach focuses on an asset-based (i.e., student strengths and opportunities) versus deficit perspective (i.e., student challenges and deficiencies).

\(^8\) Highly selective institutions accept approximately 10% of all applicants (U. S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, College Navigator, Retrieved November 15, 2020, IES-NCES).
universities, recruits high-achieving students, including those from underrepresented populations.

Like other elite institutions, ECIT has rigorous admission standards. In Fall 2019, 9% (approximately 2,438 students) out of the 27,087 applications were admitted. The average standardized test scores for students admitted for the 2019-2020 academic year were: SAT Reading and Writing (720), SAT Math (750), and/or ACT composite (33). The 2019 entering class also included 65 National Merit Scholar awardees\(^9\) (National Merit Scholarship Corporation, 2021).

According to the Institute of Education Statistics, ECIT reported their Fall 2019 total enrollment at 7,282 students (3,989 undergraduate and 3,293 graduate), of which 16% of the undergraduate population identified as Hispanic/Latino (approximately 638 students). Based on the 2019-2020 academic year, the estimated cost of tuition, fees, and supplies (excluding on/off-campus living costs) was $50,312. During the 2018-2019 academic year\(^{10}\), multiple types of financial aid were provided to 69% of full-time beginning undergraduate students enrolled at ECIT (\(N=664\)), 17% (\(N=167\) students) received a Federal Pell grant (average

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\(^9\) Number of National Merit Scholars compared to elites Harvard (\(N=207\)), Yale (\(N=140\)), Princeton (\(N=114\)) and schools listed in Table 1, Private#1 (\(N=38\)), Private#2 (\(N=14\)), Private#3 (\(N=24\)).

\(^{10}\) The financial aid award data is the most recent available, the ECIT website did not include 2019-2020 award data.
amount $4,795) and 12% ($N=112$ students) had student loans (average amount $7,188).

One factor that many students consider in making their college choice
decision is distance from home (Jalomo & Rendón, 2004). Most elite institutions
are not in Texas, so distance from home may limit Texas students’ potential list of
schools. By focusing on ECIT, which is in Texas, the study was able to lessen the
impact of this potential concern.

Table 1 denotes the acceptance, retention, and graduation rates for the
study site, Elite College in Texas (ECIT) and other Texas institutions, for
comparison.

**Table 1**

*Outcomes for Hispanic Students in Post-Secondary Schools in Texas*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Acceptance Rate</th>
<th>Retention Rate</th>
<th>Graduation Rate</th>
<th>Graduation Rate, Hispanic students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ECIT</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>98%</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flagship #1</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flagship #2</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>79%</td>
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<td>78%</td>
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<td>91%</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private #3</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Adapted from the U. S. Department of Education, National Center for
Education Statistics (Retrieved November 15, 2020, IES-NCES).
Data Collection

After I secured IRB approval from the University of Texas at Arlington, I began a campaign to recruit participants for the study. The process began by posting a recruitment message on my personal Facebook and LinkedIn accounts, and on the Latinx Alumni Facebook group for graduates of ECIT (see Appendix B). I also emailed individuals whom I thought could help me recruit participants, this included the Latinx student alumni group and the Director of Multicultural Affairs at ECIT, and two colleagues from my campus who are ECIT alumni.

The recruitment email and social media posts contained three qualifying questions to pre-screen prospective participants to ensure they would be eligible for the study. Participants needed to answer ‘yes’ to all three in order to meet the requirements of the study (see Appendix B).

1. Do you identify as Hispanic or Latino/a?
2. Are you a recent graduate (within 3 years)?
3. Are you willing to participate in an interview via video conferencing tool (i.e., Skype, Google Hangouts, FaceTime) or by phone?

The use of these tools eliminated the need to travel while still providing a private setting for them to share their personal experiences. Further, I sought graduates because the focus was on students who were “successful,” which was defined as graduating from this college. Also, by limiting the study participants to graduates (within three years, 2014-2017), it was more likely that they experienced a similar
institutional context. I decided to recruit graduates from a three-year time frame so that I would have a better opportunity to recruit a sufficient number of participants to the study.

All recruitment emails were sent within a 24-hour period. Three weeks after the initial email and social media posts (Appendix B), I did not have a response from potential participants or colleagues. A second announcement calling for participants was sent via social media (Facebook and LinkedIn). Within a few days of the second posting, I received a response from an ECIT alumni, Sergio\textsuperscript{11}, who met the study’s criteria.

After verifying he and the rest of the participants qualified for the study, I sent a follow-up email (see Appendix D) with a link to the consent form (see Appendix F), pre-interview questionnaire (see Appendix E), and details for scheduling an interview. The pre-interview questionnaire collected demographic and background information and was disseminated via Qualtrics (a survey development tool for online surveys as a part of the research study). To protect participant anonymity, I also asked participants to offer a pseudonym or code name; I assigned one if one was not indicated on the pre-interview questionnaire. After receiving a completed pre-interview questionnaire and consent form,

\textsuperscript{11} This is a pseudonym.
participants were scheduled for a semi-structured interview (see Appendix G for confirmation email for interview; Appendix H for interview questions).

After conducting Sergio’s interview, he offered to help me recruit other ECIT alumni. He forwarded my information to people he knew and sent me contact information for alumni who would be interested in participating in the study. Within a week of Sergio’s interview, I had contacted four of his referrals and completed their interviews. It should be noted that the snowball sampling strategy proved to be the most fruitful of all the recruitment methods I employed; in all, Sergio recruited 5 participants, Janice recruited 4, and Alex recruited 3. I was able to build a pool of participants, because they trusted their fellow graduate, which helped them feel comfortable with me as an outsider. The remaining participants responded to the other postings/emails.

Once I completed interviews with the first five participants, I sent out another round of recruiting emails and social media posts to increase the sample size. Since I did not have additional volunteers for the study, I submitted an IRB modification review so that I could interview current upper-division students enrolled at the study site. Once this was approved, I emailed current students, who were referred by alumni and Latinx and multicultural student organizations. One senior volunteered for the study and became the sixth interview. A few days after this interview, I experienced a surge of correspondence from alumni who wanted to participate. As a result, although the interview with the current student was
conducted, I chose not to include it in the final analysis because a sufficient number of alumni who met the original criteria participated.

All 18 interviews took place between December 6, 2017 through January 6, 2018. The average time of the interviews was approximately 80 minutes, ranging from 45 minutes to 105 minutes. All interviews were recorded and transcribed for data analysis. Five interviews were conducted via video conference (Skype or Google Hangout) and 13 by phone call.

In addition to the interviews, data collection included analytic memos. Within 24-48 hours of each interview, I wrote a reflective memo detailing parts of the interview that were important and memorable (e.g., descriptions of home-life, friend and family, college choice factors, positive and negative experiences in college). I documented any immediate thoughts I had about potential themes. Within 10 days of completing an interview, I sent a follow-up email to each participant thanking them for their time and confirming the mailing address for their $25.00 Visa gift card incentive (see Appendix I for thank you email).

**Participant Selection**

Research methodologists like Creswell (2013) recommend interviewing 3-15 individuals for qualitative studies. My goal was to conduct eight to 12 interviews depending on data saturation, which was when no new data emerged from the interviews (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2013). This number of interviews
provided the opportunity for themes and patterns to emerge from the data (Creswell, 2013; Gall et al., 2007).

Even though 20 people completed the pre-interview forms, only 18 followed up and were scheduled for an interview. Because one of the 18 individuals who responded was still attending ECIT, they were not included in this study. Therefore, this research focuses on the lived experiences of 17 Latinx college graduates who completed their degree at ECIT. Pseudonyms were selected by the participants and used to protect their identities and ensure confidentiality (Creswell, 2013). See participant information in Table 2.

**Table 2**

*Participant Pseudonyms and Background Characteristics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Degree/Major</th>
<th>Graduation Year</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>First-Generation Student</th>
<th>Home state</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alejandra</td>
<td>Public Health</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>TX</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>Latin American Studies and Policy Studies</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>TX</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alina</td>
<td>Spanish and Portuguese, English</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>TX</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angela</td>
<td>Kinesiology and Policy Studies</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>AR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue Skies</td>
<td>Environmental Science</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>TX</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Major</td>
<td>Graduation Year</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>lived in</td>
<td>State</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel</td>
<td>Mechanical Engineering</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>TX</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helena</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>FL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irma</td>
<td>Kinesiology - Health Science</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>CA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janice</td>
<td>Psychology and Spanish &amp; Portuguese Studies</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jocelyn</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Joey</td>
<td>Mechanical Engineering</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>TX</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kristina</td>
<td>Civil Engineering</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>TX</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lizzy</td>
<td>Hispanic Studies &amp; French Studies</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Female</td>
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<td>TX</td>
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<tr>
<td>Messi</td>
<td>Mechanical Engineering</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>TX</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nancy</td>
<td>Economics and Spanish</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>TX</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sergio</td>
<td>Mechanical Engineering</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tiffany</td>
<td>Bioengineering</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>TX</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The 17 participants (12 females, 5 males) graduated between 2014–2017: one graduated in 2014, three in 2015, seven in 2016, and six in 2017. The participants’ majors spanned seven areas: engineering (6), psychology (3), kinesiology/health science (2), Hispanic/Latino studies (2), science (2), languages.
(1), and economics (1) with five participants having double majors. When comparing parental education, eight self-identified as a first-generation\textsuperscript{12} college student and nine identified as a continuing student\textsuperscript{13}. Of the nine continuing students, five participants had one parent with a college degree and the remaining four were from families where both parents had college degrees. Most of the participants were originally from Texas, only four were from out-of-state. Of the 13 in-state participants, four lived in the same city as ECIT, while nine were from out of the area and therefore had to relocate to attend ECIT.

**Data Analysis**

The first step in analysis was the transcription of the interviews. I transcribed six of the interviews myself and sought help from someone not affiliated with the study, to transcribe the remaining 12. Transcribing the data took place anywhere from a few weeks to a couple of months after the interviews were completed. After completing the interview transcriptions, I listened to the audio files again to check for accuracy in the transcriptions and made corrections, as needed. I also wrote notes and reflective memos on what I noticed to be emerging from the data, for example, college choice influences, experiences moving to ECIT, personal accounts of orientation week, descriptions of the

\textsuperscript{12} First-generation, refers to a student where neither parent completed a 4-year college degree (HEA 1965).

\textsuperscript{13} Continuing student, refers to a student who is not first-generation to attend college, meaning one or both parents have a baccalaureate degree.
residence hall system, and interactions with peers and faculty. These notes and memos were beneficial in categorizing themes/subthemes. This process allowed me to become more familiar with the data.

The next stage in the data analysis included reviewing and coding each transcript multiple times. I used open coding to “chunk” the data, which meant I labeled each paragraph in the transcript with a single, broad descriptive code (Corbin & Strauss, 2007; Maxwell, 2013; Patton, 2002). After chunking the data, I reviewed the transcript again, this time coding line-by-line to capture more specific details shared by the participants. Line-by-line coding allowed me to break through the data and think deeper about what the participant was describing (Corbin & Strauss, 2007).

After the open coding process, I reviewed the transcripts multiple times in a cyclical manner. This iterative process is referred to as the constant comparative approach to analysis. When a new code emerged, I returned to earlier transcripts to see if the same idea was mentioned in them as well. This process enabled me to continue to dig through the data to find common impressions by the participants that I might have missed during earlier reviews. I also paid close attention to discrepant perceptions within the themes. I repeated the process with all previous and subsequent interviews. By exploring the data fully in this way, I obtained multi-dimensional views into the lived experiences for these Latinx college students (Maxwell, 2013; Miles & Huberman, 1994). I continued this process
until the data reached saturations, which is when there is a preponderance of data associated with themes (Creswell, 2013).

In addition to employing the constant comparative method of analysis, I listed the codes by participant into a table. The listing included the location of the code, the participant’s name, and a quote representing the theme. By the end of the process, I had examined themes within a transcript and broadly across all 17, which helped me see what ideas and thoughts were common and unique across participants.

After using open coding and reaching saturation, I shifted my focus to reviewing the data through the lens of Jalomo and Rendón’s (2004) three critical processes: separation, validation, and involvement and coded each transcript for those specific concepts. This is referred to as using a priori codes (Charmaz, 2014). The purpose of this process was to see if participant responses helped support, contradict, or possibly extend the theory. The findings reflect the participants’ perceptions as they related to the theoretical framework.

**Ethical Considerations**

I ensured that no harm was done to any participants through compliance with the measures outlined by The University of Texas at Arlington’s Institutional Review Board. I changed the names of the interviewees to protect their identities and ensure their confidentiality. In addition, the transcripts, recordings of interviews, and other data collection materials (i.e., pre-interview questionnaire
and post-interview follow-up survey for mailing address) were secured by the researcher as required by The University of Texas at Arlington.

**Trustworthiness**

I implemented several methods suggested by Creswell (2013) to ensure trustworthiness and credibility. I clarified researcher bias with a personal biography of my experience with this topic in Chapter 1 titled, “Position of the Researcher.” I sought to provide thick, rich descriptions of the Latinx student experience at an elite university in the findings of this study by consistently asking the participants to expand on their responses to explain or describe ideas and terminology. For instance, in the event that a participant mentioned a term or phrase in Spanish, I followed up with probing questions to check for understanding and clarify the meaning behind the term or phrase. I did not want participants to assume I understood what they meant by certain descriptions or phrases. Further, in the findings, I used the participants’ own words and perceptions so the reader could fully understand and trust the accurate representation of the graduates’ experiences.

Upon completion of the interviews, I conducted member checks to verify the accuracy of how information was analyzed and interpreted. Due to the large sample size, I decided to email my preliminary findings to half of the participants where I invited them to review and ensure my interpretations were accurate. Eight participants were selected for follow-up contact based on the length of time of the
interview; I chose to contact four participants with the longest interview times and four with the shortest. They had one week to respond with comments or corrections regarding the findings. I received no feedback from any of the participants; therefore, I assumed they believed the findings accurately captured their experiences and proceeded with finalizing my conclusions.

Creswell (2013) recommended clarifying research bias for trustworthiness and debriefing with a peer as a useful way to limit researcher bias. To minimize any personal bias, I used peer review by enlisting the assistance of a fellow doctoral student who was familiar with qualitative research. We reviewed my coding to make sure my interpretations were accurate. There were no major discrepancies as we discussed our interpretations and came to the same conclusions regarding coding and themes. This effort helped me to mitigate my own biases as a student who had college experiences similar to those of the participants (Maxwell, 2013). Therefore, in total, I used four strategies to help ensure the credibility of the findings.

**Limitations**

There were several limitations of the study. First, as with all qualitative studies, the findings are not generalizable (Gall et al., 2007). The study was based on the responses of 17 participants and represents only their views. Other Latinx students at this institution and those attending different elite universities may have different experiences. Second, this study was limited because of the requirement
that participants recalled information and experiences from the past and their perceptions and memories may be inaccurate or incomplete. Third, four alumni were originally recruited from the social media post outreach (Sergio, Janice, Tiffany, and Alex). The remaining participants came from snowball sampling from them. As a result, there was the potential of engaging people with similar views or community bias (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998), because of their personal connections. The goal of employing both approaches was to ensure I obtained enough participants who are not members of a single network, so that different perspectives of Latinx graduates could be captured. However, snowball sampling may have introduced bias to the study, nevertheless.

Next, the data collected through interviews may have been limited because the participants may have perceived my background as Latina and assumed I understand their experiences. Participants occasionally responded vaguely to questions, or with responses that suggested that I knew their references, for instance, “you know what it’s like” and “you understand.” I tried to follow up and probe deeper into responses to fully capture their perceptions regarding their lived experiences. However, they occasionally did not respond to my requests for clarifying information. Furthermore, there may have been times when I did not follow up with the participant because in the moment, I assumed I understood what their point was. Finally, because participants did not provide feedback through member-checking as requested, I assumed they agreed with my
interpretation. This may not have been the case. So, they may have had some disagreements with my analysis, which has not been captured here.

Despite these limitations, employing four strategies to ensure the findings were trustworthy reduces the likelihood of misrepresentation of their experiences. This study provides valuable insight into the experience of Latinx students at an elite institution in Texas, shedding light onto an understudied but timely phenomenon. Results provide a better understanding of the Latinx experience at an elite college in Texas, Chapter 4 presents the findings that emerged from analysis of the 17 interviews.
Chapter 4

Findings

This research study explored the experiences of 17 Latinx alumni who graduated from an elite college in Texas (ECIT) between 2014 and 2017. This chapter includes a presentation of themes that emerged through in-depth interviews with the participants. (See Figure 2 for an overview of themes and sub-themes.) The first section outlines the aspects that affected the students’ college choice decisions that propelled these graduates to consider ECIT. The second section describes the process by which participants relocated to the campus from their homes, which required them to separate culturally and emotionally from the friends and family as they transitioned to college. The next section explores the validating and invalidating experiences throughout their college journey. The last section shares the activities participants engaged in during their college experience while at ECIT.

Figure 2

Overview of Themes for Findings
The college choice decision was important to first-generation and continuing college students. The graduates mentioned a range of items they considered when selecting an institution from the weather (Alejandra, Daniel, Irma, Jocelyn) to campus climate (Angela, Helena, Irma). However, the three main points that factored in their decision to attend ECIT were: 1) distance and cultural norms, 2) prestige, and 3) financial aid.

**Distance and Cultural Norms**

The location of the institution was important to all but one participant. Five participants spoke about their choice to stay close to family. As Messi, a
local\textsuperscript{14}, first-generation student, shared his mom did not care where he went, but “was just happy that I stayed in town.” Tiffany, a continuing student, moved from another part of the state to attend the school. It was far enough from home to give her some independence, but close enough to allow her to travel back. Going home for school breaks represented an expectation, whether it was a holiday or just a long weekend. Tiffany noted, “I always went home because I knew that if I didn’t my mom would be really upset.” Attending ECIT allowed Tiffany to respect her family’s expectation to maintain close family ties, but also allowed her to maintain some distance.

In contrast, Alina, a local, continuing student, felt encouraged by her parents to attend college either locally or out-of-state. Her decision to attend ECIT stemmed from her desire to attend a prestigious college and remain close to home. Alina explained how proximity to family was important because of her mother’s illness:

In high school, my mother was diagnosed with cancer. She survived, and that kind of impacted about how I spent time with my parents. When I was in college, my mom had major surgery, I was able to come home … and still attend classes and everything, but also help my mom … that was a

\textsuperscript{14} For the purpose of this paper, local student refers to a student who lived in the same city as ECIT.
priceless thing for me. It was really important, and so it worked out and my parents were thrilled in the end.

As an only child, Alina’s familial bond and concern for her mother’s health were factors in her choice to attend college near home. For students like Messi, Tiffany, and Alina, geographic proximity and maintaining close connections with their family during college were important.

While five participants preferred to be close to home, 11 graduates chose to move away from their hometown for various reasons. Irma, an out-of-state, first-generation student stated:

I wanted to create a physical barrier between me and my hometown, to really make myself grow, and [the college’s location] was far enough and still had a large Hispanic presence, but it’s not home. If I get homesick, it’s a 24-hour drive or [couple of] hours flight.

Irma felt moving away would make her be self-sufficient because she wanted the experience of being on her own so she could “grow.” She valued distance between her college campus and the family home.

Although distance from home is an issue for many students starting college (Jalomo & Rendón, 2004), this concern is heightened for Latinx students because it requires a break from tradition. In fact, nine participants (6 are first-generation) described how they broke their families’ Hispanic traditions to attend ECIT. Lizzy admitted that “both my parents are very dependent on me because I
am the oldest, I help.” She explained that in Latinx families, staying close to home allows students to continue “family obligations.” For her, this included helping to care for her younger siblings.

Alex, a male continuing student from across the state, succinctly stated what many of the participants expressed, which was that with their “cultural background” people “live at home until you get married.” For Alex, moving out of the house “felt very grown up.” He realized he was lucky, because his cousins “did not have the support within the family to move away from home to attend college, so they stayed home.” In his opinion, this cultural expectation prevented them from reaching their “full potential” to be successful.

Some of the participants said their parents did not oppose their attending college but did not want their child to move from home. Irma, an out-of-state, first-generation, and low-SES student, delayed telling her parents about her decision to attend ECIT for fear of their reaction to hearing that she would be moving to Texas and not attending college in California. She explained that her parents, who were both undocumented, had different perspectives on her decision to move out of state to attend ECIT. Her mom wanted her to stay close and attend school in California and moving to Texas “wasn’t tradition.” On the other hand, Irma’s father “crossed illegally into the U.S. at 15…not knowing anyone or the language.” He supported her choice and saw her move to Texas as “staying in the country to get an education.” Things were tense between Irma and her mother.
She shared, “we argued all the way, and even when I got to college...[but] over time things got progressively better...and [now] we have a great long-distance relationship.” Even though things worked out for Irma and her mom, decisions to move away to attend college, which are common for many families, caused familial strains for many of these graduates, because it required a break from tradition.

**Prestige**

Prestige refers to attending a college with a strong academic reputation. All graduates, whether first-generation or continuing college students, were aware of ECIT’s strong academic reputation, and this was a major consideration in determining their college choice. Tiffany and her mother were elated when she was admitted “because of the school’s reputation for having strong academics.” Similarly, Joey, shared his parents “were excited because they knew how prestigious ECIT was and the fact that I got in.” Tiffany and Joey, two continuing students, were able to celebrate the moment they were admitted to ECIT because their parents understood the school’s high academic standing.

While some parents were cognizant of ECIT’s strong reputation, other parents were unaware of the school’s status and learned when they shared the news of their student’s admission with co-workers. Messi, a first-generation college student, described his parents’ response to news of his acceptance:
My dad works at a restaurant and his boss is Anglo-American. So, he told his boss that I was going there and due to his boss’ reaction, he kind of figured like, “holy crap that is a good school.” …Once they told their superiors at work about where I was going and they saw their reactions, they figured out, “okay, wow, this is a good school.”

Messi’s parents did not attend college and they did not understand the prestige of attending ECIT. Previously, he had explained the school’s strong academics, but it only resonated with his parents after they shared his accomplishment and received positive feedback from their employers and co-workers.

Another first-generation student, Daniel, talked about how his parents did not fully understand the school’s prestige and ranking until they attended a campus event in the spring of his senior year of high school:

When we drove up to the campus…they [the institution] had discussions for the parents and they talked about the acceptance rate, GPA scores, the prestige, and the ranking. Once [my parents] found out this information they were really surprised. They said, “We don’t know what you did, but you did a great job and we are super excited that you got in and are getting to go to [ECIT].”

Like Messi, Daniel’s parents did not attend college and were unaware of ECIT’s competitive admissions and academics. However, Daniel felt reassured in his decision after his parents better understood the prestige of attending ECIT. These
participant’s families were supportive of their student’s desire to attend college, though they lacked the knowledge about rankings and reputation.

**Financial Aid**

For Latinx students in this study, college decisions were largely informed by the cost of attendance and financial aid because they needed to minimize or eliminate any college financial burden to the family. Although most college students consider distance and financial aid, the difference for these high-achieving Latinx students was that the cost was exorbitant because it is a private, elite institution. These considerations were important to these first-generation and continuing students. Messi, a first-generation student, noted how college costs kept his friends from even considering attendance. He observed:

…a few of [my high school classmates] I can count on my hand actually went to college, but most of them just got a job right after high school. You know how it is in the Hispanic community… you are trying to pay bills; you are trying to help out and you want to get a job when you are in high school. When they offer you a job for like 10 dollars an hour, to us that is a lot of money…

As Messi describes, immediate financial issues took precedence for some of his high school friends, so college was not their priority.

With financial considerations paramount, several participants disclosed that after being admitted, they researched financial aid packages to see if they
could afford to attend. Tiffany, a continuing student, based the decision to attend ECIT on the “amount of financial support” she received. For first-generation students, having money to cover the cost of attendance is important when selecting a college because students and their families try to avoid incurring debt. Two first-generation students shared their perspective on financial aid and ECIT. For Messi, getting a “free ride” was a critical factor in his college decision. A major reason for attending ECIT was “70% financial aid and 30% staying close to home.” When he learned he was eligible for a full-ride, Messi was grateful and relieved he could go to an elite school without incurring debt.

Daniel revealed that he came from a low socio-economic household and was dependent on a financial aid to afford college. He believed he would qualify for financial aid, because of his family’s income level. Moreover, during the application process, a teacher told Daniel about another student who went to ECIT and received aid to cover the cost of college, “[The teacher] shared how a previous valedictorian was able to get accepted into ECIT… and then on top of that, he told me about a great scholarship that would help you pay for the entirety of the expenses.” This information helped to reduce his financial concerns. The majority of these participants knew that attending a prestigious school would be costly investment, therefore financial aid support was critical to their college choice when they were selecting institutions.
In summary, college choice was important to the participants and the factors they considered when deciding to attend ECIT. Distance and cultural norms, institutional prestige, and financial aid led participants to select ECIT as their college and brought them to the campus. However, once they arrived, they had to deal with issues of separation, such as how to integrate into the campus and manage relationships back home.

The Separation Process

This next section describes the physical and emotional shifts that occurred when these Latinx students arrived on campus. Jalomo and Rendón (2004) talked about the separation process as having both positive and challenging aspects. When students move away from home, they are able to build new social networks, develop autonomy and independence, and foster the excitement of meeting new people and pride for what will come in the future. However, it can also lead to separations from family and friends at home. This was the case for the ECIT graduates, who mentioned this transition can lead to redefining high school friendships and testing bonds with family and friends. For the current study, the Latinx participants described the process of separation in these ways: a) homesickness, and b) relationships back home.

Homesickness

Like many first-year students, some participants struggled being away from home. As Irma (an out-of-state, first-generation, low-SES student) stated
succinctly, “Looking back, I was really homesick, [moving away] was a big transition for me.” Similarly, Nancy, a first-generation student from across the state, missed being home, too. It was so severe for her that she considered leaving ECIT. She explained:

As things started to slowly settle in, I was getting pretty homesick. I started going through culture shock about being at ECIT…I felt like I didn’t have that support system and I missed my family…I questioned if I had made the right decision.

As a first-generation student, she was not prepared for this period of adjustment because she did not know what it would be like in the first year of college. Therefore, she felt overwhelmed by the entire separation process. However, Irma and Nancy were not alone. In fact, half of the students who relocated to attend ECIT admitted that they felt homesick when they first started college.

One way the participants coped with homesickness was to look forward to the breaks from school when they could go back home to see family and friends. Sergio looked forward to hanging out with his three friends from high school; Lizzy looked forward to returning home to ground herself in “reality.”

Janice, a continuing student from across the state, also missed home but she concealed this from her family so they would not worry about her. She contacted her family on a weekly basis because of “her strong family values” with her parents and siblings. She managed her feelings of homesickness by “giving
them updates on my life and asking about how they were doing …I tried not to
tell them about my stress.” Her strategy was to focus on friends and family to
avoid talking about her school pressures. Eventually, Janice confided in her older
sister, who had completed college, explaining “we would vent to each other about
stress and other problems.” Once she started to talk with her sister about missing
family and school demands, things improved slightly; even though she continued
to miss her family while she was away at ECIT.

**Relationships Back Home**

This section sheds light on how participants experienced changes to
preexisting relationships with friends and family. All the participants in the study
shared examples of how life and their relationships back home changed in the
transition from high school to college. Some students’ struggles were exacerbated
because of the ways their families handled their absence. For instance, Irma, an
out-of-state, first-generation, low-SES student, shared how her mother expected to
have frequent contact with her even though she moved away. Her mom would call
and text daily, expecting her daughter to always be available, she would have to
explain to her mom “I want to focus on school and making friends…I can’t be on
the phone all the time.” This expectation caused tension for Irma, who was
adjusting to college life and academic demands. However, things got better once
her younger brother entered college, “he decided to go to school in Bakersfield, so
[mom] finally got to keep a child close…after that it got a lot better.” During the

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first year and a half, Irma worked through her mom’s challenging and exhausting expectations, afterwards it “got easier” to adjust to college life.

Like Irma, Lizzy, a continuing student, had similar pressure from family but they were in the same city as ECIT. She talked about returning home to visit family. In the beginning, Lizzy was overwhelmed, “I felt like I had too much work to do,” then she found a way to balance visits back home to see family with her schoolwork. In her later years, she missed home and decided to return more often:

I wanted to go back and meet real people who were actually doing real things…I think a lot of that had to do with how privileged the student body was and the university protected its students…I got very exhausted of that that I would rather go home. So, I felt like when I would go home, I always saw it as like going back to reality.

These relationships help ground some of the students.

Two participants talked about how their relationships with family improved once they moved away for college. The separation from the family made the time they would spend together more valuable. Jocelyn, a first-generation student, expressed how she believed her relationships with her family improved, noting, “it got better because we tend to argue a lot…so I guess me not being around as much made me more precious…and it was more positive with the rest of my relatives.” She mentioned how things they would argue about “seemed
less important” because they were apart. As a result, the time they would spend together during her visits led to improved relationships.

Whereas a few graduates spoke about their relationships with family, half of the participants mentioned their friendships back home. After high school ended, only a handful of friendships (regardless of local, in-state, and out-of-state) survived the separation process. Ten students spoke in detail about their high school friendships and six of these described changes in relationships. Tiffany and Janice, continuing students, mentioned that their high school connections phased out over time during college. Tiffany explained, “I mean I contacted some of them initially…and then it kind of like fades out. … everyone was doing their own thing…it’s kind of one of those growing apart things.” In other words, Tiffany saw the loss of old friendships as inevitable because of time and distance.

Similarly, Janice shared that she had four high school friendships when she started college, and only two of these survived the long-term separation. She explained that “in college you kind of grow into a different person.” She felt “…they were friendship[s] of convenience because we were at the same place…” Like Tiffany, Janice posited that moving away for college resulted in the “natural progression [loss of friendships] when you go away and go to college,” however she attributes “making an effort to keep in touch” as the reason for maintaining connections.
Although some students lost contact with friends back home, four participants maintained friendships from high school despite relocating for college. Sergio, a first-generation, low-SES student, spoke about re-connecting with his friends when he would return home for visits.

I only talk to four friends from high school. And I still only talk to those four friends...whenever I would go back I would go hang out with them.

One of my typical things that I would do is go to Denny’s at 1:00 a.m. and we would talk about school.

Sergio acknowledged a “strong bond” helped his high school friendships survive college. Yet, Sergio was unique. Although he maintained his friendships, many of these graduates described how college affected their relationships with family and friends.

The participants described the physical and emotional shifts that occurred once they arrived; these experiences effected to how they adjusted and adapted (separation)to the elite college campus. Participant backgrounds also effected the transition and adjustment as they moved into a new culture. Differences in socio-economic class affected their feeling of validation (e.g., sense of belonging, comfort with faculty, social connections). Students described how they confronted their challenges and persevered in the elite environment.
(In)validation

Jalomo and Rendón (2004) postulated that students arrive at college with invalidating life experiences, such as K-12 school officials and/or community members not supporting or encouraging their academic or personal goals throughout their pre-college years. They contend that for students who graduate high school and go on to college, it is important for someone to affirm that the student belongs in the college environment and they are capable of college rigor.

While the separation process was relatively similar across participants, validating and invalidating experiences represented a less unified construct. Prior to attending ECIT, the graduates shared examples of validating agents (e.g., faculty, staff, peers, etc.) who encouraged and supported them in college. However, the participants also disclosed invalidating experiences that presented challenges they had to overcome if they were to succeed.

Academic Experiences

Many students in the study talked about working hard in high school to earn grades so they could rank in the top percentile of their graduating classes. The first years of attending this elite college proved to be challenging and students noticed the difference in preparedness levels across their pre-college experiences when they talked to their friends. Five participants, a mix of first-generation and continuing students, shared they did not feel ready or good enough to attend ECIT based on encounters they had prior to attending college.
Participants reflected on their lack of academic confidence and how they overcame their deficit mindsets and self-doubt. They commented on academic experiences before they started college (e.g., interactions with high school teachers and staff) and as they transitioned to campus (e.g., attending class, sitting a lecture hall, and meeting professors and teaching assistants). In some cases, students arrived at college having already experienced invalidating life experiences.

Alex, a male-continuing student, shared that he did not feel he had the grades to be admitted to ECIT. He described himself “in high school I would be quiet all time and keep to myself,” and he figured he was admitted to ECIT because of affirmative action. He shared, “I definitely worried, like maybe I am only here because I am Hispanic.” This attitude weighed on him until he started his classes when he “found myself talking in classes that I loved;” thereafter, he found himself thriving in college. He found ways to connect with faculty and friends that validated his presence; these experiences helped him see that he could do well and succeed at ECIT.

Tiffany shared similar feelings, during high school “more than one person told me I got into [ECIT] because you are Hispanic and that kind of stayed with me…it is something that I carried with me into college.” These invalidating thoughts were “a stigma [she accepted] about being a minority student that goes to an institution like that [ECIT], some people feel like you got in because you are
a Hispanic.” In class, she “felt the sense to prove yourself more because of that.” It took Tiffany most of her first year to no longer believe that being Latinx meant that she had to work harder to keep up with her peers.

Kristina, a continuing student, did not think she was going to be accepted to ECIT because of invalidating experiences during her high school years. She said, “I wasn’t sure if I was smart enough to go there, I was very nervous about being able to cut it there with so many highly intelligent people … ECIT was my reach school.” A reach school, to Kristina, meant that ECIT was a type of school that she applied to just to see if she could be admitted. She felt that the high admission criteria and competitive applicant pool might not earn her admission to the school.

I was rather nervous … you really go in there with all of those fears like not being smart enough and for not like being well-prepared… Though you think, ‘oh this is not going to work out,’ but in the end, it does and you realize that everyone else kind of feels the same way, too.

Kristina attended ECIT with her twin sister who was a close confidant and someone she could turn to when she doubted herself. Her sister, her sister’s friends, and her family were helpful in building her confidence.

Some students, like Kristina, Tiffany, and Alex had to overcome negative perceptions of their skills, but others were confronted by the reality of more
challenging coursework. Joey, a local continuing student, described the change in academic rigor from high school to ECIT:

Many students who enter postsecondary schools as first time in college [students] share a common experience of adapting to the rigor of college classes. This transition from high school to college curriculum also comes with students figuring out how to study, managing their time, adapting to the difficulty of college courses.

Joey shared that he did not really have to study in high school, but he quickly learned that he would have to change if he wanted to adapt to the college rigor. Like Joey, Sergio, a first-generation mechanical engineering major, shared details about internal and academic struggles he faced initially. He stated, “In my first year, I felt the difference or disparity from growing up in [hometown] and going to public high school versus public schools in the suburbs…I felt my high school did not prepare me for college.” Sergio continued:

I just felt unprepared like everybody else…I struggled really hard. I remember walking around one night on campus and I was just so disgruntled with myself. I was like, “man how are you this dumb in college? You graduated top of you class in high school and now you are like bombing every class in college.”
Joey and Sergio’s perceptions of themselves and their abilities were not unique. Other graduates also described examples of how they needed to shift their academic mindset once they got to ECIT.

Although some students started college with deficit mindsets, they also described transformational experiences, validating or invaliding, once they got to ECIT. Validating academic experiences are when an instructor or teaching assistant (TA) foster the academic and personal development of a student. For example, a validating experience is when professors not only share knowledge, but also intentionally engage students in the learning process and collaborate with them (Jalomo & Rendón, 2004). When faculty and TAs provided acts of validation (i.e., positive encouragement, addressing a student by their name) students saw themselves capable of learning and succeeding in college. These experiences helped create and foster a positive academic mindset within the student and they were more likely to persist and succeed. An example of this was described by Sergio, during his senior year he met a young, Hispanic professor.

Hispanics kind of help each other out. There was a Hispanic professor…, he was seeking the juniors who were my friends … he would eat lunch with us and tell jokes with us. He met our parents in Parents Week and he would talk to them and say “He is a very bright student.”

While some students were proactive about communicating with their instructors, others disclosed being hesitant to talk to them for various reasons,
such as perceptions that the professor is unapproachable, cannot relate or understand their background, or fear that they will be judged or be seen as less intelligent than their peers. Three participants in the study spoke about how the large introductory classes were not conducive to developing a connection with the professor. Daniel’s (first-generation) recognized that “in the [large] classroom[s] and auditoriums it is not easy to connect with your professors.” Large introductory classes in the early years made it more challenging to approach faculty; however, things did improve over time. According to Daniel, “classes that were geared more towards my major … got a little bit more smaller, then the professors would begin to interact a little bit more with people.” In his upper-division courses, once the class sizes decreased, he felt confrontable connecting with the professor.

Other students talked about reaching out to the teaching assistants (TAs) first. Tiffany noted that they seemed accessible and approachable by Latinx students, “they would offer a lot more [office] hours that you could attend, and the professor would have like a very limited strict set of hours.” Sergio, a first-generation participant, epitomized this reticence. He rarely went to office hours because his mindset was to “figure things out on my own.” He explained that things changed when “I met a TA who was a Hispanic guy I connected with… he is someone who helped me get through a tough time at [ECIT]. I was glad to finally meet someone who I could relate too.” Sergio described the significance of
“going to somebody who is similar to you either to talk to or be open with.”

Connecting with the TA meant a lot to him because he finally had a teacher who shared his background and his culture. This connection made a difference in his experience.

Tiffany, a continuing student, also hesitated to approach her faculty because she felt intimidated. She talked about feeling as though faculty were unapproachable and

The overall atmosphere [classroom] can be a little bit intimidating…you show up to class and everybody is always so serious…so to be in a room with everybody who is always so serious about studying can be a little bit intimidating.

In their first-years, Sergio and Tiffany did not approach their faculty. They started by reaching out to teaching assistants and later they were able to approach their faculty.

Unlike Sergio and Tiffany, some students sought out their professors early in their first year and throughout college. They met them during office hours and around campus (e.g., coffee shop, cafeteria). Jocelyn, a first-generation student, was different from her first-generation classmates in that she did not hesitate to develop bonds with multiple professors throughout her time at ECIT. Sometimes things “would feel a little bit awkward” when she tried to talk with professors outside of class to ask for help. However, she talked about how valuable it was to
connect with her elementary statistics professor stating, “that class completely opened my mind to like a lot of things, and I would go to his office hours and talk about things, because I wanted to develop a relationship.” Jocelyn felt “there was a real investment there in building relationships” and this experience helped her to understand the importance of having a relationship with a professor.

Lizzy, a continuing student, described her faculty as “just fantastic.” Similar to Jocelyn, she spoke about a positive experience with one of her instructors, “Mr. Q. was my favorite professor while I was at [ECIT] and it was because he did care.” She felt that their conversations were “genuine,” and he helped guide her into considering graduate school. She realized “just how awesome the professors were” after she graduated and entered the workforce.

Alejandra, a first-generation student, connected with a professor in the second semester of her first year. As a pre-med major, she enrolled in a sociology course that had an “internal awakening,” which had a profound effect on her. She explained, “when I was introduced to Dr. Reedle…that’s when the feminist in me was finally woke up, and then that’s when I sprouted and learned things.” After this moment of personal growth, Alejandra began to talk with her professor. Through these interactions she was able to learn more about sociology and opportunities that were available, which resulted in her changing her major. Students who saw the value in connecting with their instructor had positive in-class experiences. Their individual experiences showed that professor/student
relationships can help students develop a growth mindset (Jocelyn), pursue graduate school (Lizzy), and change their major (Alejandra).

**Peer Relationships / Interactions**

Relationships with their family and friends underwent changes as they settled in as a ECIT student. Although they wanted to make new friends among their peers, it was not an easy process. The participants faced a range of challenges including lacking a sense of belonging, feeling the residence hall system hindered making friendships, being unable to find a Latinx student group, fear of disclosing financial aid status, and self-isolation.

The issues began when they first arrived on campus. Several of the participants in the study described orientation (O-week) as an opportunity to network, make friends, find clubs and organizations, and begin to get involved with the campus life. However, two students who moved from across the state said their O-week experiences had the opposite effect. Instead of feeling included and welcomed, they lacked a sense of belonging at ECIT. Nancy, a first-generation student from across the state, talked about her parents and siblings piling in the family car to move her to college. She shared how quickly she was “different” from her peers,

So, my dad understands English and can speak it okay, barely okay, and my mom doesn’t. My dad felt uncomfortable with people [and this was] my first realization of how different I was to my peers.
Nancy observed these language barriers, which heightened her sense of separation from the campus community. In addition, she found the residential college system worked against her sense of belonging, too. She explained “…there were some Latino students at [ECIT] and with the dorm system they basically divide you up, and so I felt like I didn’t have that support system.” So, in addition to missing her family, she had limited contact with other Latinx students with whom she might make connections.

Janice, a continuing student, shared similar feelings. She said, “the environment of O-week and the intensity of O-week, sometimes I felt like I belonged and sometimes I feel like I didn’t belong.” Janice recalled, “there were only two other girls in my group [during orientation] and they became best friends instantly, and I kind of felt like excluded…so I was like, ‘I hope the students at [ECIT] are not like this.’” Her initial experiences at orientation left her feeling isolated and discouraged. Like Janice and Nancy, many of the participants discussed how their initial efforts to make connections were unsuccessful.

When their immediate efforts to make Latinx friends did not work out, they turned inward. For instance, Angela befriended her roommates, who were not Latinx, but who were children of immigrants. Even though they came “from different places and had different cultures and traditions,” she explained that “we all grew up with the fact that …we had to go through the assimilation or are still assimilating to the United States.” This shared history helped them to form bonds.
Sometimes these connections were made through their courses. Alina, a bilingual, continuing student who majored in Spanish and Portuguese, was able to make friends in class, which made a huge difference in her college experience. She said, “through my Spanish classes … I found Latinx and older students who were able to mentor me and validate me because I was so scared of speaking out in freshman year.” By her sophomore year, Alina said, she “could speak out because of the validation of my peers, then I began to make relationships with the professors who began to notice my enthusiasm and interest in their classes.” Thus, Alina’s entry into a better academic experience started with students who supported her and helped her build her confidence.

Sergio, a first-generation student from across the state, talked about feeling lonely during his first year of college, because he was not interested in partying. He described how he found other like students.

I would just completely sit somewhere else and eventually people would just come join me and those were the people were like, “Hey man I really don’t like Tech Class and I’m not really interested in drinking and partying and stuff.” So over time those were more and more the people I got closer to.

Sergio enjoyed making friends and going out but doing well in his classes was priority. He wanted to connect with peers who felt the same way about school and with whom he felt comfortable. Eventually, he found his peer group.
Janice and Jocelyn described their personal struggle when attempting to build relationships with peers, in part because they were experiencing difficulty in transitioning to the campus. Janice sought out other Latinx peers to help her cope with the culture shock, she described this as “getting used to the environment and the different people…being Mexican American/Latina is a big part of my identity, so I drew support from people who I identified with.” For Jocelyn, when she lost a family member and sought comfort, she “went to my friends back home for support” because she had not made friends at ECIT yet.

Sometimes peers criticized the participants for forming these friendship groups. Angela, a first-generation college student, shared her feelings and reactions to comments made by non-Latinx, affluent peers who commented that Hispanic students were “cliquish” or “always with each other and speaking Spanish.” Angela wondered “why were only Latinx students being discussed and no other groups?” Why was it a problem for her non-Hispanic peers? She disclosed that in most cases she would challenge the person making the comment, but sometimes, she would “just blow off the comments.” She described how listening to her classmates make these kinds of remarks bothered her because she identified as a “proud Latina with many Latinx friends” and they were disparaging her community.
Making friends and finding other students whom they could relate to took time. When they found opportunities to build relationships and new social networks, this was a positive experience.

**Perceptions of Economic Disparity**

Most of the participants observed income disparities with their non-Latinx counterparts on this elite campus. Seven participants mentioned not feeling they belonged among peers because they lacked privilege. Privilege, as defined by the participants, were students whose parents had degrees, financial security, and material objects (e.g., designer clothes, new technology, expensive cars, etc.). They saw themselves as “have-nots” among the “haves.” Irma, an out-of-state student, shared how she responded to her peers when they “were shocked to learn…that I was first-generation.” She felt a “very big disconnect” because next they would ask about her parents’ jobs.

I would tell them my dad’s a truck driver and my mom works at a factory…they would be like “What? Oh my god, a factory.” I would say “she literally packed the food you are eating right now…and my dad drives those big semis…” It was like, “yeah literally that is what my parents do.” It was so frustrating it was a very simple job title and they couldn’t wrap their hands around it.
Irma was thankful she could turn to other Latinx students to “have a space where you feel comfortable and you feel people understand you.” Connecting with peers “in a relatable space” provided her emotional support.

It was an obstacle for some participants to disclose their background and financial aid status. The main reason was they were unsure how their peers would receive this information (i.e., Janice, Jocelyn). As a result, they were reticent to share with their peers that they were attending ECIT with full financial aid to support their education.

Jocelyn, an out-of-state first-generation student, admitted that she worried that her wealthy peers would think less of her if they knew she needed financial support. This belief impacted her ability to feel at ease with the other students. She said:

I did not want to share that I was also on a full ride because … for some students, obviously their parents pay thousands and thousands of dollars for them to be there…so, I felt like I didn’t want to share that information until, later on or until I felt more comfortable with it.

Janice, a continuing student from across the state, felt this information kept her from making close friendships initially. She shared: “I couldn’t see who came from privilege and who didn’t…I didn’t know who I could relate to.” Because these participants feared negative judgement by their peers, they were careful not to share that that they were attending ECIT on a scholarship or financial aid.
Whereas Janice and Jocelyn felt uncomfortable building relationships with peers because of their financial aid status, a few of the graduates did not connect with their peers for other reasons. Helena, a non-first-generation student, talked about how her family’s lower socio-economic status made her feel “socially isolated” from her roommates.

I was the only person out of 110 students in my dorm who didn’t have their parents come and help move in. So, I felt like, “wow, I’m kind of a big loser” … I think that I was the only one who did not have family members help move me in because of my parent’s financial situation. Helena explained her parents were unable to help her move in because “I don’t have as much resources as my classmates.” Lacking funds, they could not travel to get her settled. Helena also felt “self-conscious” about her socioeconomic background when she noticed “Jimmy Choo and other brand names” of designer clothes and shoes from her roommates. Helena quickly realized her roommate came “from a very wealthy family and she had literally everything.” This was a “reality check” where “she wasn’t imagining things” as she noted the wealth and privilege moving into her dorm room.

Similarly, Messi, a first-generation student, noted differences in financial resources (i.e., economic capital) among peers. He noted, “you have people talking about how they spend their school breaks going on vacations, you also see everyone with laptops, newest technology.” Angela, described this as “having
privilege rubbed in her face.” These attitudes made their transition to ECIT especially challenging.

Campus norms (i.e., traditions, student spaces and campus policies) also contributed to feelings of invalidation. The participants admitted that select campus policies made them feel lesser than their peers. These policies and practices included campus operations that affected housing, food availability, and student health insurance.

Before matriculating, the university assigns their undergraduates to one of 11 residential colleges, which have their own dining halls and public rooms. While all new students must live on campus during their first year, the school requires them to move off campus during the second or third year due to housing space limitations. In itself, that may not have been an issue, but several of the students in the study said they were unaware of the policy. For instance, Messi, a local first-generation student, enjoyed the opportunity to move out of his family’s home and live on campus with roommates. He noted “it was very cool to like experience … the dorm food was buffet style…and I had cable for the first time. I did my work, but I also chilled.” However, it came as a surprise to him that in his “junior year.. [they] kick you off [campus].” When that happened, he and his family decided he would “stay home” and commute to the campus for his remaining years.
Nancy, a first-generation student who moved across the state to attend ECIT, was also upset about the policy. She talked about how being “kicked out” of campus housing in the sophomore year came as an unpleasant surprise. She described moving off-campus with her roommates:

We lived in an apartment a mile away from ECIT and that can be one of the biggest challenges … I was involved a lot academically and it was really hard news… I didn’t have a car and half the time I was relying on others or using the rail line.

Living in the residence hall benefitted her “emotionally and mentally.” She was able to return to campus in her junior year, which made it “a lot better compared to my sophomore year… It was really a lot easier to move back and live on campus.” These students found different ways to handle the move off campus, but both were unprepared to have to move away. Messi (local resident) moved back home and decided to “just commute” his remaining years; Nancy (not local resident) chose to move back on campus as soon as she could. However, it unexpectantly changed their college experiences in negative ways.

Another example of invalidation from the institution is the result of campus operations, specifically food services. ECIT had a “well-intentioned” tradition to close all on-campus eateries for dinner on Saturday night. Janice, an in-state continuing student, understood the rationale behind this tradition stating “ECIT did not include Saturday dinner in the cafeteria so that they could
encourage us to explore food options outside of [ECIT].” However, this practice had unintended consequences for four of the participants. From Janice’s perspective, “it was very stressful in terms of like, oh like what if I don’t have the money to go explore or find food options that are relatively close by,” because the campus closed the dining halls. As she explained, this policy “alienated” the “very poor students” at the school, because they could not afford to go out to eat each week.

Another student talked about an unexpected cost that affected her ability to enroll. Lizzy, a local, continuing student, explained that the school required all students to have health insurance. She had to contend with school officials about getting insurance, she felt they assumed her “parents have insurance and have me on their [policy],” like most students, “but they don’t.” This was a “big concern each year because I can’t afford it” and it was required to register. She described how each year she would get frustrated and worried she “wouldn’t be able to continue [her] education.” In the end, “health insurance red tape plays into the college experience because people get sick” and she understood why this was necessary. However, Lizzy was upset because the institution did not seem to realize this policy created hardships for lower income students.

Some participants noted the socio-economic differences early on at ECIT; throughout their first year they sought peers whom they could relate and talk to about their feelings. Income disparities also came through from institutional
policies, such as housing, food services, and student insurance, which inadvertently contributed to and furthered the students’ feelings of invalidation. Participants felt stigmatized because of the class differences, which made them feel uncomfortable with their new classmates. These disparities added to their discomfort at ECIT.

While the validating and invalidating experiences address how the graduates felt while attending ECIT, their opportunities to engage and be involved helped to mitigate some of these feelings. The college experiences of high-achieving Hispanic/Latinx students at an elite college explain how engagement and involvement may be unique to a campus’ context. Consequently, at an Elite College in Texas there is a blending of validation and involvement; participants described how their academic and social activities led to feelings of validation.

**Involvement**

Unlike predominately White institutions (PWI) that offer an expanded variety of social organizations, ECIT has more limited options. For instance, it does not have Greek life. Thus, social life may have a different look and feel than at a PWI. Nevertheless, the participants talked about their social involvement through working on-campus, band, internships, and service to the local community. Examples of academic involvement included undergraduate research, study abroad, teaching an elective course, and participation in academic
organizations (i.e., robotics club). The following details how participants described their involvement while attending ECIT.

All participants in the study shared at least one example of their on-campus involvement during their time at ECIT. Most students joined organizations in the first semester of college, while two waited until the end of their first year to become engaged in activities. About one third of them talked about being eager to join as many clubs as they could. Alex (continuing student) stated, “I jumped into like 15 clubs…went to all the meetings that I could” until his grades started to suffer. Then he “had to buckle down and focus better on my classes” because long-term he knew he could not continue the routine of “every night staying up late or until about mid-morning.” Once he realized “I couldn’t handle all the meetings and things it was just too much, so I started to whittle it down”; therefore, reducing the number of clubs and committing time to his schoolwork. He shared that “by the end of the first semester you stay in the ones that are more meaningful and interesting to you” and drop the rest.

Social and Cultural Involvement

Participants described the following types of social activities: working on-campus (Irma, Sergio), band (Tiffany), community service (Alex, Daniel, Joey, Alina, Angela, Helena, Janice) and membership in a club or organization. In order to keep up with college expenses, some participants mentioned working while attending college. Irma balanced two on-campus jobs and Sergio worked one
while enrolled full-time. Irma and Sergio mentioned that they connected with students and faculty outside of the classroom through their places of employment, the recreation center and local bar. Irma shared an example of meeting a professor at her job at the school recreation center, “So on the weekends (a professor) would come to the gym, and they were like, ‘Hey, you work here?’… They would talk to me about what they were doing and stuff.” Irma shared “I became really good friends with a couple of professors, they were my A-Team.” These informal opportunities to connect with professors through her employment helped her develop relationships with her faculty, which she valued.

All the participants mentioned joining the Hispanic Association for Cultural Enrichment, or HACER, which was the most visible organization for Latinx students on campus. Even though some of the graduates were unsuccessful in their first attempts to connect with other Latinx students, all the graduates (except one) agreed it was important for them to meet other students “like them,” with whom they could relate. After joining this club, they felt better because they were able to build relationships and share college and cultural experiences with others. Angela, a first-generation student, sought out “the Hispanic Culture Club …[to] find friendships and people that I could bond with…not every Hispanic student needed to have Hispanic support…but I did.” Like Angela, Irma, a first-generation student, felt that students should “get involved in a low-income club or like a Hispanic club, so they can be reminded of their roots and also something
familiar.” She felt these groups provided “emotional support” when you felt alone or homesick. Alina (continuing student) felt the same as Angela and Irma about joining HACER however her first encounter was not a good experience.

The Hispanic Student Association had sent a letter to all Hispanic students who were coming in for [their] first year…they had told us, “come to our greeting reception,” which is like two days before orientation week, so I went…It seemed like everybody kind of like didn’t know what to expect, it was very [disorganized] and it really didn’t seem like it was really as important, it felt like the university really didn’t put an emphasis on it. Alina was upset at how disorganized the Hispanic Student Organization appeared to be at the orientation week event. Despite a disappointing first impression, she gave HACER a second chance and joined the club about a year later. For these students and others, this organization played a key role in helping them transition to the institution.

Conversely, Kristina, a continuing student from across the state, stated “I didn’t click with HACER…I didn’t need to associate with a culture group.” In fact, Kristina is the only participant in the study who said that she did not seek out Latinx student groups, instead she mainly associated with her twin sister and her sister’s friends. She said, “I didn’t think that it was particularly necessary for me.” She described how she was around other Hispanic students and people, so she did not feel a need to connect with them through these student groups.
Community service is another form of social involvement for seven of the students. These participants described feeling motivated to engage with local community organizations or “beyond the hedges,” as they called it, to fulfill an intrinsic sense of service. This description referred to the campus boundaries that coincide with the bushes that border the edge of the ECIT campus. Daniel and Sergio (first-generation students) served as mentors with local high school students as a way to “pay it forward” (Sergio) and give them “somebody to relate to” (Daniel). Sergio explained:

We wanted high school kids to see that we were in their shoes…now look at where we are at, college. We have graduated and have a nice job doing cool stuff…it’s kind of a support factor for them… it’s really inspiring.

While Sergio spoke about his experience mentoring at his hometown high school, Daniel mentored high school students in the ECIT area through service projects.

I really liked service projects a lot. They worked with our inner-city students…alternative schools that were geared towards helping Hispanic, Black, or low-income students in general…you go and share your experience… I really enjoyed encouraging them to take their education a little bit more seriously.

These graduates enjoyed mentoring high school students so the students could see themselves going to college. For Daniel, “being able to share your high school experience is very important…especially for a Latino to be able to share because
it is very rare to see a Latino to want to come back and share that [their experience].” Both graduates felt intrinsically motivated to serve as role models to the students they mentored.

Overall, all the participants joined a club or activity as a means to connect with peers. It was important for some students to join social/cultural clubs to connect (e.g., Angela, Irma, Alina), but not all (Kristina). Irma and Sergio found working on-campus afforded them the opportunity to connect with students and faculty. Finally, Daniel and Sergio chose to expand their network outside of peers at ECIT by volunteering to serve as role models to students at a local high school.

**Academic Involvement**

Although it was important to make cultural and social connections with peers, some of the students credited academic activities as positive experiences at ECIT. Some examples of involvement via academic experiences include, study abroad (Alejandra, Alex, Helena), internships (Alex), undergraduate research (Alejandra, Helena, Nancy, Tiffany), teaching an elective course (Jocelyn), and participating in a major-based organization15 (Alejandra, Joey, Messi, Sergio).

Alex, an out-of-area continuing student, reflected on two academic experiences that he engaged in during his junior year. He spoke about the “phenomenal” semester long experience when he studied abroad in Brazil and

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15 Major-based organization refers to a club where the student membership is from the same major or closely related academic discipline.
how once he returned for the second half of his junior year, “reality just slapped me in the face” because he realized senior year was on the horizon and he needed to begin to prepare for life after college (e.g., getting a job). He wished he could stay in Brazil longer, but he, “started to think about internships and what to do after graduation.” He was able to secure an internship at Senator Cornyn’s office in Washington, DC his junior year, which “helped me focus my thoughts and my feelings about politics, class, and race…it actually shaped my senior year.” As a graduate, he reminisced how he “learned a lot” through his experiences (i.e., study abroad and internship opportunities) they were “great experiences that made me more of a professional.”

Four participants spoke about their involvement in campus organizations that were connected to academics. Alejandra, an out-of-area first-generation student, joined the Women’s Resource Center because she was able to “think about a lot of issues about her identity.” When she first joined the club, she was frustrated about “how unjust life is being Latina,” she recalled her brothers’ “sexist” comments about “go to the kitchen and make a sandwich.” Their comments where opposite from her mother who “didn’t raise her like that” instead her mother was “very encouraging.” So naturally Alejandra was attracted to the club where she could “grow self-esteem.” She “really enjoyed” the club because it allowed her “to give back” through her role as a peer advisor, where she talked to
other students like her. Alejandra described her growth saying, “I became a stronger person mentally [and] learned from others.”

Joey, a local continuing student, wanted to create a club that incorporated his love for robotics, a passion he had since high school. While talking with friends, he learned that the robotics club at ECIT was “being rebuilt,” so rather than creating a new club, he decided to join and help restart the existing one. Joey described how the Robotics club was a great way for him to meet people who have similar interests, which was most important to him.

Like Alejandra, Sergio (first-generation student) joined two major-based organizations, SHPE (Society of Hispanic Professional Engineers) and ASME (American Society of Mechanical Engineers) where he was able to network with other Latinx students and professionals. In his junior and senior years, he attended “a Hispanic conference” with other students in the organization. In his senior year, his networking paid off because “I got my job through SHPE, I got a full-time position at Lockheed.” For Sergio, these clubs taught him to “work on a team for completing projects and competition.” and these skills helped him “now in the workforce.”

In addition to social and cultural clubs, participants described major-based organizations where they had opportunities to connect with other students in their academic programs. Graduates reported that getting involved in these engagement opportunities were beneficial to their college experience and for some even their
self-esteem (Alejandra). Academic involvement activities helped with preparation for employment (Alex), connected students with potential employers (Sergio), and renewed passion for things that students loved (Joey).

Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to describe and illustrate the Latinx student experience of 17 graduates who attended an elite college in Texas. They shared how their attendance at this highly selective institution was important to them and to their families, but it was not without some challenges. Their parents had to adjust to the idea that their child would be living away from home without being married, which was in opposition to their cultural traditions. They also contended with feelings of (in)validation on campus and with their peers, along with their insecurities and frustrations tied to their low socio-economic status. Graduates experienced validation when they matched to a highly selective institution based on their academic credentials, additionally engagement on- and off-campus and cultural familiarity (e.g., connections with peers) helped them gain confidence and sense of meaning during their college journeys. The next chapter connects the findings to previous research and offers recommendations for policy, practice, and future research.
Chapter 5

Conclusions and Recommendations

Building on a seminal work by Navarrette (1993) and Gándara (1995), I employed an anti-deficit approach to explore the college experience of 17 Latinx students who graduated from an elite college in Texas. The study provides insights into how these high-achieving, under-represented students navigated a college environment historically attended by traditional students\(^{16}\) from upper socio-economic backgrounds. This chapter includes four major sections: 1) a summary of key findings and discussion, 2) implications for practice and theory, 3) recommendations for future research, and 4) conclusion.

Summary of Key Findings and Discussion

Jalomo and Rendon’s (2004) validation framework provided a lens to explore the experiences of Latinx graduates from an elite college in Texas to gain a better understanding of what they attribute to their success and tease out the challenges they confronted. In this section, I review the three research questions related to the validation framework (i.e., separation, validation, and involvement).

Research Question 1: How do recently graduated Latinx students from an elite Texas institution describe their transition to campus? (Separation)

\(^{16}\) Characteristics of traditional students: “above average grades, enter college after high school, come from family with college experience where going to college is a normal rite of passage” (Jalomo & Rendón, 2004, p. 39).
Jalomo and Rendón (2004) described the separation as an external (physical relocation, moving away from family and friends) and internal (personal growth, reformation of identity, sense of self) process that students of color experience when transitioning to college. Thus, part of the students’ transition was choosing to attend ECIT in the first place. Research has identified distance from home as a key reason students select a particular school. High-achieving Latinx students are more likely not to attend an elite institution in order to remain close to home (Carnevale & Rose, 2004; Fry, 2002). However, 11 participants relocated to attend ECIT. Some participants looked forward to the separation from home and the growth that would accompany it (Irma, Angela, Jocelyn, Janice, Daniel, and Nancy); Irma specifically stated that she “wanted to grow” and moving away from home was how she could achieve the personal growth.

Perhaps the most important draw for these graduates was the academic quality and reputation of the university; high-achieving students want to attend prestigious schools because of the greater earning potential tied to the school’s reputation (Radford, 2013). Yet, even though this mattered to the students, their parents did not always realize the significance of prestige. Some participants talked about how their parents grew to understand when others responded positively to the news that these students were accepted to this highly selective institution. Eventually, all the graduates’ parents ended up recognizing their child’s accomplishment.
Another key factor for the participants was the cost of attendance and the availability of financial aid. When Latinx students have access to college information (e.g., cost to attend and financial aid options) they are more likely to enroll (Taggart & Crisp, 2011). However, the cost of elite institutions often makes them out-of-bounds for high achieving, underrepresented students (Fry, 2002; Radford, 2013). In this study, the participants were able to acquire the knowledge and support to make ECIT a valid option. There were issues linked to this because there was some shame attached to having a “free ride;” yet it still made ECIT possible.

In addition, the students still faced familial obstacles when they chose to attend this school. Gloria and Castellanos (2012) noted the complex dynamic that family members play in the life of a student. In some instances, families are the cause of stress by pulling the student away from the campus community by demanding the student return home frequently. This challenge is difficult for students because family and friends back home provide needed support. Also, sometimes maintaining these ties forces them to live in multiple worlds (i.e., their homelife identity and college student role) (Jalomo & Rendón, 2004; Kuh et al., 2006), which can be challenging to manage. The current study reflected this issue when eight of the participants discussed turning their backs on some cultural traditions. Lizzy, was seen as rejecting her “family obligation” to be a college student. Several participants also spoke about how their parents were not in favor
of the policy to live on campus because it conflicted with tradition to move out of the house before marriage.

Several participants also spoke about how their college choice impacted their relationships with their parents and with their former high school classmates. Though it was not an easy transition for the participants, some of them were able to maintain friendships from high school during college despite moving away, which was important. Further, one first-generation student attributed the improvement in her relationship with family members because of distance and time apart. Therefore, the close ties withstood the move and, for some, improved over time.

These findings are important because these students are negotiating home and school expectations while building resilience to be successful in their transition to college as a non-traditional student. Rendón (1994) posited that by understanding the Latinx student background, we can be aware of the struggles they carry with them when they attend college. The current study confirmed that the participants’ early lives did shape their ability to adjust to this new, elite college environment.

Research Question 2: How do recently graduated Latinx students from an elite Texas institution describe validation in college? (Validation)

Participants from the current study described validating and invalidating experiences before and during college. The subthemes include academic
experiences, peer relationships and interactions, and perceptions of economic disparity. A few participants shared invalidating pre-college experiences that they carried with them while attending ECIT. For instance, four participants acknowledged they had feelings of self-doubt; two said they did not think they were good enough academically to attend ECIT. The other two felt they were not well prepared for the rigor of ECIT. Current and previous research noted that Latinx students struggle with the perception of not being smart enough to attend a prestigious college and they experience pressure to prove themselves (Fischer, 2010; Lewis et al., 2000). The institutional culture exacerbates negative feelings for Latinx students at a predominately White campus because they sense an unfriendly campus culture (Gonzalez, 2002; Hurtado, 1994) and feeling they must acclimate to the dominant culture if they are going to succeed (Kuh & Love, 2000; Museus, 2008; Museus & Quaye, 2009). This tension adds stress to their ability to maintain their family ties, which were already challenged by their college choice.

Interactions with faculty and teaching assistants were a key finding and serve as examples that mirror existing literature that found both positive and negative relationships with faculty. For example, Jalomo and Rendón (2004) stated that validating a student can be a powerful experience of strengthening self-esteem and capacity to learn. This was evident in the current study with continuing students being more likely to interact with their professors earlier in
the semester. Positive interactions with faculty and teaching assistants early in their college career helped to develop and nurture their self-esteem. While Kuh et al. (2006) posited that Latinx students may perceive campus officials (e.g., faculty, staff, TAs) as uncaring and disinterested in their well-being. The current study similarly found some first-generation participants were hesitant to approach faculty as freshmen; they were less likely to attend office hours; and they were hesitant to talk with family about school. Thus, they exhibited the reluctance Kuh et al. discussed.

All the participants in the study described building relationships and creating new social networks at ECIT. For some participants, peer relationships played a role in validating their sense of belonging at ECIT. All the students shared how they valued their connections with peers of a similar background, which confirmed the findings of Museus (2008) and others. The graduates not only sought each other (individually) as a support system, but most also cited HACER, the campus Hispanic/Latinx culture club, as a space for critical support and connection to the campus (Museus & Quaye, 2009).

Nevertheless, some of the graduates described how their peers and the elite institution reinforced differences in social class, particularly those from low-income households. For example, some of the participants shared their fear of negative judgement by peers because of their financial aid status or how some institutional policies proved challenging for low-income students. These findings
are consistent with existing research (Aries, 2008; Aries & Seider, 2005), which found that low-income students are cognizant of the differences in economic capital from their more affluent peers. In previous and current research, students recognized the lack of financial resources in various ways, lavish room furnishings, designer clothes, ability to eat meals off campus, and travel out-of-the-country. The current study explored how students coped with and confided in their peers rather than self-isolating from financially secure classmates.

**Research Question 3: How do recently graduated Latinx students from an elite institution describe their college experience? (involvement)**

The third aspect of Jalomo and Rendón’s (2004) transition process describes the ways universities can provide involvement opportunities that benefit students. In fact, all the participants reported how much they valued their time in clubs, service, and other activities, which they saw as beneficial to their personal development and self-esteem and served as a connection to other Latinx students. Previous research (Astin, 1993, 1999; Jalomo & Rendón, 2004; Kuh et al., 2006; Kuh & Love, 2000; Museus, 2008; Otero et al., 2007; Tinto, 1993) found that getting involved in a club or organization is key in affecting student persistence. This was also true with most of the participants who found themselves connecting with peers through organizations. The Hispanic/Latinx culture club and the Hispanic society associated with their major were important spaces where the
graduates could connect and express themselves with peers, they also validated their cultural identity (Museus, 2008; Museus & Quaye, 2009).

In summary, key findings from this study provide an understanding for how high-achieving Latinx students navigated an elite college historically attended by students from college-going, upper socio-economic families. Several college choice factors influenced their decision to attend ECIT. Jalomo and Rendón (2004) guided the study’s research questions and provided a lens to explore the Latinx student experience at an Elite College in Texas. Findings from this study are significant because they support and extend some of the existing research (Aries, 2008; Aries & Seider, 2005; Cabrera et al., 1999; Museus, 2008; Museus & Quaye, 2009) by applying it to the Latinx college experience at an elite college. Furthermore, the findings support prior research that explored the personal experiences of Latinx students (Cabrera & Padilla, 2004; Navarrette, 1993), and reveal the challenges that these successful students still confronted. However, critically, these students were able to persevere despite them.

Implications for Practice

The findings from this study offer relevant implications that may be helpful to staff, faculty, and executive leadership at elite colleges and universities. Research suggests students from low-income households and first-generation college-going families share similarities with many Latinx students (Fry, 2002; Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Gloria & Segura-Herrera, 2004; Kim et al., 2014;

Elite colleges and universities should review and evaluate campus policies that may directly or indirectly affect students in a negative way. Below are key recommendations for practice at ECIT.

- Students from low socio-economic households and some students who relocate from their hometown rely heavily on institutional financial support to attend elite schools; therefore, providing need-based financial aid awards for students creates access and opportunity to attend.

- Make all meals available for students. The University closed their cafeterias on Saturdays to get students to explore the area around campus. However, some of the participants did not have the economic means to eat out, so this policy meant they did not have access to food. Instead ECIT and other institutions that share this policy should designate a cafeteria to remain open for dinner on the weekend.

- There should be a low-cost health insurance option for students whose families do not cover them on their plans. One participant spoke about how this policy threatened her ability to continue her education each year. The situation was exacerbated because the staff seemed unaware that this requirement was a financial hardship for some students.
• Offer bilingual sessions or translation services for families to better engage with the content and information sessions during Orientation Week (O-Week) and other introductory programs.

• Though the cost may make this recommendation unlikely, institutions that have a mandatory live-on-campus policy need to either increase campus housing so students do not have to move off at any point during their four years or reduce the size of future classes to be able to accommodate students with on-campus housing. At present, the policy to make students leave campus for private (off-campus) housing is a hardship for students who come from lower income households. The proposed shift in policy minimizes the challenges of commuting back-and-forth to campus or finding affordable housing near campus for the year they are required to move. Further, moving home can create other issues. At ECIT, some students whose families lived in town found that the policy was disruptive to their college plans when they were forced to move home once again.

• Private elite schools like ECIT should hire Latinx professionals to connect with diverse student populations. Participants described the significant value and importance to be able to connect with a Latinx faculty, instructors, and staff while at ECIT. This study and others have shown how representation matters (Hurtado, 1994; Gonzalez, 2002; Jalomo & Rendón, 2004; Rendón, 1994). Therefore, the campus should be
committed to diversifying their faculty, graduate assistantships, and staff to be positioned to assist these students as they transition to campus.

- Elite institutions can help foster belonging for Latinx students by highlighting Latinx clubs and organizations at campus preview events and on introductory tours. They can also validate students from underrepresented backgrounds by coordinating social and cultural involvement events such as orientation week and cultural celebrations (e.g., Hispanic Heritage month and Black History month).

- Elite institutions can evaluate their current campus culture to assess if policies are non-inclusive and remove barriers or opportunities. For instance, assigning the few Latinx students to the 11 residential houses meant that they did not have easy contact with individuals who shared their cultural backgrounds. One participant found this imposed isolation created difficulties as they attempted to adjust to the new campus environment.

- Elite institutions should listen to their students’ voices to better understand their experiences and as a means for improving practice.

- In the current study, several participants felt uncomfortable reaching out or asking questions initially as they struggled with their transition to this elite institution. As a result, elite colleges and universities should provide multicultural trainings for faculty (tenure, non-tenure, GTA) and staff (all
personnel). For instance, student employees, staff, and faculty should be provided professional development training on topics such as the three critical processes of student transition (Jalomo & Rendón, 2004) to become better prepared to provide cultural support and validation for students from non-traditional college backgrounds. Understanding the cultural backgrounds of Latinx students could lead to creating supporting and nurturing spaces on college campuses.

Overall, findings from this study inform campus officials and personnel about fostering a supportive and inclusive campus culture for underrepresented students at an Elite College in Texas. These recommendations directly connect with the experiences of the participants of this study.

**Implications for Theory**

This section provides implications for theory using Jalomo and Rendón’s (2004) three critical processes as a framework. The theory describes Latinx students’ transition to college as they navigate through separation, validation, and involvement and is set in the context of public, 2-and 4-year institutions. When applied to a different college setting (i.e., highly selective, elite institutions), this study found that the theory still helped identify and explain the situations and experiences of high-achieving Latinx students. For instance, the separation process addresses the decision to attend college and the experience of leaving family and friends for campus life. These challenges would occur regardless of
educational type, whether male or female (cultural norms). However, attending an elite institution heightened these concerns. How would they be able to navigate such a foreign environment without the support of their families? In addition, the strong academic reputation of the school made the decision to attend that much harder, as well. These students left a K-12 environment where their academic skills set them apart from their peers. Now, they were thrust into an environment where they were competing with academic heavyweights, leading some of the participants initially to lose confidence in their academic abilities. These Latinx students had to manage not only potential isolation because of cultural and economic differences, but the academic challenges that come from attending an academically rigorous private, elite college. Though the theory still helped identify key points of concern, it did not explore the unique challenges that may occur on this type of campus.

Further, the theory considers the three processes as separate ones that affect Latinx student success. Findings from this study blur the lines between these processes and adds the challenges of choosing an institution to the list of elements that can have an effect. For instance, college choice impacts the issues Latinx students confront when separating from home to attend an elite institution. There is an overlap with separation during the early process of transitioning into the campus.
Additionally, unique issues of validation were apparent in this study because of ECIT’s institution type. Differences in socio-economic class affected the participants’ sense of belonging and comfort with the faculty, but also with their social connections. They felt ill-at-ease sharing their backgrounds with their peers for fear that they would be judged negatively, which led to them feel as though they did not have someone to talk to about their experience at ECIT. These issues were unique challenges because ECIT is an expensive, private, elite institution typically attended by White upper-middle and upper-class students.

There were other validation issues that were connected to the rigor of this institution. Some participants managed the academic demands and challenges by connecting with faculty and attending office hours. However, other students resisted talking with faculty or seeking help because the elite college environment made them feel like the other students were better prepared to handle the work. High-achieving Latinx students who attend an elite university experience the adjustment from being at the top of their class in high school, to being among other high-achievers who are like them. Participants in the study described the challenges and how this affected their academic experiences and perceptions of economic disparity. This challenge is felt at other types of institutions as well, but the stress was heightened because of the high selectivity of this school.

Though the opportunities for student involvement were different because of ECIT’s limited offerings – students had fewer social outlets and more academic
ones – the participants still credited these programs and organizations (e.g., study abroad, cultural organizations, internships, community service) to their integration into campus life and their persistence. Regardless of the campus’ offerings, participants of the study used them to find social, academic, and professional connections. This aspect of the theory confirmed how the students’ engagement and involvement were important to their success.

In summary, the students in the study experienced unique challenges because of the type of institution they attended. Their decision to attend ECIT led to new and/or heightened concerns as they separated from their families, transitioned to campus, became involved, and graduated. Further, the three processes seemed to be more interrelated than initially discussed by Jalomo and Rendon (2004). For example, the way these students managed the invalidating experiences was to reach out and get involved with their peers, faculty, and staff through campus academic and social activities and opportunities. Nevertheless, Jalomo and Rendon’s (2004) framework helped to tease out the various Latinx student experiences at ECIT even though the nature of the institution did result in some differences in how these processes affected the students’ experiences.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

As highly selective institutions implement strategies to diversify the student body, researchers should consider how campus culture shapes the experiences of students from diverse backgrounds. The current study provided a
qualitative exploration into the experiences of 17 Latinx students who graduated from an Elite College in Texas. However, as more Latinx students attend college, much more research is needed to better understand their experiences to improve their college completion rates at all types of institutions. Because most previous work on the Latinx college experience has been quantitative, I offer several recommendations for future qualitative research in this section.

First, in 1993, Ruben Navarrette wrote about his own experiences at Harvard, which was the precursor to the current study. Future researchers may choose to once again look at the experiences of Latinx students in other Ivy League colleges to see if institutions and the campus culture have changed since Navarrette’s book. This work would be particularly timely as more Ivies are actively recruiting Latinx students to their campuses (Cooper, 2011; Hoxby & Turner, 2019; Lee, 2016; Leonhardt, 2004, 2011; McLoughlin, 2012; Nadworny, 2018; Pérez-Peña, 2013; Valbrun, 2014; Zweifler, 2013).

Moreover, the current study told the tale of Latinx students attending an elite in Texas. The findings suggest the unique campus policies and state contexts may affect the student experiences. Therefore, future research should explore the experiences of Latinx students attending elites in other regions of the country. It would also be valuable to conduct a comparison study that investigates the Latinx experience at different elites to tease out the differences associated with specific campus contexts. In addition, some issues, such as moving far from home, were
diminished by looking at students who attended an elite in their home state. Therefore, expanding this work to study Latinx students who attend other elite institutions, in other states, would further explore the role distance from home plays in students’ transition to an elite.

The current study also revealed that the initial transition remains a complicated one for these students, so studies focused on the first year may lead to greater insights into what supports are needed to help Latinx students adjust to their new lives on elite campus. Thus, research into the experiences of first-year Latinx students attending elite schools in Texas and across the United States would provide greater insights into what supports are needed and what challenges are faced as high-achieving Hispanic students buck cultural traditions for higher education. Research could also expand to include the role of validating agents in the experiences of racial/ethnic minority students on campuses at elite colleges. In the current study, participants described people who they encountered that were validating agents at some point in their transition to ECIT; further research should explore this relationship.

An advantage to interviewing graduates from the same institution was the insight they provided on the holistic student experience, from college choice through graduation. Most current research focuses on the implications that apply only to the first-year experience (Kuh et al., 2006; Jalomo & Rendón, 2004); however, this study’s findings address the first year and beyond. Therefore, future
research should explore the student experience throughout the college career. Additionally, future research should explore the college experience of students who are currently enrolled at elite colleges.

In addition, ECIT had several policies that unintentionally provided challenges for the participants who came from low-income circumstances—limited housing, health insurance requirements. Policy analysts may focus on identifying institutional policies that may present unique challenges to other low-income students at elites as well as other types of institutions. A 50-state analysis of institutional policies may expose those that are regressive leading to a thoughtful reconsideration of policies that create unintentional hardships for students.

Lastly, quantitative researchers may consider extending this study’s anti-deficit approach to other institutional types (e.g., Minority-Serving or Hispanic-Serving Institutions, Predominantly White Institutions, community colleges, 4-year public institutions and different admission standards) to compare which supports, policies, and experiences are more likely to contribute to Latinx student success. Future researchers are encouraged to consider this framework if studying underrepresented students attending elite and highly selective institutions, so that the Latinx and minority student experience can be explored in various settings. Continued research on these populations at elite institutions can inform practitioners of the challenges so they may work on solutions for the students.
Conclusion

Even though elite institutions are becoming more diverse by admitting more under-represented students, there is a critical need for schools to foster a supportive and inclusive campus culture. This research study provided an in-depth exploration into the experiences of 17 Latinx students who graduated from an Elite College in Texas, extending the previous work on high-achieving Hispanic students’ adjustment to college. The limited number of qualitative studies used a deficit approach, focusing on the challenges and failures of Latinx students. The current study comes from an anti-deficit approach. The findings from this study lay the groundwork for understanding the Latinx college experience at an Elite College in Texas.

When we take a closer look at the Latinx college student experience at an Elite College in Texas (ECIT), we become mindful of the following:

- While Latinx, first-generation college students are cognizant of an institution’s prestige, their parents may be unaware of the school’s reputation and therefore do not understand the environment their student is about to enter, nor how to support them as they transition.
- During the transition to college, relationships with family and friends back home may become stressed when the student moves away.
- Latinx students often challenge cultural norms when they leave home to attend any institution. This issue may be exacerbated when attending an
elite, private college that has institutional policies that may also test
cultural expectations (e.g., mandatory live-on campus policies).

- Previous friendships might provide needed support but may also work
  against the student’s adjustment to the new environment, which can
  account for their feelings of extreme homesickness and a sense of
  isolation.

- Latinx students may confront multiple forms of elitism, including race and
  class, which may lead to the assumption that they were admitted because
  of ethnicity.

- High-achieving Latinx students have increased risks (e.g., feeling unsure
  about their academic credentials and academic abilities, financial issues).
  These negative perceptions can result in Latinx students feeling alienated
  at the institution, so they may seek out culture-based organizations to
  provide them a safe harbor. This oasis helps them feel they belong, gives
  them a sense of empowerment, and provides them a support group if they
  face cultural challenges along the way.

- Validating agents (in-and-out-of-class) provide critical support (e.g.,
  recognition of a student’s capabilities and efforts).

- Academic and social opportunities for involvement may look different at
  an elite institution as they did at ECIT, but can still provide necessary
  connections to the campus.
This study illuminates when high-achieving Latinx students attend elite campuses, those institutions need to be thoughtful about the internal and personal challenges that these students undergo to acclimate and assimilate into the campus culture. Through interviews with Latinx graduates from an Elite College in Texas, we have a better understanding how high-achieving, under-represented students navigate a college environment historically attended by students from upper socio-economic backgrounds.
Appendix A

Definitions
To ensure a better understanding of frequently used terms the following is a list of terms and definitions were derived from general sources and are used throughout the proposal:

- **Highly selective, elite institution**: refers to colleges/universities with a high application/low acceptance rate (e.g., elite, top tier, Ivy league); attended by Top 10% (or higher) ranked students, academically high achievers, high scores on ACT/SAT tests.

- **Hispanic/Latino/Latina**: refers to people living in the United States of Mexican or Latin American descent and of Spanish speaking heritage (Bordes & Arredondo, 2005).

- **First generation**: refers to an individual whose parents (or guardians) did not complete a baccalaureate degree (HEA of 1965 [amended 1998], Sec. 402A.20 U.S.C. 1070a-11).

- **Latinx** is a gender-neutral term used in lieu of Latino/Latina.

- **Low Income/Low SES**: the term refers to an individual from a family whose taxable income for the preceding year did not exceed 150 percent of an amount equal to the poverty level determined by using criteria of poverty established by the Bureaus of Census (HEA of 1965 [amended 1998], Sec. 402A.20 U.S.C. 1070a-11).

- **Undermatching**: not enrolling in highly selective institutions even though students have the qualifications to do so.
Appendix B

Institutional Review Board Notification of Exemption
Institutional Review Board
Notification of Exemption

October 12, 2017

Jennifer Sutton
Dr. Barbara Tobolowsky
Student Support Services
The University of Texas at Arlington
Box 19509

Protocol Number: 2017-0817

Protocol Title: The Hispanic Student Experience at a Highly Selective University

EXEMPTION DETERMINATION

The UT Arlington Institutional Review Board (IRB) Chair, or designee, has reviewed the above referenced study and found that it qualified for exemption under the federal guidelines for the protection of human subjects as referenced at Title 45CFR Part 46.101(b)(2).

- (2) Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior, unless: (i) information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects can be identified, either directly or through identifiers linked to the subject; and (ii) any disclosure of the human subjects’ responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects’ financial standing, employability, or reputation.

You are therefore authorized to begin the research as of October 12, 2017.

Pursuant to Title 45 CFR 46.103(b)(4)(iii), investigators are required to, “promptly report to the IRB any proposed changes in the research activity, and to ensure that such changes in approved research during the period for which IRB approval has already been given, are not initiated without prior IRB review and approval except when necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subject.” All proposed changes to the research must be submitted via the electronic submission system prior to implementation. Please also be advised that as the principal investigator, you are required to report local adverse (unanticipated) events to the Office of Research Administration; Regulatory Services within 24 hours of the occurrence or upon acknowledgement of the occurrence. All investigators and key personnel identified in the protocol must have documented Human Subject Protection (HSP) Training on file with this office. Completion certificates are valid for 3 years from completion date.

The UT Arlington Office of Research Administration; Regulatory Services appreciates your continuing commitment to the protection of human research subjects. Should you have questions or require further assistance, please contact Regulatory Services at regulatoryservices@uta.edu or 817-272-3723.
Appendix C

Email to Recruit Participants (student/graduate)
Hello,

I hope this letter finds you well! By way of introduction, my name is Jennifer Luken Sutton, and I am a doctoral student at the University of Texas at Arlington. I am currently working on my dissertation focused on the college experiences of Hispanic/Latino students at highly selective post-secondary institutions.

I received your contact information from (insert institution’s contact name/reference source). S/He indicated that you might be a good candidate for my study and that you might be interested in participating in an approximately one hour to 1 and 1 ½ hour interview via video conferencing or by phone about your experiences attending a highly selective institution. Deciding to participate is voluntary and you may elect to discontinue your involvement at any time without any negative consequences. As a thank you for your participation in the study, a $25 VISA gift card will be offered to you. Gift cards will be sent within a week of completing the interview.

Would you be interested in taking part in this study?

In order to participate, you must answer “yes” to the following questions:

1. *Do you identify as Hispanic or Latino/a?
2. *Are you currently enrolled in your institution or a graduate?
   a. If enrolled, are you a Junior (60-89 credit hours) or a senior (90+ credit hours)?
   b. If a recent graduate, did you earn a bachelors’ degree within the past 2 years?
      If yes, please indicate your graduation month/year.
3. *For the interview, are you willing to participate via video conferencing tool (i.e., Skype, Google Talk, FaceTime) or by phone?

If you meet the above requirements and are interested in participating in my study, please reply to these questions to confirm your eligibility to jluken@uta.edu. Also, please indicate your anticipated work/class schedule so I can work with you to coordinate a time to conduct your interview.

Please let me know if you have any questions, I am available via email, jluken@uta.edu, or by phone at 214-212-7645. Thank you and I hope to hear from you soon.

Thank you for your time and consideration.
Jennifer Luken Sutton
Doctoral Student
The University of Texas at Arlington
College of Education
Educational Leadership and Policy Studies
Appendix D

Email to Staff at Highly Selective Institutions (to recruit students)
Dear Colleague,

My name is Jennifer Luken Sutton, and I am a doctoral student at the University of Texas at Arlington. I am currently working on my dissertation focused on the college experiences of Hispanic/Latino students at highly selective post-secondary institutions.

I am looking to recruit a small cohort of participants who are either a) currently enrolled as a Junior (60-89 hours) or Senior (90+ hours) or b) a recent baccalaureate graduate (within the last two years) to participate in an approximately 1 hour to 1 ½ hour interview to be conducted through video conferencing or by phone. Deciding to participate is voluntary and participants may elect to discontinue their involvement at any time without any negative consequences.

Would you please assist me with the recruitment of eligible Hispanic/Latino students for my study by forwarding a copy of my recruitment letter to potential participants? I have attached my recruitment letter to this email for your convenience. Please respond to this email so I will know you will or will not be able to assist me in recruiting students from your institution.

Your assistance is most appreciated. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Best,

Jennifer Luken Sutton
Doctoral Student
The University of Texas at Arlington
College of Education
Appendix E

Email for Selected Participants
Dear (Participant Name),

I hope you are doing well. Thank you for your response and for indicating your interest in participating in my study. This email is to confirm you have been selected as a participant. As a reminder, the purpose of the study is to examine the lived experiences of Hispanic/Latino students at highly selective post-secondary institutions.

Based on the schedule you submitted, I would like to schedule a one-on-one interview on (Day, Date, Time) or (Day, Date, Time). Please let me know which you would prefer.

Prior to our interview, please review and complete the following:

1. A pre-interview questionnaire has been created; this is a short survey of your background information. All responses to the questionnaire will be kept confidential. Please click the following link to access the survey, which should take no more than 15 minutes. LINK

2. A consent form is attached, please review, sign, and return when you respond with your preferred interview day and time.

Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns regarding my study or the pre-interview questionnaire. Thank you again for your interest, I look forward to hearing from you by so we can coordinate our interview.

As a thank you for your participation in the study, a $25 VISA gift card will be offered to you. Gift cards will be sent within a week of completing the interview.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at jluken@uta.edu, or by phone at 214-212-7645 or my UTA dissertation chair, Barbara Tobolowsky at tobolow@uta.edu.

Please complete the two items above and confirm you interview preference no later than (insert date, 10 days out from the date email is sent)

Best,

Jennifer Luken Sutton
Doctoral Student
The University of Texas at Arlington
College of Education
Educational Leadership and Policy Studies
Appendix F

Pre-Interview Questionnaire (distributed via Qualtrics)
The Hispanic/Latino Student Experience at Highly Selective Universities

Name: ________________________ Pseudonym/Code:

Name: ________________________

Contact Phone: _______________ Contact ID/Online ID: ________________________

Interview Preference (please rank 1-4, 1=most preferred):

☐ Skype ☐ Google Talk ☐ Zoom ☐ Phone ☐ Other: __________

If follow up communication is needed, your preferred communication: (Check all that apply): __ Phone ___ Text ___ Email ___ Other: __________

Hometown, State: __________________________________________________________

Gender: ___ Male ___ Female Age: __________

University/College (undergraduate studies): Drop-down menu, 9 schools of the study

Major/Degree: ________________________________________________________

Classification: Junior (60-89 hours) Senior (90+ hours) Graduate

Graduation: (Month) Year (2017, 2016, 2015, prior ‘15)

Enrollment: ___ Part-time ___ Full-Time

What is the highest level of formal education obtained by your parents/legal guardians?

Mother:

☐ Some high school
☐ High school graduate
☐ Some College
☐ 2-year degree
☐ 4-year degree
☐ Graduate/Professional degree
☐ Unknown

Father:

☐ Some high school
☐ High school graduate
☐ Some College
☐ 2-year degree
☐ 4-year degree
☐ Graduate/Professional degree
☐ Unknown
Please select Yes or No:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I am the first in my family to go to college.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I visited the campus prior to enrolling.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I knew someone enrolled here and they influenced my decision to apply.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I enrolled in this university immediately after high school.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I transferred to this university from another college/university.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I live/or have lived on campus.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I live/or have lived off-campus as a student.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel/felt this institution is the best fit for me.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>While in school, have you received / did you receive financial aid? If yes, check all that apply.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Scholarships?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Grants?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Loans?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you receiving or have you received a Federal Pell Grant award?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(current student) In the past year, I have visited faculty members during office hours.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(graduate) During my enrollment, I visited faculty members during their office hours.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(current student) In the past year, I have been involved in a campus organization/club.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(graduate) During my time in college, I was involved in campus life (i.e., club, organization, etc.).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix G

Consent Form
Statement of Informed Consent

Title of Research Study
The Hispanic/Latino Student Experience at Highly Selective Universities

Consent to Participate
You were selected as a potential volunteer because you are a current student with junior or senior status or graduate of a post-secondary institution characterized as a highly selective, and you have identified yourself as a person of Hispanic or Latino origin. If you wish to participate, you must initial (page 1) AND sign and date the informed consent form (page 2). By giving consent, you agree to participate in a one-time interview (approximately 1 to 1 ½ hours) to be conducted via a video conferencing program or by phone.

Participation is completely voluntary and will not affect your standing with your University or The University of Texas at Arlington, should you choose not to participate.

Conditions for the Incentive
Participants who complete one-time interview (approximately 1 to 1 ½ hours) will receive a $25 VISA gift card as a thank you for your participation in the study. After the interview, the researcher will send a follow up email (within a week of the interview) to request for the mailing address where the participant would like the gift card sent too. Gift cards will be sent within a week of receiving a response regarding the mailing address preference via U.S.P.S. mail service (with delivery confirmation notification).

Assurance of Confidentiality
Any information obtained during this study, which could identify you will be kept strictly confidential as far as possible with state and federal law. This information may be presented at research meetings or published; however, your identity will be kept strictly confidential. All data collected as a result of your participation will be kept by the investigator in a locked cabinet. Your data will receive an identifying number or pseudonym, and only the investigator will be able to identify you from your data. For the purpose of future reference, your data will be stored for three years.

Initials

Consent form-Page 1
Rights of Research Subjects
Your rights as a research subject have been explained to you. If you have any additional questions concerning your rights as a research subject, you may contact the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects representative, telephone (817) 272-2105.

Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal
You are free to decide not to participate in this study or to withdraw at any time without adversely affecting you relationship with the investigators or the University of Texas at Arlington. Your decision will not result in any loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study. Your signature certifies that the content and meaning of the information on this consent form have been fully explained to you and that you have decided to participate having read and understood the information presented. Your signature also certifies that you have had all your questions answered to your satisfaction. If you think of any questions during this study please contact the investigators. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

Signature of Subject       Date

IN MY JUDGEMENT THE SUBJECT IS VOLUNTARILY AND NOWINGLY GIVING INFORMED CONSENT AND POSSESSES THE LEGAL CAPACITY TOGIVE INFORMED CONSENT.

Signature of Investigator       Date

Investigator:
Jennifer Luken Sutton
Doctoral Student
The University of Texas at Arlington
College of Education
Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

Work phone: (817) 272-3684   Email: jluken@uta.edu

Follow up Instructions: After initialing page 1 and signing page 2, please email this form to jluken@uta.edu.
Appendix H

Email Confirmation for Interview
Dear (Participant Name),

Thank you for the completion of the pre-interview questionnaire and submission of the consent form. This email is to confirm the day and time for our one-on-one interview in addition to our contact method for the interview (i.e., video conferencing tool or phone call).

**Day/Time for interview:** __________________
*Please respond and let me know if you are no longer available at this specified day/time.

**Interview contact method:**
- [ ] Skype
- [ ] Google Talk
- [ ] Zoom
- [ ] Phone
- [ ] Other: ____________

I will contact you for our interview at **Contact Phone Number** or **Contact ID/Online ID**

Thank you again for your interest, please let me know if you have any questions or concerns.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at jluken@uta.edu, or by phone at 214-212-7645 or my UTA dissertation chair, Barbara Tobolowsky at tobolow@uta.edu.

Best,

Jennifer Luken Sutton
Doctoral Student
The University of Texas at Arlington
College of Education
Educational Leadership and Policy Studies
Appendix I

Interview Protocol
The following is a list of questions to be used in interviews with participants; however this list is not exhaustive, there might be follow-up questions to clarify meaning in the responses and add further explanation.

1. The following questions Tell me about yourself before college:
   a. Why did you decide to go to college?
   b. When do you remember coming to this decision?
   c. Who was influential in your journey to college?

2. What were your/your family’s initial thoughts before you enrolled?
   a. Probe: What expectations does/did your family have for you about college?

3. What influenced your decision to go to this institution?
   a. Probe: What mattered the most?
   b. Probe: What were your expectations of attending this institution?

Separation

4. Tell about your first impression(s) when you first arrived on the campus.
   a. Describe your experience moving to insert institution? (External separation, Relocation / Geographical move)
      i. How and when did you first travel from home to your campus?
      ii. Did you have help or did you move on your own?
   b. In the beginning,
      i. What was it like to navigate the campus (residence halls, buildings, etc)?
      ii. What was it like to navigate the surrounding areas adjacent to campus?

5. During your first and second year, can you share about your experiences with going home to visit? (External separation, Relocation / Geographical move)
   a. Probe: How far are/were you from your hometown?
   b. Probe: What were the primary reasons for your trips home?
   c. Probe: If you did not go home, why?

6. Throughout your college years, can you describe your relationships with you family and friends back at home? (Internal separation, reforming identity)
   a. Probe: How close were you when you first started college?
b. Probe: What are your relationships like now?

7. Describe your relationships with people at this institution (students, faculty, and staff)
   a. When you first came to college. *(Internal separation, reforming identity)*
      i. Probe: How did you connect with people after you arrived on campus?

Validation

8. Tell me about your academic and social experiences and relationships in the beginning (i.e., first 2 years) at *(institution)*.
   a. What are some examples of in-class experiences?
      i. Probe: With faculty?
      ii. Probe: With peers/organizations?
   b. What are some examples of out-of-class experiences?
      i. Probe: With faculty?
      ii. Probe: With campus staff or campus office?
      iii. Probe: With peers/organizations?

9. After your first 2 years, what were your academic and social experiences like?

10. What kinds of challenges, if any, did you experience in the beginning of your college years?
    a. Probe: Who did you go to for support? Why this/these person(s)?

11. What kind of challenges, if any, have you experienced in the last years of college?
    a. Probe: Who did you go to for support? Why this/these person(s)?

Involvement

12. Please describe any programs/organizations that you are/were involved in at *(institution)*.
    a. Probe: Why did you join these organizations?
    b. Probe: What is/was your role in the organization?
    c. Probe: What has been/was your experience being involved with *(list each one)*?

13. Would you recommend for other Hispanic/Latino students to join these organizations? Why?
14. If a cousin was thinking of coming to \textit{(institution)}, what would you tell them?
   a. Probe: Are there any challenges that you would want to point out to them?
      i. Probe: What would they be? How did you handle them?
   b. Probe: Are there any opportunities that you would want to point out to them?
      i. Probe: What would they be? Why are they important?

15. Do you have anything else to add to this interview that was not discussed?

\textit{Thank you for your time and contributions to this interview.}
Appendix J

Thank you note & Incentive follow up
Dear (Participant Name),

I just wanted to send you a quick note to thank you for your participation in my study of Hispanic/Latino student experiences at highly selective universities. Words cannot describe how grateful I am for your participation. Because of your contribution and insight, I was able to capture information for my study, but most importantly, I was able to get to know you and learn about your experiences.

As previously mentioned, as a thank you for your participation in the study, a $25 VISA gift card will be offered to you. When you have a moment, please respond and let me know the address where you would like your gift card sent to.

If I can be of further assistance, please do not hesitate to contact me at any time. Again, thank you so much for your participation but most of all, for sharing part of your life with me.

All the best,

Jennifer Luken Sutton  
Doctoral Student  
The University of Texas at Arlington  
College of Education  
Educational Leadership and Policy Studies
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Biographical Information

Jennifer Nicole Luken Sutton is currently the Director of two U.S. Department of Education grant programs, TRIO Student Support Services and Title V: Developing Hispanic-Serving Institutions grant, Supporting Innovation, Diversity, Excellence, Access and Success (I.D.E.A.S.). She is a proud alumnus of the TRIO Programs and is passionate about working with college students, specifically from under-resourced and underrepresented backgrounds. She has written several federal grants and generated $8.5 million in funding thus far.

Jennifer is a first-generation, college graduate who grew up in Hidalgo, Texas and graduated in the top 10% of her class from Valley View High School in May 2001. She graduated from The University of Texas at Arlington Summa Cum Laude when she completed her Bachelor’s Degree in Criminology and Criminal Justice in May 2004; she completed her Master’s Degree in Criminology and Criminal Justice in May 2006, her thesis is titled *Vehicle Cues: A Comparative Analysis of The Perceptions of College Students and Police Officers on Racial Profiling.*

Jennifer completed the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies program at the University of Texas at Arlington in May 2021; her dissertation is titled *The Latinx Student Experience at an Elite College in Texas.* Her research interests include Latinx student success, first-generation student success, and student success initiatives for non-tradition and under-represented student groups.