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# Exitosas on Their Own Terms: Centering Latina Testimonios to Understand Latina Undergraduates' Student Success Beliefs

## Abstract

Utilizing *testimonio* methodology grounded in LatCrit and Chicana Feminism, this research centered the voices of 11 Latina undergraduates attending a 4-year private, predominantly white institution in the Western U.S. to understand how they defined and measured their own success in higher education. Traditional success measures focus on the institution's dominant measures, such as graduation and persistence rates. These success measures do not fully represent Latina/o/x values nor how Latinas undergraduates define their own success in higher education. This research revealed that Latina undergraduates define their success by academic achievement, career attainment, Latina/o/x values of *familismo* and *comunidad*, and their own personal growth and wellbeing. While the Latina undergraduates in this study embraced academic achievement and career attainment, which align with dominant measures of student success, they also shared student success beliefs that more closely aligned with their Latina/o/x values. As such, the Latina undergraduates in this study were finding ways to balance both dominant measures of success and those that honored their Latina/o/x values to heal their bodymindspirit split.

The rising number of Latinas attending college and the Latina undergraduates in this study demonstrated that Latinas are committed to higher education and see it as a means to reach their goals. However, it is unknown if higher education institutions provide the support Latina undergraduates need to achieve their self-defined goals and student success beliefs connected to their Latina/o/x values. In this research, Latina undergraduates also shared what institutional support they have received and have not received from their institution to achieve their self-defined goals. This research revealed that their higher education institution supported Latina undergraduates with academic opportunities through affinity groups, support programs, and validation from faculty, staff, and peers. However, many challenges were still hindering Latina undergraduates from reaching all of their self-defined goals, including a lack of representation and sense of belonging, racism and discrimination, and the labor of promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion on their campus. Despite these obstacles, the findings demonstrated that Latina undergraduates are *ne pantleras* who were able to embrace *la facultad* to see how higher education was able to help them become exitosas on their own terms.

This research centered the *testimonios* of 11 Latina undergraduates attending a 4-year PWI in the Western U.S. to understand better how they define and measure success for themselves in higher education. With a better understanding of Latina undergraduates, higher education institutions can better support them as they work towards their own self-defined goals. As such, this research study shares implications for both higher education research and practice.

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## First Advisor

Sarah S. Hurtado

---

**Second Advisor**

Judy Marquez Kiyama

**Third Advisor**

P. Bruce Uhrmacher

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*Exitosas* on Their Own Terms: Centering Latina *Testimonios* to  
Understand Latina Undergraduates' Student Success Beliefs

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A Dissertation  
Presented to  
the Faculty of the Morgridge College of Education  
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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Philosophy

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by  
Lauren R. Contreras  
August 2022  
Advisor: Sarah S. Hurtado, Ph.D.

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Author: Lauren R. Contreras

Title: *Exitosas* on Their Own Terms: Centering Latina *Testimonios* to Understand Latina Undergraduates' Student Success Beliefs

Advisor: Sarah S. Hurtado, Ph.D.

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The rising number of Latinas attending college and the Latina undergraduates in this study demonstrated that Latinas are committed to higher education and see it as a means to reach their goals. However, it is unknown if higher education institutions provide the support Latina undergraduates need to achieve their self-defined goals and

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This research centered the *testimonios* of 11 Latina undergraduates attending a 4-year PWI in the Western U.S. to understand better how they define and measure success for themselves in higher education. With a better understanding of Latina undergraduates, higher education institutions can better support them as they work towards their own self-defined goals. As such, this research study shares implications for both higher education research and practice.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Between 1997 and 2017, the percentage of all Latina/o/x students who enrolled in higher education upon graduation from high school increased from 57.6% to 70.6% (Espinosa et al., 2019). Among Latina/o/x undergraduates, Latinas are outpacing their male counterparts in college enrollment by 16% (Espinosa et al., 2019). As demonstrated by their steadily increasing enrollment in higher education, it is clear Latinas are committed to attending higher education and see it as a means to reach their self-defined goals. However, higher education institutions were originally and intentionally created for white men, excluding women, People of Color, and other marginalized groups (Patton, 2015). As a result, Latina undergraduates still attend racially hostile campus environments where they experience microaggressions, racist jokes, and dismissal of their cultural knowledge (Acevedo et al., 2021; McCabe, 2009; Yosso et al., 2009). In addition, higher education institutions uphold white American values, such as competition, independence, individualism, and worldliness (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007). Latina/o/x values, which emphasize *familismo*, *comunidad*, collaboration, interdependence, group importance, and spirituality, collide with the white American values of the institution (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007; Triana et al., 2020). Higher education practitioners and researchers often rely on dominant student success outcomes to measure the success of their students, such as graduation and retention rates. While

Latina undergraduates also want to graduate from college, measures such as graduation and retention rates based on dominant white American values (Castellanos & Gloria 2007, Castillo et al., 2004; Triana et al., 2020) perpetuated by the institution do not account for Latina undergraduates' values. This critical qualitative research grounded in LatCrit and Chicana Feminism centered Latina undergraduates attending a 4-year private, Predominantly White Institution (PWI) in the Western U.S. to understand better how they define and measure success for themselves. This research also was conducted to understand the support Latina undergraduates have received from their institution to achieve their self-defined goals. Ultimately, this research seeks to better understand Latina undergraduates' student success beliefs so that higher education professionals can better support them.

### **Latinas in Higher Education**

Hispanic, Latino, Latina, and Latinx are pan-ethnic terms used to describe individuals living in the United States who are descendants from Latin America or Spanish-speaking countries (Lopez et al., 2020). Latina/o/x and Hispanic represent ethnicities and cultural groups, and not a race. Latina/o/x individuals and Hispanics can be from multiple racial backgrounds (Salinas & Lozano, 2019). As a term developed from Spanish, a gendered language, Latino has traditionally encompassed both males and females (Salinas & Lozano, 2019). The feminine word for Latino is Latina. Latinas, then, are women-identified individuals with Latin American heritage. In recent years, Latinx, “an inclusive term that recognizes the intersectionality of sexuality, language, immigration, ethnicity, culture, and phenotype,” has gained popularity, especially within higher education and among college students (Salinas & Lozano, 2019, p. 310). The

LGBTQIA community developed the term Latinx to challenge the gender binary. Latinx is a gender-inclusive term to identify individuals from Latin American backgrounds at various intersections of their gender identity (Salinas & Lozano, 2019). For this study, I used the term *Latina* when describing women-identified individuals of Latin American descent. When discussing students and individuals of Latin American descent of all gender identities and when gender is unknown, I used *Latina/o/x* to represent the multiple experiences and identifiers used by the Latina/o/x and Hispanic populations.

The percentage of Latina/o/x undergraduates enrolled in higher education increased from 10.3% in 1997 to 19.8% in 2017-- the most significant increase of any racial or ethnic group (Espinosa et al., 2019). The rising Latina/o/x population in the U.S., which grew from 11.1% to 18% during this same timeframe, has contributed to this increase in college enrollment (Espinosa et al., 2019). Most Latina/o/x students (66%) enroll at Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs), where the number of Latina/o/x students is at least 25%. Even though HSIs enroll a significant portion of Latina/o/x students, they are still considered PWIs if they do not enroll more than 50% of Students of Color. Nevertheless, at least a third of Latina/o/x students attend PWIs with less than 25% of Latina/o/x students enrolled. Most Latina undergraduates enroll at public two-year institutions (54.5%), and 36% enroll at public or private 4-year institutions (Excelencia in Education, 2019). A private, 4-year PWI with less than 25% Latina/o/x enrollment was the research setting for this study.

Latina undergraduates have made strides in higher education because they are committed to their education, have agency and a vision for their future goals (Delgado

Bernal, 2002; Gloria et al., 2005; Kiyama, 2018; McWhirter et al., 2013). Latinas enter college with strengths and a wealth of knowledge they have learned within their homes and communities (Aragon, 2018; Delgado Bernal, 2001, Kiyama, 2010). Once in college Latina undergraduates draw on the assets and strengths of their culture and family to survive and persist in higher education (Aragon, 2018; Delgado Bernal, 2001; Kiyama, 2010). Delgado Bernal (2002) argued the perceived deficits of Latina/o/x students, such as,

limited English proficiency, Chicano and/or Mexicano cultural practices, or too many nonuniversity-related responsibilities—can be understood within a Chicana feminist perspective as cultural assets or resources that Chicana/Chicano students bring to formal educational environments (p. 113).

Latina/o/x students draw on their knowledge from home, such as being bilingual, bicultural, and committed to their families and communities to navigate challenges in the college environment (Delgado Bernal, 2002). Latina undergraduates challenge the negative stereotypes others may have about them by embracing their identities and seeing them as positive, such as their ability to communicate in both Spanish and English (Barajas & Pierce, 2001; Conchas & Acevedo, 2020; Delgado Bernal, 2002). Latina undergraduates are holders and creators of knowledge, yet higher education institutions have failed to leverage this knowledge. Instead, many higher education professionals continue to view Latina undergraduates from a deficit perspective rather than an asset-based perspective (Delgado-Bernal, 2002). In this research, I centered the values and strengths of Latina undergraduates.

At PWIs, Latina/o/x students face unique challenges navigating higher education because whiteness embeds itself in the institutional structures. Racially and ethnically marginalized students experience challenges at PWIs because these institutions were originally and intentionally created to serve white men (Patton, 2015). During their time at PWI's, Latina/o/x students experience interpersonal and institutional racial microaggressions and are exposed to racist jokes, which question their academic abilities, demean their ethnic identities, and dismiss their cultural knowledge (McCabe, 2009; Yosso et al., 2009). Battling with “racial microaggressions drains the energies and enthusiasms of Latino/a students, leaving them feeling like outsiders within their own universities” (Yosso et al., 2009, p. 680). As a result of these experiences, Latina/o/x students do not feel accepted at PWIs. Latina/o/x students at PWIs experience stress and increased feelings of depression because of this marginalization, isolation, and a lack of diversity in the faculty, administration, student body, and curriculum (Arbona & Jimenez, 2014). Their white peers benefit from the negative stereotypes perpetuated against Latina/o/x students. As such, white students have little incentive to challenge the stereotypes facing their Latina/o/x peers (Conchas & Acevedo, 2020). Latina/o/x students are then further marginalized, and it is difficult for them to find support to achieve their goals.

Latinas have been outpacing their male counterparts in higher education enrollment for the last few decades, yet, they still face unique challenges in the college environment due to the intersection of their race, ethnicity, and gender identity (Garriott et al., 2019; Gonzalez et al., 2004; Liang et al., 2017; Rodriguez et al., 2022; Rodriguez et al., 2000). Latina undergraduates report being viewed as submissive, docile,



hypersexualized, exotic, and lacking goals other than reproducing children (Kiyama, 2018; McCabe, 2009; Rodriguez et al., 2000). As a result of these stereotypes, Latinas report facing gendered racial microaggressions and low expectations from their faculty and peers (Acevedo et al., 2021; Garriott et al., 2019; Rodriguez et al., 2022; Rodriguez et al., 2000). Latina undergraduates explained how these gendered racial microaggressions contributed to feeling unsafe, disrespected, and excluded (Garriott et al., 2019; Rodriguez et al., 2022). Furthermore, Latina undergraduates internalized stereotypes about themselves, which contributed to their self-doubt in their own abilities (Arbona & Jimenez, 2014; Rodriguez et al., 2000). The misunderstanding of the goals and capabilities of Latinas indicates higher education institutions do not have an adequate understanding of Latina undergraduates' values and aspirations.

Furthermore, when Latinas enter college, they are navigating two separate incongruent worlds, their Latina/o/x culture and community and the college environment (Cano & Castillo, 2010; Castellanos & Gloria, 2007; Castillo et al., 2004; Castillo et al., 2015; Gloria et al., 2005; Lara, 2002). Latina undergraduates experience bodymindspirit fragmentation because they are forced to prioritize their minds and suppress emotions to succeed in an environment that centers white American values (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007; Lara, 2002). In particular, Latina undergraduates attending PWIs often feel forced to acculturate, the process of adopting the white American norms and values of the institution to succeed in the college environment (Cano & Castillo, 2010; Castillo et al., 2015).

Latinas desire to achieve academic and professional success; however, research has found white American values alone do not drive Latina success in higher education.

Latina undergraduates place importance on their Latina/o/x cultural values of *familismo*, *comunidad*, and *espiritualidad*, collaboration, interdependence, and group-importance (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007; Castellanos & Gloria, 2008; Triana et al., 2020). *Familismo*, a Latina/o/x cultural value, emphasizes closeness and commitment to family, including putting the family's needs first before individual needs (Sy & Romero, 2008). In addition, *familismo* includes loyalty to family, including family in decision making, supporting family members financially, and participating in household duties (Pertuz, 2018).

*Comunidad*, closely related to *familismo*, is defined as “the caring for and responsibility to community” (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007, p. 385). In their research, Conchas and Acevedo (2020) found that Latina/o/x undergraduates “redefine success to include ensuring that their communities also have access to higher education pathways (p. 22).” *Comunidad* and *familismo* are also closely related to preferring collaboration over competition, interdependence over autonomy, and group importance over individual achievement (Castellanos & Gloria et al., 2007; Castillo et al., 2004).

*Espiritualidad* is the belief that a higher power provides a sense of purpose and meaning (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007; Castellanos & Gloria, 2008). Furthermore, cultural spirituality encompasses the idea that Latina/o/x individuals draw on their cultural values, such as *familismo* and *comunidad*, to provide them meaning and the ability to cope with challenges (Triana et al., 2020). Latina/o/x individuals also value interconnectedness meaning the “individual is inseparable from the physical and social environment in which he/she[they] lives (Castellanos & Gloria, 2008, p. 201). As such, Latina undergraduates do not separate their individual goals from their family and community and often connect their self-defined goals and post-undergraduate outcomes to their Latina/o/x values of

*familismo, comunidad, and espiritualidad* (Castillo et al., 2004; Conchas & Acevedo, 2020; Gonzales, 2012; Perez Huber, 2017; Sanchez et al., 2018; Storlie et al., 2016; Sy & Romero, 2008; Triana et al., 2020).

As a result of the collision of clashing values in the higher education environment, Latina undergraduates experience a bodymindspirit split, which is detrimental to their well-being and causes them to feel psychological distress and isolation (Cano & Castillo, 2010; Castillo et al., 2004; Castillo et al., 2015; Mayorga et al., 2018). To heal the fragment, Latinas learn how to balance their value systems with those they encounter in higher education (Lara, 2002).

### **Measuring Student Success in Higher Education**

As mentioned above, when Latinas enter higher education, they are entering spaces that uphold dominant ideologies centered on whiteness that does not always serve them, such as dominant measures of success. Higher education institutions do not have one clear indicator of what it means for a student to be “successful.” Most higher education researchers and practitioners agree that student success in college is difficult to define (McPherson & Schapiro, 2008). Student success has been described as an “amorphous construct that broadly incorporates a broad range of educational outcomes from degree attainment to moral development” (York et al., 2015, p. 1). However, most colleges and universities consider degree completion the most agreed-upon measure of student success (Kuh et al., 2006). However, success in college, including the emphasis on degree attainment, can vary depending on the student and the institution's mission and values (Breneman, 2008; Smith, 2008). Some of the most common measures used to measure student success are academic achievement, student engagement, student

satisfaction, acquisition of knowledge and skills, persistence, attainment of learning goals, and performance after college (Kuh et al., 2006). Most research equates student success to academic achievement measured by student grades and GPA (York et al., 2015). The next most common measures used to determine student success are critical thinking, retention, skills acquisition, and student engagement (York et al., 2015). Traditional measures of success also include post-graduation achievements, such as graduate school enrollment, grades on competency tests, employment after college, and salary post-college (Kuh et al., 2006). Some additional measures of success beyond academic achievement include civic engagement, cognitive development, healthier lifestyles, and becoming lifelong learners (Kuh et al., 2006). These factors broaden the student success literature; however, they do not reflect how students have defined success for themselves.

Furthermore, the institution's mission, values, and expectations influence how college students understand what success in higher education means-- not their own values and expectations. This is problematic because higher education institutions are "overwhelmingly white terrain in terms of physical representation of white students and symbolically in terms of curriculum, campus policies, and campus spaces" (Patton, 2015, p. 320). As such, the institution's values and expectations center on whiteness and not Latina values. Within higher education research, there has been a rise in measuring student success by student satisfaction with the college experience. Students are asked about their impressions of the institutional quality, overall satisfaction with their experience, and their comfort in the college environment (Kuh et al., 2006). However, students' needs inform much of these standards, and much of this data comes from

national surveys representative of the dominant student population and not the specific needs of Latinas (Kuh et al., 2005; Rendón, 2006). This can lead to policies and practices that do not center historically marginalized students.

A few researchers (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007; Rendón, 2006) have called for more culturally relevant measures of success in higher education for Latina/o/x students. Yet, the vast majority of research focused on Latina/o/x student success are quantitative studies utilizing traditional outcome measures, such as student grades, persistence, and completion of a certificate or degree (Crisp et al., 2015). These outcomes link to the students' sociocultural characteristics, academic self-confidence, coping skills, pre-college academic experiences, recent college experiences, internal motivation, interactions with supportive individuals, satisfaction with campus climate, and the institutional type. While these measures are important to understand, the unique values and experiences of Latinas are not accounted for when considering how to measure their success in higher education.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Current student success outcomes in higher education focus largely on quantitative measures, such as retention and graduation rates, which center the institution's goals and values and connect to white dominant values. These success outcomes do not account for Latina/o/x values or Latinas' own measures of success (Crisp et al., 2015). Higher education institutions most commonly utilize quantitative measures of success because they are the most accessible (Kuh et al., 2016). However, when relying only on quantitative metrics, Latina undergraduate student voices are silenced, and their experiences and values are not accounted for (Rendón, 2006).

Similarly, most research on Latina/o/x student success has focused on traditional student success outcome measures, such as student grades, persistence, and completion of a certificate or degree (Crisp et al., 2015). Current research on Latina/o/x student success still overwhelmingly relies on “ethnocentric theoretical frameworks and data from national datasets [that] continue to limit scholars’ examination/use of more culturally relevant experiences,” which accounts for Latinx cultural values and experiences (Crisp et al., 2015 p. 264). There is a need to examine how Latina undergraduates define success for themselves more thoroughly.

Furthermore, research has found that Latina undergraduates experience increased feelings of depression and psychological distress because of racially hostile campus environments and experiences with discrimination at the intersection of racial and gender identity (Arbona & Jimenez, 2014; Cerezo & Chang, 2013; Gloria et al., 2005). Due to the cultural incongruities and racially hostile campus environments Latinas are exposed to in college, researchers (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007) have argued Latinas may graduate and claimed a success by the institution. However, they graduate exhausted and with diminished self-worth. Many Latina undergraduates have learned how to navigate the challenges of higher education and reach the goal of graduating. However, higher education institutions have not accounted for how their goals connect to their values and well-being. There is a need to align student success outcomes with Latina undergraduates’ values so that they can thrive.

Latinas have increased their enrollment in higher education. Yet, only 18.5% of Latinas have completed a Bachelor’s Degree or higher, the lowest reported completion of women from all racial and ethnic groups (Espinosa et al., 2019). If higher education

institutions do define and measure success on graduation rates, this data indicates higher education administrators are not adequately supporting Latinas in achieving this indicator of success. While there are Latina undergraduates at colleges and universities who can navigate the higher education system and graduate, success by the institution's definition, it is unknown if the institution is supporting Latinas in reaching their own self-defined goals connected to their Latina/o/x values. There is a need to explore the goals of Latina undergraduates to understand how they determine and measure their success. Rather than relying on only dominant measures of success based on white American values, higher education professionals should center the Latina student voice by listening to how she defines success for herself.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Current student success outcomes and most of the research focused on Latina student success utilize dominant measures of success, such as retention and graduation rates, that connect to the institution's values (Crisp et al., 2015). Little research has explored how Latina undergraduates define their own success in higher education, particularly at 4-year PWIs. To better support Latina undergraduates in achieving their own definitions of success, there is a need to understand how Latina undergraduates define and measure success for themselves in higher education and what shaped this understanding. This understanding can lead to higher education institutions, in particular 4-year PWIs, to better support Latinas' becoming *exitosas*, successful, on their own terms.

I used a critical qualitative research approach to address the abovementioned problem adequately. A critical qualitative approach to research operates with the

understanding that oppression reproduces in society through the domination and subordination of certain groups over others, recognizes that data is touted as objective though it is the reflection of dominant values and that mainstream research reproduces oppression based on gender, race, and class (Pasque et al. 2012). To challenge these assumptions, critical qualitative researchers must “emphasize working *with* historically marginalized individuals and communities to document, publicize, and resist oppressive conditions that contribute to discriminatory educational environments and outcomes” and acknowledge “the tangled web of political, economic, social and historical factors that create and reinscribe repressive power regimes” (p. 28). Guided by critical qualitative research, I conducted my research in *comunidad* with Latina undergraduates attending a 4-year PWI in the Western U.S. to document and share their experiences in higher education and their ideologies of success. In this research, I asked Latina undergraduates attending a 4-year private PWI in the Western U.S. to share their unique experiences and perspectives because they can provide insight into their own student success beliefs. Higher education institutions are structured to oppress and silence historically marginalized student populations, including Latinas, and this research gave voice to Latina undergraduates.

Critical qualitative research also seeks to collaborate with participants to achieve social justice and equity within education (Pasque et al., 2012). Using a *testimonio* methodology, a form of narrative inquiry, which enables Latinas to “document and/or theorize their own experiences of struggle, survival, and resistance, as well as that of others” with an ally and strives to “bring to light a wrong, a point of view or an urgent call for action” (Reyes & Curry Rodriguez, 2012, p. 532), allowed for Latina



undergraduates to bring awareness of injustices and oppressive structures within higher education with the goal of higher education becoming more equitable and just for Latina undergraduates (Perez Huber, 2009; Delgado Bernal et al., 2012). Rather than blaming Latina undergraduates for their failure not to achieve dominant measures of success, their *testimonios* exposed systemic and institutionalized oppression that permeates higher education (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012). In this research, I asked Latina undergraduates to share how their higher education institution supported them. They also shared their ideas for how higher education institutions can transform their current policies, programming, and curriculum to better support Latina undergraduates in reaching their self-defined goals. My ultimate goal for this research was to align student success outcomes with the values of Latinas to allow them to reach their self-defined goals. With a better understanding of Latina undergraduates' student success beliefs, higher education institutions will have better knowledge to adequately support Latina undergraduates in becoming *exitosas* on their own terms.

Furthermore, a *testimonio* can also be a healing process as *testimonialistas* can reclaim their stories and become empowered (The Latina Feminist Group, 2001; Perez Huber, 2009). In her research with Latina undergraduates, Perez Huber (2009) found *testimonios* provided her participants a space to reflect, fully share their stories, and celebrate overcoming struggles. She explained a *testimonio* as “a verbal journey of a witness who speaks to reveal the racial, classed, gendered, and nativist injustices [participants] have suffered as a means of healing, empowerment, and advocacy for a more humane present and future” (p. 644). By sharing our *testimonios* with one another in the research process, which included the challenges Latina undergraduates face

navigating their PWI to achieve their self-defined goals, participants were validated and empowered to strive towards success as they envisioned it for themselves.

### **Research Questions**

To address the purpose of this study, this research study utilized *testimonio* methodology grounded in LatCrit and Chicana Feminism to explore how Latina undergraduates attending a 4-year private predominantly white institution in the Western U.S. understand and define their own success in higher education and the support they have received from their institution to achieve their self-defined goals. The research questions guiding this study were:

- 1) How do Latina undergraduates attending a 4-year predominantly white institution define and measure their own success in higher education? What shaped this understanding?
- 2) What support have Latina undergraduates received from their 4-year predominantly white institution to achieve their self-defined goals?

The first question centered Latina undergraduates to understand how they measure their own success in college and what shaped this understanding. The second question asked Latinas to share how their PWI has supported them in achieving their self-defined goals. Together, these questions centered the voices of Latinas to redefine traditional success outcomes in higher education to measures that more accurately reflect Latina values and experiences.

## **Theoretical Frameworks- LatCrit & Chicana Feminism**

Latina undergraduates at PWIs were centered through this research to better align student success outcomes with their values and goals. Chicana Feminism and LatCrit both challenge dominant Eurocentric ideologies by centering the experiences of Latinas (Delgado Bernal, 1998; Villalpando, 2004). LatCrit accounts for the historical and current experiences of Latinas and seeks to make higher education more equitable and just (Villalpando, 2004). I utilized LatCrit to challenge current measures of success embedded in whiteness and demand that these measures better align with the experiences and values of Latina undergraduates. Chicana Feminism focuses on the experiences of Chicana women at the intersections of their multiple marginalized identities (Delgado Bernal, 1998). I utilized Chicana Feminism to focus on the experience within the Latina undergraduate as she balances her own ideologies of success with that of the institution and develops a way to integrate her bodymindspirit (Lara, 2002). Together, LatCrit and Chicana Feminism grounded my study by centering the experiences and voices of Latinas to challenge and redefine student success outcomes.

LatCrit is a theoretical framework derived from Critical Race Theory (CRT), which began as a movement of legal scholars who questioned the ability of Civil Rights law to combat racism. Early CRT scholars developed “new theories and strategies...to combat the subtler forms of racism that were gaining ground” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 4). CRT moved from legal studies to many other disciplines, including education. Solórzano and Yosso (2002) built on the role of CRT in education. They argued CRT,

advances a strategy to foreground and account for the role of race and racism in education and works toward the elimination of racism as part of a larger goal of opposing or eliminating other forms of subordination based on gender, class, sexual orientation, and national origin (p. 25).

By utilizing a LatCrit framework with similar goals to CRT, I demonstrated how student success outcomes are part of a higher education system that institutionalizes racism by centering white values.

LatCrit is an extension of CRT and operates under similar tenets (Valdes, 1996). LatCrit was developed to account for the unique experiences Latina/o/x individuals in U.S. society encounter. LatCrit encompasses language, ethnicity, culture, identity, phenotype, and sexuality of Latina/o/x individuals (Hernández-Truyol, 1997; Villalpando, 2004). LatCrit acknowledges that Latina/o/x is a pan-ethnicity that encompasses many ethnicities, cultures, and other identities (Valdes, 1996). LatCrit also examines the intersections of racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of oppression, which allows for the concerns of Latinas to be addressed and for new theories to develop that center the Latina experience (Hernández-Truyol, 1997; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). Furthermore, LatCrit allows researchers to recognize the racially discriminatory practices and policies enacted in higher education and seeks to expose and dismantle these practices in favor of higher education institutions becoming more racially equitable (Villalpando, 2004). I further explain the tenets of LatCrit in Chapter 2.

Chicana Feminism focuses on the unique struggles and challenges Chicana women face (Delgado Bernal, 1998). Traditional feminist perspectives focused on the needs of white middle-upper class women, leaving out the experiences of Women of Color. Chicana Feminism highlights the multiple experiences of oppression Chicanas

face based on her race and ethnicity, gender, and class (Vera & De los Santos, 2005). By using a Chicana feminist perspective, I was able to focus on the experience of the Latina/Chicana at the intersections of her multiple marginalized (gender, race/ethnicity, and class) identities.

Gloria Anzaldua (1987) developed the foundation for Chicana Feminism in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, where she discussed the complexity of the Chicana experience. Anzaldua explained that the *mestiza*, a woman of mixed ancestry like the Chicana, lives in the borderlands, “a vague and undetermined place created by emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in constant transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants” (p. 25). Those who live in the borderlands are *atravesados* and represent those deemed to not be “normal” by the dominant groups. The *atravesados* have no power, and “the only legitimate inhabitants are those in power, the whites and those who align themselves with whites” (p. 26). To gain power, the *mestiza* feels pressure to assimilate. Within herself, the *mestiza* undergoes a battle of her opposing cultures as Anzaldua explains, “within us and within *la cultura Chicana*, commonly held beliefs of the white culture attack commonly held beliefs of the Mexican culture, and both attack commonly held beliefs of the Indigenous culture” (p. 100). The *mestiza* is torn between both cultures and constantly feels an inner conflict to decide whether or not to assimilate to the dominant culture (Anzaldua, 2002; Vera & De los Santos, 2005). The *mestiza* “straddles cultures, races, languages, nations, sexualities, and spiritualities -- that is, living with ambivalence while balancing opposing powers” (Delgado Bernal, 2001, p. 626). Chicanas/Latinas experience stress as they strive to balance multiple cultures and

identities. Anzaldua (1987) refers to this clash of cultures as *un choque*, “the coming together of two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference” (p. 100).

To cope, *mestizas* develop a tolerance for ambiguity, which makes them flexible and adaptable as they navigate and juggle multiple cultures (Anzaldua, 1987; Delgado Bernal, 1998). The *mestiza* is constantly moving in and out of different cultures and adapting as she transitions. Chicanas can heal the split between opposing cultures by developing a *mestiza consciousness*. Operationalizing *mestiza consciousness* in her work with Chicana college students, Delgado Bernal (2001) explains it as “how a student balances, negotiates and draws from her bilingualism, biculturalism, commitment to communities, and spiritualities in relationship to her education” (p. 627). Drawing from this work, I was able to understand the process by which Latina undergraduates experience and navigate the tensions at PWIs and the ideologies of success thrust onto them by the institution.

Extending her own work, Anzaldua and Keating (2015) explained the seven stages of the path to *conocimiento*, which translates to “path to knowing,” a process of deep awareness that leads to “awakening, insights, understandings, realizations, courage, and the motivation to engage in concrete ways with the potential to bring us into compassion interactions” (p. 19). The ultimate goals of *conocimiento* are healing and integration of the bodymindspirit. Anzaldua and Keating (2015) provided the story of Coyolxauhqui, a Mesoamerican moon goddess, who was decapitated and had pieces of her body scattered in multiple places by her brother Huitzilopochtli. Coyolxauhqui became a symbol for “the process of emotional, psychical dismemberment, splitting mind/body/spirit/soul, and the creative work of putting all the pieces together in a new

form...a labor of re-visioning and re-membering” (p. 124). As such, Anzaldua and Keating argue that Latinas must go through a process of putting back together their bodymindspirit. Lara (2002) argues when Latinas go to college they experience a bodymindspirit fragmentation because they must prioritize the rational mind and suppress emotions to succeed in an environment that centers white American values. However, this split is detrimental to the well-being of the Latina student. To heal this fragment experienced by Latinas, they must unlearn white American epistemologies, integrate the sacred and the profane, spiritual and the political, and be able to think and feel at the same time. The process of *conocimiento*, then, is a process to reintegrate bodymindspirit, to rejoin the severed pieces of oneself, to put Coyolxauhqui back together again, which can then lead to healing for the Latina undergraduate. In Chapter 2, I further outline the stages of *conocimiento*.

### **Key Terminology**

In this section, key terms used throughout my study are defined to provide context, clarity, and consistency for the reader.

*Latina/o/x, Latina, Hispanic* –The U.S. Office of Management and Budget defines “Hispanic or Latino” to be individuals who identify as “Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race” (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020, para. 1). Even though these terms are often used interchangeably, Hispanic is associated with individuals from Spain or Spanish-speaking countries and Latino encompasses all people from Latin America, including Mexico, Central and South American and the Caribbean, and not only those who are Spanish-speaking.

In 2015, 50% of individuals identifying as Latina/o/x or Hispanic primarily described themselves by their ethnic origin (i.e., Mexican, Cuban, Puerto Rican), and 23% used the term Hispanic or Latino. Of that 23%, 32% preferred to use the term Hispanic, 15% preferred Latino, and 51% had no preference between the two terms (Lopez et al., 2020). In recent years, the gender-neutral term Latinx has gained popularity among college students (Salinas & Lozano, 2019). However, in 2019 only three percent of U.S. Latino or Hispanic adults used this term. The term Latinx is most commonly used by Latina or Hispanic identifying women in the 18 to 29 age group, with 14% of this population identifying as Latinx (Lopez et al., 2020). For my participants, I used the term they preferred to self-identify. Even though I used these broad terms, I am mindful that the Latina/Latino/Latinx and Hispanic population is not a monolith and encompasses multiple racial and ethnic backgrounds, experiences, and histories.

*Latina/o/x Values* - When referring to Latina/o/x values, the most commonly cited values from the literature refer to collaboration, interdependence, group importance, and spirituality (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007). Latinas also place value on *familismo*, which is the importance of and loyalty to family, *comunidad*, which emphasizes collectivism, and cultural spirituality (Triana et al., 2020). When speaking about Latina values, I referred to these ideals. I also asked the participants to share how they define their own values and which Latina/o/x values are most salient in their lives.

*Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs)* - The vast majority of higher education institutions in the U.S. were created to serve white men, who mainly were studying to become clergy and businessmen (Patton, 2015). Due to U.S. demographics, there are now Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) that enroll 25% or more Latina/o/x students



(Excelencia in Education, 2019). HSIs can vary in their Latina/o/x population from 25% to 100% and still be considered a PWI if less than half the students are Students of Color. In this study, Predominantly White Institution (PWI) was used to describe an institution in which the majority of students enrolled are white. I was also mindful of the historical development of higher education institutions and how whiteness as a construct embeds itself in the values, policies, and curriculum at these institutions (Patton, 2015).

*Student Success* – In this research study, I asked Latina undergraduates to define success in higher education for themselves. The Latina undergraduates in this study identified some of the more dominant measures of success, such as graduation, academic achievement, student engagement, student satisfaction, acquisition of knowledge and skills, persistence, attainment of learning goals, and performance after college (Kuh et al., 2006; York et al., 2015). This research acknowledged those success indicators and also broadened the definition of student success focused on Latina undergraduates.

*Testimonio* and *Testimonialista* - *Testimonio* is the Spanish word for testimony. *Testimonios* are the act of sharing the stories of the lived experiences of Latina/o/x individuals (The Latina Feminist Group, 2001). In education research, *testimonio* can be a methodological, pedagogical, and political tool to address educational inequities faced by Chicana/o/x and Latina/o/x communities (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012). Asking participants to share their *testimonio* is a data collection method. *Testimonio* as a methodology is a way for a collective to share their stories and to push back on Eurocentric research methods by centering the one telling the story, the *testimonialista*, as the holder and creator of knowledge (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012). In this research, I

referred to *testimonio* as both a form of method and methodology and the *testimonialista* as the participants in my study who shared their stories.

### **Significance of the Study**

This research study is significant because it centers Latina undergraduates at PWIs, a continuously growing population in higher education, using a *testimonio* methodology to understand their beliefs about success better. Through *testimonio*, Latinas shared their experiences, and the listener of the *testimonio*, in this case, higher education researchers and practitioners, can be moved to act to transform traditional success measures to be more validating and affirming for Latina undergraduates. Currently, there is no research utilizing *testimonio* to understand and expand student success measures and outcomes. *Testimonio* allowed for broadening student success literature by affirming the Latina experience (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012). In particular, this research provided insight into how Latina undergraduates define and measure their own success. Latina undergraduates are not often asked about their experiences in higher education, and through providing their *testimonio*, they had an opportunity to share what success meant to them in their own words.

Furthermore, this research is significant because utilizing *testimonio* methodology provides an opportunity for Latina undergraduates to heal the bodymindspirit split experienced in higher education (Calderon et al., 2012; Delgado Bernal et al., 2012). Their *testimonios* exposed how traditional measures of success do not fully capture Latina undergraduates' experiences and assisted Latinas in bridging their different beliefs about student success. Through sharing their *testimonios*, Latina undergraduates began to heal their bodymindspirit split because they realized others had

similar experiences and began to feel empowered by sharing their stories (Calderon et al., 2012; Elenes, 2013; Perez Huber, 2017).

Finally, this study is significant because a better understanding of Latina undergraduates can contribute to developing programming, practices, and policies to support Latina undergraduates in achieving success on their own terms. Higher education institutions currently emphasize success measures based on the institution's values and goals embedded in whiteness and the dominant students' college experience. The Latina undergraduate experience and needs are unique and must be further explored. This study provided higher education researchers and practitioners an opportunity to hear from Latina undergraduates directly and to implement change based on their needs.

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I provided background on Latinas in higher education and how student success has been measured. In my statement of the problem, I argued how current student success outcomes are based on dominant measures embedded in white values, which do not center the experiences and values of Latina undergraduates. I articulated the purpose of this study, which is to utilize a critical qualitative methodology in the form of *testimonio* to center Latina undergraduates at a 4-year private PWI in the Western U.S. to understand better how they define and measure their own success in higher education. I also shared my research questions that guided this study. I provided background on the theoretical frameworks, LatCrit and Chicana Feminism, which grounded my study, and provided definitions of key terms used throughout this research. Finally, I shared the significance of this study. In the next chapter, I provide a review of the literature relevant to the themes explored in this study.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

I conducted this research to understand better how Latina undergraduates attending a 4-year private PWI in the Western U.S. define and measure success for themselves in higher education and the support they have received from their PWI to achieve their self-defined goals. In this literature review, I provide an overview of the dominant student success narrative and the research focused on Latina student success and the Latina undergraduate college experience. Utilizing a LatCrit framework, in the first part of the literature review, I focus on how higher education institutions measure, define and have institutionalized dominant student success outcomes, such as graduation and retention rates. In the next section, I provide an overview of research by scholars (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007; Rendón, 2006; Rendón et al., 2018) who have challenged traditional measures of student success outcomes by centering Latina/o/x students. Drawing from LatCrit and Chicana Feminism, I then provide an overview of research focused on the Latina undergraduate experience in higher education. I also provide an overview of the values held by the Latina/o/x community, including *familismo*, *comunidad*, and *espiritualidad*, and how these connect to Latina student success beliefs. In the final section, I share how this research extends the literature on Latina student success by centering Latina undergraduate voices and experiences through *testimonios*.

## Measuring Student Success

A key tenet of both CRT and LatCrit is that race and racism are embedded in all aspects of U.S. society, including higher education (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Drawing from CRT, LatCrit posits racism is endemic in U.S. society, meaning that “racism is ordinary...the usual way society does business, the common, everyday experience of most people of color in this country” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 7). Due to racism being endemic and ordinary, it is difficult to cure or address (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). CRT posits racism is permanent and intersects with other forms of oppression, such as discrimination based on class and gender (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). LatCrit further emphasizes that for Latina/o/x individuals, race and racism intersect with other identities of Latina/o/x individuals, such as language, generation status, gender, sexuality, and class (Villalpando, 2004). LatCrit scholars argue oppression is intersectional and exponential. As such, Latinas face oppression at the intersection of both their ethnicity and gender. Latinas are othered in the dominant U.S. culture due to their ethnicity and are othered in the Latina/o/x community based on their gender (Hernández-Truyol, 1997).

Another tenet of CRT and LatCrit is that they both challenge dominant ideologies, including “the traditional claims that educational institutions make toward objectivity, meritocracy, color blindness, and race neutrality in U.S. society.” CRT and LatCrit scholars argue traditional claims of equality are a mask that protects the power and privilege of dominant groups in the U.S. (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). This restrictive view insists on equality for all and can only address blatant forms of racism rather than the more systemic and subtle forms of racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Dominant ideologies built to serve educated, straight, white men are a guise of equality. Hernández-

Truyol (1997) argues, “the concept of ‘the straight white Christian man of property [as] the ethical universal’ is other worldly to the Latina” (p. 921). As a result, policies and practices developed based on the dominant groups in society subordinate the identity, agency, and potential of Latinas (Hernández-Truyol, 1997). Higher education purports that Latinas have the same opportunities to succeed as white students. LatCrit challenges this by demonstrating that Latina/o/x students are harmed by dominant ideologies, such as dominant beliefs about student success (Villalpando, 2004).

LatCrit scholars emphasize the importance of examining the historical and cultural context in which policies and practices are shaped to understand how they are connected to race and racism and uphold a dominant narrative (Villalpando, 2004). By examining this context, CRT and LatCrit “expose the ways in which so-called race-neutral institutional policies and practices perpetuate racial or ethnic subordination” (Villalpando, 2004, p. 42). Student success in higher education is shaped by a dominant narrative. In this section, I present the literature most often referred to when discussing student success in higher education, how colleges and universities institutionalize this dominant student success narrative, and how Latina/o/x student success has been framed and conceptualized.

### **The Dominant Student Success Narrative**

As evidenced by literature dating back to the 1930s, student success has been connected to college retention and graduation. In the 1930s, the federal government became interested in student mortality, the rate at which students did not continue in college (Venit, 2016). After the GI Bill in the 1940s, the growth in college enrollment continued, and more colleges became concerned with student attrition (Venit, 2016). In

the 1970s, research on student success focused on student retention, defined as whether an institution would be able to re-enroll a student from year to year. Tinto's theory on student integration into the college environment highly influenced student success during this time which posited that students must go through a process of leaving behind their homes and communities to fully incorporate into the college environment (Tinto, 1988). Tinto acknowledged this process is stressful for college students as students must reject their family's values, but emphasized it is necessary for their continuation and retention in college. Tinto's argument affirmed that if a student cannot integrate into the college environment, then it is their own fault. Researchers such as Tierney (1992), Rendón (2006), and Pidgeon (2008) have critiqued Tinto's theory because it asked Students of Color to assimilate into the dominant college environment while leaving behind their families, traditions, and cultural values to integrate into the college environment.

During the 1980's student success focused more on student enrollment, and programs were developed to support students who were not graduating in high numbers, primarily students from minoritized and low-income backgrounds. Also, during this time, student success was influenced mainly by Astin's (1997) work on student engagement, which argued that students are more likely to persist in college if they are engaged in both curricular and co-curricular programming. In the 1990s, colleges began to focus on the first-year experience and retention more than graduation. In the 2000s, colleges shifted their focus back to graduation. In recent years, there has been a rise in the emphasis on return on investment from college and connecting college to career (Venit, 2016). This brief overview provides an understanding of what higher education has emphasized in terms of student success. Furthermore, this overview demonstrates how college student

success has focused on white dominant values and has not accounted for the experiences and values of Latinas.

### **Institutionalizing Dominant Student Success Measures**

The concept of student success is difficult to define, and each institution determines how to measure student success on its campus. Most colleges and universities consider degree completion to be the most agreed upon measure of student success (Kuh et al., 2005). However, success in college, including the emphasis on degree attainment, can vary depending on the student and their goals and on the type of institution and their own mission and values. The degree of “heterogeneity [of colleges] greatly complicates any notion of evaluating success” (Smith, 2008, p. 7). Student success at a 4-year private institution may differ from a regional comprehensive institution or a community college. For example, Breneman (2008) found graduation rates were a poor measure of success at Northwestern University, which consistently has a high graduation rate. Likewise, graduation rates at a regional comprehensive institution may not accurately reflect student interests and goals. Furthermore, students live in multiple worlds, including their families and communities, when they are in college that are also shaping their goals and motivation (Rendón, 2006). Higher education institutions emphasize goals and outcomes that are different from those other worlds.

Additionally, higher education institutions have long had capitalistic aims to benefit the white upper-middle class population. Many higher education institutions were founded to educate white upper-middle-class men and to reproduce to their wealth and success (Patton, 2015). The original intent of higher education was to encourage white upper-middle class families to send their children to college by “guaranteeing their



success, wealth and production of leaders, clergy and businessmen, all of whom were white” (Patton, 2015, p. 323). Higher education is still connected to business and industry and is considered to be central to the knowledge economy (Olssen and Peters, 2005). In their article, Kuh et al. (2006) argued, “having a college degree is a hollow accomplishment if one does not acquire in the process the skills and competencies demanded by the 21st century” (p. ix). This argument leads to higher education success being measured by obtaining a job that allows for the reproduction of a capitalist society.

Higher education institutions have utilized multiple measures to determine student success, including academic achievement, student engagement, student satisfaction, learning new knowledge and skills, persistence, achieving learning outcomes, and career success (Kuh et al., 2006). Traditionally, the most commonly used factors to measure student success are academic achievement, including students’ grades, GPA, persistence, obtaining academic skills and competencies, and career success (York et al., 2015). Post-college career success has been measured by both intrinsic factors and extrinsic factors, with job attainment, salary, and promotion being the most common. These student success measures appear to be objective and race-neutral. However, simply utilizing these dominant quantitative measures does not fully capture the Latina undergraduate experience nor their values. Rendón (2006) argued:

exclusively employing quantitative approaches limits the ability to capture and ground the notion of student success in the breadth and depth of student experiences in multiple systems. Moreover, sole use of quantitative research tends to “objectify” students, effectively silencing their voices and precluding a deeper analysis of multiple meanings of success from the students’ own perspective (p. 21).

Another tenet of LatCrit is that it emphasizes the experiential knowledge of Latina/o/x individuals as “legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing and teaching about racial subordination” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 26). As such, voices of Latina/o/x individuals in the forms of narrative, counterstories, and *testimonios* are essential for the common understanding of the oppression they experience (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005). LatCrit centers Latina/o/x experiential knowledge and views Latina/o/x knowledge “as an asset, a form of community memory, a source of empowerment and strength, and not as a deficit” through LatCrit (Villalpando, 2004, p. 46). LatCrit scholars have called on higher education professionals to acknowledge that Latina/o/x individuals enter college with their own strengths and have their own agency. Latinas, in particular, “have been denied visibility, the power to speak, and the potential to be heard” (Hernández-Truyol, 1997, p. 921). Their voices, among the most marginalized, are centered through LatCrit. Thus, it is crucial to center Latina students to understand their own definitions of success better. Utilizing a LatCrit framework, higher education professionals can begin to understand how dominant measures of success that purport to be objective and race-neutral continue to benefit the dominant white student population while silencing Latina/o/x student voices and minimizing their experiences (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Villalpando, 2004).

Student success on college campuses has been the responsibility of everyone and no one at the same time. In their review of campus student success initiatives, EAB, an education technology and research firm focused on helping colleges support students from enrollment to graduation, found few divisions on college campuses dedicated solely to student success (Venit & Bevevino, 2020). Kuh et al. (2005) argued it is everyone’s

responsibility at the institution to contribute to student success. They argued institutions acculturate their students through the mission, values, and expectations to learn what success means at that institution. This is problematic because higher education institutions are steeped in whiteness, and their values are based on white American culture (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007; Patton, 2015).

While early student success theories may not be overtly racist, they also do not challenge the,

deficit-based grand narrative which excludes the experience of students of color in the framing of early theoretical perspectives, overlooks structural inequalities that have worked against low-income students and families, and fails to interrogate the assumptions regarding assimilation that underlie these perspectives (Rendón et al., 2018, p. 232).

A race-neutral approach to student success excludes the historical and political experiences of Latina/o/x populations (Rendón et al., 2018). Rendón (2006) argued that race, class, and gender must be accounted for when understanding student success.

By utilizing LatCrit, higher education scholars can begin to “recognize patterns, practices, and policies of racial inequality that continue to exist in more insidious and covert ways” (Villalpando, 2004, p. 42). The ultimate goal of LatCrit is to dismantle these practices and policies so Latina/o/x can thrive. In particular, LatCrit enables higher education scholars and practitioners to see how dominant policies and practices harm Latina undergraduates based on white American values that do not account for their unique experiences and values (Hernández-Truyol, 1997). Rather than relying on dominant student success perspectives and assuming Latina undergraduates' needs and goals, LatCrit argues for higher education professionals to ask Latina undergraduates

directly what their needs are and develop practices and policies based on those needs (Villalpando, 2004). In this research, Latina undergraduates are centered to understand better what shapes their definition of success so that they may reach their own self-defined goals without requiring them to sacrifice their own values to achieve them.

### **Centering Latina/o/x Students to Create a New Student Success Narrative**

Another tenet of CRT and LatCrit is that those who engage in these frameworks should strive toward social justice and ending all forms of oppression (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Villalpando, 2004). Like CRT, LatCrit works towards eliminating racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, and oppression based on language and immigration status (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Villalpando, 2004). As such, LatCrit moves towards action, and those who engage in LatCrit should continually develop strategies to try to address inequities (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Villalpando, 2004). Thus, higher education scholars engaging in LatCrit should seek to create programming and policies that work towards social justice and ending oppression. By adopting LatCrit, higher education professionals can also begin to develop new policies and practices, including measures and definitions of student success, that center and affirm Latina/o/x students.

There are a few higher education researchers (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007; Rendón, 2006; Rendón et al., 2018) who have proposed creating new student success measures and policies that center the Latina/o/x experiences and view their experiences as assets rather than deficits. These researchers challenged traditional success outcome measures, such as graduation and retention rates, by emphasizing how traditional metrics do not fully capture the Latina/o/x student experience. In their research, Barajas and

Pierce (2001) challenged the idea that Latina/o/x students must assimilate to achieve success. They argued,

Success is predicated on assimilation. If students do not conform to the mainstream culture, they will fail. Such an assumption precludes other possible definitions of success, such as students who may be successful academically but are still strongly tied to culture and identity that is not white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, and individualistic (p. 860).

A notion of success based on assimilation does not allow for Latina/o/x values to be centered within student success measures. A few researches have challenged traditional measures of success that asked Latina/o/x students to assimilate and have emphasized the need to center Latina/o/x students to create more culturally relevant success measures (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007; Rendón, 2006; Rendón et al., 2018). For instance, Rendón et al. (2018) argued for culturally validating student success initiatives that are “grounded in the experiences, strengths, and culture of Latino students and not on models that were framed with middle- and upper-class majority students in mind” (p. 229).

Due to the diversity of students in higher education, Rendón (2006) argued students cannot be lumped into one large group when measuring success. She stated, “researchers who ignore these complexities are operating with a bias about what constitutes the newly emerging American college student” (p. 1). As such, higher education professionals must seek to understand the nuanced experiences of college students better. Rendón (2006) suggested a more holistic model of student success should be adapted and modified based on the institution's context and its student population. Her model accounted for a student's race, class, and gender and the way students are influenced by multiple worlds of family, community, and the college environment they

are constantly moving in and out of. In addition to academics, Rendón's student success model focused on the whole person and emphasized social, emotional, and spiritual aspects of a student's development. Furthermore, Rendón put the onus of student success back onto the institution. She stated,

Once students enter college, it is the structural elements within this system which need to be changed and transformed. Accordingly, the formulation of the 'student success problem' is actually a 'higher education structural problem' where the primary locus of change is within the institution (p. 21).

Rendón (2006) argued that traditional measures of success privilege students who are from dominant backgrounds and put historically marginalized students at a disadvantage. She challenged higher education professionals to create programming and policies that view students as individuals -- each with their own hopes, dreams, and ways of knowing. To build on this work, Rendón et al. (2018) proposed a Culturally Validating Latino Student Success Framework that focuses on the assets of Latina/o/x students, aligns institutional policies with student knowledge and experiences, recognizes the historical and political experiences of Latina/o/x communities, centers equity and racial justice, creates a validating institutional culture, develops culturally relevant student support services that focus on the holistic needs of their students, utilizes culturally relevant and inclusive pedagogy in the classroom, and approaches assessment from an equity mindset that includes race, ethnicity, and gender.

Castellanos and Gloria (2007) also argued for higher education institutions to take a more holistic view of the Latina/o/x student experience, including psychological, social, and cultural dimensions. They argued colleges and universities recruit Latina/o/x students but do not account for their experiences and values when they enter the institution.

Instead, higher education institutions view Latina/o/x students as a number and believe their role in fulfilling student success stops at ensuring the student graduates. Latina/o/x students value their families and communities and see their education as an extension of these values (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007). As such, higher education institutions must find ways to connect Latina/o/x lived realities and values to their educational experiences, including their student success outcomes.

Furthermore, Latina/o/x students experience racially hostile campus climates, and curriculum that does not reflect their backgrounds and experiences, and a lack of racially and ethnically diverse faculty and staff, which result in Latina/o/x students questioning their belonging in college (Arbona & Jimenez, 2014; Yosso et al., 2009). Castellanos and Gloria (2007) argued, “if Latina/o students’ experiences are not appropriately attended it stands to reason that the end outcomes (e.g., graduation) will not truly evidence a holistic and culture-centered success” (p. 394). Instead, they argued for the infusion of *cultura*, or Latina/o/x cultural values into the college experience, including *comunidad*, *familismo*, and *espiritualidad*, so Latina/o/x students can not only graduate but also feel validated within the college environment. As such, higher education institutions should also infuse Latina/o/x values into how they measure and define student success outcomes for Latina/o/x students.

LatCrit scholars have argued for higher education professionals to create policies and programming that honors the experiential knowledge of Latina/o/x students to,

ensure that they reflect an understanding that these students have often experienced varying levels of racism, discrimination, and other forms of oppression, instead of assuming that these experiences do not exist or are unimportant to their academic success (Villalpando, 2004, p. 46).

An understanding of how Latina undergraduates define and measure success for themselves has the potential to lead to more culturally affirming and relevant programming and policies. In this study, I built on the work of Rendón (2006), Rendón et al. (2018), and Castellanos and Gloria (2007) by extending the research on student success to encompass how Latina undergraduates define and measure success for themselves.

### **The Latina Experience in Higher Education**

A LatCrit framework also argues for higher education professionals to take a deeper look into historical and contemporary contexts in which Latina/o/x individuals have been mistreated and discriminated against in the U.S. to understand Latina/o/x students' experiences in higher education (Villalpando, 2004). Villalpando (2004) argued that "in order to develop culturally relevant services and programs for Latinos, CRT and LatCrit call for a deeper understanding of the historical factors that have affected and continue to affect their lives and educational experiences" (p. 47). This includes how white supremacy and Eurocentric ideals have oppressed Latina/o/x individuals (Valdes, 1996). While the Latina/o/x community may collectively experience oppression, they also have varied experiences based on their multiple intersecting identities. Thus, the Latina/o/x experience nor the Latina experience can be essentialized (Hernández-Truyol, 1997). LatCrit calls for higher education professionals to understand better the history of Latina/o/x communities and how it informs their unique experiences. Furthermore, LatCrit requires higher education professionals to understand that Latina/o/x individuals represent a variety of backgrounds, histories, and experiences. Drawing from LatCrit, in this section, I provide an overview of the historical and current experiences of Latina



undergraduates in higher education, including their experience entering a college environment that clashes with their own Latina/o/x values, how they manage to navigate this clash, and the connection between Latina/o/x values and student success. In this section, I also explain how Latina undergraduates are on the path to *conocimiento* during their college experience and how infusing Latina/o/x values into student success can heal the bodymindspirit split they experience (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2015).

### **A Rupture: Moving from the familiar to the unknown**

Previous researchers found when Latinas entered higher education, they experienced a cultural collision (Cano & Castillo, 2010; Castillo et al., 2004; Castillo et al., 2015; Mayorga et al., 2018). Anzaldúa (1987) explained *un choque*, the clash between two incompatible frames of reference, occurs within Chicanas because they are navigating two separate and often contradictory cultures, the white American culture and the Mexican culture, that hold opposing beliefs. Similarly, when Latina undergraduates enter college, two separate cultures collide – their Latina/o/x family and community and their institution. This collision is pronounced at PWIs, where there is an increased lack of understanding of Latina/o/x culture, values, and experiences (Torres et al., 2019).

Anzaldúa and Keating (2015) further expanded on the notion of the pathway *conocimiento*. They explained that during the first stage, there is a rupture, a fragmentation that occurs, in which the individual feels “exposed, naked, disoriented, wounded, uncertain, confused and conflicted” (p. 125). This rupture occurs because the individual moves from a familiar and safe terrain to a transitional space. In this stage, the individual struggles to balance and put the pieces of Coyolxauhqui back together.

Similarly, upon entering college and experiencing this collision, Latina undergraduates

feel disoriented and distressed (Cano & Castillo, 2010; Castillo et al., 2004; Castillo et al., 2015; Mayorga et al., 2018).

Rendón (2006) argued college is much more congruent with the world of upper-middle class students, which has allowed them to integrate into the college environment easily. However, the college world and that of Latinas are incongruent, leaving them feeling isolated, alienated, and marginalized. While Latinas also want to achieve academic and professional success, research has found that white American values alone do not drive Latina success in higher education (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007). The cultural values of Latinas, collaboration, interdependence, group importance, and spirituality, drive their success and in the college environment are colliding with the dominant White American values upheld by higher education (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007).

Within psychology literature, several researchers have quantitatively studied how Latinas adapting to a higher education environment that does not align with their values can cause distress (Cano & Castillo, 2010; Castillo et al., 2004; Castillo et al., 2015; Mayorga et al., 2018). The acculturation process is the extent to which white American norms and values are adopted and the level to which individuals maintain their own culture (Cano & Castillo, 2010). Latinas undergraduates attending PWIs experienced acculturation by adopting the institution's values (Cano & Castillo, 2010). However, these values often clashed with their own familial and cultural values.

Traditional Latina gender roles further complicate the Latina undergraduate experience in higher education. The concept of *marianismo*, which emphasizes that Latinas are spiritually superior to men, humble, submissive to the demands of men, are to make sacrifices for their families, and are expected to embody the characteristics of the Virgin Mary, shapes Latina gender roles (Castillo et al., 2010). Due to all the factors it encompasses, Latinas are impacted both positively and negatively by *marianismo*. Research has found that while Latina undergraduates may hold onto traditional beliefs, their college behaviors may differ as they navigate college environments that embrace white American values (Pina-Watson et al., 2013). Latina undergraduates have experienced depressive symptoms because this clash in beliefs has led to conflict with their families. Latina undergraduates also experienced stress and tension as they gained more independence from their families by attending college (Gonzalez et al., 2004; Sy & Romero, 2008). Moreover, during college, Latinas may still be expected to be caretakers and provide for their families (Sy & Romero, 2008). Furthermore, Latinas experienced dissonance created by their families' pressure to adhere to traditional gender roles and obtain an education (Torres et al., 2019).

Latinas undergraduates can redefine their gender roles by valuing both cultural and family tradition and independence (Liang et al., 2017). Latina undergraduates reported learning about gender roles from their families, where they saw their mothers make sacrifices, be caretakers, handle finances and demonstrate strength. Influenced by their mothers, Latinas have “a desire for more autonomy...a reflection of their adoption of U.S.- based cultural norms of gender equality while also honoring traditional roles of Latina women" (p. 163). Latina undergraduates can integrate into white American culture

in their higher education institutions but not accept white American values, such as individualism and competition. White Attitudinal Marginalization is defined as this discrepancy between an individual's beliefs and behaviors with the dominant white American culture (Cano & Castillo, 2010). White Attitudinal Marginalization significantly predicts stress in Latinas (Cano & Castillo, 2010). Additionally, research has found that low enculturation, the degree to which one maintains their own cultural heritage, was a significant predictor of stress for Latina undergraduates (Cano & Castillo, 2010; Castillo et al., 2015).

Furthermore, Latinas feel pressure to navigate their cultural and family responsibilities while transitioning from college to career. They are also combatting stereotypes about themselves and redefining traditional career pathways that have been thrust upon them. Latina undergraduates are often subject to stereotypes, which suggest they are nonthreatening, submissive, exotic, and perpetual foreigners despite their generational status within the U.S. (McCabe, 2009). Regarding careers, Latinas are often expected to fulfill stereotypical roles, such as staying home and raising children (Storlie et al., 2016). However, previous research has found Latina undergraduates,

Described themselves as cultural trailblazers who break family and cultural traditions by attaining a college education and moving forward with a career uncommon to their family and cultural history. Furthermore, participants identified a sense of pride in broadening the stereotypical roles available to Latina women (Storlie et al., 2016, p. 313).

This research demonstrated Latinas experienced a collision between their values, cultures, and roles throughout their college experience, extending into their professional lives. Despite this collision, Latinas were proud they were able to be role models for their communities and challenge stereotypes about themselves.

Latina undergraduates experience college in unique ways due to their multiple marginalized identities (Acevedo et al., 2021; Barajas & Pierce, 2001; Conchas & Acevedo, 2020; Perez Huber, 2017). Chicanas are more likely than Chicanos to mention gender as an issue of inequality in the U.S. (Conchas & Acevedo, 2020). Even in high school, Latina undergraduates shared how they anticipated many barriers and challenges, including a lack of resources, lack of peer and family support, and systemic barriers to accessing and completing higher education (McWhirter et al., 2013). As a result of their multiple marginalized identities, Latinas experience oppression at the intersection of their race, ethnicity, and gender in the college environment (Acevedo et al., 2021; Barajas & Pierce, 2001). However, research has also found that Latinas have difficulty distinguishing if the discrimination they face is based on their intersectional racial and gender identities (Liang et al., 2017).

Many Latina undergraduates also report coming from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. In their study, Conchas and Acevedo (2020) found Chicanas understood structural inequalities as intersectional and were complicated by their socioeconomic class and gender. They also realized they do not have access to social and career networks that those from upper-class backgrounds have. They believed opportunities to achieve upward mobility existed but that opportunities “were only available for a small segment of privileged individuals, such as white men, while further systematically marginalizing certain identities as inferior to those deemed normative” (p. 47). Unlike Latino male undergraduates, who believed they could overcome structural barriers, Latina undergraduates believed their opportunities were limited due to structural barriers as Latina women.

Latina undergraduates, who are undocumented, have faced additional challenges (Muñoz, 2013; Perez Huber, 2017). Undocumented Latina undergraduates reported limited access to financial aid and internship opportunities and increased stress and anxiety navigating their legal status and campus resources (Muñoz, 2013). The additional stress and anxiety undocumented Latina undergraduates add to the bodymindspirit split. Undocumented Latina undergraduates have faced additional challenges in the college environment, yet they are still expected to achieve and frequently have to do so in isolation (Muñoz, 2013; Perez Huber, 2017).

### **Living in-between: Latina Undergraduates as *Nepantleras***

Drawing from the idea of liminal space, Anzaldua and Keating (2015) explained Latinas who are caught between multiple worlds live in *nepantla*, the second stage of *conocimiento*. *Nepantla*, an Indigenous word from the Nahuatl, means land in the middle or in-between space. Anzaldua and Keating (2015) argued that *nepantla* is a space where spiritual transformation and rebirth can occur. *Nepantla* is where “different perspectives come into conflict and where you question the basic ideas, tenets, and identities inherited from your family, your education, and your different cultures” (p. 127). In this space, “one can reflect critically on normative belief systems, especially as they relate to class, gender, sexuality, nationality, ethnicity, and race” (Elenes, 2013, p. 135). While in *nepantla*, individuals see double, from the perspective of one culture, then another, and eventually, a new identity emerges. As such, “*nepantleras* are threshold people: they move within and among multiple, often conflicting, worlds and refuse to align themselves exclusively with any single individual, group, or belief system” (Keating, 2006, 6). *Nepantla* is where the individual begins questioning different belief systems and

perspectives. In *nepantla*, the individual learns to see from the perspective of multiple worldviews, that of their own ethnic culture and the dominant white culture, and do not necessarily align themselves to one view.

Anzaldua and Keating (2015) explained *nepantla* as a painful space of confusion, anxiety, and loss of control. Even though this space is painful, it is an important space where transformation begins to occur (Anzaldua & Keating, 2015). In this space, Latinas begin to make sense of their contradicting identities as colonizers and colonized (Calderon et al., 2012). Anzaldua (2015) utilized her experience as one of few Chicanas in a doctoral program to explain *nepantla*. Being othered in her doctoral program and not at home with her family made her feel stuck in a liminal space. She explained, “each separate reality and its belief system vies with others to convert you to its worldview” (p. 126).

In their research with Chicana/o/x undergraduates, Conchas and Acevedo (2020) extended Anzaldua’s work to develop the Framework Atravesada/o/xs Nepantleando (FAN). When applying FAN, they found Chicana/o/x were *atravesadas/os/x*, those on the margins who, while living in *nepantla*, could access *la facultad*.

Anzaldua (1987) explained

*la facultad* is the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface. It is an instant ‘sensing,’ a quick perception arrived at without conscious reasoning. It is an acute awareness mediated by the part of the psyche that does not speak, that communicates in images and symbols, which are the faces of feelings, that is, behind which feelings reside/hide (p. 60).

Those that have been most marginalized in society, women, Queer people, and People of Color, are those most likely to have a heightened sense of awareness because it helps

them to survive in oppressive environments (Anzaldua, 1987; Conchas & Acevedo, 2020).

Similar to being in *nepantla*, Latina undergraduates face challenges in college due to their multiple marginalized identities. However, Latina undergraduates have been able to navigate higher education to overcome the barriers they face (Barajas & Pierce, 2001; Cejda, 2010; Crisp et al., 2015; Gloria et al., 2005; Gloria & Castellanos, 2012; Rendón et al., 2018). Anzaldua (1987) referenced her Shadow-Beast as a way Chicana women and Queer individuals could push back on white dominant cultural norms and sexist beliefs within the Chicano culture. Anzaldua (1987) defined her Shadow-Beast as

part of me that refuses to take orders from outside authorities. It refuses to take any orders from my conscious will, it threatens the sovereignty of my rulership. It is part of me that hates constraints of any kind, even those self-imposed. At the least hint of my limitations on my time or space by others, it kicks out with both feet. Bolts (p. 38).

Latina undergraduates draw on their own Shadow-Beast to cope in higher education by pushing back on dominant white perspectives that subordinate Latina/o/x individuals and harmful aspects of the Latina/o/x culture that subordinate women. To reach their higher education goals, Latina undergraduates demonstrate resilience and draw from their own knowledge and strengths (Delgado Bernal, 2001).

Latina undergraduates believe they can overcome academic barriers to achieve their educational goals (Gloria et al., 2005). They have been able to challenge stereotypes about them. They are “acutely aware of the difference between their own educational ability, aspirations and expectations, and the perceptions that their teachers and other authority figures held of them as lazy, uninterested in education, or culturally deficient” (Barajas & Pierce, 2001, p. 863). Chicana college students have pushed back on beliefs



their cultural values and assets were inferior, including lessons from home and speaking Spanish (Conchas & Acevedo, 2020).

Furthermore, undocumented Latina undergraduates have been able to enact their *mestiza consciousness* and see the strengths of their immigration status to overcome challenges in the college environment (Perez Huber, 2017). By embracing their own culture and identities, Latinas have been able to navigate college environments not made with them in mind (Barajas & Pierce, 2001).

To cope with multiple challenges in the college environment, Latinas take a planned and active approach (Gloria et al., 2005). Latina undergraduates take the initiative to learn about the campus environment and the resources available and ask for help from these resources (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012; Ramos, 2018). Additionally, Latina undergraduates are more likely than their Latino counterparts to seek out community with other Latinas and those experiencing similar marginalization at their PWI. These spaces help them to navigate PWIs, where they have experienced stereotypes and microaggressions (Acevedo et al., 2021; Barajas & Pierce, 2001). Through their relationships with other Latinas, Latina undergraduates' "positive self-definition is reinforced" (Barajas & Pierce, 2001, p. 860). Additionally, research has found university programs and individuals are crucial to supporting Latina undergraduates at PWIs (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012). Through these connections, "they could gain support, find refuge, and feel viewed and validated as students and as Latina/os on campus" (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012, p. 89). Additionally, Latinas coped with challenges at college by talking with their families about their experiences. Despite the fact that many of the family members of Latina undergraduates had not been to college themselves, Latina

undergraduates still felt like they were able to receive encouragement from their families to continue in college (Gloria et al., 2005).

However, putting the onus on Latinas students themselves to navigate their college environments absolves higher education institutions from making significant institutional change (Rendón et al., 2018). Latinas are embracing their strengths and voices to demand their higher education institutions change to better serve and support them (Kiyama, 2018). Higher education professionals need to listen to the voices of Latinas as higher education institutions often make assumptions about the resources and support that Latina undergraduates need. Latina undergraduates have agency and a vision for their futures. The voices of Latinas need to be heard so higher education institutions can better understand the needs and goals of Latina undergraduates.

### **Putting Coyolxauhqui Back Together: Connecting Latina Values to Student Success**

After being in *nepantla*, the Chicana/Latina enters the third stage of *conocimiento*, Coatlicue, a state of new awareness that is difficult and overwhelming (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2015). In this stage, the Chicana/Latina faces despair and hopelessness to the point where they cannot take any action. The Chicana Latina becomes self-absorbed and purposefully cuts themselves off from their connections and their communities of support. To come out of this stage, the Chicana/Latina begins to want to heal and be transformed. Then in the fourth stage, *el compromiso*, the Chicana/Latina begins to leave behind their coping strategies of escaping from their realities and begins the process of reconnecting their bodymindspirit. In this stage, the Chicana/Latina realizes they have internalized identities imposed on them and can develop a new narrative (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2015).

In the fifth stage, the Chicana/Latina begins to put Coyolxauhqui together by “creating a new description of reality and scripting a new story” of themselves and of their cultural group (Anzaldua & Keating, 2015, p. 123). In this new story, the individual begins to denounce oppressive dominant and ethnic cultural beliefs that do not allow their spirit to flourish. As the Chicana/Latina begins to put Coyolxauhqui back together, they realize their story is about the journey, that they will always be “seeking experiences that’ll give you purpose, give you meaning, give you a sense of belonging” (Anzaldua & Keating, 2015, p. 143). As the Chicana/Latina gains new knowledge from their journey, they will return to their communities to share their experiences.

The new narrative is shared in the sixth stage, the blow-up...a clash of realities. When sharing this new narrative, the Chicana/Latina may encounter challenges from those that are not receptive to this new way of thinking. Finally, the Chicana/Latina reaches the seventh stage, spiritual activism, where there is a transformation, “you shift realities; develop an ethical, compassionate strategy with which to negotiate conflict and difference within self and between others; and find common ground by forming holistic alliances” (Anzaldua & Keating, 2015, p. 123). Spiritual activism is significant because it is when bodymindspirit are re-connected (Elenes, 2013). During spiritual activism, the Chicana/Latina also realizes there are others with similar experiences with whom they can heal. When Latina undergraduates can enact spiritual activism, their sense of belonging increases, and they can heal from invalidating higher education experiences that have harmed their well-being (Acevedo et al., 2021).

The ultimate purpose of *conocimiento* is to begin to heal the split between the bodymindspirit and put Coyolxauhqui back together again (Anzaldua & Keating, 2015).

By connecting Latina/o/x values to student success outcomes, Latina undergraduates can begin to heal the rupture caused when entering a PWI not aligned with their Latina/o/x values and beliefs. The cultural values held by Latina/o/x communities, including familismo, which is the importance of and loyalty to family, *comunidad*, which emphasizes collectivism, and *espiritualidad*, cultural spirituality, are counter to the white American values of competition and individualism upheld by U.S. higher education institutions (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007; Triana et al., 2020). Connecting these cultural values to ways of knowing and understanding found in Mexican Indigenous cultures, Urrieta (2013) explained *saberes* encompass skill sets and ways of knowing and being in the world acquired over time and “learned through participation, with minimal intervention or direct instruction, a learning by ‘seeing and doing’” (p. 321). While these cultural values are still very much practiced by Latina/o/x communities, higher education does not formally recognize this knowledge.

Research has found that validation (Rendón, 1994) and a sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012) are integral to the success of historically marginalized students, including Latinas. Validation is defined “as an asset-based approach to working with students in a way that recognizes and affirms students as knowledgeable and capable of college-level work, and builds supportive relationships between validating agents and students” (Rendón et al., 2018, p. 228). Sense of belonging is defined as a,

students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty, peers)(Strayhorn, 2012, p. 3).

Cultural values of Latina/o/x students can and should occur within university settings because they bolster a sense of belonging and validation for Latina/o/x students (Triana et al., 2020).

Furthermore, the “infusion of cultural values for Latina/os...is a logical, ethical, competent, and likely outcome-effective means of ensuring education as culturally relevant for undergraduates” (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007, p. 385). If there is a better fit between cultural values and the college environment, then Latina/o/x students will feel more supported by their college (Gloria & Robinson-Kurpius, 1996). When colleges promoted Latina/o/x cultural heritage in both academic and cocurricular settings, Latina/o/x students’ self-esteem and well-being increased (Navarro, 2014).

Furthermore, Latina/o/x students experienced increased academic performance, self-esteem, and life satisfaction when they embraced their traditional Latina/o/x cultural values, identified strongly with their ethnicity, and had a positive view of themselves as part of their ethnic cultural group (Cerezo & Chang, 2013; Corona et al., 2017; Morgan Consolli et al., 2015; Navarro et al., 2014). Additionally, researchers have found cultural values protected Latina/o/x students from adverse mental health effects (Corona et al., 2017). Thus, higher education institutions should consider infusing Latina/o/x cultural values into all areas of higher education, including connecting them to student success measures and beliefs. In the following paragraphs, I identify how Latina undergraduates have begun healing the bodymindspirit split and putting Coyolxauhqui back together by drawing on their Latina/o/x values throughout their higher education experience.

*Familismo* is a Latina/o/x cultural value that emphasizes closeness and commitment to family, including putting the needs of the family first before individual

needs (Sy & Romero, 2008). In addition, *familismo* encompasses loyalty to family, including family in decision making, supporting family members financially, and participating in household duties (Pertuz, 2018). *Familia* is more than a title; it involves responsibilities and “is demonstrated and affirmed through action, mutual cooperation, and support of various sorts (Urrieta, 2013, p. 327). *Familismo* is a highly regarded value within Latina/o/x families regardless of generational status within the U.S (Sy & Romero, 2008). However, Latinas who are first-generation immigrants have a greater sense of obligation to their families, including greater respect for their family and a greater current and future desire to assist their family members (Hardway & Fuligni, 2006).

Latina undergraduates value the role their families’ role in their educational experiences and draw strength from their support (Easley et al., 2012; Gonzales, 2012; Mahaffy & Pantoja, 2012; Matos, 2015; Rodriguez et al., 2013). Due to their family’s academic aspirations, Latina undergraduates often see their goals in higher education as more than just an individual accomplishment and as an entire family achievement (Gonzales, 2012; Ramos, 2018). Furthermore, Latina undergraduates are motivated to continue pursuing higher education because of their parents’ *consejos*, or advice, and stories of how they were not able to complete their own education (Aragon, 2018; Matos, 2015; McWhirter et al., 2013). For some Latina undergraduates, their parents’ own work experiences and aspirations have influenced their particular career paths (Rodriguez et al., 2022). Furthermore, Latina undergraduates have reported being motivated to persist in college and do well academically because they provided strength to their families and wanted to set an example for younger family members (Cavazos et al., 2010; Delgado Bernal, 2002; Kiyama, 2018; Luedke, 2020a; Ramos, 2018; Rodriguez et al., 2013).

Research has also found Latinas invoke an immigrant narrative, where they recognize their parents' sacrifices, difficulties, and experiences with devaluation and exploitation of labor they endured so they could pursue an education in the U.S (Conchas & Acevedo, 2020). Latinas were "committed to helping [their] families advance both educationally and financially as [they] recognize the sacrifices they have made so that [they] can pursue a higher education" (Kiyama, 2018, p. 424). Latina/o/x students observed their parents' hard work and sacrifice throughout their lives and wanted to pay back their parents by honoring their sacrifices and achieving a higher education degree (Matos, 2015; Ramos, 2018). The desire "to honor parental struggle and sacrifice with academic achievement" is known as *ganás* (Easley et al., 2012, p.164). In addition to acknowledging their parents' struggles and sacrifices, *ganás* encompasses a strong value of family, respect for parents, a desire to repay families, and to be an example to other family members. *Ganas* fuels Latina/o/x undergraduates to strive for academic success, which enables them to feel pride in themselves upon completing their college degrees. Latina/o/x undergraduates also viewed their success as a measure of their families' success (Easley et al., 2012).

Latina undergraduates are driven to become self-sufficient through their college education. This is also tied to their commitment to *familismo* (Ramos, 2018; Sy & Romero, 2008). As a way to honor and help their family, Latina undergraduates, "primary concern was to be self-reliant as a means of relieving burden on family members, a concern that is consistent with *familismo*" (Sy & Romero, 2008, p. 218). Latina undergraduates did not report feeling pressured by their families to provide support. Rather, they felt a sense of duty connected to their value of *familismo*. Latina

undergraduates believed that becoming self-reliant will relieve their parents of financial burden, increase the social capital of their families and provide opportunities for their families to achieve upward mobility (Ramos, 2018; Rodriguez et al., 2022; Sy & Romero, 2008). Furthermore, Latina/o/x college students shared the social and cultural capital they gained from going to college, such as strategies to access, navigate and persist in college, with their family members, which demonstrated further the commitment Latina/o/x students have to their families (Luedke, 2020a). Latina undergraduates view their college success beyond their personal financial gain, which is demonstrated by their commitment to *familismo* through financial independence.

Latina undergraduates also attributed their ability to cope with discrimination while attending PWIs to their commitment to *familismo* (Sanchez et al., 2018). Sanchez et al. (2018) argued, that “the interdependence of family provides Latina women with a positive reference system for ethnic group knowledge and positive feelings about one’s ethnicity,” which can be helpful when navigating a college environment that emphasizes white American values (p. 9). Latina/o/x college students attributed their decreased depressive symptoms, increased resilience, and a means for overcoming adversity to *familismo* (Corona et al., 2016; Morgan Consolli & Llamas, 2013). Furthermore, Latina/o/x students embraced communities at their higher education institutions that adopt aspects of *familismo*, such as those that honor and celebrate their Latina/o/x culture and provide access to resources and networks that assist them with navigating their college environment (Lopez et al., 2019; Matos, 2015; Peña-Talamantes, 2013).

However, Latina undergraduates also have attributed higher stress levels to *familismo* because of their intersecting gender and ethnic identities (Corona et al., 2016;



Peña-Talamantes, 2013). Latina undergraduates experienced stress and pressure as they attempted to balance both academics and their family lives. In particular, first-generation Latinas attending college experienced pain and questioning by their parents for leaving home for college, while those who are second generation and beyond did not (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012). Furthermore, by achieving increased independence through higher education, Latina undergraduates experienced increased responsibilities and expectations from their families that led to “increased stress, lowered academic performance and continuing lower college success rates among Latinas” (Sy & Romero, 2008, p. 223). Latina undergraduates go through an experience of learning how to balance family responsibilities with their own goals, and a desire for independence.

Latina/o/x college students, who identify as LGTBQ, have a more contentious relationship with the value of *familismo*. While LGBTQ Latina/o/x college students embrace *familismo*, they are more likely to be ostracized by their families because of their sexuality (Duran & Perez, 2017; Peña-Talamantes, 2013). Due to these experiences, LGBTQ Latina/o/x individuals have had more challenges maintaining close ties to their biological families. However, LGBTQ Latina/o/x college students still value *familismo* and find ways to create their own families within the college environment (Peña-Talamantes, 2013).

For Latina/o/x individuals, *familismo* can go beyond the immediate family and include fictive kin and extended family members, known in Latina/o/x communities as *compadres/ comadres*. Aponte and De La Torre (2020) explained that,

through the extended family and the binding together of different families through the social institution of *compadres/comadres*, Latinx enlarge and strengthen the

social institution of *familia*, offering a healing alternative to insidious individualism (p. 102).

This idea of extended family or *comunidad* emphasizes the value Latina/o/x individuals place on being responsible for and caring for their communities (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007). Latina undergraduates attributed their commitment to community to the example shown by their parents and the values instilled in them by their families (Storlie et al., 2016). As such, Latinas feel responsible for giving back to their community through their education.

Latinas are motivated by their dedication to *comunidad* and understanding of education as a way to better society by pursuing higher education (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Gonzales, 2012; Storlie et al., 2016). Latina/o/x undergraduates “redefine success to include ensuring that their communities also have access to higher education pathways” (Conchas & Acevedo, 2020, p. 22). Latinas' commitment to their communities contributed to their persistence in college and also led to the growth and development of other Latina/o/x individuals in their communities. Latina/o/x students overcame personal and academic challenges in college by remaining focused on helping others and wanting to create change within their communities (Cavazos et al., 2010; Conchas & Acevedo, 2020).

When in college, Latina/o/x students develop a social consciousness, which fuels their desire to pay it forward to their communities, support others in their communities to achieve a college degree, and address social inequities within their communities (Abrica, 2019; Easley et al., 2012). Latinas, in particular, have a strong desire to give back to their communities because they acknowledge by obtaining higher education, they are now in a

privileged position (Storlie et al., 2016). In a study by Conchas and Acevedo (2020), Chicanas “exhibit a pay-it-forward mentality characterized by their eagerness to reciprocate whatever assistance and advantages from which they have benefitted back into their communities of origin as educators and scholars” (p. 152).

Latinas also have a desire to give back to others with similar experiences because of their own experiences with marginalization in college (Perez Huber, 2017). In particular, Chicana/Latinas who were undocumented activated a *mestiza consciousness* “to unite the empowerment and the conflict produced by Chicana/ Latinas subjectivities to develop new ways of being and understandings that sustain” (Perez Huber, 2017, p. 382) through their professional work. Through their professions, Latina undergraduates were able to utilize their first-hand experiences as Latina, female, undocumented, immigrant, working-class, and English learners, as well as their skills, knowledge, and abilities to give back to their communities by providing resources and assistance to other undocumented individuals. As such, Latinas were able to heal their bodymindspirit split through their professional experiences because they were able to utilize their own experiences to give back to others in their community (Perez Huber, 2017).

Furthermore, research has found Latina undergraduates benefitted when they adopted the ideals of *comunidad* in their college environment. Latina/o/x individuals in the college environment practiced *compadrazgo* by creating an academic family, which they defined “as those persons and chosen family who an individual has emotional ties and intellectual perceptions; social roles, connections and obligations; and culturally rooted values orientations within the academic environment or context” (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007, p.125). These academic families provided psychological, social, and

cultural support to Latina/o/x college students by providing a sense of belonging and validation, creating spaces where Latina/o/x students can share their experiences, and providing opportunities for students to see their cultural values reflected and honored.

Research has found that Latina/o/x college students placed importance on cultural spirituality or *espiritualidad*, the everyday practice of embracing cultural values. For Latina/o/x students, “the belief in a higher power that connects and provides meaning is fundamental” and contributed to their purpose and meaning in life (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007, p. 385). Latina/o/x college students attributed their increased ability to thrive after facing adversity to their spirituality, defined as the belief in the purpose of life, a commitment to prayer, and connectedness to others (Morgan Consolli et al., 2015). While family support and hope can contribute to Latina/o/x students being resilient, “thriving necessitates a ‘deeper’ level of factors, that is, factors that are more existential in that one realizes that he/she is part of a system and interconnected with others (not just supported by others)” (p. 313).

Research has found Latinas attributed their increased academic motivation and ability to cope with discrimination while in college to their *espiritualidad* (Ramos, 2018; Rodriguez et al., 2013; Sanchez, et al., 2018). Being a spiritual pillar provided “Latina college women with a strong sense of purpose and connection with a network of social support when faced with discrimination experiences” (Sanchez et al. 2018, p. 9). Furthermore, Latina/o/x college students attributed their increased psychological well-being to elements connected to spirituality, including practicing self-reflection and contributing to the community (Park & Millora, 2013).

Furthermore, when Latina/o/x college students understood their meaning in life, their subjective happiness increased, which impacted their self-esteem, hope, and academic motivation (Cavazos Vela et al., 2014; Cavazos Vela et al., 2015). Additionally, first-generation low-income Students of Color, including Latinas, on their spirituality, specifically, their hope, helped them believe in their ability to achieve success in the college environment (Ramos, 2018). As such, those working with Latina/o/x students should seek to help them explore and identify their meaning in life to increase their goal-specific hope and motivation toward their academic and career goals.

Previous research demonstrated that Latinas are *nepantleras* who, despite facing *un choque*, a clash of their identities and values in the higher education setting, learn to balance multiple worldviews to achieve success on their own terms. Drawing from the FAN presented by Conchas and Acevedo (2020), Latina undergraduates are *nepantleras* who can draw on their *facultad* to make connections and build bridges between the institutional and their own ideologies of success. Chicana Feminism also provides a framework for the Latina to undergo a process of integrating her bodymindspirit in academic settings. Additionally, by utilizing a Chicana Feminist perspective in higher education, “student affairs professionals can help to foster the continued appreciation for Latina culture and also positively integrate Latina culture into the culture of the institution” (Carrillo & Dean, 2020, p. 107). By framing this study using Chicana Feminism, I recommend integrating Latina experiences and values within student success outcome measures.

From previous research, it is evident Latina undergraduates seek goals and measure their success beyond only persisting and graduating in college. While

persistence and graduation are important to Latina undergraduates, Latina undergraduates also have goals not encompassed by the dominant student success outcomes, including a desire to honor their families, give back to their communities, and find a sense of purpose. As such, previous research reveals a need to more thoroughly explore how Latina undergraduates define and measure success for themselves in higher education and how their Latina identity shapes this. By connecting Latina/o/x values to student success outcomes, Latina undergraduates may be able to begin to learn to balance the expectations of their institution, their families, and their own selves, put themselves back together, and heal the bodymindspirit split created within higher education.

### **Advancing Knowledge About Latina Undergraduates**

Reviewing the current literature reveals several areas in which this research can advance the knowledge about Latina undergraduates and how they understand and measure their success in higher education. Previous literature on Latina/o/x student success focused on dominant measures of student success, such as quantitative measures of graduation and retention rates, without connecting this to Latina/o/x values and goals (Crisp et al., 2015). This research study expanded the literature on student success by asking Latina undergraduates attending a 4-year private PWI in the Western U.S. to provide their own definition of success and how they came to this understanding. Furthermore, this research expanded on the work by Rendón (2006), Rendón et al., (2018), and Castellanos and Gloria (2007) that seeks to reconceptualize Latina/o/x student success by focusing specifically on the experiences of Latina undergraduates and aligning student success outcomes with Latina/o/x values.

This research also adds to the literature focused on Latina undergraduates. Over the last few decades, there have been a few studies focusing on the needs of Latina undergraduates, yet, there is still a need to expand this literature to better understand Latina experiences in multiple higher education contexts, including 4-year PWIs (Rodriguez et al., 2000; Gonzalez et al., 2003 & Kiyama, 2018). Almost twenty years ago, in a *NASPA* journal article, Rodriguez et al. (2000) brought attention to the challenges and barriers faced by Latina undergraduates. They argued the number of Latinas in higher education was growing, yet this population was often neglected in practice and in research. While the research has expanded over the last twenty years, there was and is still a need to more thoroughly examine Latina undergraduate experiences, especially as they are a growing population in higher education (Espinoza et al., 2019). There is also a need to center Latina voices to better understand their experiences in multiple contexts, including PWIs.

Additionally, there is a need for more qualitative literature on the experiences of Latina undergraduates and measures of success. Much of the previous literature on Latina undergraduates, particularly regarding their acculturation and collision with White American values, is from a quantitative psychological perspective (Cano & Castillo, 2010; Castillo et al., 2004; Castillo et al., 2015; Mayorga et al., 2018). While this research is important, it is also necessary to qualitatively study how the white American values upheld by PWIs impact Latina undergraduates' measures of their own success and their overall well-being. Qualitative research, especially through *testimonios*, allowed Latina undergraduates to share their own experiences and definitions of student success in their own words with the goal of sparking transformation in higher education.

There is also a need to understand better the goals Latinas have for higher education and how this aligns with their values to provide them the necessary support to achieve their goals. The current research on student success has mostly relied on quantitative metrics, which are based on the dominant student narrative (Kuh et al., 2006; York et al., 2015). The dominant quantitative indicators of success do not fully capture Latina undergraduates' desires to contribute to their families, serve their communities and find purpose in life. For Latinas, these goals are important and connected to their desires to graduate from college and find employment post-graduation. With a better understanding of these goals, higher education institutions can create policies and practices to better support Latina undergraduates.

Furthermore, there is a need to better understand how Latinas intersecting gender and ethnic identities shape their college experiences and goals for higher education. In their research, Liang et al., (2017) found that Latinas could identify ethnic and gender discrimination on individual and institutional levels but had difficulties identifying discrimination at the intersection of their gender and ethnicity. This highlights the importance of more research with Latina students on the experiences they face at the intersection of their identities. This is also important as higher education institutions determine and develop policies and practices to support Latina undergraduates. Higher education professionals must understand Latina undergraduates' experiences and goals are shaped by their multiple intersecting identities.

Lastly, there is a need for more literature to understand better how Latinas believe their higher education institution supports them. While Latinas have increased their



access to college and found ways to navigate the college environment, they are often figuring out how to do so on their own. Kiyama (2018) stated

we must recognize and incorporate the assets Students of Color, and specifically Latina students, bring into postsecondary spaces...Latinas...are committed to their education. Higher education institutions must also demonstrate commitment to Latina students by being proactive in their implementation of inclusive policies, practices, and curriculum (p. 425).

A LatCrit framework allowed me to challenge dominant ideologies in higher education, such as success outcomes connected to white American values. Through a LatCrit framework, I was able to center the voices of Latinas and asked them to share how they define success for themselves. Furthermore, I was able to expand traditional student success outcomes by aligning them with Latina values and experiences. LatCrit also allowed me to argue for higher education researchers and practitioners to develop new policies and practices that support Latinas as they work towards their own desired success outcomes. By being grounded in LatCrit and Chicana Feminism, this research demands higher education institutions better support Latina undergraduates, so they not only survive and graduate from college but are also able to thrive in higher education by receiving the support they need to achieve their self-defined goals.

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I reviewed the dominant student success literature, including how student success has been defined and conceptualized in higher education. I also provided a review of the literature focused on Latina student success. Furthermore, I presented a review of the literature on the Latina undergraduate student experience, including how Latina undergraduates have navigated higher education. I also provided an overview of Latina/o/x values, including *familismo*, *comunidad*, and *espiritualidad*, and how Latina

undergraduates have connected these values to their goals and success in higher education. Finally, I shared how this research advances the literature on Latina undergraduates and student success by centering their voices and experiences through *testimonios*. The next chapter reviews the methods and methodology I utilized to conduct this study.

### Chapter 3: Methods

The purpose of this critical qualitative research grounded in LatCrit and Chicana Feminism study was to understand how Latina undergraduates who attended a 4-year, private PWI in the Western U.S understand and define their own success in higher education. This research also seeks to understand what institutional support Latina undergraduate students have received from their PWI as they work towards achieving their self-defined goals. The research questions guiding this study were:

1) How do Latina undergraduates attending a 4-year predominantly white institution define and measure their own success in higher education? What shaped this understanding?

2) What support have Latina undergraduates received from their 4-year predominantly white institution to achieve their self-defined goals?

A critical qualitative study utilizing a *testimonio* methodology enabled me to answer my research questions because *testimonios* honor the complex lived experiences of Latinas, empower those sharing their *testimonios*, bring attention to injustices and seek to create systemic change (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012). Furthermore, a *testimonio* methodology aligns with LatCrit, and Chicana Feminism, which both validates the

experiential knowledge of Latina/o/x individuals and emphasizes marginalized communities are the best narrators of their own experiences (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012; Perez Huber, 2009; Villalpando, 2004). Additionally, these frameworks are committed to racial and social justice and emphasize the need to dismantle and transform unjust systems, such as dominant beliefs about student success. In this chapter, I explain why critical qualitative research methods and *testimonio* methodology were appropriate for my study. I also share my positionality and epistemology as a researcher and how they informed this research study. I also describe my data collection and data analysis process. Finally, I address trustworthiness/*confianza*, ethical considerations, and the limitations of this research study.

### **Rationale for Qualitative Inquiry**

Qualitative research seeks to understand the experiences of individuals in their everyday lives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). There are two primary purposes of qualitative research, “to illuminate and understand in depth the richness in the lives of human beings and the world in which we live” and the other is for “emancipatory purposes” (Jones et al., 2014, p. 11). In addressing this first purpose, the researcher is an observer of the experience being studied. The researcher becomes the instrument utilized to interpret these experiences. Qualitative research also focuses on the multiple perspectives participants have about a particular subject and seeks to share the stories of voices not often heard. The second purpose of qualitative research aims to empower participants to share their stories from their own perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The ultimate goal of qualitative research is “transformation, and its aim to emancipate, so people are capable of controlling their own destiny” (Jones et al., 2014, p. 13). In this research

study, I addressed these two purposes by centering the experiences of Latina undergraduates and seeking to transform higher education institutions to be more equitable and socially just for Latina undergraduates, making qualitative inquiry an appropriate approach for my study.

Traditional qualitative research methods do not adequately address inequities in higher education (Pasque et al., 2012). Through critical qualitative inquiry, I aimed to critique and challenge how dominant and oppressed identities are viewed in society and to enact “real, material change in the lives of those most touched by inequitable power relations in our society” (Pasque et al. 2012, p. 28). I also strived to “problematize the cycle of socialization, incorporate marginalized voices with the research process, and make visible alternative paradigms” (p.27). Using a critical qualitative research approach, I could better understand the stories of Latina undergraduates, whose experiences and voices are marginalized in higher education, and I could consider new ways to understand student success. The voices of Latina undergraduates were centered through critical qualitative inquiry using *testimonio* methodology, a form of narrative. The Latina undergraduates’ *testimonios* contributed to new knowledge and are an impetus to changing dominant structures within higher education. In the next section, I provide an overview of the key components of narrative inquiry from which *testimonio* methodology stems.

### **Narrative Inquiry**

Narratives have been simply defined as “stories lived and told” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20). Human lives are composed of stories they tell about themselves and that others tell about them (Clandinin & Connelly, 2006). Narrative inquiry, “the

study of experience as story, then, is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2006, p. 375). As a methodology, narrative inquiry focuses on experience as the phenomenon to be studied. Furthermore, narrative inquiry asks individuals to share their lived experiences with a particular situation in a specific context and place (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Narrative inquiry understands experiences as being temporal, continuous, and influenced by social dimensions (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). Narratives are temporal, shaped by past experiences, told at a particular time, and will impact the individual and the communities they are part of (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). Narratives also operate on a continuum – they are experiences that build on one another and lead to additional experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Narratives are also shaped by social dimensions, emphasizing that “stories are the result of a confluence of social influences on a person's inner life, social influences on their environment, and their unique personal history” (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 42). Thus, narrative inquiry explores how context impacts an individual’s experience and the social, cultural, and institutional factors in which their lives are situated.

In this study, I focused on the lived experiences of Latina undergraduates at PWIs, which are not the stories often heard or told in higher education. Narratives often focus on majoritarian stories, which “privileges Whites, men, the middle and/or upper class, and heterosexuals by naming these social locations as natural or normative points of reference” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 28). Majoritarian stories are seen as the standard and often put People of Color at a deficit. Black, Native American, and Latina/o/x communities have a long history of telling their stories as part of their survival

and liberation (Delgado, 1989). Counterstories are told by those on the margins of society and offer different perspectives than the majoritarian stories (Delgado, 1989; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Counterstories are “a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 32). Counterstories are powerful tools that 1) build community among those that are marginalized, 2) challenge what is known about marginalized groups by those in dominant groups, 3) demonstrate to the most marginalized that they are not alone in their experiences, 4) combine the story and reality to create a new and richer story, and 5) transform established belief systems (Delgado, 1989; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). Counterstories are important for both those telling the story and those listening to the story (Delgado, 1989; Rodriguez, 2010). Those telling the story can experience healing by sharing their stories and learning they are not alone. Furthermore, counterstorytelling creates a safe space for the researcher and participant “to resist, reflect, and to recuperate” (Rodriguez, 2010, p. 495) from their experiences with racism and systemic oppression. Through hearing counterstories, the dominant group transforms the way they perceive those that are marginalized, and they are challenged to act on behalf of the storyteller (Delgado, 1989). In this study, Latina undergraduate counterstories challenged the dominant story told about their experiences and offered a new perspective in their own words.

Counterstorytelling is grounded in Critical Race Theory (CRT) and LatCrit. LatCrit scholars posit that the knowledge of Latina/o/x individuals is “legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing, and teaching about racial subordination in the field of education” (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001, p. 314). LatCrit scholars have utilized counterstorytelling and counternarrative as a way to share

the experiences of Latina/o/x individuals in higher education because counterstories allow for an in-depth look at the experiences of Latina/o/x students with racism, classism, sexism, and other forms of oppression (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). By sharing their counterstories, this study created a space where we, as both the researcher and participants, could unpack the gendered racism experienced by Latinas at PWIs (Rodriguez, 2010). A form of counterstorytelling that aligns with Chicana Feminism and is from the Latina perspective is *testimonio*. A *testimonio* centers Chicana/Latina voices, challenges traditional forms of research and strives to address inequities in education that harm Latina/o/x and Chicana/o/x communities (Calderon et al., 2012). Aligned with LatCrit and Chicana Feminism, *testimonio* methodology was the methodological approach for this research study. In the next section, I provide more details about *testimonio* as a methodology in educational research.

### ***Testimonio* as Methodology**

*Testimonios*, accounts of first-person experiences, are a form of methodology, similar to narratives, that are intentional and political (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012). *Testimonios* are both method and methodology. The Latina Feminist Group (2001) simply described them as “stories of their lives” that detail the complexities of the lived experiences of Latinas (p.1). The narrator is empowered and affirmed by sharing their experiences through their *testimonio*. Additionally, *testimonios* are an act of sharing *papelitos guardados*, translated from Spanish to mean guarded papers or protected documents, which are memories of difficult times that are either written down or stored away in one’s memory and revealed at the appropriate time (The Latina Feminist Group, 2001).



The origins of *testimonios* can be traced back to liberation and resistance movements in Latin America during the 1970s (Reyes & Curry Rodriguez, 2012). The Latina Feminist Group (2001) explained that “*testimonio* has been critical in movements for liberation in Latin America, offering an artistic form and methodology to create politicized understandings of identity and community” (p.3). In the U.S., Chicana and Latina Feminists utilized *testimonios* to share their experiences in *This Bridge Called My Back* (Moraga & Anzaldua, 1983) and *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios* (2001) to “expose brutality, disrupt silencing, and build solidarity among women of color” (Anzaldua, 1990 as cited by Delgado Bernal et al., 2012, p. 363).

Today, *testimonios* are used in anthropology, education, ethnic studies, psychology, and gender and women’s studies (Reyes & Curry Rodriguez, 2012). In recent years, *testimonios* have grown in their usage within education, particularly by Latinas and Chicanas who seek to expose injustices and create social change (Reyes & Curry Rodriguez, 2012). A “*testimonio*, then, can be understood as a bridge that merges...brown bodies...with academia” as Latinas and Chicanas seek to utilize *testimonio* in educational spaces (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012, p. 364). Using *testimonios* as methodology, I shared the Latina undergraduate experience within PWIs, expressly how they understand and define their own success and believe their institution has supported them in achieving their self-defined goals.

A *testimonio* is “a form of expression that comes out of intense repression or struggle, where the person bearing witness tells the story to someone else” (The Latina Feminist Group 2001, p. 13). Through *testimonios*, Latina/o/x individuals can recount

stories that may otherwise not be heard (The Latina Feminist Group, 2001). *Testimonios* give voice to those who live in society's margins and are often silenced.

Additionally, *testimonios* do not seek to essentialize the Latina experience and recognize the varied histories of Latinas and how their experiences have been shaped by the intersections of their identities (The Latina Feminist Group, 2001). By sharing their *testimonios* with one another The Latina Feminist Group (2001) “gained nuanced understandings of differences and connections” that allowed for them to develop “established respect and deeper understanding...as individuals and as Latinas” (p.11). While told as one account, *testimonios* represent the varied stories and experiences of a collective who has experienced oppressive social structures (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012). As a methodological tool, the one sharing their *testimonio* is the holder and creator of knowledge, while the researcher is an “interlocutor...an outside activist and ally” who bears witness and shares the story (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012, p. 365). In this way, *testimonios* are counter to traditional Eurocentric research methods, which purport that the researcher is the producer of knowledge (Perez Huber, 2009). Instead, the researcher is a witness to the *testimonios* and seeks to uplift the voices of the experiences of their participants, the *testimonialista* (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012). As a *testimonio* researcher, I refer to my participants as *testimonialistas* because they were the storytellers in this study and are the holders of knowledge about their own higher education experiences. As the researcher, I was the vessel to tell their stories.

One singular definition for *testimonios* does not exist; however, there are important elements to consider, including that *testimonios* are both intentional and political (Perez Huber, 2009; Delgado Bernal et al., 2012). *Testimonios* in the academy

“disrupts silence, invites connection, and entices collectivity-- it is social justice scholarship in education” (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012, p. 371). The researcher, who witnesses the telling of their participants’ *testimonios*, is called to “act on behalf of the speaker in an effort to arrive at justice and redemption” (Reyes & Curry Rodriguez, p. 534).

*Testimonio* methodology was appropriate for this research study because I served as a witness to the stories of Latina undergraduates navigating higher education. Aligned with LatCrit and Chicana Feminism, Latina undergraduates, often marginalized in higher education, were able to share their stories by providing *testimonios*, which can be an impetus to systemically transform unjust institutions. Previous research with 20 Mexican-heritage female college students found sharing *testimonios* led to *conocimiento*, a critical awareness that connects bodymindspirit, which allowed Latinas to begin to heal by feeling empowered that they can transform systems of oppression (Perez Huber & Cueva, 2012).

Furthermore, research has found by participating in counterstorytelling and the *testimonio* process, the researcher can also find healing from their experiences with systemic oppression and racism (Calderon et al., 2012; Rodriguez, 2010). Similar to previous *testimonio* scholars, I entered this research with the intent to be a witness to my participants' experiences with the hopes that by providing their *testimonio* my participants and I would find healing, and empowerment that would lead to more equitable, and culturally affirming beliefs about student success. In this study, I asked Latina undergraduates to share their *testimonios* through two individual *testimonio* sessions, one group *testimonio* session, and a vision board activity.

## ***My Testimonio***

As a Chicana Feminist researcher conducting critical qualitative research using *testimonio* methodology, I must self-reflect throughout the research process and consider how my privileged and marginalized identities may impact the research process (Calderon et al., 2012). This process allowed me and my participants to understand how my own identities and societal position impacted my research (Pasque et al., 2012). My goal was to bring in different aspects of my identity and experiences throughout my research process. One way I did this was by sharing parts of my own *testimonio* with my participants. In the following paragraphs, I share more of my own *testimonio*.

I identify as a Queer Latina from a Mexican-American background who has experienced predominantly white higher education spaces as a student, practitioner, and researcher. I am a 3<sup>rd</sup> generation Mexican American as my parents and three of four of my grandparents were born in Texas. Due to my Mexican roots, I am not fully accepted into white spaces, and due to my American identity, I am not fully embraced as Mexican. I experience the U.S. as neither an insider nor an outsider but in the borderlands. Anzaldúa (1987) argued many Mexican Americans live in the borderlands. As a Queer Mexican American woman, I constantly live in *nepantla*, a space where I navigate living in between two worlds.

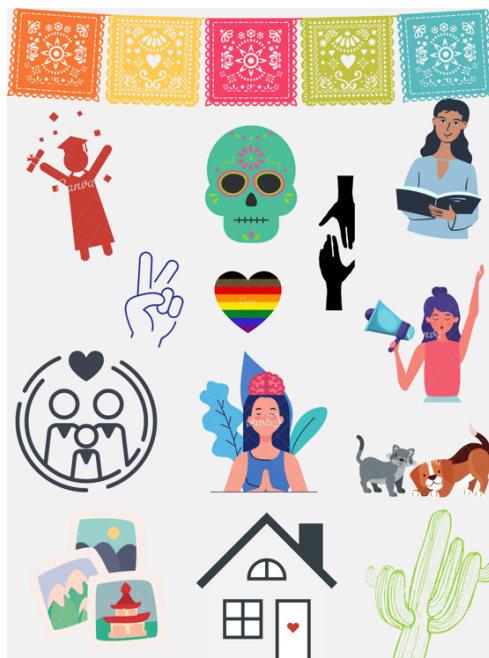
My parents and grandparents encouraged me to pursue education because they believed education was transformational. My grandparents were not able to obtain a formal education. A generation later, my mom became the first in her family to receive a college degree paving the way for me and others in our family. My parents wanted to set me up for success and for them, that meant moving into a predominantly white

neighborhood in Dallas, Texas. I was one of the few Students of Color in the earlier years of my education. I was always encouraged to do well in school and to attend the most prestigious and selective higher education institutions I could access. Once I entered predominantly white institutions, I quickly learned they were not created with people like me in mind and often were not welcoming of People of Color. In these spaces, my cultural history, knowledge, and values were not valued and were often left behind. I often sought ways to bring in my own culture by selecting projects related to Latina/o/x Leaders, such as Cesar Chavez, Dolores Huerta, and Gloria Anzaldua and enrolling in any college course related to Latina/o/x culture. With my own resilience and the support of faculty and peers, I have achieved a Bachelor's Degree and Master's Degree and nearly completed a Ph.D.

For a long time, I equated my own success with monetary value and prestige. This drove me to continue to advance my education and career. While I believe I have many achievements to be proud of, I often sacrificed my mental health and well-being to achieve them, which led to experiencing anxiety and depression. I finally realized nothing I would do would ever be enough if I continued to measure my success in these ways. I now orient my success with making my family proud, generations past, and those to come, and serving the Latinx community by making higher education systems more equitable and just. My mental health and well-being have also become important to me, and I strive to ensure what I commit myself to enriches my well-being.

As part of this research, I also created a vision board to illuminate my personal, academic, and professional goals. Through this experience, I attempted to bring Coyolxauhqui back together again by sharing goals related to academic and career

achievement, *familismo*, *comunidad*, and personal growth and well-being. For example, I aim to complete my Ph.D. and become a faculty member. My desire to accomplish these goals is shaped by my family's commitment to service and education. Additionally, by accomplishing these goals, I hope to be able to uplift the voices of Latinas and other historically marginalized students in higher education to ensure they have an equitable and inclusive higher education experience. Throughout my life, I have been committed to the goal of serving my *comunidad* and honoring my family. These values are often not valued in the academy, and through my experience and research, I strive to challenge this.



*Figure 3.1 Lauren's Vision Board*

Furthermore, I am also a higher education practitioner, and I have worked with student success programs that support first-generation and minoritized college students, many of whom are Latina. My current work is as a program coordinator for a women's

leadership program at a PWI that provides financial, academic, and community support to first-generation undergraduate women, Women of Color, and LGBTQ women. I have witnessed the challenges my students encounter navigating the college environment. I see how colleges and universities often ask Latinas to leave their family, spirituality, and cultural values behind and assimilate into white American values. I know how this struggle can create internal conflict for Latinas and a conflict with the PWI they are attending.

I do acknowledge that while I have marginalized identities, I also have privileged identities. I am a U.S.-born Latina that grew up middle-class with parents who were able to obtain formal education in the U.S. I will never fully know the unique struggles that some of my own students and participants faced as first-generation college students, undocumented immigrants, Afro Latina, and from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. While I identify as a Latina, I acknowledge each Latina has her own experience based on the intersections of her multiple identities. I hope through my educational and economic privilege I can amplify the stories of those in the Latina community that are the most marginalized. During the research process, I shared my *testimonio* and social identities with my research participants throughout the data collection process so they could understand why I am interested in this research and my goals for the research. I also shared my epistemology as a critical Chicana Feminist researcher and how this impacts the entire research process with my participants. In the next section, I will discuss how I collected data for the study.

## Data Collection

### Setting

The setting for this research was Mountain University (MU), a 4-year private, Predominantly White Institution (PWI) located in the Western U.S. In the Fall of 2021, which is when data collection for this research began, the total student population for undergraduate and graduate students was about 14,100 students with 5,900 being undergraduates. Of the undergraduate student population, 16% were first-generation college students, and 30% were Black, Indigenous, Asian, and Latina/o/x. Of the undergraduate student population, 13% were Latina/o/x, and 8% were Latina. Latinas were the largest demographic population at the institution after accounting for white male and female students.

### Sample and Criteria

To select *testimonialistas*, I utilized purposeful sampling to intentionally find participants who could provide in-depth information about their lived experiences related to the research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The purposeful sampling technique I utilized was criterion sampling, which allowed for the recruitment of *testimonialistas* who met specific criteria and could provide the perspective of a Latina-identified undergraduate student. There were 11 total participants in this research study who met the following criteria: 1) self-identified Latina/Chicana/Hispanic woman, 2) completed at least one year of college and was still enrolled in college, 3) were currently attending MU, a private 4-year predominantly white institution in the Western U.S., as an undergraduate student, 4) was open to discussing their goals for higher education. I asked



the *testimonialistas* to reflect on their college experience, so it was vital that they had recent experiences with being in college and were working towards their current goals.

Additionally, I utilized snowball sampling to identify *testimonialistas* who may be information-rich within existing networks (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Gaining access to research participants can be difficult for an outsider, so this allowed for the *testimonialistas* and others with knowledge to identify potential *testimonialistas* (Jones et al., 2014). By utilizing these sampling strategies, I could find and recruit *testimonialistas* that provided rich and in-depth information related to the research study.

### **Recruitment**

To find *testimonialistas* who fit the criteria for the research study, I identified Latina/o/x student support resources at MU. I contacted the Cultural Center, Latina/o/x student organizations, and Latina-based sororities at MU. To gain access, I contacted the organizers of these groups and explained the purpose of my study. With their permission, I emailed a request to the groups and asked them to share my call for participants through email and on their social media pages (see Appendix A). I intentionally targeted these groups as many of their members identified with the study criteria. Students in these groups may also have been able to reflect on the impact of their Latina identity during their college experience. The Cultural Center, a Latina/o/x student organization, and two Latina-based sororities shared the call for participants to their membership and on their social media pages. Once on social media, additional groups at the institution began sharing the flyer on their social media pages. I also shared the call for participants on my social media pages to reach anyone who knew of students who fit the study criteria. This first attempt at recruitment yielded nine *testimonialistas*. After this first attempt at

recruitment, I asked the *testimonialistas* to recommend other students to the study who met the criteria. From snowball sampling, two additional *testimonialistas* signed up for the study.

I asked interested participants to complete a Qualtrics questionnaire to collect demographic information to ensure the participants qualified for the study and solicit information regarding the participants' understanding of success in higher education (Appendix B). A total of 12 individuals completed the questionnaire, including one person who was in their first year at MU and did not meet the study criteria. I then requested to schedule the first *testimonio* session with those that qualified based on the study criteria. The 11 individuals who qualified agreed to participate in the study and completed all of the study's components except for 5 *testimonialistas*, who were unable to participate in the group session.

While qualitative research does not recommend a certain number of participants, there should be enough participants to adequately answer the research questions and provide opportunities to generate themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). *Testimonio* methodology emphasizes the importance of recounting the collective story of multiple experiences (Perez Huber, 2009). For my sample, I intentionally found participants who represented a myriad of experiences and backgrounds by opening up the study to any Latina undergraduate attending MU and recruiting from multiple groups on campus. In addition to identifying as Latina, 90% of the *testimonialistas* identified as first-generation college students, and several also identified as low-income. The *testimonialistas* represented multiple ethnic backgrounds, including Mexican, El Salvadoran, Indigenous, and Chilean, and represented different immigration statuses. They also represented a

variety of majors and years in college. I provide a more detailed summary of the *testimonialistas* in Chapter 4. As a result of this diverse sample of *testimonialistas*, I could tell a fuller and more in-depth story of Latina undergraduate students attending a 4-year private PWI in the Western U.S. I stopped collecting data once I met data saturation from a diverse sample of *testimonialistas*.

### **Testimonios**

*Testimonios* require trust/*confianza*, respect/*respeto*, collaboration/*colaboracion*, and for the *testimonialista* and the listener to be in *sustained dialogue* (The Latina Feminist Group, 2001). As a *testimonio* researcher, listening alone is not sufficient. I also needed to engage deeply with the *testimonialista* to understand her experience better (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012). By utilizing this approach, I was able to become connected to the *testimonialista* and in solidarity with their story. When conducting *testimonio* research, the *testimonialistas* and the researcher should engage in “collective decision making...a conscious commitment to nonjudgmental listening, [and] building trust” (The Latina Feminist Group, 2001, p. 11). As such, rapport building was essential to my participants’ sharing of their *testimonios*. Additionally, *testimonios* tell a life story that many participants may not have reflected on or shared before, which required more than one sitting to recount in an in-depth manner.

Aligned with *testimonio* methodology, I asked the participants to engage in two individual *testimonio* sessions, a group *testimonio*, and a vision board activity. A common method for collecting stories is through interviews. Traditional interviews guided by the researcher’s questions have a power dynamic embedded (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In my study, I wanted to center my participants’ stories rather than

mine. To center their stories, I engaged in dialogue with them to understand how social structures have affected them (Jones et al., 2014). *Testimonios* grounded in Chicana Feminism provide an alternative to a traditional interview because they honor the *testimonialista* as a co-constructor of knowledge, value their everyday lived experiences as valid knowledge, provide the potential for healing, and require reciprocity and reflexivity (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012; Perez Huber, 2009). During these sessions, I was vulnerable and shared parts of my own *testimonio* as it related to the *testimonialistas*' experiences. In the first individual *testimonio*, I established rapport with the participant. In the second individual *testimonio*, I was able to go further in-depth with the participant and learn more about their higher education experiences. The individual *testimonios*, conducted in-person or through Zoom video conferencing, were structured as a two-way conversation guided by my research questions allowing the *testimonialistas* to direct their *testimonio*. Due to the COVID-19 Pandemic, I asked the participants to choose which mode of interviewing they preferred, in-person or Zoom video conferencing. Zoom provided a cost-effective, convenient and secure way for my participants to share their *testimonios* (Archibald, 2019). If they selected to meet in person, the participants chose our meeting place. I met with participants on campus in common and meeting spaces throughout campus. For the group *testimonio* session, I met with the participants in-person in a large meeting space on the campus. When we met in person for individual and group *testimonio* sessions, we followed the institution's COVID-19 protocols by wearing face coverings and observing social distancing.

With permission from the *testimonialistas*, I audio recorded and transcribed the *testimonios* by Zoom if conducted online and by Otter.ai if conducted in-person. After

each interview, I listened to the audio to confirm the accuracy of the transcriptions. I kept the audio files and transcripts on a password-protected computer and online in a password-protected Google Drive. Throughout the transcription process, I kept a notebook to memo thoughts on the interview process. I started to develop themes as they emerged from the data. Through the two individual *testimonio* sessions, I built rapport and trust with my *testimonialistas* and spent significant time learning their *testimonios*. I conducted 22 total individual *testimonios* with a sample of 11 *testimonialistas* and one group *testimonio* session with six *testimonialistas*. To review data collection methods by *testimonialista*, see Table 3.1.

Table 3.1 *Data Collection by Testimonialista*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Testimonio 1</b>	<b>Testimonio 2</b>	<b>Group Testimonio</b>	<b>Vision Board</b>
Amy	Zoom	In-Person	Did not participate, recruited after session	Completed
Ana	Zoom	Zoom	Attended	Completed
Camila	In-Person	Zoom	Attended	Completed
Em	Zoom	Zoom	Did not participate, work conflict	Completed
Gabriela	In-Person	Zoom	Did not participate, class conflict	Completed
Jessica	Zoom	In-Person	Attended	Completed
Luna	In-Person	Zoom	Attended	Completed
Nina	Zoom	Zoom	Attended	Completed

Sarah	In-Person	In-Person	Attended	Completed
Selena	Zoom	In-Person	Did not participate, work conflict	Completed
Sofia	In-Person	In-Person	Did not participate, Other commitment	Completed

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### **Testimonio 1**

The first testimonio sessions were conducted from October 2021 through February 2022. The purpose of the first individual *testimonio* was to build rapport, and *confianza*/trust with the participants, so they felt comfortable sharing their lived experiences with me. Before the *testimonio* began, I reviewed the consent form for the study with the participants and addressed any questions they had about the study (See Appendix C). I kept a copy and offered to provide them with a copy. I informed the participants of the study's purpose, shared the study's risks and benefits, and asked for permission to audio-record the interview. I also asked my participants to provide a pseudonym to use in the study's findings. To build *confianza*, I shared my positionality with the *testimonialistas* throughout the study and let them know my purpose for conducting the study. By sharing parts of my own *testimonio*, the *testimonialistas* were able to connect with me and begin to feel more comfortable sharing their own experiences with systemic oppression. As a narrative researcher, I recognized that participants' current experiences are shaped by their past and will impact their future (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). As such, during the first *testimonio*, I asked open-ended

questions about the *testimonialistas*' past educational experiences, their goals for completing a college degree, and how their experiences and goals have been shaped by their Latina identity (See Appendix D). After the *testimonio* session, I provided the *testimonialistas* with guidance on the next steps of the research process. The first individual *testimonio* sessions lasted between 48 to 86 minutes, five were conducted in person, and 6 were conducted over Zoom.

## **Testimonio 2**

The second *testimonio* sessions were conducted between January 2022 and March 2022. The purpose of the second individual *testimonio* was to address any remaining thoughts from the first individual *testimonio* and group *testimonio* session if they were able to attend. I also asked any follow-up questions I had about their vision board. If they could not attend the group *testimonio*, I asked them about their vision board. In the remaining portion of the *testimonio*, we focused on the *testimonialistas*' experiences and involvement in college. I asked the *testimonialistas* to reflect on the support they have received from their MU to achieve their self-defined goals. I also asked them to provide any recommendations they may have for MU to better support Latinas working towards their self-defined goals in higher education. After the interview, I asked the *testimonialistas* to provide any additional insights they would like to share related to the entire study (See Appendix E). I also addressed any questions the *testimonialistas* had about the study's next steps. Additionally, I invited the *testimonialistas* to collaborate in the research process by asking them if they would be willing to review excerpts from their transcript and emerging themes. The second individual *testimonio* sessions lasted between 59 to 83 minutes, and I conducted five in person and six via zoom.

## Vision Board Activity & Group Testimonio

Between individual *testimonio* sessions, I asked all the *testimonialistas* to complete a vision board and meet for an in-person group *testimonio* session to reflect on their vision boards. While narrative research is primarily collected through interviews, other forms of data, such as observations, documents, and pictures, can help provide a fuller story (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Likewise, *testimonios* can be generated in many creative forms including “poetry, fictionalized personal account, interior monologue, dramatic dialogue, novelistic writing, and other forms evolved from the creative process of how to best represent the range of...life experiences” (The Latina Feminist Group, 2001, p. 21).

Furthermore, the vision board aligns with Anzaldua’s (2015) call to pay attention to dreams and imagining processes to develop awareness and begin the healing process. In this dreaming state, Anzaldua explained that she was able to “process feelings, traumas, negativities resulting from gender, racial or other oppressions...These stories--- both those I create and those created for me by something outside of myself-- nourish me, heal me” (p. 35). The purpose of the vision board activity was to assist the *testimonialistas* in conveying their ideologies of success and goals for the future and reflect on how their lived experiences as Latinas have shaped their ideologies and goals. Before the group *testimonio* session, the *testimonialistas* were asked to create a vision board on a physical board or digitally, utilizing images, photos, text, drawings, and other forms of expression, to identify their academic, personal, and professional goals (See Appendix F). I hoped that by tapping into their dreams, imaginings, and creativity, the *testimonialistas* would process their feelings and find nourishment and healing. The



*testimonialistas* were provided the prompt for the vision board after the first *testimonio* sessions were complete. I reminded them to complete the vision board before the group *testimonio* session if they could attend or before their second individual *testimonio* session. All 11 *testimonialistas* completed a vision board (See Appendix G) and discussed them in the group *testimonio* session or their second *testimonio* session. During the group and second *testimonio* sessions, I asked each participant to explain their vision boards and highlight specific images. In the second individual *testimonio*, I also asked specific follow-up questions about images on their vision boards that they had not previously discussed in the group *testimonio*. By engaging in this process, I could understand and interpret their vision boards better.

In January 2022, I facilitated an in-person group *testimonio* session with the six *testimonialistas*, so they could discuss their vision boards and reflect on the role their Latina identity and education played in shaping their goals (See Appendix F). To find a time for the group *testimonio* session, I sent a request to the *testimonialistas* to complete a Doodle poll with their availability. I selected the time that worked for most of the participants. Unfortunately, four *testimonialistas* could not attend due to class, work, and other personal commitments. I did not invite one *testimonialista*, Amy, because she completed the Qualtrics questionnaire to participate in the study the week after the group *testimonio* occurred. With permission from the *testimonialistas*, I audio recorded and transcribed the group *testimonio* session with Otter.ai. The group *testimonio* session lasted 79 minutes, with six *testimonialistas* participating. I was able to tell a fuller story of the *testimonialistas*' experiences by drawing from the group *testimonio* session and their vision boards.

Focus groups have the potential to encourage connection and healing among Latina participants (Perez Huber & Cueva, 2012). The group *testimonio* provided a space for the *testimonialistas* to engage in healing as they shared their goals with other Latinas who had similar experiences. During the group *testimonio* session, I saw healing begin as the *testimonialistas* validated and affirmed each other's experiences and even directed other *testimonialistas* towards on-campus resources. The six *testimonialistas* who attended the group *testimonio* confirmed healing was occurring during the second *testimonio* session. When I asked them to reflect on their experience in the group session, many shared how they appreciated the opportunity to connect with other Latina undergraduates who had similar experiences. For example, Luna shared, "I thought that it was nice having a group session just because you get to talk with other people that have similar experiences. And...it's just nice seeing that other people are in the same boat as you." The *testimonialistas* that were unable to participate in the group session did not have the opportunity to experience this healing process. In the next section, I explain how I analyzed my data.

### **Data Analysis Grounded in Chicana Feminist Epistemology**

As the one who bore witness to my participants' *testimonios*, I was tasked with transcribing, editing, and translating their lived experiences (The Latina Feminist Group, 2001). I was the mode of interpretation for my *testimonialistas* experiences. To enact social change in higher education, critical qualitative researchers must shift their epistemology from dominant research to align with an epistemology that maintains "an emphasis on the social and material contexts in which knowledge forms" and acknowledges the participant as a co-constructor of knowledge (Pasque et al. 2012, p.

33). As such, I utilized Chicana Feminist Epistemology (CFE), which centers Latinas, to guide my data analysis process.

As a Chicana Feminist researcher, CFE allowed me to reflect on my own history and that of my Latina participants, “a unique history that arises from the social, political, and cultural conditions” (Delgado Bernal, 1998, p. 556). CFE acknowledges that Chicanas' lived experiences differ from that of men, including Chicano men and white women. Additionally, CFE “validates and addresses experiences that are intertwined with issues of immigration, migration, generational status, bilingualism, limited English proficiency, and the contradictions of Catholicism” (Delgado Bernal, 1998, p. 561). It is important to note that CFE draws from other Women of Color epistemologies and feminist epistemologies to allow for the unique life experiences of Chicanas to be centered in research.

Furthermore, CFE reveals the historical oppression Chicanas face based on their interlocking identities and strives for social justice and equity in research. CFE encourages researchers to utilize decolonizing methodologies, like *testimonio*, because these methodologies “disrupt oppressive research paradigms that reinforce the bodymindspirit split” (Calderon et al., 2012, p. 527). By utilizing *testimonio*, a methodological approach informed by CFE, my participants could begin to heal the bodymindspirit split created within their higher education experience.

Cultural intuition is a key component of CFE, defined as “the unique viewpoints Chicana scholars bring to the research process” (Delgado Bernal, 1998, p. 556). A Chicana Feminist researcher’s cultural intuition is shaped by their memories, existing literature, one’s professional experience, and the analytical research process (Delgado

Bernal, 1998). By adopting CFE, my background and that of my family and community shaped how I understood, made sense of and interpreted the data I collected in the research process (Delgado Bernal, 1998; Perez Huber, 2008). Additionally, my own experience as a higher education practitioner, who has worked directly with Latina undergraduates, influenced my interpretation of the data. Furthermore, my understanding of the data was informed and influenced by the existing literature related to Latina undergraduate experiences, LatCrit and Chicana Feminism. My cultural intuition also informed the analytical research process as I interacted more with the data by “making comparisons, asking additional questions, thinking about what [I am] hearing and seeing, sorting data, developing a coding scheme and engaging in concept formation” (Delgado Bernal, 1998, p. 566). Thus, my data analysis was ongoing as I collected data, and as I continued to review and question my data throughout the research process.

### **Translating Themes in *Comunidad***

Zoom and Otter.ai automatically generated transcripts. After I completed the first individual *testimonios*, I went through and listened to each session and edited the transcripts for clarity. I followed the same procedure for the second individual *testimonio* and group *testimonio* sessions. Once I edited the transcripts, I uploaded them to NVivo 12 Pro Software. Narrative inquiry emphasizes that the researcher is always in relationship with the participant and cannot separate themselves from their participants (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). Thus, narrative is a collaborative process in which the story is co-constructed by the researcher and participant to share a message with a larger audience. During restorying, narrative researchers rewrite the stories chronologically and identify themes within the stories (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Guided by critical qualitative research and *testimonio* methodology, which emphasizes conducting research *with* those who experience oppression rather than *on*, I developed themes in *comunidad* with my participants by consulting them during theme development (Pasque et al., 2012; Perez Huber, 2009). My process for translating participants' stories and developing themes followed these steps. First, I read through the transcripts from the first *testimonio* session and noted initial themes. I then re-read at least one transcript and began bracketing information that stands out. Next, I developed an initial list of all topics and themes related to my research questions. Guided by my research questions, CFE, and *testimonio* methodology, I looked for common themes to convey the collective story of the *testimonialistas* (Delgado Bernal, 1998; The Latina Feminist Group, 2001). Before the group *testimonio* session, I noted themes that emerged from the first individual *testimonio* session and asked the participants to confirm themes by asking questions related to these themes. After I transcribed the group *testimonio* session, I read through it and noted any additional topics and themes that emerged. During the second *testimonio* session, I asked the *testimonialistas* to reflect on their experience in the group session if they attended and shared themes that emerged in the group session with those that did not attend. After the second *testimonio* session, I noted additional themes that emerged from the data. Next, I analyzed the transcripts and vision boards of each *testimonialista* and noted themes that emerged from each person. In NVivo, I went through and highlighted quotes that related to the emerging themes. Utilizing NVivo, I ran queries to learn the most common themes that emerged for each *testimonialista*. I then created a spreadsheet with tabs for each *testimonialista* highlighting the major themes that emerged from their *testimonios* and vision boards and

included quotes that represented those themes. The themes were separated into the following categories, *salient identities, definitions of success, ideologies of success* (this included *comunidad, familismo, personal growth, well-being, academic achievement, and career attainment*), *indicators that shaped understanding of success, college experiences – benefits* (this included *validation, support programs, academic opportunities*) and *college experiences- challenges* (this included *racism/discrimination, lack of representation, lack of sense of belonging and labor of promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion*). To ensure these themes reflected the *testimonialistas* experiences, I emailed each participant the themes that emerged in their *testimonios* and quotes I may use to represent those themes in the findings. I asked the *testimonialistas* to confirm the themes and quotes accurately reflected their experiences and allowed them to provide feedback on the themes and quotes. I then modified themes based on participant input and made final decisions on themes. While certain themes were more salient for some of the *testimonialistas*, in my final analysis, I focused on the most common themes that emerged for the collective.

When conducting narrative inquiry, “researchers need to discuss participant’s stories as well as be reflective about their own personal and political background, which shapes how they ‘re-story’ the account” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 73). Similarly, both a Chicana Feminist and LatCrit framework emphasize I shared my own background and used it as a guide as I retold the stories of the *testimonialistas* (Delgado Bernal, 1998; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). By sharing my own identities and experiences with the *testimonialistas*, I was able to build trust/*confianza*, with them, which led to creating *comunidad* (Perez Huber, 2009; The Latina Feminist Group, 2001).

## **Trustworthiness/*Confianza***

Critical qualitative research “does not set out to achieve complete knowing of individual subjects or social processes” and instead focuses on “coming to know the historical discourses in which such subjects are immersed” (Pasque et al. 2012, p. 33-34). Likewise, *testimonios* do not seek outside validation from external sources other than the participant. Instead, they seek to understand participants' lived realities and collective experiences with systems of oppression (Perez Huber, 2009). In this research, the *testimonialistas*' stories were seen as truth and, thus, did not need to be validated externally. *Testimonios* guided by CFE also stress the importance of the *testimonialistas*' involvement in data analysis as this contributes to the cultural intuition of the researcher (Delgado Bernal, 1998). Collaborating with the *testimonialistas* when conducting *testimonio* research “validates the assertion of the participants as equals in the study and allows the participants to ensure their experiences are being portrayed as they see accurate” (Perez Huber, 2009, p. 171). I achieved trustworthiness by including the *testimonialistas* in the data analysis process by sharing the themes that emerged from the *testimonios* and vision boards and asking them to confirm that I was portraying their stories in a way that was affirming and truthful to them. By including the *testimonialistas* in the data analysis process, their knowledge and experiences were validated, analyzed, and interpreted appropriately by me as the researcher. To further ensure trustworthiness, I collected multiple forms of data, including two individual *testimonios*, a group *testimonio*, and a vision board. I also shared rich, detailed stories so readers could better understand the *testimonialistas*' experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

I also engaged in memoing, which created an audit trail to track my thinking and understanding throughout the research process. Memos are ideas and concepts that the researcher is attempting to make sense of and analyze during the research process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Memoing required constant reflection on my data throughout the research process. This process allowed me to see how my own experiences connected with that of the *testimonialistas*. The strategies I have shared allowed for my research to engender trustworthiness. In the next section, I share ethical considerations regarding my research study.

### **Ethical Considerations**

When embarking on this study, I considered the ethics involved in qualitative research. During my study, I asked the *testimonialistas* to be vulnerable and share their stories and experiences. Ethics were in progress throughout the research study and were considered at every point, including in my approach to research, data collection, and data analysis (Davies & Dodd, 2002). I ensured I was approaching my study ethically by ensuring my participants consented to the study, understood the study and its intentions, and were provided the option to withdraw from the study at any point in time. I ensured privacy and confidentiality by asking the *testimonialistas* to provide pseudonyms and using pseudonyms for any other identifiable information about the participant.

Before conducting this study, I received approval from the Institutional Review Board and followed all necessary protocols. When asking my participants to consent to the study, I shared with them the risks and benefits of the study (Appendix C). The benefits of the study included the possibility of advancing knowledge that can create higher education policy and programming to support Latina undergraduates in achieving



their self-defined goals. I also provided the *testimonialistas* a \$25 gift card for their participation in all three *testimonio* sessions and completion of the vision board. The *testimonios* might have experienced discomfort if negative or distressful feelings emerged from answering questions during the *testimonio* sessions. I provided the *testimonialistas* the option not to answer any questions and to discontinue their participation in the study at any point for any reason without penalty.

Zoom provided security to video recordings by allowing encryption, password-protected meetings, and allowing recordings to be saved to the cloud, where only I, as the host, could access them (Zoom Video Communications, Inc., n.d.) Additionally, I kept the interview recordings, transcripts, study notes, and documents on a secure, password-protected computer and Google Drive that only I could access. Throughout the research process, I was attentive to any ethical issues that arose. In the next section, I discuss the limitations of my study.

### **Limitations of the Study**

As my research tells a collective story of the experiences of Latina undergraduates, I was careful not to essentialize their experiences. In the data collection and analysis phase, I could not assume all Latina undergraduates had similar experiences to mine or that their experiences were similar to each other. While my positionality helped me to gain trust with the *testimonialistas*, it may have also limited what they shared. The *testimonialistas* may have assumed I understood their experiences as a Latina and not thoroughly explained the details of their own stories. As with all qualitative research, I interpreted the results through my lens, and my unique background shaped my interpretation. Another limitation of the study is the sample is specific to one particular

type of institution in a particular region. Participants in this study may have different views from students who attend another higher education institution type in another part of the U.S. This study may have also recruited students with similar stories that are not representative of the entire Latina undergraduate population.

Due to the COVID-19 Pandemic, I collected my data both in-person and through Zoom. In January 2022, there was an uptick in COVID-19 cases in the U.S and at MU, which caused MU to start the quarter online. Due to this, I delayed the group *testimonio* session and the second *testimonio* session until the end of January. I also gave participants the option to meet via Zoom. I did have an option for the *testimonialistas* to join the group session by Zoom, but no one did, and all the participants in the group session attended in-person and followed COVID-19 protocols by wearing face coverings and observing social distancing. Only having six *testimonialistas* attend the group *testimonio* limited the opportunity for the *testimonialistas* to benefit from the healing process of the study. If more *testimonialistas* had been able to attend the group *testimonio*, there might have been an opportunity for additional data and themes to emerge.

In agreement with previous research, I had no trouble building rapport with my participants through Zoom, and I could still respond to nonverbal cues from my participants (Archibald et al., 2019; Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). By collecting data through Zoom, I encountered limitations, including the audio and video quality and interruptions during the interview (Archibald et al., 2019). The advantages of Zoom, including cost-effectiveness, convenience, and user-friendliness, outweighed any disadvantages. Before the start of the *testimonio* sessions conducted on zoom, I ensured

my participants understood how to use Zoom, was prepared to provide any technical guidance, asked my participants to be on video, and had them find a place to be on Zoom where they felt comfortable speaking about their experiences.

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I explained why utilizing critical qualitative research, specifically *testimonio* methodology, a form of narrative inquiry, was appropriate for addressing my research questions focused on Latina undergraduates attending a 4-year private PWI in the Western U.S. and their definitions of success. I explained the background of *testimonios*, their purpose, and how they have been utilized in higher education research. I also connected *testimonios* to LatCrit and Chicana Feminism, the theoretical frameworks that grounded my study. I shared my own *testimonio* and thoughts on how my positionality and epistemology impacted my research. I then explained my data collection and data analysis approaches for the study. I addressed how I approached trustworthiness, shared my ethical considerations, and pointed out the study's limitations. This chapter outlined how I approached data collection and analysis regarding how Latina undergraduates at PWIs define and measure success in higher education. In the next chapter, I provide profiles of the *testimonialistas* who participated in the study to understand better their identities, experiences, goals, and beliefs about success.

## Chapter 4: Profiles of the *Testimonialistas*

This chapter provides an overview of the Latina undergraduate participants in this study or *testimonialistas* to understand the findings better. This information was gathered from their questionnaires and *testimonios*. LatCrit scholars argue that Latina/o/x individuals are not a monolith, and each is shaped by their own unique histories and experiences (Villalpando, 2004). The *testimonialistas* in this study all identified as Latina. Yet, there were other intersecting identities, such as ethnicity, immigration status, sexuality, socioeconomic status, and being a first-generation college student, that shaped their experiences and definitions of success. The profiles of the *testimonialistas* are intended to provide context to the study and to give voice to each participant. Each profile shares the participants' pseudonym, their salient identities, majors and career goals, and their definitions of success. The definitions of success were taken directly from the *testimonio* sessions and only edited by me for clarity. The *testimonialistas* were also given the opportunity to review their profiles, and many provided feedback to ensure they represented them accurately. See Table 4.1 for demographic information about each participant.

Table 4.1 *Testimonialistas*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Self-Identified Racial &amp; Ethnic Identity</b>	<b>First-Generation College Student?</b>	<b>Year in College</b>	<b>Major</b>
Amy	Mexican	No	Senior	Biochemistry & Biology
Ana	Hispanic/Latino	Yes	Sophomore	Psychology
Camila	Salvadoran	Yes	Senior	Biochemistry & Public Policy
Em	Hispanic/Latina/ White	Yes	Junior	Biology
Gabriela	Salvadorian/ Hispanic/Latina	Yes	Sophomore	Political Science
Jessica	Brown/Latina	Yes	Sophomore	History & Political Science
Luna	White, Hispanic/Latina	Yes	Sophomore	Psychology & Sociolegal Studies
Nina	Latina, Mexican, Native American	No	Sophomore	Undeclared
Sarah	Mexican	Yes	Sophomore	Biology
Selena	Hispanic	Yes	Senior	Environmental Science
Sofia	Indigenous Latina/Biracial	Yes	Sophomore	Psychology

## Amy

Amy was a senior in her last quarter at MU, who identified as Latina and Mexican. Her parents both attended college, her father owns his own business, and her mother is a teacher. Her parents are divorced, and she is part of a large blended family, all of whom she had close relationships. She was attending college out of state and was the only one in her family living out of their home state. Amy was a Biochemistry and Biology major, and her goal after college was to attend Pharmacy School and become a compound pharmacist. When I asked her about her definition of success, she shared,

Success... Well, honestly whenever people think success, I think that people are like, 'Oh, all your accomplishments,' they really only look at, like, oh what you achieved, and, I really think that there is more to success. In that, people don't get to where they are by just doing good all the time because people fail, that's how people learn from their mistakes and, so, I feel like honestly, failures are a really big part of success, just because you need to know what not to do or...Just figure out what doesn't work or what does work to figure out how to get to the place that you want to be successful. But I just feel it's a really loaded term in the sense that everyone defines it differently, I would say, at the moment, the success that I have so far is mostly school related. In that, most of my academic achievements would define my success, just because that's what I've been doing these past four years and, that's what's consumed my time and energy. I think that's how I would define my success at this time. Just because it's what my life has been leading up to up to this point, but obviously, that's going to change once I'm older and I'm not in school and actually in the real world.

## Ana

Ana was a 2<sup>nd</sup> year student who identified as Hispanic and Latino. Ana was the first in her family to attend college and was also low-income. During her *testimonio* sessions, Ana shared that her parents were undocumented immigrants from Mexico. Her parents' undocumented status played a significant role in her upbringing as her dad was detained by ICE and deported to Mexico. Throughout her childhood, Ana went to therapy because the court required her to do so, and she found therapy was helpful for her to process the experiences in her childhood. Ana was now a Psychology major, and her goal was to become a Social Worker to support others who had similar experiences in their childhood. Ana was also born and raised in the city where MU was located and commuted to MU. Ana defined success as

I think it's just reflecting on how much you've grown as a person. I guess your mentality, as the things I've never actually gained from whatever it is you're measuring. And so, my success, I'm not saying like 'oh my God, I'm the GOAT [Greatest of all time],' no. I'm starting out here. Well, compared to where you were freshman year of high school to where you are right now, not even freshman, middle school, let's say middle school, seventh grade because middle school, seventh grade was something else. You've grown so much as a person, your mentality has changed so much, your values have changed so much, you respect yourself more as a person. You started identifying as a Chingona Latina, Chicana, stuff like that.

## Camila

Camila was a senior in her last year at MU who identified as Latina of Salvadoran descent. She was also a first-generation college student. Camila was raised by her single mother, who immigrated from El Salvador to leave the political unrest in the country. Although Camila was born and raised in a city near MU, she was proud of her Salvadoran heritage. She lived on campus for her second year and was now living at home and commuting to campus. Camila was a Biochemistry and Public Policy major. She hoped to attend graduate school to further her research focused on women's health. Camila defined success as

My version of success was to acquire more wealth than what my mom could reach. I now have more financial stability than what I had growing up myself, and in the future, I can provide more for my children or family if I choose to have it. But I also would like to help my mom have access to more lifestyle options (i.e., travel, entertainment, hobbies), and together be more mindful of how we eat or how healthy we are. All these things. If I five years from now, I can say my mom has different habits, we have had different experiences, and I'm able to show her different places of the world, then that's success to me. If I'm able to experience that for myself and travel and just have these experiences that I've never thought I would have. I think that's success for myself because I remember growing up being limited, and going to Walmart was exciting for me...So, I think the way that I grew up in some ways it was great, but also, in some ways, it was limiting because my mom was an immigrant. She knew work from home, work from



home, grocery store, and that's what she could do because she was tired from trying to provide the best life she could provide for her family.

### **Em**

Em was a 3<sup>rd</sup> year in college who identified as Hispanic, Latina, and White. Em was from a nearby state to MU, which significantly shaped her experiences and how she viewed success. She earned a full-ride scholarship to attend MU and felt grateful for the support she received from her scholarship. Em was also a first-generation college student and part of the LGBTQ community. Em was involved in a multicultural sorority on campus, which she was very proud of. Em was majoring in Biology and planned to attend veterinary school after graduation. Em defined success as

I define success as me moving forward, as me meeting my goals or potentially making new goals, and I suppose I also define success based on my identities, trying to pave the way for my siblings and for my family, as well as people similar to me. I guess right now, success is good grades and staying on top of things, doing everything for the sorority, and trying to navigate that, but in terms of future success, it would definitely be to make lots of money, achieve my career goals, and also just to be happy. I'd be successful if I was happy.

### **Gabriela**

Gabriela was a 2<sup>nd</sup> year at MU who identified as Salvadorian, Hispanic, and Latina. She was also an undocumented immigrant and a first-generation college student. The political unrest in El Salvador forced Gabriela's parents to leave when she was a child. Her family settled in a rural community in the southeastern part of the U.S. Her family was still living there while Gabriela was attending college out of state. Gabriela's

dad was a music teacher and highly influenced Gabriela's interest in music. Gabriela entered MU as a Music Composition major and recently changed to Political Science. Previously, she had planned to go into a career in film scoring and has now decided to become a civil rights or immigration attorney. She defined success as

In the aspect of education, just learning as much as I can both academically and just about myself in general. Because I've changed, like senior year me and right now me, are very different people. So, just learning who I am as a person, which sounds really basic. In terms of career-wise...I guess success would be just like pushing myself as hard as I can, but in a healthy way because I tend to do that but in an unhealthy way. So, yeah, just how far I can go.

### **Jessica**

Jessica was a 2<sup>nd</sup> year at MU who identified as Brown, Latina, and Mexican American. Jessica and her family immigrated to the U.S. from Mexico when she was a child to receive medical treatment for one of her siblings. For most of her life, Jessica had been undocumented and recently became a U.S. citizen. Jessica was also a first-generation college student and the only one of her siblings to attend college. Jessica was born and raised in a city near MU. Even though her family lived nearby, Jessica lived on campus. Jessica was majoring in History and Political Science and was planning to become an educator. Jessica was passionate about teaching Students of Color their histories but often felt like others did not support her goals. Jessica's experiences greatly impacted how she defined success, which was,

I think success for myself is one...making sure that it's what I want for me, not what different people are telling me that they want for me, and I think it's all

about... one leaving a legacy, it doesn't even matter if people can tie back to you. I don't want people to necessarily know my name, but I think, as long as my impact has been made, as long as I supported someone. To realize the power of their voice and it's like a ripple effect, like the domino effect, if I can support one person, that person supports another person... I see that as my form of success, leaving behind a legacy where people feel confident in themselves and feel confident that they can lead for change because I think as educators, that's our goal is to support students in supporting other like generations, so for me, that's my idea of success, and also a having my own happiness as well because... I think a lot of the times, we're fed this mindset, 'support others support others, support others,' and we forget to support ourselves and I also want to involve myself in my idea of success to also be able to find happiness and to also be there to support my family.

### **Luna**

Luna was a 2<sup>nd</sup> year at MU who identified as White, Latina, and Hispanic. Her parents were immigrants from Mexico who lived in a state nearby to MU. Luna was proud that she earned a full-ride scholarship to attend MU. As a first-generation college student from a low-income background, she was grateful to have the opportunity to attend MU. She shared that most of the support she received during her college experience was from the program that granted her the scholarship. Luna also shared openly about her mental health challenges, which significantly shaped her academic and career interests. Luna was a Psychology and Sociolegal Studies major. Even though she

had not yet identified a future career, she knew she wanted to provide mental health support and resources to Latina/o/x communities. Luna defined success as,

A very broad way of putting it...you make a life for yourself that you actually like, and you're proud of because... people think success is money and stuff like that but is it really success if you're making a lot of money, but you hate your job? I don't think it is, or you just hate your life because you hate your job, you didn't win, I mean you have the money, but everything else is not there... or it's mostly just you doing all the things that you want to do, or maybe not all the things you want to do but all the things that you can do that you want to do that make you happy so that you don't end up having regrets for not doing things. It's just finding something that works for you.

### **Nina**

Nina was a 2<sup>nd</sup> year student at MU who identified as Latina, Mexican and Native American. Nina was proud of both her Mexican and Native American cultures. Nina was also part of the LGBTQ community. While Nina was not technically a first-generation college student, she felt like one because her mom earned her Bachelor's Degree from an online university when Nina was in high school. Nina felt her college experience was unique from anyone else in her family. Nina was born and raised in the city where MU was located. Nina lived on campus but would travel home during the week to visit her family. Nina had an undeclared major at the time of the study but had plans to pursue a major in Business. She did not yet have a career goal in mind, though she thought being a CEO would be a good choice. Nina defined success as

I think success can come in many different forms, and I don't think there's just one time where you're successful. That's it. Huzzah, there you go, you did it. I think there's many different moments for that. One of the biggest ones was graduating high school, and I'm like, 'wow, I went through four years of high school, and I'm already done.' I cried when I graduated. So, I would say that's success, I did that. Leadership wise, in high school, when I ran the Native American club, I spoke at equity forums. And because I wanted change, I wanted more...change or have the history curriculum be more inclusive because I remember sophomore year of high school in my history class they didn't even mention the American Indian Rights Movement when we were talking about Civil Rights, and I was like what? You mentioned the Chicano movements and the African American movement and not the American Indian one. That inspired me to want that to change...And then follow up, 2020, I was invited to a district board meeting to talk with other Native students as well to talk about why it's important to have inclusive curriculum and our experiences as Native students, and I was told that they are currently working on inclusive curriculum for Native American history or just Native American classes, LGBTQ curriculum and things like that, so I was like, 'wow because of me,' and so I was really happy to know that because I took action, other people wanted to join in.

### **Sarah**

Sarah was a 2<sup>nd</sup> year student at MU who identified as Mexican. Sarah's parents were immigrants from Mexico. Sarah was born and raised in the city where MU was located. During her first year of college, she lived in a living and learning community.

She now lived at home and commuted to MU. Sarah was a first-generation college student. Sarah was one of five siblings; two older that completed college, and two younger and still in high school. Sarah's older siblings were her role models and helped pave the way for her to attend college. Sarah also felt strongly about her Christian faith. Sarah was majoring in Biology and planned to be a Physician's Assistant. Sarah defined success as,

There's success that you feel when you finish a week or even a day, and then like success after you've been working for something for so long. I feel like for me success in a day feels like finishing all my things that are due. And then, for a week, same thing, especially in school, submitting all my assignments on time. Feels like I've had a successful week... I could give an example, so I feel finishing my first year of college was a big time for me to feel successful just because it was hard. It was a really hard year for me just because I didn't have friends. I was one of the few people from my high school to come here and to live on campus my first year. So, it was very isolating in a way. I was also in a living and learning community, and I still felt alone just because nobody looked like me.

### **Selena**

Selena was a senior at MU who was going to graduate soon with a degree in Environmental Science. Selena identified as Hispanic and Mexican American. After graduating high school, Selena joined the military and served for four years. After her time in the military, she moved to the state where MU was located, then applied, was accepted, and enrolled at MU. Selena's family was still living in the Southern state where she was born and raised. Selena was a first-generation college student and the only non-

traditional college-aged student participating in the study. Selena chose her major because she was interested in environmental justice and planned to work in sustainability after graduation. Selena defined success as

My definition of success will just be someone who's financially independent...I want to have a career and not just jump from job to job. And obviously, I want to be able to promote throughout the career and jump to a different company that way, but at least have some sort of growth along the way, not just like a stagnated position. So, as for [my vision board], I put in that woman that was the CEO... and I definitely put in a few words to help remind me along the way like, 'stay strong,' 'against the tide,' just little mementos to be okay, you can have your faults, you can have your hiccups or, times where it feels like nothing else is progressing. But, you know, you're moving towards something, towards a better future, for myself, for my family.

### **Sophia**

Sophia was a 2<sup>nd</sup> year at MU who identified as Latina, Indigenous, and Biracial. Sophia's parents were both immigrants to the U.S. Her mom was a Polish immigrant, and her dad was an immigrant from Chile. Her dad's family left Chile to escape the violence inflicted under the Pinochet dictatorship. Sophia's dad was Indigenous Mapuche. Sophia identified deeply with her Indigenous heritage and felt closer to her dad's family, including her grandmother. Sophia was also a first-generation college student and from a low-income background. Sophia was from a state on the East Coast of the U.S. and was attending college out of state. She was the only one in her immediate family not currently in her home state. Sophia was a Psychology major and planned to become a Psychologist

because she wanted to heal the trauma experienced by those in her communities. Her ultimate goal was to return to Chile and practice psychology. She defined success as,

I feel there's a very much taught definition of what success is, but I think for me growing up, it was never really money related or it was never how much I had. Because we didn't have much money and I didn't have much things. But I still will always see my parents as successful because they are incredibly loving people, especially my dad...And I think success is just; I see him in the way he is with other people. And the fact that he came from so much violence and that he's still able to be such a kind person, he's so kind. But he always taught me that when I can find my own truth and when I can speak that is success. When I can hold my own person, and I can walk into a room, and people know that I'm there, people can feel what I emit, my radiation in a way, how I just am. My dad always made sure that I knew that no matter what I do, as long as I'm doing it with passion, as long as I'm doing it for my people in a way, that I bring it back to that... There's so much, and I view success as in that sense, that when people do things for their communities or when people do things to give back in a way. That's something really important to me. And, no matter how big or small it may be, I still view that as success.

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I provided profiles of each of the *testimonialistas* who participated in this study to highlight their unique individual experiences and definitions of success. I shared each *testimonialistas* salient identities, major and career goals, and their own definition of success. Although the *testimonialistas* differed in some of their identities



and fields of study, common themes emerged, including a commitment to family, dedication to community, investment in personal growth and well-being, and the desire for academic and career attainment. In the next chapter, I will further elaborate on the findings by sharing excerpts from all of the *testimonialistas*.

## Chapter 5: Findings

In this chapter, I share the findings from my participants' individual *testimonios*, vision boards, and a group *testimonio* session. This critical qualitative research study aimed to understand better how Latina undergraduates attending a 4-year private PWI in the Western U.S. define and measure success for themselves in higher education and what shaped their understanding of success. Furthermore, through this research, I wanted to understand better the support Latina undergraduates have received from their PWI to achieve their self-defined goals. In this research study, I used a *testimonio* methodology grounded in LatCrit and Chicana Feminism to center the voices and experiences of the Latina undergraduate participants in the study. *Testimonios* lead to empowerment and liberation for the *testimonialista*, expose injustices, and lead to social change (Perez Huber & Cueva, 2012; Reyes & Curry Rodriguez, 2012). *Testimonios* also require reflection and reciprocity from the researcher, who becomes the vessel through which the *testimonios* are shared (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012; Perez Huber, 2009). By drawing on Chicana Feminist Epistemology, I used my own cultural intuition to make sense of and understand my participants' *testimonios*. As I intentionally developed *confianza* with my participants and interpreted themes in *comunidad* with them, their involvement in the research study helped ensure my findings were representative of their experiences. While each *testimonialista* has her own story to share, in my findings, I share quotes from the collective to address my research questions.

The overarching themes that emerged and are shared in this chapter also align with Chicana Feminism and LatCrit, which are the theoretical frameworks that grounded this study. The major themes that emerged were *Finding and Fighting for Coyolxauhqui to be Exitosa*, *In Their Own Words: Latinas Share How Their PWI Supports Their Self-Defined Goals*, *Embracing their Shadow-Beast to Resist Dominant Ideologies of Success*, and *Enacting La Facultad to Define Success on their own Terms*. The section *Finding and Fighting for Coyolxauhqui to be Exitosa* answered my first research question by sharing how Latina undergraduates defined and measured success in multiple ways and have found ways to bring together their multiple indicators of success to heal their bodymindspirit split. The section *In Their Own Words: Latinas Share How Their PWI Supports Their Self-Defined Goals* answered my second research question by sharing how the *testimonialistas* felt they were being supported or not by their PWI to reach their self-defined goals. The section *Embracing their Shadow-Beast to Resistant Dominant Ideologies of Success* and *Enacting La Facultad to Define Success on their own Terms* further expand on the first research question by sharing how Latina undergraduates were able to resist dominant success ideologies and define success on their own terms.

### **Finding and Fighting for Coyolxauhqui to be Exitosa**

*In 2007, after completing my Bachelor's Degree, I traveled to Mexico to better learn Spanish and to connect with my familial roots. I spent three months in Guanajuato, Mexico, my paternal grandfather's birthplace. During this trip, I traveled to Mexico City and visited the Museo Nacional de Antropología. This is when and where I snapped the photo in Figure 5.1. I had no idea who Coyolxauhqui was at this time or that her story would become such an important*

*part of my dissertation. Looking back, I realize I was also on my own path to conocimiento, to put Coyolxauhqui back together, again, by taking this important trip, where I learned more about my Mexican heritage, and my identities as a Queer Latina. – Lauren*



*Figure 5.1 A Photo of Coyolxauhqui at the Museo Nacional de Antropologia*

Anzaldúa refers to the Coyolxauhqui imperative as the

struggle to reconstruct oneself and heal the sustos resulting from woundings, traumas, racism, and other acts of violation que hechan pedazos nuestros almas, split us, scatter our energies and haunt us...It is an act of calling back those pieces of the self/soul that have been dispersed or lost, the act of mourning the losses that haunt us (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2015, p. 1-2).

As explained in Chapter 2, Coyolxauhqui was a Mesoamerican moon goddess who her brother decapitated for killing her mother. Anzaldúa (2015) believed Coyolxauhqui was a symbol for “the process of emotional, psychical dismemberment, splitting mind/body/spirit/soul, and the creative work of putting all the pieces together in a new form...a labor of re-visioning and re-membering” (p. 124). In this study, the Latina

undergraduates were on a path to put Coyolxauhqui back together by acknowledging the multiple ways in which they defined success, such as academic achievement and career attainment that did align with the institution, as well as their own definitions of success shaped by their identities, families, and communities. The most prevalent ideologies of success the *testimonialistas* shared were academic achievement, career attainment, *comunidad* (including giving back to their communities and being a role model for other Latina students), *familismo* (including honoring family sacrifice, considering families in decision making, and role modeling for family members), and their own personal growth and well-being. The Latina undergraduates in this study were challenging the dominant notions of success embedded in higher education, such as a focus only on academic achievement and career attainment. They were also finding ways to connect their own values of *familismo* and *comunidad* to their definitions of success. Furthermore, their ideologies and definitions of success became ways they were reintegrating their bodymindspirit to heal the split created when entering higher education. Figure 5.2 below represents the different ideologies of success held by the Latina undergraduates in this study and how they were working to redefine success to encompass all of these beliefs. Rather than dedicating a section exclusively to academic achievement and career attainment, in this section, I highlight the themes of *Familismo*, *Comunidad*, and Personal Growth & Well-Being and weave in how they are each connected to the goals of academic achievement and career attainment.



Figure 5.2 Latina Undergraduates Ideologies of Success

**Familismo: “I’m Going to Do Everything in My Power to Make you Proud”**

*I do; I have this one thing to add. The reason why I decided to pursue higher education is because my parents weren't given the opportunity, and they weren't told that they had the opportunity, they were just told to work. So that's why they encouraged me to go to college or go to trade school or go to the military. They were like, go do that, and now I'm doing it. I'm in college. I'm a student. - Nina*

From speaking with the *testimonialistas*, it was evident that their families played an important role in shaping their goals and how they defined success. For the Latinas in this study, the Latina/o/x value of *familismo* in the form of honoring family sacrifice, involving family in decision making, and being a role model to family members, was prevalent in their decision to attend college, identifying their career choice, motivating them towards their goals, and shaping how they defined success for themselves. As demonstrated by the quote above, when I spoke to Nina, a Mexican American, and

Indigenous woman, she shared how important her family was to her and how they encouraged her to go to college because of the limited opportunities they had to pursue higher education. This was a common theme amongst the participants as they were often pursuing higher education as a way to honor their families and their families' sacrifices. LatCrit emphasizes the importance of considering the historical context of Latina/o/x individuals because the historical context informs the present context of Latina/o/x individuals (Villalpando, 2004). Due to the racism, discrimination, and struggles, many of my participants' parents and families experienced as Latina/o/x individuals, their access to educational opportunities was limited. Nina was one of only two participants who were not first-generation college students, as her mom attended and graduated from college when Nina was in high school.

Ana, a Mexican-American, first-generation college student from a low-income background, shared more specifically how she tied her student success beliefs' to honoring her family's sacrifice. During our *testimonio* sessions, Ana spoke of her close relationship with her mom. Ana's relationship with her mom was strengthened when Ana learned about her mom's immigration journey to the U.S. and the abuse her mom endured from her father, who had recently been deported back to Mexico. Due to racism, sexism, discrimination, and the limited opportunities available to undocumented Mexican women in the U.S., Ana's mother was unable to obtain a formal education in the U.S. However, she knew that an education would benefit Ana and her sister and encouraged them to further their education. Ana shared more about the influence of her mother's experiences in the following quote,

My mom, as soon as I realized all the things she told me, I'm like I'm going to do everything in my power to make you proud somewhere...my dad may have brought you over here, but it was you who pushed me... it was you who gave me the idea to go to college, it was you who gave me the idea to do something with my life, other than just working my ass off...and so I'm like you know what I want to go to college just for you. I'm going to struggle, and I'm going to tell you this, I'm going to struggle. I'm going to cry. And I don't know how many mental breakdowns I will have, But I will do this for you. She's been my motivation, and then, sometimes I'm just like I cannot with like class, I cannot, and I'm like you gotta remember that you're doing this for someone, you're doing it for your mom, you're doing it for your grandparents because I remember when I went to Mexico, my grandparents were like, 'Are you studying?' I'm like, 'I'm going to a white private college.' And they're like, 'whoa.' And I'm like, 'I'm going to do it for you guys too.'

Even though Ana knew college was going to be challenging and stressful and she would face systemic oppression as a Latina woman attending a PWI, knowing the sacrifices made by her mom and grandparents, she was motivated to complete college to honor her family's sacrifices to bring her to the U.S. to have access to higher education.

Similarly, Sophia, an Indigenous and Chilean first-generation college student whose family escaped a dictatorship in Chile, shared how her pursuit of higher education was also connected to her family's historical background, the challenges they faced as Indigenous people living under a dictatorship in Chile, and the sacrifices they made as immigrants in the U.S. Sophia's family also shaped her definition of success. She



explained how she felt her dad and her grandmother, though they do not have college degrees because they faced limited opportunities to access education in both Chile and the U.S., were successful because they stood up for what they believed in and spoke out against the dictatorship in Chile. She also believed they were successful because they were able to leave their home country and create new lives in the U.S. Sophia connected how her family framed success to her own pursuit of higher education. In the following excerpt, Sophia shared how her grandmother's experiences influenced how she defined success,

She has me and my sister, her granddaughters who are, one graduated from a top university in the world, and me as well going to a huge university like this one, and I love her because...before I left, she would call me this university woman; I'm a University woman now. I need a leather bag or something, and she would talk to me about how she dreamed of that, whether it was for her or for future generations to become that; she's proud of us for working with the little that we had and actually making it. And so, if I can make them proud, I can make my grandmother proud, as the amazing woman that she is, and she doesn't even acknowledge it. She's like, 'well, I did what I had to do', and that's how she sees it, and so, my family always it was...that's what success was. It was never like how much you had; it was what you did, how you showed yourself.

Like Sophia and Ana, Selena's family background shaped her views about success and her goals to pursue higher education. Selena was a first-generation college student and a non-traditional student pursuing her college degree after serving in the military. Selena grew up seeing her parents work long hours and make sacrifices to ensure she and

her sisters were supported and had the resources they needed. As first-generation immigrants from Mexico, her parents had limited opportunities to pursue higher education and believed it was important for Selena to do so. Upon leaving the military, Selena was hesitant to enroll in higher education, but her family's encouragement and her desire to want better for future generations of her family motivated her to enroll. When discussing her journey to higher education, Selena shared,

Definitely what pushed me was just a different life than what my parents had. I love them to death, and I know they provided what they could for us. But I definitely see them and my sisters still struggling, and I just I don't want to be struggling at their age; I want to kind of at least be comfortable and settled, and I'm just seeing all my family in general; we're all really close to my aunts and uncles, and none of them have gotten their higher education. It's really just like me, and I'm about to finish, and then two other cousins, and there's like 20-30 cousins. So, it's definitely not a family thing to go to college, and I see the struggle. So, it's definitely a motivational aspect for me to just want better for my family.

Like Selena, Luna, a first-generation college student with parents who immigrated from Mexico, wanted to pursue higher education to have a different life than her parents. While Luna's parents never explicitly encouraged her to go to college, they were supportive of her attending college. Luna recognized her parents' struggle and saw how, as immigrants, they were not afforded opportunities to complete a college education. Luna felt motivated by her family's limited opportunities to complete a college degree herself. She shared,

My parents want me to have a better life than them, just have a job that I enjoy for the most part...get to like travel and have new experiences...They were pretty happy when I got my scholarship [to attend college]. My mom got to go to college, but she didn't get to finish it. And my dad did not get to go. So, neither one of them got to finish a degree, so they're pretty happy because my sister and I are going to go to college, or I am in college. My parents, it hasn't been like a thing that's been like forced on us, they would like us to go to college, but they're not gonna make us...we don't want to go, then it's just like, 'okay get a job or do something else'. But it's just experiences have shaped the way that I think about wanting to go to school, just because I've helped my mom clean houses...and it's not fun. It's pretty exhausting.

Em's parents, who were low-income and Mexican-American, were more vocal in their desire for Em to pursue college because they wanted her to be able to have more opportunities than they did. As such, Em's goal of pursuing higher education was shaped by her parent's advice. Furthermore, Em also wanted to encourage her younger siblings and others in her predominantly Latina/o/x community to pursue higher education. She shared,

My parents have always wanted the best for me, and being a first-generation student, I'm never satisfied with what I do; even just graduating high school is like 'Okay, this is barely step one.' And they've always pushed me; college wasn't even an option; it was like mandated by my parents, they've always told me since I was younger, 'you're going to college,' and that's it. So that definitely helped shape my goals. As well as just showing an example for my future generations...

to show them that they're not first-gen anymore, I put the stepping stones in place for them, so now it should be even easier for them to go further and do more.

In addition to honoring their family's sacrifices and being role models to their family members, the *testimonialistas* made it clear that their families' historical context as Latina/o/x in the U.S. was influential in shaping their current goals and their beliefs about success. This was also true for Amy, whose parents did have college degrees. In her *testimonios*, Amy shared her close relationship with her family and how her parents influenced her to pursue pharmacy. Aligned with previous research, Latina undergraduates are influenced by their parents' professional experiences to pursue certain careers (Rodriguez et al., 2022). Amy shared how she felt her family knew her best and sought their advice when seeking out what to do after college. This impact of her family on her goals was evident on her vision board. See Figure 5.3. When discussing her vision board, she shared

I followed your guidelines and put professional, personal and academic. I felt like it's all intertwined because you can't have one without the other, but... starting with professional, academic...Obviously, I want to go to pharmacy school...and then ownership...obviously, this could change, but at the moment, I want to go into compound pharmacy, and my parents are very big supporters of me going into that and have discussed with me opening our own compound pharmacy locations. My parents are very big on ownership, and if you want to start a business.

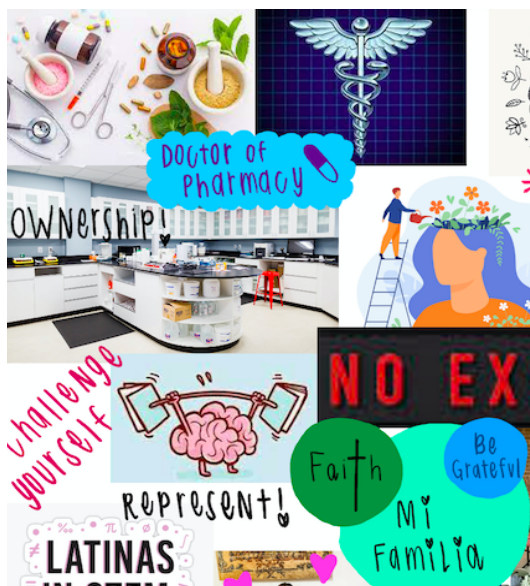


Figure 5.3 Amy's Vision Board

In addition to the excerpt shared above, Amy's vision board also included pictures of her family, further demonstrating their important role in her life and goals. During the process of Coyolxauhqui, Latinas are attempting to bridge together multiple different worlds. Amy's vision board demonstrates how she has begun the process of putting Coyolxauhqui back together again by intertwining her professional and academic goals with the goals of her family. Amy believes she will be successful when she becomes a pharmacist, yet it is important to note how important her family's influence is in achieving this success.

All of the *testimonialistas'* present-day experiences were shaped by the historical and contemporary context and experiences of Latina/o/x individuals in the U.S. with racism, discrimination, and limited opportunities to pursue higher education. While the *testimonialistas* did not often explicitly attribute their parents' limited educational opportunities to racism and discrimination, U.S. society and institutions, such as colleges

and universities, have intentionally marginalized Latina/o/x individuals and presented challenges to them in accessing and completing higher education. The *testimonialistas* were determined to change this narrative by honoring their families' sacrifices and completing their college degrees.

**Comunidad: “I Just Want to Help Others”**

*I feel personally that my identities do play a role because I want to be able to support and grow with students who do have similar identities to me particularly but, obviously, in general, I just want to be there to support future generations. - Jessica*

Another prevalent theme in the *testimonios* was *comunidad* in the form of the *testimonialistas* wanting to give back to their communities. The *testimonialistas* desired to either work with others in their communities or be role models to those in them. The Latina/o/x value of *comunidad* greatly influenced the *testimonialistas* goals and how they defined success for themselves. The *testimonialistas* understood how they existed in a society that systemically oppressed Latina/o/x individuals, and through their academics and careers, they wanted to work towards ameliorating the injustices facing their Latina/o/x communities. For example, Jessica, a first-generation college student and Latina immigrant from Mexico shared how being part of the Mexican-American community shaped her desire to become an educator. As an educator, she hoped to provide a representation of Latinas in education and to empower others in her communities by teaching them their own histories. This is evident in her vision board in Figure 5.4 as she shared images with text stating, “fight today for a better tomorrow” and



systemic oppression faced by Latina/o/x individuals and Women of Color, particularly in the medical field. In her future career, she wanted to be part of the change within this system. Due to her own experiences with health care, and the systemic oppression she observed facing Women of Color in health care, Camila wanted to support Women of Color through research. She shared,

I would really like to focus on Women of Color because one, the research right now that's happening within fields is not women-centered or leaves them out, and you're just using male data... And then, let alone Women of Color...and as a person affected by polycystic ovarian syndrome, which is just an umbrella term...they don't really even know that much about it. They just give you medicine to combat the effects of it, but they don't really go out to the above and beyond to find out how can we help these people live a better life, so that's why for me, I really want to focus on women's health.

Luna also wanted to help others and give back to her community. Luna's goal was to provide her community with more mental health services. During her *testimonio* sessions, she shared how her own mental health and her observation of the treatment of mental health within her own Mexican family shaped her desire to provide mental health treatment. She shared,

I've dealt with mental health issues since I was in eighth grade, it affects me, and I want to help people, and I noticed that...with, families that, at least for me, Mexican families they're very...about the hustle like work, keep going type thing. So mental health issues aren't talked about or treated; it's you're being lazy. Don't



want to do things. And, I just want to do something to help people...and I don't really know which [career] I would lean towards, but I just want to help people.

Due to systemic oppression, Latina/o/x individuals have focused more on working to survive and have had limited opportunities to access mental health resources. Luna wanted to be part of this change and destigmatize mental health in the Latina/o/x community.

The *testimonialistas* often referred to this theme of wanting to help people through their career choice. Em also wanted to help her community by demonstrating to other Latinas that higher education was an option. Em was from a state with a significant Latina/o/x population, yet due to racism and systemic oppression, there were limited opportunities for Latina/o/x individuals in her state to access higher education. As such, Em explained how she was among the few people from her state and her local community pursuing higher education. Em expressed how she wanted to be a role model to others in her community. She shared,

Just paving the way for my siblings and my family and being the first to graduate, being the first to go to grad school, being the first doctor in the family is going to be absolutely insane...and, I want to be a role model to my family, as well as to females similar, like me, like some that have a similar background in terms of coming from [a state] where we're very low on the education, reading in the U.S. and showing them that it is possible, you can do it, you don't have to...fall into your class, you can rise above.

Amy also had a desire to be a role model and specifically wanted to increase the representation of Latinas in the STEM field. While U.S. higher education claims to be a

meritocracy, the number of Latinas in STEM is still limited (National Science Foundation, 2016). Furthermore, Latinas in STEM face a multitude of barriers and challenges, including microaggressions and hostile classroom environments (Acevedo et al., 2021; Castellanos, 2018), which was evident to the Latinas majoring in STEM participating in this study. Amy believed representation of Latinas in STEM was important because, as a Latina in STEM attending a PWI, she seldom saw others like herself and felt this representation would have made a difference in her college experience. Due to this experience, Amy was motivated to be a role model for other Latinas in STEM. She shared,

I don't really get to see that Latino or Latina side in science, which I find interesting to see...there are students, but I feel like that's not the same, just like seeing someone who's already there, you know? All my professors and research lab group, people that I've worked alongside that have just helped me figure out what I want to do have all been white males. I definitely think it does motivate me just in the sense that I do want to see more people in the field, at least a little bit; I know that they're out there, but in a PWI who claims they want inclusivity and diversity, but they don't have any professors that look like their students.

Through this quote, it is evident Amy observed how the institution was not aligning its espoused values of diversity and inclusion with her lived reality in the classroom. Furthermore, she began to see how MU was not a place of equal opportunity for historically marginalized students, even though they claimed to be, because there was a lack of Latina/o/x STEM faculty. As demonstrated by these findings, Latina undergraduates connected their career goals to their desire to give back to their

communities and be role models to those from similar backgrounds and identities within their communities. When discussing the goals on her vision board (see Figure 5.5) and how she defined success, Sophia tied these elements together,

I think that all of them have to do with community, and I think all of it comes back to community. And I think that in terms of success, as long as I'm giving back to my community where I'm providing some sort of support to my community, I think that is success to me and to my family... I think that my whole vision board connects in a way that just all comes back to community. And I feel like giving back to my family and maintaining familial knowledge; I think that really is how it relates, I think, to my idea of success. I think it's just giving back or supporting.



Figure 5.5 Sophia's Vision Board

Like the other *testimonialistas*, Sophia wanted to give back to her community through her career; that was how she defined success for herself. As her quote and vision board with photos representing her Chilean and Indigenous heritage indicated, Sophia was

in the process of re-envisioning success and putting Coyolxauhqui back together by connecting her goals to become a psychologist to giving back to her family and her community as her ultimate goal was to return to Chile to practice psychology. For her and many of the *testimonialistas*, success was about community. By reconceptualizing student success to include community, the *testimonialistas* were pushing back on the dominant student success beliefs connected to individualism and solely investing in one's own academic success and career attainment.

**Personal Growth & Well-Being: “I also want to involve myself in my idea of success”**

*Luna: I feel like success is defined by money a lot of the time or by how much you have...and sure, it's nice to have money...who doesn't like money? but I don't know. I feel like money isn't success because you can have money, you can have it all material-wise, but it doesn't really mean a whole lot if you're not actually happy. So, I feel like for me success is...graduating and getting a job that I like doing, graduate school. All of that is success to me, becoming a more educated person. All that and then for me, success is just reaching...happiness, liking what I'm doing. I'm just working on making myself better in whatever ways that I can. I feel that's success. It's building something that you're happy with. And, like in your job and everything. Just chasing what actually brings you happiness*

*Sarah: I completely agree with what all of you guys are saying. Even though I do want to be a PA, I feel like when I do become a PA, I'm gonna want something else. So, I think, just being happy with where I'm at now and also what Camila said, having a job like not just to survive. I really want to get to that point.*

*Jessica: I agree. To go off of that, I just want to 'live, laugh and love.' But in all reality, I just want to get to where I'm happy...just feel confident in what I'm doing.*

*Ana: I think happiness for me is like the number one thing, number two is money because, like shit, I want to be filthy rich. It's just something about having that financial stability because when I grew up my parents did not have the most amount of money, and just having the fun of actually being able to do that. It's kind of scary in a way but... I want to just give that back to my mom in general, and if I do become filthy rich one day, I might not, but like I just want to give back to all the people that helped me get to where I am right now.*

As evidenced by the excerpt from the group *testimonio* session, in addition to family and community, the *testimonialistas* wanted to ensure their success also included their own personal growth and well-being. Several participants shared how they wanted to be happy, in whatever way they defined it. For some, financial gains were important to consider for that happiness; for others, it was their well-being; for others, it was having a better life and more opportunities than their families. As Luna shared in the group session, the idea of bettering herself through education was an important factor in her happiness and personal growth. In her individual *testimonio*, she shared a similar sentiment,

My dad works at two or three different restaurants as a waiter. That's still pretty exhausting...I even had a job for a month and a half at a restaurant, where I was a cashier, and I had to stand for six to nine hours straight, and it was pretty tiring,

and I would just think...I don't mind working here, but I don't want to be working here my whole life... I want a job that actually...and, it's still going to be tiring and stuff like there's stuff that you don't like about it but, I don't know, at least you're doing something that hopefully you feel passionate about to an extent. So that's the main reason why I want to go to college, and I also think that education is good, whether you got it through college or reading...I feel educating yourself is always good.

Luna wanted to ensure her success also contributed to her personal growth and her ability to have a career she was able to enjoy and have a passion for. Her belief about success challenged the dominant notion that success should be connected to only financial wealth. Luna related success to the ability to have continued growth and to be content with her life.

Even though she could not attend the group session, Selena shared similar sentiments to those in the group. She defined success as being happy and ensuring she and her family did not have to worry about financial concerns. She shared,

Being content with your life and being happy, overall, I want to say, I want the well-paying job and all that, but...I mean money has never really been a huge factor for me, I just want to make sure that I'm not stressed about it either...I want enough that I'm not like, 'oh my God, I can't afford my bills,' but I don't need to be rolling in dough either. I don't need designer things. That's never been me. And, so I think, as long as I'm happy, I'm happy with my partner, we're happy together, I'm happy with my house...I have my vehicles, and I think that's just success enough for me. And...as long as my parents are taken care of, I'm good.

Like Luna, Selena pushed back on the dominant notion of success only defined by financial wealth and materialism. While she wanted to ensure she could pay her bills, Selena focused her definition of success on her happiness and her parents' ability not to have to struggle. For the *testimonialistas* like Luna and Selena, it was important for them to continue their education because of the struggles they saw their families endure. They invested in their own personal growth and academic achievement because they did not want to have the same financial worries as their families. They wanted to be financially stable and to be able to buy a house, or travel, if they wanted to.

Amy also wanted her career as a pharmacist to lead to a worry-free life, where she could spend her time and money how she desired. Amy felt having a job in pharmacy would afford her these opportunities. She shared,

I don't want [work] to be something I have to do in my life just because I have gone through...internships and work and stuff, and I like work, but I know there's something bigger out there. So bigger, and better... I just have to push through and go through those hard times...but at the end of the day, I want to when I'm older, and if I decide to have a family...or significant other...want that time and money to decide how I want to spend it, I don't want someone to dictate how I can spend my time.

Even though Amy connected her definition of success to financial wealth, her reason for wanting to have a high-paying career was to have the freedom to spend her time and money as she wanted. Building upon Amy's sentiments, Nina connected her desire to be happy with being healthy and accruing wealth. Nina explained how the importance of happiness and well-being shapes her and her family's values. She believed

by adhering to these values, she would be successful financially and otherwise. She shared,

Happiness, health and wealth are always my top three [values], no matter what, because actually my parents, they gave me this book called *The Secret*...Because my parents always taught me those values that are within the book throughout my life. And I guess, I could say in a way it's kind of our Bible because we're not religious. So that's how I view it, personally. For example, I've always been told, if I'm happy, I'm healthy, and if I'm healthy and happy, I'll gain wealth. I really do believe that...and I've seen it in my family where, if that is not aligned or taught, things don't always go well. So just seeing that, I genuinely do think those things are important, so like right now, I'm happy. Even though I'm kind of stressing over school—a little thing in life. I just remember I'm happy, I'm healthy, and if I'm healthy, I'll gain wealth.

By defining success in this way, Nina was pushing back on dominant ideals solely focused on financial wealth. Rather than believing wealth would lead to health and happiness, Nina and her family reversed this and believed focusing on health and happiness would lead to wealth, and they would achieve all three of these values.

The *testimonialistas* also connected their happiness to their well-being and having a life where they would not be stressed. For example, Gabriela, a first-generation college student, Latina, and undocumented immigrant from El Salvador, connected her personal growth to taking care of her mental health and well-being. These themes were apparent on Gabriela's vision board (see Figure 5.6) with the quotes "You are enough" and "Treat yourself like someone you love."



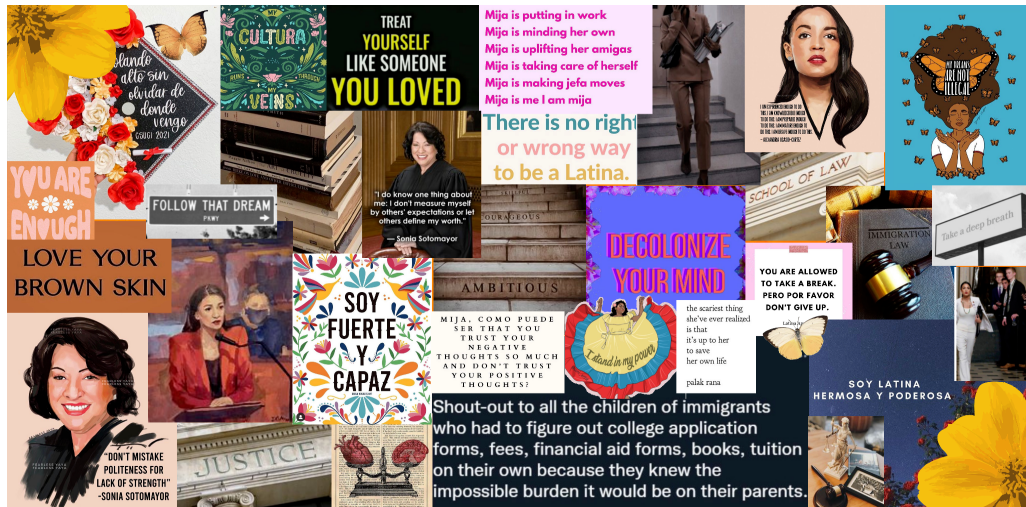


Figure 5.6 Gabriela's Vision Board

During our second *testimonio* session, we discussed this further, and Gabriela shared,

Those goals tie into that definition [of success] simply just trying as much as possible in terms of, I was looking at my past with my how healthy I approach things or the lack of. I feel those goals, the goals, I have on my vision board specifically, really reiterate them, like the health aspect of it. So, I want to do as much as I can, I want to help as many people as I can, and make whatever impact I can. But I need to keep in mind that there is a healthy way to do things, even if that's harder to do for me, like not being experienced doing things in a healthy way. I'm really just keeping in mind that in the long run, it's not going to be worthwhile for me to try to push myself as far as I can if I end up in the ER again because I didn't put my health first, which I have done.

In U.S. society, it is embedded that to achieve success, there is a need to sacrifice well-being. White American values emphasize competition (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007).

However, in the past, when Gabriela focused on achievement at all costs, including her

well-being, the pressure and stress she put on herself to achieve academically led her to the emergency room. Most of this pressure came from feeling that as an immigrant, a Latina, and a first-generation college student, she had to do more and be better than her white, U.S.-born counterparts. While U.S. higher education implies Latinas have the same opportunities to succeed as their white counterparts, Latinas face more significant discrimination and oppression in a system that was not created to serve them. As such, Latinas feel they have to prove themselves in spaces embedded in white American values. From this experience, Gabriela learned that even though she wanted to help others through her future career as an immigration attorney, she also needed to make sure to take care of her well-being.

Similarly, Camila shared how she learned the importance of taking care of her well-being during college. She shared,

I just do things that I genuinely enjoy so that my days are not miserable. I say no to stuff that I don't think I can commit to...Because...I'm insulin resistant; I get tired more than my peers in my age group. I gotta listen to my body. My body's telling me no, I'm doing something wrong, or something around me is affecting me in a negative way. I feel I've been progressively getting better at it. But last year, during my third year during winter quarter, I was about to join another club, and this was a high-commitment club...I was getting anxious. I'm like, 'dang, y'all need all of this from me?' but I wanted to do it, but then my body was like, I couldn't sleep at night. I felt anxious; I was like, 'oh my God, I'm getting so overwhelmed by what I'm doing'...I should stop this. So, I quit.

Through this experience, Camila realized she needed to prioritize her health and consider her well-being and her other responsibilities. Though she also shared with me she does not believe balance in life exists, Camila was now trying to implement the idea of self-care into her future success. However, she recognized there were times in her life when she may not be able to have balance. As such, her vision board, seen in figure 5.7, shared the opposite words of “grind” and “flow.” For Camila, she felt there were times you will need to “grind” and will not have balance, and there are times when you need to just go with the flow. The ideals of the dominant white culture that encourage competition and a focus on self-achievement at all costs are deeply embedded in U.S. society and impacted the *testimonialistas* ability to focus on their own well-being. Camila was learning she could push back on dominant notions of success and grind culture by saying no and focusing on her well-being.



Figure 5.7 Camila's Vision Board

While the *testimonialistas* in the study deeply desired to honor their families and give back to their communities, they did not want to forget their own personal growth and well-being in the process. Jessica spoke directly to her aspirations of giving back to the

community and inspiring others; however, she also noted how she did not want to forget about herself in the process,

I think success for myself is one...making sure that it's what I want for me, not what different people are telling me they want for me, and I think it's all about...one leaving a legacy, it doesn't even matter if people can tie back to you. I don't want people to necessarily know my name, but I think, as long as my impact has been made, as long as I supported someone to realize the power of their voice and it's a ripple effect...if I can support one person that person supports another person... I see that as my form of success, leaving behind a legacy where people feel confident in themselves and feel confident that they can lead for change because I think as educators, that's our goal is to support students in supporting other generations as well, so for me, that's my idea of success, and also having my own happiness as well, because I think a lot of the times we're fed this mindset, 'support others, support others, support others' and we forget to support ourselves and I think I also want to involve myself in my idea of success...also be able to find happiness and to also be there to support my family.

As demonstrated by Jessica's quote, Latinas do want to give back to their communities and their families, but they also want their success to include their own happiness and well-being.

Furthermore, due to the ways in which U.S. higher education is steeped in white American values that do not fully capture Latina values, Latinas face challenges navigating the institution and often feel they have to prove they are supposed to be there. Due to the pressure they experience, Latina undergraduates may be overwhelmed and

experience distress, which adversely impacts their well-being. However, the Latina undergraduates in this study were finding ways to bring Coyolxauhqui together, again, by including their own well-being and personal growth in their definitions of success. The *testimonialistas* were pushing back on white dominant values that encouraged them to sacrifice their own well-being to achieve success.

### **In their Words: Latinas Share How Their PWI Supports Their Self-Defined Goals**

LatCrit scholars argue the knowledge of Latina/o/x individuals is an asset and essential to understanding their experiences with systems of oppression (Villalpando, 2004). To give voice to my participants, during the *testimonio* sessions, I asked the *testimonialistas* to share how they have been supported or not by MU to achieve their self-defined goals. The *testimonialistas* shared the challenges they encountered at MU that hindered their success. The themes that emerged were lack of representation and sense of belonging, racism, and discrimination, including microaggressions and systemic oppression experienced by those with multiple marginalized identities, and the pressure to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion at MU. The *testimonialistas* also shared that they received the most support to achieve their self-defined goals from the academic opportunities provided by their institution, support programs and affinity groups, and validation from faculty, staff, and peers. In this section, using their own words, I share more about the barriers and challenges faced by the *testimonialistas* and the support they received to achieve their self-defined goals.

### **Barriers & Challenges to Success**

During their *testimonios*, the participants shared several challenges they encountered to achieving success on their own terms. In this section, I highlight the

following barriers and challenges, lack of representation and sense of belonging, racism, and discrimination, and the pressure to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion at their PWI. These barriers gradually harmed the participants' well-being and led to additional challenges in achieving their academic and career goals. The participants wanted to achieve their academic goals, yet these barriers led them to question if they should stay enrolled at MU and continue to work towards their college degrees.

### **Lack of Representation & Sense of Belonging**

Latina undergraduates attending PWIs, which were not made with them in mind, are adversely impacted by racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression embedded in higher education institutions. In this study, the *testimonialistas* shared how they were impacted by intersectional oppression based on both their gender and racialized identities. This was evident as the *testimonialistas* shared how their transition to MU was often challenging and a culture shock. Previous research has emphasized the importance of a sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012). Many of the *testimonialistas* shared how they struggled to find a community on campus that would be able to understand them and support their goals as Latinas. Due to the lack of Latina/o/x representation, social support, and feeling of connectedness, the *testimonialistas* often felt like they did not belong at MU. This led some *testimonialistas* to question if they should remain at MU. Sarah, a first-generation college student and Latina, shared more about how she struggled to find community at the PWI in her first year,

I was living in [a residence hall], and I was in this [living and learning community] ...literally, everybody was white. And it was really hard for me to connect with them...I feel like they didn't really know what adversities were, so

the very first quarter...we had to talk about adversities, and a lot of them had such; I thought they were silly examples. I did not think they were being serious. So, it made me feel really left out, and it made me feel like I wasn't white enough to be here. Just because I didn't have everything that these people had, I remember they would talk about all the businesses that their dad owned...and they were just very cocky.... I didn't feel like I belonged. I hadn't found my community, and as much as I tried to make it my community. I just couldn't. I couldn't keep a conversation up with them. It was just very forced...I didn't build connections with them at all. So, it was hard for me. And then, because I didn't have any connections. I feel I didn't have any support from students at [MU] or from the [MU] community.

While MU purports it is a place where all can achieve their goals, Sarah and her white, affluent peers had vastly different upbringings and familial resources, which shaped how they navigated MU. Due to the lack of connection with her white peers, Sarah felt like she did not belong at MU and did not have resources to support her in navigating MU. Even though Sarah remained enrolled at MU and eventually found supportive communities, Sarah questioned being at MU because of these experiences. By not staying at MU, Sarah's ability to further her education and to be that support and example she wanted to be to her family was hindered.

Amy spoke specifically to the lack of Latina/o/x representation in STEM at MU and how it impacted her as a Latina in STEM. She shared,

I definitely have noticed it throughout my years because I'm like oh, I only see so many People of Color and it's so different because...they don't really say 'oh look

she looks different' but, for me, no one around me has color to their skin...but it has been eye-opening because I love all my professors, but interesting to see because I actually have never, I could be wrong, but from what I can tell, none of my professors have ever come from a Latino background.

Racism and sexism are embedded within the fabric of MU, resulting in limited opportunities for those from historically marginalized backgrounds to access MU, particularly within the STEM fields. Previous research indicates that a lack of Latina/o/x faculty in STEM sends a message to Latinas in STEM that they do not belong in STEM (Acevedo et al., 2021). Aligned with previous research, while no one explicitly told Amy that she did not belong in STEM, she questioned her belonging because there were no Latina/o/x STEM faculty at MU with whom she interacted. Sarah, Amy, and Camila, the STEM majors in the study, all shared about the lack of representation in STEM at MU.

The lack of representation of Latina/o/x individuals went beyond the STEM field at MU and was also felt by Jessica, a History major, who shared how the lack of Faculty of Color at MU impacted her,

We had a [Latina/o/x Student Group] event based on identities. One of the questions that we had was, 'Do I see people at [MU] who are doing the things I want to do?' 'Do I see people who are doing the careers I want to be in?' and I said, No, because I mostly see like, Yes, I do see women who are educators, but I don't see people who share the same ethnic background as me...because they don't have those same experiences. It's always like... 'Oh, you can't do it because of XY and Z'. And if you do, if you can do it, 'you're gonna be miserable because of XY and Z'. And it's not a lot of positivity. There's not a lot of, 'yes, you can do



it, and you'll be amazing at it.' And...there isn't enough encouragement...I feel a lot of first-generation students or low-income students, they know that the careers that they're going to go into, there's just gonna be issues because of systemic issues like no one really needs to tell us that. We already know that and by another person just discouraging us that just creates more motivation.

Jessica spoke about how the lack of representation at MU made her feel like there was a lack of support from faculty and staff at MU to pursue a career in education. Jessica had a passion for education and wanted to further her own academic goals by going to graduate school, yet, she felt there was not enough encouragement and support at MU to pursue her goals. She felt representation was important because Faculty and Staff of Color would better understand her struggles and be more likely to support and encourage her. Even though MU provided opportunities and resources for the *testimonialistas* to achieve their academic goals, Latinas and other students from historically marginalized backgrounds have been prevented from entering MU because of systemic oppression, which has resulted in a low number of Latina faculty, staff, and students at MU.

### **Racism & Discrimination**

Beyond a lack of representation, the *testimonialistas* also shared more blatant instances of racism and discrimination that made several of them feel unsafe attending MU. Due to this, some of the *testimonialistas* considered transferring to different institutions. They also questioned MU's support for Students of Color and felt there was more MU could do to prevent instances of racism and discrimination from happening. Ana shared a specific incident of racial discrimination with a white male faculty member,

I was in my psych class, and we were taking a test. And so, everyone is taking their test... And so, I was just sitting down, minding my own business. And I guess my eyes wandered somewhere but didn't wander on the screen; they were just wandering around; it's like I don't know what the professor was thinking; he gave me the most nastiest look ever. And I'm like the audacity for you to look at me that way, I am not doing anything wrong, and I still scored pretty good on that test. It's disgusting when you think about it because you're like there's no way that even the professor is looking at you like that. If you have something to imply if you think I'm cheating, then call me out on it, but there's no need for you to be looking at me differently. I feel if it were someone else, he wouldn't even care to look at them.

After Ana shared this, I asked her what she felt motivated this incident. She believed this incident was racially motivated and that white students in the class did not experience the same scrutiny. This further emphasized the point that Latina undergraduates endure harm, racism and discrimination at their higher education institutions that their white peers do not. While Ana was determined to continue her education at MU, these experiences contributed to an inequitable experience for her and other Latina undergraduates attending MU.

Em also spoke about the microaggressions experienced by her and her peers at MU. She shared how she was frustrated MU did not do more to condemn the racism and discrimination occurring on campus. She shared,

There have been so many microaggressions I've seen, witnessed, been a part of or my peers have been a part of and have talked about, and so it makes you a little

bit intimidated and baffled that, like the school doesn't promote it, but allows it and, there's no consequence to it. I would also say it just makes you want to succeed, even more, because it makes you feel like you can't push me out of here, and I am here and I'm just as smart as you are, just as good as you. I deserve to be here and trying to fight that...imposter syndrome. I think that's definitely one of the things that happens after witnessing something like that.

While Em felt motivated to succeed more at MU because of the racism and discrimination she faced as a Latina, this added an unnecessary challenge to Em and the other *testimonialistas* that their white counterparts did not have to worry about. They should not have to feel unsafe and intimidated at their own institution. Furthermore, Em pointed out how MU does not condemn the racism and discrimination taking place on the campus. The lack of accountability from MU harmed Latina undergraduates in this study because they felt they did not have support from MU.

Sophia, who was part of both the Native Student Group and Latina/o/x Student Group at MU, also shared how she did not feel supported by MU,

Definitely, I think there's a lot in terms of supporting minority students on campus that [MU] doesn't really do a good job of, I think definitely, they make the whole thing out of it like they do. But in reality, when you talk to, obviously I'm in [the Native American Student Group], and a lot of my friends are in [the Latina/o/x Student Group], there could be more support, and whether it's, not just financial, but also spiritual support...because [the Native Student Group] has been fighting for a space on campus to smudge and to burn sage without getting, campus police called on us for smoking weed when we're not smoking. It's literally just

spirituality. And we can't even do things like that on our own, in a private space...So in terms of that, I think; definitely, it's very performative. The way that [MU] says that they support minority students. And so, I think definitely [MU] could do better in that kind of thing. So, it's a love-hate relationship.

The quotes by Em and Sophia demonstrate how MU purported to be a place that promoted diversity, equity, and inclusion. Yet, MU did not condemn racism and discrimination or provide an environment in which students from historically marginalized backgrounds could thrive.

Even though the Latina undergraduates in this study found ways to navigate the institution despite racism and discrimination, their experiences with microaggressions and a hostile campus climate added to the stress they experienced at the institution. This added stress can gradually harm the well-being of Latinas (Arbona & Jimenez, 2014). Research has found that inaction from higher education institutions to address racism and discrimination causes frustration and stress for historically marginalized students and further harms their well-being (Linder et al., 2019b). While they may graduate from the PWI, which is one of their goals, they have experienced harm and stress in the process, which inhibited their goal of personal growth and well-being.

### **Labor of Promoting Diversity, Equity & Inclusion**

Latina undergraduates at MU felt stressed and pressured to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) on their campus. While they wanted to provide a supportive community to their peers through affinity groups and critical conversations about race, they did not feel it was fair to have this added pressure. Latina undergraduates at MU were experiencing an inequitable college experience because of this pressure to promote

DEI at MU, especially as their white peers did not have to do the same. Camila spoke to the burden she experienced to advocate for historically marginalized students at MU as a Latina versus her white counterparts,

They [MU administration] leave a lot of the pressure to the students. I know for a fact that I as a student if I'm trying to reach equality or equity I shouldn't, like the white student next to me isn't advocating, doesn't need to advocate for themselves as much as I do...because they are a part of the majority and...that's a lot of pressure on one person, on the group of people.

Gabriela also shared how she felt additional pressure to promote DEI at MU because MU was not adequately addressing it. As an officer in the Latina/o/x student group on campus, Gabriela appreciated the ability to create a space to have an open dialogue about racism and discrimination, yet, she felt there should be more support from the administration to have these conversations. She shared,

I have a love-hate relationship with [MU] simply because it is a dominantly white school, so it's like you're seen, but not always seen in the right ways; we had a [Latina/o/x Student Group] event...last week or two weeks ago and...we basically had ten statements...And then the individuals who were of all ethnicities... They came and...one of the questions was... 'Are you seen as a statistic?', and a lot of people, most of them, including myself, said yeah or lean towards yes, which I feel... I know [MU] tries to be more culturally inclusive, but a point that was brought up at that event was that most of the diversity and inclusivity events that are put on are run by students...So, [the Latina/o/x Student Group] we're all undergrads, we're the ones that put on those events...so that the community can

have a safe space. It's not like the administration is doing it. It's like the students have to take into their own hands to create that space for each other, which I think that's pretty cool, but at the same time, we shouldn't really have to do that.

Gabriela emphasized how MU claimed to be culturally inclusive yet, left the work of DEI to the affinity groups on campus. Even though the institution purported all students have the same opportunities on campus, this additional labor on historically marginalized students reduces their ability only to be students like their white counterparts (Linder et al., 2019a).

Similarly, Jessica, who was involved in a committee to implement DEI on campus, further discussed the stress experienced by students to create an inclusive environment. She also shared how she noticed the few Staff of Color at MU also experienced this stress.

I'm part of [the DEI committee]; a conversation that we've been having a lot is that for so long, [MU] has put advocacy in the hands of students; students are always the ones who are forced to be these changemakers. And kind of how... a lot of students are getting burnt out by this point. A lot of students really want to do this work, but at the end of the day, it shouldn't have to be students' work to do. Because the system should be supporting...I think the main thing is just resources and...just more staff support...it'd be nice to have multiple coordinators for these programs. I feel a lot of the work typically gets put onto one person. And that can feel overwhelming...for them as well. I think...it's just resources, staff support, financial support. And I'm pretty sure there's more.

Jessica highlighted the point that MU should invest more in resources and support for Students of Color so they did not feel like they were solely responsible for the work to promote DEI on the campus in addition to being a student. By providing more support for racially marginalized students, Latina undergraduates would benefit and not feel as stressed to do the DEI work of the institution. While Latina undergraduates may still want to be involved in DEI work and support historically marginalized groups on campus, additional funding and staff support would ease the burden of this work. From Jessica's quote, it is evident the students also noticed how historically marginalized staff and faculty were given additional labor to promote DEI on campus, which they believed was unfair. Putting this work solely on one or a few staff members is also not the solution, and the work to promote DEI should be embedded throughout the institution.

### **Factors Contributing to Success**

Despite the many barriers facing Latina undergraduates to achieve success on their own terms, the Latinas in this study continued to work towards their self-defined goals, and several were even nearing graduation. The *testimonialistas*' acknowledged the multitude of challenges facing them at MU, yet, they also shared resources and support systems at MU that were helping them to navigate MU and achieve their self-defined goals. In this section, I will share how academic opportunities at MU, support programs and affinity groups, and validation from faculty, staff, and other students were crucial to supporting the *testimonialistas* in achieving their self-defined goals.

### **Academic Opportunities**

Due to the racism embedded within higher education systems, private PWIs often have greater resources than public colleges that enroll a majority Student of Color

population. Though being at a PWI comes with the challenges noted above and throughout the study, the *testimonialistas* realized how MU, as a private institution, had greater financial resources, which led to more academic opportunities than other institutions may have. These academic opportunities were attractive to the *testimonialistas* because they believed they would help them to achieve their academic goals and eventually lead to career attainment. For example, Jessica shared,

Touring here, I could already see the difference between [State College] and this campus. [State] felt small and squished like even though MU probably realistically is the same size. There's less people here. It was also the classroom; I think just looking at the statistics, not the statistics, but yeah, definitely the statistics, the graduation rates from MU to State College. The class ratio between MU, no one really had to tell me the numbers were just saying it for itself. And the whole thing between private school versus public school, and I had already learned, taking that one education course on the history of education, made me understand that this school would have more opportunity than another school.

Due to the academic opportunities, and resources available at MU, Jessica realized attending MU would increase her chances of being able to graduate. Though this was not her only goal, it was important to her to be at an institution that would be able to provide her with more opportunities and help to ensure her graduation and eventual career attainment. Gabriela also grappled with the tensions of being at MU because it provided her with academic opportunities, yet, MU had challenges supporting historically marginalized students like herself. In the quote below, she explained this tension,



[MU] has a better plan in terms of flexibility to allow students to have multiple areas of study. Also, because we're on the quarter system, so we can study more, take more classes and still graduate within a normal four-year period. It's a balance thing. I wish they would do more in other aspects, but structurally speaking, I guess it's a good option for an undergrad when you're trying to figure out, solidify what you want to do in the next chapter of your life. It's a good structural place to take in a lot of different areas of study. So, I'm doing, assuming I keep all my minors and majors, I'm doing a combined study of law, music, film, leadership, ethnic studies. And I'm doing that on the assumption that I can graduate within my four-year period...So, it has its good things and bad things, but I think, overall, I don't regret coming here at all because...it's definitely opened the doors to a lot of cultural and academic opportunities that I would have otherwise probably not had.

Despite the challenges, the *testimonialistas* felt the educational opportunities at MU supported them to further their knowledge and reach their ultimate academic goals. Some students even shared how taking courses at MU that focused on injustices helped them to develop a critical consciousness and inspired them to continue working towards resolving issues within their local communities. For example, Selena shared how taking Environmental Science courses helped her better understand environmental injustices in her hometown. She shared,

They [Environmental Science classes] definitely opened my eyes up to a lot of issues. First off, obviously, growing up right there by the ship channel. I knew it was a thing, but I didn't even know the term environmental injustice. I just

thought that's just how it is. So, it definitely opened my eyes to a lot of the issues happening within my own neighborhood that I never knew was an issue. I knew it was something bad, and well, we can't do anything to change it; it's just the way life is. So, it definitely gave me more empowerment to realize what we can actually change what isn't right. So, that's a huge part in it, and also just broadening my eyes or insight to what other careers I could have. So definitely not keeping a narrow mind on that. And honestly, I didn't even know Environmental Science was a major until I came to MU. So, that's awesome.

Even though there were challenges at MU with addressing DEI and social justice issues, the *testimonialistas* shared how certain courses and professors challenged them to think about how they could enact social justice within their communities. These courses and professors were directly helping the *testimonialistas* to achieve their academic goals. They also provided them with resources, tools, and empowerment to create the change they wanted within their communities.

### **Support Programs & Affinity Groups**

To assist with navigating the challenges faced at MU, the Latina undergraduates in the study were actively involved in multiple programs and organizations at MU that were intentionally created to support students from historically marginalized backgrounds. The *testimonialistas* shared how they were involved in support programs for first-generation college students, Latina/o/x student' organizations, and multicultural sororities. They shared how being involved in these programs and affinity groups was critical to their academic success and well-being at the institution. Jessica shared how

being part of multiple programs, and affinity groups were beneficial to her and made her feel a greater sense of belonging at MU,

Thinking about my time here, First-Generation Student Programs and the Latina Sorority, it's mostly...like platforms of representation here...that have supported me because it really does, it makes you feel less lonely. And it's not even that sensation. Because I feel when people say lonely, it's like, oh, well, then just make friends...I don't know how to say...it's going beyond that loneliness. It really is nice to talk to other people who are going through the same. And even talking to them it gives you advice because, oh, they might have more insight because they're like, oh, they're a third year or something. And it goes beyond the loneliness; it goes to I can talk to you about what I'm feeling, and I don't have to feel uncomfortable. I don't feel like I don't have to worry about making you feel uncomfortable because you're obviously going through the same thing. Well, different things, but most of the time, it's similar experiences.

The support programs and affinity groups provided the *testimonialistas* a space on campus where they could connect with peers and staff that had similar identities and similar experiences. The *testimonialistas* were able to decrease their feelings of isolation and increase their sense of belonging at MU by connecting with peers from similar backgrounds. Through a program focused on historically marginalized students in STEM, Sarah gained more confidence as a STEM major because she met other Latinas who were also pursuing STEM. She shared the importance of this in the following quote,

I was still a little bit scared, though because I had heard a lot of things about oh STEM majors in college are hard. And so, I never declared my major until it was

pre-orientation for [First-Generation Student Program]. So, I went there, and I met two Latina STEM majors, and I didn't know about [the STEM Support Program] yet; I went for the [First-Generation Student Program] orientation, but they were all together...they were all in the same Zoom Room...And I remember they went around asking the mentors their majors. And two Latina undergraduates started talking about how they were Latinas in STEM. And they were doing the Bio major how I wanted to do it. And it was the first time that I saw somebody that looked like me in the STEM field.

Sarah highlighted the role support programs had in connecting her to Latina peers pursuing the same major as her, which impacted her sense of belonging within her field of study. Aligned with previous research that found a network of STEM faculty and peers leads to an increase in sense of belonging and validation (Acevedo et al., 2021), Sarah's sense of belonging and well-being was enhanced by finding opportunities to connect with other Latinas in STEM.

Nina also shared how being part of multiple programs with others who shared her identities, including a Latina sorority, positively impacted her experience at the PWI, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. She shared,

I'm in the Leadership program, and then I'm in the Native Student Group, and even with that, I still felt like something was missing. I needed more because we were all on Zoom...So that's why I joined the sorority, maybe they'll help me feel more connected with [MU], and that did help a lot, too, I would say. So now that I'm in the sorority, the Native Student Group, and the Leadership program. I feel

definitely more grounded with being on campus, like being more interactive. So, I think that definitely has helped my experience so far at [MU].

Even though Nina did not initially plan to join a sorority, she felt being in a Latina sorority at MU helped to contribute to a positive experience at MU. A few participants were in multicultural sororities and aligned with previous research (Garcia, 2020), they shared how being part of these organizations played an important role in their sense of belonging at MU.

Beyond connecting historically marginalized students with each other, the support programs, affinity groups, and multicultural sororities also provided a space for the *testimonialistas* to learn more about their Latina identity and to feel as though that identity was celebrated. Gabriela shared,

The general area that has supported me the most in my goals has been anything that's tied to the Latina/o/x student group, the First-Generation Student Program, just that general area, the more cultural side of campus has helped me the most because in navigating my undergrad I'm also navigating embracing my culture, which is something I don't have experience doing. So, trying to balance my culture with my academics and how they coincide. The cultural-based organizations on campus have been what has helped me the most.

Gabriela shared the importance of having a space on campus to help her with embracing her culture as a Latina. In the college environment, Latinas are experiencing a cultural collision because their Latina/o/x culture clashes with the white dominant values perpetuated by the institution (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007). Gabriela shared how the Latin/o/x student group helped her to heal the split created by this clash. This emphasized

affinity groups' important role in supporting Latina undergraduates with their own personal growth and well-being.

### **Validation from Faculty, Staff & Peers**

*Institutionally, I don't feel supported, but I think in meeting individuals that I have met and making the connections that I have made, I think that has made all of my struggles here worth it in some aspects because at the end of the day I wouldn't give up those experiences or that growth...At the end of the day, I don't regret my decision, but I think that we can always we can for sure do better. – Camila*

As the quote above by Camila highlights, the *testimonialistas* also attributed their overall success and well-being to building relationships with particular staff, faculty, and other students, who provided them holistic support. Rendón's (1994) validation theory stressed the importance for students from culturally diverse backgrounds to feel supported and affirmed by their college administrators, faculty, and staff. In later work, Rendón et al., (2018) explained that,

validation theory stresses the importance of authentic affirmation, support and encouragement from family members, and in- and out-of-class validating agents (faculty, student affairs staff, coaches, advisers), and considers the whole as critical to student success (p. 228).

In this study, the *testimonialistas* shared how authentic affirmation, support, and encouragement led to their holistic success, including their academic success, well-being, and personal growth. Nina shared how receiving validation from a Latina admissions counselor contributed to her decision to attend MU. She shared,

The admission counselor I was becoming good buddies with her, so she was helping, was bumping me up for the scholarship I eventually received. So, I was

already networking before I was even at [MU] for the scholarship. I wasn't just using her because I'm like, oh, I wanna get the scholarship but also she was a really nice person. So, it was nice to have someone that I'm being genuine with her, and she's being genuine with me, and I think that's also the reason why I'm like she's a nice person. She's not just being like we want students. She liked the things I've done because I was like telling her some of the leadership things I did in high school, and she likes that.

Nina appreciated the investment the admissions counselor put into their relationship and getting to know Nina's interests beyond her academics. As a result of this relationship, Nina was able to receive a scholarship, which influenced her decision to attend MU.

Several of the *testimonialistas* also shared how relationships with both white faculty and Faculty of Color were important to their success at MU. In the first few years of college, Camila struggled to find a research lab where she felt like she could be supported and conduct research on the topic of her interest, which was improving health care for Women of Color. As such, Camila appreciated her current research lab principal investigator, a white female faculty member, who invested in getting to know Camila and her interests. She shared,

I'm actually trying to get access to a Latino research database that they've been working with. My PI, she listens to me, she knows that...I want to pursue those things, and I feel as a woman herself, even though she's not a Person of Color. I think she also tries to do that within her own by using female mice instead of male mice...I'm hoping to have her...I'm still going to talk to her after I graduate.

By taking her time to listen to Camila, and understand her interests, her PI connected Camila to research that would contribute to her academic and career goals of becoming a scientist and her goal of giving back to her community by improving health care for Women of Color. Even though Camila recognized the challenges at MU, she did not regret her decision to attend MU because of the experiences she had with supportive faculty, like her PI.

In her second year of college, Gabriela made a significant change in her major and felt unsure about it. She had focused her academics to this point on music composition, but after reflecting on her goals and her mental health, she decided to change her major to political science. As an undocumented student, she was also cautious about who she shared her status with. Gabriela shared how a white male law professor helped her to feel confident in changing her major from Music Composition to Political Science and validated her experiences. She stated,

He's a law professor in the undergrad department, he has a lot of experience, and I remember the first meeting I had with him last quarter, I sat down with him, and I explained my background and explained my goals, and he was very invested, he was very supportive, he still is, that's even in like the struggles, generally speaking in my undergrad of, I went from being a top student to having to file incompletes because I can't get my work in on time because I'm struggling mentally, but I don't want to admit to myself that I'm struggling mentally so trying to navigate everything. And he noted that, and I told him about it. And we had a Zoom meeting over winter break and he was like, 'I'm rooting for you, you are a very impressive person, you just gotta do it,' and I'm like I know I'm trying.



Throughout our *testimonio* sessions, Jessica shared that she did not have enough people supporting her goal of becoming an educator. Additionally, her family often questioned this decision and wanted her to become a lawyer. She also shared how a white female high school counselor discouraged her from attending MU because she believed it was too expensive for someone who wanted to pursue a career in education. Despite these critiques, Jessica continued to work toward her goal of becoming an educator. Yet, she longed to find faculty and staff to support her goals. She shared how two Faculty of Color in the College of Education at MU affirmed her choices. She stated,

What I liked about her [Professor Mendez] when I met with her was that and I feel like I've noticed this a lot with when I, for example, I applied to the teacher educator program here, and my interviewer was Professor Wilson...he's not white. He's a black educator. That really helped me to feel more comfortable when I was interviewing, and then when I asked him questions, I feel like...I've noticed this as things are with a lot of white people that I ask for help, they make assumptions and try to give me answers based on those assumptions; compared to when I went talked to Professor Mendez and Wilson, they wouldn't really tell me...they would give me advice based on what they knew and what their experiences were and such but on things that they didn't know, they'd be like, I don't know the answers, but I think I could connect you to someone who would know. So, that was a different thing because I don't know; I appreciate that because it wasn't like, 'oh, you can't do it because of this.'

Jessica felt that these two Faculty of Color could understand her experiences better than the white faculty she had encountered in the past because they affirmed her choices.

During her *testimonios*, Jessica shared how representation in faculty and staff was important to her because those individuals could understand her challenges better.

Similarly, Sophia shared how having support from Indigenous and Latina/o/x staff and students contributed to her staying at MU. During her time at MU, Sophia experienced several instances of blatant racism and discrimination, which caused her to consider leaving MU. After reflecting on the support she has received from Indigenous and Latina/o/x staff and students at MU, she decided to stay. In the following quote, she shared more about the importance of validation from staff and peers,

Definitely the support that I have is above and beyond, and I think that especially as someone who is Indigenous identifying, I have also my Latinidad there. It's a different identity altogether and experience from Northern Natives, specifically U.S. Natives. So, I do think that, at times, I feel a little isolated because my identity is so unique here and not really anywhere else...definitely, it can be isolating. But I think that the support that I have here, the people who are there to support me, do their best to hear me out or to listen to me and to give me that space to exist as the person that I am. And validate my experiences and me. And I think, whether it's people who are the Native Student Group staff coordinator, who are older, who are in different positions, than an undergrad student. Then I have my friends here, who, literally, it's them. And that's it; we're super, super close. And we do everything together...And I think that...I really don't think I would find the same community that I have here anywhere else. So, there's good and bad, but I think that the good is definitely, a lot more important to me and a

lot more special than any of the bad could be...but I definitely do have the support that I need.

Without the support and validation from Staff and Students of Color, particularly those from the Indigenous community, Sophia would not have felt as supported at MU. She may have decided to leave to attend another college. Rather, Sophia chose to stay at MU despite the discrimination she faced because of the relationships she built. Many of the *testimonialistas* shared how finding a community of support of other historically marginalized students, staff and faculty were important to their success. These individuals contributed to the personal growth and well-being of the *testimonialistas*, which ultimately contributed to their academic achievement.

### **Embracing their Shadow-Beast to Resist Dominant Ideologies of Success**

*My Shadow-Beast – it is part of me that refuses to take orders from outside authorities. It refuses to take any orders from my conscious will, it threatens the sovereignty of my rulership. It is part of me that hates constraints of any kind, even those self-imposed. At the least hint of my limitations on my time or space by others, it kicks out with both feet. Bolts. (Anzaldua, 1987, p. 38)*

In this study, Latina undergraduates were asked to share their ideologies of success and how their higher education institution has supported them to achieve the goals they have for themselves. As noted above, the *testimonialistas* encountered both challenges and support to reach their self-defined goals. The *testimonialistas* also shared how the challenges they often faced were due to the definitions of success imposed on them by their families, dominant narratives about Latinas, and their higher education institution. To resist these definitions of success and reconceptualize their idea of success on their own terms, Latina undergraduates in this study drew on their own Shadow-Beast,

which Anzaldua (1987) described as a way to push back on dominant cultural norms from the dominant white culture and from Chicano culture that marginalized women and queer individuals. As Latinas are on the path to *conocimiento*, of which the ultimate goal is to put Coyolxauhqui back together, they find themselves in *nepantla*, which is an in-between space, where they begin to question their worldviews and perspectives (Anzaldua & Keating, 2015). This is a painful space where “each separate reality and its belief system vies with others to convert you to its worldview” (Anzaldua & Keating, 2015, p. 126). In this transformative space, Latina's views come into conflict, and they question perspectives they have inherited from their families, their education, and their culture as a Latina (Anzaldua & Keating, 2015). Similarly, the Latina undergraduates in this study experienced pain and challenges as they resisted dominant ideologies of success. However, the Latina undergraduates in this study were able to embrace their Shadow-Beast to challenge the institutions’ dominant view of success, the dominant narrative told about Latinas, and their family’s conceptions of success to understand their own definition and beliefs about success.

### **Un Choque with the Institution’s Definition of Success**

Anzaldua (1987) defined *un choque* as “the coming together of two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference” (p. 100). Latina undergraduates experience *un choque* in the college environment because they are navigating their cultural and institution’s beliefs, which are often incongruent (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007). Dominant student success beliefs are closely connected to white American values, which often measure success by financial wealth and career attainment (Kuh et al., 2006; York et al., 2015). While Latinas also strive to achieve

academically and professionally, they believe success is more than “numbers” and should be tied to how well the institution supports them in reaching their own goals. For example, when asked if her definition of success aligns with the institution, Jessica shared,

I don't know if they [MU] have a statement of success but just looking at the atmosphere of this school. I think it's very much like I feel [MU] really prides itself in its numbers. And that's how I feel their success is based on like, ‘Oh, are we bringing this amount of students in? Are they graduating?’ I feel that's what [MU] views success is like; oh, am I getting you to graduation? Are we having our diversity number met? I don't feel like that necessarily aligns with mine because I think it's one thing because obviously, I feel a lot of students, even if they don't have the support, they'll find a way to make it, but that wasn't because of [MU] obviously. I guess I see it like the mission...they have their diversity excellence and inclusion mission, but if they actually lived up to it, because I feel it's one thing to say, oh, I want this but...you can't say that you want diversity, excellence, and inclusion, if you're not actually supporting that...It feels like it's performative inclusivity sometimes here, very much so, and the way they make that performance is at the end of the day, through their numbers...So I think I can somewhat stand with their statement that, yes, students should be graduated, students should graduate. But students should also be supported. And...we shouldn't be doing this just to reach numbers, but also make differences in students' lives because that's what education is supposed to be for.

Similarly, Castellanos & Gloria (2007) argued that success in higher education should go beyond graduating Latina students, and should support the well-being of Latinas, so they do not graduate exhausted and burned out from the lack of support they received to navigate their higher education institution. Like Jessica, Camila felt a clash with how the institution professed its support for Communities of Color. She also shared how she felt the ideologies of the institution were incongruent with her own,

I think those are really problematic things as they're trying to invite more People [of Color], and I think that, yes, we should feel like we're part of the whole institution, but it's hard because we're not what institution looks like. Ultimately, you're not going to shove down my throat certain ideologies or have certain things I don't feel like they pertain to me or my identity. So, I think that's the first thing that they could do to support us. Like definitely investing more in mental health...and I think just sticking to what they say that they're going to do.

Building upon this, Sophia felt the institution's dominant notions of success did not fully capture her own because it is steeped in white American values that differ from hers. When asked about how her definition of success aligns with the institution, Sophia shared,

I feel success here is defined by the majority of the student body, which tends to be a white student body. And I feel that success is very financial, economic success. How much you have, or how much you can show off, or...the way people present themselves, things like that, I feel that is the biggest way that the student body at least creates that idea of success. I don't think really how the school defines it is relevant when students are doing their own thing, you know? I

feel as though, for me, everywhere that I go, from down to the clothes that I wear, the way that I upkeep my, whether it's my nails or little things, my own femininity, the way I wear my makeup, it's very much like how I learned to do it from the women in my family and so it's still very, Latina-esque, or, the music that I listen to, my sense of humor, or my presence, especially in a lot of spaces kind of disrupts what is normal, or what is successful, and to see me still succeeding, whether it's through my academic success, or, the amount of things that I'm doing, you know? All of it. I feel, in a way, defies a lot of...because I'm not doing what I do for money, I'm not doing what I do for, I want to have all these labels, and I'm literally doing it for my community and for my family, and everywhere, even in classes, when I speak, I make sure that my very, unique in a way experience is heard or its addressed, because I know very often when I walk into a space I'm probably going to be the only person with the one specific experience that I have and that my family has...I disrupt a lot of comfort and I come in with my lashes and all, and then I go off. So, I think that definitely, there's a different definition of success that this campus brews and produces in a way versus my own. So, I definitely am using what I can to succeed just to go back to my community and just give.

Aligned with previous research that argues Latinas tie their ideologies of success to their communities and families (Conchas & Acevedo, 2020; Kiyama, 2018; Ramos, 2018; Storlie et al., 2016), Sophia challenged the definition of success perpetuated by the institution, which is steeped in white American values, by embracing her Latina identity

and staying committed to her own ideologies of success based in her family and her desire to give back to her community.

Jessica, Camila, and Sophia shared that they were unaware of what MU has formally stated about student success; however, through their own experiences as students at the institution, they have noticed how the institution perpetuates a dominant narrative of success based on enrollment rates, graduation rates and financial wealth. While they also want to graduate and reach their career goals, they found these dominant measures of success did not adequately capture their own success beliefs connected to their families and bettering their communities. Jessica, Camila, and Sophia were embracing their Shadow-Beast by questioning and challenging the dominant ideologies of success perpetuated by the institution. Rather than assimilating to these ideologies, they resisted them and remained true to their own beliefs about success. They also understood how they could utilize the resources and opportunities available at MU to achieve their own self-defined goals.

### **Challenging the Dominant Latina Narrative**

The dominant narrative most often told about Latinas is that they lack goals and do not have a desire to further themselves and their education (Kiyama, 2018; McCabe, 2009; Rodriguez et al., 2000). The Latina undergraduates in my study certainly debunked this by attending college and having goals far beyond graduating from college. Furthermore, in this study, Latinas keenly aware of the expectations that society puts on them were determined to challenge the dominant narrative told about them, which implies they are not as capable as their white counterparts. For example, Em, who was from a state where the number of Latina/o/x individuals going to college was low, wanted



to prove that Latinas were capable of achieving their academic and professional goals.

When discussing her vision board (See Figure 5.8), she stated,

I put ‘plot twist’ because I’m from [a state] where the dropout rate is very, very high for high school graduates. So, going out of state is very, very rare, especially to a university that is as prestigious as [MU] on a full-ride scholarship. So, I am the plot twist to statistics. And I still want to continue to be the plot twist by getting my DVM, doctor of veterinary medicine degree, and then I put nothing can knock me down because that’s just always my goal and my saying is ‘nothing can stand in my way; no obstacle will stand against me.’ And then, for work, I’m just going to keep putting in the work to achieve my goals and continue to work to better my community.



*Figure 5.8 Em's Vision Board*

Em was embracing her Shadow-Beast to resist dominant narratives told about Latinas by continuing to work towards her goals and demonstrating that Latinas were capable of achieving their academic and professional goals. Like Em, Sarah, who was pursuing a Biology degree to become a Physician's Assistant (PA), was also impacted by the lack of Latinas in STEM and wanted to prove to herself and others that she belonged

at the institution and in the STEM field. However, Sarah had doubts she had to overcome, she shared,

I just don't like to compare myself to other people. And I don't compare myself to my friends, but I tend to compare myself a lot to the white kids. And I don't even know them. I just wanna be smart like that. Or just feel competent in my classes, which is really sad. And there are times where I'm like, 'no, I belong here.' I had half as much as the resources that they had, and I still made it here. But a lot of the times, I just let it get to me, and I'm like, 'Oh, I'm not scoring average. I'm not as smart as the white kid. I'm not gonna make it into PA school.'

Being in *nepantla* is a painful in-between space where Latinas are contending with the dominant narrative told about them and trying to push back. As demonstrated by Sarah, this can be difficult when systemic oppression has kept Latinas from being able to access the same types of resources and support available to white students and leads to a lack of representation of Latinas in STEM (Acevedo et al., 2021). However, Sarah was on a journey to embrace her Shadow-Beast when she would remind herself she belonged at the institution and could reach her goal of becoming a PA.

Furthermore, Gabriela was also challenging the dominant narrative about Latinas by seeking to become an immigration attorney. Anzaldúa and Keating (2015) explained that *nepantla* is also a place where Latinas begin to “see through the fiction of the monoculture, the myth of the superiority of the white races” (p. 127). Gabriela challenged the dominant beliefs about Latinas and wanted her definition of success to encompass embracing being Latina as a strength. When discussing her vision board (see Figure 5.6), Gabriela shared,

A lot of my goals in life are dependent on me embracing my identity and not continuing the habit of me dismissing it or, you know, putting it to the side, which is why there's a lot of, for instance, like 'There's no right or wrong way to be Latina' or 'Decolonizing your mind' point blank. One of my major goals in general is just to become comfortable with my identity and to use that to my advantage in my career. So, since I'm planning to go into law, realistically, I'll probably lean towards either immigration law or civil rights law, which with my background, would make the most sense. And in that, I would have to use my identity, not dismiss it.

Gabriela further explained the reason why she shared a picture of U.S. House Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez on her vision board was because she saw Ocasio-Cortez as a strong Latina who, despite being seen as a diversity statistic by white men, was able to represent Latinas positively. Gabriela hopes to be this representation for other Latinas. She stated, "because, even though there isn't much representation, if I'm going to be one of the few, I would like to try to do that as best as possible to represent Latinas for the way that we actually are." Gabriela embraced her Shadow-Beast to resist the dominant narrative that to be successful professionally, Latinas had to hide their identities and assimilate to the dominant white culture. Rather, Gabriela was learning to embrace her Latina identity and view it as a strength that could benefit her in her future career.

For Em, Sarah and Gabriela, and many other *testimonialistas*, it was important that their definition of success challenge the dominant narrative told of Latinas. Rather, being Latina was a strength they embraced to reach their academic and career goals. Even

though the dominant narratives about Latinas are deeply embedded in society and at times caused them to question their own abilities, Em, Sarah and Gabriela embraced their Shadow-Beast by resisting the dominant narratives about Latinas and finding ways to achieve their self-defined goals.

### **Clash with Family Definitions of Success**

The Latina undergraduates in this study greatly valued their families and spoke explicitly about wanting to give back to their families for the sacrifices they made to give them opportunities to pursue higher education. However, there were moments when the *testimonialistas* experienced tension with their family's ideas of success. For example, Jessica, the only one of her siblings to attend college, hoped to give back to her family through higher education, yet, she has experienced tensions with her parent's understanding of success. Her parents wholeheartedly supported Jessica in her pursuit of higher education, but they hoped Jessica would become an immigration attorney. However, Jessica was passionate about becoming an educator to teach Communities of Color about their own histories and empower them through education. In her *testimonio*, Jessica shared how this has been a point of tension between her and her mother because her mother has been influenced by her privileged, white American bosses. Jessica stated,

My mom's bosses like they would give me advice, but sometimes I would take it with a grain of salt, with them being like 'everything will work out,' it's so easy for you to say that when you had someone who was supporting you financially to get there, and that's why it's so hard for me sometimes when they're like, 'oh Jessica will change her mind in her career path,' and I'm like 'ouch.' Sometimes my mom gets those ideas from them...because even my mom will tell me because

I recently applied for the dual degree for the teacher education program, and I was telling my mom about that, and she was like, 'oh, I'm happy for you.' She's like, 'I still have the hope that you're going to change your mind, though,' and I'm like 'ahh.' Well, now it's kind of become funny in a way, but I remember at first I was like 'aww.'

For some Latinas, like Jessica, going to college and gaining independence can lead to high-stress as they try to balance their family expectations and academics (Corona et al., 2016; Gloria & Castellanos, 2012). Even though it was painful and caused tension, Jessica embraced her Shadow-Beast by resisting her parent's bosses and her mom's advice and following her own ideology of success to become an educator.

In her *testimonios*, Camila also expressed this theme of resisting conceptions of success held by family members. Camila, raised by a single mother who immigrated to the U.S. from El Salvador after civil unrest, also wanted to honor her mother's sacrifices through higher education. However, Camila wanted to ensure her life had more balance than that of her mother, who, as an immigrant to the U.S., had limited opportunities and was forced to work long hours to provide for Camila and her family. Camila shared,

I think also as an individual, I've grown a lot more like the fact that I'm reaching out to learn more about my heritage. I feel the first-generation Americans that I'm surrounded around...we're growing. I'm in therapy. That's something that I would have never imagined; no one in my family has been in therapy... Just growing like that and just continuously striving to grow. Just me knowing me and the thoughts that go around my head I always strive to do better, or now I think self-care is something that is so important to me. That was not something that I was instilled

with at all...When I was in my sophomore year, I was like, ‘no, it doesn't matter how tired I am, I'm going to work.’ I need to work; my mom has worked 10 hours, still got home, was a mom, did more things, whatever I'm doing, my tiredness is not valid...I was like nothing was stopping me.

Even though Camila was grateful to her mother for the sacrifices she made to support her and give her more opportunities, by seeing her mother work so much, Camila had internalized an unhealthy commitment to school and work and was neglecting her own well-being. By embracing her Shadow-Beast, Camila was seeking therapy and refused to work beyond the point of exhaustion. As such, she was able to develop a definition of success that included her self-care and well-being.

### **Enacting *La Facultad* to Define Success on their Own Terms**

While Latina undergraduates in this study experienced the clashing of multiple inconsistent belief systems, as *nepantleras*, they were able to enact *la facultad*, an ability to sense below the surface, to define success for themselves. Conchas and Acevedo (2020) argued that Latina/o/x students in their study were able to enact *la facultad* to overcome obstacles and survive within higher education. They explained that Chicana/o/x students were “able to see multiple perspectives, and identify with multiple cultures, *nepantleras* also aim to build bridges between these worlds” (Conchas & Acevedo, 2020, p. 34).

Similarly, by drawing from this unique ability, Latina undergraduates in this study were able to see how higher education can contribute to their success on their own terms. For example, when I asked Ana about a time when she was most proud of herself, she shared how it was her ability to overcome obstacles in her first year of college to achieve

her ultimate goals of making her mom proud and being a role model to her younger sister. She shared,

Oh, sis, I don't even know when I was proud of myself. Oh, I want to say it was the end of my first year [at MU] because I feel like I was not going to get through it; a sis is struggling. I mean, classes were easy; it was the whole sense of belonging. Because I do remember the first week I came home and I cried. I'm like I cannot, I don't feel safe, I don't know, I don't feel like I belong on this campus. There are people who do not talk like me, people who do not dress like me, people who are not like me, and that scares me because I was so used to having people that would be like me, and so it was when I realized I'm like 'whoa, you're doing this by yourself.' I had to constantly remind myself, 'you're doing this by yourself, you are a first generation, you are pushing through to one make your mom proud, two to set an example for your sister.' I raised the bar high enough for her. I mean if she doesn't end up [at MU], I hope she ends up somewhere else, somewhere better. And I hope that makes a difference in her life too because it's like my mom told me she's like, 'I don't want you guys to work like me, I don't want you guys working Monday through Sunday because it's a pain. I want you to have a future, have a career.'

By drawing on *la facultad*, participants in the study also recognized that higher education was a way to reach their ultimate goals to honor their families' sacrifices, be role models to their siblings and others in their communities, and serve their communities. During her *testimonio* sessions, Sophia shared several instances of racism and discrimination she experienced at MU being Indigenous and Latina. Despite this, she

was dedicated to achieving her college degree to eventually become a psychologist to provide culturally relevant mental health services to Latina/o/x and Indigenous communities in the U.S. and Chile. When asked why she wanted to attend college, Sophia shared,

Why I wanted to come to college was mainly just because I knew that I did have a very big privilege being here in the States and having access to American Universities...Being able to grow up from literally kindergarten through high school in American schooling and then to have just a straight opportunity to get into an American university. I think that it was always just the number one thing on my mind at all times; everything I did in school was eventually going to be for college...But I think that it was really all that I had, and it was...my way out in a way of, like I could do anything I wanted, essentially once I got that degree, and I don't believe personally that college is what defines you as a successful person, but definitely in the world we live in, especially in this country, when you aren't white, when you're low income, and when you're a child of immigrants, all these different things, they just add up, and I think that education definitely was my way to being able to achieve these bigger things of how I wanted to one day be in therapy and sit with people and hear people.

Camila also shared that even though she did not agree with how MU defined success, she was able to utilize her experiences at MU to achieve her self-defined goals related to her own personal growth and her family's growth. She shared,

I think [MU], they're really in par with what general society is imposing on my generation. Of like...you're getting a really good job especially because you're



coming out of MU, and then...you have like your property or wealth, and you're just really on top of it, and I feel that's like the depiction of what they hope to achieve as success. But I feel for me, I think that's a definition that's always evolving, and I don't think that the grander part of MU reflects that. Not only because of identity and different backgrounds but just because...I don't believe in this ultimate perfect person...It's not like that. I don't know that just because I'm coming out of MU or because of whatever workshop you organized or whatever thing you thought you offered I'm gonna be the most powerful. Just killing it. Look at my Aramis watch...I think my success is I'm acquiring more wealth than what my mom. I have more financial stability than what I had growing up...and I can provide more for my children or family if I choose to have it. But also helping my mom grow...from like what she didn't know...I think if I, five years from now, can say my mom has different habits, we have different experiences, I'm able to show them different aspects of the world, then I feel like that's success to me, and if I'm able to experience that for myself and like travel and just have these experiences that I never thought I would have.

In their *testimonios*, Ana, Sophia, and Camila all shared how they experienced marginalization in the college environment and how MU's ideas about success did not always represent their own. Despite this, they remained committed to their own definitions of success of honoring their family's sacrifices, serving their communities, and investing in their personal growth. Their *testimonios* demonstrated how the Latina undergraduates in this study were able to draw on *la facultad* to overcome obstacles at their higher education institution and see how obtaining a college education would help

them achieve their self-defined goals of honoring their family, serving their communities, and investing in their own personal growth and well-being. As *atravesadas*, those on the margins of society, Latina undergraduates in this study were able to enact *la facultad* in higher education, even though they faced systemic oppression, to see it as a place where they can find success on their own terms – a success that contributed to their families, communities and their own personal growth and well-being. As such, they were able to see how a college education contributed to them achieving their self-defined goals.

### Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I shared the findings from the individual *testimonio* sessions, group *testimonio* session, and the vision board activity that were most prevalent and representative of the *testimonialistas*. Latina undergraduates in this study were on a path to *conocimiento*, in which the ultimate goal is to put Coyolxauhqui back together by integrating their multiple ideologies of success, which included academic achievement, career attainment, *familismo*, *comunidad*, and their own personal growth and well-being. Furthermore, I shared how the Latina undergraduates felt supported by their institution to achieve success on their own terms. They shared how MU has hindered them in achieving their self-defined goals and how MU has supported them. The findings also indicated that Latina undergraduates are *nepantleras* who despite facing obstacles in the college environment, including systemic oppression, were able to embrace *la facultad* to see how higher education was able to help them in achieving success. In the next chapter, I discuss further how these findings can be utilized to move higher education institutions towards taking actions to better support their Latina undergraduates in becoming *exitosas* on their own terms.

## Chapter 6: Discussion and Implications

The purpose of this study was to understand how Latina undergraduates attending a 4-year private PWI in the Western U.S. define and measure success for themselves and what shaped this understanding. Additionally, I conducted this study to understand better how Latina undergraduates had been supported by their PWI to achieve their self-defined goals. The 11 *testimonialistas* participating in this study shared their definitions of success and the many goals they had for themselves.

In their *testimonios*, the Latina undergraduates in this study collectively defined success as academic achievement, career attainment, honoring family sacrifice and being a role model for family members, giving back to their communities, and personal growth and well-being. In the findings, the Latina undergraduates shared some of the dominant measures of success held by the institution, such as graduating from college and career attainment. However, the Latina undergraduates in this study also shared through their *testimonios* that they had a more nuanced view of success. For the *testimonialistas*, their academic achievement and career attainment were closely tied to their family, community, and personal growth and well-being. In the findings, the *testimonialistas* also demonstrated how they were able to heal their bodymindspirit split and put Coyolxauhqui back together, again, by defining and understanding their success in these multiple different ways.

Furthermore, these findings revealed a need for higher education professionals to understand better Latina undergraduates' student success beliefs and goals to provide support that will assist them in achieving success on their own terms. In their *testimonios*, the Latina undergraduates revealed ways in which they feel they are being supported to reach their self-defined goals. In particular, Latinas do feel they are receiving adequate academic support to reach their goals, which often causes them to endure other challenges and barriers at their PWI. The Latina undergraduates also revealed there is far too little support and resources to ensure they are successful beyond measures related to their academic achievement. In this chapter, I further discuss the importance of the findings of this research study, including how Latinas define success for themselves and the support they have and have not received from their institution. I also share how this research study contributes to the current research and how this research can be expanded further. I also share implications for higher education professionals as they seek to better support Latina undergraduates at their institutions to become *exitosas* on their own terms.

### **Discussion of Findings**

In this research study 11 Latina undergraduates attending Mountain University, a private, 4-year PWI in the Western U.S, shared their *testimonios*. I asked each participant to share about their educational experiences, their goals, their definition of success and what shaped this definition, and how they felt supported to achieve their self-defined goals by their institution. Higher education often pushes the voices of Latinas to the margins. Through their *testimonios*, the Latina undergraduates in this study shared their stories in their own words. LatCrit brings Latina voices to the center to better understand the experiences of Latinas who have been oppressed because of their race, ethnicity, and

gender (Hernandez-Truyol, 1997; Villalpando, 2004). While higher education institutions claim that Latina undergraduates have the same opportunities, PWIs are steeped in white American values, such as competition, individualism, worldliness, and self-importance, and cater to the success of the majority, which are their white students (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007). As such, graduation and retention rates and other measures of academic achievement and career attainment are the measures most often used by higher education institutions to determine success (York et al., 2015). By utilizing LatCrit, I challenged the use of dominant measures of success to evaluate the success of Latina undergraduates. Through their *testimonios*, the Latina undergraduates in this study shared how their experiences at MU had been inequitable and, at times, painful, as they have encountered blatant racism and discrimination, which has led to unnecessary stress and a lack of sense of belonging at their institutions. Latina undergraduates shared how they have been harmed, which impacted their well-being, an important way in which they define their own success.

However, the *testimonialistas* also shared instances where they were able to draw on *la facultad*, their ability to see below the surface, to navigate higher education despite obstacles and achieve success on their own terms (Anzaldúa, 1987). The findings demonstrated that MU primarily focused on supporting the *testimonialistas*' academic and career goals and lacked in supporting their goals connected to their Latina/o/x values of *familismo* and *comunidad* and their personal growth and well-being. Yet, the Latina undergraduates were finding ways to heal their bodymindspirit split that asked them to separate their academic and career goals from their family and community by finding ways to connect these goals to each other. Even though they were able to navigate higher

education to achieve their self-defined goals, this study's findings revealed a need for higher education institutions to find ways to better support Latina undergraduates beyond their academic and career goals. By providing support to Latina undergraduates to achieve success that accounts for all of their goals, Latina undergraduates will be able to reach graduation, a goal of both the institution and Latina undergraduates, without sacrificing their own well-being in the process. With this additional support, Latina undergraduates can go beyond surviving higher education to thriving in higher education.

### **Putting Coyolxauhqui Back Together: Latina Student Success Beliefs**

In this study, Latina undergraduates shared their goals for higher education and provided their own definition of success in a series of *testimonios*. The *testimonialistas* individual definitions can be found in Chapter 4, and the main themes that emerged from these definitions were discussed in Chapter 5. While the *testimonialistas* shared how they hoped to graduate from college and find careers in their fields of interest, speaking to them in greater depth revealed that the *testimonialistas* connected their beliefs about success to their Latina/o/x values of *familismo* and *comunidad* and their own personal growth well-being. Previous research on Latina undergraduates has revealed how Latinas embrace the Latina/o/x values of *familismo* and *comunidad* (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007). This study further emphasized the importance of these Latina/o/x values when considering Latina student success beliefs. In their *testimonios*, the Latina undergraduates connected their success to these values by honoring their family's sacrifice, a desire to be role models to their family members and communities, and giving back to their communities.

Another value within the Latina/o/x community is *marianismo*, which emphasizes that Latinas should be submissive, humble, and make sacrifices for others (Castillo et al., 2010). The Latina undergraduates in this study wanted to honor their family's sacrifices by working towards their college degrees; however, they also wanted their idea of success to include their own personal growth and well-being. The theme of connecting success to personal growth and well-being is contradictory to the value of *marianismo* that emphasizes women should sacrifice themselves for the betterment of others. The Latina undergraduates in this study demonstrated how they were able to adhere to the Latina/o/x values of *familismo* and *comunidad* while pushing back on *marianismo* and finding ways to focus on their own personal growth and well-being. This is another example of how the *testimonialistas* were healing their bodymindspirit split (Anzaldúa, 1987; Anzaldúa & Keating, 2015).

### **Familismo**

The Latina undergraduates in this study shared the importance of *familismo* in shaping their beliefs about success. They also shared how they tied their academic success and career attainment to the Latina/o/x value of *familismo* by wanting to honor their family's sacrifice and being a role model to other family members. The *testimonialistas* displayed *ganas* by connecting their academic achievement to honoring their parents' sacrifices (Easley et al., 2012). Many of the *testimonialistas* shared how their parents had hopes and dreams of attending college themselves, and many of their parents had begun college in their countries of origin. However, due to how the U.S. has systemically oppressed and marginalized Latina/o/x immigrants, the parents and family members of the *testimonialistas* were unable to complete college in the U.S. and were

often working in jobs that required physical labor. Many of the parents of the *testimonialistas* drew from these personal experiences with education and work to encourage the Latina undergraduates to pursue higher education (Aragon, 2018). Other parents of the *testimonialistas* were not as explicit in telling them to pursue higher education. Yet, the *testimonialistas* noticed how their parents had limited opportunities to pursue education and were grateful for their hard work to provide them with educational opportunities. Whether or not their parents explicitly told them to pursue higher education, the *testimonialistas* had a strong desire to achieve academically and pursue their careers to honor the sacrifices made by their parents. The *testimonialistas* hoped to complete the college education their parents started or never had the opportunity to begin.

Aligned with previous research, the *testimonialistas* also connected their goals of becoming self-sufficient and financially independent to their family (Ramos, 2018; Sy & Romero, 2008). Many of the *testimonialistas* wanted to become financially stable because they observed the struggles of their parents. A few *testimonialistas* shared that their parents had specific professions they wanted them to pursue, such as lawyer and doctor, to become financially wealthy. However, they did not explicitly share that their parents asked them for money or financial support. Rather, due to their commitment to the value of *familismo*, the *testimonialistas* felt it was part of their responsibility to increase their financial capital for themselves and their families.

Furthermore, as found in previous research, the *testimonialistas* were often motivated to remain in college when they faced challenges because they had this desire to give back to their families (Corona et al., 2016; Morgan Consolli & Llamas, 2013). When there were moments of doubt, the *testimonialistas* would remind themselves of their



family's sacrifices and strong desire to give back to their family, which motivated them to continue pursuing their higher education.

### **Comunidad**

The *testimonialistas* beliefs about success also emphasized the Latina/o/x value of *comunidad*. The Latina undergraduates in this study connected their academic achievement and career goals to giving back to and supporting their communities.

Aligned with previous research, the *testimonialistas* had a strong commitment to giving back to their communities through their education because they realized they were now in a position of privilege (Conchas & Acevedo, 2020; Storlie et al., 2016). Many of the *testimonialistas* chose their desired careers because of how they would be able to utilize their skills and experiences to impact their communities through the work they were doing. For example, Jessica wanted to become an educator to empower Students of Color through learning their histories and Sophia wanted to become a psychologist to heal the trauma within her communities in the U.S and Chile. Other *testimonialistas* chose their specific careers because of their interests and skills and not necessarily the direct impact their career would have on their community. Yet, these *testimonialistas* still made a connection between their careers and *comunidad*. For example, Em shared how she wanted to go to college and become a veterinarian to demonstrate to others in her community that they could do the same, and Amy wanted to become a pharmacist to increase the representation of Latinas in STEM.

The value of *comunidad* also influenced Latina undergraduates to stay motivated towards their goals. The *testimonialistas* would often share how they felt driven to achieve their goals because they believed through their education and careers they would

be able to have a great impact on their communities. The *testimonialistas* were able to easily connect their goals of supporting their community to academic achievement and career attainment, which contributed to the healing of their bodymindspirit. Even though they faced challenges at their institution, they found ways to overcome them and remain motivated because they felt their college education would assist them in reaching their ultimate goal of giving back to their communities.

### **Personal Growth & Well-Being**

In addition to their commitment to *familismo* and *comunidad*, the Latina undergraduates in this study also wanted to ensure their success accounted for their own personal growth and well-being. While this may seem contradictory to the *testimonialistas* dedication to *comunidad* and *familismo*, they were finding ways to balance all of these beliefs about student success. They were redefining what student success meant for them within the Latina/o/x culture and within the white dominant higher education environment.

In the Latina/o/x culture, the value of *marianismo* can cause tension for Latina undergraduates within their communities and families and even lead to depressive symptoms as they navigate balancing the expectations of their families (Gonzalez et al., 2004; Sy & Romero, 2008). The *testimonialistas* in this study experienced these tensions as they sometimes felt the expectations to complete college, honor their families and give back to communities were overwhelming and stressful. For example, Jessica shared how she experienced tension with her family's desire for her to become an attorney even though she wanted to pursue a career in education. The *testimonialistas* were challenging the value of *marianismo* within Latina/o/x communities that asks them to sacrifice

themselves by investing in their own personal growth and well-being. This finding aligns with previous research that found Latina undergraduates are able to embrace family and cultural values while also becoming more autonomous and not adhering to traditional Latina/o/x gender roles (Liang et al., 2017).

Furthermore, student success within higher education is still connected to obtaining a career in order to reproduce wealth (Patton, 2015). Many of the *testimonialistas* did share that they wanted to be financially stable and gain wealth through their education. However, they also stated how their ultimate goal was to be happy and not have to be stressed about finances. Each *testimonialista* had her own ideas about what happiness entailed, and many mentioned leading a stress-free life, traveling, not worrying about bills, providing for their families, and feeling content with their careers. Aligned with previous research, understanding their meaning in life, including giving back to their communities and families, can lead to increased happiness for Latina/o/x students (Cavazos Vela et al., 2015). For the *testimonialistas*, understanding their meaning in life and finding happiness was ultimately more important than financial wealth. As such, they were challenging the idea that obtaining a higher education degree was solely about gaining financial wealth.

Many of the *testimonialistas* also shared how it was important for them to invest in their own well-being and recognized when they might be pushing themselves beyond their own capacity and harming themselves to achieve. For example, Gabriela shared how as a Latina, there was an overwhelming amount of pressure to achieve, which caused her to strive for success in an unhealthy way. White American culture is focused on competition and striving at all costs to achieve (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007; Lopez et al.,

2019). By investing in their well-being and pushing back on white American culture that focused only on academic achievement and career attainment, the *testimonialistas* were redefining what success could mean within the college environment. They were also healing their bodymindspirit by focusing on their own well-being and happiness and challenging the dominant narrative that encouraged them to achieve at all costs.

### **Supporting Latina Self-Defined Goals**

The Latina undergraduates in this study also shared in their own words through their *testimonios* how their PWI has contributed to their success and helped them with achieving their self-defined goals, which is further discussed in Chapter 5. The *testimonialistas* shared how they felt supported to achieve their academic goals because of the opportunities and resources offered at MU to support their academic success. This finding aligns with the dominant student success measures that emphasize academic achievement, including grades, persistence rates, obtaining academic skills, and finding a career post-graduation (York et al., 2015). However, the *testimonialistas* revealed how they received little support to overcome challenges with racism and discrimination and their overall well-being. Rather, they shared how they were often taxed with promoting DEI and creating safe spaces on their campuses for their peers because there was not enough action by the institution to address racism and discrimination. The findings revealed that to fully support the goals of Latina undergraduates, there must be more support for student success beyond their academic achievement and career attainment.

Higher education institutions purport to provide equal opportunities that allow all of their students to achieve success. However, through this study, I found there are still far too many challenges Latina undergraduates must navigate at their institutions in order

to achieve their self-defined goals. The *testimonialistas* shared challenges that included a lack of role models, a lack of sense of belonging, blatant racism and discrimination, and the added labor of promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion. Previous research found that when Latina/o/x students are subjected to racism and discrimination, this leads to increased stress, exhaustion, and depression (Arbona & Jimenez, 2014; Yosso et al., 2009). Likewise, the *testimonialistas* felt exhausted from the toxic racial climate at MU and the inaction by MU administrators to support historically marginalized students on their campus. Several of the *testimonialistas* also mentioned they felt unsafe at MU and were concerned they could be subject to harm at MU because of their ethnic and racial identities. While Latina undergraduates may have access to the same academic resources and support as their white peers, these additional barriers have created an inequitable higher education experience for them as their white counterparts do not have to worry about these same issues. Latina undergraduates were harmed by these instances of racism and discrimination, which impacted their well-being, an important indicator of success for the *testimonialistas*.

Furthermore, the *testimonialistas* shared they were often taxed with creating spaces that promoted DEI and educating their white peers about DEI –thereby forcing them into a student activist role on their campus (Linder, 2019; Linder et al., 2019a). Many of the *testimonialistas* shared they wanted to create safe spaces at MU to have an open discussion about race and other forms of systemic oppression, yet, they felt MU should not leave these responsibilities solely up to them. Previous research indicates that these responsibilities are costly to Students of Color because they can isolate students from their peers, lead to decreased academic performance and cause physical and

emotional exhaustion (Linder et al., 2019a). This is another example of how MU created an inequitable higher education experience for Latina undergraduates. Aside from being concerned about their academic performance, due to their emphasis on *comunidad*, the Latina undergraduates were also concerned with creating an environment in which they and their peers could be supported. Even though the *testimonialistas* may have access to academic resources at MU, their institution was not supporting their well-being. My findings emphasize the need for more holistic support for Latina undergraduates.

Through their *testimonios*, the Latina undergraduates in this study revealed academic opportunities, student support programs, and validation from faculty, staff and peers supported them in reaching their self-defined goals. Many of the *testimonialistas* shared that they were drawn to MU because of its academic resources and opportunities. They shared how they decided to attend MU instead of other institutions because of the prestige and resources it was known for. They also shared how when they told others they attended MU, they were impressed and knew it was a well-known and well-resourced institution. Once at MU, the *testimonialistas* felt thankful for their academic opportunities, such as research experiences, internships, the ability to pursue multiple degree programs, and access to supportive faculty. By having access to these academic opportunities, the *testimonialistas* were able to meet their goals of academic achievement and career attainment, thereby, assisting them with their goals of honoring their family's sacrifices and giving back to their communities. Some *testimonialistas* also shared how certain classes assisted them with developing a critical consciousness, which gave them a better understanding of the injustices facing their communities and historically

marginalized populations. These classes more directly provided the *testimonialistas* with knowledge and skills to go back to their communities and make an impact.

Support programs, such as affinity groups, multicultural sororities, and cultural centers, were also significant in assisting the *testimonialistas* in reaching their self-defined goals. These groups and programs provided events and spaces where the *testimonialistas* could connect with others with similar experiences and find a supportive community. The *testimonialistas* shared how these spaces provided them with a sense of belonging and were often the reason why they remained at MU. For example, Sophia was considering transferring to another institution but decided to stay at MU because of the support system she had built with Staff and Students of Color. When the *testimonialistas* felt overwhelmed and stressed from academics and the racially hostile campus climate at MU, they turned to these support programs. These programs supported the well-being of the *testimonialistas*, which enabled them to continue working towards their academic and career goals. However, the *testimonialistas* noticed how under-resourced these programs were and felt much of the labor to support historically marginalized students at MU were placed on these programs.

Aligned with previous research (Acevedo et al., 2021; Rendón, 1994), the *testimonialistas* reported validation from supportive faculty, staff, and administrators contributed to their ability to reach their self-defined goals. The *testimonialistas* shared how supportive relationships with faculty, staff, administrators, and peers were important from the admissions process until graduation. They also shared how making a connection with MU staff before coming to MU helped them to feel supported and as though they belonged at MU. They revealed how validation increased their confidence and affirmed

their place at MU. The *testimonialistas* provided examples of how validation came from both white faculty and staff and Faculty and Staff of Color. The *testimonialistas* hoped MU would increase the number of Faculty and Staff of Color because they felt Faculty and Staff of Color would be able to understand their experiences better. The findings show that validation is an important factor in supporting holistic student success, as these relationships contributed to the academic achievement and the well-being of the *testimonialistas*.

### **Implications for Research**

I conducted this research to fill gaps within the literature about Latina undergraduates in higher education, particularly as it related to their beliefs about student success and the support they have received from their higher education institutions to achieve their self-defined goals. From conducting this research, I found there are implications for research as well as additional areas where higher education research can be expanded. In this section, I share the following areas in which research should be expanded, including Latina Voices in Research, Well-Being of Latinas, Student Success Research, and *Testimonios* as Method.

#### **Including Latina Voices**

I began this research on Latina undergraduates because they are a rapidly growing population in higher education attending multiple types of higher education institutions (Espinosa et al., 2019). Due to this, I believe it is important to listen to Latina voices and amplify their higher education experiences. Participation in this study was open to any Latina undergraduate at MU; as a result, the *testimonialistas* represented multiple identities and backgrounds. This further emphasized the point that the Latina



undergraduate population in higher education is not a monolith. Thus, more research must seek to understand the ways in which Latina undergraduates are impacted by their multiple identities, including their racial and ethnic identities, their immigration status, their gender, their sexuality, their socioeconomic class, their ability status, and their educational background. A more nuanced research approach that focused on particular subgroups of Latina undergraduates would help to determine how different identities shape student success beliefs.

In this research, I focused on Latina undergraduates during their college experience because the intention was to be able to have them reflect on their experiences as they were happening. To better understand how Latina values and student success beliefs develop and change over time, I recommend future research to explore the experiences of Latinas during their K-12 experiences and post-graduation from college. Research studies that focused on K-12 experiences and post-graduation experiences would be able to determine if Latina undergraduates' values, goals, and student success beliefs changed and evolved at different points in time of their educational journeys.

Furthermore, I focused this research study specifically on Latina undergraduates at a PWI in the Western U.S. This is a unique higher education experience, and the Latina undergraduate experience may differ based on the region of the U.S. and the type of institution they are attending. To better understand the Latina undergraduate experience, I recommend conducting further research on Latina undergraduates in multiple areas of the country, including locations where there may be an emerging Latina population. I also focused this research specifically on Latina undergraduates at a 4-year private institution. Additional research should further investigate the Latina undergraduate experience at

community colleges and public institutions. There are also a rising number of Hispanic Serving Institutions and emerging Hispanic Serving Institutions (*Excelencia in Education*, 2022), and I recommend further research seek to understand if Latina undergraduates have similar experiences at these institutions. Expanding the research on Latina undergraduates at multiple institutions will provide a better understanding of how the institution may impact Latina undergraduates' goals and beliefs about student success. This research may also illuminate if particular higher education institutions are better supporting Latina undergraduates in becoming *exitosas* on their own terms and reaching all of their self-defined goals.

By utilizing a *testimonio* methodology grounded in LatCrit and Chicana Feminism, I amplified the voices of Latina undergraduates and brought their experiences from the margins to the center with the goal of transforming higher education institutions to be more equitable and socially just for Latina undergraduates. Future higher education research must continue to share the stories and experiences of Latina undergraduates from all backgrounds and in all institutions. These stories have the power to move higher education professionals to implement changes within their institutions.

### **Well-Being of Latinas**

A finding that emerged within this study is the importance of holistic well-being to Latina undergraduates. As such, there is a need to better understand Latina undergraduates' mental health and well-being. Previous quantitative psychological research on Latina undergraduates has shown how a clash between the Latina's family and community and their college environment can cause distress (Cano & Castillo, 2010; Castillo et al., 2004; Castillo et al., 2015; Mayorga et al., 2018). Research has also found

that Latina undergraduates are subjected to racism and discrimination in the college environment, which further causes distress (Arbona & Jimenez, 2014). Additionally, a recent survey found mental health was a leading concern for all college students (Hi, How Are You? Project & American Campus Communities, 2021). There is a need to expand research with current Latina undergraduates to better understand their mental health and factors that may be causing distress. Furthermore, many of the *testimonialistas* shared how there were not enough mental health resources or programs at that their institution that invested in their well-being. To ensure the mental health needs of Latinas are being met, I recommend more research to better understand the mental health resources on college campuses and how they are being accessed and utilized. Additional research on mental health resources on campus can ensure Latina undergraduates receive adequate and culturally relevant care at their higher education institutions.

### **Student Success Research**

The research on student success still primarily focuses on degree attainment and academic achievement, including research on Latina/o/x student populations (Crisp et al., 2015; York et al., 2015). Latina undergraduates in this study also desired to obtain a college degree and achieve academically. However, through this research, I found Latina undergraduates also believe their own success encompasses the Latina/o/x values of *familismo*, *comunidad*, and their personal growth and well-being. In this study, the *testimonialistas* also demonstrated they were able to draw on their own assets and knowledge to navigate higher education and graduate – a success by traditional measures. However, they also shared how there were barriers and challenges that created inequities and distress. Therefore, Latina undergraduates can graduate, but in the process, they may

be sacrificing their well-being and may not have the support and resources to reach all of their self-defined goals.

Some research has focused on more culturally relevant measures of success for Latina/o/x students (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007; Rendón, 2006; Rendón et al., 2018). There has also been research to better understand the student success of Black women (Winkle-Wagner, 2015) and Indigenous college students (Pidgeon, 2008). This study adds to the call from these previous research studies to create more culturally relevant and equitable measures of student success. While there have been recent attacks on CRT that claim it is divisive, anti-American, and harmful to students (Flaherty, 2021; Tichavakunda, 2021), higher education must continue to draw from critical frameworks to expose the inequities facing Latina undergraduates and to center their voices to create change within higher education. To ensure Latina undergraduates and other historically marginalized students, including BIPOC and LGBTQ+ students, are able to become successful on their own terms, I recommend there be more research utilizing critical methodologies, such as counterstories, and *testimonios*, and critical frameworks, such as Critical Race Theory, LatCrit, Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005), funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 2001; Kiyama, 2010) and pedagogies of the home (Delgado Bernal, 2001), to center the voices of historically marginalized students, further interrogate taken for granted student success measures and continue to find new ways to define and measure success. These frameworks center the experiences of Latina undergraduates and challenge the dominant narrative that views Latina undergraduates from a deficit perspective (Rendón et al., 2018).

### ***Testimonios* as Method**

When writing their *testimonios*, The Latina Feminist Group (2001) encouraged each other to utilize multiple forms of expression, including poetry, novelistic writing, and images, to tell their stories. They believed the creative process allowed them to best represent their life experiences. For this research, I also wanted the *testimonialistas* to have a creative outlet to share their stories. I tapped into my own cultural intuition to bridge the vision board activity between research and practice. In my work as a higher education practitioner, I have often asked students to create vision boards. Each time I have done this activity, students respond positively, and engage deeply. They have utilized magazines to find text and images that speak to them. Others have utilized art supplies to develop paintings or drawings that represent their goals. Future higher education researchers should pay close attention to their own cultural intuition and activities within their own practice to see how they can connect them to research.

When explaining the Coyolxauhqui imperative, Anzaldúa and Keating (2015) explain how it is important to pay attention to *ensueños*, “a dream that becomes reality,” that develop within *nepantla*. While in this creative process, transformation and healing can begin to occur. A vision board provides individuals the ability to imagine, to dream, to put into reality ideas that may have been hidden away. By asking the *testimonialistas* to create a vision board, I was able to expand the creative outlets in which a *testimonio* can be shared. I was also able to connect the Coyolxauhqui imperative to *testimonio* by providing the vision board activity as another opportunity for healing. Future research utilizing *testimonios*, should consider other ways to tap into Anzaldúa’s call to embrace the creative process as a form of healing. Future researchers should consider utilizing

artistic outlets such as photos, drawings, poetry, and prose (Rodriguez et al., 2021) that tap into the dreams and creativity of Latina undergraduates and other historically marginalized students.

### **Implications for Practice**

In this study, I asked Latina undergraduates to share the ways in which they were supported and not supported by their higher education institution to reach their self-defined goals. Hearing directly from Latina undergraduates illuminated several implications for practice for higher education professionals. In this section, I share the following implications for higher education practice, Infuse Latina/o/x Values into Student Success, Validation of Latina Undergraduates, Support Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Initiatives, and Resources to Enhance Well-Being.

#### **Infuse Latina/o/x Values into Student Success**

In this research, the *testimonialistas* emphasized the importance of the Latina/o/x values of *familismo* and *comunidad* in shaping their beliefs about student success. Higher education professionals must infuse Latina/o/x values in co-curricular programming, pedagogy, curriculum, and throughout the campus environment. Higher education professionals may assume Latina undergraduates have the same goals and values as the dominant student population. However, as this research demonstrates, Latina undergraduates emphasize the importance of their Latina/o/x values, *familismo*, and *comunidad*.

An important first step to infusing Latina/o/x values into student success would be for higher education professionals to seek to understand Latina undergraduates' motivations for higher education. Previous research has shown that when Latins were

asked in small groups about their experiences and their recommendations, they felt valued, and their institution was able to develop new programs that supported their goals (Lopez et al., 2020; McWhirter et al., 2013; Mireles-Rios & Garcia, 2019). Likewise, I recommend higher education institutions create surveys and facilitate focus groups to ask Latina undergraduates about their goals for higher education. The initial survey of Latina undergraduates can occur in the admissions process when Latinas are applying to college to understand better how the institution aligns with the Latina students' own vision for success. As their perspectives may change while they are in college, higher education professionals should convene periodic focus groups with Latina undergraduates to understand their goals and motivations.

I also recommend any program or higher education professional, who works with Latina undergraduates on a more one-to-one basis, including admission counselors, academic advisors and coaches, financial aid counselors, mental health counselors, and career counselors, receive training to understand the values and goals of Latina/o/x students. This will help to equip higher education professionals to have meaningful and culturally relevant conversations with Latina students. In particular, career counselors and academic advisors should be prepared to ask Latina undergraduates how their Latina/o/x values and their families are shaping their decision-making and higher education goals (McWhirter et al., 2013). By having these conversations, higher education professionals will be better equipped to support Latina undergraduates in becoming *exitosas* on their own terms.

Previous research indicates faculty, staff, and other higher education professionals may have different expectations for Latina undergraduates than their families (Lucero et

al., 2017). In this study, the *testimonialistas* identified *familismo* in the form of honoring family sacrifice and being a role model for their family members as an important indicator of their success, which may differ from the expectations faculty and staff have for Latina undergraduates. As such, I recommend higher educational professionals seek to understand how family influences Latina undergraduates and provide opportunities for Latina undergraduates to incorporate their families within their higher education experience. Higher education institutions should provide opportunities for family members to be included in the educational experience by asking them to participate in events and experiences throughout the time their student is in college and providing resources and information in Spanish.

In this study, the Latina undergraduates were particularly concerned with honoring their family's sacrifices and being role models for family members. Aligned with previous research, Latina undergraduates shared their higher education experiences with their younger family members to support them in accessing and navigating higher education (Luedke, 2020a; 2020b). To build on this, I recommend higher education institutions honor how Latina undergraduates bring back knowledge from their higher education experience to their families. Additionally, higher education institutions should formally recognize and value how Latina undergraduates share resources and create new opportunities for family members. To do so, they could enlist Latina undergraduates' help in outreaching to Latina/o/x families and should provide course credit and compensation for this work.

Furthermore, higher education institutions reinforce white American values, such as competition and individualism, that are counter to *familismo*, which emphasizes



collectivism, reciprocity, and care (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007, Lopez et al., 2019).

While family may not always be able to participate in the higher education experience, higher education institutions can honor and recognize the value of *familismo*. This would include creating environments and spaces that promote collectivism, sharing resources, and celebrating Latina/o/x values (Cerezo et al., 2018; Lopez et al., 2019). By infusing *familismo* into higher education classrooms and everyday interactions with Latina/o/x students, higher education institutions can help to heal the bodymindspirit split of Latina undergraduates by supporting their goals of academic achievement, *familismo*, and well-being.

In addition to *familismo*, Latina undergraduates value *comunidad* and want to give back to their communities through their higher education experiences. As such, I recommend higher education professionals also find ways to infuse this value into the institution. The *testimonialistas* demonstrated their commitment to uplifting their communities through their education. Research has found Students of Color were committed to sharing their college knowledge with those in their communities (Luedke, 2020b). Aligned with previous research, I recommend there be more formalized opportunities for Latinas to share their knowledge with their communities as peer mentors and recruiters. When Latina/o/x students had the opportunity during their college experience to contribute to their communities, their culture was affirmed, and their sense of belonging was enhanced (Garcia, 2020). However, this labor must be recognized and rewarded through fair compensation and/or college credit to not further tax Latina undergraduates.

There must also be more opportunities for Latina undergraduates and all students to engage in community-based learning where they can be involved in projects that relate their academic and career goals to their community. Throughout their higher education experience, Latina undergraduates must have opportunities to develop a critical consciousness (Freire, 1970), which enables them to learn more about the issues facing their communities and how through their education, they can address injustices and inequities in their communities. Previous research has found that Ethnic Studies courses (Cammarota, 2016; Marrun, 2018) and a program developed to specifically address issues facing Latina/o/x communities contribute to Latina/o/x students' ability to develop a critical consciousness (Cerezo et al., 2018). When Latina/o/x students develop a critical consciousness, they are then able to connect their academics to their desire to promote equity and social justice within their communities (Cammarota, 2016; Marrun, 2018). In this research, the *testimonialistas* represented a variety of majors, and as such, all courses, not just Ethnic Studies courses or those focused on diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice, must make efforts to incorporate opportunities to develop a critical consciousness and offer opportunities for students to connect their learning to their communities.

By assisting Latina undergraduates with connecting their academics to their community, higher education institutions would be supporting Latina undergraduates with their goals to achieve academically, serve their community, and enhance their well-being. Furthermore, I recommend higher education institutions develop a student success indicator that includes contributing to collective uplift and service to the community. By

doing so, higher education institutions would be contributing to the healing of the bodymindspirit of their Latina undergraduates.

### **Validation of Latina Undergraduates**

Previous research indicates the importance of caring faculty and staff who support students' academic, emotional and cultural needs (Acevedo et al., 2021; Lucero et al., 2017, Rendón, 1994; Rendón et al., 2018). Likewise, the *testimonialistas* in this study shared how important supportive faculty and staff were to their overall success, including their academic achievement and their well-being. In the group *testimonio* session, Jessica shared how there were too many people doubting her and that there was a need for more people to “hype” her up. During the *testimonio* sessions, the *testimonialistas* shared examples of both Faculty and Staff of Color and white faculty and staff who supported them. They also shared how there were faculty and staff who practiced microaggressions and doubted their capabilities. These faculty and staff became hindrances to the Latina undergraduates in achieving their goals. Yet, those faculty and staff who took the time to get to know them, support their goals, and provide them with resources contributed to both their academic success and their well-being.

There is a need for all faculty and staff to have an increased understanding of Latinas' undergraduate goals (Acevedo et al., 2021; Cavazos, 2016; Lucero et al., 2017). As such, I recommend higher education institutions provide training to faculty and staff on Latina/o/x cultural values and the assets Latina undergraduates bring with them into the college environment (Rendon et al., 2018). The purpose of this training should be to help faculty and staff learn to enact validation and *familismo* within the college environment, including classrooms and co-curricular programs. If they make an effort to

develop an understanding of the values and experiences of their Latina/o/x students, Faculty and Staff of Color and white faculty and staff are both capable of engaging in these practices (Cavazos, 2016; Lucero et al., 2017).

By adopting validation and *familismo*, faculty and staff would be able to resist notions of competition and individualism and create spaces where students feel like their voices were heard and that they are collaborating with each other and their faculty and staff to reach a common goal (Lopez et al., 2019). If their faculty and staff enact validation and *familismo*, Latina undergraduates may be able to heal previous trauma from their self-doubt and lack of support they have experienced in higher education (Acevedo et al., 2021). I recommend validation and *familismo* be practiced in all phases of the student's interaction with their higher education institution, including as early as the admissions and orientation process (Rendón, 1994; Rendón et al., 2018). A few of the *testimonialistas* shared how validating experiences with admissions counselors gave them opportunities to receive scholarships, connect to support programs early, and feel like there were supportive faculty and staff at MU. This demonstrates that higher education professionals who enact validation and *familismo* can contribute to healing the bodymindspirit of Latina undergraduates by affirming their academic goals and well-being.

The *testimonialistas* also expressed how they would like there to be more Faculty and Staff of Color because they believed they better understood their experiences. Previous research has found that Latina/o/x faculty were able to serve as mentors and role models to Latina/o/x students because of their shared experiences and understanding of the Latina/o/x culture (Cavazos, 2016) Thus, increasing the number of faculty and staff in

at PWIs is also important. However, Faculty and Staff of Color are often taxed with additional labor to support historically marginalized students (Baez, 2000). Similarly, the *testimonialistas* noticed how the Faculty and Staff of Color at their institution were overworked and under-resourced. As such, there is a need to also to provide adequate institutional support to Faculty and Staff of Color, including increasing salaries and programming budgets, and ensuring evaluation metrics of faculty and staff, including tenure and promotion, account for the additional labor Faculty and Staff of Color contribute to mentor and support Students of Color.

### **Support for Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Initiatives**

The *testimonialistas* shared how they often felt their institution placed the responsibility on them to create safe spaces for historically marginalized students to come together. Latina undergraduates' academics and well-being (Linder et al., 2019a). Several of the *testimonialistas* also shared how they appreciated having the opportunity to create these spaces; they just wanted more support from their institution. As such, I recommend higher education professionals develop programming throughout the institution that is committed to uplifting and celebrating Latina undergraduates and other historically marginalized students and support the efforts of Latina undergraduates and programs already doing this work by providing additional resources and funding.

Historically marginalized students are often put in the position to be activists because they feel like they must take on the responsibility to challenge racism and other forms of injustice at their higher education institutions in order to survive (Linder, 2019). The *testimonialistas* did not utilize the term activist to describe themselves; however,

they shared many instances of where they felt responsible for advocating for historically marginalized students and creating spaces to promote DEI at MU.

Higher education administrators often do not support historically marginalized students' activism because it can challenge and disrupt campus policies and university values (Linder, 2019). Unfortunately, higher education “educators and peers frequently expect students with minoritized identities to address oppression as part of their daily experience rather than seeing it as a form of activism, involvement, engagement, or leadership” (Linder, 2019, p. 19). Similarly, the *testimonialistas* often shared how they did not feel MU supported their efforts to advocate for Latina/o/x students and other historically marginalized students. They also shared how they felt MU professed their support for historically marginalized students yet, acted in ways counter to this by not taking a stronger stance on the racism and discrimination that occurred on campus. As such, the labor to continue advocating for historically marginalized students at MU was often left to affinity groups and Students of Color. Research has found that taking on this activism can cause stress and trauma for historically marginalized students (Linder, 2019; Linder et al., 2019b). Therefore, not providing support to Latina undergraduates engaging in activism can hinder their well-being, a goal that is important to them.

As long as there continues to be inequitable experiences of historically marginalized students on college campuses, Latina undergraduates' activism should be recognized as leadership capital they possess (Rendon et al., 2018). The *testimonialistas* stories and experiences show that they “seek to push, inspire, motivate and empower others through their actions” (Rendon et al., 2018, p. 225) and that they are enacting a form of leadership that must be recognized and valued. In agreement with previous

research by Linder (2019) on student activism, I recommend higher education institutions recognize and support the labor of Latina undergraduates to promote DEI by providing support for their activism through developing workshops that help them navigate the institution and understand how to enact change at their institution and by incorporating student activism into student learning. Similar to integrating community-based learning into their pedagogy, faculty and staff can equip students with knowledge about social movements and assign projects that address injustices at their higher education institution. By doing so, Latinas would have opportunities to receive college credit for their activism, and it “contributes to better self-care for these students because their engagement becomes cocurricular, rather than extra-curricular, and it allows them to see themselves and their work as legitimate and important” (Linder, 2019, p. 24). Higher education institutions must also compensate Latina undergraduates for the additional labor they put in to promote DEI at their institutions which can take away from their academics or opportunities for paid work. By supporting the efforts of Latina undergraduates to promote DEI, higher education professionals would be healing the bodymindspirit split of Latina undergraduates by investing in their academics, well-being, and commitment to *comunidad*.

To ensure Latina undergraduates’ voices are still included in developing programming that contributes to DEI, I recommend higher education professionals consult students in the planning and implementation of DEI initiatives. Higher education institutions must also break down silos of Latina/o/x faculty, staff, and students and bring them together to create and sustain programs that uplift and support all Latinas (Lopez et

al., 2020). This type of collaboration would enable Latina undergraduates to still have a voice in programming and share the programming responsibility with faculty and staff.

The *testimonialistas* also shared how there were spaces on campus where they did feel like DEI was celebrated. They shared positive experiences in affinity groups, multicultural sororities, a program for historically marginalized students in STEM, and a program for first-generation college students. Previous research has found affinity groups that celebrate and value the cultural assets of their racial and ethnic group members contribute to their identity development and increase their sense of belonging (Cerezo et al., 2018; Garcia, 2020; Lopez et al., 2019; Lucero et al., 2017). These are often safe spaces on campus where historically marginalized students can find support from others with similar experiences (Cerezo et al., 2018; Garcia, 2020; Rodriguez et al., 2022). Previous research found that when Latina/o/x students were part of at least one group that affirmed their cultural and ethnic identity, they experienced a greater sense of belonging (Garcia, 2020). As highlighted by the *testimonialistas* and previous research, affinity groups and cultural centers are critical to supporting Latina undergraduates, yet, they are often underfunded, under-resourced, and understaffed (Linder, 2019). As such, I recommend higher education institutions continue to create and support organizations that affirm Latina/o/x culture and ethnic identity and provide resources, including funding and staff, to them as they are contributing to both the academic goals and well-being of Latina students on their campus.

### **Resources to Support Well-Being**

The *testimonialistas* also shared how their own personal growth and well-being were important to their success. However, they also shared how there was a lack of



mental health resources on their campus, and they wished their higher education institution would invest funding into more mental health services. They also shared how they were often unaware of the resources available on campus to support their mental health and well-being. As such, there is a need for more mental health resources at higher education institutions that are easily accessible and affordable. I recommend higher education institutions provide free mental health care services to students and ensure there are culturally competent mental health providers that understand the challenges and barriers faced by Latina undergraduates. In addition, mental health services should partner with programs and academic departments to share mental health resources, and strategies faculty and staff can adopt in their programs and classrooms to enhance well-being. Higher education institutions must adopt pedagogy committed to supporting the whole student and helping them connect their bodymindspirit, such as Rendón's *sentipensante* pedagogy (2009), which integrates contemplative practices and healing. Furthermore, faculty and staff who adopt this type of pedagogy must be honored and recognized for this work.

Additionally, after the group *testimonio* session, many of the *testimonialistas* shared how they appreciated the space to come together and share their experiences. In this space, they realized they were not alone and even shared resources of support with one another. This session provided an opportunity for the *testimonialistas* to heal their bodymindspirit. Previous research has also found that when Latina undergraduates have the opportunity to come together to share their experiences with racism and other forms of oppression in their college environment, they created spaces that were able “to foster

their own learning and nurture a supportive environment wherein their experiences are validated and viewed as important knowledge” (Rodriguez, 2010, p. 495).

I recommend higher education institutions create workshops or programs that bring Latina students together to share their college experiences and resources that have supported them in navigating their higher education institutions. In their implementation of the Latino Educational Equity Project, a day-long workshop with Latina/o/x college students grounded in CRT, Cerezo et al. (2018) found that Latina/o/x students were able to relate to each other’s experiences, notice differences in their experiences, and assist each other with finding support on campus. While this project, like the group *testimonio* session, only lasted a day, it had a meaningful impact on the Latina/o/x students who participated.

I recommend higher education institutions affirm their support for programs that are grounded in CRT and LatCrit. As evidenced by this research and other research (Cerezo et al., 2018), programs grounded in CRT and LatCrit are crucial to supporting Latinas and other Students of Color because they create spaces where Latina undergraduates can develop a critical consciousness, find others with similar experiences and learn about the support available to assist them in navigating their higher education institutions. So long as higher education institutions are spaces where Latina undergraduates are marginalized and face multiple forms of oppression, it will be necessary for higher education professionals to create spaces and places to bring together Latina undergraduates to share their experiences and provide support for one another. By doing so, higher education institutions would be helping Latina undergraduates to heal their bodymindspirit split by supporting their academic goals and their overall well-being.

## Conclusion

In this study, Latina undergraduates defined success through academic achievement, career attainment, *familismo*, *comunidad*, and their own personal growth and well-being. The Latina undergraduates in this study embraced the dominant notions of success of academic achievement and career attainment. Yet, they also embraced their Latina/o/x values of *familismo* and *comunidad*. Furthermore, the Latina undergraduates were also challenging both their institution and their Latina/o/x values by investing in their own personal growth and well-being. In this study, I also shared the ways in which Latina undergraduates feel supported or not by their higher education institutions to achieve their self-defined goals. The *testimonialistas* shared they were supported by academic opportunities, support programs, and the validation they received from faculty and staff. However, they also shared a multitude of barriers and challenges that inhibited their abilities to become *exitosas* on their own terms, including racism and discrimination, a lack of sense of belonging, and additional labor to contribute to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Latinas are graduating from college and accomplishing their goals. Yet, there is still more the institution can do to ensure Latina undergraduates are not merely surviving and graduating exhausted from their institution, but that they are thriving and becoming *exitosas* in all the ways in which they define it.

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## Appendix A

### Recruitment Invitation

**SUBJECT: Invitation to Participate in a Research Study:** *Exitosas on their own terms: Centering Latina Testimonios to Understand Latina Undergraduates' Student Success Beliefs*

Hello! My name is Lauren Contreras and I am a Ph.D. student in the University of Denver's Morgridge College of Education. I would like to invite you to participate in my dissertation research study about the student success beliefs of Latina undergraduates attending the University of Denver, a 4-year, private, predominantly white institution (PWI). You are being invited to participate in this research study because you can provide valuable information about your experience as a Latina undergraduate attending the University of Denver. This study is focused on understanding the goals of Latina undergraduates and how Latina undergraduates attending a PWI define success for themselves in higher education. Your insights will help to advance knowledge that can create higher education policy, programming and curriculum to support Latina undergraduates in achieving their self-defined goals.

I am seeking participants for this study who meet the following qualifications:

- Self-identified Latina/Hispanic woman
- Completed at least one year of college as an undergraduate and is still enrolled in college as an undergraduate
- Be a current University of Denver undergraduate student
- Open to discussing their goals for higher education and how they define success for themselves

This study will include two in-person or Zoom video-conference, audio-recorded individual *testimonio* sessions (interviews) and one in-person or Zoom video-conference, audio-recorded group *testimonio* session and the completion of a vision board activity. Each *testimonio* session would last between 60-90 minutes and would focus on your experiences as a Latina attending higher education at a PWI and how you define success for yourself. Data collected from these sessions will inform the findings of my dissertation study.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may end your participation at any time. For your participation in the study, you will be provided a \$25 VISA gift card after completion of the three testimonios. If you would like to be involved in this study or have any questions, please contact me at [Lauren.Contreras@du.edu](mailto:Lauren.Contreras@du.edu) or by phone at 512-825-9913.

Thank you for your consideration.

Lauren R. Contreras

PhD Candidate, Morgridge College of Education at the University of Denver

Faculty Sponsor: Sarah S. Hurtado PhD, Assistant Professor

## Appendix B

### Recruitment Survey

*Please answer the following questions:*

1. What influenced your decision to attend college?
2. How do you define success for yourself?

#### *Demographic information*

1. How many years of college have you completed?
2. What is your academic standing?
  - a. First-Year
  - b. Sophomore
  - c. Junior
  - d. Senior
  - e. Other. Please, explain \_\_\_\_\_
3. What is your current college major?
4. Do you identify as Latina/Latinx/Hispanic/Chicana?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No

#### *Solicitation for participation*

1. Would you be interested in participating in a research study about the ideologies of success of Latina undergraduates attending Predominantly White Institutions?
  - a. Yes, please provide contact information.
    - I. Name
    - II. Phone
    - III. Email
  - b. No

## Appendix C

### Exempt Research Consent Form

**Title of Research Study:** *Exitosas* on their own terms: Centering Latina *Testimonios* to Understand Latina Undergraduates' Student Success Beliefs

**Principal Investigator:** Lauren R. Contreras, Ph.D. Candidate, University of Denver  
**Faculty Sponsor:** Sarah S. Hurtado, Ph.D., Assistant Professor

**IRBNet Protocol #:**

**Voluntary Participation:** You are being asked to participate in a research study. Your participation in this research study is voluntary and you do not have to participate. Even if you decide to participate now, you may change your mind and stop at any time. This document contains important information about this study and what to expect if you decide to participate. Please consider the information carefully. Feel free to ask questions before making your decision whether or not to participate.

**Study Purpose:** If you participate in this research study, you will be invited to provide valuable information about your experience as a Latina undergraduate attending a Predominantly White Institution. This study is focused on understanding the higher education goals of Latina undergraduates and how Latina undergraduates define success for themselves in higher education. Your insights will help to advance knowledge that can create higher education policy, programming and curriculum to support Latina undergraduates in achieving their self-defined goals.

**Potential Risks:** Potential risks and/or discomforts of participation may include the emergence of negative or distressful feelings in answering interview questions. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to and you may choose not to continue with the interview for any reason without penalty.

**Compensation:** You will receive a \$25 Visa Gift Card for participating in this research project after completion of the three testimonios.

**Procedures:** If you agree to be part of the research study you will be asked to participate in two individual interviews/*testimonio* sessions, 1 focus group/group *testimonio* session and a vision board activity. The *testimonio* sessions will ask you to share your story and will include questions about your Latina identity, educational background, your goals, ideologies of success, and experiences as a Latina attending a Predominantly White Institution. Each *testimonio* session will take approximately 60-90 minutes to complete.

You will be audio/video recorded during each *testimonio* session via Zoom technology. The audio recordings will be transcribed for the purpose of data analysis. After transcription, the audio and video files will be destroyed. If you do not want to be

audio/video recorded, please inform the researcher, and only hand-written notes will be taken during the interview/focus group.

Your name and identifying information will not be connected in any way to your responses in this study.

**Data Sharing:** De-identified data from this study may be shared with the research community at large to advance knowledge. The researcher will remove or code any personal information that could identify you before files are shared with other researchers to ensure that, by current scientific standards and known methods, no one will be able to identify you from the information we share. Despite these measures, we cannot guarantee the anonymity of your personal data.

**Questions:** If you have any questions about this project or your participation, please feel free to ask questions now or contact **Lauren R. Contreras** at **512-825-9913** or **Lauren.Contreras@du.edu** at any time.

If you have any questions or concerns about your research participation or rights as a participant, you may contact the University of Denver's Human Research Protections Program (HRPP) by emailing [IRBAdmin@du.edu](mailto:IRBAdmin@du.edu) or calling (303) 871-2121 to speak to someone other than the researchers.

The University of Denver Institutional Review Board has determined that this study is minimal risk and is exempt from full IRB oversight.

**Please take all the time you need to read through this document and decide whether you would like to participate in this research study.**

**If you agree to participate in this research study, please sign below. You will be given a copy of this form for your records.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Participant Signature**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

## Appendix D

### Individual *Testimonio* Session/Interview Protocol 1

1. Tell me a little about yourself.
  - a) Where did you grow up?
  - b) What is your family like?
  - c) What is your major and your academic interests?
  - d) What are you involved in on and off campus?
2. What are your educational/professional goals?
3. How were these goals shaped?
4. What identities are important to you?
5. How do your identities shape your values?
6. What role do your identities play in shaping your goals?
7. How do you define success generally?
8. How does your family define success? How does your community define success?
9. What were your goals for attending college?
10. Tell me about a time when you were most proud of yourself. What were you doing? How did you feel?
11. Tell me about a time when your family/your community was most proud of you. What were you doing? How did you feel? How do you know they were proud of you?
12. How do you know you have met a goal?
13. How do you know when you are “successful”?

## Appendix E

### Individual *Testimonio* Session 2/Interview Protocol 2

1. Did you have any thoughts or reflections about our last conversation?
2. Tell me why you decided to attend college.
3. Why did you decide to attend this college in particular?
4. What has your experience been like at this college?
5. How have your identities impacted your experience at this college?
6. How do you believe your college defines success for its students? Does this align with your beliefs?
7. Are the goals you had at the beginning of college the same as they are now?
8. Tell me how your college supports your goals. Are there specific places and/or individuals on campus that support you in achieving your goals?
9. Do you have thoughts on how your college could better support you in achieving your goals?
10. Is there anything else you would like to share about your college experience?

## Appendix F

### Vision Board Activity & Group *Testimonio* Protocol

#### Activity Instructions:

For this activity, you will be provided with a large poster board, scissors, glue, markers, and magazines to create a vision board that outlines your personal, professional and academic goals. You may also use your own supplies, including additional images, and photos. You can paste images onto the board and/or draw images and words that describe your personal, professional and academic goals. You will have 2 weeks to complete your vision board. Please, come prepared to share and discuss your vision board at a group *testimonio* session with other Latina undergraduates participating in the study.

#### Group *Testimonio* Questions:

1. What feelings came up for you when doing this activity?
2. What goals are represented on your vision board? Is there a theme(s)?
3. What do these goals mean to you?
4. How do your identities shape these goals?
4. What role does family/community play in these goals?
5. What role does education play in these goals?
6. What role does your college play in these goals?
7. What types of support/resources do you need to achieve these goals?
8. How will you know you have achieved these goals?
9. How are these goals connected to your definition of “success”?

# Appendix G

## Vision Boards

Amy's Vision Board



Ana's Vision Board





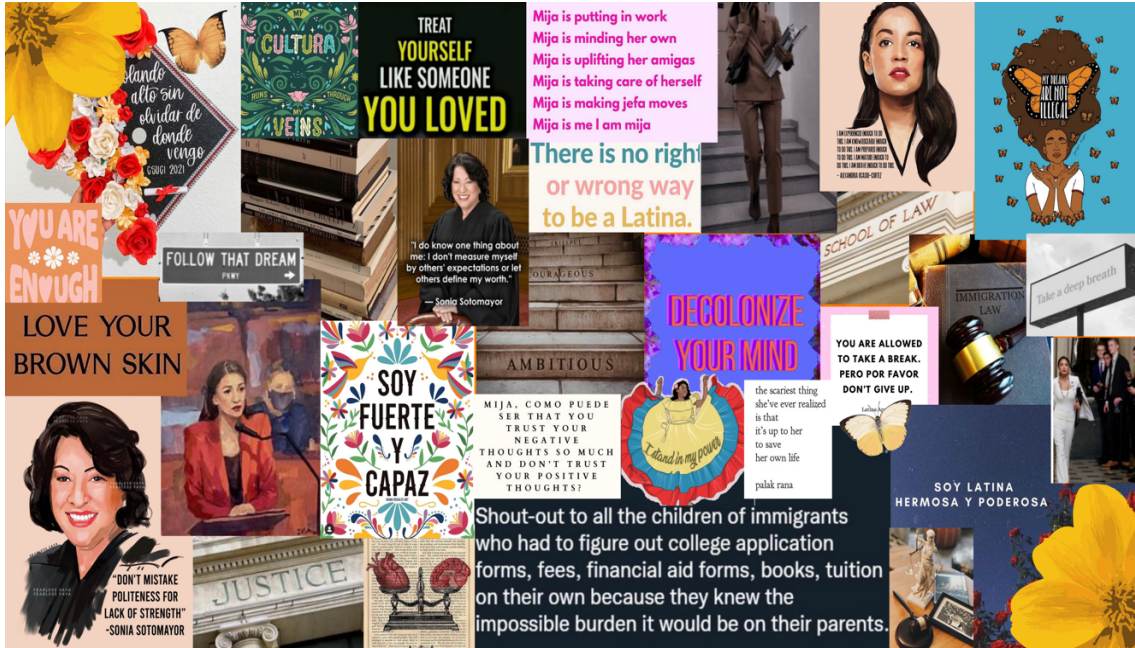
Camila's Vision Board



Em's Vision Board



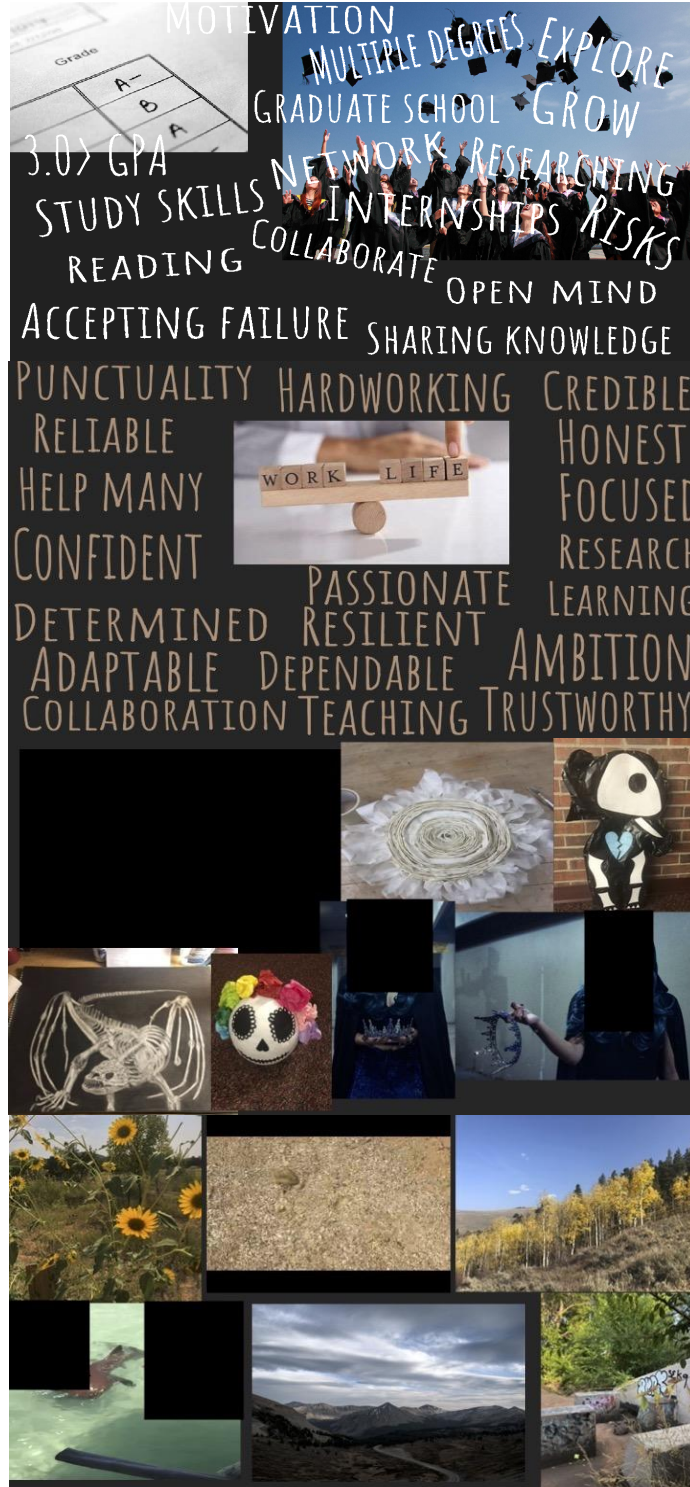
## Gabriela's Vision Board



## Jessica's Vision Board



# Luna's Vision Board



Nina's Vision Board

## Vision Board 2022

### Personal

- compose a 2nd album
- record my 1st album over summer
- exercise once a week (walking, gym...)
- improve posture
- stretch everyday
- go to concerts and [redacted]
- relax!



### Professional

- get a summer internship [redacted]
- improve and increase leadership skills
- network within the business school [redacted]
- work on linkedin profile

### Academic

- study abroad in Fall 2022 in Spain
- figure out major and career path
- get excel certified and teach my friend [redacted]
- complete leadership and Spanish classes for minors



Sarah's Vision Board



Selena's Vision Board



Sophia's Vision Board



# Vision Board Compilation

