"Stop Giving Up on Us": The Experiences of First-Generation Latinx Students in their College Choice Process

Lillianna Shantey Franco Carrera

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

“STOP GIVING UP ON US”: THE EXPERIENCES OF FIRST-GENERATION LATINX STUDENTS IN THEIR COLLEGE CHOICE PROCESS

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN HIGHER EDUCATION

BY
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CHICAGO, IL
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Thank you to my ancestors for being the strong foundational raíces (roots) of my tree. Your undeniable faith and hard work ethic still live in me until this day and are something I plan to pass on to my children and my community. To my parents, thank you for always encouraging me to obtain a higher education. You sacrificed so much for me to be where I am now and I am immensely grateful. Papi, gracias por enseñarme que todo es posible cuando se hace con dedicación y esfuerzo. Mami, tu cuidado y sacrificio como madre me ha enseñado a tener compasión por los demás y gracias a eso ahora soy quien soy. To my partner, thank you for always encouraging me to push forward in my dreams and for supporting me in my doctoral journey. There have been many times when you have made sacrifices for me to be where I am now and I am appreciative that you have been by my side always cheering me on. Te amo Isaac. To Vida, Mia, and any future children that God blesses me with, please know that I worked very hard to complete my doctorate and dissertation; let this be proof that you too can do anything. As long as you follow your purpose, you will always be successful. To my professors, advisors, mentors, and dissertation committee members, thank you for sharing your knowledge and experience with me; it has helped me learn and grow. More than anything, thank you for believing in me and my potential; you will never know how much it truly encouraged me and gave me the confidence to continue on in my journey. To my cohort, I would have never made it this far had it not been for our constant check ins, help, and support for each other. I have never
seen more love for one another like I have seen in this group of friends. I truly believe you all have made me a better human and for that reason I thank you—Ashley, Amy and Quortne. To my Latinx and first-generation community, I pursued this research focus for us. Let’s continue to work together to find ways to improve our educational paths and live equitable lives. Better yet, let’s continue to push for justice by showing love for one another.
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ABSTRACT

To improve college access for racially minoritized populations, such as first-generation Latinx students, current practices must be assessed to ensure equitability. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to learn about the experiences of first-generation Latinx students who chose to attend one of two institutions, a private 4-year institution and a private 2-year institution. I collected their reflections on their high school college choice process via interviews to understand their personal experiences and why they led them to the institution they chose. I also considered the support their high school counselors offered them in their college choice process. This study was guided by the following research questions: How do first-generation Latinx students who attend a 2-year college make meaning of their college choice process? How do first-generation Latinx students who attend a 4-year university make meaning of their college choice process? To what extent did students feel supported by their high school counselors in their college choice process? Why or why not? The findings showed the participants felt various conflicting emotions, such as stress, anxiety, fear, and discouragement, related to being first-generation Latinx students. In addition, results showed the extent to which these feelings were exacerbated by participants’ high school counselors. Hence, future research regarding the college choice process should include not only a lens of higher education but also holistic counseling practices. Consequently, this should incite changes in policy and preparation requirements for school counselors to improve the supports racially minoritized populations receive.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

As a former college guidance counselor at a majority Latinx\(^1\) high school, meeting prospective first-generation college students was common and very exciting to me. It offered me an opportunity to be a true educator of the college choice process as no one else in their family had attended college—therefore, they had no one to whom they could turn for information and guidance. “Soy la primera,” my Latina high school student said to me during our first college counseling meeting as she opened up about being the first in her family to go to college. I responded to my student, “Yo también,” as I was also a first-generation college student, and her body language changed from anxious to relaxed. I could tell she felt more comfortable with the fact that being the first in her family to go to college was not going to be a hinderance. I was proof of that idea for her as I was not only a first-generation student but also a Latina, and she could see herself in me. For me, supporting first-generation Latinx students provides an opportunity to work on increasing equity in college access for those with whom I identify and care for wholeheartedly.

\(^1\) The term Latinx is an all-inclusive gender-neutral label for individuals who are of Latin American ancestry (Salinas & Lozano, 2017). In the past, the term Latino/a has been used; however, it is preferable to use a more inclusive label that encompasses all Latinx students regardless of gender. I use this term to represent all participants as whole but use the term each participant preferred when discussing them individually to respect their personal identity.
My personal experience as a prospective first-generation college student with my own high school counselor was one of both gratitude and disappointment. Though my counselor shared with me endless college choices and scholarships that were a fit for me, I also experienced how they would treat other students with whom I was friends. I was an involved and very academically successful student and, therefore, I could tell my counselor believed I could be successful in college. Their encouragement and support helped me believe in myself and navigate my college choice process and selection successfully. However, my peers did not receive the same support as I did simply because they did not have high enough grades or the counselor believed they could not be successful. These peers would be directed to vocational schools regardless of their desires and goals. I still remember when the counselor told my good friend, “You will never make it at this university and should just consider a vocational school.” Those words and that moment have always stuck with me as a reminder to lead rather than direct students. My personal experiences with the college choice process and guiding others through it have led me to be curious about those who identify as first-generation Latinx and the counselors who support these students in their college choice process.

Research Problem

Higher education has long been presented as the great equalizer of cultural capital (Tierney & Hagedorn, 2002). Cultural capital includes the cultural attributes that determine class, and for some this can include language and characteristics (Bourdieu, 1986). However, according to the most recent data from the National Center for Education Statistics, the number of first-generation college students decreased by 4% between 2000 and 2012 yet these students
represent one-third of the overall population in postsecondary institutions (Cataldi et al., 2018). In addition, Redford and Mulvaney Hoyer (2017) reported 27% of Latinx undergraduates are first-generation students. Currently, only 65% of Latinx high school graduates go on to enroll in college (Ma et al., 2016) and Latinx students are not attending or graduating from college at the same rate as their White peers (Baum et al., 2013; Rios-Aguilar & Kiyama, 2012). By the year 2023, one-fourth of high school graduates, and prospective college students, will be Latinx (McGee, 2015). Therefore, as Latinx individuals become one of the fastest growing ethnic groups in the United States, it is important to focus on their college choice in order to better assist them and improve college access (Pérez & McDonough, 2008). In order to promote college access to underrepresented populations, such as first-generation Latinx students, policy and practices must be reevaluated to ensure they reflect equitable access to postsecondary education (Hurley & Coles, 2015).

Within Perna’s (2006) college choice model, the context of each student and their support systems influence their college choice. However, research shows the more students and parents know about college, the more likely the students are to enroll in higher education (Engberg & Wolniak, 2010; Plank & Jordan, 2001). For first-generation students, or those whose parents did not attend college, high school counselors become a necessary resource (Hurley & Coles, 2015; McDonough, 2005). High school and college counselors are vital to helping increase the college enrollment and persistence of underrepresented groups and students of color (Bishop, 2010; McDonough, 2005; McKillip et al., 2012). For Latinx students, both aspiration and encouraging support systems that help them navigate college choices contribute to choosing to attend college
(Acevedo-Gil, 2017). Acevedo-Gil (2017) stated Latinx students, in particular, face obstacles when it comes to college choice as their process may be repeated. For example, students who drop out or transfer out may need to repeat the college choice process by choosing the next institution to which they want to transfer or enroll.

Equitable college access increases social mobility and racial and ethnic diversity promotes positive educational outcomes for White and racially minoritized students alike (Gurin et al., 2002). It is optimal for college campuses across the nation to increase equitable college access. For this reason, not only should the practices and policies currently in place within institutional admissions be reviewed, the various college choice structures and support systems should be evaluated. Engberg and Wolniak (2009) noted the college choice pathway is different depending on racial and social class perspectives. With regard to the college choice process, first-generation college students are likely to be more influenced by their high school counselors than by other individuals in their networks (Jarsky et al., 2009; Plank & Jordan, 2001). Acevedo-Gil (2017) stated counselors foster college aspirations, share college information, help with application and choice, and support self-advocacy development for Latinx students. College guidance counselors focus on helping students “decide, plan, and pursue a post high school education” (Rowe, 1989, p. 260). Simply meeting with a counselor increases the chance of a student attending college (Belasco, 2013; Robinson & Roksa, 2016). However, both first-generation and Latinx students are underrepresented at 4-year institutions. McDonough and Calderone (2006) reported on the connection between counselor influence and choosing between a 2-year community college or a 4-year institution for low-income Latinx families. In short,
examining high school counselors in relation to improving college enrollments is vital in ensuring more equitable admission practices and outcomes (McDonough, 2005).

**Purpose of the Study**

The overall purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of first-generation Latinx students during their college choice process. When considering college equity and access, the fact that both first-generation and Latinx students are underrepresented at 4-year institutions is a factor that cannot be ignored. For example, 46% of first-generation students attend public 2-year institutions, 26% attend public 4-year institutions, and the rest enroll in private nonprofits, for-profits, or other types of institutions (Cataldi et al., 2018). Moreover, 58% of Latinx students enroll in a 2-year college (Liu, 2011). It is important to understand the intersection of these identities and how it affects the college choice process because the difficulties these students face create inequality for both populations separately and together.

To the best of my knowledge, much of the literature regarding the college choice process of Latinx individuals is based on the assumption that the former also identify as first-generation students. Although the two groups often intersect, this assumption can be detrimental. If a researcher does not explicitly indicate the individuals interviewed were both first-generation and Latinx, it is not valid to assume both identities were being assessed. For example, if a researcher assumes all their participants are both Latinx and first-generation, they could be collecting data from Latinx participants who are actually second-generation students. Acevedo-Gil (2017) denoted a few places in which first-generation students were taken into account in their model
and elsewhere this identity is not mentioned but assumed. This could reduce the validity of the data collected by Acevedo-Gil as they might not accurately depict the needs of first-generation and Latinx students. Approximately 27% of Latinx students are also first-generation students (Redford & Mulvaney Hoyer, 2017). In contrast, research that contains a focus on first-generation status often does not specifically identify the individuals beyond that single identity (J. J. Lee et al., 2004). Hence, first-generation individuals are not typically identified by their race, gender, or other identity markers, which could be harmful for understanding the essence of a first-generation individual.

It is important to understand the college choice experiences of both identities separately and as they overlap. For example, Latinx students often aspire to obtain a postsecondary education because it is ingrained in the educational ideology of their family and community (Kiyama, 2010; McCallister et al., 2010). First-generation students also have high aspirations and motivations for obtaining a higher education because of their parents’ belief in social mobility to fulfill the American dream (N. E. Hill & Torres, 2010). Hence, both have high aspirations for a postsecondary education because of their family’s expectations. However, it is important to note that their family’s reasons for having high aspirations differ and yet, may overlap. In addition, both first-generation and Latinx students use their high school environments, community, and peers to access college information and this affects their college choice and access (Ceja, 2000; Hurley & Coles, 2015; Jarsky et al., 2009; McDonough, 1997). It is clear that updated research is required to understand the intersectionality of these identities with regard to the college choice process as this directly affects college equity and access.
There is also a need for a focus on the experiences of this population in terms of their interactions with their high school counselors. Perna’s (2006) college choice model highlights the counselor’s role as being present in most layers of the model. Within the habitus context, which is the student’s perceptions acquired from their environment, counselors use social and cultural capital to share college information. In the school and community context, there are limited resources and organizational structures that hinder effective counseling. However, higher education researchers have not considered how high school counselors play a role in aiding higher education admission counselors with recruitment. Finally, counselors can greatly affect the college choice process by helping students understand financial aid. Acevedo-Gil’s (2017) framework contains a focus on how counselors are present for Latinx students at most stages. However, research shows that within the negotiation and choosing stage, during which students are trying to compare their options and make a college choice, the role of the counselor can be positive or negative. These models help in the understanding of the college choice process and allow for a consideration of how counselors influence a student’s process. However, the current empirical research uses these models to focus on students’ processes and not counselors’ influences on students’ choices. This is an important gap to fill in particular for the first-generation Latinx student population as they are at a disadvantage when it comes to college equity and access. It has been noted that counselors are positively influential for this population if they help build higher education aspirations within the beginning stages of the college choice process (Adelman, 1999; McDonough, 1997, 2004). There is evidence to show first-generation Latinx high school seniors believe their counselors are crucial in providing them with college
information (Bryan et al., 2011; Grothaus & Cole, 2010; Martinez, 2013; Stanton-Salazar, 2001). Seeing a counselor increases the chances of attending a college over not at all (Belasco, 2013; Robinson & Roksa, 2016), as those who engage with their counselors about college are more likely to attend college. However, little research has included a focus on the first-generation Latinx student perspective on how counselors influence and support their college choice in practice. It is important to continue to update our understanding of the strengths, shortcomings, and unique approaches high school counselors use when supporting first-generation Latinx students.

The focus of this study was on the college choice experiences of first-generation Latinx students to provide a deeper understanding of the high school counseling experiences of students who chose between a 4-year institution or a 2-year college. This is important because of the evidence indicating both populations overwhelmingly choose a 2-year college despite many having the grades and skills to attend a 4-year institution. For example, 46% of first-generation students attend public 2-year institutions (Cataldi et al., 2018) and 58% of Latinx students enroll in a 2-year college (Liu, 2011). Latinx students with high academic preparedness disproportionately choose 2-year colleges based on “affordability, family and work obligations, and lack of information about financial aid and college life” (Liu, 2011, p. 4). Similarly, first-generation students disproportionately choose public 2-year institutions based on their lower self-efficacy and perceived barriers to attending college (Gibbons & Borders, 2010). By understanding the college choice experiences of this demographic and the relationship with their high school counselors, we can further understand the overrepresentation of these individuals in
a 2-year college versus a 4-year university. The focus on a private 4-year institution and private
2-year institution enabled a deeper understanding of why this specific demographic chose to
attend private institutions. Leaders in the field of education can use the information from this
study to improve their college choice support systems, increase college access, and create a more
diverse higher education environment. Above all, by exploring the experiences of high school
students and connecting them to their college choice, we can unite our understanding of high
school counseling and access to higher education.

Research Questions

The college choice process of first-generation Latinx students is understood by higher
education practitioners through models and frameworks that detail the process in stages. These
stages typically depict the main turning points for students as they engage in the college choice
process. Unfortunately, the research that exists about this demographic is not updated and the
influence of their intersecting identities is not made clear. For example, there is currently no
updated college choice model with an explicit focus on both first-generation and Latinx
individuals, specifically. Furthermore, the role of the high school counselor has never really been
explored extensively from the perspective of this specific population. Similar to previous
literature regarding first-generation Latinx students in the college choice process, I believe these
students experience challenges and barriers that hinder equitable college access. I also believe
counselors can either play a positive or negative role in supporting these students in their college
choice process depending on the student’s environmental context and the counselors’
expectations and relationships with their students. To fill this gap in literature, I used a
phenomenological approach to interview first-year students who identified as first-generation Latinx students at a private 4-year university and a private 2-year college. I asked participants to reflect on their college choice experience and the extent to which they were supported by their high school counselors in the process. As such, the research questions that guided the study were as follows:

1. How do first-generation Latinx students who attend a 2-year college make meaning of their college choice process?
2. How do first-generation Latinx students who attend a 4-year university make meaning of their college choice process?
3. To what extent did students feel supported by their high school counselors in their college choice process? Why or why not?
   a. From the perspective of the students, what was their relationship like with their high school counselor?
   b. From the perspective of the students, how did their high school counselor influence their choice?

   **Overview of the Study**

   I chose to conduct a qualitative study with a phenomenological approach as I wanted to understand the essence of a specific phenomenon—the college choice experience of first-generation Latinx students. A phenomenological methodology characteristically is used in an attempt to understand the lived experiences of participants (Van Manen, 2016). For the purpose of this study, I concentrated on two similar private institutions but with one major difference.
Recruitment took place at a 2-year college and a 4-year university that are both private and religiously-affiliated and located in the same metropolitan area in Illinois. Within these sites, I recruited first-year, first-generation Latinx students and asked them to reflect on their high school college choice experiences with a particular focus on the extent to which they felt supported in the process by their high school counselors. In particular, I wanted to use the understanding of the college choice processes of first-generation Latinx students at a 2-year college and a 4-year university to improve college access and the practices of those who support and influence racially minoritized students in their college choice.

As I specifically looked to interview first-generation Latinx students, I used purposeful sampling to identify my ideal population. Purposeful sampling is a form of sample selection that emphasizes the need for an in-depth understanding of a particular population as it requires participants to be purposefully chosen (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). I recruited the participant sample through convenience and snowball sampling. Convenience sampling is used when accessibility for the researcher is required (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Palinkas et al., 2015). The snowball method enables the researcher to identify participants by reaching out to individuals in a network (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). In particular, I reached out to the institutions’ multicultural student and success program coordinators to be able to recruit these students. Semi-structured interviews were the data collection method. Semi-structured interviews have guided questions but remain flexible (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). In addition, I created a profile chart of each participant with additional information about their high school environment. In the data analysis, I used a transcendental phenomenology method to illuminate the whole essence of the
phenomenon without including bias (Husserl, 1962; Peoples, 2020). Moreover, because the researcher is considered the primary instrument in qualitative research, I used bracketing to suspend my judgments and focus on the participants’ experiences (Husserl, 1962; Peoples, 2020). Bracketing is discussed in more detail in the methods section; nonetheless, I used the process to focus on the experiences of the participants and not my own. However, in order to be transparent as a researcher, I included my positionality below and provide a summary of my bracketing as a form of my reflexivity in Appendix A. I believe that by making my positionality and reflexivity known, I was able to maintain integrity and validity. Therefore, I accounted for validity through various strategies, including triangulation, positionality, and reflexivity of bracketing.

**Positionality and Limitations**

When I reflect on my positionality, I realize my past experience as a college guidance counselor and my identities as a first-generation and Latina college student enabled me to view this study from a unique insider perspective. Primarily, I viewed this study from the lens of a student and the lens of a counselor. This can be a regarded as both a benefit and a hinderance. As a first-generation Latinx student, I assumed the students in my study would have similar experiences to my own, which posed a limitation. I took this into consideration and was open to the fact that the students I interviewed may have had different experiences. One benefit is that I was able to build a strong rapport with the students I interviewed as I share their identities. Additionally, my deep understanding of the college choice process from my time as a high school counselor could have affected the lens through which I viewed the findings. As a former
high school college guidance counselor, I came into this study considering the various roles and responsibilities counselors must balance. In addition, I considered the lack of resources high school contexts provide counselors, which affects students negatively. My positionality enabled me to understand the typical counselor point of view and experiences in relation to the students’ reflections on how they felt supported. Though this can be seen as a benefit, it is important to highlight that it could have been a limitation as I may have been inclined to defend or give the counselors the benefit of the doubt instead of accepting the experiences of those I interviewed as valid. Hence, my positionality and assumptions could have been both a positive and a limitation in this study. My goal was to be reflective of my personal experience without it affecting the essence of the experiences of the students I interviewed. I worked to maintain my distance so as to not allow my assumptions to affect the legitimacy of the findings. However, I made sure to make my experience as the researcher of the project known in my reflexivity statement as I knew I could not completely separate myself from the research and transparency was necessary for validity.

An important limitation of the study is that the phenomenological methodology was structured using binary and Western cultural practices that may not be inclusive of my population’s need for social or collective experiences. However, I used the phenomenological approach to highlight the true experiences of this population in connection to their social context and relationships. Another limitation related to time and location constraints brought on by the global COVID pandemic that led me to use convenience and snowball sampling. I focused on only two sites, a private, religiously-affiliated urban 4-year university and a private, religiously-
affiliated urban 2-year college. Another limitation related to the types of postsecondary options included in the study. However, by focusing on only two sites, I was able to highlight important distinctions between the two for my particular population. For example, the 4-year university provides support services for multicultural and generational students and the 2-year college is majority first-generation racially minoritized students. The connections to multicultural and generational and first-generation racially minoritized students at the two sites enabled me to conveniently locate first-generation Latinx students to interview. Moreover, the private 2-year college is unique in that little research has been done with private 2-year colleges and I saw this study as an opportunity to expand the research about these types of institutions.

A final major limitation was that I did not include the perspectives of high school counselors in this study. Future researchers should include the perspectives of high school counselors as a support system for this demographic about their college choice. Not only should their experiences working with this population be evaluated, but the counseling preparation and standards should be considered to improve their engagement with this population. Their understanding of the college choice process from the higher education context should also be evaluated. However, for this study I believed it was important to limit the perspectives to increase the rich understanding of the students’ experiences as serving and supporting them is most important in improving equitable college access.

**Core Definitions**

To ensure a basic understanding of the language used in this study, the following is a list of core definitions used in the dissertation.
**College Choice Process**

The college choice process for students refers to the navigation of college information, the application process, and the selection process. Various college choice models exist with which to understand this process for various types of students (Acevedo-Gil, 2017; Holland, 1959; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Perna, 2006). I used Perna’s (2006) college choice model, which is most inclusive, and Acevedo-Gil’s (2017) Latinx framework, as it is connected to the population I studied.

**First-Generation**

The term first-generation student can be denoted in two ways: they are considered students whose parents did not enroll in or attend college or whose parents did not attain a baccalaureate degree (Ward et al., 2012). It is important to note students can be considered first-generation college students even if a sibling has enrolled in or attended college or attained a baccalaureate degree. The most important factor in whether a student is considered first-generation is their parents’ educational progress.

**First-Year Students**

College and universities tend to use the term freshman to denote students who are in their first year at an institution. However, some schools have employed a new term, first-year students, to be inclusive to all students (Dicker, 2012). For this study, I used the term first-year students; however, it is important to note that most researchers or institutions still use the term freshman for reporting purposes.
**High School Counselor**

In terms of the high school counselor, there is no identifier that categorizes this population other than their work role. According to the American School Counselor Association (2019), school counselors are involved in various capacities, such as “character education, violence prevention, career planning and much more” (para. 1). For this study, high school counselors were represented in their capacity of supporting students in their college choice process as college guidance counselors.

**Latinx**

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the terms Hispanic and Latino are used to identify those who are of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or Spanish origin regardless of race (Humes et al., 2011). I intentionally used the term Latinx to recruit and describe participants as a whole as it denotes a gender-neutral label for Latino/a individuals who identify as having Latin American ancestry (Salinas & Lozano, 2017). This term has caused some pushback from conservative Latinx individuals in reference to traditional societal norms and grammar factors (Vidal-Ortiz & Martínez, 2018). It is important to note that none of the participants in my study used Latinx to describe themselves; rather, they identified as Latina or Latino. However, I chose to use Latinx when recruiting and speaking about my participants as a group to form an inclusive dialogue for all of those who identify as being of Latin descent regardless of gender identity. When participants noted a preference for Latina or Latin, I used those terms when speaking of those participants individually to respect their chosen identities.
Racially Minoritized Students

In contrast to the use of the term students of color or minority students, I used the term racially minoritized students in this study. Benitez (2010) used the term minoritized to designate the “process of student minoritization” (p. 131). This indicates minority status is socially constructed in society and not just connected to racial identity (Stewart, 2013).
CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this literature review is to understand the past and current research regarding the college choice process of first-generation Latinx students (Acevedo-Gil, 2017; Chapman, 1981; Hanson & Litten, 1982; Holland, 1959; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Iloh, 2018; Jackson, 1982; Kolter, 1976; Perna, 2006). Perna’s (2006) college choice model is one of the most highly influential models as it is inclusive of diverse identities and used as the foundation of many new models. For example, Acevedo-Gil’s (2017) model is based on Perna’s model as its foundation and contains a specific focus on Latinx students. This literature review is used to highlight the gap that exists in the research that reflects the intersection of both first-generation and Latinx identities. Though Acevedo-Gil included Latinx students who were also first-generation students, not all Latinx students can be assumed to be first-generation in this framework. To the best of my knowledge, much of the literature regarding the college choice process of Latinx individuals tends to include the assumption that they are also first-generation students. Although the two groups often overlap, this assumption can be hurtful to the understanding of this specific population. If an article does not clearly indicate the individuals interviewed were both first-generation and Latinx, it is not valid to assume both identities were being evaluated, and, therefore, the research cannot be trusted in assessing both first-generation and Latinx individuals. Though there is a general assumption that most Latinx research includes first-generation
students, it is important not to infer that all research is inclusive of both identities unless it is clearly noted in the study.

I found, from my extensive search of the existing literature, that the specific identity of first-generation students has been less researched in the context of the college choice process. Moreover, research that included a focus on this population typically also included a consideration of other salient identities. For example, “While studies have identified the inequities and their possible sources for first-generation students, few studies have examined this group beyond the simple distinction of first-generation status” (J. J. Lee et al., 2004, p. 2).

Approximately 27% of Latinx students in the United States are also first-generation students and the majority of their parents never attended college (Redford & Mulvaney Hoyer, 2017). As previously noted, the intersection of both identities is rarely made clear in the research, meaning the explicit intersection of both identities is missing in the college choice process literature. Hence, this literature review includes research for both identities and I note when they do overlap. The goal was to represent both in this literature review as these are intersecting identities that should be considered together. Furthermore, in this literature review, I examine the current role of high school counselors within the college choice process and include research on how high school counselors influence and support the college choice process of first-generation Latinx students. The literature review is organized by the following sections to help understand the full context of this topic: overview of college choice models, college choice process for first-generation Latinx students, and the role of high school counselors in college choice.
Overview of College Choice Models

College choice models are helpful in contextualizing student reasoning when choosing to attend college and selecting an institution. College choice is defined as the process and selection of a student’s postsecondary institution (Cunningham, 2002). College choice models have evolved over time, and they have each grown from each other. The first recorded study with a focus on the complexity of the college choice process included high-ability high school students and results showed personal choices were grounded in cultural and personal development (Holland, 1959). Then, Kolter (1976) created the first enrollment process model, which included making the decision to attend, information seeking, college inquiries, applications, admissions, college choice, and registration. The following three models were developed simultaneously but were not created in relation to each other. One focused on traditional-aged students and included categories such as the influences of significant people, characteristics of institutions, and institutions’ efforts (Chapman, 1981). Concurrently, Hanson and Litten (1982) created a five-stage model that included college aspirations, search process, gathering information, sending applications, and enrolling. Simultaneously, Jackson (1982) developed a model that narrowed down the stages into preference, exclusion, and evaluation. What makes this model unique is the consideration of social influence, family background, and economic influences in the preference phase during which students begin to make their first engagement in the college choice process. Jackson found social context influenced the next steps in the college choice model and should be highly regarded and considered when trying to understand the college choice process. Jackson specifically focused on how these influences lead to the exclusion of options and therefore
influence the number of choices (Jackson, 1982). This revolutionized the way in which college choice models are framed. With this model, college choice was no longer solely focused on the student’s choices but also on their environments and social contexts.

The most comprehensive model at this time was Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) three-phase model of college choice that included predisposition, search, and choice. In the predisposition phase, students determine whether they want to attend college by considering their economic status, parent involvement, college information, and support (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). In the search phase, students gather information about college options, and in the choice phase, students decide which institution to attend (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Though this model only has three phases, it includes various factors, such as individual characteristics, educational activities, college values, search activities, and choice options (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). The minimal number of phases enabled the model to be applied to a diverse demographic of students in practice although this was not what was intended by Hossler and Gallagher. Other researchers were able to use this model to build new models with a specific focus on a diverse demographic of students.

For example, almost 2 decades after Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) model was published, Perna (2006) introduced a new model based on their model. Perna focused on updating the model to be more inclusive of socioeconomic status and race/ethnicity. Perna’s conceptual model of student college choice is depicted by four layers that include the habitus, the school and community context, the higher education context, and the social economic and policy context (see Figure 1). The habitus is defined as “the individuals’ internalized system of
thoughts, beliefs, and perceptions that are acquired from the immediate environment” (Perna, 2006, p. 113). The habitus arose from Bourdieu’s (1986) work on social capital and the need for access to networks to improve an individual’s own social class. Within the habitus context, social capital and cultural capital are recognized as important to gain college information and receive assistance in the college process. Social capital resources enhance upward mobility within social networks (Coleman, 1988; DiMaggio & Mohr, 1985; Morrow, 1999). Cultural capital includes cultural attributes, such as language and cultural characteristics, that determine class (Bourdieu, 1986). The second layer is the school and community context, which reflects the ways in which social structures, such as schools and school counselors, assist with resources to aid the student in their college choice (Perna, 2006). The third layer is the higher education context, which contains a focus on the role higher education institutions play in shaping student college choice (Perna, 2006). The final layer denotes how the college choice process is shaped within the social, economic, and policy contexts.
Figure 1. Perna’s (2006) Conceptual Model of Student College Choice

Perna’s model has been used by other researchers as a foundation for newly created models that include a focus on specific demographics or characteristics and to further research.
college access. For example, Perna’s college choice model has been used as the foundation for improving the college choice process of community college students (Goldrick-Rab, 2010) and those of various socioeconomic classes (Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2008). In addition, Perna’s college choice model has furthered the research about college access in terms of the effects of postsecondary enrollment (Engberg & Wolniak, 2009, 2010) and college counseling (Perna et al., 2008). Though Perna’s model was constructed to be inclusive of all, making something so broad can leave out a lot of particular information about a specific identity or, in this case, the two identities of Latinx and first-generation. Though Perna’s model does not particularly focus on these two identities, it can be implied that these individuals can be considered in this model. However, as previously stated, it is detrimental to assume particular identities are being included in any research unless explicitly stated. Therefore, although Perna’s (2006) college choice model is inclusive of all, it leaves out details about the particular experiences and choices of racially minoritized students, such as first-generation Latinx students. It is important to consider diverse cultural groups and their experiences with the college choice process (Perna & Jones, 2013).

Though college choice models are continuously being developed and updated in light of the constant research being produced about certain identities, it is impossible to overview every model as this was not the focus of the literature review. However, it is important to include the college choice models applicable to the identities of the students included in my study in this literature review. For example, Holt (2012) found identity matters when considering the choice students make about higher education as there is a subtle interplay of individual agency and personal and social circumstance. Perna and Jones (2013) asserted Perna’s college choice model
involves the following assumptions: various theoretical perspectives must be considered; students have multiple layers of context that influence their decision; and in order to close the college access gaps, culture and circumstance vary across groups and this should be considered. Therefore, in this literature review I highlight Acevedo-Gil’s (2017) college-conocimiento college choice framework for Latinx students. Acevedo-Gil created this college choice framework for the Latinx population by building upon Perna’s (2006) college choice model and incorporating Anzaldúa’s (2002) theory of conocimiento to contextualize the Latinx culture. Anzaldúa poetically described how Latinx individuals find that “aha moment,” which is framed as conocimiento or the moment that guides them to transform their reality above all the conditions in their life. It is important to note that Acevedo-Gil (2017) did not explicitly indicate a focus on both first-generation and Latinx students. However, some of the remarks made by Acevedo-Gil in the article can be used to infer that the focus was on both identities. However, this is something I did not assume as it was not explicitly stated and therefore, was inconclusive. This is the largest critique of Acevedo-Gil’s work as it does not address the full context of the students being explored.

Acevedo-Gil (2017) described the college-conocimiento process as a serpentine course Latinx individuals engage in as they reflect on the college information they have gained in relation to their intersectional identities when making a college choice. Acevedo-Gil considered Perna’s college choice model, which includes the following four layers: student habitus; school and community context; the higher education context; and the social, economic, and policy context (Perna, 2006). Acevedo-Gil stated, “Given that Perna’s college choice model accounts
for institutional and individual contexts, the college-*conocimiento* framework considers previous studies that examine the four layers of college choice as they apply to the intersectional identities of Latinx students” (p. 833). Latinx students have nuanced experiences, such as transferring to another college, that are more recognized in Acevedo-Gil’s college-*conocimiento* framework than in others.

**College Choice Process for First-Generation Latinx Students**

In this section of the literature review, I explore the intersectionality of Latinx and first-generation students in terms of their college choice process. As previously stated, there is no current college choice model that places first-generation students at the forefront. For that reason, in order to understand the college choice process of first-generation Latinx students, I use Acevedo-Gil’s (2017) Latinx college-*conocimiento* framework as it contains a focus on one of the two identities. However, as formerly noted, I integrated references from the literature in which the college choice process of first-generation students was considered. Figure 2 illustrates the seven stages as being non-linear. Acevedo-Gil “define[d] college-*conocimiento* as a serpentine process where Latinx students reflect on college information that they receive in relation to their intersectional experiences” (pp. 834–835). In the first stage, *El Arrebato*, aspirations to earn a bachelor’s degree are the main focus and deciding to pursue a postsecondary education is key (Acevedo-Gil, 2017). *Nepantla*, the second stage, is known as an in-between space that considers self-reflection and the limitations in society as students search for college information (Acevedo-Gil, 2017). In *Coatlicue*, which is indicative of the third stage, students consider their lived experiences in relation to the college information they receive to anticipate
college obstacles (Acevedo-Gil, 2017). The fourth stage is known as *El Compromiso* and is where individuals use their identity to organize a new reality, which is where students plan and apply for college (Acevedo-Gil, 2017). In the fifth stage, *Coyolxauhqui*, students review college admission letters and financial aid packages to make a choice on what college to attend (Acevedo-Gil, 2017). Cox (2016) had previously found reviewing admission and financial aid letters can occur at various times for underserved students, in particular, as these students can stop-out or transfer out while already in college and this choice process can happen all over again. “A clash of realities: entering and conflicting with college” (p. 842) is the sixth stage in which Acevedo-Gil (2017) considered the disappointments and conflicts Latinx students encounter at various points such as when the students are choosing a college sector to pursue, are accepted to college, and enter college. The final stage is called “Spiritual activism: self-advocacy and peer support,” which is where Latinx students use support from peers, family, and others to not only gain resources to be successful but also transform themselves (Acevedo-Gil, 2017, p. 843). An important consideration to make when evaluating the college-*conocimiento* framework for first-generation Latinx students is that college choice is considered a serpentine process because of the postsecondary interruptions these students are likely to experience, as the framework may not be linear (Acevedo-Gil, 2017; Bergerson, 2009; Cox, 2016). It is important to emphasize again that no current college choice model specifically focuses on first-generation college students and this is a gap I attempted to address by incorporating research on the college choice process of first-generation students.
First-Generation Latinx Students Deciding to Attend College

The following discussion contains a focus on the first few steps in Acevedo-Gil’s (2017) Latinx college-conocimiento framework as those steps provide an overview of the stages related to deciding to attend college and seeking, receiving, and navigating college information before the college selection is made. It includes other research related to first-generation and Latinx college access literature.
El Arrebato: Deciding to Attend College

Acevedo-Gil (2017) stated the first step in the college choice process for Latinx students is their decision to pursue a postsecondary education. For that positive decision to be made, aspiration is the most impactful factor for a Latinx student (Acevedo-Gil, 2017). For Latinx students, college aspiration is considered to be the hope of achieving a postsecondary education, which for these students is highly ingrained in their family’s educational ideology (Kiyama, 2010). Latinx parents typically have high educational aspirations for their children (McCallister et al., 2010). Furthermore, Latinx individuals have respect for their parents and desire their support (Barthelemy, 2017). First-generation Latinx parents, in particular, communicate that high value in education to their children and provide the support needed to maintain that mindset (Gonzalez et al., 2003; Pérez & McDonough 2008; Pérez et al., 2015; Yosso, 2005). Consequently, Latinx students refer to parents as their inspiration for pursuing a higher education (Gándara, 1995). This indicates Latinx students follow their parents and believe in the importance of an education. According to Bourdieu (1986), cultural capital refers to attributes such as language, cultural competency, and characteristics that are attributed by parental figures to determine class. This concept has been applied to the college choice process by denoting how cultural capital can place value on college attainment (Perna, 2006). For students, cultural capital can be beneficial to college access through the promotion of college-related behaviors and outcomes (McDonough, 1997). In this case, parents can be a powerful avenue in which to increase cultural capital though these values and aspirations. Yosso (2005) engaged in the idea that Latinx families bring cultural wealth to the values of racially minoritized students and this
cultural wealth should be used to optimize the success of these students rather than viewing them from a deficit lens. Rios-Aguilar and Kiyama (2012) focused on challenging the premise that Latinx students and parents require additional cultural capital and instead considered the funds of knowledge families bring to the table. Funds of knowledge are the skills and knowledge that have been culturally developed and can be used to empower individuals (Rios-Aguilar & Kiyama, 2012). Research shows families and communities, regardless of race, are critical in obtaining a higher education (Tierney, 2002). Tierney (2002) focused on exploring the role of cultural capital in encouraging or deterring parent involvement. Specifically, parents influence occupational and educational aspirations for the Latinx population (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Perna & Titus, 2005). Unlike Tierney, these former academic researchers focused on examining Latinx populations to understand the cultural capital parents bring to influence college aspirations. According to N. E. Hill and Torres (2010), although many Latinx students in high school have low academic outcomes, Latinx families have high hopes and aspirations for their children’s education. Hence, this strengthens the idea that family aspirations can be very powerful in encouraging higher education above other considerations. Additionally, first-generation students have high aspirations and motivation for obtaining a higher education because of their family beliefs in social mobility to be able to fulfill the American dream (N. E. Hill & Torres, 2010).

In addition to parents, institutional agents and factors can influence students’ aspirations. All students’ predispositions about college can also be affected by student-level characteristics such as social, culture, or economic characteristics, as well as their high school characteristics,
which include academic backgrounds and school characteristics/environment (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Nuñez & Kim, 2012). Consequently, first-generation racially minoritized students typically have inadequate resources in the college choice process, which results in a lack of aspiration for a postsecondary education (Dyce et al., 2013; Freeman, 1999; Gándara, 2002; Perna & Titus, 2005). Counselors and teachers can be highly influential in students’ aspiration and achievements (Adelman, 1999; McDonough, 1997, 2004). However, if racially minoritized students are in environments in which resources are not available, they will be negatively affected by external factors. It is important to note that in this stage, students do not consider obstacles and instead focus on envisioning the possibilities (Acevedo-Gil, 2017).

**Nepantla: Searching for College Information**

After deciding to attend college, in this stage, the student actively accepts college information and, depending on their environment, can receive an in-depth understanding of all postsecondary options or only gain information about one path (Acevedo-Gil, 2017). Although first-generation and Latinx parents tend to inform students’ aspirations and help students discern a college choice, these students are less likely to rely on parents without a college degree as information sources; rather, they depend on the school context or high school college counselors for resources and information (Ceja, 2000; Jarsky et al., 2009; McDonough, 1997). School counselors and high school agents have the ability to use their knowledge to provide college readiness counseling, which is critical in increasing access for underrepresented populations (Hurley & Coles, 2015). However, as Acevedo-Gil (2017) noted, many factors hinder first-generation racially minoritized students from receiving the high school support they deserve,
including, but not limited to, a lack of resources, being understaffed, sharing information too late in the planning stage, having low expectations for students, and presenting singular or specific pathways versus all the options. Perna et al. (2008) stated many contextual constraints hinder college counseling in high schools, such as the availability of counselors, school influences, lack of fiscal resources, state financial aid policies, and relationships with higher education institutions.

Regardless of high school institutional agents being able to share college information, recent research has put a higher emphasis on students’ search for college information from their social networks. In particular, first-generation Latinx students use their social networks, such as siblings, peers, extended relatives, and high school contacts, for information and, therefore, follow in their footsteps to make a college choice (Pérez & McDonough, 2008). Compared to all other racial groups, Latinx students are the most influenced in their college choice by their peers (Nuñez et al., 2008). Pérez and McDonough (2008) researched Latinx students from a regional area and found first-generation Latinx students were more likely to rely on siblings, peers, relatives, and high school contacts for planning, considering, and applying to college. Yosso (2005) considered the network and community resources found within social capital and found them to be a benefit to the students. Other resources first-generation Latinx students use are the college institutional agents who at times provide misleading or incomplete information to marginalized populations (Bailey et al., 2001). Students who take advantage of college outreach and bridge programs have more access to college information (Pérez et al., 2015). However, Swail (2000) found these programs only serve 10% of the first-generation student population and
so this population is less likely to take advantage of these opportunities. Updated national research will improve the understanding of how first-generation students take advantage of these types of programs. Acevedo-Gil (2017) indicated that in this stage, Latinx students tend to receive conflicting information, which means they engage in both this stage and the next stage as they begin to face college obstacles.

**Coatlicue: Anticipating College Obstacles**

In the third stage, students assess the information received and evaluate whether they will “be admitted to college, belong in college, and succeed in college” (Acevedo-Gil, 2017, p. 839). Anzaldúa (2002) described the *Coatlicue* stage as an individual trying to decipher among multiple worlds and cultures; with the new information received, this can be difficult but the individual typically then engages in discomfort in considering obstacles. Acevedo-Gil (2017) took into consideration academic information and financial aid information when students contemplate obstacles. When negotiating academic information, students’ past experiences can have a large influence on their personal confidence to be successful in college (Acevedo-Gil, 2017). Literature shows the educational context can be a large influencer of confidence. For example, students who have received negative support from their educational institutions are more likely to question their ability to be successful in college in terms of their academics (Pérez et al., 2015). For instance, counselors are known for often limiting academic progress by having low expectations of students (Vela-Gude et al., 2009) that may be internalized by the students in their academic potential (Acevedo-Gil, 2017). An example of this outcome is that racially minoritized students who feel they have low academic abilities are likely to apply to fewer
colleges (Hurtado et al., 1997; Perna, 2000). Gibbons and Borders (2010) found first-generation students report lower college-going expectations because of low self-efficacy. Therefore, first-generation Latinx students begin to engage in considering academic obstacles based on past experiences or influences, and this influences their college choice process.

When negotiating financial aid information, many Latinx students consider the cost of college and financial aid packages (Acevedo-Gil, 2017). The majority of first-generation Latinx student belong to a lower socioeconomic population (Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Pascarella et al., 2004), and paying for college is a main consideration (Pérez et al., 2015). In particular, Vega (2018) researched the college choice process of first-generation Latinx transfer students and found finances affected their college choices. Because Latinx students are more likely to have to take out loans to attend a 4-year university, they tend to choose to attend a 2-year institution regardless of academic potential or aspiration (Muñoz & Rincon, 2015).

However, during the college application process, the number of applications submitted is not significantly related to income or finances (Hurtado et al., 1997; Long, 2004; Perna, 2000); hence, students tend not to consider finances during the application process. Once financial aid packages are received, counselors and other institutional support resources can help low-income students understand the typically confusing information to make a more educated decision, though a lack of access to college counselors limits the ability to receive financial guidance (McDonough & Calderone, 2006). Perna (2006) indicated the benefits and costs are considered within the college choice process and for first-generation Latinx students the costs can be an obstacle (Acevedo-Gil, 2017).
To further consider the obstacles some Latinx and first-generation students may face, it is important to take into account that 65,000 undocumented students graduate from high school each year (Passel, 2006). Less than 10% go to college or attend a higher education institution (Gonzales, 2016). In addition, these students are more likely to enroll in a community college compared to their peers (Flores, 2010). Unfortunately, some undocumented students typically do not learn about their citizen status until they are about to apply for college and this surprise leads to increased levels of stress (Gonzales, 2016; Gonzales & Chavez, 2012; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2011). This specific group of students encounters many additional obstacles related to financial, legal, and social issues in accessing a higher education (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015). It has been noted that undocumented students inhabit a state of “ambiguous belonging” (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2011, p. 444). This causes a heightened amount of anxiety, stress, trauma, and fear among undocumented students during the college choice process.

**El Compromiso: Planning for and Applying to College**

In the fourth stage, the student assesses information and obstacles considered to determine their college choice (Acevedo-Gil, 2017). Acevedo-Gil (2017) considered this stage as planning and then actually applying to college. As students are planning, they reflect on their experiences with receiving college information (Acevedo-Gil, 2017). Latinx students tend to make college choices after reflecting on their identity within the school system (Fernández, 2002). They connect their experiences of receiving college information to their personal identity and context, which is described as the first layer of habitus within Perna’s (2006) college choice model. This reflection enables students to consider their intersecting identities. For example,
migrant students are also considered racially minoritized students in education and tend to have a deficit outlook, and yet internalize the possibility of pursuing a higher education (Gibson & Hidalgo, 2009). Prospective first-generation college students demonstrate lower self-efficacy and more perceived barriers in attending college than do those not considered first-generation students (Gibbons & Borders, 2010). McDonough and Calderone (2006) discussed how counselors can influence students to consider certain types of schools over others because of their belief of fit, expectations of the students’ academic success, or certain identities the students possess. For example, Hart and Gray (1992) found counselors are less likely to recommend rigorous academic institutions to low-income racially minoritized students. Conversely, Gibson and Hidalgo (2009) discovered that when Latinx students received college guidance from Latinx counselors who challenged them to believe in themselves, they were more likely to see college as a possibility. Moreover, students tend to revert to their support group to gain motivation to continue their plans amidst any obstacles. Latinx students, in particular, focus on how their higher education will serve as an example for their family and community (Rendon et al., 2014). Acevedo-Gil (2017) acknowledged that because Latinx students constantly revisit the information received and reflect on their experiences as they submit college applications, this stage is not static.

**First-Generation Latinx Students Choosing a College**

The second part of the discussion relates to the second half of the steps in Acevedo-Gil’s Latinx college-*conocimiento* framework as they provide an overview of the college selection that is made. The focus in this section is on the college choice selection of first-generation Latinx
students. It is important to understand that the college-conocimiento framework for Latinx students presents the college choice process as a serpentine process because of the postsecondary interruptions they are likely to face (Acevedo-Gil, 2017; Bergerson, 2009; Cox, 2016) that cause some of these students to make a college choice more than once. In Acevedo-Gil’s (2017) framework, the college choice process does not end at selecting a college to attend, it follows the students through engaging in college and therefore applies to students who may consider dropping out or transferring. The selection process may happen multiple times and, unlike many frameworks, this model is inclusive of diverse college selections. The second part of the section focuses on the second half of the steps in Acevedo-Gil’s Latinx college-conocimiento framework as those are the ones that represent when college selections are made.

*Coyolxauhqui: Choosing a College*

During the fifth stage, students receive admission letters and begin to develop their college student identity by making a choice (Acevedo-Gil, 2017). At this stage, students revert to the *Nepantla* stage as they consider all information regarding admission and financing a higher education (Acevedo-Gil, 2017). Although there are various factors that influence the information Latinx students receive and the choice they make, family and community are key to the college choices of these students (Pérez & McDonough, 2008). Therefore, to make a choice, they will consider their family, siblings, peers, and community members. Finances and the means to afford college are familial topics that are highly regarded as deciding factors for most racially minoritized students (McDonough & Calderone, 2006). For first-generation students, the academic quality of the college has been shown to be more influential, followed by their
socioeconomic status (Cho et al., 2008). There is a lack of research surrounding the influences for individuals who identify as both first-generation and Latinx students.

To further understand how and why first-generation Latinx students make their decisions, it is important to review the choices they make. According to the data, about 27% of Latinx students are also first-generation college students (Redford & Mulvaney Hoyer, 2017). Research with first-generation students shows about 46% of these students attend public 2-year institutions, 26% attend public 4-year institutions, and the rest enroll in private nonprofits, for-profits, or other colleges (Cataldi et al., 2018). Latinx students represent a smaller percentage of students enrolling in postsecondary institutions in comparison to White students (College Board, 2011; Hurley & Coles, 2015; Marisco & Getch, 2009). There are many reasons why Latinx students do not enroll in postsecondary institutions, including, but not limited to, “affordability, family and work obligations, and lack of information about financial aid and college life” (Liu, 2011, p. 4). For the most part, these are the reasons most Latinx students choose to attend a public 2-year institution. In fact, 58% of Latinx students enroll in a 2-year institution and, therefore, this is considered a point of access for Latinx students (Liu, 2011). Moreover, research shows certain Latinx students choose to attend less selective institutions with high dropout rates (Pérez & McDonough, 2008; Swail et al., 2004). For example, Nuñez et al. (2008) found Mexican American students tend to enroll in less selective schools compared to other Latinx subgroups. This showcases that the choices of Latinx students tend to be less than informed and more focused on the possibility versus considering their abilities. However, it is important to note that seeing a counselor increases the probability of attending a college over not attending at
all (Belasco, 2013; Robinson & Roksa, 2016). Moreover, for Latinx students and not for Whites, the likelihood that they will attend a 4-year institution or community college over not at all attending increases by discussing college-related topics with a counselor (Riegle-Crumb, 2010; Robinson & Roksa, 2016). Because most Latinx students’ parents do not have a college education, counselors often fill in for the parent role. Because of this important distinction, the literature review includes an examination of the role of the high school counselor in the college choice process.

However, before moving into the role of the counselor, it is important to understand the rest of the college choice process. This college choice stage enables students to reflect on their choices, so even after choosing a college, students can go through this stage again if they find they did not receive adequate guidance or made a wrong choice and choose a transfer path (Acevedo-Gil, 2017). This flexibility makes this framework versatile and realistic for this specific population. Iloh (2018) also considered this cycle of choices in comparison to the current generation and stated restricting the framework to one choice is a limited way of understanding the college-going process.

A Clash of Realities: Conflicts With College

In the sixth stage, the individual can encounter disappointments with college as they test their college choice (Acevedo-Gil, 2017). What makes this model so useful for underserved populations, such as first-generation Latinx students, is that it is not static. For example, this stage does not have to occur only after being accepted to college; instead, this stage can occur throughout the college choice stages and beyond (Acevedo-Gil, 2017). The following examples
are presented to describe how a student can face a clash of reality throughout the college choice process. One example is when racially minoritized students are guided away from a 4-year institution because of their perceived socioeconomic status (McDonough & Calderone, 2006). Before an enrollment choice even occurs, the student faces a clash of reality because of their lack of appropriate guidance due to social injustice. Another example is when a “student encounters academic, financial, and social conflicts” (Acevedo-Gil, 2017, p. 842). Latinx students tend to face these postsecondary interruptions (Cox, 2016), which causes them to have the highest rate of reverse-transfers, meaning they go from a 4-year to a 2-year institution (Ruiz Alvarado, 2014), or if they chose a community college in the first place, they have a high number of stop-outs, also known as taking breaks from college enrollment (Solórzano et al., 2013). First-generation students also tend to face difficult transitions into and throughout college that involve academics and facing different social cultures (Terenzini et al., 2018). Results of one study showed most first-generation students who dropped out of college felt they did not belong in the institution because of the unique challenges they faced related to social mobility and class (Ward et al., 2012). Hurtado and Carter (1997) studied Latino students and found those who experienced supported academic and social transitions in college perceived feeling a sense of belonging or of feeling welcomed on campus. These conflicts and clashes can cause students to go through the college-conocimiento college choice model various times over the course of their lives. Acevedo-Gil’s (2017) goal was not to create an unrealistic and stagnant college choice model but to develop a model that can include the various pathways Latinx students consider. For underserved students, such as first-generation Latinx students, Anzaldúa (2002) denoted those in
a stage such as this one are confronted with conflict because they face something from outside of their culture that blocks them from using their authentic self to move forward.

**Spiritual Activism: Self-Advocacy and Peer Support**

In the last stage within the college choice process for Latinx students, self-advocacy and supporting other peers in the process enable students to “bridge their aspirations with expectations while simultaneously seeking and offering resources” (Acevedo-Gil, 2017, p. 843). Again, this stage does not have to be experienced only after being accepted to college but can be used throughout the college-conocimiento choice process when a student is self-advocating and seeking help or resources (Acevedo-Gil, 2017). This stage is new to the understanding of the college choice process for any student but is very useful in understanding the college choice of Latinx and other marginalized students as it includes the idea of the importance of using a community for cultural wealth and resources (Yosso, 2005). Espinoza (2011) described how essential it is for educators to motivate underserved students to become self-advocates and use help-seeking behaviors to improve access. Byrd and MacDonald (2005) found first-generation students were college-ready if they were able to speak up and ask for help. Moreover, this stage amplifies the importance of internal transformation (Acevedo-Gil, 2017), which has yet to be researched further in the topic of college choice and in particular for racially minoritized populations. However, some research showed how Latinx students, in particular, are inspired during their college choice process by guiding and helping their peers and future generations in their community (Rendon et al., 2014). This assertion is supported by previous research presented that showed how peers and community members are essential in influencing first-
generation Latinx students in their college choice (Nuñez et al., 2008; Pérez & McDonough, 2008). Acevedo-Gil (2017) called this stage “spiritual activism” as it requires “outward actions” (p. 843) to support each other in the Latinx community as a push for social justice within the college choice process of marginalized populations. For this reason, I believe it is important to further research all the support networks first-generation Latinx students access in this process. In particular, I shift the focus to the role of the high school counselor in supporting these students in their college choice process.

**Role of High School Counselors in College Choice**

Counselors are vital in addressing the inequalities that prevent students from transitioning to college (McKillip et al., 2012). Therefore, for the purpose of this section, I use Perna’s (2006) college choice model to frame the involvement of high school counselors within the college choice process. Though many other models include a consideration of counselors as influences and involved in college choices, I chose Perna’s college choice model to organize the research as it is the most updated model that is inclusive of socioeconomic status and race/ethnicity. It is important to note that in order to cover the most research, I explore the role of the high school counselor through the much larger context of working with racially minoritized students. However, any significant research related to the first-generation or Latinx demographic is included in this literature review. For example, Acevedo-Gil’s (2017) college-conocimiento college choice framework for Latinx students provides an in-depth understanding of Latinx students and when counselors are included in this framework it is noted in this section. Overall, Acevedo-Gil noted counselors act as agents for fostering college aspirations, being key sources
of college information, affecting the negotiation of information, helping with the application process and providing direction in choosing a college, and supporting the self-advocacy of Latinx students. In review, in this section I use Perna’s model to organize the research regarding counselor involvement at each stage as a means of understanding how high school counselors are involved in the higher education college choice process.

The Habitus Context

Counselors as Contributors to Social Capital

Perna (2006) described social capital, in the context of college choice, as the relationship that helps with the sharing of college information and assistance with the college process. Perna focused on the sociological construct of social capital and how it influences college choice. For example, social capital represents the resources that assist in enhancing productivity or upward mobility (Coleman, 1988; DiMaggio & Mohr, 1985). The ability to gain access to these resources and support is dependent on social networks and connections (Morrow, 1999). Though Coleman (1988) focused on the social capital between children and their parents and parents and other adults, Bourdieu (1986) concentrated on the networks needed to obtain social capital and the stratification that exists between social classes. Other barriers that exist in obtaining social capital include race/ethnicity, gender, and other marginalized identities (Dika & Singh, 2002). However, social capital can be increased through college information. “The availability of the types of social capital that promote college choice may be manifested through information about college and assistance from school officials with college-choice processes” (Perna, 2006, p. 139).
Strong college choice models are those that include sociological notions of culture and social capital (Perna, 2000).

According to Perna and Jones (2013), parents are the most influential in association with college outcomes. For Latinx students enrolled in undergraduate education, 27% are first-generation (Redford & Mulvaney Hoyer, 2017), meaning their parents never attended college (Gardner, 2005). Hence, their parents’ understanding of college is minimal, they have no networks, and they receive little guidance from parents (Ceja, 2004; Gardner, 2005). This showcases an inequality in social capital among racially minoritized students compared to racially/ethnically-privileged individuals (Gándara, 2002). However, although many Latinx parents do not know about college information, they can use the social capital that is offered to them in their social context. In this context, counselors can create relationships with parents and their children to offer college information and guidance (Hurley & Coles, 2015). Institutional agents, such as counselors, can provide access to information and resources for college (Acevedo-Gil, 2017; Perna, 2006; Stanton-Salazar, 1997, 2011). In particular, Farmer-Hinton (2008) found a strong connection between students of color using school guidance counseling to help inform their college decisions. By analyzing social capital frameworks against focus group transcripts, Farmer-Hinton discovered the school-based supports senior students of color used in their college preparation. Counselor–student contact for college information, as social capital, is a significant predictor of applying to college (Bryan et al., 2011; Robinson & Roksa, 2016). Research focused on Latinx high school seniors has shown counselors are crucial in providing these students with college information, guidance, and opportunities (Bryan et al., 2011;
Therefore, counselors play a vital role in the college choice process as the main transmitters of college information.

**Counselors as Contributors to Cultural Capital**

According to Bourdieu (1986), cultural capital refers to attributes such as language, cultural competency, and characteristics that are attributed by parental figures to determine class. Cultural capital is demonstrated through cultural knowledge and the value placed on college attainment (Perna, 2006). For students, cultural capital can be beneficial in helping them with college access through the promotion of college-related behaviors and outcomes (McDonough, 1997). For Latinx students, it is especially important to have cultural knowledge and value placed on college attainment to be able to adequately affect the college decision-making processes (Perna, 2000). Yet, according to research, students of color often do not have this knowledge because of the social class to which they belong (Nora, 2004). It is thought that cultural capital can be learned and taught to marginalized students through increased engagement (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Tierney, 1999). Counselors can be vital in teaching cultural capital by connecting to and understanding their students’ cultures. Tello and Lonn (2017) found high school and college counselors can support first-generation Latinx students through addressing their psychosocial and emotional needs.

Counseling professionals can be highly effective at positively influencing students’ aspiration and achievements (Acevedo-Gil, 2017; Adelman, 1999; McDonough, 1997, 2004). According to Acevedo-Gil’s (2017) college-*conocimiento* college choice framework for Latinx students, counselors help students gain aspirations to earn a bachelor’s degree by helping them
gain confidence. Within this stage, Latinx and first-generation students find counselors are important in reassuring students they are capable of graduating from college (Choy et al., 2000; Pérez & McDonough, 2008). Unfortunately, research has demonstrated counselors have low expectations of students at times (Vela-Gude et al., 2009). It is possible for expectations to be based on the background characteristics and identities of students (Corwin et al., 2004; Vela-Gude et al., 2009). Perna (2006) noted that in order for someone to shape the cultural knowledge of college, they must know the student’s culture and demographic characteristics.

According to Rosas and Hamrick (2002), counselors must be aware of how first-generation Latinx students negotiate conflicting familial values in planning their higher education. *Familismo* is a term in Spanish that relates to the expectation that Latinx individuals will put the needs of family before their own needs (Valenzuela & Dornbusch, 1994). Above all, counselors should understand that Latinx parents typically have high educational aspirations for their children (McCallister et al., 2010). Therefore, they should consider building relationships with students’ parents in order to promote that aspiration. Finally, Eckenrod-Green and Culbreth (2008) found students reported a need for counselors to speak Spanish in order to be able to communicate with parents. Providing Latinx parents with information on college and financial aid in Spanish can improve access (Castillo et al., 2010; Marisco & Getch, 2009; Tierney & Auerbach, 2005). In order to service the needs of all students, counselors should be culturally responsive by developing cultural knowledge and placing value on college attainment (Arredondo et al., 2014; C. Lee, 2001).
The School and Community Context

Within the college choice model, the school and community context refers to the way in which social structures, such as schools, assist with resources to aid students in their college choice (Perna, 2006). Perna (2006) specifically described this context with available resources as well as structural supports and barriers. In particular, research shows school guidance through the quantity and quality of information influences college choice (McDonough, 1997). School counselors have the ability to use their knowledge to provide college readiness counseling, which is critical to underrepresented populations, such as first-generation Latinx students, to increase access (Hurley & Coles, 2015; McDonough, 2005). First-generation students are more likely to use institutional support agents, such as high school counselors, for guidance (Jarsky et al., 2009).

However, though research shows assisting Latinx students can be challenging for counselors because of the diverse cultures they uphold (Martinez, 2013), the greatest challenge is found within the inadequate structure of resources and supports offered in the school and community contexts (Dyce et al., 2013; Freeman, 1999; Gándara, 2002; Perna & Titus, 2005). The limited resources available to counselors make it difficult for them to be effective. For example, the limited resources that exist in urban schools in particular affect the ability for counselors to be available to students (Pérez & Ceja, 2015). According to Rogers et al. (2010), most Latinx-majority schools are understaffed. A lack of sufficient personnel or the multitude of tasks counselors must perform prevent counselors from providing the intensive college counseling needed by these students in the college planning and application phase (Hurley &
Coles, 2015). Matthay (1989) shared that only 16% of the students interviewed consulted their high school counselors about their college choice because the counselors were overworked and not informed. Matthay distributed 181 questionnaires to first-year college students to understand the resources that were most helpful in making a college decision. Unfortunately, this study is outdated. However, Martinez (2013) emphasized that with the various roles school counselors take on, including emotional counseling and course planning support, it is no surprise that time devoted to aiding students in their postsecondary plans has diminished. Counselors are more known for their psychological roles and, therefore, are not asked about college information (McDonough, 1997; Perna et al., 2008; Rowe, 1989). Students of color and students from low-income families are more likely to attend schools with high student–counselor ratios, which only further hinders their access to counselors (Hart & Gray, 1992; McDonough, 1997). For instance, results of one study showed Latinx students felt their counselors were completely inaccessible (Vela-Gude et al., 2009). According to the American Counseling Association (2011), the maximum recommended student-to-counselor ratio is 250:1 and yet, the current U.S. average is 457:1. Studies have shown lower student-to-counselor ratios provide better college preparation (McDonough, 1997, 2004). Without adequate quality time with counselors, first-generation Latinx students are unable to receive the resources they need to positively affect their college choice.

Another issue to consider is how efficient the school structure is for supporting first-generation Latinx students in their college choice process. For example, most high schools use the structured process of college linking to help students prepare, apply, and select a college (L.
D. Hill, 2008). This process is broken down into three different processes that are prescribed to certain schools depending on the available support structures and resources. For example, a school with a large student population and a high student-to-counselor ratio would use the traditional process in which basic college information is shared to the mass population but no follow-up is given (L. D. Hill, 2008). Conversely, the process that is most useful is called brokering, which is to provide resources and ensure resources are used, is only possible in schools with small student-to-counselor ratios. The third process is called clearinghouse and it is when information is funneled to recipients but it depends on the students to use the resources (L. D. Hill, 2008). There are many reasons why a certain process is used and it all depends on the type of school. L. D. Hill (2008) found strategies varied depending on the different racial/ethnic backgrounds in high schools. Engberg and Wolniak (2009) researched distinct pathways in college choice and stated the pathway is different depending on the racial group and other sociological perspectives. They also argued for the need to move away from using a single process (Engberg & Wolniak, 2009), as one-size-fits-all does not work for everyone.

Unfortunately, when counselors choose to use a single process, this causes them to become gatekeepers. “Gatekeeping means discouraging certain students from attending college but encouraging others, while the college-for-all approach refers to lukewarmly encouraging all students towards college” (McKillip et al., 2012, p. 53). Sometimes, within a school context, counselors are forced to disseminate information selectively because of the lack of resources or their own discriminatory practices (Hart & Gray, 1992) and, therefore, counselors become gatekeepers of college information (Liou et al., 2009; Rosenbaum et al., 1996; Stanton-Salazar,
For instance, counselors are likely to recommend general or vocational postsecondary education versus rigorous academic institutions to low-income racially minoritized students based on their personal ideologies of what these students can do (Hart & Gray, 1992; McDonough, 1997). Early research portrayed counselors negatively and indicated they advised based on social class by sorting higher socioeconomic status students into the college path (Robinson & Roksa, 2016). Current research paints counselors in a much more positive light; however, their effects, whether negative or positive, should be further investigated to understand their role. Those who have high academic potential but because of circumstance or guidance gain lower aspirations are considered talent loss (Plank & Jordan, 2011). Perna (2006) shared that depending on the school context, the student can either gain an in-depth understanding of all postsecondary education options or only receive one pathway as an option. Latinx and underserved individuals typically only consider the choices that are presented to them (Acevedo-Gil, 2017). However, it has been noted that for Latinx students, a counselor’s high expectations can lead to very successful outcomes (Davidson-Aviles et al., 1999). Acevedo-Gil (2015) stated institutional agents can either steer Latinx students away from 4-year institutions with the notion that the work will be too difficult or propel them toward such a choice.

**The Higher Education Context**

The higher education context within the college choice model refers to the role higher education institutions play in shaping students’ college choice (Perna, 2006). Higher education institutions provide information to students and their families about postsecondary options (McDonough et al., 1997). This form of recruitment is specifically seen through marketing
efforts that are focused on geographical location (Chapman, 1981). Unfortunately, there is little updated information on recruitment strategies and how they influence racially minoritized students in their college choice. This is a gap in the literature that must be addressed. However, Perna (2006) focused on the need for students to align with the characteristics of their institutional choice. Nora (2004) stated students want to be at colleges they feel connect with their personal characteristics and identities in order to gain acceptance and support. Much of the research regarding the higher education context only included counselors as contributors. The following presentation of research showcases how counselors who support Latinx or underrepresented students, such as first-generation, are not considered in the research.

Although counselors do not specifically assist leaders of higher education institutions with their marketing or recruitment, they assist recruiters in making connections with students through such actions as the creation of college fairs. Research shows college fairs provide students with the opportunity to learn about different types of college options (Hurley & Coles, 2015). Little research exists on how counselors can be narrowing or widening the options for students, in particular first-generation Latinx students, through who they invite to college fairs or by connecting students to representatives. The only research that can be connected to this idea is that counselors guide students to determine the institutions they feel they have a fit with and to which they apply (Pérez & Ceja, 2015). Pérez and Ceja (2015) stated it is important for counselors to help students understand and choose a good institutional fit in order to increase the likelihood of retention and graduation. It is important to denote that Pérez and Ceja highlighted the idea that institutional recruitment strategies can convince Latinx students and families to
choose an institution regardless of fit and no mention was made as to whether counselors can do anything about this issue.

However, when recruitment strategies are not present, counselors have the opportunity to shape the college choice of underserved students by being innovative in their approaches to supporting students (Nienhusser, 2013). Counselors are recommended to be advocates for their students; they should affirm potential and the possibilities they see in their students to teachers, administrators, the community, and admission representatives (Acevedo-Gil, 2017; Hart & Gray, 1992). Some counselors advocate for students through recommendation letters to admissions representatives as a way to strengthen their opportunities. The need for counselors to act as social justice advocates is imperative to improving college access (Decker et al., 2016). Though the higher education context is only dedicated to how colleges affect the college choice process, it is important to validate that counselors influence the recruitment and institutional characteristics students consider, and thus this should be researched further.

**The Social, Economic, and Policy Context**

Perna (2006) outlined that the college choice process is shaped within social, economic, and policy contexts. The social context includes demographic characteristics of the population, the economic context considers the population’s financial stability, and the policy context includes the policies that discourage or encourage a college choice (Perna, 2006). Within the social context, research has been conducted to understand how the demographic characteristics of students have affected or influenced enrollment. According to Pérez and McDonough (2008), Latinx students are highly influenced by their surroundings and those in their environment. In
their study, 106 high school juniors and seniors were interviewed individually and in focus groups and results showed Latinx students who identified as first-generation students were likely to rely on siblings, peers, relatives, and high school contacts (Pérez & McDonough, 2008). This study explicitly detailed this finding for Latinx students who also identified as first-generation. A report that focused on college counseling for Latinx students detailed independent variables such as school size, average socioeconomic status, and the rigor of the high school curriculum as having the ability to affect college choice (Hurley & Coles, 2015). In relation to counselors, school characteristics can shape counseling practices and college enrollment numbers (Hurley & Coles, 2015). Counselors can play a role in influencing Latinx students by reflecting on college aspirations, anticipating obstacles, discovering fears, and developing a plan to apply (Acevedo-Gil, 2017).

Within the economic context, research has been conducted regarding how a student’s family income affects the college choice process. When it comes to college enrollment, family income is consistently an important factor, in particular for Latinx students (Baum et al., 2013). One report focused on the benefits of higher education and highlighted how family income correlates with college enrollment (Baum et al., 2013). Martinez (2013) interviewed five secondary school counselors and found socioeconomic status was a major factor that shaped the first-generation Latinx college choice process. McDonough and Calderone (2006) recommended counselors gain an understanding of affordability through the perspectives of their students and parents and bring awareness to these families about the cost and benefits. For first-generation students, it is imperative that counselors are proactive in providing assistance for students and
families to understand financial aid award letters, providing other forms of financial support such as scholarship applications, and helping parents plan for their financial stability earlier (Hurley & Coles, 2015). Acevedo-Gil (2017) stated Latinx students do not consider economic costs until they receive their admission letters.

Finally, the public policy context includes more than just financial aid policies that affect college enrollment (Perna, 2006). Cunningham (2002) detailed a report that overviewed the policies that affect college choice and affirmative action influences on enrollment based on race. However, policy goes past the political ties to the higher education admission processes. Perna and Titus (2004) suggested K-12 education policies should be evaluated to consider whether and how they affect college enrollment. For example, “Academic readiness is influenced by the structures and contexts in which students are embedded” (Perna & Jones, 2013, p. 19). Typically, underserved students have inferior K-12 school experiences. For example, in reviewing college access trends for Latinx students, Zarate and Burciaga (2010) highlighted that Latinx students have less prepared teachers and counselors, more improvised facilities, and a lack of college preparation. Academic preparedness, which relies on the policies and procedures in place within K-12 schools, is influenced by grades and test score results, which affect college choice options. One example of this is academic tracking, a policy that influences racially minoritized students because it denies them access to the curricula and guidance needed for successful postsecondary education (Gamoran, 2010; Hart & Gray, 1992). Gamoran (2010) identified tracking as an inequality in education and presented new recommendations to improve practices, such as raising standards for low-achieving students. Decker et al. (2016) created strategies for
counselors to become advocates for their students and to battle injustices like tracking. Though research within the public policy context has included analyses of how some educational policies may influence the college choice process, it would be beneficial to focus specifically on how counselor policies affect the college choice process and how counselors can help combat these issues.

**Summary**

In order to best serve marginalize populations, such as first-generation Latinx individuals, in their college choice it is important to understand their college choice process, selection, and consider their supports, such as counselors (McKillip et al., 2012). Therefore, in this literature review I investigated the college choice process models that exist, the choices and selections of first-generation Latinx students, and the role of the high school counselor in the college choice process of these students. This literature review highlighted the development of various college choice models and showed Perna’s (2006) college choice model is most inclusive of all identities. In addition, Acevedo-Gil’s (2017) framework is most useful in understanding the college choice of Latinx students. Unfortunately, no college choice model expands on the understanding of first-generation students specifically and literature was integrated to understand both intersecting identities.

I used Acevedo-Gil’s (2017) college-conocimiento college choice framework for Latinx students to organize and present all related research regarding the college choice process and selection of first-generation Latinx students. First, first-generation Latinx students must decide to attend college and parents and the community play an important factor in influencing this
aspiration. Second, because first-generation students do not have parents who attended college, their search for college information must come from high school, community, and peer resources. Third, Acevedo-Gil acknowledged Latinx students face various obstacles and therefore, it is important for this population to anticipate for and prepare for all the diverse issues they face in their college choice process. Fourth, when planning and applying to college, personal and school identity truly influence this population. Fifth, when actually choosing a college, parents, community, and finances are key to making a choice. Sixth, first-generation Latinx students face various conflicts in their college choice process and this is something they continuously encounter. Seventh, to overcome these conflicts, personal advocacy and community support are not only useful but essential to the success of this population. Finally, the college choice process for most first-generation Latinx students is realistically more continuous as they face many injustices, conflicts, and transitions in their pursuit of a higher education. Acevedo-Gils’s goal with their framework was to not only inform theory but to also consider practical future implications for policies, secondary counseling, and postsecondary enrollment for Latinx students. The college choice of Latinx students is most influenced by their peers and community (Nuñez et al., 2008). With such an emphasis on the importance of parents, family, peers, and the community, it is important to reevaluate how these students are supported and who is invited to the conversation to support them; therefore, in this literature review I also focused on the role of the high school counselor in the college choice process for this population.

By evaluating how counselors are framed in Perna’s (2006) college choice model and support first-generation Latinx students, it was valuable to discover the strengths and
shortcomings of how counselors support students. The literature showed counselors are present in most of the layers within Perna’s college choice model. Within the habitus context, counselors use social and cultural capital to create relationships in which they share college information and assist in college guidance. In the school and community context, there are limited resources and organizational structures that hinder effective counseling for this population. The higher education context research did not consider how counselors play a role in aiding higher education recruitment and this is something that should be further researched. Finally, counselors can affect the college choice process as it relates to finances but implications for further research include focusing on their role within the social and policy contexts. According to Acevedo-Gil’s (2017) college-conocimiento framework, the counselor’s role is framed at most stages; however, within the negotiation and choosing stage, the role of the counselor can be positive or negative.

The largest limitation in this literature review was that most research did not take into account the intersection of both first-generation and Latinx identities explicitly. As previously stated, it cannot be assumed that all Latinx students are first-generation students. Although a good number are, most research did not include this distinction (J. J. Lee et al., 2004). Therefore, in this literature review I included research for both identities separately and noted where they overlapped. Research for both identities intersected at support systems such as high school counselors. School counselors play an essential role in helping these students access postsecondary education (Hurley & Coles, 2015; McDonough, 2004). It is fundamental to understand how counselors are framed in existing models as this is how we can continue to examine how they are involved and engaged in improving their practice of serving first-
generation Latinx students in their college choice process and selection. Unfortunately, there is a lack of updated research regarding this area, which led to my decision to continue to explore the college choice process for first-generation Latinx students and their support systems.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Qualitative Research Rationale

In this research study, I used a phenomenological approach to data collection and analysis. “Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 6). I chose qualitative research as it is the best way in which to make meaning of others’ experiences and take into consideration their specific environments (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). I focused on considering the specific environment of each student as they may have been different and it is important not to make assumptions across individuals’ experiences. One of the main characteristics of qualitative research is the attempt to focus on meaning and understanding in a particular context (Patton, 2015). This was specifically important for my study, as the focus was on understanding the college choice process and experiences of first-generation Latinx students.

Moreover, qualitative research is known for the use of an inductive process that requires the researcher to gather data and build theories from the data versus deducing theories from testing a hypothesis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). In this study, I used an inductive process to explore all the data collected to gain a better understanding of how first-generation Latinx students make meaning of their college choice process. Finally, qualitative research is known
for being richly descriptive (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The purpose of this study was to bring forth the rich experiences of this racially minoritized population with this specific topic. Therefore, it was valuable to gain in-depth descriptions of participants’ experiences in the college choice process in order to develop meaningful results.

**Phenomenological Approach Rationale**

From among the many types of qualitative research methods I could have applied to this study, I chose a phenomenological approach as the most appropriate for understanding the experiences of this particular population and how they made sense of those experiences. Philosophically, phenomenology contains a focus on how experiencing a specific event or thing is transformed into consciousness (Moustakas, 1994). Therefore, a phenomenological study is characterized by a researcher wanting to gain a further understanding of a “lived experience” (Van Manen, 2016 p. 26). “Phenomenology is the way of access to the world as we experience it prereflectively” (Van Manen, 2016 p. 28). Patton (2015) stated phenomenological researchers analyze and compare different experiences to identify the essence of the phenomenon. The task of a researcher using this method is to depict the essence of an experience (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Lichtman (2006) described the importance of examining the lived experiences of participants with a common phenomenon to find a common essence of that experience. Vagle (2018) explained the importance of intentionality in order to discover how people find meaning in their connectedness with the world. Husserl (1962) depicted the importance of finding the pure essence of a phenomenon by having the researcher suspend their own judgments. For the
purpose of this study, I used transcendental or descriptive phenomenology to suspend my own judgments and focus on the pure essence of the phenomenon (Husserl, 1962; Peoples, 2020).

It is important to note that I did not choose to follow a strict phenomenological methodology for this study. The most major critique of phenomenology relates to its focus on a Western male philosopher’s perspective (Sheets-Johnstone, 2000). I believed this directed and binary methodology would not account for the social and collective experiences that may have influenced a participant’s meaning. The foundational structure of a phenomenological study would have been limiting and rigid to my study of a population that is heavily researched to consider social and collective experiences as their own. The first-generation Latinx population is most known for their community engagement and strict phenomenological methods require a dissociation of social experiences to understand the specific experience of an individual. Hence, I decided not to use stringent phenomenological methods but rather an approach to phenomenology that would allow for inclusivity of my participants and their stories, which may have included their community as a collective.

A theoretical framework is the underlying structure to a research study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) and the theories and concepts that inform the study (Maxwell, 2013). I purposefully chose not to apply a theoretical framework to this study so as to allow the essence of the participants’ experiences to flourish without any particular perspective or lens (Husserl, 1962; Peoples, 2020). Husserl (1962) specifically believed that in order to find the pure essence of a phenomenon, nothing should be assumed or taken for granted. However, it is important to note that in my literature review I relied on the use of college choice models to organize the
information. I used these models to frame my protocol questions and coded the data by considering themes relevant to these models but did not allow them to overshadow the findings.

**Bracketing**

When conducting a study based on a phenomenological methodology, Creswell (2013) described important features such as emphasizing the phenomenon, focusing on a group, discussing underpinnings of the phenomenology, the researcher bracketing themselves out of the research, collecting data through interviews, using a systematic approach for analyzing data, and discussing the collective essence of this experience. Husserl (1962) encouraged reduction, which is the process of using bracketing in order to be intentional about one’s consciousness. Bracketing refers to suspending judgements or biases in order to focus on the studied phenomenon (Husserl, 1962; Peoples, 2020). For this study, the college choice process experience was the phenomenon and the essence was found in the reflections of the interviewed first-generation Latinx students. The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the college choice experiences of this population at a 2-year and a 4-year institution by asking them to reflect on their high school experience and their counselors’ support in order to answer the main research questions. To get to the essence of the experience, I used interviews as the primary method of data collection (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The role of the researcher in this methodology is very important and they must set aside, or bracket, their perspective to highlight the participants’ experiences (Creswell, 2013; Husserl, 1962; Lichtman, 2006). However, Lichtman (2006) recommended that rather than setting aside personal perspectives, it is important to make the researcher’s perspective known and explicit. Therefore, I have included a
reflexivity statement in Appendix A based on my bracketing and my own experiences as a researcher in this study regarding the college choice process for first-generation Latinx students in order to make my positionality clear to the reader. However, it is important to stress that because I employed descriptive analysis, I did not use my perspectives to interpret any findings and they are only useful to understand my own positionality and experiences. Moreover, I believe it is important to share my own positionality and experiences as I do think it brings clarity to my researcher epistemology.

**Research Questions**

In order to highlight the experiences of a racially marginalized population, I chose to focus on the college choice experiences of first-generation Latinx students. For this research study, I used a phenomenological approach to the methodology to understand how this population made meaning of their college choices. My research questions were the following:

1. How do first-generation Latinx students who attend a 2-year college make meaning of their college choice process?
2. How do first-generation Latinx students who attend a 4-year university make meaning of their college choice process?
3. To what extent did students feel supported by their high school counselors in their college choice process? Why or why not?
   a. From the perspective of the students, what was their relationship like with their high school counselor?
b. From the perspective of the students, how did their high school counselor influence their choice process?

**Site and Participant Selection**

**Site Selection**

To gather the most inclusive and reliable data regarding the college choice process of students, I chose an urban institution that houses both a predominately White midsize 4-year university and a diverse small 2-year college. It is important to note that this institution is also private and religiously-affiliated. The use of this specific site enabled me to gather data that are inclusive of various higher education entities. For the purpose of this study, I considered this entity to be two different sites as they are different in nature. In addition to these sites being located in an urban area, it is important to note that they are both private religiously-affiliated institutions and uphold a mission of transforming students through social justice. These unique institutions aided in the collection of diverse data and allowed me to gather information about the college choices of racially minoritized students from similar institutions. In the context of the study, the details of these two institutions are discussed more in depth. However, it is important to note that I chose these two institutions because their Latinx populations align with the research that showed more Latinx students enroll in 2-year colleges than in 4-year universities (Liu, 2011). My expectation was that the college choice process for students at these two institutions would contrast and that their counselor support and influence would also differ. Although I conducted the study at only these two sites, I asked the students about previous experiences at their high schools regarding their college choice process. Students’ previous high school contexts
and school environments made their experiences diverse and influenced the data collection. For example, I assumed the students would have attended various different types of high schools with varying school contexts and counseling experiences. I used the interviews as an opportunity to learn about each participant’s personal context and assumed the high schools they attended would be only within the State of Illinois. However, one participant attended a high school that was out of state. Below, I describe both sites in detail and further discuss the high school context within the State of Illinois, as the majority of my participants attended high school in Illinois.

**Context of the Study**

The first of the two sites is located in an urban setting in Illinois. According to the institution’s website, it is a private medium-sized 4-year liberal arts university with over 17,000 enrolled students in undergrad and graduate school. In 2018, the institution produced a diversity report that showed over 16% of students identified as Hispanic and 32% identified as racially minoritized students. It is a religiously-affiliated institution and its mission is to serve the community and transform students through social justice. The second site is located in the same urban setting in Illinois. According to the institution’s website, it is a private small-sized 2-year liberal arts college and when it first opened its doors, it enrolled under 200 students to work toward an associate’s degree. In 2019, according to the institution’s metrics report, 97% of the students identified as people of color. In 2016, it was noted that 68% of the population was Latinx. Uniquely, the second site is a 2-year college that was started 4 years ago under the first institution mentioned above. It is also religiously-affiliated and its mission is to ensure diverse populations have access to an affordable education. Within these two sites, I interviewed first-
generation Latinx students and asked each to make meaning of their high school college choice experience. Therefore, each student was unique depending on their high school environment and personal context.

I asked each student to provide information regarding their personal background but also about the type of high school they attended. The students attended various types of high schools with varying school contexts and counseling experiences. The majority of the students attended high schools in the State of Illinois and this correlated to the research that shows a large number of Latinx students tend to stay in state for college to stay close to their families (Pérez & McDonough, 2008). To gain a deeper understanding of each high school, I used the Illinois Report Card provided by the Illinois State Board of Education. This data-driven report is released each year by the Illinois State Board of Education and shows state, school, and district progress on various educational objectives (Illinois State Board of Education, n.d.-a). According to the Illinois Report Card (Illinois State Board of Education, n.d.-a), 74% of the 2018 high school graduates enrolled in a 2-year or 4-year college within 12 months. In addition, the Illinois State Board of Education highlighted the standards and competencies for school counselors include providing academic, college and career, and personal social services to students (Illinois State Board of Education, n.d.-b). In particular, the Illinois State Board of Education recommends a student-to-counselor ratio of 250 to 1; however, this may not be the case at each high school (Illinois State Board of Education, n.d.-b).

Using data regarding the State of Illinois and the interactive online report card allowed me to search high schools in the State of Illinois and gain a deeper understanding of their
contexts. For example, data reflected the postsecondary enrollment percentage, the school environment with data from a student and teacher climate survey, and the high school demographics (Illinois State Board of Education, n.d.-a). For each high school, I used this tool to gain a deeper understanding of the foreground of the participant’s experience. Only one participant attended a high school outside the State of Illinois and for that student, I researched the information on their school website to gain the same amount of insight. This enabled me to further understand the environmental context and gain a deeper understanding of the high schools’ structural aspects that influenced the college choice experiences of the participants.

**Participant Selection**

As the focus in my study was on a specific population at two sites, I used purposeful sampling and in particular convenience and snowball methods to select participants. Purposeful sampling is a form of sample selection that emphasizes the need for an in-depth understanding of a particular population as it requires participants to have been purposefully chosen (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Purposeful sampling is based on the researcher’s selection criteria to gain the most insight regarding the topic or issue (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Patton, 2015). For this study, students needed to have been in their first year at one of the two sites. Because the interview questions required students to reflect on their high school college choice, it was important they were not so far removed from their past experience that it would have affected their recall. Second, students needed to be 18 years or older to participate, as participants needed to be mature enough to disclose information about themselves and have agency in their lives to provide the truth. Third, students needed to self-identify as first-generation students. First-
generation students are considered students whose parents did not enroll in or attend college or did not attain a baccalaureate degree (Ward et al., 2012). Because first-generation students are the first in their family to choose and attend a college, it is important to analyze their experiences in choosing a college as they require further information and support. Finally, students needed to self-identify as Latinx as this is a racially minoritized population in higher education and yet a growing population in the nation. Therefore, I chose to use Latinx participants to understand the most about this underserved and yet growing population within the college choice process. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the terms Hispanic and Latino are used to identify those who are of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or Spanish origin regardless of race (Humes et al., 2011). It is important to note that the purposeful sampling was only focused on my unit of analysis, which was first-generation Latinx students. No other identity, including, but not limited to, gender, socioeconomic status, or high school type, was considered at the time of recruitment in order to obtain the greatest number of interviews. However, I believe these other identities are significant to the college choice experience and considered them during the data analysis.

Because I wanted to interview the students as close as possible to their high school college choice experience in order to improve the reliability of their memories, this study was under time constraints. Convenience was an important indicator to be able to collect information from participants. Convenience sampling is used when accessibility for the researcher is required (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Palinkas et al., 2015). Accessibility was also important as I live in a different state. I used the snowball method to select individuals who met the identities required.
The snowball method enables a researcher to identify participants by reaching out to individuals in a network that fit the participant requirements (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). In particular, I reached out to the institutions’ multicultural student and success program coordinators to be able, with a recruitment flyer (see Appendix B), to connect to first-generation Latinx students specifically. Because the focus was on two sites and the participants’ identities were specific in nature, I was limited in the number of participants I would be able to interview. After conducting a few interviews, I asked students to identify others who shared similar characteristics in order to recruit more participants. Patton (2015) stated snowball sampling allows for an increased number of participants and also contributes to information-rich data. In terms of sample size, Patton encouraged setting a tentative number based on expectations and the purpose of the study and therefore, I believed I would interview about eight to 10 participants. After much recruitment, I was able to obtain nine participants. Participants received a $20 gift card for participating in the study.

After I gained permission from the dissertation committee, I applied for Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, after which I began identifying participants through convenience and snowball sampling. These potential participants received a participant outreach email (see Appendix C). At the time of the interview, they were given a participant consent form (see Appendix D) that outlined the purpose of the study, their rights as participants, and confidentiality. Participants had the opportunity to either interview in person or via Zoom (video chat). Because the global COVID pandemic was happening as I began to conduct interviews, all participants chose the video chat format for safety. They were able to schedule an online
appointment to complete the interviews. To maintain confidentiality, participants’ names were changed, privacy was maintained by making adequate provisions to remove educational institution names from the data collected, and data were saved on a private and password protected computer. To maintain the safety of the participants, I designed the study to minimize risk, informed participants of the minimum risks and anticipated benefits, and informed participants that participation was voluntary and they could choose not to participate or stop participation at any time with no consequences.

It is also important to note that to build rapport, when I began the interviews I always asked participants how they were feeling related to the COVID pandemic. Many shared their feelings regarding their institutions closing their campuses and having to move back home, dealing with online courses, and sicknesses or losses in the family. They shared emotions such as frustration, being overwhelmed, stress, and grief. This question enabled the students to quickly open up about their stories and emotions with me. When it came to the actual interviews, the students seemed comfortable sharing their vulnerabilities with me. It should be considered how the heavy emotions with which they were dealing could have influenced their reflections regarding their college choice process.

**Data Collection Procedure**

In terms of data collection methods, interviews, document analysis, and participant observations are among the most commonly used (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). In a typical phenomenological methodology, interviews are the primary method of data collection (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Vagle (2018) believed each interview provides an opportunity to learn
something valuable about the phenomenon of study. I conducted data collection through semi-structured interviews to gain personal background context of the participants and a deeper understanding of their college choice experience. Semi-structured questions enabled me to maintain consistency across participants but be flexible with each participant as the interview progressed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). I used the college choice models highlighted in the literature review to help form some of the initial semi-structured questions and refined these questions after conducting a preparatory pilot study.

The primary method of data collection in this study was two semi-structured interviews with each participant. It is important to note that some students chose to perform both semi-structured interviews back-to-back with a short break in between. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) noted interviews are the best method when working with a small number of participants. Patton (2015) stated interviews enable researchers to gain an insider perspective on a topic. The interview questions are discussed further below. Students who were interested in participating contacted me via email to set up two 45-minute interviews and were able to interview in person on campus or via Zoom (video chat). Because of the global COVID pandemic, all participants chose the video chat option for safety. The audio recordings are protected by being saved on my personal and password protected computer. I had each participant sign a consent form in order to be able to audio record all interviews and had them choose their pseudonym. To maintain confidentiality, participants’ names were changed and confidentiality was maintained by making adequate provisions to the data collected. In addition, I followed an interview protocol (see Appendix E) to conduct the interviews efficiently.
As the goal of this study was to explore the college choice process of first-generation Latinx students and their experiences with their high school counselors, I conducted semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews have guided questions but remain flexible with the conversation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). In the first interview, questions started with background information and then moved to probing questions regarding the participants’ experiences with choosing a college. In the follow-up interview, because rapport had been built, I asked about counselor influence in their college choice process and then asked participants to reflect on their experiences. The order of questions was meant to build trust and rapport with the participants as starting out with more simple questions and leading up to the more complicated questions created a sense of ease for the participants (Roulston, 2010). For example, participants were asked to describe their personal background, high schools, their college choice process, how their counselor influenced their choice, and then to reflect on their choice. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) encouraged the use of open-ended questions to collect rich data and the interview questions were modeled by this recommendation. It is important to note that before I began the interviews, I asked the participants to consider their identities as a first-generation and Latinx student as well as when they overlapped when answering the questions.

Before conducting any interviews with participants, I conducted a pilot interview to test the interview questions. A volunteer in my professional network, who also identifies as Latinx and first-generation, was interviewed for this pilot. I chose not to interview an actual student for this pilot, but instead someone with the same characteristics because I wanted to make sure I would be able to have enough students to participate in the actual study. The pilot study was
recorded and transcribed. Following the interview, I used the experience to improve the protocol. After conducting interviews with the participants, I transcribed and analyzed the interview recordings. The analysis procedure is explained below.

**Data Analysis Procedure**

“Data analysis is the process of making sense out of the data” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 202). The data analysis procedure for transcendental phenomenology involves a focus on the entirety of the essence of a phenomenon without bias (Peoples, 2020). As the main goal of data analysis is to determine the answers to the research questions, I followed a specific procedure to maintain structure and transparency. My data set comprised interview transcriptions and a profile of each student and high school gathered from the Illinois Report Card and high school websites.

**Management**

Researchers should have a management plan to keep data protected and organized and to be able to make sense of the tremendous amount of data collected (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). I saved all documents behind a firewall on my password protected personal computer. Each transcribed interview was organized into an electronic folder. Another electronic folder housed notes taken during the interviews. A third electronic folder was created to house memos of each interview. Memos are initial reflections, tentative themes, and ideas of the interview (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The consent forms were saved separately in a password protected Dropbox folder. I transcribed the audio recordings of the interviews and once transcription was complete, I destroyed the original audio recording files. Any notes taken during the interview and all other
records will be destroyed after 5 years, except the consent forms which will be kept indefinitely.

I then entered the transcribed interviews into a data management system called Dedoose.

**Data Analysis Process**

First, I read each interview in its entirety to understand each participant’s complete story and deleted any unnecessary information (Peoples, 2020). Then, I developed preliminary meaning units or codes that focused on the research topic to “reveal a feature or trait of the phenomenon being investigated” (Peoples, 2020, p. 60). These codes were relevant for answering the research questions. The third step in the process was to generate themes using these codes while considering the research questions and in particular the descriptions from each participant. Fourth, I used Dedoose to organize and gather each participant’s situated narratives under each theme. Fifth, I used each situated narrative to create a unified general narrative to include the experiences of all participants. Finally, I created a general description to focus on the major phenomenological themes. It is important to note that as I completed this analysis process, I maintained a journal to bracket my biases and continue to allow for a transcendental or descriptive phenomenological methodology (Husserl, 1962; Peoples 2020). A summary of my bracketing is included in my reflexivity statement for transparency (see Appendix A).

**Validity**

Qualitative research is orientated toward a constructionist form of knowledge (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Heppner and Heppner (2004) noted constructionism is focused on the artifacts created by social interactions. In terms of constructionism, information is relative and biases cannot be completely removed from the data collected (Heppner & Heppner, 2004; Merriam &
Tisdell, 2015). This means that because constructionism is created through social interactions, we cannot remove the context of those social interactions from the outcomes. Therefore, I could not separate the context of the students’ environments from the data collected. Because the focus of qualitative research is to engage in social realities and remain subjective, I ensured validity through remaining critical and reflexive (Ravitch & Carl, 2015). With much of qualitative inquiry comes the question of validity because of the interpretive nature of this type of research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). According to Maxwell (2013), validity is the clarity in how participant selection, data collection, and analysis decisions were triangulated to disprove biases and prove validness of findings. The strategies I used to support the validity of this project included triangulation, bracketing, and reflexivity.

Triangulation, or the use of more than one method to improve internal validity, can be obtained by providing more than one data collection source for evidence (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). To improve triangulation of the data collected in the interviews, I substantiated the data with the Illinois Report Card and high school websites to gain further documentation of the high school context (See Context of the Study for more details on the Illinois Report Card and how it was used). I created a profile chart to describe the participants’ demographics and to categorize the context of their high schools according to the Illinois Report Card and their high school websites. To improve validity, I also used member checking and an outsider to review findings. Member checking helps improve validity as it requires the participants to review the transcriptions and provide feedback (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). After I transcribed the interviews, I sent them to the participants via email for their review and approval. Once I
received feedback from the participants, I took that feedback into consideration and corrected any inconsistencies. I also asked an outside reader to review the findings I discovered. After the interviews, I organized the evidence in an Excel database to keep it organized.

Because the purpose of this study was to gain an in-depth understanding of a particular environment and as the researcher I was considered a primary instrument, I made my biases knowing by bracketing and reflexivity. However, I still removed my biases from the analysis and descriptions of the data collected. Husserl (1962), who is foundational to transcendental or descriptive phenomenology, recommended bracketing to remove the researcher’s biases from the analysis process. Creswell (2013) and Lichtman (2006) highlighted the role of the researcher within phenomenology as being vital. Nonetheless, both recommended that the researcher bracket, or remove, their perspective to emphasizes the participants’ experiences. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) stated, “These prejudices and assumptions are then bracketed or temporarily set aside so that we can examine consciousness itself” (p. 27). Hence, it is recommended that the researcher make their perspective explicit (Lichtman, 2006). I believe it was important to share my truths but not allow them to interfere with my participants’ experiences. As such, I kept a journal as I completed the data analysis in order to bracket my prejudices and biases. A summary of my bracketing is in my reflexivity statement (see Appendix A). This way, my perspective is explicit but did not interfere with the transcendental or descriptive analysis of the experiences shared by my participants. My desire was to allow the participants’ experiences to speak for themselves. However, I do believe it is impossible to be completely objective and, therefore, in order to increase validity, I made my positionality known. I share my positionality in my study
through reflexivity. Reflexivity begins with the act of critical reflection concerning the individual’s beliefs, experiences, and identities to situate themselves in how they affect all pieces of the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Below I discuss how my positionality and identity gave me “insider” knowledge to better describe the experiences of my participants more accurately. By using these strategies, my hope was that I would be able to maintain the integrity and trustworthiness of this study. Additionally, below I share the limitations of the study.

**Positionality, Limitations, and Strengths**

**Positionality**

In conducting a phenomenological study, it is impossible to separate the positionality of the researcher as they are the primary instrument of the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Therefore, it is important to consider how the researcher’s positionality is both a limitation and strength. Reflecting on my past experience as a first-generation Latinx student, I have had positive and negative experiences. I trusted my counselor and yet disliked who they were with my peers. Though they shared lots of information with me and motivated me to apply to college, they treated other types of students in a completely different manner based on their perceptions of students. To me, this felt like an injustice that needed to be corrected. My confusing relationship with my counselor led me to question how counselors take into account students depending on their academics, extracurriculars, and character. In conjunction to this experience, as a student who went through the college choice process, I believe I bring an interesting perspective as I was also a high school college counselor. As a high school college counselor, I promised myself I would never discourage a dream no matter what I thought or felt about the
student. However, I was in for a rude awakening. As a counselor with various responsibilities, pressures, and lacking resources, it can be very easy to generalize a group of students. Although the goal is to respect each student and treat them individually, the structure is not set up to support this in underserved high schools that typically house mostly first-generation racially minoritized students. I constantly questioned whether I was actually helping my students in the way they deserved and whether I was influencing them one way or another regardless of their true desires.

I share intersecting identities as both a student and high school counselor that allowed me to view the data collected through various perspectives at once. As a researcher, with my various perspectives that were both positive and negative, I viewed the data with both types of individuals in mind. I believe this was an overall strength that increased the validity of the study as I had a diverse positionality in mind. However, I believe it to be important to make my personal experiences known in order not to hinder the study. My personal experiences could have led to assumptions made during the data analysis procedure. During the data analysis procedure, I reminded myself that although I shared similar identities with my participants, they too may have counterstories I needed to consider and accept. I remained open to their stories regarding their counselors though at times I may have felt personally offended by their comments as a past high school counselor myself. I separated myself from the data collected and accepted all findings as they were. Because it is important to make my positionality known for transparency, my positionality is summarized in the introduction and my reflexivity statement summarizes the bracketing and my experience as a researcher in this study (see Appendix A).
Limitations and Strengths

At its core, phenomenological research is designed to investigate the essence of a phenomenon (Vagle, 2018). The greatest strength of phenomenology is the focus on lived experience. A critique of phenomenology is that it was framed through a Western male philosopher’s perspective. Sheets-Johnstone (2000) critiqued phenomenology because of its use of binary approaches and practices from Western culture. The major critique of phenomenology, with regard to this study, is that it acknowledges that individuals construct their meaning (Sheets-Johnstone, 2000). This foundational structure was limiting to my study as it does not incorporate or consider social and collective experiences and how they influence an individual’s meaning. Hence, I decided to use a phenomenological approach for my methods rather than rigid phenomenological methods. However, I used its strength of getting to the essence of a phenomenon to capture the core experiences of this population within their personal and structural environments. I achieved this by considering their personal backgrounds, confirming their structural high school environments through the Illinois Board of Education and high school websites, and considering their relationships with their high school counselors.

Other limitations I considered included time and location constraints, limitations related to the research site, and lacking the counselor perspective. In order to work with my personal constraints, I chose to use convenience and snowball sampling to gather as many participants as possible at the two institutions. By choosing only two sites to study, I was limited to not interviewing students who decided to choose a nontraditional postsecondary option. For example, I did not include students who decided to take a gap year or chose a different
postsecondary education path such as vocational school. However, I believe this study is reliable as even though I only focused on two sites, I still interviewed students who attended different types of high schools. Future research can focus on students who made nontraditional postsecondary choices and their reasons for choosing those paths. Moreover, one of the chosen sites is considered an anomaly in higher education. The 2-year college is a private institution and that is not ordinary as often 2-year colleges are known for being public. However, I believe this provided a great opportunity to further understand private 2-year colleges through the perspectives of the first-generation Latinx students who choose to attend such schools. I saw this as a strength as it furthered the research regarding this unique site.

Another major limitation was that I did not include the perspectives of high school counselors. Though I believe this aspect to be important, I decided to focus on students only to be able to set the context and understanding of their true experiences. Future research should include the perspectives of high school counselors as a support system for this demographic and their college choices. Although I highlighted various limitations, I believe this study had many strengths.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I provided a detailed description of the phenomenological approach to the methodology. The focus in my study was on the essence of the college choice process phenomenon of first-generation Latinx students and how they were influenced by their high school counselors to choose an institution. The two sites, a 4-year university and a 2-year college, allowed me to recruit students from various personal and high school contexts to study
their college choice experience. I recruited the participant sample through convenience and snowball sampling and used semi-structured interviews as the data collection method. Through the use of transcendental or descriptive coding, I developed codes from the data collected and the college choice models previously mentioned in the literature review. Then, I developed major themes to answer the research questions. I accounted for validity through various strategies, including triangulation and reflexivity.
CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

In this study, I explored how first-generation Latinx students at a 2-year college and a 4-year university make meaning of their college choice process. In addition, I wanted to know to what extent this student demographic felt supported by their high school counselors during their college choice process. In this chapter, I present the participant demographics and the major findings from the interviews. Specifically, this chapter is organized by the following overarching themes: (a) motivations and considerations, (b) full of emotions, (c) *se necesita un pueblo* (it takes a village), and (d) building counselor *confianza* (trust). I organized the findings using this thematic approach to better capture the complexity of the participants’ experiences. Each theme supports the research questions in various contextualized forms. The quotes emphasized in this chapter strengthen the understanding of each overarching theme. Subsequently, these themes then help answer the research questions of the study.

**Participant Demographics**

Using the data collected, I created a profile chart (Table 1) to describe the participants’ demographics and to categorize the context of their high schools according to the Illinois Report Card and their high school websites.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant pseudonym</th>
<th>Self-identified salient identities</th>
<th>Type of institution chosen</th>
<th>Data for high school attended</th>
<th>College choice support systems and notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kamila</td>
<td>First-generation, Mexican/Hispanic</td>
<td>Urban, midsize, predominate White, 4-year university, and mission driven.</td>
<td>Located in Illinois, urban selective public school, over 1,000 students, 90-95% college enrollment, and predominantly White students followed by Hispanics.</td>
<td>Received support from family, sibling and friends. Noted that counselor was not available or helpful.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veronica</td>
<td>First-generation, Mexican/Hispanic/Latina</td>
<td>Urban, midsize, predominate White, 4-year university, and mission driven.</td>
<td>Located in Illinois, suburban public school, over 2,000 students, 70-75% college enrollment, and predominantly Hispanic students followed by White.</td>
<td>Received support from family, sibling, and counselor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vanessa</td>
<td>First-generation, Colombian/Latina</td>
<td>Urban, midsize, predominate White, 4-year university, and mission driven.</td>
<td>Located in Florida, urban public, over 4,500 students, 95-98% college bound, and predominantly White students followed by Hispanics.</td>
<td>Received support from family, sibling, friends, and college readiness program. Noted counselor was not as available but helpful.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pricilla</td>
<td>First-generation, Mexican/Hispanic/Latina</td>
<td>Urban, midsize, predominate White, 4-year university, and mission driven.</td>
<td>Located in Illinois, suburban public school, over 1,500 students, 70-75% college enrollment, and predominantly Hispanic students followed by White.</td>
<td>Received support from family, friends, college readiness program, and counselor. Noted counselor was a mother figure to her.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant pseudonym</td>
<td>Self-identified salient identities</td>
<td>Type of institution chosen</td>
<td>Data for high school attended</td>
<td>College choice support systems and notes</td>
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<tr>
<td>-----------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alma</td>
<td>First-generation, Latina, Undocumented</td>
<td>Urban, midsize, private, predominately White, 4-year university, religiously-affiliated and mission driven.</td>
<td>Located in Illinois, urban selective public school, under 1,000 students, 85-90% college enrollment, and predominately Black students followed by Hispanic.</td>
<td>Received support from family, college readiness programs, and counselor. Noted counselor shared her identity and she felt very comfortable with her however, later felt uncomfortable with lack of confidence in her.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lupe</td>
<td>First-generation, Mexican/Latina, Undocumented</td>
<td>Urban, small, private, diverse, 2-year college, religiously-affiliated and mission driven.</td>
<td>Located in Illinois, urban public charter school, over 500 students, 85-90% graduation rate but no recorded college enrollment percentage, and predominately Hispanic followed by Black students.</td>
<td>Received support from family and college readiness program. Noted counselor was available but not as helpful or supportive as college readiness program which was in class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cynthia</td>
<td>First-generation, Latina</td>
<td>Urban, small, private, diverse, 2-year college, religiously-affiliated and mission driven.</td>
<td>Located in Illinois, urban alternative public school, over 200 students, 45-50% graduation rate but no recorded college enrollment percentage, and predominately Hispanic followed by Black students.</td>
<td>Received support from family and teachers. Noted counselors were present but not as helpful as teachers. Also shared that the school did not have a college-going culture.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucia</td>
<td>First-generation, Latina/Hispanic</td>
<td>Urban, small, private, diverse, 2-year college, Catholic school, over 500 students, 60-65% college enrollment,</td>
<td>Located in Illinois, urban private Catholic school, over 500 students, 60-65% college enrollment,</td>
<td>Received support from family, sibling, and counselor. Noted that the counselor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant pseudonym</td>
<td>Self-identified salient identities</td>
<td>Type of institution chosen</td>
<td>Data for high school attended</td>
<td>College choice support systems and notes</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel</td>
<td>First-generation, Guatemalan/Latino, Undocumented</td>
<td>Urban, small, private, diverse, 2-year college, religiously-affiliated and mission driven.</td>
<td>Located in Illinois, urban public military school, under 500 students, 70-75% college enrollment, and predominately Hispanic students.</td>
<td>Received support from family and mentor. Noted that counselor was not always available but was not supportive or understanding.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Data for high school attended were collected from the Illinois Report Card (Illinois State Board of Education, n.d.-a) and if the participant attended a high school out of the State of Illinois, data were collected from the high school’s website.

**Motivations and Considerations**

**Motivations: Pride, Parents, and Responsibility to the Community**

Regardless of whether participants chose to attend the 2-year or the 4-year institution, their motivation was directly tied to pride in their identities, their parents, and their responsibility to help their communities. Their motivation to attend college was directly associated with their salient identities, family, and community. Specifically, the participants shared a sense of pride in representing their cultural identities and being the first in their families and communities to attend college. For example, Cynthia, a first-year student attending the private 2-year institution, shared how her pride in her identity motivated her to pursue a higher education. She shared,

I’m proud to be first generation and I’m 100% proud to be Latina, and I feel like we need to instill that sense of pride in the younger generation because it can be a great source of motivation. . . . And I feel like being first generation gives you a good sense of motivation if you choose to see it as a positive.
An additional example of a participant who demonstrated pride in their identities was Daniel, another first-year student attending the private 2-year institution. Daniel identifies as a Latino who feels a sense of pride in being both Latino and a first-generation college student. He explained,

It is important [to be who we are] because we get to say we changed the Latino mindset. Like a lot of the Latinos, I mean, this is just in my family’s and my experience, but there’s a lot of machismo involved. There’s a lot of like, oh, I don’t know about that. Like, we don’t want help. Like, we don’t like receiving help, things like that. So, um, that’s why I feel like it’s important to identify as Latino because we get to change it in the future and say, I was a Latino that used to think like that, but now I changed. So it’s important to keep that dynamic and culture going. . . . And it is super important for me to say that I’m a first-generation because that’s unique. And you go into the world after college and you say, you know what, like I was first-generation and you have different perspectives as somebody whose parents have been to college already. You have that unique characteristic inside of you that like, wait a second, let’s look at it through a different lens. That’s why it’s important for me to identify as a first-generation college student.

Cynthia used her identities to motivate her to attend college, whereas Daniel used his identities to motivate him to improve himself during college and change the negative mindsets attributed to his Latino identity. Further, he used his first-generation identity to view the world differently. Pride in the participants’ identities was common, as they found it to be a form of inspiration.

In addition to pride in their identities, the participants felt their parents were an important motivational factor. Some participants even noted they decided to go to college for their parents. Veronica, a first-year student attending the private 4-year institution, stated, “And I feel like the biggest gift that you could give your parents is you becoming more educated and more well-informed to . . . become something better.” Kamila, also a first-year student attending the private 4-year institution, discussed how her parents motivated her and what they instilled in her. She said, “Honestly, I think it was like my parents who motivated me because they always talk about
how, you know, like they came here to the U.S. to like have a better life.” Participants stated their parents’ desire to improve their lives through education influenced not just their individual families but also their communities. This level of care also led these participants to develop a sense of responsibility for their communities and the generations thereafter. For instance, Lupe, a first-year student attending the private 2-year institution, recalled the importance of her college choice and what it meant for her family and community. She discussed her understanding of what it means to go to college as a first-generation Latinx student as a sense of obligation and importance, as many view her as an example to follow. She said,

Yeah, [college] is really important for me because since I have a younger brother, like I am always that person that everybody goes to whenever they need help. So, there’s either friends, family, or friends of family that have their children and then, they see me as a role model and I didn’t know that until a couple months ago. That like being a first-generation student eventually, like puts a picture on everybody’s mind. And it’s like really surprising how people eventually see you as a role model that like you could be doing so many things and be focused and just being like that person that anybody could go to. Like to me, [it] is really important.

Most participants shared this sense of responsibility to contribute to their communities and selflessly use their educational pursuits to act as vessels from whom future generations can learn. As Pricilla, a first-year student attending the private 4-year institution, stated, “[By deciding to go to college] you’re taking the initiative. You really are being the first one to decide if the rest of the generations are going to go to college.” As these examples show, there was an important emotional and interrelational element that contributed to the participants’ motivations to pursue a college degree. Also, material aspects such as the cost of a college education and physical closeness to family were important concerns, as demonstrated in the following section.
Factors Considered: Familial and Institutional Concerns

The factors participants considered when making their college choices can be separated into familial and institutional concerns. Within familial concerns, participants considered a material concern, which is the cost of college and how it would affect their family. Another familial concern was to choose an institution close to family to best support them while they attended college. Regarding institutional concerns, participants considered the quality of education and institutional fit when making their college choice. Regardless of whether participants chose the 2-year or 4-year institution, they considered these factors. However, it is important to note how participants at the 2-year institution compared the quality of private and public community colleges.

Familial Concerns

Overwhelmingly, the participants in this study alluded to the fact that the cost of attendance was an important factor they considered before choosing which institution to attend. The cost of college is an important factor for first-generation students, as some tend to come from non-educated, low-income families. Cynthia, who attends the 2-year institution, shared how her low-income family required an affordable college choice, which is why she chose a community college. She said, “Honestly, money-wise, I was looking for whatever was going to be the cheapest on my family and I knew that I had a better chance of transferring most likely to a 4 year [after].” When considering the cost of a college education, participants noted how their families played a very influential role in their choice. Participants spoke of their parents and family members regarding the cost of attendance. In particular, participants noted how they
considered their family’s income and how they worked together as a family to be able to pay for their colleges of choice. Pricilla, who attends the 4-year institution, was responsible for paying the bills at home and discussed how she spoke to her parents and explained why she chose a school that was more expensive than they expected. She stated,

So, I manage the finances and my dad is like, “how much are we going to pay?” And I tried to explain to them everything. So, it’s hard because you have to make them understand why you doing the things you’re doing, especially like they’re like, “Why are you going to such an expensive school?” And I’m like, “You guys told me I can go to any school.” But then they’re like, okay. And thankfully, I got a scholarship. I got an $8,000 scholarship to go to college. So, that really helped me out. That made my costs way lower. . . And then, I’m like, “okay, this is how much we have to save.” We made a goal during the summer and reached it by saving. I had a job, so I worked a lot during the summer. My dad had one too, and my mom had one, so we all kind of working together to make that goal [happen].

Discussing the cost of college with parents, before or while making a college decision, was very common among the participants. In fact, it was a revelation to see how Pricilla, a first-generation college student, managed to educate herself and her family to understand the cost and why it was worth the investment. She also organized a family financial plan to be able to afford college.

However, the participants’ families were involved in more than just financial decisions. For some, parents and family were also considered when choosing a college close to home.

Alma, a first-year student attending the private 4-year institution, alluded to this as she discussed why she felt a desire to stay close to family to help them when they needed support regarding things they could not do on their own. She stated,

Like, I didn’t want to be far from home because if they needed someone to translate, like I can come [and do it]. I’m familial—I can get on a bus or two buses and I can be there, you know? And so, I think that was very important for me. And, uh, aside from that, like finances were huge because we’re low income.
Kamila, who attends the 4-year institution that her sibling also attends, further indicated staying close to home was important. She stated, “I just have like a close-knit relationship with my family, so being close to home was important and then, it was just like a bonus that my brother was there.”

It is clear many of the participants held family in high importance given their cultural upbringings regarding family being a top priority. Whether they took their family’s thoughts on the cost of attendance into consideration to make a college choice or decided to stay close to home for their family, it was undeniable that the participants felt a strong tie to their families. However, familial concerns were not the only options considered, as participants also noted institutional concerns, such as quality of institution and fit, as elements about which they debated before making their college choice.

**Institutional Concerns**

Participants discussed various institutional concerns they considered before making their college choice. Though cost was a primary concern and could be integrated into this section regarding institutional concerns, it was previously addressed in the Familial Concerns section, given most participants were inclined to connect the concern to their families rather than the institution. Participants were likely to discuss the cost with family to gauge their thoughts regarding the investment and what it would mean for their families financially. Therefore, other than cost, participants predominantly reported two major institutional concerns related to quality of education and environmental fit. For the most part, quality of education and environmental fit were next considered after the financial factor. Daniel, who chose to attend the private 2-year
institution, spoke about the factors he considered when making his choice and what questions he asked himself and believes other first-generation students should ask themselves to make their choice. He said,

Resources is the number one, I think. And affordability. Look at the prices, really do your research? Look at the environment, too. How does it make you feel? What do you see your potential in that institution? What can the institution give to you? But what also can you give to the institution? And I feel like that’s really important for first-generation students, but I also say like, why do you want to go to college?

Again, Daniel reaffirmed the importance of affordability and contributing to his community and the institution. However, he also shared insight regarding the importance of recognizing what a first-generation student needs, which includes resources, a supportive environment, and personal potential and growth. Daniel further affirmed his wish for a quality education by choosing to attend a private community college that employs professors with higher degrees. He stated,

Like if you go to [public] community college, like you don’t have doctors, you have like professors. There’s nothing wrong with that. And I’m not saying that I prefer either or. But if I can have a better education, why not? So, quality of education was, well, one of the big [factors].

Another participant who discussed the value of a private community college over a public community college was Cynthia, who chose to attend the private 2-year institution. She noted she felt an instant difference in how students were treated. Cynthia said,

The environment in [public community] colleges, when I’ve gone, you can tell that they care, but because the student body is so large and they have people who are young adults and then they have people who are older and it always just seems kind of rushed. Like, yeah, they care but they don’t have the time to put all their resources into it. You have to be very brief. Whereas in my school we have a smaller community, we have so many counselors. Like we have a counselor for everything—admissions, careers—and they just have more resources that a bigger university name can offer.
She highlighted how private community colleges tend to be smaller and students receive more resources and support because of the smaller environment. Daniel and Cynthia alluded to a very important finding—though participants desired an affordable education, they still compared options among the most affordable choices to make an educated decision about where they felt they would receive the most quality education. Cynthia also helped expand the understanding regarding the type of environment first-generation Latinx individuals search for, which includes one that is supportive and intimate. Hence, the environmental fit for these participants was also a leading factor in their college choice.

Participants explained that the environmental fit was a very important factor they considered when making their college choice. Lupe, who attends the private 2-year institution, expanded on why environmental fit is essential as it relates to cultural and familial values. She stated,

The reason why I chose that school is because I had such like a community vibe. So, my community is like a big thing for me. That’s such a completely different vibe from any other schools that I went to. It was like either big and nobody knows each other. So, that’s why I like that family oriented [feeling].

This indicates Latinx individuals truly believe a familial environment is important to their college choice. Though this was the case for some participants, others felt the reason for needing an institution with a good environmental fit was because of necessary comfort due to past stress. For example, Kamila, who attends the 4-year institution, established her desire to be happy as a first-generation student rather than to always be in competition. She said,

I feel like the main reason [I made this choice] was having like a comfortable environment. I didn’t want to go to a school where it was going to be super competitive, you know, and everyone just kind of like on top of each other. . . . Because I was in something like that for 4 years, you know, I just wanted to be happy.
Kamila shared that attending a very competitive high school did not entice her to pursue a higher education institution with a competitive environment. For her, finding an environment that was supportive and not competitive was something she considered when choosing to attend her institution. Veronica, who attends the 4-year institution, felt environmental fit was essential to her college success. As Veronica reflected on her college choice, she realized the investment was worth it. She stated, “I’m only a freshman and I’m already in so much debt, but I’ve made so many connections, [had] so many experiences, and I’ve learned so much that I feel like it’s worth the debt.” Here, Veronica alluded to the fact that the environmental fit is even more essential than the cost of college. Much of the literature regarding college choice for the Latinx population contains the broad assumption that the cost of college is a main factor considered (McDonough & Calderone, 2006; Vega, 2018). However, Veronica’s input contradicted this finding in the literature and indicates college choice is more complex, specifically for first-year Latinx students who choose to attend a 4-year institution. Most participants who decided to attend the 4-year institution noted they felt a strong need for the environment to be a fit and some even regarded it as more important than the cost, such as Veronica. As another illustration, Vanessa, a first-year student who attends the private 4-year institution, originally considered staying close to home to save money. However, once she visited the 4-year institution and realized it encompassed the environment she desired, it became her number one choice, although it was more costly. Therefore, though the cost of college was a valid concern for my participants, some who chose the 4-year institution found that the environmental fit was worth the money.
Another important finding to highlight regarding environmental fit was that some participants noted a need to create and support diversity. Most participants discussed looking for a place where they would feel welcomed and comfortable. However, those who decided to attend the 4-year institution, which is predominately White, explained they did not prioritize diversity as much as they desired the ability to contribute to creating diversity on campus. Although the literature has long highlighted that Latinx students need others with whom they can identify to develop a sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997), these participants showcased that when choosing a predominately White 4-year institution, their desire was to contribute to diversity. For example, Pricilla discussed how she felt a responsibility to choose a predominately White institution as a first-generation Latinx student to help create that diversity. She explained her conversation with others as they discussed this issue. She said,

I know [my school], when I applied, that their diversity was 40% minority. But I know they trying to increase it in that. And people would tell me, “it’s a White school, why are you going to go to there?” And they’re like, “don’t you want to go to like [another school] where it’s like more diverse?” I was like, “When I go there, I’m increasing the diversity rates. I think it’s better and it’s a really good school.” . . . I’m Latina and it doesn’t mean I’m going to let a White school take that away from me. And when I got here, then I got the email [of a program to support first-generation students]. I’m like, I should definitely apply because I do need that support, especially throughout college, cause I’m mainly in the person in my, in my whole house that knows how to do anything about college.

Pricilla demonstrated students do not necessarily prioritize being a part of the majority on their campus, rather they want to contribute to building diversity and discovering community and support. The quality of education and environmental fit contributed to the factors on which participants focused to make their college decisions; however, their choices were also influenced by their emotions, as described in the following section.
**Full of Emotions**

The participants detailed the various feelings and emotions they faced while making their college choices regardless of whether they chose the 2-year or 4-year institution. This section is separated into subsections of the types of emotions the participants felt. In addition, a special subsection, which outlines the participants who identified as undocumented, is included to highlight this specific population. This particular subsection is necessary to acknowledge how undocumented students’ circumstances affect their emotions. Though participants felt various emotions, most were negative, such as stress, anxiety, fear, self-doubt, and discouragement. These emotions varied among the participants regardless of the type of institution they chose, but below I highlight the common situations the students faced that caused these emotions to occur.

**Stress of the Unknown**

One of the main factors that caused negative emotions was related to the fact that these individuals identify as first-generation college students. Therefore, they faced many unknowns as they made their college choice. In addition to feeling they had no knowledge of their options because they are first-generation college students, they felt they had to make their decisions alone. This difficult task caused a lot of stress for these students. The participants described the stress of making a decision regarding something that felt unknown to them. Lucia, a first-year student who attends the private 2-year institution, shared, “I definitely stressed out about it a lot because I was in between going to a 2-year or a 4-year university.” She described her decision-making process as stressful, specifically because of the many unknowns first-generation students
face. However, the stress of the unknown was magnified by the loneliness of the college choice experience. She continued and said,

I feel like I have to work twice as hard as other people that aren’t first-generation. Like going to college and everything—I have to learn everything by myself. . . . I feel like I have to experience everything by myself and I have to work twice as hard just because I don’t have it like spoon-fed to me like other people.

This lack of experience and knowledge leads to feeling taxed by the difficult task. However, when reviewing Lucia’s excerpt, it became clear that the stress happens more than just because of the lack of experience or unknown, but rather because of being alone in the process. The lack of social and cultural capital contributes to their emotional environment. Interestingly, it was discovered that even when first-generation college students have an older sibling who may have attended college, they still feel this same stress given they are still considered a first-generation student who attends college. This establishes the idea that this sense of the unknown and difficult choice is still stressful for any first-generation student regardless of whether anyone else in the family has attended college. Veronica, who attends the 4-year institution, shared her perspective regarding what it was like to make a college choice even with an older sibling who attended college. She stated,

I am fortunate that I do have an older sister and she did go to school; she graduated this past May of 2019. So, I was fortunate enough to really just have her as like the guinea pig of the family. Sadly, like she had to go through it, like really? Like she had to go through a lot of it by herself. Like, you know, filling out FAFSA, dealing with student loans and parent plus loans, paperwork, and stuff like that. So, um, for her, I obviously, know she went through a lot. But I’m still like a first-generation student, too. I think it’s important to realize that. Your come to the realization that like, “I don’t know what I’m doing.” Like I’m really here like going with the flow, but it’s not because of like my own choice. It’s like I’m being like forced to go with the flow. Like if something pops up, I can’t go to my parents to ask.
Veronica highlighted how much more difficult her older sister’s experience must have been but also contended that her own experience was not much different as a first-generation student. In essence, her experience and the experience of her sibling, both as first-generation students, showcased virtually no difference in the difficulty of the unknown and the stress it causes. Though the unknown caused stress for the participants, they also noted having anxiety during their college choice process.

**Anxiety Caused by Fear**

Stress was not the only emotion these participants discussed, as they also recalled a great amount of anxiety related to fear. The participants noted various fears, which included making the wrong choice related to their personal circumstances. In terms of making the wrong choice, some participants felt fear of others, particularly their parents. To demonstrate this, Veronica, who attends the 4-year institution, shared her fear of her parents becoming upset with her for her choice. She said, “I don’t want people to get mad at me or like my parents to be upset with me. So, it was like just like a really like hard time for me and I [relied] on the people around me.” According to Veronica, the wrong choice was related to not complying with the desired expectations of her parents. Therefore, she relied on those around her to make a choice. Other participants still feared their parents, but it was either regarding moving too far from them and family or choosing an overly expensive school. This is related to the aforementioned finding that participants considered familial factors and expectations in their college choices. This section reestablishes the past finding and also expands upon it to describe the feelings participants felt when considering familial factors. However, parents were not always the cause for fear in
making the wrong choice. In fact, participants noted their own fear, which caused them a deep
level of anxiety in making their college choice. Pricilla, who attends the 4-year institution, shared
her powerful experience as she navigated her college choice process. She said,

It was between those two [schools] and for like a month, I was like on and off. I’m like,
one day I’d sit and be like, Oh, I’m going to go to the other school and another I’d be like
oh no. And my friends are like, make a choice already. Like this is insane. So, one day I
just went to the library and I kind of made like a chart of like each school, what the
benefit was for me. And at the end I was kind of like, I didn’t really have the thing where,
you know, everyone has like that feeling. I didn’t really have that. . . . That’s when I
knew that feeling [of fear] and I had a therapist and my therapist told me that it was
because I was worried I was going to make the wrong choice. I’m a person that’s like
very anxious, like I’m a perfectionist and I really am afraid to make the wrong choice.
So, I’m like, oh my God, I have to fix that. But she really taught me that it’s okay if you
make a wrong choice, you should have to learn. So, I’m like, even if I didn’t like [this
school], I would’ve transferred. I could just transfer.

Pricilla and many other participants felt overwhelmed by the choices and anxiety of making what
they considered was a wrong choice. For these first-generation students, college choice was a
very important decision that they took seriously, which is why it affected their emotional state.
However, though Pricilla alluded to seeking the support of a therapist to calm her anxiety, many
of the other participants stated they had anxiety throughout the entire process without any
support.

Other fears related to the college choice experience for this population were associated
with personal circumstances such as economic resources and citizenship status. As previously
reported, the cost of college was related to a familial consideration in the college choice. This
section supports the finding that emotions influence the college choice process. Though many of
the first-generation Latinx participants self-identified as low-income or living at the poverty
level, their financial circumstances caused them to fear their choice, as it would influence the
type of institution they would likely attend. Veronica, who attends the 4-year institution, stated how she believes first-generation students are scared by the financial obligations of obtaining a higher education. She stated,

I mean like as first-generations you’re just, you get scared and stuff. Like, it’s really just that fear. . . . Along with like [acceptances and denials], you’re getting like that financial aid that they’re providing. And it’s in that moment where you’re looking, okay they gave me this much, but it’s like you’re happy but it’s like, look at how much the school actually costs and you realize that they didn’t give you much in terms of what’s left over that you have to pay out of pocket. I think it’s, it’s that like moment where it’s like, well, shoot, like can I even afford this? Like is it like worth it? And I feel like with first-generation students, a lot of them we just like automatically, like just get turned down. We’re coming from like a low background or like low educated family and stuff. And it’s like, well, I clearly can’t afford this. And then a lot of them turn to like, like community colleges and stuff. I just feel like first-generation students, they are really at like a 50/50 chance thing where we’re like—I going to take the economic risk of attending like a 4-year private or public like university and like go into so much debt or not.

Though Veronica denoted how college choice causes fear related to risking getting in debt, it is important to note that some participants used their economic circumstances as motivation instead. Cynthia, who attends the 2-year institution, noted,

When you grow up your whole life, like considered quote–unquote poverty level by the government, like you want to strive for better and you’re reminded of that every day that you are at home. Because if you don’t strive for better than this, this is going to be your whole life. And yeah, that’s what got me to apply to [the private community college] and that’s kind of what got me to write the essay and just kind of explaining my situation.

Though some participants discussed a fear of their personal economic circumstances and how they would influence their college choices, some noted how they actually used these circumstances as motivation to pursue a higher education, regardless of the type of institution. Though economic circumstances caused fear in some of the participants, other circumstances, such as citizenship status, created another fear that is important to highlight.
Anxiety and Invincibility of Undocumented Students

Though only a subset of the participants self-identified as undocumented students, it was important to create a subsection to describe their emotions as their circumstances were like those of no other participants in this study. Of the three students who identified as undocumented, two attend the 2-year private institution and one attends the 4-year private institution. They described their citizenship status as a legitimate fear they had throughout their entire college choice process and how this caused them an extreme amount of anxiety. Alma, an undocumented student who attends the 4-year institution, shared how she concluded she would stay close to home as she made her college choice because of familial concerns and her undocumented status. She stated,

So, being first-generation, an immigrant, the oldest sister, and my family is very united; I was not interested in applying to any Ivies because I didn’t want to leave the state. Like also because of that risk of like ICE and depending on how undocumented friendly [the schools] were.

As Alma considered her college options, she identified that going out of state could cause issues with her immigration status. She noted being very cautious of the schools to which she applied, as she wanted to make sure they welcomed undocumented students. Students who are undocumented have to consider a variety of additional factors compared to those who are not. For the undocumented participants, their immigration status caused them fear and anxiety, but it is vital to comment that they also used this identity to narrow down their choices and considerations. Additionally, this circumstance was considered a great motivator for some of the participants. For example, Lupe, an undocumented student who attends the 2-year institution, shared,

I was checking on the fact that Latino and undocumented students [like me] couldn’t get out loans specifically. So, I was like, you know what, like I’m just going to give it a shot,
you know. . . . I couldn’t find another way to go to college because for me there were many obstacles. That just like pushes me through to do better and like every obstacle is just like a milestone. And like I’m like invincible in a way. Like anything that you put in my way, I will try my best to get out of it.

Lupe found a way. She realized that because her grades were exemplary, she could apply for the Dream U.S. Scholarship, which is open to undocumented students, and she received a fully funded scholarship. Though fear seems to be inevitable in light of the current landscape regarding immigration in the United States, some undocumented students found ways to overcome these obstacles.

**Self-Doubt**

Another prevalent negative emotion the participants shared they felt during their college choice experience was self-doubt. Some felt self-doubt given the fact that they did not have confidence in themselves and they compared themselves to others. Alma, who attends the 4-year institution, shared how her lack of confidence caused her to initially limit her college choices.

She said,

I guess I shouldn’t have limited myself. Maybe I could have, I feel like I had what it took to go to an Ivy League. Um and maybe I shouldn’t have limited myself to only some schools. I guess I should have believed in myself a little bit more. Maybe it was partly because I didn’t want to leave my family or also because I didn’t want to not get in, you know?

As Alma reflected on her college choice experience, she felt conflicted regarding why she limited herself. She stated she may have chosen institutions that were near to stay close to family but then referenced the fact that she also did not want to be rejected admission. Hence, this insinuated her limitations were related to her own lack of confidence. Other participants had self-doubt because they compared themselves to others. For example, Veronica, who attends the 4-
year institution, stated that after reflecting on her college choice experience, she realized she doubted herself because she compared herself to others. She shared her reflection about this as she stated,

I feel like I had a lot of self-doubt in terms of like scholarships. I’m like so many kids are applying like I’m not going to be that kid to like win it. I’m like so many other kids have done better than me in terms of like academics. Like no, there’s kids with like 4.5 GPAs and it’s like, I’m over here with like a 4.3. It’s still good, but like me comparing myself to even better students then, I felt like nothing.

She did not apply for scholarships because she did not believe she would get them because she felt others were more academically successful. She later realized she was qualified; however, she felt self-doubt in that moment. If Veronica believed in herself enough to apply to this scholarship or others, she could have expanded her college choice options and had a different college choice experience. Another example in which a participant compared themselves to others was when Kamila, who attends the 4-year institution, compared herself to her classmates at Ivy League schools. She said,

So, like honestly, like at first when we were like on decision day, I think that’s what’s called like on May first. It’s like when everyone decides on a school. Like, you know, everyone wears their school colors and all of that. And like, honestly, at first, I don’t know, I just felt like kind of weird because [my school] was not really considered like an Ivy League and because everyone was wearing [Ivy League schools], you know. So I felt—not like jealous, but I just thought that I like wasn’t smart enough or like I didn’t try hard enough to get into like a school like theirs.

Although Kamila chose to attend the private 4-year institution, she still felt self-doubt in her college choice compared to others in her school who attended well-known and competitive schools. This supports the idea that first-generation students choose to compare themselves to others because they do not have anyone in their own families to whom to compare themselves. Therefore, participants expressed a lack of confidence, compared themselves to others, and had
self-doubt, even when they successfully made a college choice. Along with feeling various emotions, participants in the study shared feelings of discouragement, intimidation, and disrespect. However, these feelings were connected to how their high school counselors made them feel about the college choice process.

**Unsupported: Discouraged, Intimidated, and Disrespected**

Participants in this study shared their feelings about their counselors and how they supported them or not. Mostly, counselors were present in the lives of the participants as they encountered the college choice process. However, it is notable that many counselors were not supportive and even discouraged or intimidated students. Alma, an undocumented student who attends the 4-year institution, noted she felt unsupported and discouraged by her counselor when she was told to be realistic about her goals. Thereafter, Alma stopped going to her counselor for support. She stated,

The reason I stopped going to [my counselor] is because she basically told me like, community college is going to be what your next step is. Basically, like don’t apply to [4-year institutions] because you’re not going to get in. Even though I was top of my class but I just feel like she was like—you have to be realistic because you’re undocumented. She just told me things that I, that took me by surprise. It’s just like, you know my dreams and my hopes and you know how hard I work and you’re here discouraging me to apply to [4-year] institutions. It was just like a shock to me. And she like really like discouraged me from the college process. That’s right. That’s why I stopped talking to her.

Alma’s counselor wanted her to be “realistic,” as being undocumented would not allow her to apply for financial aid and, hence, not allow her to afford a 4-year institution. Surprisingly, Alma shared that she gravitated toward her counselor originally because she also identified as Latina and Alma connected with her on many levels. However, as soon as she felt discouraged, Alma no longer felt supported and distanced herself from her counselor.
Many participants highlighted more than just being discouraged but also being
intimidated and having negative feelings toward their counselors. For example, Daniel shared he
felt intimidated when approaching his counselor to ask questions. He stated,

Then, when you would go to [the counselor] with questions I would kind of feel scared or
not scared but intimidated a little bit to ask them questions because then they’d be like,
“Why? Like why would you do that? Like why would you ask that?” Like it was just, I
don’t know. They were okay. I’m not going to say they weren’t good, but you know, they
really didn’t exceed the expectation that I thought they would.

Daniel expressed how his counselor’s interrogations and constant doubt only pushed him away
from feeling supported. This made Daniel not trust their professionalism as he distanced himself
from engaging with the counselor to ask further questions or express concerns regarding the
college choice process. Daniel further shared how he felt the lack of professionalism from his
counselor was not only directed toward him but toward other students. He shared how he felt his
counselor was even disrespectful toward others by making them feel less than for their own
college choices. He said,

Like they told me that [the private community college] degree was better than a [public] community college degree, which, okay, that’s fine. But they said that when there were
other students in the office that were going to a [public] community college. So, now
they’re making them feel bad. . . The way that he treated me was all right, but the way
he treated others was, was worse because I would not have let myself get treated like that.
You’re just not this disrespectful to young adults, you know, like just treat us with
respect. And then the other students, like they would just let themselves be treated like
this, because they didn’t know how to, some of them are first-generation students too,
and they didn’t know how to react to somebody talking to them like that.

Daniel expressed his negative reaction to how counselors can make first-generation students feel
inadequate given their questions or college choices. Hence, when first-generation Latinx students
are intimidated or feel less than by their counselor, they are likely to lose confidence in that
support system. As this section indicates, counselors can be of great influence over emotions
during the college choice process, and the following section expands upon why counselors and other individuals are so crucial to these participants.

**Se Necesita un Pueblo (It Takes a Village)**

**Family and Friends Support**

As previously stated in other sections, family and friends play an important role in the college choice process. Although most families and friends cannot offer expert advice or information regarding the college choice process, the participants distinguished them as crucial sources of support. For example, Alma, who attends the 4-year institution, noted her mother as essential to her existence in this country and the most present with her in the college choice process. She said,

> I feel like my mom [was most supportive in this process] because without her, I wouldn’t be here in the United States. . . . And those late nights applying to scholarships or writing papers—she stood up with me for the most part; she was there.

Although Alma’s mother may not have given her guidance on the college choice process, her presence and acts of care meant Alma was not alone in the process. Family was not the only support received outside of counselors. Kamila, who attends the 4-year institution, expressed that because her high school had very absent counselors, she turned to her friends for assistance. She shared how they created a community to share information and work together on the research and application process. She discussed her community experience by sharing,

> I think I did a lot of like research on my own and a lot of like, my friends in high school, we like all would just come [together] and like talk about it, like within our life. It’ll be like, oh, like I researched it and called them. There’s a deadline for this type of thing. So, it was mainly like on us [together]. So, it wasn’t really like [adult] figures who like guided us, it was mainly like us, like researching on our own.
Kamila went on to share that although her friends helped her learn about college information, her family also played a vital role in her college choice process. She spoke to her parents first when she reviewed financial aid packages. She shared,

I talked to my parents first [when I got them in the mail] and I was just like, I got into like these two schools, and then together we looked at what school gave me more financial assistance. . . . I think the main [support came from] my family. So, like my parents and my brother. Just because like my mom, she was just saying like, I just want you to go like somewhere where you’re going to be comfortable. It doesn’t matter like the type of school or whatever it is. So, I say it was mainly like my parents that helped me just like feeling like more comfortable with the decision I made because even though my friends were like there, my parents just [made me feel] more comfortable and more natural when I like talked about it with [them].

Her experience proved that friends can be a great resource and source of support but family more often brings comfort to the college choice process for first-generation Latinx students. For most, their parents offer the most support, but for some first-generation students who have an older sibling who attended college, they look to a brother or sister for guidance and support. Lucia, who attends the 2-year institution, was one of the participants who had an older sibling who attended college. She shared that she felt very drawn to follow in the footsteps of her sister and take her guidance into consideration. She noted she applied to the school her sister attended and said,

The reason why I applied to [that college] was because my sister went there and I was already familiar with the school and I had met her friends and other people there. So, I felt like since I already knew them and my sister went there and my sister was like telling me like, “Oh, if you go there, I would go back for my master’s so we can be there together.” So, it was just easier. But I mean, not because I really, really wanted to go there just because I was just familiar with it already.

Though Lucia found her sister to be helpful in her college choice process, it is important to stress that in her experience, she only applied to that specific college to follow in her sister’s footsteps.
She took what she considered to be an easy choice, as the path had been set before her by her sister. Therefore, though siblings who have attended college can be helpful to first-generation students, it is important to consider how they narrow the college choice options for them as well. Though Lucia decided to attend a different institution than her sister, the other first-generation Latinx participants who discussed having an older sibling who attended college followed in their footsteps and attended the same school. Though friends and families played an important role for most participants, they also noted other counselors as key players who contributed to their support system.

**Counselor Support**

Most participants noted the importance of a strong support system, such as from their high school counselor, during their college choice process regardless of whether they chose the 2-year or 4-year institution. For some, their counselor was their confidant and their biggest support system, and for others their counselor played a more functional and practical role. Regardless, counselors played an important part for most of the participants. For those whose counselors did not help, their absence was noticeable. Though I discuss the details of the students and their counselor interactions in the following findings section called Building Counselor Confianza (Trust), this section is dedicated to engaging in the idea of why counselor support was necessary during some of the experiences participants shared. Overall, for this specific demographic, first-generation Latinx individuals, counselors are important because first-generation students have few or no individuals to turn to for help during the college choice process. Pricilla, who attends the 4-year institution, shared that professionals in institutions, such
as counselors in school settings, are necessary for students such as her who identify as first-generation and view this experience as difficult. She stated,

You don’t have the family member there to support you. Like, I can’t turn to my right side and have a sister or cousin or anything that knows how to write a paper, right? I have to go through professional institutions and go through that whole process. And it’s just a lot. So, it’s a lot of work to catch up on your own, especially if you don’t have anyone there.

Pricilla noted the importance of a professional’s support to navigate the difficulty of the college choice process because these students are the first in their families or communities pursue this process. However, it is not only because they are the first to go through such a process that counselors are important. Though counselors can be an incredible resource of knowledge, they are also an important source of emotional support. Hence, counselors are specifically important to the college choice process for first-generation Latinx students who constantly doubt themselves and lack confidence due to their specific, racially minoritized, and first-generation identity. A powerful example in which a counselor supported a student who lacked confidence was the experience that Lucia, who attends the 2-year institution, encountered while she considered whether to apply to a 2-year or 4-year institution. She recounted,

[My counselor] definitely helped me understand that a 2-year college wasn’t a bad thing and she helped me understand that even though that’s not where I wanted to be, like I still had an opportunity to get where I wanted to be. Like it wasn’t just because I went to a 2-year, that it was over for me or she didn’t think any less of me for that. That’s what I was worried about because I didn’t want people thinking less of me. Even though I shouldn’t care what people think about me. At the time, I didn’t want people to think bad of me because they had, like, everyone had so high expectations of me that I didn’t want them to feel disappointed just because I attended a 2-year. So, she definitely supported me and did not bring me down from my college choices.

Lucia noted concern about what others thought even though she understood she should not care about others. However, as many of the high achieving first-generation Latinx students
interviewed noted, those high expectations were ever-present, and seemingly making a mistake made them hypervigilant of their choices to try to please others. Lucia’s counselor showcased how a supportive counselor should respond based on her knowledge and emotional support in the college choice process. The counselor’s encouragement and belief in Lucia’s success, regardless of the college choice, truly empowered Lucia to feel confident with her choice to attend a 2-year institution. Other than counselors, the participants also reflected on teachers and mentors as important sources of support.

**Teacher and Mentor Support**

Other than counselors, family, and friends, the participants denoted other members in their community as useful sources of support during their college choice process. In particular, they indicated teachers and mentors as being very helpful in their college choice experience. Many participants noted teachers were valuable to the college choice process by helping them decipher between choices, opening their eyes to new options, and being emotionally supportive. For example, Lucia, who attended a private Catholic high school and now attends the 2-year institution, stated her teacher engaged her and her classmates to think of different options. She stated, “I remember one of my teachers was talking to us and said, you should really consider going to all women’s university and it was different. So, they really exposed us to like all different types of options.” Veronica, who attends the 4-year institution, shared how her teacher went above and beyond to support students such as herself, who identified as first-generation Latinx. She stated,

> A lot of like teachers [helped me]. One specifically, Ms. G, she made it like her job to create events for first-generation students and for Hispanics and their parents. There’s
currently a program called *universidad de padres* [Parent University] and that program does monthly meetings? Like informing like the parents to come and be like educated on what’s going on in school or like what steps should their students be taking for like college and stuff. Like it’s a very informative. They get more like parents to come, they like offer food and stuff and they offer like babysitting at the little center there for like the kids and stuff. Because obviously like, you know, we have like the little kids and stuff and the teachers who are in charge of it are like aware of that. So, they want to make it like a, like you can still bring your kids, like we don’t want it to be like an issue or like your, your kids to be like a burden and stuff.

It is obvious Veronica felt Ms. G was a teacher who not only supported her but also her classmates who identified as she did. Veronica focused on the important role teachers can play in supporting their students. She noted Ms. G helped support a parent program. As first-generation Latinx students tend to rely on their parents, teachers like Ms. G can support their students and educate their parents so they, too, can be a source of support for their children.

Another form of support some participants noted came from mentors. Though mentors can be from their community or within their network, they can also play an important part in supporting the college choice process for first-generation Latinx students. Daniel, an undocumented student who attends the 2-year institution, depicted how a public school employee he met became his most important confidant and support system. He said,

I looked up a lot of people but if anybody gave me the most information was [him]. He was a [public school] employee. He still works at [the public school] and he helps undocumented students. He told me about the [scholarships available to undocumented students]. He told me about a bunch of scholarships and he told me, I know people here and there and he actually got me to speak with actual people that go to these schools and then I would get insight from Hispanic students. And I felt, I felt good about that.

Though Daniel depicted his mentor to not only be resourceful, given his particular circumstance, he also engaged in the idea that mentors can be good resources for networking and meeting others who can also be helpful. He noted how his mentor connected him to students at schools he
was interested in attending, and speaking to them helped him in the college choice process. Hence, mentors can play a crucial role in connecting first-generation students to a much larger network and expanding their options and knowledge of the college choice process. Though many participants discussed having mentors, most mentioned them coming from mentoring or bridge programs.

Additional Programs

More than half of the participants connected their additional support from mentors to their participation in college support programs. It is important to mention that their involvement in additional programs did not have a strong correlation with whether they chose a 2-year institution versus a 4-year institution. However, those who were involved in programs received support regarding the application process, scholarship information, financial aid education, career advice, and new perspectives, which, for most first-generation students, can be the most essential information they need. Some of the programs students described were specifically for first-generation college students, whereas others were for students who identified as minorities and some others were college bridge programs to help students gain admission to selective schools. These programs were connected to after school programs and community center programs but, surprisingly, some of the programs were even integrated into the school setting. Lupe, who attends the 2-year institution, discussed how a specific program that was integrated into a class in school was essential for her college choice success. She said,

That class pushed us to do the application process way earlier. So instead of doing my letter my senior year I was already doing it in my junior year. I was the only one in that class, in that program, that was undocumented. . . . At the end of the day I got accepted and it was like a big help. I think I got more help from that program than my counselor
specifically. One of the [program] counselors, that came from the downtown office to
class to specifically help us and push us through. And when we were talking, we were
having like a monthly meeting, all of a sudden, I was always checking my emails with
her and I got an email from [a college]. And so I opened it and I was like, I’m so scared
to open that email. Can you check it first? And she’s like, no. She grabbed my hand and
she was telling me, she was like, we’re going to both check, okay, go here. And whatever
happens, like either it goes downhill, or if not, we have a backup. So, I was like, great.
We checked it, and I started crying because I got accepted. I was super excited. . . . So,
there were always that connection that I could run to when I need an information. And
that was like a big impact in my life because I have so many questions and the people that
were there, that was them whenever, like I had questions.

One important thing to denote about the program Lupe described is that it was a selective
program to which students had to apply and, therefore, it was not offered to all students at her
school. According to Lupe, the support counselor for this program was not only helpful in the
application process and when answering her questions, they were caring, encouraging, and
supportive of her. For an undocumented student, like Lupe, this additional resource was a game
changer that allowed Lupe to get the support she needed to be able to afford and attend college.
The students who received resources outside of the school setting felt they understood the
college choice process and had a much more supported experience. However, these programs
were not only useful to give students more support, they were useful to give first-generation
students new perspectives. As Alma, who attends the 4-year institution, denoted,

I was part of a [college bridge] program that helped minorities get into selective colleges.
So, I was in [a college] taking summer classes as a part of that program. So, having that
college feel like that’s another reason why I didn’t go to [that college] because I didn’t
like that environment. They’re negative; very cut throat. And that’s a whole different type
of environment. I want to be supported with my peers, and that’s not the type of
environment that I felt there.

For Alma, participating in a program that exposed her to a college environment was enlightening
because it enabled her to determine what she did and did not like. This experience helped her
analyze and consider what would be best for her when choosing a college to attend. For first-generation students, an experience such as this can be essential because given they are the first in their families to attend college, they do not know what to expect. A program like this can offer an understanding of what to expect and on what to base a college choice, which no one would explain to a first-generation student. As this section shows, it takes a village to truly support and deliver useful resources and information to first-generation Latinx students during the college choice process. Furthermore, the way this village supports this demographic of students really matters. Hence, it is valuable to review how building counselor trust is important for these participants.

**Building Counselor Confianza (Trust)**

**Time, Representation, and Understanding Matters**

The participants in this study established the importance of either a counselor or a mentor/advisor from an extracurricular program supporting them in their college choice process. It was not only necessary for these participants to have someone present to provide support, they needed someone they could trust. The findings, in particular, indicated a counselor relationship was fundamental for this population in their college choice process. Students with strong and positive counselor relationships tended to feel more supported in their college choice experience versus students who may have had present counselors but to whom they did not feel personally close. Specifically, of the five participants who chose to attend the 4-year institution, only one noted not having a close relationship or good support from their counselor. Additionally, of the four participants who chose to attend the 2-year institution, only one signaled having a good
relationship with and support system from their counselor. During the discussion, this finding was further analyzed and examined. In particular, it was found that participants felt that when spending time with their counselors, representation among their counselors was important, and the counselors’ understanding of the students’ identities and cultures mattered when building trust. Additionally, their holistic support was valuable and it was empowering when a counselor believed in a student’s potential.

First and foremost, building a counselor relationship is based on time and effort. It was noted by various participants who felt they did not have supportive counselors that their counselors were not available to speak with them due to having an excessive number of students or an overwhelming amount of responsibilities. For example, Lupe, who attends the 2-year institution, said, “[The counselor] were submitting [transcripts and letters of recommendations] late because they were way too focused in making us field trips to go see the college instead of helping get in the college.” Hence, Lupe believed counselors were not supportive because they were not available or were too busy to help students. Individuals who felt their counselors were most helpful distinguished the fact that their counselors were integrated into the classroom. For example, Lucia, who attended a private Catholic high school and now attends the 2-year institution, shared how her high school created college counseling groups and the homeroom or advisory class time would be when they met with their counselor/advisor who helped them with the college choice process. She expanded upon the topic and stated,

In our college counseling groups, they would like to inform us and like really motivate us to pursue a college career and explore different options. Like I remember one time my advisor, we were in our college counseling groups or classrooms, she was like talking to the girls and saying like, you should really consider going to an all women university and
stuff like that. And it was different. So, they really exposed us to like all different types of options, but they really emphasized pursuing higher education.

Having the college counseling happen inside the classroom allowed for the time and space to share college information in a group format and for students to have the dedicated time to learn. Other students supported the idea of having counselors in the classroom or as a part of the classroom by comparing their relationships to their counselors and their teachers with whom they spent more time. Cynthia, who attends the 2-year institution, discussed,

The counselor was nice, but she was just kind of there to support, but I was like more connected to the teachers. They offered you like more options and more support. You get to interact with your teachers more. You see them at least for an hour a day and you get to make conversation with them. So, I just got to gain a better relationship with them than I would with my college counselor.

For Cynthia, more time with her counselor would have allowed for a better relationship to develop. The participants who had counselors inside the classroom not only felt supported during their college choice process, they also felt they had developed more meaningful relationships that could better support their college-related decisions. Another way in which participants reported building trust was with those with whom they shared identities and understood them.

Most participants described how representation and understanding mattered to them to build trust. Not only was it important for them to feel supported by someone, it was even more powerful to be supported by someone with whom they identified. Kamila, who attends the 4-year institution, explained what she would have preferred from her college counselor during her college choice experience. She shared,

I was going say, getting to know the students more on a personal level and maybe having more counselors who like they themselves were first-generation or like who are minorities, too. Just because like, you can relate to them more in a way, and they understand you better as opposed to having all, like Caucasian teachers who don’t really
understand what you’re going through. . . . Because I didn’t get to know [my counselor] on a personal level, even though they were like all really nice and everything. It was just like the lack of like the personal connection.

Kamila explained that having counselors who identify with students can be more helpful because these counselors can better understand and form a personal connection with the students, which first-generation Latinx students ultimately seek. Pricilla, who attends the 4-year institution, alluded to this idea and expanded upon why it is important to have a personal connection with a counselor, specifically one who feels like family. She stated,

I feel like [my counselor] is like my mom at school. They were always there for me and they told me the ways that the things were, she didn’t like give me information that was just useless. . . . She’s Latina. So, she kind of empowered me. She’s like, you’re Latino. Like use that. It was just kind of a good relationship because she was also Hispanic. So, when she would talk to my parents, it would be in Spanish. So, it was kind of nice.

Pricilla felt very connected to and empowered by her counselor because they shared certain identities. She even felt like her counselor was family, which is an important value for Latinx individuals. This propelled Pricilla toward success in her college choice experience. Sharing identities with others not only empowers individuals, it makes them more comfortable asking questions and sharing information. Veronica, who attends the 4-year institution, also shared how it felt to visit the office of a counselor with whom she shared an identity. She said,

I was constantly in there. I think it helped too, that [the counselor] was like Mexican, too. I had more *confianza* (trust) to actually talk to them and to relate to them. Because I would like in many occasions talk to them in Spanish, for example. And then it was just easier too for my parents to communicate with them.

For Veronica, having a counselor who identified with her culture made her trust them more with her college choice process. Additionally, as Pricilla and Veronica both shared, having a counselor who spoke their language allowed them to speak and educate their parents about the
process, which was very important to these participants. Hence, the findings denoted the importance of having representation from counselors. However, it is important to note that although representation in a counselor is ideal, it is not always possible.

Participants felt that although they would love to be motivated by counselors, teachers, and mentors who looked just like them, they also noted the importance of just feeling understood and welcomed. Veronica, who attends the 4-year institution, shared that she loved when her high school hosted a college night for first-generation students that welcomed all students from different cultures. She felt this program recognized the diversity and representation of the students, and she shared that it welcomed students to consider college regardless of whether they shared the same culture as their counselors or teachers. She stated,

I’m just acknowledging and recognizing that promoting awareness [at the college event], like to first-generation students is so important because like I said before, representation is so important, and you having that person represent you or them displaying your culture can change a student’s mind completely and like gear them towards like being motivated.

Veronica alluded to the idea that even though representation is important, making an individual feel welcomed can make a difference in the college choice experience. This means the understanding of a student’s identities, experiences, perspectives, and issues is just as valuable as sharing them with a person. Further, participants described the importance of better preparing counselors and school staff to understand them and the issues they face. Daniel, who attends the 2-year institution, expressed his frustrations regarding working with school staff who did not understand his undocumented status or how to support him and his past traumas. He said,

So first of all, schools need to have more social workers. I agree with that. Second of all, there needs to be more days in the calendar year for teachers to get trainings. On how to treat undocumented [student] well, not to treat, but how to interact with them.
Undocumented and/or minority students that have faced a lot of trauma. You could say, that for me, are the things that they could change.

It was noticeable in Daniel’s determined tone of voice that he felt he did not receive the support he needed during the college choice experience as an undocumented minority student who needed more help than solely deciding on a college. He encouraged training for staff to help them learn how to understand him and other students like him. This highlighted the importance of helping school staff, who may not identify with the students they support, learn how to better understand, welcome, and build relationships with their students. Overall, holistically supporting students regarding their college choice experience was essential for these participants. Another important finding that is indispensable to document is how students need to feel their counselor has confidence in them.

“Stop Giving Up on Us”

To build strong relationships, there has to be trust from both individuals within the relationship. Though trust can be built with time, effort, representation, and understanding, another important factor for counselors to consider is the need to believe in their students. A finding that stood out among the participants was their need for counselors and other support systems to have confidence in their potential. Some participants stated their counselors had high expectations for their college choice processes. Though this may have caused the students stress, it also helped them feel confident. However, other participants shared that they lacked feeling those high college expectations. Some of the participants felt their counselors were only present for transactional interactions, such as requesting a transcript to apply to college, rather than creating meaningful relationships with them. These students also noted feeling as though their
counselors were not authentically present to support them in their college choice process but to just improve the college application and acceptance numbers for their high school statistics.

Cynthia, who attends the 2-year institution, shared her thoughts regarding the low expectations her high school counselor had of students. She stated,

They kind of made us apply cause in order to graduate you had to apply to at least two colleges and I think apply to like one job or two jobs, just to know you had a plan, but there weren’t like super high expectations. Like the expectation was just to get us out the door with a high school diploma. And other than that, they would kind of expect us to just go apply to a [community] college or something like that. I think if they saw that you were motivated, they spent more time kind of trying to talk to you. Whereas if they saw that maybe you weren’t doing as well your senior year, they kind of pushed you to apply maybe to one school, but they weren’t hopeful. They weren’t expecting much. The expectations weren’t as high.

This excerpt revealed how the counselors and high schools demonstrated low expectations and also how they ignored unmotivated students. Another student who alluded to this idea was Veronica, who attends the 4-year institution. She had a supportive counselor but witnessed how others were ignored, given their lack of motivation. She explained that lack of motivation is just a cry for help. She stated,

I see the clear bias that some [counselors and teachers] take, and I feel like they really have to stop giving up on us. Like they see a student who’s like Hispanic or Latinx and they right away off the bat, like stereotype the kid. I completely understand them when there are some students that like talk back and they just don’t show up to class. And it’s like I understand your point and you taking a position after that, but like please don’t off the bat stereotype us, because I know a lot of kids, like they use that as a coping mechanism. Like them giving attitudes, it’s just like a coping mechanism for [all the other issues] Latinx students face.

Veronica urged counselors and teachers to understand that they cannot have low expectations or ignore students because of their attitudes, because this is mostly due to first-generation Latinx individuals dealing with other issues that require the students’ attention. This significant finding
shows how easy it is for counselors, teachers, and support systems to stereotype students and not be as supportive as they need to be to help students make a college choice. According to the participants, including Veronica, it is important to have high expectations and be supportive even with students who seem unmotivated about going to college. Believing in these students is essential in supporting the first-generation Latinx demographic. It is significant to note that even students with supportive counselors, who are present and helpful during the college choice process, could also have counselors who lack the ability to believe or have confidence in a student’s success. For example, participants noted counselors were present to help with the application process but still questioned or doubted the students’ abilities. Alma, who attends the 4-year institution and whose story was previously highlighted, was discouraged by her supportive counselor to apply to 4-year institutions given her undocumented status. Rather than being encouraged to pursue her dreams, Alma was deterred because of her circumstance. A support system made up of individuals who are committed to building a meaningful relationship with the student and are confident in the student’s potential is the most powerful support system a first-generation Latinx student can have in their college choice process.
CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

As aforementioned, the participants’ college choice experiences were determined by their own motivations to obtain a higher education. Their experiences related to the college choice process showed the emotions associated with making their choices, support systems, and counselor confianza (trust). In this discussion, I contextualize participants’ experiences to answer the research questions, which included (a) How do first-generation Latinx students who attend a 2-year college make meaning of their college choice process? (b) How do first-generation Latinx students who attend a 4-year university make meaning of their college choice process? (c) To what extent did students feel supported by their high school counselors in their college choice process? Why or why not? Following the discussion, I offer implications and recommendations to be considered and implemented by academic scholars, higher education administrators, high school administrators and counselors, and first-generation Latinx students, families, and communities.

Similar College Choice Experiences

Regarding the experiences of first-generation Latinx students during the college choice process, I anticipated there would be a major difference between students who attend the private 2-year institution and those who attend the 4-year university. Statistically, 46% of first-generation students across all racial and ethnic groups attend public 2-year institutions, 26% attend public 4-year institutions, and 28% attend private nonprofit, for-profit, or other institutions
Specifically regarding Latinx students, 58% of students attend 2-year institutions (Liu, 2011). I believed there would be a clear difference in these students’ college choice experiences. However, I discovered the majority of the participants made meaning of their college choice experiences in a similar manner.

Regardless of the school they chose to attend, the participants encompassed similar motivations, considerations, emotions, and support systems. Their similar experiences with the college choice process highlighted an important factor that high school counselors and college admissions representatives should consider more deeply when supporting these students during this time. Commonly, high school counselors and college admissions representatives assume which type of institution they believe students should attend based on academic performance, finances, disposition, and fit. Subsequently, how they support first-generation Latinx students changes depending on the schools the students are considering. For example, Daniel, one of the participants in the current study, attends the 2-year community college and stated his counselor treated students disrespectfully if they wanted to attend a public college rather than a private college. It is important to emphasize that counselors’ biases and whether students lack confidence or are disinterested play a large role in the relationships between counselors and students.

The findings of this study indicated that when a student pursues either a 2-year or 4-year private education, they consider their options in similar ways. This finding supports that counselors and college admissions representatives must not change their methods depending on the type of institution the student is considering. There is no need for counselors to treat Latinx
students differently based on the types of institutions they are considering attending, as the
students may consider these institutions out of ignorance or self-doubt. More importantly,
counselors should consider common college choice experiences to better understand how to
serve first-generation Latinx students regardless of the institution they pursue.

Engberg and Wolniak (2009) discussed college choice pathways based on racial groups
and sociological perspectives. Their findings indicated college choice support should be
administered based on each student’s experience rather than on the school they choose.
Specifically, the participants in this dissertation study shared similar motivations, considerations,
emotions, and support systems. Overall, counselors and admissions representatives should
consider these factors when they support Latinx students during the college choice process. In
the following sections, I review the similarities my participants shared during the college choice
process.

Motivations and Considerations

As demonstrated in Chapter 4, the participants shared they were motivated by their pride,
their parents, and contributing to their communities. Much of the research regarding college
choice did not include pride as an experience in the college choice process. However, the
findings from this study indicated participants found pride in their identities as Latinx and first-
generation students and used these identities as motivation.

Another motivator mentioned in this study was family, which is highly supported by the
literature regarding Latinx students. In particular, the literature indicates Latinx students often
view their parents in high regard (Barthelemy, 2017) and higher education is an aspiration in
their families (Kiyama, 2010; McCallister et al., 2010). Hence, the findings further confirmed the importance of family for Latinx students during their college choice process. Another important source of motivation for these students was contributing to their communities. Acevedo-Gil’s (2017) college choice framework supports that the college choice process for Latinx students includes a consideration of their institutional choice as well as advocacy and support for others in their communities. Therefore, the findings further support the literature that shows Latinx students often feel the need to help their peers and future generations in their communities (Rendon et al., 2014). It is important to continually highlight the fact that Latinx students want to serve as examples for their families and communities, which ultimately motivates them. The robustness of this finding supports the importance of engaging first-generation Latinx students’ sense of pride and their desire to give back to encourage them during their higher education pursuits. I expound upon this area in the recommendations for practitioners and future research.

The participants also considered material factors when making their college choices. Regardless of whether they chose the private 2-year or private 4-year college, they acknowledged familial financial concerns and proximity to family. Previous literature denoted finances as a familial topic that is highly regarded among racially minoritized students (McDonough & Calderone, 2006). For example, participants stated they reviewed their financial aid packages with their parents and considered their family’s financial circumstances before making a decision. Research regarding first-generation Latinx transfer students has shown finances have a major impact on students’ college choices (Baum et al., 2013; Vega, 2018). Acevedo-Gil (2017) considered the difficulty of affording college-related expenses, given a high
proportion of Latinx students are from low-income backgrounds. With the annual increase in college tuition costs, Latinx students from low-income families sometimes view cost as an obstacle during the college choice process. The findings support prior literature regarding family finances for this student population, as students noted experiencing difficulties and stress when they discussed college costs with their families. Hence, these findings further support that financial concerns regarding college choice are a familial worry for first-generation and Latinx students as they tend to come from low-income backgrounds.

In addition to financial costs, participants noted the importance of staying close to their families. This finding aligned with prior literature that also stressed how Latinx students tend to stay close to home and remain connected to their families (Pérez & McDonough, 2008). The participants in this study further affirmed this assertion when they discussed the importance of being close to home to help their families and prioritizing the strong cultural values placed on family. Participants further noted a desire to stay close to home to support their families during times of trouble, including financial and language barriers.

Counselors and admissions representatives often believe students can move to and attend their top college of choice. Realistically, it is often more difficult for first-generation Latinx students to pursue this endeavor given their familial responsibilities. According to the College Board (2011), it is recommended that counselors encourage students to apply to three types of colleges: at least one safety school where they are sure to be admitted, one match school where they are likely to be admitted, and one reach school where it may be a challenge to get admitted. At times, students’ reach schools seem out of grasp, because they are often out of state.
However, students benefit from being encouraged by their counselors given their belief that students can attend their reach schools. Other times, counselors prioritize improving the school’s college application and acceptance percentages over the actual needs of first-generation Latinx students and their families.

Individuals who support the college choice process of first-generation Latinx students should advocate for familial involvement during the college choice process and familial connection once students attend college. Rosas and Hamrick (2002) stated counselors must be aware of how first-generation Latinx students negotiate conflicting familial values when planning their higher education pursuits. Hence, family culture and responsibilities should be considered when students are encouraged to apply to colleges that may be too far for them to attend and still maintain their cultural values. Furthermore, additional information should be provided to educate first-generation Latinx students and their families about the costs of attending college.

Regardless of their college choice, the participants also considered institutional concerns such as quality of education and environmental fit. This finding is supported by the literature that showed Latinx students can be guided to choose a good institution fit (Pérez & Ceja, 2015) and a sense of belonging is important for Latinx students (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). However, it is also important to note that this finding potentially emerged given the type of institutions chosen for this study. This study specifically included two private intuitions that both have religiously-driven missions. The only major difference between the two was that one was a 2-year community college and the other was a 4-year institution. Hence, it is possible that the quality of
education was considered for both institutions, as the participants noted each of the private schools as providing a quality education. The participants specifically discussed that they felt public community colleges did not provide the same level of quality education and support as do private schools. Hence, they determined private institutions were a better choice for them.

Ultimately, it is possible that the findings indicated the participants wanted a quality education, regardless of the institution, because public institutions were not included in the study.

In addition, both institutions involved in the study provide first-generation and Latinx students various support resources that align with their identities, which may explain why these participants felt strongly about environmental fit. For example, participants who chose to attend the private 2-year community college compared it to a public community. The students felt a private 2-year community college would offer a better quality education for a lower cost than a 4-year institution. Also, they felt the private 2-year community college would offer a more welcoming environment for them, according to their racial identity. In short, these findings demonstrate a quality education and environmental fit are equally important concerns for first-generation Latinx students. The participants in the study discussed how they were willing to pay a higher cost for tuition if it meant they received a good quality education, including additional resources and a welcoming environment. Moreover, these findings highlight how first-generation Latinx students are often cognizant of the quality of their education and the environmental fit at an institution. It is vital to thoroughly discuss these considerations with students given they are important for the students to make a good college choice that is right for them, which will ultimately affect retention and completion rates.
These findings have important implications for research and practice. Much of the literature places finances as the most important factor in college choice for first-generation Latinx students (Baum et al., 2013; Vega, 2018). However, the findings from the current study support that finances are not the sole concern for this student population regarding college choice. Researchers must consider the integration of other factors, such as students’ financial situations and perceived institutional fit, when developing college choice models. Regarding practice, the findings indicate counselors and admissions representatives should not assume a student’s family income level is the only determining factor that affects a student’s college attendance. Though finances can have a great influence on college choice, counselors and admissions representatives must engage students to learn about other factors that need to be considered. By being more conscious of important college choice factors for this student demographic, counselors and admissions representatives can be more successful in supporting students. Overall, those who support first-generation Latinx students should not only provide financial information but also share information regarding the quality of education and environmental fit of every institution students consider.

**Emotions**

The majority of the participants, regardless of whether they chose the private 2-year or private 4-year institution, shared similar emotions during their college choice experiences. Participants shared a common theme regarding feeling negative emotions during their college choice process. Though some students noted feeling stress and anxiety as first-generation Latinx students, others shared feeling unsupported by others and full of self-doubt during the process.
Many participants said they felt stressed about the unknown based on being the first person in their families to pursue a higher education. Interestingly, the findings revealed even first-generation students who had an older sibling who attended college still felt stressed.

Some participants also noted anxiety caused by fear regardless of their college choice. For some participants, their parents actually contributed to their anxiety over making the right choice given their high expectations and the value they placed on obtaining a higher education. First-generation students might feel anxiety and fear during their college choice process associated with the high stakes of being a first-generation college student. The fear of making the wrong choice can cause stress that, in turn, affects the college choice process. This fear implies students may feel pressured to choose a school they believe will please their family or other significant figure rather than an institution that will be the best fit for them.

Further, it is important to reiterate that students are still considered first-generation college students even if they have a sibling who enrolled in or attended college. First-generation student status is determined by parents’ non-enrollment in college (Ward et al., 2012). Hence, the typical definition of being the first in the family to attend college is not supported by Ward et al.’s (2012) definition. In addition, this study complicates the assumption regarding being first-generation and I advocate for all to consider a broader definition of first-generation status in particular because my findings show that even if a student is not the first in their family to attend college, it is still difficult. For example, the findings showcased an important detail that must not be overlooked. Even if older siblings attend college, it does not make the college choice process any easier for a first-generation college student. It has been almost over 25 years since results of
McDonough’s (1997) breakthrough study showed the transfer and access of college information is difficult for students who lack social class networks and optimal school structures. It has been noted in various literature that both first-generation and Latinx students use their high school environments, community, and peers to access college information, and this affects their college choice and access (Ceja, 2000; Hurley & Coles, 2015; Jarsky et al., 2009; McDonough, 1997). It is important to note that siblings can be a valuable tool for first-generation Latinx students to use for help and support as they are considered to be funds of knowledge in the college choice process according to Rios-Aguilar and Kiyama (2012). However, what this finding indicates is that even with those social networks in play, and in particular close social networks such as a sibling, these students still struggle in the college choice process. This realization revealed how difficult the college choice process can be for first-generation students, even with guidance from siblings. Therefore, even with generational capital, there are many unknowns and stressors related to the college choice process for first-generation students. Ultimately, it is important that all first-generation students, regardless of whether they have an older sibling who attended college, be supported to lessen the stress of the unknown during the college choice process. Finally, first-generation students must still be considered to have capital wealth. Many times students who are first-generation are assumed to be at a deficit; however, what the findings showcased is that some were able to share value with siblings and each other. As first-generation status develops every generation, there are changes in the idea of what it actually means to be a first-generation student and hence, this population should continuously be studied.
A subset of participants who identified as undocumented students also noted feeling a heightened sense of fear given their undocumented status. There has been a vast amount of published literature related to the emotions of undocumented students who attend college. For example, literature has expounded upon the fact that, typically, undocumented students are stressed because of their undocumented status during the application and college choice processes (Gonzales, 2016; Gonzales & Chavez, 2012; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2011). Undocumented students also experience fear of not feeling welcomed or not feeling a sense of belonging on the campus they choose to attend (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015). Torres-Olave et al. (2020) explored the experiences of undocumented students who attended a community college and found these students felt dislocated as a result of their undocumented status and their socioemotional and psychological stresses. Though much of the research regarding the experiences of undocumented students highlights their emotions and feelings, it is important to recognize that first-generation Latinx students who may not identify as undocumented may also have these same emotions.

It is important to fill the gap between what is unseen and what exists. Though the issues experienced by first-generation Latinx students have not been explored, it does not mean the concerns do not exist. The participants in this study felt strongly about their emotions and feelings regardless of their citizenship status. Therefore, like undocumented students, many first-generation Latinx students can experience stress and fear regarding their race, ethnicity, generational status, or other personal issues. The college choice process often does not consider each student holistically, which is a central component of the higher education field.
Many participants also noted feelings of self-doubt during their college choice process. Among the participants who felt self-doubt, their choice to attend a 4-year institution rather than a 2-year institution did not change their insecurity about college choice. Unfortunately, there is a gap in the research regarding the college choice process and the confidence students feel. However, the findings from the current study helped shed light on the fact that even students who were successful in choosing a college they liked discussed feelings of self-doubt. An important finding to highlight is that some participants felt self-doubt because of how they compared themselves to others. Given they are first-generation college students, they had no one else to gauge as a point of reference. Thus, they compared themselves to others they deemed more successful than themselves. In addition, some participants noted a lack of self-confidence because they felt unsupported by individuals they assumed were their most fervent supporters.

Some participants discussed having unsupportive counselors who made them feel discouraged, intimidated, and disrespected. To illustrate, one participant, who identified as undocumented, shared how their counselor discouraged them from pursuing a 4-year institution because of their citizenship status. The counselor believed the student could not afford to attend a 4-year institution without government assistance. Within this scenario, the counselor’s reaction was most surprising because they shared the same racial identity as the student. This suggests racial representation does not always guarantee strong relationships will be built between counselors and students. There is little research regarding how racial representation can strengthen a student–counselor relationship. However, many of the participants noted feeling more comfortable when they did share the racial identity of their counselor. Nonetheless, much
of the research focuses on counselors being culturally responsive, regardless of their racial identity, by developing cultural knowledge (Arredondo et al., 2014; C. Lee, 2001). In this case, the lack of confidence the counselor had in the student’s situation demonstrated the counselor’s lack of cultural responsiveness, which discouraged the student. Much research demonstrates how counselors can have low expectations of students as a result of biases, discriminatory practices, and level of academic potential (Acevedo-Gil, 2017; Hart & Gray, 1992; Vela-Gude et al., 2009). These low expectations cause issues with self-doubt, a lack of confidence, and discouragement during the college choice process.

Another student noted feeling intimidated and disrespected by their unsupportive counselor. They stated the counselor acted negatively toward them and other students and made many students feel uncomfortable with their college choice, especially if they chose to attend a 2-year rather than a 4-year institution. This is a revelation regarding how much a counselor’s feelings, thoughts, and ideas can influence students. If a counselor shares their personal ideologies and it hinders a student’s comfort level, this can cause the student to feel inadequate during the college choice process and, ultimately, when they select an institution.

Counselors should not demoralize one student’s choice against another, as they should view any postsecondary education option as viable in the development of their students. Students should not be intimidated or disrespected by counselors, which is an example of a counselor who has given up on their students’ potential, regardless of their college choice. In other words, counselors and their dispositions toward students matter to those who identify as first-generation Latinx students. First-generation Latinx students need to feel supported so they can have the
confidence they desperately need as they navigate the college choice experience rather than experience negative feelings about the process. These feelings should not and cannot be ignored as they directly influence the college choice for these participants. It is important to note that these feelings are directly tied to behavioral outcomes. In particular, these behavioral outcomes coincide with the college choice and ultimately their retention, completion, and success in their educational pursuit. It is imperative to realize how feelings and emotions can ultimately affect choices and well-being.

The college choice experience for these participants was emotional, which is not encompassed within any college choice model. The participants acknowledged feeling the stress of the unknown, anxiety caused by fear, self-doubt, and unsupportiveness. Unfortunately, there is little research regarding stress, anxiety, or fear during the college choice process from the higher education field. Therefore, further research must be conducted to determine how this emotional experience may influence the college choice process and, ultimately, the student’s success in college. This lack of research presents a gap in the literature regarding the college choice process for first-generation Latinx students. Future implications include that researchers should more closely explore students’ emotions and an overlap should be made between higher education and counseling research regarding college choice. In particular, the emotional component these participants shared showcased an important revelation that is new to the college choice process. Much of the research regarding college choice focuses on the systematic process of a student’s decision (Chapman, 1981; Hanson & Litten, 1982; Jackson, 1982; Kolter, 1976). Though college choice models have evolved from only considering systemic choices to being inclusive of a
student’s predisposition (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987), race, and identity (Perna, 2006), they do not go into depth regarding the feelings students experience when making a college choice.

Nonetheless, Acevedo-Gil (2017) did note that throughout the college choice process, Latinx students face obstacles and discover fears. Hence, literature is uncovering the importance of these emotions in the college choice process and my findings highlight the need for continued research regarding these emotions. In particular, research regarding how these emotions affect the college choice process for marginalized populations, such as first-generation Latinx students, should focus on how this population may face various emotions during this process that can negatively affect their college choice and overall well-being.

Regarding implications for practice, counselors and admissions representatives must be more aware of students’ feelings during the college choice process, specifically for first-generation Latinx students. They should focus on how students feel when they make their college choices as well as which college choice they make. The majority of the literature regarding college counseling of racially minoritized students focuses on how to increase access (Hurley & Coles, 2015; McDonough, 2005). Though increasing college access is an important factor that should never be disregarded for racially minoritized students, it is important to specifically focus on access that will encourage student success. If those in the higher education field only focus on increasing the college access of racially minoritized students rather than ensuring they make the best choice for themselves, then the focus is misplaced. When students are supported and do not feel negative emotions during the college choice process, they are more likely to make a level-headed and calm decision that will positively affect their success in
college. Within the counseling field, the counselor role is meant to not only help with postsecondary plans but also course planning and emotional counseling (Martinez, 2013). However, as the findings demonstrated, the psycho-emotional support component gets lost when the focus is solely on college choice. Recent literature within the counseling field highlighted the importance of high school and college counselors in supporting the psychosocial and emotional needs of first-generation Latinx college students (Tello & Lonn, 2017). Though this literature did not focus on high school students during the college decision-making process, it did shed light on the needs of first-generation Latinx students and showed there should be psychosocial and emotional counseling provided to this student population. It is surprising that though college guidance counselors tend to come from the counseling field, the findings demonstrate their lack of practice regarding the use of psychosocial and emotional counseling when serving students during their college choice process. This neglect could be related to the fact that counselors are typically overwhelmed with work responsibilities, lack resources, or there is a political administrative emphasis on college acceptance and enrollment percentages. Given these obstacles, counselors often do not focus on students’ meaningful college choice experiences. Nonetheless, counselors should not only inquire about where students are going to college but also why they are going and how they feel about going. Counselors must consider how their words and actions affect students’ emotions. Counselors should be cognizant of the language and remarks they make to students during their college choice process to be more supportive and encouraging and not elicit further negative emotions from their students.
Support Systems

The majority of the participants, regardless of their college choice, also discussed that *se necesita un pueblo* (it takes a village) to make a college choice. All participants noted having a support system during their college choice experience. They all mentioned family and friends as support, counselor support, teacher and mentor support, or additional college programs that were helpful during their college choice process. For example, participants shared that their parents provided great moral support even when they could not help with college information. Other participants stated counselors were helpful with providing college information once the students felt they could trust their counselors. Some participants also noted having a special teacher or mentor outside of the classroom who undertook a special role during the student’s college choice process. They stated teachers were helpful in providing different perspectives and mentors assisted in connecting students to different resources or networks. Some participants even noted having more than one support system and how they found this diverse support helpful. Much of the literature regarding support systems or extracurricular college programming for first-generation Latinx students reinforced the study’s findings (C. Lee, 2001; Pérez et al., 2015). For example, many of the newly developed college choice process models highlight that college choice no longer solely focuses on students’ choices but also on their environments and social contexts. Specifically, these college choice models now include how social capital resources enhance upward mobility within social networks (Coleman, 1988; DiMaggio & Mohr, 1985; Morrow, 1999). First-generation Latinx students, in particular, use their social networks, which include siblings, peers, extended relatives, and high school contacts, for information. Therefore,
these students, ultimately, follow in the footsteps of others when making their college choices (Pérez & McDonough, 2008). As previously stated, the findings from this study reinforce this idea as the participants used their full networks to make their college choice. Rios-Aguilar and Kiyama (2012) alluded that community connections are great funds of knowledge for Latinx students in their college transition. Hence, the literature supports the finding that family and friends are great influences in the college choice process.

Some participants specifically noted their siblings and peers played important roles in gaining information regarding their college choice. In particular, some students noted choosing their college because their older sibling attended the same institution. According to the literature, choosing a college based on a peer’s choice is called chain migration, a term specifically coined to describe Latinx students who choose a college based on others (Pérez & McDonough, 2008). However, the literature does not specifically consider how chain migration may influence first-generation Latinx students to make certain choices based on having limited selections from which to choose. For example, a student may choose an institution based on why another peer chose it and not on fit. For the participants who chose to follow peers and siblings to specific institutions, it almost seemed this was meant to be rather than their choice. It is important to consider how chain migration, although seen as a positive as it creates networks and access to college for this population, may be harmful. We must consider how it affects college retention, completion, and success. It is also important to reconsider the term chain migration. Chain migration is connected to the geographical migration of populations and although this may sound applicable to the migration of large numbers of students to a specific institution, it can also be
confusing for those who research and understand the migration of populations to different geographical locations. Though the term may sound similar, geographical migration and the college choice phenomenon are different and should be discussed as such. I would recommend the following terminology of college choice: *en cadenita* or in a chain/linked up. This term is related to the Latinx community as it is in Spanish, is more precise in referring to college choices, and cannot be confused with geographical migration. Furthermore, as I alluded previously, college choice *en cadenita* can be a positive resource and network that opens doors to college access; however, it can also be a negative if the student makes the choice solely based on their peers’ attendance at this institution and not for their own reasons. I would consider the latter type of students to be *seguidores* or college followers as we should always encourage students to be leaders versus followers of their own choices and lives.

Other participants mentioned they had counselors, teachers, or mentors who supported them during their college choice process. Literature regarding the involvement of these individuals during the college choice process shows they can be highly effective at positively influencing students’ aspirations and achievements (Adelman, 1999; McDonough, 1997, 2004). The participants who felt they had positive counselors stated their counselors provided them with insight and support during their college choice process. However, it is important to note that some participants discussed having negative experiences with their counselors. Therefore, though counselors can influence students, it is important to consider how their influence can be positive or negative for marginalized populations. This finding is discussed in further detail in a later section.
Participants who noted having supportive teachers shared how these teachers created cultures of care for their students during their college choice process. Some students noted teachers helped create meaningful college parent programs for diverse populations or even helped them consider various options as college choice possibilities. These testaments showcased how teachers, who spend more time with students than do counselors, were conscious of students’ identities and how they can play a role in promoting and supporting the college choice process. Other students noted mentors as great sources of help to connect with others who encompass resources regarding the college choice process. This finding was sustained by the aforementioned literature regarding social capital (Pérez & McDonough, 2008). Moreover, it must be considered how mentors are helpful to first-generation Latinx students and help them gain a wider network and resources.

By expanding these students’ networks, we can ensure the chain migration occurrences within this demographic are less limiting in choices. It should also be further questioned why the teachers and mentors of participants were only helpful, and students did not feel negatively influenced by them like they did with some counselors. These negative feelings can be attributed to the fact that students have higher expectations of counselors than they do teachers or mentors regarding support during their college choice process. Students could have also felt this way because teachers and mentors shared more valuable time with the participants and, hence, knew how best to support them. If this is the case, counselors could improve their student support strategies by spending more time with students.
Some participants noted additional programs, such as extracurricular college preparation or bridge programs, as beneficial to their college choice process. It is important to mention that their involvement in additional programs did not have a strong correlation to whether they chose a 2-year institution or a 4-year institution. Literature regarding college preparation or bridge programs for first-generation Latinx students denoted these programs as beneficial for students who take advantage of them (Pérez et al., 2015). The findings aligned with the literature, as many of the participants who stated they were involved in additional college support programs felt the programs were helpful in providing them with support with college applications, scholarship information, financial aid education, career advice, and new perspectives.

Unfortunately, the literature also shows these programs only serve 10% of the first-generation student population; therefore, this population is less likely to take advantage of these opportunities (Swail, 2000). For first-generation students, experiences like this could be essential because they are the first individuals in their families to attend college and do not know what to expect. A bridge program, for example, can provide an understanding of what to expect and how to determine a college choice, which no one else may be able to explain to a first-generation student. Hence, when the participants noted having the opportunity to participate in additional programs related to college readiness, they shared feeling more prepared.

In terms of implications for future research, scholars should consider how peer and family dynamics within the Latinx community play a part in the college choice process. In addition, it is important to question whether college choices based on chain migration, among first-generation Latinx students, can hinder students, given students follow the paths of others.
Regarding implications for practice, counselors and admissions representatives must evaluate whether chain migration determines the best fit for the student. It should be considered how choosing an institution because a sibling or peer attended the institution can be detrimental for students, as the school may not be the best fit for their academic or personal success. In addition, the findings from this study indicate counselors need to spend more time with students and be trained to ensure they prioritize positive interactions with students. Finally, it is essential to provide additional programs and opportunities, such as extracurricular college preparation or bridge programs, for this population of students, as my findings indicate they are beneficial to the college choice process.

**Difference in College Choice Experiences: Counselor Confianza (Trust)**

Despite the similarities between participants who chose a private 2-year or private 4-year institution, during the college choice process there was one area in which the participants’ experiences differed significantly in relation to counselor support. Of the five participants who chose to attend the 4-year institution, only one noted not having a close relationship or not receiving support from their counselor. Of the four participants who chose to attend the 2-year institution, only one discussed having a good relationship with and support from their counselor. It is important to note that one student who decided to attend the 4-year institution, although they did not have a strong counselor relationship, chose to pursue the school to follow in the footsteps of their older sibling who attended the institution. Regarding the one student who did have a good counselor support system and chose to attend the 2-year institution, it is vital to note that this participant attended a private high school in which their college counselor was also a teacher
within the classroom. Hence, their counselor was supportive and recommended the student attend a private 2-year institution, which was planned and executed considering the desire of the student. When reflecting on this major difference found among the participants, it is important to comment that although it may seem as though having a supportive counselor helps students make a better college choice, such as attending a 4-year institution, the students who decided to attend the 2-year institution had great reasoning as to why that institution was a great fit for them. Hence, this difference was not a hinderance to them and their choices. For example, they felt the private 2-year college was more cost efficient; the environment, resources, and support would be more positive for them; and they wanted to stay close to home. It is important to also consider that this private 2-year institution was more expensive than a public 2-year institution but offered a lot of financial assistance and support for this student demographic.

However, the findings showed having counselor support and a close relationship with a counselor can only enhance the college choice process for any student, regardless of the type of institution they choose. Of the nine participants, four noted having positive support systems from their high school counselors and had great college choice experiences with less stress. The other five participants discussed having a harder time choosing a college given the lack of a positive and supportive college counselor. These five participants also had additional support systems such as family, friends, mentors, and additional programs to help alleviate the negative feelings. Though high school counselors can be great assets to first-generation Latinx students during the college choice process, these findings and the literature show they can also be great hinderances. Counselors have a reputation for limiting academic progress by having low expectations of
students (Vela-Gude et al., 2009). Some participants noted feeling their counselors had low expectations for Latinx students because of their biases.

Conversely, the participants who felt supported by their counselors ultimately felt their counselors believed in them and there was confianza (trust) built that helped grow their relationship. Those who did not have counselor support noted this lack of trust caused stress and other negative emotions during the college choice process. Hence, this difference in counselor support engages researchers and policymakers to consider how we understand the role of a counselor during a college choice process. The higher education literature does make the connection regarding how counselors may or may not be beneficial for students. However, it is important to contribute to the research and include the specific first-generation Latinx demographic in these endeavors, as they are a growing demographic in higher education, and in particular in considering the college choice process. These findings further complement previous research and expand upon how counselor time, representation and understanding, and belief in their students matter in building trust for first-generation Latinx students. These findings can help improve counselor relationships and, in turn, create more positive support systems for these students in the college choice process.

**Time, Representation, and Understanding**

Participants who shared that they felt supported by their counselors distinguished a few important factors in comparison to those who did not. For example, they felt time, representation of their identity, and understanding of their identity were strong indicators of being able to build trust with their counselors. Participants who spent a large amount of time with their counselors or
whose counselors were readily available to them felt their counselors were more supportive and stated they built stronger relationships with them. Participants who did not spend time with their counselors or felt they were not available were unable to build this trust. Previous research solidified the importance of the investment of time. Martinez (2013) emphasized that with the various roles school counselors take on, including emotional counseling and course planning support, it is no surprise that time devoted to aiding students in their postsecondary plans has diminished. Much of the additional research devoted to counselors supports the limited resources and understaffed urban schools that cause personnel to multitask and hence not be prepared or available for students (Hurley & Coles, 2015; Matthay, 1989; Pérez & Ceja, 2015; Rogers et al., 2010). The research shows counselors are spread too thin in their job responsibilities and cannot support students as they should. For first-generation Latinx students, this type of conscious and continuous support is needed. Therefore, the findings and literature support the idea that leaders of K-12 school systems, administrators, and counselors must make improvements in their systems and practices. This is necessary for all students, as the participants who felt truly supported by their counselors noted the quality time they spent with counselors really helped them during their college choice process.

Another finding was that participants had a stronger relationship with individuals with whom they shared personal identities, such as racial, ethnic, or gender identities. They shared that their counselors seemed like family given the close relationship, and this was because Latinx individuals put a strong cultural emphasis on family and need to have this relationship be supported. Some students who did not connect with their counselors as strongly noted they felt
underrepresented by their counselors. One reason representation is important to first-generation Latinx students is because, as the literature shows, for someone to shape the cultural knowledge of college, one must know the student’s culture and demographic characteristics (Perna, 2006). Counselors who share a similar identity with their students often have an easier time understanding the students’ cultures and demographic characteristics and, therefore, are often better able to support them. For example, according to Rosas and Hamrick (2002), counselors must understand how first-generation Latinx students negotiate conflicting familial values when planning their education. In addition to counselors knowing how to support their students, the findings also demonstrated students felt representation helped them feel welcomed and seen.

Unfortunately, it not always possible to have a perfect ratio of demographic representation between counselors and their students, which was also noted by participants. However, participants strongly felt counselors should try to understand students’ identities and personal concerns, as they influence college choice. If counselors have a better understanding of their students’ identities, they can better support them. Unfortunately, research has demonstrated counselors, at times, have low expectations of their students (Vela-Gude et al., 2009). It is possible for the level of expectations to be based on background characteristics and identities of students (Corwin et al., 2004; Vela-Gude et al., 2009).

Hence, when considering practical implications, leaders of K-12 school systems, administrators, and counselors must make improvements in their systems and practices to ensure students spend sufficient time with those who support their college choice processes. In addition, if representation is difficult for school systems to achieve, it is important to train counselors to be
understanding of students and their identities, traumas, and perspectives and how they may affect or influence college choice. Training should be situated using Yosso’s (2005) community cultural wealth model, which engages the idea that Latinx families bring cultural wealth to the values of racially minoritized students. This would optimize the effectiveness of these students rather than them experiencing a deficit as a result.

“Stop Giving Up on Us”

The participants who indicated feeling disconnected and having a lack of trust with their counselors reported there was a need for their counselors to have confidence in the student’s potential. One participant, Alma, noted feeling their counselor did not believe in their goal of attending a 4-year institution because the counselor believed it was not realistic in light of Alma’s undocumented status. However, Alma persisted and attended that 4-year institution with a scholarship. Alma’s counselor only created stress and anxiety. Another participant, Cynthia, illustrated how her counselor had low expectations and insisted she should only apply to 2-year institutions. Finally, various other participants noted how counselors discouraged them from pursuing their dreams. Even participants who did feel they had a supportive counselor shared that they felt most counselors have a clear bias of Latinx students. Veronica even stated, “Stop giving up on us!” as she requested that more counselors believe in the potential of first-generation Latinx students.

Most of the research regarding this subject supports the fact that counselors’ biases do exist and hinder the college choice process. For example, counselors are likely to recommend general or vocational postsecondary education to low-income racially minoritized students rather
than a rigorous academic institution based on their personal ideologies of what students can do (Hart & Gray, 1992; McDonough, 1997). Conversely, Vela-Gude et al. (2009) discovered that when Latinx students received college guidance from Latinx counselors who challenged them to believe in themselves, they were more likely to see college as a possibility. It has been noted that for Latinx students, a counselor’s high expectations can lead to very successful outcomes (Davidson-Aviles et al., 1999). Acevedo-Gil (2015) stated institutional agents can either steer Latinx students away from 4-year institutions under the guise that it is too difficult, or propel them toward such a pursuit. Most of the participants who discussed not having a counselor who believed in them stated they had a heightened sense of stress, anxiety, and overall discouragement. Consequently, it is essential that practical implications include training counselors to understand their biases, consider how they can better support first-generation Latinx students in their college choices, improve their expectations, and support their students, holistically and emotionally.
CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Conclusion

To improve college access for racially minoritized populations, such as first-generation Latinx students, practices must change and continue to be assessed through future research. In this study, I used a phenomenological approach to explore the experiences of first-generation Latinx students who attend a private 4-year or private 2-year institution. These participants made meaning of their college choice experiences and results showed a major difference did not exist between the types of students and their school choice. However, what emerged from the findings was the benefits of having a supportive counselor and the disadvantages of not having one. The benefits of a supportive counselor were potentially connected to the time counselors spend with students or the understanding counselors have regarding students’ identities. It was highlighted that when a student feels *confianza* (trust) with their counselor, they have a better relationship and support in their college choice process. Finally, the participants felt various negative emotions, such as stress, anxiety, fear, and discouragement, related to being first-generation students. Hence, there is a need for counselors to build trust with their students and also support their emotional feelings. Most importantly, results showed there is a disconnect in the college choice research in the higher education field and what is executed in the school counselor setting. When considering the college choice process that is most connected to this population, Acevedo-Gil’s (2017) college choice framework for Latinx students, the findings were connected but
additional considerations emerged. For example, the motivations, considerations, and support systems the first-generation Latinx participants noted are mostly supported by Acevedo-Gil’s college choice framework for Latinx students. Though Acevedo-Gil alluded to the difficulties Latinx students face, the findings of the current study denote specific difficulties such as emotions and building counselor confianza (trust) as important factors to consider when contemplating the college choice process for this population. These findings complicate the current models that exist and call for future higher education research to be conducted that overlaps higher education and counseling.

Many high school leaders struggle to have enough funding for sufficient counselors so they increase the student-to-counselor ratio, which causes counselors to take on heavy loads. Conversely, this research demonstrated policies should be put in place to amend funding structures and high school leaders must adjust counselors’ workloads so they can effectively do their jobs and guide students to college. In addition, high school leaders should change their approaches to improving college access. Though many high school leaders focus on improving the college-going rates, specifically for racially minoritized populations, the focus should be on forming a less systemic way to increase equity. The focus should be on providing a high level of care to each student in which their needs and wants are holistically met in a compassionate and encouraging way. Counselors should not only guide students through the college choice process, they should also consider the emotions and feelings of each student to provide them a more holistic approach to the college choice process. In many ways, this holistic approach can be obtained by not considering the student as a number but as a friend or family member they want
to support. By spending time with students in this caring way, students will feel authentically cared for and better supported during this experience.

Moreover, findings allude to the need for future research and policy to be reconsidered regarding the preparation of counselors. Currently, when school counselors are prepared to work with guiding high school students in the college choice process, they are educated on the career development of students. Little education is given to prepare these individuals to understand postsecondary options, higher education, the college choice process, and how to support special populations with their mental and emotional health through this process. Future research should overlap the counseling field with the field of higher education and policy changes should be made to train these individuals appropriately. The counseling accreditation bodies currently have vague standards and they must ensure there are adequate requirements for counselors to be prepared to handle these situations and work with these students.

This research shows first-generation Latinx students want to build family-like relationships with others given their cultural values. In addition, counselors should focus on having confidence in their students’ potential. It is unacceptable to show bias and ignore unmotivated students. It is important to uphold high expectations of each student but also support them so they do not feel overwhelmed with stress, anxiety, or fear. Counselors must not only ask students where they are going to college but also how they feel about going to college. First-generation Latinx students need to feel supported during the college choice process, as it is a time of uncertainty, stress, anxiety, fear, and discouragement. However, the way participants made meaning of their experiences showed they need more than college information. They need
to build *confianza* (trust) with those who encourage them to receive the necessary holistic support. Veronica, one of the participants in this study shared, “Stop giving up on us.” She referenced the need for continued non-biased and holistic support from counselors. Her words are a call to action to all in education to see the value first-generation Latinx students can bring to themselves and their communities. In order to achieve this, it is important to reflect on how we as educators can improve the way we work toward social justice for the students we serve.

Rendon (2011) recommended the following:

> In this season of light and darkness in our lives, many of us are hearing the calling to create a new vision of education that cultivates the new *persona educada*. This is not an easy task to do so we must have the valor to step out of our comfort zones, for we are being asked to challenge the status quo in order to liberate ourselves from the hegemonic belief system that works against wholeness, social justice, and the development of moral and ethical personal and social responsibility. We are being asked to create a vision of education based on newly constructed agreements that will form the basis of a belief system undergirding all that we do in higher education. We are being asked to turn inward, to become more self-reflective about our views and our willingness to entertain diverse perspectives. Not all are ready for this monumental yet exciting endeavor. For those who accept the challenge, perhaps two simple, powerful questions can start us on this adventure of inward and outward transformation: Who am I? What is the greatest gift I could give to foster a vision of education focused on wholeness, social justice, and liberation? Welcome to the journey. (p. 8)

Hence, we must first work on liberating ourselves in order to work toward the social justice we want to see in the new *persona educada*.

**Implications for Future Research and Practice**

It is important to consider what should be done to improve the support provided to first-generation Latinx students during the college choice process. In this section, I review implications for future research and practice that consider both previous literature and the findings from this dissertation. The implications for future research indicate what academic
scholars can and should continue to explore in their research efforts. The implications for practice focus on what higher education administrators, high school administrators and counselors, families, communities, and first-generation Latinx students can do to improve the college choice process for this student population.

**Future Research and Policy**

Given the previous discussion of findings, there is significant proof that additional research and policy changes regarding higher education, college choice, and counseling standards and practices are needed regarding first-generation Latinx students and other racially minoritized populations. Particularly regarding college choice and access, it is recommended that future research be conducted to explore these processes through different lenses and frameworks. The majority of research focused on college choice and access tends be explored through a higher education lens. The lens is systemic and only considers college choice as a structured step-by step-process versus a complex process that changes with the type of student and their environment. This lens also neglects the inclusivity of counseling practices and does not consider individuals and their lives holistically. I suggest those in the higher education and counseling fields focus on college choice and access using more diverse frameworks that include, but are not limited to, counseling, mental and emotional health, and equity. To my fellow academic scholars, I implore you to continue to study and highlight the aforementioned items for further research and policy changes. I specifically invite you to consider the following items for future research and policy:
• Many consider that the main influences of college choice for first-generation Latinx students are family and cost; however, participants also noted quality of education and environmental fit as important. Though family and cost play an important role when considering college for this demographic, the findings show this demographic of students also considers their quality of education and environmental fit. When acknowledging quality of education, the participants considered the quality of professors and support resources available. When participants discussed the importance of environmental fit, they considered where they would feel most welcomed and find support groups with which they could associate. This finding demonstrate this demographic not only considers family and cost, they also consider what is in their best interest for ultimate success in college. In addition, because the focus in this dissertation was on private institutions only, further research should consider the college choice process for students at public institutions and how the findings may differ.

• Research shows social capital and chain migration are closely related to college choice for Latinx students. Many Latinx students choose institutions they are told about or that their peers attend. However, it should be considered how choosing an institution because of a sibling or peer attended the institution can have a negative effect on the student in terms of college retention and completion. Chain migration might cause students to choose an institution solely based on the fact that someone else attended the institution and not based on whether it is a good fit for their own success in college. We must consider whether chain migration causes too many narrow paths to college choice for Latinx students. How is this pursuit dangerous for Latinx students regarding their college retention and completion?
Furthermore, I advocate for more precise terminology to be considered when discussing following a peer or sibling in their college choices. It is important to consider how chain migration is connected to geographical migration and can be confusing for those who research or study the college choice process. I would recommend the following terminology of college choice: *en cadena* or in a chain/linked up. This term is related to the Latinx community as it is in Spanish, is more precise in referring to college choices, and cannot be confused with geographical migration.

- The definition of first-generation students should be reconsidered and reaffirmed. It is typically assumed that if a student is the first in their family to go to college, they are considered first-generation. However, according to Ward et al. (2012), first-generation status is considered if a student’s parents were not enrolled in college. Hence, a student can be considered first-generation even if they have a sibling who attended college. Some of the participants identified having older siblings who attended college and yet, they still considered themselves first-generation students because of all of the unknowns and difficulty they faced. I advocate for future research to consider these students as first-generation and to continue to complicate the definition. Moreover, as first-generation status develops every generation, there are changes in the idea of what it actually means to be a first-generation student and hence this population should continuously be studied through a lens that does not see this identity as a deficit to the college choice process.

- Many of the past college choice models focused only on the systemic influences and choices of students. Future research should consider how emotions play a role, particularly for
racially minoritized students, in the college choice process and emotional well-being of students. The findings showcased various negative emotions the participants felt during the college choice process. We must explore the higher education research that is based on college choice and access through a counseling lens. Furthermore, how counselors influence students positively or negatively should be further researched as it can powerfully influence their emotions and choices during the college choice process. Ultimately, counseling accreditation standards must be revisited to develop a more precise understanding of how school counseling programs can educate and train their students to understand postsecondary options, higher education, the college choice process, and how to support special populations with their mental and emotional health through this process. Concrete measures for assessing school counseling programs can include required courses in higher education programs, practical hours working with college guidance in high schools, and additional training required for focusing on the college choice mental and emotional health for special populations.

- Participants noted various positive support systems in their college choice process such as family, friends, mentors, and teachers. Future research should be initiated to consider these specific support systems individually and in particular how they affect the context of education and the college choice process. Another consideration that can be made is to review the neighborhoods of first-generation Latinx students as community is vital to these students in their college choice process. In addition, though teachers are included in the school environment aspect and can be great sources of information and help in the college
choice process, practices and policy must be considered for how much weight they take on in supporting the college choice process. The role of high school teachers can be a positive support for this particular population but being burdened with the college choice process can cause them to feel overworked and do their jobs less well. Some participants stated counselors were helpful though others did not. By restructuring funding approaches within school systems, more counselors can be hired to improve the counselor to student ratio and increase the amount of time counselors spend with students, as the findings showed students had more positive support systems with the counselors with whom they spent more time during the college choice process. Furthermore, it should be studied how counselors can build *confianza* (trust) with their diverse students to best support them during the college choice process. Finally, research can help us further understand students’ expectations of counselors and how to bridge those expectations with reality.

**Practice**

Given the telling findings previously discussed, I believe there are many recommendations that can be made for higher education administrators, high school administrators and counselors, families, communities, and first-generation Latinx students to follow. First, all stakeholders involved should consider the holistic college choice process of first-generation students. It is no longer acceptable to only focus on increasing college access. It is important to also increase the quality of options students consider that will lead to their ultimate college success.
Systemically, all stakeholders should work together to offer the best opportunities possible for this demographic of students. High school leaders should refocus their energy from wanting to increase their application numbers and scholarship totals to increasing the resources they offer to students. Counselors should reflect on how they can be more available, encouraging, and provide the most holistic support possible. Students should explore their options and ask for help when trying to learn as much as possible to increase their chances of going to the right college for them. To all of these individuals, I invite you to consider the following recommendations to improve the college choice process for all students, in particular first-generation Latinx students.

**Higher Education Administrators**

- Consider how your institution can make a commitment to the schools in your neighborhood by providing and partaking in additional college readiness programs, such as bridge programs. These programs can provide growth for your community and diversify and build the inclusive community your institution requires. By partaking in or providing these programs, first-generation Latinx students in the community can use these programs to better understand their college options. Above all, your institution can greatly benefit from these types of programs as it helps create a pipeline of students who enroll in your institution and bolster enrollment numbers. Moreover, if your surrounding neighborhood is diverse, it is possible that these types of programs can help improve the diversity of your institution and the educational outcomes a diverse classroom offers.
Reflect on how you work with high school administrators, counselors, and nonprofit college readiness programs to best support their efforts in guiding their seniors to obtain a higher education. Higher education institutions have many educational and financial resources that can be made available to these entities to improve the quality of support they can offer their high school students. By strengthening these entities, your institution will benefit not only one student but the many students these individuals service.

Contemplate how your recruitment, admissions, and enrollment strategies are supportive and inclusive of first-generation and racially minoritized students. We must consider how higher education institutions are the initial gatekeepers of a student’s college choice. Policy is a powerful tool that unconsciously limits the options for marginalized students, such as first-generation Latinx students. Consider how policies and practices in your recruitment, admissions, and enrollment strategies are limiting for this demographic. For example, is your recruitment only focused in certain regions that do not include a high number of Latinx individuals? Do your admission requirements focus solely on academics and test scores but exclude holistic considerations for recruitment? Do students have to pay a large enrollment deposit, which can be hindering to low-income first-generation Latinx students?

**High School Administrators and Counselors**

It is highly recommended that high school administrators and counselors use the sense of pride first-generation Latinx students possess to encourage them to pursue a higher education and contribute to their community. Many participants noted the need to showcase pride in their identities, and most of the time it was meant to ultimately give back to the community.
for the future. The notion of giving back to the community can be used as a catalyst for first-generation Latinx students to be motivated to attend college initially.

- Push for family involvement during the college choice process and family connection once first-generation Latinx students attend college. As the literature and the findings of this study show, family is very important to this demographic. By involving family in the college choice process, first-generation Latinx students may become more comfortable with the college choice process and, ultimately, their choice. Consider the mobility of first-generation Latinx students as they may not have the option to go to school far from home because of their families. Develop ways to engage family in the process and further educate them about finances and the costs of college.

- Provide first-generation Latinx students information about the quality of education and environmental fit of every institution the student is considering. As noted in the findings, first-generation students are no longer solely considering family and cost in the college choice process. They also consider the type of education they will receive as well as the environment. First-generation Latinx students search for an institution in which they feel supported in a one-on-one setting with their professors and one that offers the resources necessary for their success. In addition, with the stress they have of the unknown, they are looking for institutions to provide them with a welcoming environment where they can relate to others on campus.

- Offer support to first-generation Latinx students that not only engages them in making the college choice but also considers their mental and emotional well-being to lessen the stress of
the unknown, anxiety caused by fear, and discouragement caused by doubt. Our focus should involve more than just supporting the ultimate college choice. We need to support first-generation Latinx students with their mental and emotional health as the findings indicate this can ultimately affect the college choice process.

- Counselors should consider how their words and actions contribute to their students’ emotions to be more supportive. The findings signify that a counselor can truly influence the confidence of first-generation Latinx students. Having more confidence in first-generation Latinx students will help students feel more confianza (trust) with their counselors and, hence, find them to be more supportive. Overall, counselors should have more confidence in the potential of racially minoritized students and be encouraging. Literature has shown counselors have biases that can negatively affect their students (Acevedo-Gil, 2017; Hart & Gray, 1992; Vela-Gude et al., 2009).

- Leaders of K-12 school systems, administrators, and counselors should consider how the data collection of college applications and acceptances causes counselors to encourage students to submit multiple applications to meet the status quo rather than to best support the students. At times, quantity does not equate to quality college choices. By not focusing on increasing the college application numbers or the total scholarship amount, counselors can focus on working with each student individually to meet their specific needs.

- Leaders of K-12 school systems, administrators, and counselors should consider how they can improve their funding, support systems, and practices to provide students with more quality time. The findings showed that when first-generation Latinx students did not have an
available counselor or a counselor with whom they spent valuable time, they felt as though
the counselor was not as helpful nor did they connect well with them.

- Leaders of K-12 school systems, administrators, and counselors should consider how they
can use their networks and surrounding environments and other institutions to create
additional college readiness opportunities for their students. Many participants noted the
benefits of having additional support through college preparation programs. It would be
beneficial to consider how creating or improving these types of programs to serve all students
would help improve the support first-generation Latinx students need to make their college
choices.

- Administrators should continually diversify their counseling employees to fit the
demographic they serve and best support the students in the college choice process. If
representation is difficult for school systems to achieve, it is important to better train
counselors to be understanding of students; their identities, traumas, and perspectives; and
how they may affect or influence their college choice. Yosso’s (2005) community cultural
wealth model should be used for these trainings to optimize the effectiveness of viewing
students as assets rather than deficits. It is recommended that counselors receive training to
understand their biases and consider how they can best support first-generation Latinx
students in the college choice process by improving their college choice expectations, holistic
perceptions of their students, and mental and emotional health support.
Families, Communities, and First-Generation Latinx Students

- First-generation Latinx students attend college not only for themselves but for their families and communities. Hence, it is highly recommended that students continue to work with their families and communities to ultimately make their college choice decision. They should include them in what they learn about their choices and the choice itself. Parents and family should educate themselves about the information and resources available regarding the college choice process. Moreover, students should stay connected to their families and communities once in college not only to give back but to also remain motivated in college. This continuous involvement of family and community is essential for this population.

- First-generation Latinx students should look for additional programs related to college preparation or bridge programs in which to take part. At times, the programs are limited and require special applications or certain requirements to participate. For this reason, it is valuable to search and apply for such programs as early as possible to increase the chances of acceptance and participation. If involvement in these programs is impossible, students can look to peers, mentors, teachers, or community members for support to increase their network and knowledge of available options.

- First-generation Latinx students should look for resources to find emotional support during the college choice process. Because they are the first in their family to attend college, the college choice may cause mental or emotional health issues. The unknown of college and trying to make the right choice for their family and community can be overwhelming. It is important to find someone to speak to about these emotions and feelings to make sure they
do not affect the final choice negatively. For example, students should consider reaching out to their counselors for the value they can bring during the college choice process. Not only can counselors provide college information and support, they can help students process any emotions and feelings. If counselors are not available, students should look to other mentors, teachers, or community members for support.
APPENDIX A

REFLEXIVITY STATEMENT
Reflexivity Statement

In this reflexivity statement, I review the identities, experiences, and beliefs I removed while following the bracketing process as I conducted the data analysis for my study. During the analysis process I employed descriptive analysis and did not use my own perspectives to interpret any findings. To ensure I was not biased as I analyzed the findings, I maintained a journal in which I took notes of how my identities, experiences, and beliefs were intertwined with the findings. This allowed me to disassociate myself from the analysis. However, as this reflexivity statement will show, I feel very connected to this research and my participants. In order to understand my positionality and experiences, I first overview how my identities and experiences intersect with my research and the participants. Then, I summarize my thoughts and beliefs as I analyzed the findings.

It is important to share that I have always felt drawn to focus my research on the college choice process for racially minoritized populations. I have always been curious to learn more about the experience I and others went through as high school students transitioning into college. I always questioned whether I had made the right choice, whether I had sufficient information to make a choice, and whether I was truly supported as I should have been during the college choice process. Of course, my curiosity is not just about my experience but also about the experiences of others who do not have positive outcomes as I believe I had in my college choice process. The college choice process seems to be extremely subjective to the individual, their environment, and systemic issues. So, the college choice process is one that I cannot help but always wonder about. In particular, my personal college choice experience called me to want to
learn more about this experience but my identities also played a very important role in why I focused on this topic.

My identities as a first-generation and Latinx student encouraged me to focus my research on the same population. First-generation students are new to understanding the college choice process. When I experienced the college choice process, I felt unaware of the options but more than anything I always felt overwhelmed by the process. I always thought I was missing something or forgetting something during the process. As I interviewed my participants, I saw my life reflected in their experiences but more than that I saw the variety of experiences this population faces depending on their personal lives, family, community, and environment. I was also called to conduct this research because of my previous experiences as a college guidance counselor at a high school in Chicago, IL. I entered into the college guidance counselor profession truly wanting to make an impact on my students—I cared about them obtaining a higher education and wanted to support them as best I could in their college choice process. However, what I learned about the experience of being a college guidance counselor is that it is harder than it seems even if your intentions are good. It is a difficult job, especially if you are in a public school system with few resources. Not only was I spread thin and asked to take on various tasks that did not relate to the college guidance counselor position, I was also overwhelmed by the number of students I had on my caseload. My experience as a college guidance counselor allowed me to view this research from the lens as a counselor as well. I definitely felt represented in the research I conducted for this dissertation as I fall under both
identities of being a first-generation Latinx student in the college choice process and a previous college guidance counselor who supported students like my participants.

During the analysis of my findings, I bracketed my thoughts and beliefs in order to maintain validity. As I reviewed the motivations and considerations of my participants, many of the ideas they discussed seemed very connected to what I experienced. However, there were a few surprises for me. In terms of motivations, I shared a similar sense of motivation from my parents and family to attend college. In addition, I felt motivated to go to college to help my community. When I realized most of my participants also felt strongly about giving back to their communities by obtaining a higher education, it was surprising to me that this concept has not been included in training materials for counselors to use as a form of motivation for this particular population. Participants also noted a sense of pride as a motivator for obtaining a higher education. They felt pride in their identity of being a first-generation Latinx student who was going to go to college. This finding is not something I particularly identified within myself until I was already in college, so it was surprising to me to see that individuals felt pride in this way before even going to college. In terms of what the participants considered in the college choice process, results were in line with my own considerations of family and cost. However, what was surprising was that they also considered institutional concerns such as quality of education and environmental fit. For me personally, I did consider quality of education but did not think other first-generation Latinx students would also consider this when making a college choice decision. In terms of environmental fit, this was a complete shock because I personally never thought of this factor when I was a high school student and even when I was a counselor, I
saw few students who identified as first-generation Latinx students considering this factor. Their main focus was affordability and staying close to home, so it was interesting for me to see that these students were considering quality of education and environmental fit. I wondered whether this had anything to do with the current state of our society with its focus on diversity and inclusivity.

As I reviewed the findings related to the various emotions my participants felt, including stress, anxiety, fear, self-doubt, and discouragement, I was blown away by the similar experiences these participants had in terms of their mental and emotional health during the college choice process. Although I identified with feeling overwhelmed and stressed about the college choice process as a first-generation Latinx student and recalled that some of my students shared with me that they felt these feelings when I was their college guidance counselor, I had no idea how much it affected first-generation Latinx students. By diving deep into understanding how these emotions affected these students during the college choice process, I realized how important it is to conduct further research on how this affects the college choice process and develop training to better prepare counselors to help students who face these emotions during the college choice process. Though there is a lot of research that shows how undocumented students feel fear and anxiety during the college choice process related to their citizenship status, there is little research focused on how other students with different identities feel.

During the analysis of the findings related to the various types of support my participants obtained from family, friends, counselors, teachers, mentors, and by attending additional college support programs, I discovered just how invested the entire community is in improving college
access for first-generation Latinx students. I truly do believe it takes a village to help first-
generation and racially minoritized students to navigate the college choice process and make the
right decision for them. This is something I have always read about in the literature and seen in
my experience as a counselor working with students during their college choice process.
However, what was truly enlightening was just how many students had negative experiences
with their counselors. When I reviewed the findings regarding counselor relationships, I found
that building counselor *confianza* (trust) is harder than it seems. As a counselor myself, I related
to the findings as I could see how not spending time with students and not understanding their
identities could make it harder for students to trust and receive help from their counselor. What
was truly revealing about my findings was just how many students felt as though their counselors
were unsupportive. Participants noted feeling discouraged, intimidated, disrespected, and as
though counselors had identity biases that made the participants feel a lack of confidence. I
personally had a counselor who was supportive of my aspirations but also attended a high school
in which there were other counselors who would put down students for their academic
performance and identities. So, though I was not surprised to learn about what some of my
participants experienced, I was saddened to learn that this lack of support and confidence in
students happens more than it should. I hope that by making my identities, experiences, and
beliefs known I was able to bring awareness to my positionality in this study.
RESEARCH OPPORTUNITY

ARE YOU A FIRST-GENERATION LATINX FIRST-YEAR STUDENT?

We are looking for first-generation first-year students who identify as Latinx to participate in a research study regarding their college choice experience in high school. Students must be at least 18 years old and in their first-year at [University Name].

Students will participate in no more than two 45 minute interviews in which they will be asked to reflect on their college choice experience and therefore, contribute to improving the process for others in their community. *Participants will receive a $20 gift card.

IF INTERESTED PLEASE EMAIL LILLIANNA FRANCO CARRERA, DOCTORAL STUDENT AT LFRANCO1@LUC.EDU
APPENDIX C

PARTICIPANT OUTREACH EMAIL
Dear [name],

My name is Lillianna Franco Carrera and I am a doctoral student in Loyola University Chicago’s Higher Education Program. I am pleased to invite you to participate as an interviewee in a research study entitled “First-Generation Latinx Reflections on the College Choice Experience.” This study seeks to expand our knowledge of college choice process of first-generation Latinx students in order to improve college support practices and access. This study is supervised by Dr. Blanca Torres-Olave, an assistant professor at Loyola University Chicago.

Criteria for participation includes:

- Must be a first-year student at one of two institutions
- 18 years or older
- Must self-identify as First-generation and Latinx
- Must be willing to participate in two 45 minute interview regarding their college choice process

I am particularly interested in understanding your experience in the college choice process in your high school. In particular, we wish to document your experiences with your high school counselor in their involvement in your college choice. Not only will this give you an opportunity to reflect on your experience but also on your college choice. In addition, the research collected will help improve the college choice practices and supports for this first-generation Latinx students. Participants will also receive a $20 gift card for participating in the study.

If you are interested in participating, we can set up a zoom (video chat) or in-person interview session on [date and time range options]. The two interview sessions will take no more than 45 minutes. Your participation in this research project is completely voluntary, and all the information you provide will be strictly confidential, in accordance with Loyola University Chicago’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines. Some of the topics covered in the interview include questions on your personal identity, your high school environment, your college choice experience during high school, the ways in which high school counselors were involved in your college choice, and reflections on your college choice decision.

If you would like to participate, or have questions regarding the project, please contact us at the email address or phone numbers listed below. We look forward to hearing from you and to have you involved in this project.

Sincerely,
Lillianna Franco Carrera, M. Ed
Doctoral Student
Loyola University Chicago
School of Education
Email: lfranco1@luc.edu
APPENDIX D

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM
Project Title: First-Generation Latinx Reflections on the College Choice Experience
Researcher(s): Lillianna Franco Carrera, M. Ed

Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Blanca Torres-Olave

Introduction: You are being asked to take part in a research study being conducted by Lillianna Franco Carrera (a doctoral student in Loyola University Chicago’s Higher Education Program) for a dissertation. Lillianna is working under the supervision of Dr. Blanca Torres-Olave, Professor in the higher Education Program at Loyola University Chicago. You have volunteered to participate in this study because you self-identify as a first-generation Latinx first-year students at one of two sites. Please read this form and ask any questions before deciding to participate in this study.

Purpose: This study explores the college choice process of first-generation Latinx students, in order to improve college support practices and access. Additionally, the purpose of this study is to understand how these students perceive their high school counselor’s involvement in their college choice.

Criteria for participation includes:
- Must be a first-year student at one of two sites
- 18 years or older
- Must self-identify as First-generation and Latinx
- Must be willing to participate in two 45 minute interviews regarding their college choice process

Procedures: If you agree to be in the study, we will conduct an interview with you. Some of the topics covered in the interview include questions on your personal identity, your high school environment, your college choice experience during high school, the ways in which high school counselors were involved in your college choice, and reflections on your college choice decision. The two interviews will take no more than 45 minutes each to complete. Interviews will be audio recorded.

Risks/Benefits: We do not anticipate any risks to you in participating in this study beyond those experienced in everyday life. Nonetheless, some questions may require you to discuss your background, identity, previous life experiences, and personal reflections regarding your choices. These discussions may evoke an emotional response. However, the information you provide will help us better understand and improve the college choice process and supports for first-generation Latinx students. Additionally, this interview will provide you with the opportunity to reflect on your experience and feelings regarding your college choice.
Compensation:
Participants will receive a $20 gift card for participating in the study.

Confidentiality:
Participants will be asked to choose a pseudonym name to maintain anonymity. The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report we make public we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. Research records will be kept in a password-secured computer folder; only the researchers will have access to the records. The audio recording of the interview will be transcribed by a member of our research team; once transcription is complete, the original audio recording will be destroyed. Any notes by the researchers during the interview and all other records will also be destroyed after five years, except consent form which will be kept indefinitely.

Voluntary Participation:
Participation in this study is voluntary. If you do not want to be in this study, you do not have to participate. If you decide not to participate or decide not to answer any question, it will not affect your current or future relationship with one of the two sites. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty.

Contacts and Questions:
If you have questions about this research study, please feel free to contact Lillianna Franco Carrera, M.Ed at lfranco1@luc.edu.
If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Loyola University Office of Research Services at (773) 508-2689.

Statement of Consent:
Your signature below indicates that you have read the information provided above, have had an opportunity to ask questions, and agree to participate in this research study. You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

Participant’s and Researcher’s Signature

____________________________________________ __________________
Participant’s Signature Date

____________________________________________ __________________
Researcher’s Signature Date
APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL
Interview 1 (45 Minutes)

Introduction Statement:
Hello, my name is Lillianna Franco Carrera and I am a doctoral student in the Higher Education Graduate Program at the Loyola University Chicago. Thanks again for participating in this project. I am working on a research project that is seeking to explore the college choice process of first-generation Latinx students, in order to improve college support practices and access. Additionally, the purpose of this study is to understand how students perceive their high school counselor’s involvement in their college choice. An important factor that I would like you to consider when answering the questions is when your identity as a first-generation and Latinx student are prevalent in your answers or intersect.

As I mentioned in the email, I would like to record this interview if that is ok with you? This interview should be no more than 45 minutes, but we may end sooner. Also, as a reminder, your name or any identifying information will not be used in any reports or publications that result from this study. If at any time during our interview you want to end the conversation, you have the right to exit the study at no penalty.

Do you have any questions for me before we begin?

Along the lines of protecting your identity in the study, I am asking all participants to select names that I will use to refer to you during the study instead of your actual name. Do you have a preference for a pseudonym?

Again before we begin, I would like to remind you that I would appreciate if you can highlight when your identity as a first-generation and Latinx student are prevalent in your answers or intersect.

Interview Questions:

SECTION ONE: Background

1. Can you tell me about your background?
   a. Where were you born?
   b. Where did you grow up?
   c. How would you describe the environment?
   d. How would you describe your family and upbringing?
   e. How would you describe your socioeconomic status growing up?
   f. What language was spoken at home?
   g. What is your parents’ background? (Where were they born? What is their highest level of education? Where do they work?)

2. Can you talk to me about your high school and your experience there as a first-generation Latinx student?
   a. What is the name of the high school?
b. Where is it located? (Urban, suburban, or rural.)
c. What size was it? Did it have many students? (Large, medium, or small.)
d. What does it identify as? (Public, private, religious, charter or other.)
e. What was the demographic of the student population?
f. Did you believe most students in your class expected to go to college? Why or why not?
g. (Academically, extra-curriculars, and character, etc.).

3. Is it important for you to describe yourself as Latinx? Why or why not?
4. How about first-generation?
5. Can you talk to me about the college or university you currently attend and why you chose this school?
   a. Do you attend one of the two sites?
6. Why were you interested in participating in this study?

SECTION TWO: College Choice Process
7. Talk to me about when you began to think of college?
   a. Who or what motivated you to think that you could attend and be successful in college?
8. Do you think making a choice about going to college is different for first-generation Latinx students compared to others? Why or why not? Can you give an example?
9. Who or what provided you with college information and what information did you learn?
10. Can you tell me about the colleges you considered and why you considered them?
    a. How did you learn about them?
11. Walk me through your college choice experience after receiving your acceptance and financial aid letters?
    a. What factors did you consider to compare institutions and make a final choice?

(End of Interview 1- Schedule interview 2)

Interview 2 (45 Minutes)

Introduction Statement:
Thanks again for participating in this project. In our last interview I got to know more about your personal identity and your high school environment. We also began to discuss your college choice process. Today, we will focus on your relationship with your high school counselor, if any, and reflect on your college choice.

As I mentioned in the email, I would like to record this interview if that is ok with you? This interview should be no more than 45 minutes, but we may end sooner. Also, as a reminder, your name or any identifying information will not be used in any reports or publications that result from this study. If at any time during our interview you want to end the conversation, you have the right to exit the study at no penalty.
Do you have any questions for me before we begin?

Again before we begin, I would like to remind you that I would appreciate if you can highlight when your identity as a first-generation and Latinx student are prevalent in your answers or intersect.

SECTION THREE: Counselor Support

12. Was your high school counselors available to talk about your college choice?
   a. If not, who in your high school supported your college choice process and how?
   (Skip following question if they answer no to question 12).

13. In what ways, if any, did your high school counselor play a role in supporting you during your college choice?
   a. From your perspective, what was your relationship like with your high school counselor?
   b. From your perspective, how did your high school counselor influence your college choice process?

14. What can high schools staff (like high school counselors) do to improve how they support or better prepare first-generation Latinx students in their college choice?

SECTION FOUR: Reflection

15. Now that you have completed at least a semester in college, do you feel you made the right choice? Why or why not?
   a. If you attend a 2-year, do you think you should have chosen a 4-year institution? Why or why not?
   b. If you attend a 4-year, do you think you should have chosen a 2-year college? Why or why not?

16. Reflection on your high school experiences, can you share with me what was truly helpful in supporting your college choice?

17. Now that you have experienced making a college choice and your first semester in college, what would you have done differently?
   a. What recommendations would you give to other first-generation Latinx individuals who are making a college choice?

18. Anything else you would like to add that you feel I did not ask you about?

(End of Interview 2)
REFERENCE LIST


VITA

Dra. Franco Carrera’s scholarly journey began in Cicero, Illinois, where she attended public schools from kindergarten to high school. Dra. Franco Carrera was awarded the Gates Millennium Scholarship in her senior year of high school, which allowed her to attend a private institution, Northwestern University, to begin her postsecondary education. She obtained her bachelor’s in communication studies in May of 2011 but ultimately always felt a calling to promote higher education to all. She felt blessed to have been able to obtain a higher education with no loans but knew this was not always possible for others who grew up in her community. She saw this as an injustice and wished others could have the opportunity to obtain a higher education and expand their minds and lives. So, she decided to become a college guidance counselor in a high school in Chicago, Illinois. This experience opened up her eyes to the field of higher education and she ultimately decided to pursue a master’s in higher education at Loyola University Chicago to learn more about the field. During this time, Dra. Franco Carrera worked in the field of student affairs in various departments, such as admissions, advising, multicultural student affairs, experiential learning, and many other offices that helped service a diverse population of students. After graduating in 2016, Dra. Franco Carrera decided, with the encouragement of her professors, to pursue a doctoral program. Dra. Franco Carrera has always been curious about how equitable college access could be improved for all students, and in particular for racially minoritized populations, through supported college choices and career choices, expanding experiential learning practices, and improving the support of purposeful
development. Hence, she believed conducting further research would not only expand the scholarship regarding the topic but also improve the practice in how these students are supported. Dra. Franco Carrera was accepted to the Doctor of Philosophy in Higher Education program at Loyola University Chicago. After she completed the required program coursework and passed her comprehensive exams, Dra. Franco Carrera successfully defended her dissertation in May of 2021.