EDUCATION IS LIKE A MAGIC CARPET: TRANSFER PERCEPTIONS OF URBAN LATINO COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

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The Graduate School
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2011
EDUCATION IS LIKE A MAGIC CARPET:
TRANSFER PERCEPTIONS OF URBAN
LATINO COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS

ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the College of Education at the University of Kentucky

By
Catharine Mary Anne Penfold Navarro
Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Dr. Jane McEldowney Jensen, Associate Professor of Education
Lexington, Kentucky
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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

EDUCATION IS LIKE A MAGIC CARPET:
TRANSFER PERCEPTIONS OF
URBAN LATINO COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS

Latino students are the only ethnic group more likely to enroll in community colleges than four-year institutions. However, they transfer to four-year institutions at much lower rates than their white counterparts. This gap in transfer rates for Hispanic students is of significant concern to higher education researchers and policy makers because of its broad impact on overall educational attainment for Hispanics.

Research on Latino transfer rates has focused predominantly on quantitative data, which paints a clear picture of what is happening, but falls short in explaining why transfer rates continue to be low. Researchers have offered both structural (social reproduction theory and the community college “cooling out” theory) and agency explanations (transfer aspirations and self-efficacy) for low transfer rates. This dissertation expands our understanding of Latino student transfer through a qualitative, interview-based study, which gives voice to six Latino students at an urban community college in the Ohio Valley. Individual interviews were conducted with transfer-ready students and were then transcribed and analyzed through narrative analysis.

Each of the students in this study planned to earn an associate’s degree and then transfer to a four-year institution, but despite these goals they had done limited transfer planning. Although the community college provides access to these students, the students also struggle financially and wonder if they’ll be able to afford the American Dream. Within the context of the community college and American culture, the students are navigating cultural values, gender roles, and expectations as they pursue their education.

The students pursue their educational goals and persistence within the context of strong family connections. They are navigating an unfamiliar education system, often in a foreign language. As they experience education in another language, they are actively engaged in the production of their own cultural identities.
Despite the obstacles these students face – particularly financially), the student narratives are grounded in a strong sense of personal agency and a belief that education will provide them with a better future.

KEYWORDS: Community College, Community College Transfer, Hispanic Students, Narrative Analysis, Cultural Production

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Student’s Signature

May 2, 2011
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EDUCATION IS LIKE A MAGIC CARPET:
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LATINO COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS

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DISSERTATION

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DISserTATION

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to
Sal and Olivia
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation emerged from my intellectual curiosity and professional commitment to student access and success. However, while this represents my intellectual work, Dr. Jane McEldowney Jensen, my dissertation chair, guided my growth as a scholar and challenged me to expand my understanding of theoretical frameworks and explore narrative inquiry. Her feedback throughout this process has been insightful and has resulted in a far superior work. The members of my dissertation committee have persisted with me through this process, helping me refine my research focus (and refine it some more), ultimately resulting in the creation of an intellectual work of which I am very proud. Dr. Karen Carey provided ongoing encouragement and support, affirming my own self-efficacy and challenging me to expand my aspirations. Dr. Jeffrey Bieber challenged me to think more deeply about the community college and its role in higher education, an intellectual interest that has guided my career and scholarly interests. Dr. Beth Goldstein’s early classes in comparative education prompted me to think more deeply about the cultural elements of education, which has served as a foundation for this study.

The students who participated in this study willingly shared their stories of opportunity and challenge with me. It is my hope that, through the generous sharing of their individual narratives, the understanding of Latino community college students – and their experiences – will be expanded.

My parents provided me with early life experiences that prepared me for this work, including travel, living cross culturally, a strong value for education, and the belief that everyone deserves equal opportunities to pursue their dreams.

My husband, Salvatore Navarro Jr., has kept me grounded throughout this process, providing unwavering love and emotional support. His generosity of spirit and continued faith in me has energized my work. Life (and dissertations) are much easier with a soul mate. Thank you for your support through this part of the journey.

When I began my data collection, I was pregnant with our daughter Olivia, who continues to be an inspiration to me. I hope her life will be filled with many opportunities to follow her dreams.

This dissertation is one of mine.
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CHAPTER ONE
THE OTHER SIDE OF THE OPEN DOOR: LATINO STUDENTS IN THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

There is no agony like bearing an untold story inside you.

– Zora Neale Hurston

Elena: Elena¹ is 27 years old. She is Mexican-American (“My mom’s white and my dad’s Mexican.”) and she is a mother herself. After her first semester at a regional university, she left college when she got pregnant. Now her daughter, Isabella, is 8. Elena has a great boyfriend, and she is back in college – determined to earn her bachelor’s degree. For her, the community college is a place where she has a second chance to get an education that will open doors to her future. “You get a degree and it’s like a magic carpet. You can just hop on it and it just takes you far.”

Tonito: Tonito came to the United States from Cuba when his ex-girlfriend won the immigration lottery.

My goal is to get a bachelor’s degree. The day I got here – when I get to the Miami airport I say, “I'm a new born!” So I was a new born. I got into a new place. Everything's new. So I'm not the same marine biologist from Cuba. I’m not the person who used to know a lot of people, who used to do this, do this. So I'm a new person. I have to go through a learning process. So it takes five to ten years if you're going to be successful. … So, that was my decision the day I got here. So. I'm a newborn. I want to see after ten years, I'm going to go back to the same neighborhood and look and say, you know, the person who was there in 2006, the person who's going to be in 2016. (Tonito)

For Tonito, the community college is an inexpensive education option. He needs it to be – he works long hours at his job, takes as many classes as he can, and sends money back to Cuba for his grandmother and brothers. He does not have any money to spare on an expensive education. His grandmother raised him and now, even though he is currently away from her and the rest of his family, he works hard for his money and his education in order to give back to his family, especially his grandmother.

I remember [my grandmother] when I was in high school. She used to cook with wood on the back of the house. We didn't have any oven. We didn't have

¹ Study participants’ names have been changed.
electricity to cook – so we didn't have any gas. So, just close my eyes and thinking of my grandma doing that – you can imagine. I have to do what I have to do. That is what we say in Cuba. I have to do what I have to do. (Tonito)

To both Elena and Tonito, the community college represents a hope of a better life. They are not alone. They are just two of more than 2.5 million Hispanics enrolled in higher education in the United States (Pew Hispanic Center, 2008). Like Elena and Tonito, most Hispanic students begin their higher education at community colleges. In fact, Hispanics are the only ethnic group more likely to start at community colleges than at four-year institutions (Chronicle of Higher Education, August 24, 2009a).

For students like Tonito and Elena, the community college provides an open door to higher education. Low tuition rates, open admission requirements, and geographic proximity make community college accessible. In fall 2007, there were more than one million Hispanic students enrolled in community colleges in the United States (approximately 668,000 enrolled at public four-year institutions that same year) (Chronicle of Higher Education, August 24, 2009a). Because so many Hispanic students begin their education in the community college, their successful transfer to four-year institutions is critical to increasing educational attainment for Hispanics. “Advocates, scholars, and policy makers concerned about issues of social stratification have highlighted the importance of transfer, noting that minority and working-class students are increasingly relying on community colleges for access to the baccalaureate” (Dougherty & Kienzl, 2006, p. 453). The concern of scholars and higher education administrators can be no greater than those of the students themselves, who are counting on the community college to prepare them for further education.

For these students, the community college provides a pathway to the “American Dream.” But what happens on the other side of the community college’s “open door?” Do students like Elena and Tonito succeed in making their dreams come true? Do they find their magic carpet? Do they complete their education at the community college and transfer to four-year institutions to earn their bachelor’s degrees?

For the majority of Hispanic students, the answer to these questions is “No.” Like Elena and Tonito (and the other students who participated in this study), many Hispanic students hope that the community college is the first stepping stone toward a bachelor’s degree. However, despite high educational aspirations, Hispanics are less likely to
transfer to four-year institutions than are students in other ethnic groups (Adelman, 2005; Dougherty & Kienzl, 2006; Lee & Frank, 1990; Velez & Javalgi, 1987).

This gap in transfer rates for Hispanic students is of significant concern to higher education researchers and policy makers because of its broad impact on overall educational attainment for Hispanics (see for example, Boswell, 2004; Dougherty & Kienzl, 2006). “If major differences exist in transfer rates by social background, the pursuit of equal access cannot stop simply with getting minority and working-class baccalaureate aspirants into the community college. It is also important to make sure that students have an equal chance to transfer” (Dougherty & Kienzl, 2006, p. 454).

**Research Focus: Low Hispanic Transfer Rates**

The problem of low transfer rates among Hispanic community college students is of particular importance because Hispanics are now the fastest growing ethnic group in the U.S (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2004). Between 1990 and 2000, the Hispanic population in the United States doubled (U.S. Census Bureau News, 2005) and the Hispanic population is now the second largest ethnic group in the United States, second only to whites who comprise 74.3% of the total population in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006-2008). In 2009, Hispanics made up 15.1% of the population in the United States, with a populace of more than 45.4 million Hispanics in the United States (excluding Puerto Rico) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006-2008).

Despite this rapid growth in population, Hispanics are underrepresented in higher education, comprising only 14.1% of the student population with in higher education institutions (Chronicle of Higher Education, August 24, 2009b). The inequities in Hispanic educational attainment begin early in the pipeline; Hispanics have high attrition rates in both elementary and secondary schools (Attinasi, 1989). Those who do graduate from high school are less likely to enroll in college, although Hispanic enrollment in college has shown dramatic increases in the last decade. In 2010, 32.7% of Hispanics ages 18-21 were enrolled in college. This is a 7.4% increase from the 25.3% of Hispanics enrolled in 2000. However, Hispanic enrollment continues to be significantly less than the college participation rate for whites of the same age, which was 49.5% in 2010 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2010a). This unequal participation in higher education causes
concern for policy makers and higher education administrators who believe higher education should provide equal opportunity to students across racial lines. “Deeply troubling is the growing evidence of an increasing opportunity gap between students from different racial, ethnic, and socio-economic class backgrounds” (Boswell, 2004, p. 24).

When Hispanic students do enroll in higher education, they are more likely to begin their education at the community college than traditional-age white students, (Adelman, 2005, p. 3). In comparison to both white and African American students of similar socioeconomic status and comparable academic achievement, Hispanics are more likely to start at community colleges (Kurlaender, 2006). The community college, therefore, is in a unique position to impact Hispanic educational attainment. “Community colleges have become integral components of Latino’s educational pathways” (Flores, Horn & Crisp, 2006, p. 72). A number of factors influence Hispanic students in their choice to enroll in a community college. More than 50% of Hispanic students cite cost, location close to home, opportunity for self-improvement, and flexibility to work as reasons for choosing to attend community college instead of four-year institutions (Nora & Rendon, 1990, p. 244).

Students of other ethnic backgrounds who reported intention to earn a bachelor’s degree are less likely than Latino students to enroll in community colleges (Kurlaender, 2006). Some researchers have begun to explore the decision making process of Latino students in an effort to understand why Latino students are choosing community colleges over four-year institutions. In an analysis of national, longitudinal data, Kurlaender (2006) found that, “common explanations for attending a community college, such as lack of motivation, weak academic preparation, or limited financial resources, are only part of the reason that many Latino students choose to attend community colleges” (Kurlaender, 2006, p. 15). Latino students may choose a community college because it is closer to home, tuitions costs are significantly lower, and, frequently, has a more diverse student population. (Kurlaender, 2006). “Obviously students’ choices about whether to enter community colleges or four-year institutions are subject to their preferences, financial or geographical constraints, beliefs about the prospects of benefiting from the respective institutions, and many other unobservable characteristics” (Kurlaender, 2006, p. 14). Flores et al. (2006) found that “Latino students make different choices about
college than whites and other racial and ethnic groups do, that these choices are influenced by different factors, and that Latinos fare differently in community colleges than other traditionally underrepresented minorities” (p. 72).

National longitudinal studies demonstrate that the community college is not succeeding in providing effective transfer pathways for Hispanic students; to the extent that these pathways do exist, Hispanic students are not walking down them at the same rate as white students. For example, in California, where nearly half of students in the K-12 system are Latino, only 39% of Latino students enrolled in college following high school and the majority of those students enrolled in the community college (Rivas, Perez, Alvarez & Solorzano, 2007). For each 100 first-time Latino college students, 75 were enrolled in a California Community College and, although 40% of these students indicated an intention to transfer (and an additional 28% reported they were undecided about transfer). Only seven of the 75 actually transferred (Rivas et al., 2007).

These compelling statistics underscore the need for research that explores the transfer experience of Hispanic community college students. In addition to fulfilling the dreams of students like Elena and Tonito, improving the transfer rate and educational attainment of Hispanic students will have both broad societal and deep individual effects. Increasing the higher education attainment for more Hispanic students will not only improve their individual opportunities for economic success (College Board, 2005) but also provide a positive impact on the overall United States economy (Carnevale & Fry, 2003; Spellings Commission, 2006). Lower transfer rates and bachelor’s degree completion for Hispanics lead to gaps in economic earning power and professional opportunities. (See for example, Boswell, 2004; College Board, 2005; Dougherty, 1994; Spellings Commission, 2006).

If current Hispanic enrollment trends and low transfer rates continue, many Hispanic students (like Tonito and Elena) will not benefit from the economic and professional benefits of higher education attainment at the same rate as their white peers. “Improving the transfer rates of community college students is an issue of paramount importance” (Nora & Rendon, 1990, p. 250). Since so many Hispanic students begin their education at community colleges, the community college is in a unique position to facilitate educational opportunity and economic mobility for students. Shaw, Valadez and
Rhoades (1999) strongly argue that the community college must increase student success, including student transfer rates. “Community colleges are positioned to play a critical role in the process of upward mobility in American society” (Shaw et al., 1999, p. 1).

**Basis for the Study: Socioeconomic Status Doesn’t Tell the Whole Story**

Why do Hispanic students transfer at lower rates than their white peers? Researchers have sought to answer this question by studying demographic factors that have been linked consistently to transfer, providing helpful information that provides a partial explanation for low transfer rates. The most recent studies of national, longitudinal data show that the strongest demographic predictor of transfer is socioeconomic status (SES) (Dougherty & Kienzl, 2006). Related demographic factors also predict transfer, including parents’ educational background, student aspirations, age, and high school academic preparation (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Dougherty, 1994). Most notably, while differences in transfer rates among ethnic groups continue to persist, these differences are no longer attributable to race; socioeconomic status is now the strongest predictor.

Hispanic students are more likely to come from lower socioeconomic family backgrounds (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2003) and thus are more likely to be affected by the impact of socioeconomic status on transfer rates. In 2007, the average Hispanic family annual income was $40,566 in contrast to $64,427 for whites and $61,355 for all families combined (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2010b). Although Hispanics make up 15.1% of the population, a quarter of all people living in poverty in the United States are of Hispanic origin (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2003). “The paradox of the situation is that while admission to, and completion of, college may be the most effective way to end the cycle of poverty, the poverty itself creates a major barrier to educational attainment” (Hagedorn & Lester, 2006, p. 830). The cycle of poverty is hard to break.

Tonito knows this first hand.

Because you are new here, you don’t have anything at all. You have to start getting the things you need to get in order to have a nice life. So, you make choices. Get the cheapest food. Get the cheapest car. Get the cheapest stuff. We know that this is an economic law. The cheapest you get the stuff, the more you buy them. So, if you get a cheap car, you have to replace it soon. But because you don't have the money, you don't have any other choice. You have to do it and so the poor spend more than the rich in that way. And that’s an economic law. It is
the way it is. That’s the law. It’s everywhere. Not just here. If you are poor and you need to get something that’s cheap, you will end up paying one and half more than the rich people will end up paying for the same things. (Tonito)

Tonito said he specifically chose to come to a community college because of the low tuition rates. He believes other Latino students make the same choice, opting for a lower cost education, even though they, like others, want the best education possible. Tonito knows he is paying less for his education because he is attending a community college. However, despite this, he still hopes this choice will help him “get further” in the long run. “We know it’s cheaper. We know we have to try to make it as cheaper as possible. It’s not that we need to get cheap education. It’s because cheaper means that we will be able to get further” (Tonito).

Although socioeconomic status may be one demographic predictor of transfer, it only provides a partial answer to the question of low Hispanic transfer rates. The question still persists: Why do Hispanic students transfer at lower rates than their white peers? With tuition rates at community college so low, how does socioeconomic status influence higher education attainment? Research has previously focused on descriptive, quantitative demographic statistics. This research helps in identifying the problem of low Hispanic transfer rates and offering a picture of what is happening in transfer nationwide. Yet deeper questions remain about why this is the case.

While national, longitudinal data has provided some level of understanding of Latino community college students in general, less is known about who they are as individuals. We know they are more likely to come from families with lower education levels and socioeconomic backgrounds (Adelman, 2005; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2003), however we don’t know how and why this impacts their decisions about education. We know they hold strong family commitments (Auerbach, 2006; Nora & Rendon, 1990), yet we don’t know how these family interactions impact community college students in their decisions to transfer. And while we know that students without legal immigration status face additional challenges (Caplan, 2007), we have not yet fully explored how immigration experiences impact students’ feelings and thoughts about their futures and to what extent they believe education can prepare them for their futures. This study provides an avenue through which Latino community college students can share their life stories and begin to answer these questions, providing a deeper understanding of
Latino students that will serve as a foundation for further research. This study will explore the life histories of six Latino community college students. Their lives, their words, and their perceptions will tell the story that to date has gone virtually untold.

Educators and policy makers committed to increasing the overall transfer rates of community college students, as well as limiting racial differences in transfer rates, would benefit from a deeper understanding of the unique factors influencing Latino community college students in their educational persistence and their decisions regarding whether to transfer and pursue a baccalaureate degree. A number of scholars have called for further research on Latino students and their persistence, transfer, and graduation (see for example, Attinasi, 1989; Flores et al., 2006; Hernandez, 2000; Olivas, 1986). While researchers have explored Latino student educational access to college, further research is needed to understand persistence and attainment at the college level (Attinasi, 1989).

“The production of knowledge, especially in the light of post-colonial critiques, gives rise to a crisis of representation, especially when trying to give a voice to ‘marginalized groups’” (Parr, 2001, as cited in Blaufuss, 2007, p. 122). The students, themselves, have stories to tell – stories about their lives and their choices related to education. Stories that will help answer this question. “The power of the analyses results from bringing new voices and previously untold stories into conversations on topics about which these voices provide invaluable witness, critique, and alternative narratives” (Maynes, Pierce & Laslett, 2008, p. 7).

An underlying assumption in the literature is that equal opportunity to transfer would result in equal results. In other words, in an environment of true equal opportunity, a researcher could measure the transfer rates of any two groups of students and the transfer rates would be consistent. To some extent, this assumption overlooks two critical facets that may impact educational decisions – the individuals involved and their personal agency.

In an effort to answer to more fully understand why Hispanic transfer rates remain low, this study is designed to explore individual narratives, or, as Haleman (1998) describes them, the “lived experiences” (p. 1) of students. This research study tells the
stories of six individual Hispanic community college students and the role education plays in their lives. It is, at the same time, many stories bound together. It is a story of the community college student and a story of immigration. It is a story of economic opportunity, liberty, democracy, and learning, four values inherent in the community college mission. It is a story of the “American Dream,” how much that dream costs, and how elusive it can be. It is a story of ethnic identity and how students struggle with being authentic to Latino/a gender roles, while at the same time encountering cultural values of what it means to be an American man or woman. It is the story of students who experience education as a foreigner and English as a foreign language. But above all else, it is the story of individuals and their education. It is the story of their dreams. As Elena so eloquently puts it, education is “like a magic carpet. You can just hop on it and it just takes you far.”

I met these six students in their learning spaces, including classrooms, meeting rooms, and library of the urban community college they attend in the Ohio valley. I interviewed each of them individually, using prepared questions to guide the interviews. I wanted to know about their experiences at the community college, the role education plays in their lives, and what they thought about transferring to a university to continue their education after the community college. Though I asked each of them the same questions, their individual answers were, quite simply, unique. These students were selected for the study because of their common characteristics. They are all community college students and they each identify as Latino. They all had earned at least 15 credit hours and held a minimum 2.0 grade point average. But despite these common characteristics, the stories these students told are as individual as they are. Their personal narratives tell the untold story behind the educational statistics related to student achievement that have concerned so many researchers, community college administrators, and politicians. Through this study, faces emerge of the Hispanic students on the other side of the community college’s open door. These faces belong to Elena and

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2 Research that studies Hispanic students as a whole will be discussed in this study, providing a broad basis for our understanding of Hispanic community college students. However, most of the Hispanic students who attend college in this region are of Latin American origin and self-identify as Latino. The student participants in this study all self-identify as Latino/a. Further details regarding definitions used in this study for “Hispanic” and “Latino” are found on page 10.
Tonito as well as the other student participants in this study who you will meet later. These faces also belong to the other 960,000 Hispanic students currently enrolled in community colleges across the United States.

**Definitions and Delimitations of this Study**

This study focused on the transfer of Latino students from community colleges to four-year institutions. For the purposes of this study, the “community college” is defined as an accredited, public, two-year institution offering post-secondary education courses. “Transfer” is defined as the process through which community college students who begin their postsecondary education at the community college subsequently enroll in four-year institutions with the intention of earning their bachelor’s degree. It is important to acknowledge that students exhibit a wide variety of transfer behaviour, often transferring back and forth between two- and four-year institutions, or concurrently enrolling in more than one institution – described as “swirling” enrollment. Close to 60% of traditional-aged college students attend at least two institutions (Adelman, 2005). However, although students engage in a wide variety of transfer behaviour, this study focuses on transfer from community colleges to four-year institutions.

The term “Hispanic” is a broad category that includes people from a wide range of ethnic and cultural origins encompassing many differences in cultural values. For the purpose of this research, “Hispanic” will be defined using the U.S. Census Bureau definition, which includes people of any race who are of Hispanic origin – including Spanish speakers and people of Spanish heritage by birth location or ancestry, including those with ancestry in Central and South America and in Spain. Much of the quantitative and longitudinal research includes is focused on students who fall into the broad category of “Hispanic.”

The terms “Latino” and “Latina” are more specific terms, used throughout the literature to refer to Hispanics living in the United States who are of Latin American origin, from Spanish speaking countries or regions including Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Columbia and other areas in Central and South America. Some researchers focus on a specific ethnic group within the broader “Hispanic” category (such as Mexican, for example). When referencing these studies, it is specifically noted. It is important
recognize that while Latinos share a Latin American heritage and language, they are by no means a homogenous group. They have a variety of ethnic, national, and religious backgrounds. Like any other groups who share a common heritage, they hold a wide variety of beliefs and values, immigration experiences, and cultural traditions.

Much of the national research pulls from data gathered for the entire Hispanic population. This data and research will be cited to provide a broad foundation for this study. More specific research examining Latino students will also be considered in this study. When the research cited is focused on Hispanic students as a population, the term Hispanic will be used when referencing study results. Likewise, when specific studies related to Latino students are discussed, the term Latino will be used. Latinos make up the majority of Hispanics who live in the region where this research was conducted and the study participants all self-identify as Latino/a.

**Summary**

We know that Hispanic community college students are more likely to begin their higher education at a community college than a four-year institution. We also know that they are less likely than their white counterparts to transfer to four-year institutions to earn a bachelor’s degree. What is not known is why they transfer at such lower rates.

In chapter two, I will provide an overview of research that has sought to offer explanations for low transfer rates, including structural and agency explanations. 

*Structural:* The literature offers two broad theoretical perspectives offering structural explanations for low transfer rates among Latino students: social reproduction theory and the community college “cooling out” theory. *Agency:* Scholars have explored how individual factors, viewed in the context of student aspirations, student self-efficacy, and demographic factors influence student transfer. Both structural and agency theoretical perspectives will be discussed in more depth in chapter two.

Research has provided us with broad strokes resulting in a demographic picture of Latino community college students. But the personal experiences of people are not effectively captured in these broad strokes. “Analysis of personal narratives have served to introduce marginalized voices … and they also have provided counternarratives that dispute misleading generalizations or refute universal claims” (Maynes et al., 2008, p. 1).
The study explores the personal narratives of six Hispanic community college students and the role higher education plays in their lives. In their own voices, they tell a story of opportunity and barriers. They describe economic, familial, and personal challenges of earning a degree that go far beyond the cost of tuition. These students are pursuing their own American Dream. This dream is an education that will bring them more opportunities and the hope of breaking free from poverty. They are navigating an unfamiliar culture, learning a new language, and traversing the cultural and gender roles of their varied Latino heritage within the context of their new home. This study gives voice to these individual students, and begins to answer the broader questions that remain unanswered by adding individual voices to the quantitative data that seeks to explain low Hispanic transfer rates.
CHAPTER TWO
WHAT DOES THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE OPEN DOOR MEAN FOR LATINO STUDENTS?

This study seeks to understand the low transfer rate of Hispanic community college students by exploring students’ perceptions of their educational experiences and the role further education plays in their lives, giving voice to the students themselves. Because Hispanic students are more likely to begin their higher education at a community college rather than a four-year institution (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2009a), low transfer rates result in fewer Hispanics with bachelor’s degrees, thereby limiting future earning potential and participation in graduate education.

As a framework for this study, it is important to understand the community college’s role in providing access to higher education (particularly for Latino students) and the transfer mission of the community college. Building on that foundation, I will include an overview of the large body of literature that exploring predictors of student transfer, including individual factors (socioeconomic background, first generation status and student aspirations) and institutional factors (including ethnic representation and faculty/staff support). As this study seeks to specifically understand Latino student transfer, I will also explore preliminary findings of an earlier pilot study that indicates family commitment and immigration experience may have significant influence on Latino students’ decisions about transfer.

Researchers have offered both structural and agency explanations for low transfer rates and these theoretical approaches will be discussed. Two broad structural theories provide conceptual frameworks through which to view this problem, social reproduction theory and the community college “cooling out” theory. The literature related to agency frameworks focuses on individual transfer aspirations and self-efficacy. Although these theoretical perspectives offer insight into transfer behaviour, they do not provide us with a full understanding of the issue. This study, therefore, is designed to build on this knowledge and deepen our understanding of individual student experiences within the context of various societal structures (in this case, postsecondary institutions as exemplified by the community college) within the context of American culture, with
regard to immigration, marginalized ethnic populations, and poverty. With this literature as a foundation, this study will explore personal narratives, in order to understand how these students produce aspirations and negotiate the systems in which they are engaged (using the conceptual framework of cultural production).

**The Community College: Gateway to Economic Mobility**

Hispanic students are more likely to begin their education in a two-year college than in a four-year institution (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2009a). In 2004, the minority student population included 1.8 million Hispanic students. While white students are more likely to enroll in four-year institutions (64%), Hispanic students are more likely to attend a two-year institution. In 2004, 54% of Hispanic students attended two-year institutions. Grubb (1991) found that high ability Hispanic students were more likely to start at a community college.

Because the majority of Latino students begin their higher education at a community college, it is important to understand the community college’s role in providing access to higher education, including low-tuition rates, open admission to associate degree programs and a transfer pathway to four-year institutions.

In general, minority students are less likely to enroll in higher education than white students. In 2003, approximately 66% of white students enrolled in higher education immediately after high school, in contrast to 57% of black students and 52% of Hispanic students (College Board, 2005). Lower enrollment of Hispanic students reflects a consistent trend since the early 1980s, prior to which Hispanic students were slightly more likely to participate in higher education than were white students (College Board, 2005, p. 10).

By providing an open door to higher education, community colleges are offering an open door to the American Dream. For many students, particularly those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, the community college is the first step to opening this door (Adelman, 2005; Boswell, 2004; Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac, 2009a).

Increasingly, higher education is connected with economic opportunity (Boswell, 2004). As early as 1960, Clark (1960) recognized the connection between economic earning potential and higher education achievement. “The means of moving upward in
status and of maintaining high status now include some years in college, and a college education is a prerequisite of the better positions in business and the professions” (Clark, 1960, p. 570).

In more recent decades, education has become an even more significant factor in upward mobility due to the decrease of manufacturing jobs and increased requirements for employees to have more than a high school education. “The driving force behind the 21st-century economy is knowledge, and developing human capital is the best way to fuel it” (Carnevale & Fry, 2003, p. 5). Economic changes have necessitated an increase in higher education for many in the job market. “These structural shifts in the American economy make postsecondary education necessary for anyone who wants to compete in and command a living wage in today’s labor market” (Boswell, 2004, p. 24). Over 80% of managers and professionals had some college education in 1998, in contrast to 59% only 25 years earlier (Carnevale & Fry, 2003). In particular, the bachelor’s degree has increasingly become a necessity for upward mobility and participation in professional careers (Carnevale, 1999; Shaw, 1998). “The acquisition of a bachelor’s degree can be likened to an admission ticket allowing entrance to the middle class and beyond where economic and social mobility are possible” (Hagedorn & Lester, 2006, p. 830).

U.S. Census data indicate that people who have earned a bachelor’s degree earn an average of $600,000 more in their lifetime than those whose education ended with their high school diploma. According to 2004 U.S. Census data, workers with a bachelor’s degree earned an average of $49,900 per year, in contrast to an average annual income of $37,600 for workers with only an associate’s degree (College Board, 2005). The bachelor’s degree is also the gateway to higher levels of education including masters and doctoral degrees; those who don’t transfer are also cut off from this opportunity. For those with a master’s degree, the average income jumped even higher to $59,600. Individuals with doctoral or professional degrees earned an average of $79,400 to $96,700 per year. Rivas et al. (2007) found that Chicano students who earned their doctorates were more likely than other racial groups to have begun their education at a community college. The community college plays an important role in access, not only to the associate’s degree, but also subsequent levels of higher education.
Because education is so closely linked with economic earning power, it is essential that all students have access to participate in higher education. Admission to higher education in the United States is both based on merit (in the form of high school grade point average and standardized test scores for selective admissions schools) and is open access (in the case of community colleges and some state-funded universities). However, there remains a disparity among those who attend college based on socio-economic status. For those most in need of an opportunity to increase their earning power (those in poverty or from lower socioeconomic backgrounds) participation in higher education remains limited. Students from lower-income backgrounds are more likely to attend community colleges, but less likely to transfer and earn a bachelor’s degree. The socioeconomic gap in transfer and the disparity of transfer rates among different ethnic groups means that some students are losing out on the central method through which individuals in the United States achieve economic mobility, the bachelor’s degree. “The growing income disparity between those with college degrees and those without college degrees has already turned us into a nation of college-haves and college-have-nots” (Carnevale & Fry, 2003, p. 5).

**Hispanic Associate’s Degree Completion**

On the other side of the community college’s open door, Hispanic students show strong educational persistence and associate degree completion. Hispanic students complete their associate degrees at much higher rates (40%) than African American students (26%) and at a comparable rate to white students (42%) (Alfonso, 2006). Alfonso (2006) found that associate degree completion rates were significantly related to a number of factors. Enrolling in an academic major increases the likelihood of graduation (students who pursue occupational majors are 12% less likely to graduate than students in academic majors). Additionally, parents’ educational attainment also influences students’ educational attainment; students were 12% more likely to complete an associate’s degree if they had a parent with a bachelor’s degree. Students with a child were 21% less likely to finish an associate’s degree. Full-time attendance and being married were also positively related to successful graduation (Alfonso, 2006).
One might expect that strong associate’s degree completion rates would result in strong transfer rates. However, analysis of longitudinal data shows this is not the case. As discussed earlier, Hispanic students transfer at much lower rates, resulting in much lower rates of bachelor’s degree completion.

**The Transfer Function of the Community College**

Throughout its history, one of the key functions of the community college has been to serve as a transfer institution. “From the beginning of the community college, one of its fundamental missions has been to facilitate the attainment of baccalaureate degrees by providing the early stages of a baccalaureate education and aiding transfer to four-year colleges” (Dougherty & Kienzl, 2006, p. 452). However, the community college has had varied success in reaching this goal, which has resulted in strong criticism.

**Baccalaureate Degree Attainment Gap**

Perhaps the strongest argument of community college critics is that students who enter the community college following high school graduation are significantly less likely to earn the bachelor’s degree than students who enter four-year institutions (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Dougherty, 1994; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Researchers have found varying bachelor’s degree attainment rates for community college students, depending on the methodology and analysis used. However, regardless of the methodology, the findings are consistently low. National surveys show an average of 70% of students who enter four-year colleges earn a baccalaureate degree, in contrast to only 26% of those who begin their education at two-year colleges (Velez, 1985). In a more recent study, Bailey, Calcagno, Jenkins, Kienzl, and Leinbach (2005a) found that 36% of students who entered community colleges in 1995-96 had earned a degree or certificate, including a bachelor’s degree, within six years.

Students who come from low socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely to complete a bachelor’s degree, regardless of where they begin their education (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). However, even when controlling for these factors there still remains a large gap in educational attainment for those who begin their education at community colleges (Dougherty, 1994, p. 53). Analysis of national survey data consistently shows that “students who enter community colleges receive significantly fewer bachelor’s
degrees and years of education than students of similar background, ability, and aspirations who enter four-year colleges” (Dougherty, 1994, p. 53). When controlling for a wide number of variables, including academic aptitude, race, and gender, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) found that students who begin their education at community colleges are 15% less likely to earn a bachelor’s degrees than similar students who begin at four-year institutions. “The very fact of attending a two-year rather than a four-year institution lowers the likelihood that a student will obtain a bachelor’s degree” (Brint & Karabel, 1989, p. 15).

Although some of the difference in baccalaureate attainment can be attributed to factors outside the community college, including student socioeconomic status, high school preparation, and educational aspirations (Cohen & Brawer, 2003), research has found that “even when comparing students of equivalent background, ability, high-school record, and aspirations, several different studies have found that students entering the community college receive 11 to 19% fewer bachelor’s degrees and average one-eighth to one-fourth a year less of higher education than similar students entering four-year colleges” (Dougherty, 1992, p. 190).

This difference in educational attainment is of significant importance to community college scholars, administrators, and policy makers, not to mention the students themselves. According to Dougherty (1994), “This result is so cruel given the fact that so many students (particularly among working-class and minority youth) enter the community college in the belief that it will greatly assist their pursuit of the baccalaureate degree” (pp. 67-8).

While these findings are troubling to educators and researchers who promote the strong egalitarian mission of the community college, they are not the end of the argument for community college advocates. They argue that the community college is successful because it provides access to higher education for many who might not otherwise attend college. Dougherty (1994) maintains that both the advocates and the critics are justified in their claims. Community colleges do provide access to all students, but at the same time, students who attend community colleges are less likely to earn a bachelor’s degree. Dougherty (1994) points to a number of characteristics of the community college that either fail to support or actually hinder student transfer, including institutional factors that
decrease or “cool out” student aspirations. He also identifies other barriers, including the challenges students experience related to readjustment during transfer, the lack of financial aid, and transfer admissions policies at four-year institutions.

In a review of the related literature, Alfonso (2006) outlines six major arguments that seek to explain the gap in baccalaureate degree attainment of community college students. Firstly, the high number of community college students who are simply trying out college, and therefore defined as “experimenters,” results in a lower persistence rate among community college students, and therefore a lower transfer rate (Grubb, 1991). Secondly, institutional factors including lack of residential facilities contribute to a lower level of integration into the college community and therefore a lower persistence and transfer rate (Dougherty, 1987, 1992, 1994). Thirdly, the open door admissions process of the community college (low level of selectivity) has been found consistently to correlate with lower levels of academic persistence. Dougherty (1992) argues that this contributes to lower faculty expectations as well as lower student expectations. Fourthly, challenges related to the actual transfer process, including information related to transfer of credit, effective advising, and the challenges of moving and adjusting to a new school provide obstacles that students must successfully overcome (Dougherty, 1987, 1992, 1994). Fifthly, many students experience what has come to be called “transfer shock” related to the experience of transferring credit, adjusting to a new academic environment and expectations, and making significant personal and life adjustments (Laanan, 2007). Sixthly, community college students often enroll in courses and programs that do not prepare them for transfer to four-year institutions. (For a more thorough overview, see Alfonso, 2006, pp. 894 - 896)

Institutional emphasis can impact both graduation and transfer rates of community college students. Colleges that emphasize certificates have higher graduation rates – and tend to emphasize preparation for the workforce above academic transfer (Alfonso, Bailey & Scott, 2005). Brint and Karabel (1989) and Dougherty (1994) argue that low transfer rates can partially be attributed to an institutional emphasis on occupational programs in contrast to transfer. Grubb (1991) also attributes the overall decrease in transfer to an increased emphasis on vocational programs, in contrast to academic programs.
While community college advocates maintain that increased emphasis on vocational programs (including many of the associate of science and certificate programs) is a positive response to changing workforce needs, critics argue that it is an intentional attempt to maintain the current societal structure (Dougherty, 1994). Regardless of the motivation behind these decisions, this contradictory mission has a direct impact on transfer rates. Students who earn academic associate degrees are more likely to transfer than students who earn vocational associate degrees (Grubb, 1991). Grubb (1991) also found that although the number of students earning vocational associate degrees has increased, the likelihood of those students transferring decreased by approximately 30%. During that same time period, the transfer rate of students with associate’s degrees declined from 68.7% to 48.9%. As these numbers have decreased, students have increasingly transferred without associate’s degrees – 25% of transfers in the Class of 1972 had associate’s degrees, in contrast to 14% of transfers in the Class of 1980 (Grubb, 1991).

**Measuring Transfer Rates**

Measuring and comparing transfer rates has proven to be a challenge for researchers because of the wide range of definitions and calculation methods used. Until recently, there have been considerable differences in the methodology used – and thus in the findings. Researchers have considered the following factors when measuring transfer rates: student educational aspirations, student academic preparedness, institutional emphasis, the number of credits earned prior to transfer, the length of time to between attendance at the community college and transfer, the time to bachelor’s degree completion, and whether or not a student is enrolled in an academic program at the community college. Whether these variables are considered or controlled for directly affects the outcome.

Cohen (2005) argues that researchers have intentionally selected the method that would best prove their point – whether that is to advocate the effectiveness of the community college or prove that the community college is not successfully meeting its goal of transfer. According to Cohen (2005), community college critics have consistently found transfer rates in the 4 to 5% range when measuring transfer rates of the entire
student population at a community college. In contrast, those who have considered “transfer intent” in their measurements have reported transfer rates closer to 75 or 80%.

In recent years, a more consistent equation for calculating the transfer rate has emerged. In 2005, Cohen encouraged researchers to agree upon a common definition for measuring transfer rates, offering this equation: “the number of students matriculating at a community college in a given year and who complete ten or twelve units there, divided into the number of that group who enroll in a university within a specified time, usually four to six years” (Cohen, 2005, p. 86). While there still exists some variance in this equation (i.e. the number of credits to consider and the length of time in which to count students), there is now greater consistency in the equation used – and thus the results, allowing policy makers and researchers to compare data that is, in fact, comparable.

Using this new definition, Townsend (2002) reports national transfer rates of 21.2 to 23.7% from 1984-1989, and a 25.18% transfer rate in 1995, using data gathered from the Center for the Study of Community Colleges (2001) and including students who earned 12 credits and transferred within four years to an in-state public university.

Regardless of the definition used, Nora and Rendon (1990) argue that in the coming decades, the success of the community college will partially be measured by its ability to effectively facilitate transfer. “In particular, a most crucial problem will be not only how the college can facilitate the transfer process of minority and disadvantaged students but how the college can raise far above historic levels the numbers of students who successfully transfer” (Nora & Rendon, 1990, p. 236).

**Demographic Predictors of Transfer**

While the door from community colleges to four-year institutions may be open, Hispanic students walk through that door at a much lower rate than do white students. A significant body of literature has explored causes for low transfer rates. This section will discuss two major strands in the research related to transfer rates: 1) socioeconomic status (SES) and 2) first-generation status.

**Socioeconomic Status (SES)**

A wide body of literature has emerged that explores how demographic factors including race/ethnicity, socio-economic status, and gender impact transfer rates.
Through the analysis of national data sets from the 1970s and 1980s, Lee and Frank (1990) and Velez and Javalgi (1987) found that these demographic factors were all significant predictors of transfer. In a similar study of two national data sets from the 1990s (the National Education Longitudinal Study of the 8th Grade, which gathered data on a national sample of students who were in eighth grade in 1998; and the Beginning Postsecondary Students Survey, which gathered data regarding students who began postsecondary education between July 1, 1989 and June 30, 1990), Dougherty and Kienzl (2006) confirmed earlier findings that socioeconomic status significantly impacts transfer rates. However, their analysis indicates a significant change in terms of race/ethnicity and gender impacts on transfer – the impact of both factors is no longer statistically significant. Dougherty and Kienzl (2006) attribute this shift to the wealth of programs developed and implemented in the 1990s designed to mitigate these differences.

This study follows an earlier report produced by the U.S. Department of Education (Adelman, 2005) that reveals that SES plays a critical role in who attends community colleges. Adelman (2005) found that “neither gender nor race/ethnicity nor second-language background nor first-generation status ends up playing a statistically significant role in explaining who starts out in a community college” (p. 4). However, Adelman’s findings did reveal that SES was a significant predictor – including parents’ income, level of education, and occupation. “The higher the SES quintile, the less likely the student will start in a community college” (Adelman, 2005, p. 4).

Despite the fact that race is no longer a significant predictor of transfer, these findings do not indicate that all is well in terms of transfer opportunities. Minorities – particularly blacks and Hispanics – still transfer to four-year schools at lower rates than their white counterparts. The difference can be explained, however, not due to race, but due to socioeconomic status (Dougherty & Kienzl, 2006).

With regard to race and ethnicity, we found that in the 1990s, as in the 1970s and 1980s, blacks and Hispanics had lower transfer rates than did whites and Asians. However, our study breaks with earlier studies (Lee & Frank, 1990; Velez & Javalgi, 1987) in finding that this racial-ethnic disparity is not statistically significant, particularly if we compare black and Latino students with whites of similar gender, age, and above all, SES. (Dougherty & Kienzl, 2006, p. 480)
Dougherty and Kienzl (2006) call for further research regarding how socioeconomic status impacts successful transfer. While Dougherty & Kienzl’s (2006) study focused on an analysis of national data sets (including high school academic preparation, educational aspirations, family factors including marriage and children, etc., choices of academic program, and other factors), this study will illuminate the untold story of students’ lives and develop further understanding of this issue.

**First Generation College Students**

Many Latino community college students are the first in their families to attend college – labeled “first-generation college students” by researchers who have produced a growing body of literature that provides descriptive information about college students who are first in their families to attend college and the challenges they face. As with students from other ethnic backgrounds, parents’ education impacts students’ college attendance – but with Latino students it is the mothers’ education that has the positive relation with school attendance (Hurtado-Ortiz & Gauvain, 2007).

While several studies have shown that first-generation college students have lower persistence rates (See for example, Ishitani, 2006, p. 863), only a limited number of researchers have explored the link between first-generation status and likelihood to transfer. An analysis of the California community college pipeline shows that Latino students may be at a disadvantage in the transfer process because of their first-generation status (Chapa & Schink, 2006). Because transfer admission to the University of California is competitive, students must surpass the minimum requirements in order to gain admission. Minority students, who are less likely to come from families with higher education levels and incomes, are often at a disadvantage in terms of the social and cultural capital necessary to navigate the transfer process (Chapa & Schink, 2006). In California, where enrollment in community colleges continues to grow – particularly in the Latino student population – the number of transfer opportunities for students in the UC system has not grown, offering fewer opportunities for Latino students to transfer.

For many first-generation Latino community college students, one of the major barriers to transfer is limited knowledge about the processes of transfer (Hurtado-Ortiz & Gauvain, 2007). Although these students may receive strong support from their families to pursue higher education, their parents are often unequipped to provide information and
support in the same way as parents who have attended college themselves. These students enter the higher education environment with limited social capital – particularly if they are recent immigrants to the United States and unfamiliar with American culture – in contrast to students from well-educated families whose parents are familiar with the educational structure and processes, including registration, financial aid, meeting professors’ expectations, and navigating the peer culture. Parents of Latino students often provide strong support to their students, however, they often have limited knowledge about the college admission process, availability of financial aid, and other factors which parents who have attended college frequently pass on to their children (Nora & Rendon, 1990; Olivas, 1986). It is important to acknowledge, however, that lack of knowledge regarding college process and higher education culture does not indicate a lack of interest in higher education (Carnevale & Fry, 2003; Fry, 2002).

First-generation college students are often faced with the challenge of navigating two cultures with competing values, speech patterns, and expectations. In a study of 16 first-generation college students, Cushman (2007) found that many of the students experienced daily cultural adjustments. These students revealed what a challenge it has been to remain true to themselves in an environment where they differ from the norm. Keeping that balance means changing, but it also means remembering their roots. They learn what both the old and the new settings call for, and they continually move in and out of different cultures. (Cushman, 2007, p. 47)

Students from cultural backgrounds different from the mainstream culture face the challenge of maintaining what Brayboy (2004) refers to as “cultural integrity” in an effort to be both true to their culture and succeed academically. In his study of American Indian students at two Ivy League universities, Brayboy (2004) found that “American Indian students use strategies to make themselves less visible to the dominant population, thus minimizing the surveillance and oppression they experience on a daily basis” (p. 127). Some students, in an attempt to fit into the mainstream culture within the institution, choose to remain “invisible,” a term used by Brayboy (2004). “Striving for invisibility (a state that can never be entirely reached), individuals may behave in ways that make them less noticeable to others, which becomes a strategic response to oppression and surveillance” (Brayboy, 2004, p. 130). The students in his study found some value in remaining “invisible” in the dominant culture. “Almost all of them concluded that the
cost of being visible was rarely mitigated by the benefits associate with that visibility” (Brayboy, 2004, pp. 129-130). Some qualitative research studies have sought to understand why some minorities are able to navigate cultural boundaries while others are unable to, resulting in less academic success (Ogbu, 1987).

For first-generation Latino college students, the challenges of college often include a sense of being out of place combined with a lack of awareness of college processes and culture. First-generation students “feel the tensions of entering new territory, and their parents are unable to reassure them. Their fellow college students often seem to be members of a club of insiders to which they do not belong” (Cushman, 2007, p. 44). The challenges faced by first-generation college students include: less academic preparation, less money, and lower confidence in their ability to succeed (Cushman, 2007). First-generation college students also frequently face financial challenges in funding their education, and work more hours for lower wages than their peers (Lundberg, Schreiner, Hovaguimian & Slavin Miller, 2007; Nora & Rendon, 1990). They also are more likely to have dependents (Lundberg et al., 2007).

It is important to note that students who fall into the category of first-generation college student have a wide range of precollege experiences that also influence their persistence and graduation, including the rigor of their high school program and their success in high school – which also influence college persistence (Ishitani, 2006).

**Institutional Characteristics that Influence Transfer**

Institutional factors have also been found to influence transfer rates. Among these are the academic curriculum, use of institutional research, strong faculty support of transfer, and articulation agreements (Cuseo, 2001). Cohen (1996) found that institutions with higher transfer rates had a “visible and vigorous” transfer center, a culture of transfer expectation among staff, and a university located in close proximity with low grade-point average required for transfer student admission.

**Faculty/Staff Support**

Among the factors contributing to the success of community college students is the encouragement of faculty, administrators, and counselors (Nora, 2000; Nora & Rendon, 1990; Pak, Bensimon, Malcom, Marquez and Park, 2006). Hispanic students
who receive support from faculty and staff earn more college credits (Nora & Rendon, 1990). “Faculty play an important role in identifying and facilitating student acquisition of academic competencies needed to complete general education requirements, and they play a critical role in the design of programs and practices to bring underprepared students into the higher education mainstream” (Nora, 2000, p. 6).

In their 2006 study of transfer students who successfully transferred to selective institutions, Pak et al. (2006) researched the life stories of 10 such students. By exploring the life stories of these students, the authors were able to identify common factors which impacted student success. The students, predominantly minority and first-generation, shared common experiences, including mentoring, academic success, increased knowledge about financial aid, and involvement in campus activities (Pak et al., 2006).

A common experience shared by these successful students was being mentored by a faculty member or administrator who took a specific, individual interest in them and instilled in them the confidence to transfer. Although these students experienced academic success late in their educational career (often after they entered college and completed developmental courses), the experience of academic achievement served to boost their confidence. Most frequently, this academic success was experienced in a classroom environment with a faculty member who was considered to be very challenging yet very supportive. During their community college education, these students were exposed to knowledge about educational opportunities and financial aid or scholarships, of which they had previously been unaware. Additionally, by becoming involved in campus activities – particularly in leadership roles – students gained a sense of self-confidence, became more connected with the institution, and developed friendships with other students (Pak et al., 2006).

“Transfer agents” played a pivotal role in these students’ educational futures (Pak et al., 2006). Often, a faculty member, administrator, or advisor played a significant role in providing information about transfer opportunities to students. “If students are not lucky enough to meet the right individual(s) or find the right program(s), they may continue to drift aimlessly and never make a successful transfer” (Pak et al., 2006, p. 31). Mentors served in a number of capacities, among them instilling confidence in students.
“Positive authority figures (e.g. instructors, directors, and administrators) seem to play a critical role for marginalized students by helping them overcome their internalized feelings of not being good enough or smart enough for college. By noticing, nurturing, and believing in students’ abilities, key individuals appear to have the power to affirm students and influence them to achieve their full academic potential” (Pak et al., 2006, p. 32).

But even when strong support systems are available, Hispanic students are less likely to participate in programs such as academic and career counseling, which assist students in the transfer process (Nora & Rendon, 1990, p. 252.). Additionally, they tend not to connect with useful networks that provide advocacy and information that lead toward transfer. The community college, therefore, must seek not only to develop more effective programs, but also to increase Latino student participation in these programs. Nora & Rendon (1990) call for a two-pronged approach, identifying potential transfer students early in their academic studies, paired with effective academic and transfer advising programs.

Nora and Rendon (1990) found that successful transfer students share the following characteristics: strong commitment to the institution and academic goals, strong sense of academic and social integration, parents with a high education level, positive attitudes about transfer, and becoming involved in transfer-related activities while at the two-year institution. Additionally, students who enter college with strongly developed academic goals are more likely to transfer (Nora & Rendon, 1990). As with many students, Hispanic students’ academic success is impacted by the availability and use of financial aid. Nora (1990) found that students earned more semester hours and were more likely to earn a credential if they received high levels of financial aid (both from institutional and outside sources).

**Pilot Study: Familial Commitments and Immigration Experience**

A group interview, conducted by the Transfer Center at Bluegrass Community and Technical College (Penfold, 2008), resulted in two significant findings that inform this work. Firstly, the Latino students interviewed were very cognizant of the financial and career benefits of earning a bachelor’s degree. Students considered earning potential when making decisions regarding whether to pursue transfer and a bachelor’s degree. However, while they had strong aspirations for further education, they did not expect to
continue their education beyond the associate’s degree. For many, their documentation status means they could not afford a bachelor’s degree education because they were not eligible for financial aid. Additionally, because of their immigration status, the anticipated limited potential for employment and therefore expected they would not be able to enjoy the economic benefits of having a bachelor’s degree. Secondly, the Latino students interviewed verbalized a strong commitment to living with their families – particularly their mothers – and transfer options were considered in light of this, resulting in limited options for four-year schools because they chose to consider only those institutions that would allow them to live at home with their families. While their aspirations were unaffected, their anticipated transfer behavior reflected a combination of issues resulting from low SES and immigration status, as well as family commitment. These issues are examined further in this study.

Theoretical Foundation

Research regarding transfer rates has been predominantly descriptive in nature. Rather than providing a theoretical approach to explaining differences in transfer rates, research has focused on identifying student demographic characteristics that predict transfer. Studies geared at understanding low Latino transfer from community colleges to baccalaureate institutions have failed to offer a conceptual framework that provides an adequate theoretical explanation for the inequities in transfer rates. “Investigators not using conceptual frameworks have been content with establishing the correlates of persistence, rather than understanding the phenomenon as a dynamic process” (Attinasi, 1989, p. 249). This study will seek to develop an understanding of how an integrated theoretical foundation (in particular, how students navigate structural and cultural environments to develop their own educational aspirations) can assist us in understanding the low transfer rate of Latino students.

Broad Theoretical Approaches: Structure or Agency?

Two broad theoretical approaches that have attempted to explain low transfer rates among community college students go one step beyond descriptive research by offering a theoretical framework for understanding this problem. However, they fail to
acknowledge both structural and individual elements and thus are inadequate to explain the problem of low Latino transfer rates. These broad theoretical frameworks have fallen into two very different theoretical perspectives. Firstly, those that seek to explain the problem of low transfer rates as a structural issue, and secondly, those that see it as an agency or cultural issue.

The current literature focuses predominantly on structural issues – looking at society and institutions for solutions to the problem of low Latino transfer rates. However, although structural issues are central to understanding factors that influence Latino transfer, they provide explanations that focus on students as members of a large group – leaving gaps in our understanding of how individual aspirations and student self-efficacy contributes to transfer rates. While these theoretical approaches provide a lens through which to view Latino transfer, they leave many pieces of the individual stories of students untold. After an overview of both structural and agency explanations, I will argue for a more integrated theoretical approach to understanding the problem of low transfer rates which combines both structural perspectives and an understanding of individual aspirations and self-efficacy. Furthermore, this study will seek to create new knowledge and broaden our understanding of the interplay between structural and individual factors in the personal narratives of students.

**Structural Explanations**

The structural explanations fall into two camps, those that view lower persistence and transfer rates as a determined outcome of a student’s social background (i.e. social reproduction theory) and secondly, those that view the low transfer rates as a result of the community college’s impact on students (“cooling out” theory).

**Social Reproduction Theory**

Social reproduction theory has frequently been used to explain low educational persistence among students of lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Social reproduction theory argues that societal structures such as educational or judicial systems perpetuate structural inequalities over time. “Reproduction theory attempts to show how and why the United States can be depicted more accurately as the place where ‘the rich get richer and the poor stay poor’ than as ‘the land of opportunity’” (MacLeod, 1995, p. 7). When
applied to the community college, social reproduction theory explains low transfer rates by arguing that by design, community colleges in particular and American society in general, perpetuate socioeconomic hierarchies and educational attainment inequalities – students who are poor and uneducated will remain poor and uneducated. “In the popular mind, school is the great equalizer: by providing a level playing field where the low and the mighty compete on an equal basis, schooling renders social inequality superfluous. Reproduction theorists, in contrast, show that schools actually reinforce social inequality while pretending to do the opposite” (MacLeod, 1995, p. 11). Social reproduction theory has been less frequently applied to transfer, but it offers a fitting structural explanation for low Latino transfer rates. Research consistently shows that socioeconomic status impacts participation in higher education, the type of institution a student attends, their persistence in higher education, and if they attend a community college – whether they transfer. Studies that seek to explain the disproportionately low transfer rate of Hispanic community college students have consistently focused on socioeconomic background (in terms of parents’ educational level and salary) as a predictor of transfer. As noted previously, recent analysis of national longitudinal data sets shows that race no longer remains a significant predictor of transfer, however, socioeconomic background continues to be strongly correlated to transfer (Dougherty & Kienzl, 2006).

Much of the transfer literature includes descriptive analysis that links students’ socioeconomic status with their academic participation and persistence. Bourdieu and Passeron’s (1977) theory of social and cultural capital offers a theoretical explanation for why socioeconomic status has such an impact on student persistence. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) argue that children develop cultural and social capital early in their lives as a result of their family experiences – and these forms of knowledge provide advantages to students in future years. Bourdieu (1986) differentiates between various forms of capital: economic capital (which includes financial assets), social capital (which includes relationships and networks that serve as resources for an individual), and cultural capital (the knowledge of and ability to easily participate in high status society, as well as high parental expectations).

Bourdieu’s (1986) theory of cultural and social capital provides a basis for understanding Latino students’ experience in higher education. Applied to the problem of
low Hispanic transfer rates, social capital theory would maintain that students’ social class impacts their participation and success in higher education because of both parental expectations regarding college and the economic and social resources they have available. Additionally, many Latino students enter the mainstream educational culture as students who inhabit a non-mainstream culture, attempting to negotiate the majority culture without the cultural capital that students of the main-stream culture would bring to the same context. Through the transmission of cultural and social capital from one generation to the next, economic earning power is also transmitted inter-generationally. “A person who is ‘at home’ in a prestigious status culture can display tastes, styles, or understandings that serve cultural resources, making communication easier and indicating status group membership” (DiMaggio, 1982).

Much of the data regarding educational participation and attainment can be explained by Bourdieu and Passeron’s (1977) theory of social reproduction, which argues that education systems serve to reproduce existing social structures. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) argue that people’s success in society is impacted by their economic, social, and cultural capital. Social capital theory is consistent with the fact that students from lower-socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely to participate and persist in higher education. From a social capital perspective, this is because these students lack the social capital to face the unknown challenges of higher education.

Latino students, many of whom are from immigrant families and/or lower socioeconomic backgrounds, are at a disadvantage in terms of social and cultural capital. Their families were not able to teach them about participation in the American higher education system – or about American culture in general. The acquisition of a new language also poses challenges for many Latino college students and their families. For example, Hurtado-Ortiz and Gauvain (2007) found a link between student acculturation and perceptions of college affordability, indicating that Latino students who are first generation students or immigrants are less likely to believe that they can afford to attend college. They found a positive relation that shows that Latino students who were more acculturated were more likely to perceive themselves as being able to afford to attend college (Hurtado-Ortiz & Gauvain, 2007).
A body of literature has explored the impact of social and cultural capital on the academic achievement of high school students. Teachers, who are predominantly from the majority culture, “communicate more easily with students who participate in the status cultures, give them more attention and special assistance, and perceive them as more intelligent or gifted than students who lack cultural capital” (DiMaggio, 1982, p. 190).

Those with the least social capital – minorities, first generation college students, and nontraditional students who are older or have children – are overrepresented in the community college. Indirectly, lack of social capital can have an impact on the extent to which students become integrated into the institutional culture and support structures of the community college. Carnevale and Fry (2003) argue that increasing students’ social capital through supportive services is necessary to get the best return on the investment that states make into higher education. “Social capital is the collateral necessary for human capital development” (Carnevale & Fry, 2003, p. 9). However, despite the increasing availability of programs that promote transfer, the students who would benefit most from these programs are least likely to be aware of these services – and to participate in them. “Research consistently finds that students most at-risk are least likely to get involved in the social and academic infrastructures of institutions, hence merely offering opportunities for involvement is not adequate” (McGrath & Van Buskirk, in Shaw et al., 1999, p. 17).

Social capital theory and social reproduction theory have been used frequently to explain differences in academic performance among high school students. (For an overview, see DiMaggio, 1982). With regard to community college student transfer, social capital theory has been applied less frequently, although it offers a useful theoretical explanation for understanding student persistence and educational attainment.

**The Cooling Out Theory**

One significant aspect of social reproduction theory found in the transfer literature relates to the efficacy of the community college in promoting and supporting student transfer – the “cooling out” argument, first introduced by Clark in 1960. The “cooling out” theory offers an institutional explanation for low student persistence and transfer of community college students. The community college “cooling out” argument seeks to
explain low transfer rates by positing that the community college purposefully (although not always explicitly) decreases students’ educational aspirations and thus attainment. Clark (1960) argued that the community college serves as the mechanism in American society for decreasing or diverting student educational and career aspirations and realigning them to education and career levels more fitting with what institutional agents believe to be their skills, ability, and motivation (Clark, 1960). According to Clark (1960), all education systems have a point at which students are diverted into various stratification levels. Whereas in many European systems tracking happens earlier in secondary education, in the United States, where secondary schools no longer openly track students into vocational programs and instead are expected to prepare all students for post-secondary training or education, cooling out occurs primarily through the community college.

Clark (1960) argues that the community college serves an important role in the American education system – that of providing a method through which to divert students into education and training opportunities that prepare them for participation in lower-wage jobs. “A major problem of democratic society is inconsistency between encouragement to achieve and the realities of limited opportunities” (Clark, 1960, p. 569). Providing open access to the community college provides the illusion of equal opportunity, but Clark (1960) argues,

the conflict between open-door admission and performance of high quality often means a wide discrepancy between the hopes of entering students and the means of their realization. Students who pursue ends for which a college education is required but who have little academic ability gain admission into colleges only to encounter standards of performance they cannot meet. As a result, while some students of low promise are successful, for large numbers failure is inevitable and structured. (p. 571, italics in the original)

Therefore, the community college plays an important role in the United States education system, and serves “not only to motivate achievement but also to mollify those denied it in order to sustain motivation in the face of disappointment and to deflect resentment” (Clark, 1960, p. 569). There remains a concern that the community college perpetuates class inequality, by intentionally channeling lower class students into lower class jobs. “How do we reconcile the formal equality of the educational system with the persistence of class inequality? In particular, how do we account for the strong tendency
of working class children to end up in jobs similar to those of their parents?” (Burris, 1980, p. 524, as quoted in Gordon, 1984, p. 106).

According to Clark (1960), “democracy asks individuals to act as if social mobility were universally possible; status is to be won by individual effort, and rewards are to accrue to those who try. But democratic societies also need selective training institutions, and hierarchical work organizations permit increasingly fewer persons to succeed at ascending levels” (p. 569). By offering an open door to higher education through the community college, students are not “denied” access to further education – they are simply advised toward courses and majors that are more “fitting” to their skills, achievement, and motivation levels. The “cooling out” process is implemented through what Clark (1960) describes as the “reorienting process” through which students are diverted to academic or technical programs that will ultimately result in jobs with lower wages and prestige. This begins with pre-entrance testing, developmental coursework, and is carried on through academic counseling, orientation to college courses which include career testing, and ongoing academic interventions. These techniques are interpreted by Clark (1960) as mechanisms through which to decrease students’ educational and career aspirations. “Situations of opportunity are also situations of denial and failure. Thus democratic societies need not only to motivate achievement but also to mollify those denied it in order to sustain motivation in the face of disappointment and to deflect resentment” (Clark, 1960, p. 569).

Clark (1960) was one of the first authors to express concern that community colleges might decrease educational aspirations instead of increasing them. His seminal work has been foundational to an ongoing debate in the literature regarding the efficacy of the community college in facilitating student success and educational achievement, including transfer.

Other community college researchers have further explored Clark’s original cooling out theory. Most notably, Zwerling (1976) and Brint and Karabel (1989) have expanded on Clark’s early work to argue that the community college intentionally seeks to divert student dreams and perpetuate existing social structures. Zwerling (1976) noted that community colleges are “commonly believed to be among the great equalizers in a society which professes to be democratic and egalitarian” (p. xvi) while in fact the “social
effect of the community college, however, tends to be just the opposite. Instead of blunting the pyramid of the American social and economic structure, the community college plays an essential role in maintaining it” (p. xvii). Like Zwerling (1976), critics of the community college maintain that despite open access, students who attend community colleges do not experience the success many advocates assume, as evidenced by low graduation and transfer rates. While it is true that community colleges offer an open door, critics argue that it is more of a “revolving door” – with students gaining access but not the ultimate success that is desired (Zwerling, 1976 p. xviii).

“Upward mobility has real social and psychological costs, and not everyone is willing – or able – to pay them. For many Americans, hopes of a ‘better life’ crumble in the face of obstacles; consigned to low-status jobs, they nonetheless find fulfillment in the private sphere of family and friends. Moreover, aspirations to move ahead are often accompanied by a belief in the legitimacy of inequalities that are based on genuine differences in ability and effort – and by doubts about whether one measures up.” (Brint & Karabel, 1989, p. 7).

The research regarding community college transfer rates is consistent with Clark’s “cooling out” theory – at least in terms of results. Regardless of the impact of the community college on student aspirations, students who begin their higher education in community colleges are less likely to earn a bachelor’s degree than those who begin at a four-year institution (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Dougherty, 1987, 1992, 1994, 2004; Grubb, 1991; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). And the difference is significant; longitudinal studies have found that 70% of students who begin their education at four-year colleges earn a bachelor’s degree, in contrast to 26% of students who begin their education at community colleges (Dougherty, 1992; Velez, 1985).

In a recent study, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) found that students who begin their education at community colleges are 15% less likely to earn a bachelor’s degree than similar students who begin at four-year institutions, even when controlling for a wide number of variables, including academic aptitude, race, and gender. “The very fact of attending a two-year rather than a four-year institution lowers the likelihood that a student will obtain a bachelor’s degree” (Brint & Karabel, 1989, p. 15).
However, while there is significant research to support Clark’s claim that community colleges “cool out” students’ educational aspiration, some studies have found that some community college students increase their educational dreams. In a recent longitudinal study of the high school graduating Class of 1992, 19% of students who attended community colleges increased their educational expectations to include a bachelor’s degree, in contrast to 7% of the same group who decreased their expectations (Adelman, 2005). Contrary to critics’ claims that community colleges divert high aspiring students from pursuing their dreams, Adelman’s analysis indicates that many traditional-age students in fact increase their educational aspirations while attending community college.

Whether lower educational attainment is an unintended outcome of community college education – or the intention – is an ongoing debate. Some community college scholars, including Zwerling (1976) argue that the community college is doing exactly what it was intended to do – allowing students to feel like they have access to higher education while in fact channeling them into lower levels of educational attainment and the lower-paying jobs in the workforce. Zwerling (1976) argues that the community college with a high drop-out, low-completion, and low-transfer rate is not a failure; in contrast, it is succeeding at its “hidden function of schooling,” which according to Zwerling (1976) is the function of socialization to lower paying jobs and reproduction of the existing social order.

Regardless of whether community colleges increase, decrease, or have no impact on student aspirations, transfer rates continue to show little variation; many fewer students transfer than originally report they intend to do so (Dougherty, 1994). Furthermore, despite high expectations to transfer, African-American and Hispanic students transfer at about half the rate (12.5 and 12.4% respectively) as do their Caucasian and Asian counterparts (23.4 and 23.6% respectively) (Cohen, 1996).

Structural theoretical perspectives, however, are limited to the extent that individual agency is virtually ignored and societal structures are seen as all powerful in determining individual fates, in this case, educational outcomes. “Structuralist theories, which stress that history is made ‘behind the backs’ of the members of society, overlook
the significance and relative autonomy of the cultural level and the human experiences of domination and resistance” (MacLeod, 1995, p. 21).

**Agency Explanations**

Structural theories explain low transfer rates as the result of structural issues in society, specifically community colleges’ processes of advising and academic policies which divert students from transfer. The agency explanation has focused primarily on individual self-efficacy and aspirations. The breadth of literature on structural issues may have helped identify the problem – but without an understanding of the personal agency of individual students, the whole story is not told. Researchers who reject the structural explanations offer explanations focused on agency, arguing that low transfer rates are primarily a result of low educational aspirations and/or low self efficacy. Educational researchers have extensively explored the connections between educational achievement and self-efficacy and aspirations.

**Transfer Aspirations**

Many researchers and advocates of the community college have argued that the low transfer rate of community college students is a reflection of students’ low transfer aspirations – that students simply are not interested in earning a bachelor’s degree. From this perspective a student’s “depressed aspirations are either an indication of laziness or a realistic assessment of his natural assets and attributes (or both)” (MacLeod, 1995, p. 6). However, a broad range of research shows that students attending community colleges consistently indicate a high intention to transfer (Adelman, 2005; Dougherty, 1992; U.S. National Center for Educational Statistics, 2007). While many community college students enroll in technical programs, the majority study toward an associate in arts or associate in science degree – programs that are frequently referred to as “pre-baccalaureate” or “transfer” programs.

Scholars have researched transfer aspiration extensively. Although the findings are mixed based on the methodology and definitions used, the studies consistently find transfer aspirations above 30%. According to data from the U.S. National Center for Education Statistics (2007) across all two-year institutions, the bachelor’s degree is the most common goal – with between 56 and 86% of students stating this as their top degree
goal (p. 33). Adelman (2005) found that 38% of students who began their education in community colleges expect to earn a bachelor’s degree. Dougherty (1992) reports that between 30 and 40% of community college students report their intention to transfer, with even higher rates for full-time students (p. 189). Cohen and Brawer (2003) reviewed studies conducted at institutions across the country, and report that approximately one third of students report that earning a bachelor’s degree is their “primary reason for attending” (p. 59). In their study, Bailey, Jenkins, and Leinbach (2005b) showed even higher aspirations; they found that three quarters of students starting their education at community colleges have the goal of completing a bachelor’s degree.

Despite the claims of Clark (1960) that community colleges decrease students’ educational aspirations, many students also increase their transfer aspirations while in the community college. “Ten years after high school graduation, an additional 19% of those who started in the community colleges raised their education expectations to the bachelor’s level, while 7% lowered their expectations from the bachelor’s level” (Adelman, 2005, p. 3).

Hispanic students also report high transfer aspirations. Among Hispanic students, transfer to a four-year institution is the top reason reported for attending a community college (Nora & Rendon, 1990). Nora and Rendon’s (1990) findings also indicate that ethnic origin was not a significant determinant of student disposition to transfer.

Researchers have explored the correlation between transfer aspirations and transfer behaviour and it is clear that students with bachelor’s aspirations are more likely to transfer. In an analysis of longitudinal data tracking educational attainment of the class of 1992, Adelman (2005) found that student expectations of educational attainment were significantly correlated to their eventual academic achievement. Grubb (1991) found that almost 40% of students who aspired to earn the bachelor’s degree transferred within four years. However, this rate is still declining – from almost 50% in the Class of 1972. Despite a decline in the transfer rate, Grubb (1991) found that baccalaureate aspirations increased during this same time period.
Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy is the central mechanism of human agency (Bandura, 1982) and is critical to our understanding of how students navigate the community college system. “Judgments of self-efficacy also determine how much effort people will expend and how long they will persist in the face of obstacles or aversive experiences. When beset with difficulties people who entertain serious doubts about their capabilities slacken their efforts or give up altogether, whereas those who have a strong sense of efficacy exert greater effort to master the challenges” (Bandura, 1982).

Researchers have explored the relationship between students’ sense of self-efficacy and their educational aspirations and persistence, uncovering an interesting interaction among self efficacy, aspirations, and academic success. Past academic success influences student efficacy and thus aspirations. Nora and Rendon (1990) found that academically successful students were more likely to engage in transfer behaviour and were more likely to be positive in their attitude to transfer. However, efficacy has been shown to be even more important than actual past academic success in impacting student educational aspirations (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara & Pastorelli, 2001). “Efficacy rather than their actual academic achievement is the key determinant of their perceived occupational self-efficacy” (Bandura et al., 2001, p. 187). Bandura et al. (2001) argue that efficacy exerts a strong influence of students’ education and career choices.

Among the mechanisms of human agency, none is more focal or pervading than people’s perceived self-efficacy. Unless people believe they can produce desired outcomes by their actions, they have little incentive to act or to persevere in the face of difficulties. Whatever other factors may operate as guides and motivators, they are rooted in the core belief that one has the power to produce effects by one’s actions. (Bandura et al., 2001, p. 187)

Bandura et al. (2001) found that socioeconomic status had only an indirect effect on the perceptions of children’s self-efficacy about careers – and the influence was primarily through the parents. Socioeconomic status raised “parental educational aspirations and belief in their efficacy to promote their children’s academic development” (Bandura et al., 2001, p. 198).

While agency theories offer another important viewpoint from which to examine transfer rates, viewing the problem solely from the perspective of individual aspirations or efficacy also results in a limited perspective. Placing the burden of achievement (or
lack thereof) on the student fails to acknowledge how institutional and societal structures serve to mitigate quality of persistence and achievement (Valencia & Black, 2002).

Theoretical perspectives that focus solely on individual agency or cultural perspectives fail to acknowledge the power of the societal structures at play. “Culturalist theories … pay too little attention to how structurally embedded material and economic forces weigh down and shape human experience” (MacLeod, 1995, p. 21).

**Integrating Structure and Agency**

Both structural and agency explanations offer valuable perspectives from which to view this problem. However, on their own, they fall short of telling the whole story. These explanations often lean toward *either* the individual *or* the social, creating a duality that simply does not exist. These students are individuals, but they are navigating their individual experiences within the context of existing societal structures. We must, therefore, create a model that accounts for the entirety of the individual’s experience.

Maynes et al. (2008) argue that we can best understand human agency as *both* individual and social.

The ontological argument of structure versus agency has led to assumptions and assertions that we must change one of the following in order to facilitate equitable educational attainment for students: the individuals involved (primarily students), mainstream or Latino culture, or the educational institutions themselves. Either of these theoretical perspectives is simply insufficient. This study, therefore, was based on an integrated theoretical approach and the personal narratives of the student participants tell a story that, when seen within the context of structural forces and the power of personal agency, is a story based on a more complete truth. Maynes et al. (2008) argue that, analysis of personal narratives, beyond the contributions they make to specific areas of empirical research, can also serve to reorient theories about the relationship between the individual and the social by calling attention to the social and cultural dynamics through which individuals construct themselves as social actors. In so doing, they have the potential constructively to intervene in the theoretical impasse resulting from the collision between skepticism of hegemonic individualism, on the one hand, and the persistent, even increasingly urgent interest in understanding selfhood and human agency, on the other. (p. 2)

An integrated theoretical perspective takes into account a wide range of influences on transfer behaviour including: socioeconomic status, institutional
characteristics, family commitments, immigration experience, cultural capital, transfer aspirations, and self-efficacy. Much of these students’ experiences cannot be fully understood through one lens. Instead, I focus on the intersections of the factors already identified by the literature. For example, the interplay of immigration experiences with self efficacy and how transfer aspirations are produced within the context of cultural gender roles and values.

**Cultural Production**

Both structural and agency frameworks provide us with valuable insight into the problem of low transfer rates. However, the conceptual framework of cultural production provides a more integrated approach to the study of low Hispanic transfer rates. A cultural production perspective acknowledges individual student agency in navigating the structures and producing and creating their own educational aspirations. Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998) define cultural production as “a development, or interlocking genesis, that is actually a codevelopment of identities, discourses, embodiments, and imagined worlds that inform each moment of joint production and themselves transformed by the moment” (p. vii). The study of this problem focuses on the student as the focus of analysis, but it is within the context of the larger cultural discourses and structures that these students live their experiences. It is, as Holland et al. (1998) articulate, “a powerful version of human life as necessarily mediated: as produced by social interchange among persons whose activity, however, circumscribed by material and social circumstances, and however cast in forms of discursive and practical genres, nonetheless remakes these conditions” (p. viii).

The theoretical framework of cultural production allows this study to acknowledge personal agency within the context of social structures, recognizing the agency of individuals engaged in an ongoing interplay with the social world. “…Cultural production occurs not by accident, but as a result of particular social conditions, and an analysis must explore not only phenomena but also the conditions that give rise to them” (Gordon, 1984, p. 107).

“Although mobility between classes does take place, the overall structure of class relations from one generation to the next remains largely unchanged” (MacLeod, 1995, p.
4). This is evidenced by the low transfer rates of students from low socio-economic backgrounds. However, it is difficult to believe that only a few of these individuals wish to transfer or that these individuals have no agency and that their futures are so strongly determined by their origins. Nor is it easy to believe that all students will have agency strong enough to overcome the structural obstacles they face.

Although some disciplines (such as social psychology) have effectively integrated the interplay between structure and agency, much of the transfer literature has overlooked the interplay of individual agency within structures, instead setting up a conceptual dualism that positions structure and agency as rivals in identifying the problems (and solutions) related to educational attainment. From this dualistic perspective, much of the transfer and community college literature is based on the theoretical perspective that the problem of low transfer rates is either a) a direct result of structures set in place to reproduce social class or b) the result of individual problems relating to aspirations or work ethic. Cultural production offers an integrated alternative. “The concept emerged in reaction against orthodox structuralist and ‘cultural reproduction’ approaches that emphasized the automatic transmission of cultural form across the generations, as overdetermined either by deep structures of human thought or by the overarching frameworks of economy and society” (Auslander, 2011).

Two seminal research studies provide a theoretical background for this study: Willis (1977) and MacLeod (1995) both conducted ethnographic studies that explore the formation of aspirations among youth from low socio-economic backgrounds. Willis (1977) studied twelve British working class “lads.” The boys were all friends and members of an “oppositional culture in a working class school” for boys (p. 4). Willis (1977) explored how these boys produced aspirations and resistance within this context.

MacLeod (1995) explored two groups of teenage boys at “Clarendon Heights” high school – the eight boys who composed the mostly-white “Hallway Hangers” and the “Brothers.” These groups represent both two opposing groups. The Hallway Hangers were the rebels who resisted the rules of both high school and society. In contrast, the Brothers were “conspicuous by their conventionality (MacLeod, 1995, p. 43), conforming to the rules and expectations of both their schools and society.
It should be noted that both these studies focus on male participants exclusively and thus cannot be generalized to include women. Additionally, although both studies include students from a range of ethnic groups, neither focuses exclusively on Hispanic students. However, they do offer insights into the process of cultural production among students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Both the theoretical foundations and the analysis informed this study.

Both studies conclude that structural forces exert a powerful influence on aspirations as well as social and economic mobility. Yet their studies also reveal forms of resistance – youth who seek to overcome their origins by fighting (either transparently or subversively) against the structures and structural agents in order to break free from a determined future. Willis (1977) focuses on the individuals within the powerful social forces. “Learning to Labor breaks free from the pessimism of the structural closure that is inevitable when one simply counterposes lonely, naked individuals against overwhelming social determination,” (Willis, 1977, p. 207).

Both Willis (1977) and MacLeod (1995) focus their inquiry on the points at which social class is either perpetuated or diverted. The challenge facing scholars is understanding why social immobility exists as it does – how aspirations are mediated by structural forces, for example, or how structure determines educational choices.

Recognizing the interplay of structure and agency, cultural production seeks to find the point at which these two forces converge – the moments of agency that shine through strong structural forces, mediated but not obliterated. Gordon (1984) has built on the seminal work of Willis (1977). Gordon (1984) argues that we must take into account both the systems in which individuals function, and their personal agency within those systems. “It becomes impossible to conceptualise working-class ‘failures’ in the school system as passive victims of an all-powerful capitalist ideology. It is made painfully clear that the lads perceive themselves as having power and control over their own existence” (Gordon, 1984, p. 106). Willis (1977) argues that,

in the liberal perspective, the social and cultural forms of the oppressed were seen as “the problem” to be eradicated or compensated for, and where the “Reproduction” perspective for the most part ignores them or sees them simply as “ideology,” this cultural perspective seeks both to understand them as central theoretical phenomena, learn from them, learn from life, and in some way to evaluate them positively and critically in an open and challenging way. (p. 207)
The research and intellectual work of Willis (1977) and MacLeod (1995), serves as the conceptual foundation for this study. Within the context of cultural production, this study explores how Latino community college students perceive their educational experiences and the choices that are available to them.

Like the participants in Willis’ study (1977), when I entered this study, I anticipated that these students would perceive that they have a strong sense of agency within their educational choices, and this was indeed the case. However, whether their agency is authentic – or simply an illusion – has yet to be revealed. Gordon (1984) maintains that the perceived autonomy of the lads in Willis (1977) can translate into actual agency – at least for a time. However, whether that agency endures is another question altogether. “Through the exercise of their perceived autonomy within the system—a perceived state which, in the short term, leads to a great deal of actual autonomy—the lads develop a sense of superiority over the conformist working class. They see themselves as having a free choice over their present and future activities” (Gordon, 1984, p. 106). According to Gordon (1984), the lads’ choices, while initially giving them a certain sense of freedom, “concurrently ensures the reproduction of the existing relations of production, and thus the very system which the lads have rejected” (p. 106).

Cultural production theory, therefore, acknowledges the interplay of both systems and individuals. The systems often result in inequality of outcomes and perpetuate cultural reproduction, yet individuals have agency to produce their own aspirations and navigate and negotiate these very same systems. This theoretical perspective will serve as a framework for this study.

Summary

The current difference in transfer rates remains a serious problem to educators and policy makers committed to equalizing educational outcomes. Nora and Rendon (1990) argue that “high attrition rates, deficiencies in student academic preparation, and low levels of transfer to senior institutions have raised serious doubts that the colleges can increase access for Hispanic students” (p. 237). Learning more about the unique experiences of these Latino community college students will provide insight into how
these individuals perceive their educational opportunities and navigate societal and educational structures. By identifying their own cultural production, my aspiration is to deepen our understanding of individual experiences lived out in our educational systems, thereby offering further opportunities for the attainment of individuals’ educational aspirations.
CHAPTER THREE
PERSONAL NARRATIVES WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF AGENCY AND STRUCTURE

Although a wealth of research shows how demographic factors influence community college transfer (notably, socioeconomic status – including family educational attainment), less is known about Latino students’ experiences and how those experiences influence their perceptions about continuing in higher education after the community college. In order to expand on the rich quantitative data that has identified continued inequities in the educational attainment of Hispanic students (as measured by transfer rates), this study was designed to focus on the stories of individual lives lived out in the context of American culture and the community college. The students’ narratives add richness and depth to the quantitative research (which focuses on statistical analysis and demographic indicators).

These personal narratives increase our understanding of Hispanic student perceptions of the role education plays in their lives and offers some explanation of why Hispanic students transfer at lower rates than their white peers. Perceptions are difficult to identify and measure and are thus most effectively explored through qualitative research methods. The students’ perceptions of educational pathways are part of a complex story that includes their family commitments, cultural identity, immigration experiences, language skills, and economic status, all of which influence their experiences in higher education, their interaction with others in their communities, and their sense of personal agency.

These narratives are stories of individuals, embedded in the American educational system and cultural environment. They are stories of students who are producing their own futures within the context of structures and culture. As such, they offer a deeper understanding of student experiences and thereby expand our knowledge regarding Latino student transfer.

Individual life stories are very much embedded in social relationships and structures and they are expressed in culturally specific forms; read carefully, they provide unique insights into the connections between individual life trajectories and collective forces and institutions beyond the individual. They thus offer a
methodologically privileged location from which to comprehend human agency. (Maynes et al., 2008, p. 3)

This study focuses specifically on inequality in educational outcomes. Inequality can be better understood by developing an understanding of the individual interactions within these institutions, according to Shaw et al. (1999). Analysis of these stories, therefore, focuses on both personal agency and the educational and cultural systems these students navigate in order to attain their educational goals.

**Guiding Research Questions**

After conducting a thorough review of the literature on Latino student transfer, one compelling question remains: *Why* do Latino students transfer at lower rates than their white counterparts? This study is designed to expand our understanding of student experiences in an effort to further our knowledge and begin to partially answer that question.

At the outset of a research study it is critical (yet perhaps impossible) to determine the most important questions to ask, including research questions that will guide the study, the selection of methodology and, in an interview-based study, the questions asked of the participants. I began with two central questions. However, what emerged from these questions were narratives so rich and detailed they far surpass the questions originally guiding the research. The following questions guided the research design and implementation, as well as data analysis:

1. What do Latino community college students know and believe about educational pathways (particularly the pathway from community college to four-year institutions) in their own lives? What influences their perceptions of these pathways? How do Latino students interpret education as it applies to themselves? (Areas to explore include: perceptions of the community college culture, values about education, immigration status, family commitments, and socioeconomic status.)

2. What do Latino community college students know and believe about their personal aspirations and how education fits into those aspirations, particularly regarding transfer from a community college to a four-year institution? (Areas to explore include: academic self-efficacy, personal commitment and work ethic,
beliefs about education, educational aspirations, immigration experience, and family commitments.)

**Qualitative Research Methodology**

Since the late 1970s, researchers have called for more research on the Hispanic student experience. As noted previously, research related specifically to Hispanic student transfer has been limited and has primarily focused on identifying the problem of low transfer rates. There still remains a considerable need for further research in this area. “Quantitative mobility studies can establish the extent of this pattern of social reproduction, but they have difficulty demonstrating how the pattern comes into being or is sustained” (MacLeod, 1995, p. 4).

In 1979, Olivas argued for research specifically aimed at understanding Hispanic students. “Our understanding of Hispanic college students is not significantly increased by available student literature” (Olivas, 1979, p. 4). Three decades later, most of the research remains focused on identifying the problems with Hispanic educational attainment, with only limited exploration of why this inequity continues to persist. As community colleges seek to increase their transfer rates, part of their success will depend on their ability to facilitate the successful transfer of minority students. Hispanic students represent a dramatically increasing portion of the community college population and Flores et al. (2006) call for further research on Latino community college students. “Much more is needed if we are to truly understand the complex and important relationship between Latinos and two-year institutions of higher education” (Flores et al., 2006, p. 71).

Because of this, I chose to use qualitative research methods to explore this problem. Qualitative methodology is uniquely suited to exploring perceptions, agency, and action within the context of existing structures (educational, societal, and cultural).

While demographic predictors of transfer offer some valuable information regarding transfer behaviour, it fails to provide the whole picture. By gathering data in categories (such as race, sex, socioeconomic status, etc.), individuals are thus reduced to clusters of social variables that serve as proxies for persons. Consequently, within such frameworks, human agency is reduced to social position; understandings of the relationship between the individual and the social remain superficial. Social actors are treated as if they had little or no individual
history, no feelings or ambivalences, no self knowledge – in short, no
individuality. (Maynes et al., 2008, p. 16)

Trujillo and Diaz (in Shaw et al., 1999) contend that further research should
explore “the richness and complexity of the educational experience for many working-
class and minority students as they confront and overcome obstacles on their navigational
course through the community college” (p. 126). This study provides an inside look at the
individuals who are navigating the community college on their own pathways to a better
future.

Increasingly, researchers are turning to qualitative analysis to understand the
varied personal stories that provide insight into the lives of community college students.
“By using different theoretical and methodological frameworks, we can better understand
the ways and extent to which community colleges and other institutions of higher
education are enhancing Latino educational opportunity” (Flores et al., 2006, p. 76). Researchers have also begun to use interpretive frameworks to research community
college education, including London and Shaw (1996), and Rhoads and Valadez (1996).

Qualitative methods are effective for understanding individual agency and
exploring the depths and richness of culturally-related factors, information that cannot be
generated through the use of a survey instrument (Attinasi & Nora, 1992). As such, qualitative methodology is uniquely suited for this study. The stories that emerged from
this research can help us discover the meaning these Hispanic students give to education
and how they perceive the educational pathways that lie ahead of them. “These meaning
structures are often hidden from direct observation and taken for granted by participants,
and qualitative interview techniques offer tools for bringing these meanings to the
surface” (Hatch, 2002, p. 91).

**Research Design**

**Methodology**

Our current understanding of Latino student transfer is deficient to the extent that
it focuses on the meta-narrative and fails to acknowledge individual narratives of
students. In response to this, I designed this study with individual interviews as the
primary method of data generation. These interviews give voice to the students’ untold
stories, in other words, their “lived culture” (MacLeod, 1995, p. 18), grounded in the
context of the community college. “Each one was a conveyor of its own story, context and narrative” (Blaufuss, 2007, p. 16). The interviews were aimed at creating a meaningful discourse between the participants (community college students) and the researcher (me). I guided and listened to the life stories of six Hispanic community college students and how their perceptions about education, their cultural values, and their economic situations influence their thoughts about transferring to four-year institutions to seek bachelor’s degrees.

Following the research design utilized by Pak et al. (2006) in their study of community college students who transferred to selective four-year institutions, the focus of this study is on individual Hispanic community college students and their perceptions of transfer. Pak et al. (2006) interviewed community college students who had transferred to elite four-year institutions, constructing life stories. Analysis of the data they generated revealed common themes among the student experiences that were instrumental in their transfer success.

In the Pak et al. (2006) study, interviews were conducted with students who had already successfully transferred. In contrast, I focus on the participants at a different point along the transfer pathway. I chose to conduct interviews with students who are currently enrolled in the community college, thus identifying perceptions of students prior to transfer. This allowed me to understand the experiences and perceptions of students at a specific point in their lives. Whether their dreams and aspirations ultimately result in transfer is not a focus of this study; instead, the interviews identify perceptions and experiences at a specific point in students’ lives, namely during their enrollment at the community college. Qualitative transfer research, like the Pak et al. (2006) study, has often focused on students who have transferred successfully to four-year institutions. This allows researchers to identify factors that contribute to successful transfer, and has provided valuable data regarding transfer. However, students who do not transfer are excluded from participation in research conducted at four-year universities, therefore preventing researchers from identifying obstacles that inhibit student transfer. Choosing research participants who are currently attending a community college, therefore, provides an opportunity for the collection of data that will contribute to our understanding of student experiences prior to transfer.
The study used a series of formal, semi-structured individual interviews (Hatch, 2002) as the primary method of data generation. The interviews were formal to the extent that they were scheduled, recorded, and guided by the researcher. Both the interviewer and the participants knew that the interview was designed to generate data (Hatch, 2002). However, they were semi-structured because the discourse between participant and researcher was iterative and dynamic, leading to further questions to explore the deeper aspects related to a discussion. “Sometimes the best interviews come from a comment, a story, an artifact, or a phrase you couldn’t have anticipated. The energy that drives a good interview – for both you and your informant – comes from expecting the unexpected” (Chiseri-Strater & Stunstein, 1997, p. 223). As a researcher, my goal was to create the space for valuable discourses by using guiding questions to explore how these students’ view their educational pathways and the role education plays in their lives. The interviews focused on the narrative of their educational experiences. Beginning with their earliest educational experiences, I asked questions, guiding the participants through their educational experiences since childhood. This allowed me to consider the students not simply through the lens of demographic descriptors (i.e. race, age, sex, socioeconomic status), but instead as individuals with agency, navigating their futures and producing their lives within the context of their own “habitus” including their ethnic identities, the structures of the community college, and American culture.

To consider whole persons involves understanding multiple aspects of an individual’s life and experiences over the life course and in historical time. Studying whole persons involves an epistemological strategy that sees individuals both as unique and as connected to social and cultural worlds and relationships that affect their life choices and life stories. (Maynes et al., 2008, p. 10, italics in the original)

As Hatch (2002) writes, “Qualitative researchers use interviews to uncover the meaning structures that participants use to organize their experiences and make sense of their worlds” (p. 91). With little hesitation, these students shared their stories with me, making meaning of their experiences through the sharing of their personal narratives. The stories that emerged as a result of these interviews tell not only the facts of their lives as they remember and interpret them, but also their understanding of their place in American culture, their pursuit of their own “American Dream,” and their identity as a Latino/a living in this area of the United States. The stories they told are rich, not only with their
life experiences, but also the meanings they attribute to these experiences – both the life lived and the interpretation thereof. “Narrative discourse organizes life – social relations, interpretations of the past, and plans for the future” (Daiute & Lightfoot, 2004, p. xi, as cited in Benwell & Stokoe, 2006, p. 130).

The students are learners of much more than the knowledge gained in the classrooms; they are learners of their own lives. In response to my guiding questions, they painted a picture of challenges and hope by telling me not only the facts of their lives, but their view of them. “What people do and their understandings of why they do what they do are typically at the center of their stories about their lives,” (Maynes et al., 2008, p. 3). Central to the students’ narratives is a shared belief that education, though tough to achieve, might someday make their lives better.

**Interview Design**

I conducted two individual interviews with each participant. Interview protocols were developed for each interview (see Appendices A and B). The first interview was designed to generate narrative information on students' educational histories, educational aspirations and current experiences in the community college. I explored these topics within the context of family and the community college, using follow up questions to explore the connection between family and education.

The second interview protocol moved students from a retrospective narrative to a focus on the future, specifically exploring the role they believe education plays, or will play, in their lives. Questions were also designed to prompt students to discuss education within the context of their own challenges and strengths, as well as their ethnic identity. This interview was also designed to clarify data and further explore emerging themes from the initial interview. The process was iterative and questions were asked to follow up and clarify responses from earlier questions.

Students were also asked to complete a brief biographical questionnaire (see Appendix C), in order to provide some baseline information on their current educational experiences and life histories. Part One of the questionnaire includes items such as age, credit hours earned, family information. Students completed this section of the questionnaire at the beginning of the first interview. Part Two of the questionnaire includes questions about the student's educational history, immigration experience,
status. Students completed this section prior to the first interview. At the conclusion of the first interview, I completed Part Two of the questionnaire with the participants based on the information provided throughout our conversation. I discussed the information in this section with the students for verification. By reviewing this section at the conclusion of the first interview, I was able to ask them these more personal questions (related to citizenship and immigration experience) after having established a sense of rapport and trust throughout the first interview.

Interviews varied in length, depending on the participant with most lasting approximately 60 minutes. The interviews were digitally recorded, with the participants’ knowledge. Interviews were conducted in classrooms, meeting rooms, and the library. These were the learning spaces of these students and were specifically selected because they are settings the students connect with their educational experience. Rooms were chosen to ensure adequate privacy to promote confidentiality.

Site Selection

The site selected for this study was a large, urban community college in the Ohio valley (referred to herein as Urban Community College or UCC). I limited the study to one institution in order to limit differences in institutional impact on student experiences (Townsend, 1995). There is a growing Hispanic population in this region. Recent projections indicate that the number of Hispanic high school graduates in this state will increase by 450% by 2021 (Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, 2008). In the 2004-2005 academic year, 406 Hispanic students graduated from high schools in this state (Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, 2008).

In the 2008-2009 academic year (the year in which the interviews were conducted), less than 1.1% of students enrolled in public higher education in this state were Hispanic. However, despite these low numbers, Hispanics represent a growing population. Between Fall 1998 and Fall 2008, enrollment of Hispanic students grew from 1,044 to 2,523 students which is an increase of approximately 140%.

Because much of the research related to Hispanic students is focused on institutions in Florida, California, and Texas, as well as other states with large Hispanic

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3 Data regarding enrollment was drawn from the state educational governing board. In order to maintain the anonymity of the institution where this study was conducted, the specific citations for these reports are not included.
populations, this site selection offers a unique perspective on the Hispanic community college student in the United States. Although the Hispanic population in this region is growing rapidly, Hispanics are still a very small minority population. As a result, the experiences revealed through these personal narratives provide a distinctive perspective on minority experience and cultural identity.

At the time of the study, UCC was the largest community college in the state, with an enrollment of approximately 15,000 students. UCC also had the largest population of Hispanic students of any college in the state, with over 300 Hispanic students. Almost 30% of the Hispanic community college students in the state attended UCC. UCC is more diverse than most colleges in the region with minority students comprising approximately 40% of the student body.

Despite a rapidly growing Hispanic population in the state, during the time of the study there were no Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI’s) in the state. (HSI’s are identified by the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU) as institutions with at least 25% Hispanic student enrollment.) Nor was there any institution that met the broader definition of “Associate HSI” – institutions with 10-24% Hispanic students. In 1997, there were 209 HSI’s in the United States, enrolling close to half of all Hispanic college students (49%) (HACU, 1997). HSI’s show greater success than predominately white institutions in serving Hispanic students (Laden, in Townsend, 1999, p. 153).

In the 2006-2007 academic year, only 40 of the 4,478 students who transferred from community colleges to four-year institutions in the state were Hispanic (less than 1% of all transfer students). UCC has a strong transfer partnership with a large research university located in the same city, and, for the region, had high transfer numbers overall. In 2006-2007, more than 600 students transferred from UCC to four-year institutions in the state (second only to the leading transfer institution, which had more than 1,000 students transfer). However, Hispanic transfer numbers were very low. In 2006-2007, the two top universities in the region had a combined total of 31 Hispanic transfer students, significantly higher than other universities, but an indication of the disappointingly low numbers of Hispanic community college students who make their way through the transfer pipeline.
Transfer holds significant importance for legislators and policy makers hoping to increase overall educational attainment in the state where this research was be conducted. Increased transfer rates can have a direct impact on baccalaureate attainment levels. During the same time that this research was being conducted, the state governing board and community colleges increased their emphasis on transfer as a strategic initiative instrumental in increasing the number of baccalaureate degrees in the state. Additionally, during this time period state legislative sessions, a number of legislative bills were introduced that sought to facilitate transfer in the state. The state education governing board has also expanded its data collection and reporting to institutions of higher education to include transfer data. This data includes a detailed overview of student transfer demographics, transfer student persistence, academic performance, and bachelor’s degree completion.

During the process of data collection, I provided leadership for a community college transfer center in the same region as UCC. This gave me a unique perspective in understanding the transfer process within the region, services provided to students, and the individual experiences of community college students interested in transferring. I was in the heart of the transfer process, not only in terms of student contact, but also in terms of context. I provided leadership within a professional organization focused on advising and I presented regionally and nationally on transfer issues. While my own institution provided a fertile ground for rich research, I instead selected a different research site to avoid the potential challenges related to “backyard research” (Glesne, 1999, p. 26). As an administrator, I had an established role that might have prevented me from being viewed primarily as a researcher. Additionally, my experience with the institution could have potentially impacted the expectations with which I approached the research experience (Glesne, 1999). According to Glesne (1999), one of the inherent challenges experienced by researchers who are also professional colleagues at the institution is that fully delving into the role of researcher might result in strain or challenges to professional relationships (Glesne, 1999). As an “outsider” to the institution in which I conducted my research, I was able to introduce myself simply as a student who was writing a paper, establishing a level of rapport with the student participants who were also students with the same experience of writing a paper.
Approaching the research as a student, instead of as an administrator, also helped me avoid two other potential problems outlined by Glesne (1999): the potential of uncovering information about the institution that one might handle differently as a researcher than as an administrator and the challenge of ending the research project once the study is complete. Approaching this research as a student researcher allowed me to avoid being placed into the role of administrator.

**Participant Selection**

The participants in this study are Hispanic students at UCC. I interviewed students who are considered “transfer ready” (i.e. meeting the minimum grade point average requirements for acceptance into a four-year university and pursuing a degree that prepares them for transfer). At the time of the study, each of the participants had earned at least 15 credit hours, had a minimum grade point average of 2.0 and were working toward their associate of arts or associate of science degree.

A list of Hispanic students who met the criteria for participation in the research was provided to me through an institutional contact at UCC. After the participant pool was identified, students were invited to participate in the study through individual emails in Spring 2009. Eligible students were contacted at least three times by email with an invitation to participate. Ten students agreed to participate in this study. A total of six students participated in individual interviews during Spring 2009.

Although students did not have to state an intention to transfer to be included in the participant pool, during the interview process each of them indicated that they wanted to eventually transfer to a four-year institution to each at least a bachelor’s degree.

These students represent large differences in cultural background and life experiences. They can be considered “homogenous” to the extent that they are all Hispanic community college students who self-identify as “Latino” and are considered “transfer ready.” Homogenous “selection strategies are useful for studying small groups in depth” (Hatch, 2002, p. 50). However, although participants in this study fall into common data categories, they are by no means a homogenous group when it comes to life experience, cultural background, or age. They are individuals, with individual life stories and individual experiences. They all self-identify as “Latino,” but they come from varied cultural, ethnic, and national backgrounds. They may share the broad category of
“student,” but they are taking their courses at full-time and part-time rates, as traditional or non-traditional students, with some or no previous college coursework, and with distinctly different goals in mind. The participants could be grouped together by demographic category into one group or into a wide range of groups.

**Methodology of Data Generation**

In narrative research, the method diverges somewhat from the traditional question-based interview style. “The researcher’s responsibility is to be a good listener and the interviewee is a story-teller rather than a respondent” (Holloway & Jefferson, 2000, p. 31). As interviewer, my goal was to hear the personal narratives by asking questions and directing the conversations, but the participants readily shared their stories by doing much more than simply responding to the questions that were asked. The questions served more as prompts to continue the conversation. “In the narrative approach, the agenda is open to development and change, depending on the narrator’s experiences” (Holloway & Jefferson, 2000, p. 31). The narrative is more than just the retelling of events. It also includes the interpretation and meaning the participants assign to those events.

The participants involved in this study had a unique opportunity to share their stories and decide how they would choose to share them. They are part of their story and had the power to decide which of their experiences to share and which to leave out, as well as emphasizing what they believe is important (Agar, 1980). They are, in fact, not only sharing their experiences, but their perceptions of their experiences. Agar (1980) maintains that it is the “perception of things that is of interest” (p. 225). This is, of course, the very essence of this study – to explore student perceptions in an attempt to uncover and create knowledge that will further explore the low transfer rates of Hispanic students.

It is also important to note that the stories told to us as researchers conducting qualitative research are not told in a vacuum; these are stories directed and mediated by the researcher – in this case, me. I led the conversation, asked the questions, and probed for more information or clarification. But beyond that, I chose which story was to be told (the story of the Latino community college student), by whom (these students), and when (during spring 2009). “Understanding the interview means understanding all of it – the
situation that produces it, the person who gave it, the shared and idiosyncratic knowledge which constitutes the unseen context needed to interpret it” (Agar, 1980, p. 224).

The participants in this study told me their stories. They described their educational experiences, and in so doing, told me about their lives. The only direct telling of their story was the story told by the participants themselves, which of course, is found only in interview transcripts, and is itself, an interpretation by the participant. To what extent they told me the truth is difficult to ascertain. Are they all as hard working as they portray themselves to be? Do they really have such unadulterated adoration for their mothers and unwavering commitments to their families? To what extent were the stories they told of opportunity and tragedy factual? Holloway and Jefferson (2000) caution researchers to really listen to the stories as they are told.

Will you believe everything you are told? If not, how will you distinguish between truth and untruth? Even if you believe everything you are told, will you be satisfied that you have been told everything that is relevant? How will you define this, and how would you know? What do you assume about the effect of people’s motivations and memory on what they tell you? What will you assume about your effect as interviewer on the answers given? Does your sex, race, age and so on make a difference?” (Holloway & Jefferson, 2000, pp. 1-2)

We know that when people share their stories, they have different motivations and a wide range of interpretations of events (Holloway and Jefferson, 2000).

Treating people’s own accounts as unproblematic flies in the face of what is known about people’s less clear-cut, more confused and contradictory relationship to knowing and telling about themselves. In everyday informal dealings with each other, we do not take each other’s accounts at face value, unless we are totally naïve; we question, disagree, bring in counter-examples, interpret, notice hidden agendas. (Holloway & Jefferson, 2000, p. 3)

But perhaps the power of narrative is found not just in the facts of the stories as told by the participants, but in the perspectives, the values, the interpretations that the participants give to these stories. This is, after all, the impetus for choosing qualitative research in general and life story narratives in particular: I wanted to know about the individual students who are described in great statistical detail in the research. Believing the stories people tell us is democratic, according to Holloway and Jefferson (2000). “Who are we to know any better than the participants when it is, after all, their lives?” (Holloway & Jefferson, 2000, p. 3)
Storytelling has many functions. In the case of this study, the interviewer asked for the story in order to generate and gather data related to a specific, identified research question. But the purpose of storytelling for the participants in the study may have been completely different. They were informing, but they might also have a wide range of motivation for telling their story. Among them, to teach someone about Latino culture, to share their concerns as a student, to tell the story of their education because they are proud of their accomplishments, to earn the stipend offered, to help someone else in the future, to help a fellow student in a project, or to share their story with someone who would listen. The motivations are likely as varied as the students involved, and the students themselves may have had multiple motivations for telling their stories but perhaps through their participation, they have also gained something of value. “It is in narrative that we construct identities. Lives are made coherent and meaningful through the ‘biographical’ work that people do” (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006, p. 130, italics in original).

**Research Journal**

I borrowed a technique from anthropologist researchers, keeping a research journal throughout the process of research design, data collection and analysis, allowing me to record my own perceptions, insights, questions, and challenges as they arose. “Research journals provide a record of the affective experience of doing a study. They provide a place where researchers can openly reflect on what is happening during the research experience and how they feel about it” (Hatch, 2002, pp. 879-880). The research journal served as a basis to further reading throughout the process, in order to continue to integrate the developing literature with the process of data generation and analysis. It also helped me organize and structure my thoughts, as I attempted to truthfully tell the story of these individual lives, keeping in mind that the decisions I made regarding what story to tell (and how to tell it) had as much impact on this work as those same decisions made by the story-tellers themselves.

**Researcher Positionality/Reflexivity**

These stories were told to me by the participant/narrator. The stories move from the participant to me, from spoken to written word, and then from transcript to story.
They move across cultures, from Latino students to a Canadian researcher, within the context of American postsecondary education. In many cases, the narratives move across age differences as well.

Guiding the interview process is an understanding that “researchers ask questions in the context of purposes generally known fully only to themselves” (Glesne, 1999, p. 68). This research study is unique; it reflects my scholarly interests and professional commitments. Extensive study of the body of literature focused on the community college students in general and Latino community college students in particular, provided a foundation for this research and formed my understanding and beliefs about students’ lives and experiences. As such, it was critical to maintain awareness that the questions I asked were rooted in this knowledge and values. I entered the research setting with this foundation of expertise, but as a learner committed to the telling of personal narratives and the creation of knowledge; if the knowledge gained through the literature were sufficient, the research would be unnecessary. In light of this, it was essential to listen deeply to the student voices and interpret their stories effectively and truthfully. The interview process allowed for the exploration of this problem from the perspective of those who are most directly affected by this problem. “Respondents, the possessors of information, answer questions in the context of dispositions (motives, values, concerns, needs) that researchers need to unravel in order to makes sense out of the words that their questions generated” (Glesne, 1999, p. 68). It is these “dispositions” that are so critical to explore; they are the driving purpose for this research, which is designed to explore qualitatively what cannot be known through quantitative research.

As a white, middle-class researcher, I am unfamiliar with the experiences of many Latino students. I am neither Latina nor a first-generation college student. My parents both attended college (my father earned his master’s degree before I attended college) and provided strong moral support for education and practical support in navigating an educational system they had previously navigated themselves. I also grew up in a middle-class household, and despite the financial challenges common to many, I never lived in poverty or had to wonder about economic resources for everyday food and shelter.

I earned my bachelor’s degree at a private, liberal arts college, with my tuition funded primarily through scholarships and government student loans, which (despite a
bureaucratic procedure) were relatively easy to obtain. I went to school full-time and worked only part-time during the academic year (and full-time in the summer). At no time did I contribute funds to my parents’ household. I earned my master’s degree while working full-time. Throughout the process of working toward my doctorate, I also worked full-time, attending classes and completing research as a part-time graduate student. While I have some understanding of the challenges of balancing full-time work with classes, I did this only during my graduate school experience.

I am an immigrant to the United States from Canada, but had an immigration experience much different from the students in my study. I am familiar with both the legal processes and procedures to obtain legal status, and the ensuing emotional experiences that accompany the immigration process. I am also familiar with navigating two cultural “homes” which includes both the growing comfort in the new home environment and the continual sense of being a visitor in both countries. However, I came to the United States as an adult to further my education, gaining access through a student visa. Although I navigated the visa process, it was facilitated in the most part through my school. I later became a permanent resident. I came to the United States for an education and an adventure and visited my family frequently in Canada. I came with no intention of staying in the United States permanently. My motives were much different than the immigration hopes of my participants and/or their families, who were in pursuit of what they perceived to be the only opportunity for liberty and economic freedom.

As a native English speaker, I did not experience language challenges when I moved to the United States, as the participants in this study did. However, I can relate to the experience of being completely immersed in a country where you do not speak the language. In the early 2000s, I lived in Lithuania (Eastern Europe) for a year, in a city where English was rarely spoken. I did not know the language when I moved there and experienced the accompanying challenges related to sustaining a household, navigating a new culture, interacting with authorities and police, and conducting health-related communication in a foreign language.

While I have some shared experiences with my participants, in many ways I entered this study as a learner, intent on understanding the experiences of these students despite the differences from my own life. To some extent, that position allowed me to
elicit richer descriptions from the participants in this student. Agar (1980) maintains that this sense of “otherness” prompts participants to be more explicit in their narratives.

The analytic work in contextual schema construction is partly a function of two relationships – that between the ethnographer and the informant, and that between the ethnographer and the audience of his analysis. The less the informant assumes the ethnographer knows, the more he will make explicit in the story; the more experience the informant has in talking with people like the ethnographer, the better he will know what needs to be made explicit. If the informant has been explicit in the appropriate way, given the background of the ethnographer, then the more the ethnographer’s intended audience is similar to the ethnographer, the less analysis the ethnographer must supply to make the text understandable. (Agar, 1980, p. 231).

While this was not a completely ethnographic study, his analysis also holds true for this study. The participants provided detailed descriptions of their experiences, including information about their cultural values that they may have not explicitly stated to a Latina, whom they might assume would know this already.

Entering the research project, I also needed to recognize my biases and values. I entered this research project believing that immigrants are brave people. I have respect for those who accept the challenges related to language and cultural acquisition, as well as geographic distance from family and support systems, for a wide range of reasons. I also hold a personal belief that immigrants contribute in many ways to American culture and that their stories are valuable and of importance to the country as a whole. I believe that ensuring access of Latino students to the full range of higher education available in the United States will benefit both the students and society. The process of analytical inquiry is by nature one that must be approached with respect and trepidation. It is what Blaufuss (2007) refers to as “inexorable exercise of power” that comes with “…translating and transposing lived encounters and experiences into text and the written word” (p. 14).

**Methodology of Data Analysis: Narrative Analysis**

Interviews were digitally recorded, with the participants’ knowledge. Each interview was transcribed verbatim, providing a written record of the interview discourse in addition to the oral recording. These interview records, both written and oral, contained the untold stories of six Latino community college students. Their stories were,
to me, almost sacred. The students chose to share their stories with me, likely with the hope and expectation that I would tell their stories truthfully in my paper. From this perspective, I approached the analysis of this newly-generated data.

I began by reviewing the transcripts, attempting as much as possible to immerse myself in their stories and their lives. I approached this portion of the analysis with a desire to learn the truths of their experiences, without the expectation of common themes among the interviews. After all, my goal in designing an interview-based study was to go beyond the meta-narrative to seek out the individual truths of the individual students. However, through multiple readings of the transcripts and repeated listening to the digital recordings, general themes began to emerge. Further readings brought deeper salience to these themes and I began to code the transcripts according to these general themes. I developed additional documents containing the narrative related to each of the themes, moving text back and forth as I sought to most accurately reflect the meanings within the students’ narratives, attempting throughout to honour their stories. It is my hope that what emerged is an authentic representation of the students’ narratives. Telling the story of another’s life with veracity is not trivial, and I did so with some trepidation.

The richness of this data is deeply intertwined with the methodology through which it was generated. It is, at its most pure, narrative. The data was generated through narrative and accordingly, I chose to approach the data using narrative analysis. Narrative analysis is uniquely suited for this study, which tells stories of cultural production. It focuses on the individual story within the context of society and culture. This is rich data and is much more than numbers and demographics. Yet the value of this knowledge also surpasses the individual stories. Within these individual narratives, recurring themes became apparent. My aspiration is to tell these stories with authenticity, at the same time preserving the individual narratives and giving voice to the meaning within these experiences. Narrative analysis is geared at understanding individual situations in the context of a larger, structural context. Agar (1980) describes life histories as “a focal point for the individual perception of and response to broader cultural patterns” (p. 224).

A Definition of Narrative

Storytelling, or narrative, is at the foundation of this research study. “Story-telling of various kinds is fundamental to meaning, to knowledge, and to our identities” (Daya &
Lau, 2007, p. 4). While definitions of “narrative” are diverse, two examples are included here. Labov’s early work (1972) provides a structured description of a fully-formed narrative. According to Labov (1972), true “narratives include an orientation, complicating action, suspension at the focus, resolution, and a coda (returns to the present time). Benwell and Stokoe (2006) offer an additional, structured definition of narratives:

Narratives have a teller and a trajectory: they are expected to ‘go’ somewhere with a point and resolution. They have beginnings, middles and ends, and include the recounting of events that are displaced spatially and, crucially, temporally. For a stretch of talk or text to be categorized as a ‘narrative, it has to incorporate basic structural features including a narrator, characters, settings, a plot, events that evolve over time, crises and resolutions. (p. 133, italics in original)

The essential essence of narrative is story telling. Regardless of whether these student narratives easily fit into the literary definitions set forth by these researchers, they are, at their essence, stories, told by individuals participating in a research study. It is important to acknowledge that “each story is only a selected narrative, each narrative a glittering fragment of a reality” (Daya & Lau, 2007, p. 2).

**Narrative Analysis**

Narrative researchers have set forth various approaches to the use of this methodology. Agar’s (1980) method includes three levels of analysis: the interview as story, the interpretation of the interview, and a thematic understanding. Following this methodology of narrative analysis, the first step is to identify and develop the “schemata” of the life story, focusing on the story as a “linguistic entity independent of the context in which it was obtained” (Agar, 1980, p. 227). Through this lens, the experiences shared by participants are viewed as distinct “stories” within the context of their larger life story.

The second step in this narrative analysis focuses on interpretation. “The focus here shifts from a schema for the product to a schema for an outsider’s interpretation of the product. There is less attention toward the details of talk, and more on the analyst’s task of constructing a framework so that an outsider can understand it as would another member of the subculture” (Agar, 1980, p. 228). The third step includes what Agar (1980) terms “thematic analysis” (p. 231). This element of analysis shifts the focus to the story as a method for understanding the participant. Here, “the emphasis shifts away from the structure of the discourse per se. In contrast to the second, the emphasis is not as much on
the explanation of the discourse to an outsider as it is on using the discourse to make inferences about the mind of the individual narrator (Agar, 1980, p. 231).

Goodley, Lawthom, Clough, and Moore (2004) describe four different approaches to the analysis of life stories: discourse analysis, voice relational approaches, grounded theory, and literary criticism. Clough draws on Plato’s *Republic* as a method through which to understand life stories: diegesis and mimesis, or viewing the life story as told by the speaker, or as narrated by an author, who is, in essence, mediating the story (Goodley et al., 2004). The analytical approach of literary criticism can fall into two camps: showing or telling. “‘Showing’ is the supposedly direct presentation of events and conversations, the narrator seeming to disappear (as in drama) and the reader being left to draw his own conclusions from what he ‘sees’ and ‘hears.’ ‘Telling,’ on the other hand, is a presentation mediated by the narrator who, instead of directly and dramatically exhibiting events and conversations, talks about them, sums them up” (Goodley et al., 2004, p. 122).

Clough uses literary analysis to analyze the themes in three categories: “the literal (what appears in the story); the construction (the devices used to locate it in the story); the derivation (the events, experiences and thoughts which might have led to this element being here)” (Goodley et al., 2004, p. 124). Both Agar (1980) and Clough (in Goodley et al., 2004) approach this methodology as a highly structured process. However, many researchers who use narrative inquiry argue for some flexibility with these formulas, arguing that narratives come in all shapes and forms.

Ultimately, narrative analysis should be focused on the telling of the story and the interpretation thereof. Common to these approaches are three key elements: 1) the telling of the story itself, 2) the literary aspects of the story, and 3) the interpretation of that story. Narrative analysis takes into account historical, social-scientific, and literary contexts (Maynes et al., 2008, p. 2). For the purposes of this research, I focused on the telling of the story (shown both in the direct quotes of the participants and in my own written narrative) and the interpretation of the story, in other words, my analysis based on my best understanding of the “truths” told by these students. As much as possible, I have preserved the words and the overall “voice” of the participants in this study. Their narratives, as a whole, were the basis for the analysis. In order to illustrate the themes that
emerged, I selected excerpts, some of them lengthy, which preserve the essence of their narratives and their experiences.

The interview is the heart of narrative analysis. This telling of the story is critical and the participant plays the role of storyteller. However, the participant’s telling of the story is only the first step in the process. The narrative is then subsequently interpreted and told by the researcher (in this instance, me) who becomes a partner story teller with the student. For all intents and purposes, I become a collaborative narrator in the telling of this story, with the power to choose what to include, the themes on which to focus, and what to ignore.

The analytic work in contextual schema construction is partly a function of two relationships – that between the ethnographer and the informant, and that between the ethnographer and the audience of his analysis. The less the informant assumes the ethnographer knows, the more he will make explicit in the story; the more experience the informant has in talking with people like the ethnographer, the better he will know what needs to be made explicit. If the informant has been explicit in the appropriate way, given the background of the ethnographer, then the more the ethnographer’s intended audience is similar to the ethnographer, the less analysis the ethnographer must supply to make the text understandable (Agar, 1980, p. 231).

Holloway and Jefferson (2000) advocate that researchers use these questions to guide their analysis, increasing the level of intensity and depth at each stage of inquiry.

- What do we notice?
- Why do we notice what we notice?
- How can we interpret what we notice?
- How can we know that our interpretation is the ‘right’ one? (Holloway & Jefferson, 2000, p. 55).

Building on the literature, which presents either structural or individual explanations for the problem of low transfer rates, this research focuses on the intersections of both structural and individual perspectives. Because narrative captures the individual experience, one might argue that it ignores the possible structural explanations. However, narrative is much more than an individual story. Benwell and Stokoe (2006) argue that narrative is more than just an “abstract phenomenon” but is in fact, “function, occasional and constitutive of identity” (pp. 136-7). Indeed, by their nature, individual narratives must be told in the context of the structures which the individual inhabits. “Narrative is a fundamental construct for understanding the shape of
the social world” (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006, p. 136). Narratives, then, become much greater than their individual parts. “Narrative does not simply articulate what is known, rather it is through the very process of narration that knowledge, and indeed materiality, takes on meanings in social context” (Daya & Lau, 2007, p. 4). While the integrity of the individual experience is preserved, it is done so within the framework of structural elements – in this case, the community college and American culture – “focusing on the detailed, interaction-oriented and rhetorically organized structure of stories, rather than on their individual components” (Wooffitt, 1992, as quoted in Benwell & Stokoe, 2006, p. 136).

Analysis of personal narratives are most effective when, rather than conceptualizing narrators as autonomous agents whose testimony offers transparent insights into human motivation, they explicitly recognize the complex social and historical processes involved in the construction of the individual self and, more deeply, of the ideas about selfhood and human agency that inform personal narrative accounts. (Maynes et al., 2008, p. 16)

As I prepared to write the personal narratives of the study participants, I struggled to decide if I should tell the student stories in the first person, or in the third person. Would using the first person give the participants more of a voice? Would a third person approach acknowledge that there was (whether acknowledged or not) a narrator in this process? Regardless of the approach I took, I realized that I was, in fact, going to be involved in analysis, mediation, and selection. I had power to choose what to include in their story, and what to exclude. “The process of story telling is also a process which will ultimately represent only selected facts of a multifaceted reality/realities” (Daya & Lau, 2007, p 2). As researchers, we are faced with the “…problematic and delicate situation of attempting to select (and thereby exclude) materials and stories, and of representing faithfully but through analytical lenses, while juggling the intricacies of the author’s own positionalities and multiple levels of interpretation” (Blaufuss, 2007, p. 14). I chose to use both first and third person perspectives and to refer to the students by the names they chose for themselves. I included quotations from their transcribed interviews. By doing so, my aim was to give voice to the students, using their words, their thoughts, and their descriptions, and to acknowledge the interpretive aspects of the research and my own role as researcher.
Summary

The qualitative data generated through this study is rich and detailed. The study relies on personal narratives that capture the “lived experiences” (Haleman, 1998, p. 1) of the participants. Through the analysis, I have attempted to tell their stories authentically, thereby increasing our knowledge of Hispanic community college students and their perceptions of the role higher education plays in their lives. Just as the quantitative research conducted to date does not tell the complete picture of Hispanic transfer, nor can a study with the voices of six individuals. Nonetheless, these stories expand on a rich body of literature regarding transfer in general and Latino students in particular. By adding the personal voices of six Latino community college students at an urban community college I endeavour to deepen our understanding of these students’ perceptions of the role education plays in their lives, and the impact their unique situations have on their educational persistence. My goal is to communicate both the individual experiences and how these students make meaning of these experiences within the context of the community college culture. As such, I am both giving voice to the individuals and endeavouring to provide an authentic interpretation of these experiences. “In the construction of an academic thesis, the lived and multi-voiced experiences of fieldwork have to be condensed and distilled into a single, coherent narrative thread” (Blaufuss, 2007, p. 14).

Despite my genuine attempts to authentically reflect the stories of these participants, it is done so with humility. As much as I, as a scholar, seek to create knowledge, I am also aware that, at every stage of the data generation and analysis, I have served in the role of gatekeeper. My desire to tell the truths of the participants’ experiences intersects with the reality that it happens within multiple levels of decision-making, on behalf of both the participants and myself. “The selection and arrangement of words, the inclusion of some words to the exclusion of others, the consequent concepts and associations that these words then carry and convey, far from reflecting or creating replicas of reality, is instead the business of creating new and multiple realities” (Daya & Lau, 2007, p. 4). It is my aspiration to tell the narratives the students themselves have attempted to tell, but it is important to acknowledge that, from the rich description share by the participants, I have been ultimately compelled to make decisions regarding which
stories to tell. “The question arises as to how some narratives gain precedence over others. What confers power on a narrative, and how does a narrative wield its power?” (Daya & Lau, 2007, p. 2). By inclusion in this dissertation, it is my hope these narratives will give voice (and thereby the power of voice) to these students and that their story might be told in the midst of quantitative research that focuses primarily on demographics and that the spirit and essence of their experiences will emerge. These individual narratives will allow us to more fully understand low Hispanic transfer rates and thereby provide practitioners with a stronger foundation for facilitating successful transfer.
CHAPTER FOUR
WHEN ACCESS AND POVERTY COLLIDE:
CAN STUDENTS AFFORD THE AMERICAN DREAM?

I embarked on this research in an effort to more fully understand Hispanic community college student perceptions of transfer and the role higher education plays in their lives. As discussed previously, the existing research and conceptual scholarship offers only partial explanations for low transfer rates, including attributing the cause to societal structure, the community college, family background (including SES), and individual agency and aspiration. When I designed this study, I felt confident the explanation of low Hispanic transfer lies embedded in the narratives of students themselves. As the research suggests, there is not one simple explanation for this problem. This study focused on the individuals who are, themselves, involved in the story of postsecondary education by giving voice to the students who are living these experiences.

My research findings underscore the complexity of the problem. The student narratives corroborate much of what has been learned to date regarding the experiences of Hispanic community college students, but it adds a depth not currently found in the literature. As Blaufuss (2007) writes, “…within the meta-narrative there were many and diverse voices and viewpoints” (p. 24). It is through narrative research that I have been able to tell the story of these diverse individuals.

Study Participants

For this study, I conducted interviews with six Hispanic community college students: Aurelia, Jessica, Elena, Tonito, Columbian, and Alberto. The stories told by the participants in this study are not the stories of all Hispanic students; they are the stories of six individuals who are navigating the community college, American culture, their own cultural identities, and individual family environments. They are doing so in the context of limited financial resources. Their stories bring life to the current research and insight into students who are attempting to defy the statistics.

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4 The students chose these pseudonyms for themselves.
Tonito

Tonito was 31 at that time of his participation in this research study. He did not have children and had no family living in the United States. Tonito was born in Cuba and immigrated to the United States as an adult in 2006, only two years prior to participating in this study.

Cubans make up approximately four percent of the Latino population in the United States. Among, Latinos, Cubans comprise the third largest group from any single country (after Mexicans and Puerto Ricans). A recent immigrant to the United States, Tonito follows three large Cuban immigration movements. The first wave of immigration occurred after the 1962 Cuban missile crisis. The second began in 1965 when families followed those immigrants in what were termed “freedom flights.” The third large immigration movement occurred in 1980 when 125,000 Cubans immigrated to the United States through the Mariel boatlift (Torres, 2004, pp. 7-8). Cubans immigrating to the United States have been treated as political exiles instead of economic immigrants, which has resulted in more favourable treatment and additional privileges for Cubans than for Latinos from other countries (Torres, 2004).

Cubans have the highest level of education among Latinos (71 percent have at least a high school diploma) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). Despite having already earned a bachelor’s degree in marine biology in Cuba, Tonito hoped to complete his associate’s degree at UCC and transfer to a four-year institution to earn a bachelor’s degree. He speaks Spanish, English, and French fluently. He attended UCC mostly full time.

Like many other Cuban immigrants, Tonito’s perception of the United States changed dramatically after he arrived here. In a qualitative study of Cuban students, Macia (1999) found that, “after they arrived in the U.S. they started reevaluating their perceptions. It was not the way they had pictured it before,” (Macia, 1999, p. 80). The experience of adjusting their perceptions of American culture “is a significant factor of the Cuban students’ transcultural experience that contributes to their current idea of who they are presently, who they are becoming, and how they are shaping their future.
transcultural reality,” (Macia, 1999, p. 80). Belonging or living in two different cultural environments results in the creation of a “transcultural identity” which incorporates both cultures. In their study of second generation immigrant students, Portes and Zhou (1993) found that Cuban students had very positive perceptions of the United States. “Roughly three-fourths of second-generation Cubans endorse the view that ‘the United States is the best country in the world’” (Portes & Zhou, 1993, p. 95).

Like Tonito, the students in Macia’s (1999) study are integrating their life experiences in Cuba with their current experiences in the United States. “Because their past experiences contribute to their transcultural experiences, in this sense, their prior experiences in Cuba are a bridge to their new community. They begin developing their transcultural identities long before they arrive in the U.S.” (Macia, 1999, p. 81).

**Alberto**

At the time of this study, Alberto was 27. He and his wife had three children (two sons aged four and five, and a seven-year-old daughter). Alberto is Mexican and immigrated to the United States in his late teens after dropping out of high school in Mexico. He earned his GED prior to enrolling at UCC. He and his wife speak both Spanish and English at home to help the children learn both languages and hope to teach them an additional language. Alberto was working full-time and taking an average of three classes each semester.

Alberto has already overcome numerous obstacles to attend college. Like Tonito, Alberto is a first-generation immigrant and immigrated to the United States as an adult. College going rates are usually lowest for first generation immigrants (Torres, 2004, p. 14). He hoped to earn his associate’s degree in computer programming and then transfer to a four-year institution to earn a bachelor’s degree. His career goal was to become a software engineer.

Mexicans comprise the majority of Latinos in the United States (66.9 percent) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). In comparison with other Latinos, Mexican Americans have the lowest percentage of high school graduates (51 percent) (Torres, 2004). Torres (2004) attributes the differences in Mexican educational attainment to “timing and circumstances of migration (especially when comparing Mexicans and other Latinos), type of schooling
available, socioeconomic status, and other societal issues such as quality of housing, the availability of social services, and working conditions” (p. 10).

Much of the literature and research on Latino students has been focused on the Mexican American population because they make up the vast majority of Latinos in the United States. However, it is important to recognize that there is much diversity among Latino or Hispanic students and “to examine within-group differences and consider how they affect the college experience for students from different countries of origin” (Torres, 2004, p. 5).

Aurelia

Aurelia was 20 at the time of this research. She was working on her associate of science degree and also completing the pre-dentistry curriculum. She had already earned her dental hygienist certificate and was attending school part time and working as a dental assistant. She planned to transfer to a four-year institution after earning her associate’s degree and hoped to attend dental school. Aurelia was not married and did not have children.

Aurelia is a Mexican citizen and immigrated with her parents to the United States when she was in second grade. Her family initially immigrated to Texas, where close to 40% of the population is Hispanic (Census Bureau, 2011). Her parents were originally undocumented when they entered the United States. Mexicans make up just over half (57%) of all undocumented U.S. residents (Castro-Salazar & Bagley, 2010). Being in the United States without legal documentation results in numerous challenges, both practical and emotional. “Undocumented Mexican migrants to the U.S. are discursively positioned as highly vulnerable and subjugated,” according to Castro-Salazar and Bagley (2010, p. 25). Residents without documentation are also ineligible for public services, including access to healthcare or coverage of labor laws (Castro-Salazar & Bagley, 2010). They are often “disenfranchised and live in fear of being deported and separated from their families” and are frequently exposed to ethnic discrimination and cultural marginalization (Castro-Salazar & Bagley, 2010, p. 25). Because of their fear of deportation, “the great majority of them do not claim their human rights” (Castro-Salazar & Bagley, 2010, p. 25). Instead, undocumented immigrants see to stay out of the spotlight and remain
unnoticed by authorities and others around them. Rosario, one of the students interviewed by Castro-Salazar and Bagley (2010), describes the fear of deportation.

Without documents they are afraid they could be stopped … or, in the mornings, when they leave home to go to work, their families don’t know if they will see them again. So, they are, and I was too, in a golden cage, right? You can have many comforts, yes, but if at the same time you don’t have freedom, well… (Rosario, as quoted in Castro-Salazar & Bagley, 2010, p. 28).

It is within this context that Aurelia got her start in the United States. If she succeeds in earning her bachelor’s degree, she will be among a small percentage of first-generation immigrants who enroll in community college, transfer, and complete the degree.

**Elena**

Elena was 27 at the time of this research. Her daughter was 8 years old. She was attending UCC full time and planned to transfer to a four-year institution to earn her bachelor’s degree in teaching or computers. She was born in the United States. Elena is multiracial – her father is Hispanic (from Mexico) and her mother is Caucasian. As an American born Mexican American, Elena falls into the category “Chicano,” a term used more predominantly in the 1970s to describe Mexican Americans who were born in the United States. More recently, literature has centered around generational status and students like Elena are considered second-generation immigrants. Students like Elena can be considered transcultural. She identifies as Hispanic but has limited connection with her Mexican heritage. Elena speaks English and some Spanish, though not fluently.

Students like Elena are different from first generation immigrants who generally retain more closely held ties to Mexican culture, reflected in their clothing, food, preference for Spanish, gender roles, values, etc. In their ethnographic study of Hispanic students, Portes and Zhou (1993) found that more recent immigrants “claimed an identity as Mexican and considered Mexico their permanent home.” Students like Elena (those born in the United States), are more likely to identify as “American” or “Hispanic American” and see the United States as their home. Hispanics born in the United States also have higher college graduate rates (14 percent) than those born outside the United States (10 percent) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004).
Jessica

Jessica was 22 and a full-time student at the time of the research. Her major was broadcast journalism and she hoped to earn both a bachelor’s degree and ultimately a doctoral degree in English with concentrations in composition and rhetoric. She was not married and did not have children. She was born in the United States and is an American citizen. Her father was Creole and her mother Puerto Rican. She also had grandparents with Jewish and Jamaican heritage. She described the language spoken at home as “Spanglish” with more English than Spanish.

As United States citizens, Puerto Ricans make up the second largest portion of Hispanics in the United States (8.6 percent) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). Unlike many other Hispanic groups who struggle to overcome many challenges in the immigration process, Puerto Ricans have the freedom to move between the U.S. mainland and Puerto Rico. Puerto Ricans began moving to the United States mainland in the early part of the century, with the highest level of migration in the 1950s (Torres, 2004). Currently, approximately half of Puerto Ricans live on the United States mainland, with large numbers in the New York City area (often described as “Nuyorican” or “Neoricans”). Jessica’s family also has its roots in the New York City/New Jersey area and she still has relatives in that area. Unlike other Latino groups who are often unable to travel to their country of origin, it is relatively easy for Puerto Ricans to travel between the mainland and the island of Puerto Rico (Torres, 2004). This provides many Puerto Rican’s with the opportunity to retain strong family relationships and ties to those who have not immigrated, although this was not a strong element in Jessica’s story.

Puerto Ricans in the United States have a lower high school graduation rate (66.8) than Cubans and white students (88.7%) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). In contrast to other Hispanic groups, who generally have higher educational attainment if born in the United States, one study found that Puerto Ricans born in the United States have college graduation rates similar to those born in Puerto Rico (Wojtkiewicz & Donato, 1995).

Columbian

Columbian was 19 at the time of this study. He chose his pseudonym based on his citizenship and was the only student in this study from South America. Only 3.8 percent
of Latinos are from South America, and only 1.3 percent are from Columbia. Columbia is itself very diverse, with at least 15 unique cultural groups.

Columbian’s family moved to the United States from Columbia when he was in ninth grade, less than five years prior to this research. Columbian spoke more Spanish than English at home and appeared to have some difficulty communicating in English. He hoped to earn his associate in science at UCC and then transfer to a four-year institution to earn a bachelor of science degree. He was attending school full-time and working nearly full-time, juggling a schedule that left him exhausted. Work at night, he was still trying to attend classes during the day but had difficulty staying focused or awake.

**Waiting to Plan**

Although each of the students in the study articulated strong aspirations to transfer, most of them had done little to prepare for transfer. Their focus was primarily on taking the courses that would allow them to earn their associate’s degree.

I have not done anything just because my main goal right now is to get a programmer’s degree here. Once I’ve done that, then I will start looking into that [transfer]. That’s just in my mind right now but I really haven’t looked into the prices or anything like that or… (Alberto)

Get an associate’s here because it’s cheaper, but that’s… that’s what it’s all about. (Columbian)

For Elena, the time to transfer was quickly approaching, although (like many college students) she still wasn’t sure what she wanted to study.

I just hope I figure out what I want to do soon so that I can start looking into these programs because you have to research the programs, too, after this so, I’ve got to figure something out. Sometimes, I feel like time … Like, whenever I was working full time, I felt like the school thing was going so slow cause I am going to school part-time. Oh, it’s so slow. Now, I am going full time it’s like, “Well you know it’s coming up. I am almost done.” So, I need to figure out what I am going to do and you know after that I will be looking into programs nearby and who’s got the better one and what do I need to do to get into it. (Elena)

UCC has a strong transfer partnership with a university (referred to here as Urban University) located in the same city. Urban University offers an onsite transfer advising program at UCC. The program has received national recognition. However, most of the students had limited or no knowledge of this program and none of them had taken advantage of their transfer advising services.
Elena was interested in attending one of two state universities in the region (including the university where she originally began her higher education). She was aware of the Urban University onsite transfer advising program but she had not participated in any of the programs. She was relying on her UCC academic advisor to guide her in the transfer process. She was hopeful that was enough.

Definitely [Urban University] is number one. It’s close ... or it’s kinda close and they offer a lot of programs and I guess they do work here for transfers that go there and stuff. They have … I forgot what it’s called… it’s a program that helps kids from here transfer over that makes the transition easier… it tells you what classes that will go over there that you can take. As far as I know all of my classes are transfer and I have let my advisor know that whatever I do I am going to university after this so, hopefully that all works out. (Elena)

Elena had heard positive things about the university transfer advising program but had not taken advantage of any of their services or programs. She seemed reluctant to talk with them until she selected a major. Unfortunately, this lack of planning could result in a delay in her transfer, decreased access to transfer scholarships, and/or Elena taking additional courses – the very thing she was concerned about.

I think the [Urban University transfer advising program] … getting more involved with that would help out. I have heard a lot of good things about the transfer process from here to [Urban University]. That they try to make it as smooth as possible so that when you walk into [Urban University] everything’s pretty much set up for you. You know what’s going on. You know where you need to go and things like that and my advisor, the counselor here, I think she … she would help out a lot too. I haven’t really … Since I don’t know what I want to do yet I haven’t really gotten too much, too deep into the transfer process. I’m just making sure the classes that I am taking are transferrable because I don’t want to retake anything I am taking now. (Elena)

In the state where this research was conducted, a statewide transfer agreement allowed students to block transfer all their general education requirements from community colleges to four-year institutions. Good transfer planning would have allowed Elena (and the other students) to complete general education requirements (as well as major prerequisites) at the community college, ensuring a smoother transfer to university. However, none of the students mentioned this transfer agreement.

The students’ knowledge of transfer planning was limited. In general, they believed that simply earning an associate’s degree would be sufficient preparation for transfer. Although an associate’s degree and a 2.0 grade point average are all that are
required for admission to the local university, effective preparation for transfer into a bachelor’s degree program involves much more. It would ideally include knowledge of the required course prerequisites, an understanding of admission requirements for programs (such as teaching) that require a specific grade point average for admission, and an understanding of the application process and deadlines. In general, the students did not mention the process of applying to four-year institutions. They appeared to assume (incorrectly) that it was an automatic process. Jessica seemed to have the best understanding about the transfer process – including applying for admission and financial aid. She was also working on an associate’s degree that would include the general education requirements for universities in the state.

I plan on getting my degree and then … then they have to take it. (chuckles) Then in the fall I'm going to start preparing and sending … what am I trying to say? … applications for next fall, fall 2010. I'm going to send applications and (sighs) deal with FASFA and then I have to save up money, go up there and, you know, really get on the schools and make sure they're looking at my stuff and accept me and if they don't accept me, then (sighs) try again and… (Jessica)

Unlike the others, Elena was very aware of the need to maintain a high grade point average for admission to certain programs at the university – perhaps because she was academically ineligible to return to the university where she originally began her higher education.

I just want to keep my grades up. So far, I am an A/B student, as in since I’ve came back. But if you look at my transcripts it doesn’t look so pretty because of the past… But I am hoping to fix all that and get out of here with A’s and B’s so I can have something to present to another school like, “Hey, this is why you should take me. I’m a great student. I make good grades.” (Elena)

Although the students didn’t perceive many barriers with the transfer process (perhaps because they had very limited understanding of the steps), they were aware that educational costs at a university are much higher than at the community college.

Financial challenges were the prevailing theme that emerged.

The possible obstacle that I could encounter it would be financial. But I can tell you that right now because I really haven't looked into that yet. (Alberto)

The money is an issue but if the money’s covered then there will be no problem really. … I think when I graduate from here… well, I know that I’m going to change… hopefully I’ll take easier classes. This semester I took too many hard classes. (Columbian)
Well, I have to figure out what I am going to do. What my main goal like … what my career would be. Figure out what program is the better one. Figure out how I am going to pay for it. (Elena)

None of the students were aware of the transfer scholarships offered to students in the state who were transferring to four-year institutions from community colleges. Many of these scholarships were very generous. The largest scholarships allowed students to continue their education at university while paying community college tuition rates. However, most of the scholarships involved an application process (including deadlines). Based on their lack of knowledge about the transfer scholarships and non-participation in on-site transfer services, one would predict that most of these students will not receive the scholarships, despite their significant financial need.

Although Elena didn’t know about the transfer scholarships offered by universities, her experience with receiving assistance for her current education increased her awareness that there may be scholarships, financial aid, and other assistance programs available to help fund her education.

There’s always a way. There’s student loans, financial aid. Like I said, my family is very supportive … I mean I’ll work more. If it’s a caliber, you know, great program and I am getting it and that’s where I am going to go. That’s what would decide that. … I want the best education possible and I am willing to do and work to get that. (Elena)

Elena seemed torn between the reality of limited financial resources and her commitment to getting the best quality of education in the region. Elena believed strongly that she shouldn’t give up on a dream because of limited financial resources.

If it’s something that’s just not feasible then I can’t do it and I have to take what’s next on the plate but… I just feel like if I am getting the best education there’s got to be a way I can afford it. There’s always a way. I just always hear kids, “Oh, I can’t afford that” or “My parents can’t afford that.” No, there’s a way you just have to find it. There’s so many scholarships out there and being Latino there’s a lot of scholarships open out there for Latino people, you know, women, Latino, single parent … There’s all kinds of scholarships out there and all it is, is a click of the mouse to find it. So, yeah, the caliber of the program would be the main thing for me for where I would go after here. (Elena)

The students’ choices regarding which university to attend were primarily guided by proximity; most of the students did not plan to move to attend university. Jessica was the exception. Perhaps because of her transient lifestyle as a child, she seemed interested in exploring a new part of the country as part of her higher education experience. Jessica
was hoping to attend university to earn her bachelor’s degree in journalism. The local state university only offers a general communication degree, but she wanted something more specific. She’s considering universities in Washington State because it’s a little closer to Alaska. Her university choice is also related to the environment. She said she thought she would really like living in Seattle.

I’m kinda like a punker. Like, it’s really weird because it’s like… I feel like I don’t understand where it came from but like I sing like rock music and… I have like this little pink guitar and like I go around town, like to open mike nights and I’ll sing … on my little pink guitar and I feel like… the reason I want to go to Seattle is because I feel I could just fit in so well there, you know, they’ve never seen anything like… [They have a great] alternative scene and you can be who you want to be in Seattle, yeah. (Jessica)

Elena was considering a number of universities. For her, the two main factors influencing her decision would be financial costs and the quality of the academic programs.

Mainly the price and the program would. Which program is better? Say I want to go into teaching … which program … does [Urban University] offer a better program? If they do and it costs more is it … is it worth it? Those are two main things you know? The program you know if it’s established as a great program in the United States, I definitely want to go there and you know the cost may not matter because I want the best education that I can possibly get and if that costs a little more … there’s always a way. (Elena)

Some of the students had a very specific idea of what academic program they wanted to pursue. Jessica was set on earning a degree in journalism and Aurelia was focused on completing her prerequisites in order to get into medical school. Others, like Elena and Columbian, were still deciding. Elena was torn between teaching or computers, although she originally had planned to pursue a business degree.

Teaching is definitely something I’ve been considering and even when I was a younger kid I wanted to be a teacher…when I was younger, so…I don’t know yet. Computers sounds good too because of the money and I feel comfortable on a computer, I feel like they’re easy, and I’ve taken computer classes. I really like them. I was really interested and I went to those classes every time I could…so…I don’t know. It just depends on how I….hopefully maybe just two more years and then I’ll be done, but I just…from here on out I believe I’m just going to try to do full time and then go part time for my bachelor’s and I decided that whatever I want to do I’m at least going to get a bachelor’s degree in that field. I’m not going to stop here and get just an associate’s degree because I just want to be the best. (Elena)
Columbian started at studying computer maintenance, but had changed his mind and was considering a bachelor’s degree in mathematics.

I was going for computer maintenance then. I just didn't like it no more. But I think… I think math… I think math, I think get a bachelor's in math it's not easy … you know, it's more of like something I want to, you know, like I always have on me, you know, because I'm good at it… so that I can… whatever I do I'm always… it's always going to be related to that. You know what I'm saying? It could be anything, work can be like… kind of work around in something but that… not just mathematics. (Columbian)

Choosing a major can be a difficult process and Elena continues to struggle with the decision. Although she is very interested in teaching, she is concerned about the low income potential.

My future’s kind of… I know where I want to go it’s just how I’m getting there? I’ve got to figure that out. No, I guess no. I know how I’m getting there, but where is like that’s my main thing? I’ve got to figure out what career I’m going to do ’cause I have thought of so many but I just don’t know but teaching, so far, sounds good. I am just worried about the money part, like how much I will come out making? … but teaching and computers is like the two main things I am kind of in a tug of war over. Like I said, it’s really all got to do with money right now ’cause I kind of feel like that’s why I am here now is to try and make some money. (Elena)

Elena has been following an academic plan her advisor created for her – but it is in business. Now, she is seriously considering teaching or computers. A major change at this point could impact her graduation date, as well as her transfer plan.

Well, my advisor, you know I told her what, so far that you know I don’t have a major but I’d like to take all my pre-reqs out here, everything that’s transferrable. So, all the classes that I’ve been taking are transferrable as far as she knows. I did say that I wanted a business major, so then she set up this whole … academic plan. She set it up and then I’d be like, “Oh, I don’t think I want to do that again,” and she’d set it up all over again. (Elena)

In general, the students shared two commonalities. Firstly, they wanted to earn an associate’s degree and transfer to a four-year institution to earn a bachelor’s degree.

Secondly, they had done only very limited or no planning at all for the transfer process.

This combination of strong goals and limited planning is not a strong foundation for success for these students.
Narrative Themes

The participants were a diverse group of students, both women and men, married and single. Their citizenship varied. Some of them began their education in other countries while others got their start in the United States. Their heritage is rooted in Mexico, Columbia, Cuba, and Puerto Rico. Two of them are multi-racial. Yet despite these differences, and the unique nature of their personal narratives, common themes emerged. These themes, grounded in their community college experience, showcase the students’ accounts of individual cultural production, in other words, their stories of navigating the structures of society and the community college with the power of their own personal agency.

The themes emerging from the narratives fall into two distinct areas: 1) those that focus on access and affordability (discussed in this chapter) and 2) those that focus on the students’ individual cultural production within the context of the community college (discussed in Chapter 5). This chapter focuses on two findings related to access and affordability. From the narratives emerged two contrasting themes of opportunity and obstacles. Although the community college provides access to the students thereby opening the door to their American Dream, at the same time the students struggle to persist in their education because of seemingly insurmountable financial barriers. The first theme focuses on the access and diversity of the community college.

Access and Diversity in the Community College Provide Educational Opportunities for Students

The students’ narratives are deeply rooted in the context of their community college experience, most notably the access the community college provides to higher education. Whether their narratives would be different if they were attending another type of institution is beyond the scope of this study. However, it is important to note that the access and diversity of the community college are interwoven throughout all the themes that emerged in this research.

Access

Open access to the community college surfaced as a critical theme for these students. For each student, the story of entry into the community college is different.
However, it is clear that the access provided by the community college was a critical element in these narratives of opportunity. Many of these students would not have been otherwise able to attend college. Each of the students discussed aspirations to earn their associate’s degree and transfer to a four-year institution to continue their education. They all had hopes of earning a bachelor’s degree and two of the participants (Aurelia and Jessica) aspired to earn doctoral or professional degrees.

The community college has historically provided access for a number of specific groups of students, most notably students from minority and/or low socioeconomic backgrounds. The student participants in this study fit into both categories. They also serve as examples of the diverse pathways through which students enter the community college.

In addition to providing access for minority students and those with limited financial means, community colleges are also the institution of choice for adults 24 and older entering higher education (including Alberto and Tonito). More than 60% of students in this age group begin their higher education in community colleges (Adelman, 2005, Table 7). Many of these students work full-time and, like Alberto, more than half have children (Adelman, 2005, Tables 8 and 9). The accessibility, affordability, and availability of evening and weekend courses make community colleges attractive to adult learners.

Community college for those who failed at a university. Elena first attended a local state university. However, after becoming pregnant during her first year in college, she left the university, taking a low grade point average with her. She was no longer academically eligible to attend that institution. After her daughter was born, she returned to school at the local community college (UCC). This allowed her to be closer to home and closer to family who could help her raise her daughter, which was important to her as a single parent. UCC provided access she wouldn’t have at the university because of her academic status.

Community college for students not admitted to selective institutions. Like many community college students, Jessica first applied to the local state university. Despite high SAT scores, her grade point average was low and she did not get accepted. When Jessica was at her lowest moment, a counselor at the mental health facility
suggested she try UCC. She describes it as a “last resort.” She started in Spring 2008. When I interviewed her for this study, she was in her third semester.

So, when I went to go sign up for [the local university], they did not accept me and even though I already took the SAT and I did really, really well and my essay they said was really, really well written, they didn't like me because of my GPA … so I ended up having to go to [UCC], which really hurt my feelings. You know, there's nothing wrong with [UCC], you know… You know, I really wanted to go to a university and … when I came here I was just really… felt bad about myself but as soon as I got here… I got a 4.0. (Jessica)

**Community college for GED earners.** Before immigrating to the United States, Alberto dropped out of high school because of what he describes as “family problems.” (Among other things, his father had a drinking problem). For Alberto, the community college provided access to a college education that he never expected to get. He earned his GED after moving to the United States. He then got involved in family life (he now is married with two sons and a daughter) and only later decided to attend college.

I just went to, I think it was some kind of church that used to help Latino students with [the GED] ... And I talked to the professor at that time and he said, he asked me what I knew and I told him I couldn’t tell him, you know. He would have to test me. And he gave me the GED test and I passed it so then he sent me to get the real test and I passed it, too. I didn’t have to do any classes. And then, after I got my GED I just forgot about education. I had other things that I had to worry about (my kids – I have three kids now), and until last year that I decided to attend to college. (Alberto)

Access is a central theme in the community college literature and it is central in the student narratives as well. For these students, the community college provided access to postsecondary education not offered by other institutions.

**Diversity**

The diversity of the community college emerged as a key element that impacted students’ sense of connectedness with UCC. Community colleges educate a large portion of minority students. In 2004, of the 17.3 million students enrolled in higher education, 11.4 million were white and 5.3 million were minority. (The remaining 600,000 were international students.) In 2004, 64% of all minority students attended two-year institutions, despite the fact that community college students make up only 36% of the entire college student population in the United States (U.S. National Center for Education Statistics, 2005a, Table 206). However, the majority of students at most of these institutions (including UCC) are not Hispanic.
The experience of being a minority within a predominately white postsecondary institution can contribute to some level of acculturative stress (discussed in more detail in Chapter Five). For those students who have previously navigated environments in which they are among a majority white culture, the transition may be easier than for those who are uncomfortable in that environment. “Latino students who are familiar and comfortable in Anglo culture experience less stress in universities that are dominated by Anglos. This does not in any way suggest that Latino students should reject their culture to adjust; persons who are forced to reject their cultural heritage are subject to acculturative stress” (Quintana, Vogel, & Ybarra, 1991, p. 164).

Although the study participants described UCC as diverse, most did not know many other Latino students at UCC. Although UCC has one of the highest Hispanic populations among the community colleges in the state, they still remain a very small minority. Like other participants in the study, both Aurelia and Elena said they knew very few Hispanic students. I asked if they had met other Latino students at UCC.

Yes, I was going to say no, – but yes, I have. Not too many, and they’re more from South America than they are from Mexico, I don’t think I have met someone that was from Mexico at [UCC], which it’s kind of bad, and kind of sad, too. I wish there would be more. I know there’s a lot of Hispanics in high school right now so you know I just wish they would further their education. You know, just wish to see more Latinos and Hispanics later on. (Aurelia)

I have seen a couple people that look like they might be Hispanic or something but like I don’t run into anybody that speaks Spanish or anything…. No, I haven’t really run into too many Latino students here. I don’t know any. They have a lot of organizations here … I think there is some kind of African American organization and there’s a Single Parent organization. I don’t ever see anything for Latino organization like that. There may be an organization like that here but I don’t know anything about it. That would be something to maybe start or look into and then we could all get together and know each other. (Elena)

Although the participants reported little connection with other students from their own cultural backgrounds, the students did discuss the ethnic diversity of the community college. From their perspective, the diversity of the student body provides a welcoming environment to them. Both Aurelia and Elena noted how the diversity at UCC contrasted with their experiences in high schools that were predominantly white.

I really like it [UCC] – the people. There’s people from a lot of countries. And I just, I can relate more to them. I was the only Hispanic in my high school and in
my middle school and … I think the rest were American and not from anywhere else.

And when I came here I have so many friends but from all over the world. Bosnian and you know from Ukrania, Germany… And you know it’s really weird how, like, people from different places come together, you know? (Aurelia)

There’s a lot of different ethnicities that go to school here and I was surprised by all the different types of people that you run into. This is a small community college. I go to [the local university], then yeah, I kind of expect to, you know, see all kinds of different ethnicities. I didn’t expect that here and I did. (Elena)

A growing body of research has explored the link between institutional characteristics and minority transfer rates – with mixed results. Wassmer, Moore and Shulock (2004) found that institutions with higher African American or Latino populations have lower transfer rates However, some more recent studies show that high minority enrollments are also correlated with minority academic success. Hagedorn, Chi, Chepeda and McLain (2007), in their study of community colleges, found that a “critical mass” of Latinos was positively related to Latino student success (as measured by grade point average and enrollment in transfer courses).

**Can I afford the American Dream?**

**Financial challenges threaten students’ educational persistence**

You're like in the middle. You're like in a dream. It's too real. It's too good to be real. So, when you get here, you got your real life. You see you need to fight, you know. Fight for whatever you want. You can make it. You can make it. There are a lot of successful histories about Cubans becoming famous, or becoming rich, or getting a degree, getting a good job. (Tonito)

My mom helped me out a lot the first two semesters. She watched my daughter most of the time. That first year was hard. (Elena)

For the participants in this study, the American Dream begins with a college degree. They view a college degree as their access to a better life. But achieving that degree is not easy. Despite the value these students placed on education, simply coming up with the money to pay for it was an ongoing struggle. A strong belief in the value of a college education emerged from the personal narratives, but those stories were followed closely with an underlying question: “Will I be able to afford to earn a degree?” Although I did not ask these students questions related to their socioeconomic status, their stories were peppered with references to financial challenges they and their families faces. Although the students were not selected for this study based on socioeconomic status, each of the students in this study experienced significant financial challenges. For them, poverty is much more than just a word or an income level. These financial challenges,
although not unique to Hispanic students, are common among Hispanics because of the large number of Hispanics who live in poverty in the United States. (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2003). “Relative to Anglos, Latino students experienced more academic and financial stress. Higher levels of financial stress in Latino subjects are directly related to this group’s overrepresentation in lower SES groups because these students expect lower amounts of parental contribution than Anglos” (Quintana et al., 1991, p. 166).

The students in this study are no strangers to poverty. Even at low community college tuition rates (around $115 a credit hour), the financial barrier was nearly insurmountable. “I think that this [the community college], it's a really nice way to get into education here. But it's too tough in the economic situation here” (Tonito).

The students in this study were contributing to, or fully responsible for, their own financial needs. Further exacerbating the financial pressure, some were contributing financially to their families as well, either here or in their country of origin. Columbian was paying most of his bills. Aurelia contributed money to her parents for household expenses, in addition to paying her tuition. Tonito sent money back to Cuba every month for his grandmother and brothers. While the tuition bill at community colleges is so much less than four-year universities or private colleges, tuition is only one small part of the financial picture for these students. In contrast to a large portion of college students whose education is funded by their parents and/or a combination of scholarships and loans, these students were shouldering the financial responsibility of paying for their education and much more. It’s difficult to survive on minimum wage, even without the added responsibility of paying for school or supporting a family in Cuba who will only eat adequately if you send home some of your earnings.

I send them money every month. So, you know, especially my grandma and my two brothers so they won't struggle but even though you send them money, now you see why they can't go to the market and have – what can I have? You know? Why they can't have a car if I can have a car for just $500. Or can't have a bike, new bike. So, I know it's a process, but it's tough. It's harder for a person when it's so long, because even though you want it to happen … (Tonito)

The students were creative in developing lifestyles that helped them overcome the financial challenges they faced. They work part time or full time to pay their tuition bills. Aurelia earned a technical certificate (in dental hygiene) that allowed her to earn a higher salary while working on an associate’s degree. Some of the students work nights. Often,
the financial challenges resulted in slower progression toward their degree. Some of them had (or were considering) “stopping out” (a term used by some higher education administrators to describe students who are not completely dropping out of higher education, but need to stop for some period of time). Some were taking courses at a slow rate because they simply couldn’t afford to pay for more classes. The balance was tenuous. Alberto works full time and during at least one semester, he took a lighter course load because he had to work two jobs. Elena works part time, takes care of her daughter as a single parent, and attends classes full time.

I guess that’s pretty much the biggest challenges. It is hard to work full time and go to school period. Going to school part time and going to work full time is still hard and I know kids here that work full time and come to school full time and I don’t see how they do it, but maybe it’s just cause they are a lot younger and they live at home and stuff so, maybe it’s easier. I don’t know. They all seem stressed. (Elena)

Columbian works 30 or more hours a week, juggling work with the four courses he is taking. He works nights and seemed tired during most of our conversation. Tonito works full time and he said it’s challenging to combine classes and work.

It has been really nice. I’ve been learning a lot. I like learning and studying. But at the same time I have to work full time... I have to support myself and my family so I can't work part time so, and I never choose part-time classes. I always take three or more classes. (Tonito)

Despite low tuition rates, students still face financial challenges that threaten their educational persistence. The participants’ stories bring to light a critical question that researchers and practitioners must consider if they’re concerned about the strong influence socioeconomic status exerts on access to higher education and subsequent transfer rates. The question is not, “How can we keep tuition and costs low?” although that is an important question; the critical question is: “What does it mean to be poor?” Through their narratives, the students paint a compelling picture of poverty that provides answers to questions of access that statistics cannot answer.

**Higher education access through low tuition rates**

Despite the open doors of the community college and a general cultural understanding that postsecondary participation in the United States is based on merit, not socioeconomic status, students from lower-income families are less likely to participate in postsecondary education than students from families with higher incomes. In 2003,
80% of students from families in the highest income quintile ($78,800 and above) enrolled in college immediately after high school. This is in contrast to 61% of students from the middle-income quintile and 49% of students in the lowest two income quintiles (College Board, 2005, p. 8). An analysis of the 2006 data from the UCLA Cooperative Institutional Research Program shows that college students are increasingly more likely to come from families with higher incomes (UCLA News, 2007). “The nation’s college freshmen are more financially advantaged today than they have been at any point in the last 35 years and come from families with a median income 60% higher than the national average” (UCLA News, 2007).

When they do participate in higher education, students from low income backgrounds often choose to attend community colleges. Students from lower SES backgrounds who do enroll in higher education are more likely to enroll in community colleges rather than four-year institutions. For Tonito, the community college provides perhaps the only opportunity for him to attend college in the United States. However, even with the low tuition costs, he has had to rely on a student loan to help fund his education.

I have a loan. Not for all semesters. I have a loan for two semesters so... But you know I have to think two times before I get it. If I have to do it to finish my degree, I'll do it. I won't doubt to do it. But I have to think about it. You know, so, that is the way it's... And what standard of education. All those factors really influence the decision to go – for Latino people to go to college. They really do... We know it's cheaper. We know we have to try to make it as cheaper as possible. It's not that we need to get cheap education. It's because cheaper means that we will be able to get further. (Tonito)

In 2004, Boswell reported that “65% of students from families with incomes of less than $20,000 attend community colleges, compared with only 8.6% of students from families with incomes of more than $100,000, according to the Educational Commission of the States” (p. 24). Adelman (2005, p. 22, Table 10) found that only 32.2% of students in the lowest quintile for family income enrolled in four-year colleges. In contrast, students in higher SES quintiles are less likely to start in a community college (Adelman, 2005, Table 10, p. 33). Data collected in the longitudinal study over 30 years shows that students from the lowest socio-economic status quintile are increasingly attending the community college, with an increase of 44 to 55% of these students enrolling in the community college (Adelman, 2005, Table 10, p. 33).
Among the factors contributing to this trend, according to Dougherty and Kienzl (2006), are increasing tuition costs at four-year institutions, little change in need-based aid, an increasing lack of remedial educational opportunities at four-year institutions, and a decrease in family income. Community colleges fulfill their access mission in part by providing higher education at a low cost. This is an enrollment pattern that is continuing to increase. Boswell (2004), along with other researchers, is concerned about this trend. “Deeply troubling is the growing evidence of an increasing opportunity gap between students from different racial, ethnic, and socio-economic class backgrounds” (Boswell, 2004, p. 24).

Low tuition rates facilitate access for students with limited financial resources or those who would like to save money during their first two years of education prior to transferring to a four-year institution (Kane & Rouse, 1999, as cited in Dougherty, 1994). In 2004-2005, undergraduate students at public two-year colleges paid an average of $1,847 in tuition and fees – only 31% of the average $5,948 in tuition costs at public four-year institutions (U.S. National Center for Education Statistics, 2005b, Table 312).

The accessibility of the community college to minority and lower-income students puts the community college in the unique position to provide opportunities for students to improve their economic earning potential. Indeed, community colleges enroll a large percentage of American college students – particularly those from low-income and minority backgrounds (Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac, 2009a).

Advocates of the community college argue that, “the community college is the most effective democratizing agent in higher education. It has opened college opportunities to those who would otherwise be unable to attend, either because of poverty, poor high school records, or vocational interests” (Dougherty, 1994, p. 6). They cite these factors as evidence that the community college is fulfilling its mission of providing open access to students and thereby providing these students with educational and economic opportunities they otherwise would not have enjoyed. “Community colleges are positioned to play a critical role in the process of upward mobility in American society” (Shaw et al., 1999, p. 1).

Whereas the community college obviously provides important access to higher education, the students also bring something to the college as well. Alberto knows his
perspective is different. “I guess look… looking at life differently – unlike other students. I mean, age is one thing. Probably culturally speaking, too, just because I didn't have the advantages that I… that I have here, in my country” (Alberto).

**Higher education as a path out of poverty**

The research regarding the links between educational participation (as well as transfer rates) and socioeconomic status, paints a compelling picture of inequality in opportunity. The stories of these students add a layer to that picture. Tonito’s story perhaps illustrates it best. Tonito, introduced in the first chapter, came to the United States from Cuba in 2006. For Tonito, coming to the United States was the only option he saw for making things better for himself and his family financially.

Cuba economy has been really tough for Cubans. After the Soviet Union, you know, Berlin Wall, you know whatever they called that. So for people and for families there it’s really tough – especially for my family. I’m coming from a really poor family. (Tonito)

In Cuba, Tonito went to the military academy. He was no stranger to poverty. Even in the military academy, food was not plentiful. Despite a very active schedule, he and the other students survived mostly on water, rice, and sugar.

We didn’t have almost anything to eat. So, we used to wake up six in the morning, run five kilometers (like two miles, two miles and a half) and go to take breakfast and at the breakfast just have water with sugar and a small piece of bread. So we used to go to lunch and we used to have just rice and like soup and rice with sugar. It was, you know, it was a hard, tough time but it was a really good learning time because it was so hard that you have to improve yourself twice to be able to do everything you have to do, to be able to stay in the school. And after that the military life, it’s not easy even here or there. And you have rules, you have norms, you have patterns to follow, you know so, laws. (Tonito)

After graduating from college in Cuba, Tonito worked for the government as a marine biologist, but he still didn’t have the financial resources to take care of his family like he wanted to. He didn’t have a wife or children of his own, but he felt a strong commitment to support his grandmother and mother.

So, when I finished my career that I went for two years, my …view of the world was completely different, was, you know, the way to support my family, support my grandma, you know my mom, my family, so… You don’t have enough to eat. So, you make $10 a month. Regular worker made $10 a month. So, you don’t have even to buy enough food to eat for an entire day. So… you have to do what you have to do in order to support your family. So, you start seeing everything completely different, and finding the ways to be able to support your family. (Tonito)
The Cuban economy provided little opportunity for Tonito to achieve what he wanted to financially. Like many other immigrants, Tonito came to the United States with the hope of earning an income that would allow him to support himself and send money back to Cuba to take care of his family. He did not see any opportunity to do that in Cuba without resorting to illegal activity.

So, for us, coming to U.S. is the only way that we have to support our family, or doing illegal business in Cuba. But the government send you to jail without a doubt. So, there are two ways, crime or coming to the U.S. So, doesn’t matter the way, boat, swimming, or flying, you – the only way you see is to get here to be able to help for your family. So, that is the main reason, economic reason, other than political, but you know, we won’t start here about political. Economic is the main reason that I’m here. (Tonito)

Transitioning from a different financial system (communism) to capitalism – has been difficult for Tonito. When he came to the United States, he was amazed at the high salaries people earned. However, he quickly learned that he wouldn’t get to take his entire pay check home.

There are no taxes in Cuba. There are no 20% or 25% of your salary going to the government. Right, so you have a different idea of how much you make. When you came here most of the people make 10 dollars a month. Where I work now I make a good pay hour rate, but most of the people do 10 dollars, 11 in a factory, 9 – or I don't know, let's take 15. They take 25%, it's like 4 – 16. Four, yes, about 4, so it's 4 dollars – you're not making 15, you're making 11. For that 11 you have to pay for the apartment, you have to pay for this, you have to pay for that. So when you get the cash in your hands, you are just making $500 a month. You're not making whatever your paycheck says. (Tonito)

In Cuba, Tonito did not have to pay for housing; it was provided by the government. But, although it was technically owned by the families, the government could move you out if they wanted.

There's no new housing in Cuba so you live with your parents or your grandparents, or in the same house make a second floor or a third floor. They own that – they don't pay for that. There is no pay at the end of the year. But the government owns everything. What that means – they can put you out from your house anytime. It is yours. You don't pay for it. It's in your name. You have a title. It's never yours. (Tonito)

Many Hispanic students come from families with a lower socioeconomic background and are employed, like Tonito, either part-time or full-time, contributing much of their earnings to their family (Nora & Rendon, 1990, p. 237). Despite working full time, Tonito has struggled to make it financially.
Poverty as Crisis

Though Jessica’s story is not uniquely Hispanic, it is a story of poverty, crisis, and abuse. To rise up out of this situation and earn a college degree would be a challenge for a person of any ethnic background. In contrast to the other participants in this study, who seemed to find a strong foundation in their family of origin, Jessica’s mother and father did not provide a stable life for her growing up.

My mom had to live in standardized housing and from living with families for a while so we didn't have a lot of money and my mom… (Sighs) She did… she would do things like sell Mary Kay … you know, jewelry and that kind of stuff and she would make money that way but she didn't really have a lot of money and my dad would try to come over sometimes but when I was like three he came to my mom and he said that he couldn't love me because he had given all his love to my older half-sister … who was born like three months before me and my mom was really mad about that. So, in all of our crazy family we… my mom… my family moved up to Alaska for… no reason. My grandma lived in New Jersey like all her life and my grandpa was directly from Puerto Rico, so you know, they lived in a Hispanic community up there, in Jersey, and then my family relocated to Alaska. (Jessica)

From Alaska, where Jessica’s mother met her father (who was later convicted of shooting a man), Jessica moved with her mother to California and then back up to Alaska, mostly living out of hotels and low-cost apartments. On top of the lack of stability, Jessica then had to endure the experience of abuse.

Well, then California has a big earthquake, so our apartment collapsed so we moved back up to Alaska and my mom had gotten married to a man [and he] was not a really good man. He was a heroin addict, I think it's heroin… I think he's an addict for heroin and (sighs) he sexually abused me … when I was eight, and it was really hard for me to tell anyone. I told my grandma and my grandma always either lived across the street, in the house or next door, so my grandma was my go-to person all my life… All my life, like I never really told my mom anything. I always talked to my grandma. That was pretty much like my… my only friend and I went to tell my grandma and uh, I was like, “You know, [he] touched me,” you know, and I was like crying. I was like, “Please promise you're not going to tell my mom” because I don't want my mom to get upset, you know? My grandma was like, “Okay.” Well, it was about a few more months, it was like three months, and my mom and [her boyfriend] like, we had moved to another house, like they had to move out of subsidized housing because when my mom married him it, you know, it went from being just for women and families so you know, there wasn't allowed any men. So we went to a new house because my mom actually saved up some money and they were having a fight because he had stolen food and he had stolen the Thanksgiving turkey and stuff for drugs and my grandma called at the exact same second they were having a fight and you know, my mom
was like, “He stole the Thanksgiving turkey,” and my grandma got mad. I guess out of anger she was like “Well, you know, he touched Jessica” and when my mom heard that she got really, really mad and like really, really, really mad and chased him out of the house and you know, … we ended up, you know, trying to go to Vegas for a little bit. (Jessica)

Jessica moved with her mother to Las Vegas but her mother wasn’t able to provide a safe environment there, so they returned to Alaska.

My mom’s best friend… she came over from L.A. and she was like, “You guys can't stay here” ’cause we were living… like we were behind the MGM and it was like shoot-outs every night, you know, it was… she was like, “You cannot be here, a little girl, you know, especially because she just went through some stuff,” so she goes back up to Alaska (sighs) and we didn't have any money because we used up all our money going down with Las Vegas. (Jessica)

Jessica and her mother lost most of their personal items, including her baby pictures. The greater loss, however, was stability, something Jessica never experienced.

We lost most of our stuff, lost like my baby pictures and toys and everything, we lost mostly everything and we was living in motels and like… and mom's brother is a internationally known FBI certified identity thief man and he's in jail now, like that I don't think he's ever going to get out (chuckles). But he was paying for us to be like in hotels and stuff and my mom was like, "This is not good." So, my (sighs) grandma, you know, was like, "Can I tag along?" You know, cause my grandma always loved me and we all packed up whatever we could and went to Atlanta and we just had like a little bit of stuff left and my mom had a best friend up there [and she] was supposed to take our stuff in her car and put it… and my mom had bought a specific freight to ship it to Atlanta and they… her friend never did it. So we lost everything. We lost all of our pictures and everything. (Jessica)

By the time she was in fifth grade, Jessica had moved with her mother to Atlanta, where they lived in a hotel. They did not stay there long, eventually ending up in New Jersey where her mother had family.

So, we were in Atlanta and we never really got past the motel stage and it was like my fifth grade year, I went into fourth grade, beginning of fifth grade year, and I wasn't going to school because in Atlanta you have to actually have a permanent residence to go to school and since we were living in motels…

You know, they wouldn't let us go anywhere, so my mom was looking for jobs and we were about to get on our feet and my uncle, like I told you before, he called us and said, "Hey, come up for Christmas." So, well, we were there completely on him. He said he'd promise he would send us back and when we got up there he refused to send us back and he wanted us to stay, you know… you know, the same Jersey community that my mom and he grew up in, and my mom
was really upset because you know, she didn't want to go back to Jersey, you know. (Jessica)

In New Jersey, Jessica and her mother lived in a town with a cultural history that included slavery, white domination, and now a growing Hispanic population. She noted the irony of that.

You know, well, the place they lived in it was (an)…. old slavery town that was taken over by Caucasians, that was taken over by Hispanics (chuckles) and then we moved to another part of (the) township and I ended up going… graduating elementary school there, middle school there, high school there [New Jersey]. (Jessica)

Jessica’s childhood was completely lacking in stability. The combination of frequent relocations, an unstable family environment, abuse, and poverty left her feeling very insecure. She had a difficult time developing relationships with the other students in her classes at school and was taunted for both her size and her interracial ethnicity. In response to these experiences, Jessica said she threw herself into her studies, which earned her the opportunity to take the SAT early, in ninth grade. Because of her high scores, she was able to skip a grade. She always thought the school might also be trying to get her out of the tough environment she was experiencing with other students in her class.

I had like a 1250 in ninth grade [on the SAT] and they're like, "You have this good in ninth grade," and "You’re good enough to skip." and like "Maybe we'll put you in a higher grade, those kids won't know you and so the class you went with all this time, they won't really mess with you as you won't really be in their classes anymore." So that kind of helped because, I mean, in the beginning like they were trying to heckle me. Then I went from 10th grade to 12th grade and they kept calling me "junior" and you know like, "You're not really a senior" and all this stuff but at the end like all of those kids really respected me because at first they thought that… they probably thought I was just being stupid but, you know, (sighs) it kinda helped and I graduated a three year graduate. (Jessica)

Things were not smooth for Jessica even after changing classes. The problems of abuse and instability from earlier in her life caught up to her, and she began to struggle with mental health issues including bulimia, substance abuse, and self-mutilation.

My grades were really bad because my… I had also a mental illness and, I started having a form of bulimia where I abused laxatives and I started like taking a lot of sleeping pills and cough syrup and cutting myself and hanging out with the wrong crowd who did that kinda stuff, too. (Jessica)
Jessica’s mom lost her job and once again they were evicted from their rental home. They went to live in a hotel, and Jessica stayed most of the time with a guy she described as a “friend.” When things went bad with that relationship (her friend’s mother wanted Jessica to go to a gynecologist, and Jessica refused. She simply couldn’t take it emotionally. Jessica and her mom moved to an apartment, her mother hooking up with another man who had recently moved out of a halfway house. When she was 18, Jessica began dating a man who was 29. She and her mom moved in with him for a while.

And he wanted me to be something that… I totally wasn't willing to be like extra, extra mature and I… I wasn't… I wasn't mature at all at 18, because I was… I was still messed up and we ended up all moving to this apartment, well... I mean this condo. My mom didn't have good credit so [he] actually applied for the house but my mom gave all the money to get into the house. Well, when [he] got tired of me, and he despised my mom, he wanted to leave and when he left and broke the lease, we all had to leave. (Jessica)

At that point, Jessica again moved across the country with her mother to the area in which she now attends school. It was a huge adjustment for her – moving from the Philadelphia area to a rural area outside the city. Since then, she has continued to struggle with mental illness, but feels healthier than before and is persisting in her education.

Unlike the other participants in this study who immigrated here as adults or with their parents, Jessica was born in the United States, as were her parents and her grandmother on her mother’s side. Hers is the story not simply of a second- or third-generation immigrant, but of second- and third-generation poverty. Her life of instability includes exposure or experience with drug abuse, mental illness, sexual abuse, and persistent poverty. Her life illustrates how challenging it can be to break the cycle of poverty. It is not simply an economic situation from which she is trying to break free; it is a lifestyle of poverty and abuse that she is attempting to overcome. Her own choices (living as an 18-year-old with an unstable man more than 10 years her senior) as well as the mental illness she has experienced (perhaps as a result of the early abuse in her life) make the road ahead less hopeful for Jessica. She told her story openly, perhaps too openly for social convention. Her communication style was effusive and descriptive, but beyond that, she seemed to lack some general social skills. Perhaps there is no socially appropriate way to communicate the shocking and tragic story of her young life. She seemed to cling to her intelligence and her academic success as a life raft that might keep
her afloat in the midst of all the instability. For her, navigating the obstacles in order to achieve her education is perhaps more critical, and at the same time more tenuous, than it is for the others.

**Poverty as Motivation**

Much of Elena’s motivation for her education came from watching her parents struggle financially. She hopes that education will provide her with the opportunity to earn enough money so life will be easier for her.

I don’t want to struggle financially. I just remember seeing my parents going through things like that in the past and I just I don’t want…I don’t want to have to live like day to day on money or whatever. I want to be able to be like, “Okay. I have enough money to pay my bills. So, really I’m fine. I have enough money to pay my bills, I got a place to live, a nice place to live, a car that I don’t have to like kick every time I want it to go and stuff like that.” I would love to have more children one day, maybe like two more. And I want to be able to provide for them. My daughter is eight so, probably by the time I get a bachelor’s degree, if everything goes according to plan, she will be almost a teenager. She is going to be wanting things that right now I can’t afford. So, I am hoping I get into a career in which I enjoy but also something that I won’t have to struggle with financially. That is like my main thing. I just want to get into something that I like and that I can make money. That’s pretty much like my whole goal. I understand everybody is going to have financial struggles because things in life pop up, but I want to be able to know that the job I am working at and that the money I am making I can handle those kinds of things. (Elena)

Like the others, Elena has had to work to pay tuition. She lives on her own with her daughter, and has to earn enough money to take care of both herself and her daughter. It has made it challenging, not only combining a challenging tough schedule, but also getting business done at the college. Most of the offices shut down at 5:00 p.m., making it difficult for Elena to get services she needed when she worked full time. Because she left her first university with poor grades, when Elena returned to school she wasn’t immediately eligible to receive financial aid.

I was put on academic probation and I couldn’t get financial aid or anything because of what I had done in the past. So, that was my first challenge. I had to bring my GPA up and my first set of classes was classes I had already taken but didn’t go to. So, I went back to those and the whole challenge was, I really just needed to maintain a B average to bring my GPA up for next semester and I did that. I had a great academic advisor… one of the counselors here. You know? I guess I talked to her. I had to go see her like at the beginning of the semester, the middle, I guess midterm time and then the end of the semester to review my grades … if I was eligible for financial aid. It actually took me two semesters to
get up to, you know, where I could get financial aid ... I had to borrow the money from my mother to even come back to school. (Elena)

When she first attended UCC, Elena worked at a company (full time) that offered tuition assistance, but she wasn’t eligible for that either until she raised her grade point average.

I didn’t just have to maintain my grades to get financial aid from here. I had to maintain the grades, bring the grades up to get money from [my employer] too. So, that was a challenge. I just made sure, you know, I didn’t want to overwhelm myself. I was working, single mother, I was working 40 to 50 hours at the time and just making sure I fit in these new things that were new in my life. Fitting in going to class, fitting in the homework and the study time into a short amount of time but I did that with the help of, you know, the faculty here and... my mom really. (Elena)

It was the help from her family, especially her mother, which made it possible for Elena to be successful in college, while caring for her daughter at the same time. Her mother loaned her money and took care of her daughter while Elena was at school and work.

My mom helped me out a lot the first two semesters. She watched my daughter most of the time. That first year was hard. And then finally when I did get eligible for financial aid I was still working and it just became hard to work with the financial aid people because of the [office] hours here... I would have to leave work like 30 minutes early and stuff a couple times that year. I was still on a probation, but it wasn’t an academic probation. I think it’s called a financial probation or something because I had taken a lot of classes and they still count as types of credits even though they were bad. (Elena)

Elena continues to struggle with balancing everything, particularly as she moves forward in her education and her classes are increasingly challenging. By taking advantage of social assistance programs and students loans, and with the assistance of her mother, Elena is now going to school full time and working part time.

I guess the challenges I am having now – I have a bigger work-load as in school. My classes are a little bit more advanced than they were. I guess just completing the homework is kind of hard but I’ve got time now. I have made it to where this is my main, this is my job. Coming to school every day, getting to study time and getting the homework done. I do those three things every day. I study every day. I do homework every day. I come to school every day. (Elena)

She expressed some reluctance regarding using the social assistance program, but she hopes she won’t be on it long, since her goal is to earn her education so she can be
financially self-sufficient. Her teachers know she is on social assistance and, although she feels somewhat ashamed, they have been very supportive.

Since I am working part time I am on food stamps and things like that. So, I have a case worker and she requires every month I have to prove what days I have missed in all my classes and what days I have attended in all my classes and I have to get grades. So, I pretty much know where I am at. But, I have to bother the faculty. Like, “Hey, you know I need a copy of this month’s roll or I need you to write down what days I have been here,” and stuff and they’ve all been really nice about it and given me the paperwork when I need it. So, I am able to turn that stuff in when I need to. At first, I used to not be comfortable because I kind of felt like weird that I am getting food stamps and stuff like that. And I don’t want to sit there and explain, “Well, I need you to do this ‘cause I need to prove so I can keep getting government help.” I just feel… I don’t know, weird about it. They don’t ask too many questions. They are just like, “Okay, if you need that then I’ve got it for you.” And so they help out a lot. (Elena)

She struggles with some concerns regarding how others will perceive her, because she gets government assistance. She thinks others might think she is “lowly.”

You should go work instead of using my tax money. Well, I did work. So, I am using what I put in as far as that’s how I feel about it. I’ve never gotten a bad attitude from anybody about it but I still just feel weird explaining myself you know, so…but I am glad my professors make it comfortable I guess. (Elena)

As a mother, Elena juggles multiple responsibilities. When her classes are over and she is done with work, she goes to her daughter’s softball games and track practice. Elena hopes that pursuing her degree will pave the way for a better future for both her and her daughter. She hopes that future includes financial stability.

You know, I talked to my mom about it and she was like, “Elena, you just have to learn to live within your means. That’s really where financial stability comes from.” And I’m like, I understand that but I still want to be like, “Hey, I make 50 grand a year.” (Elena)

Jessica also hopes education will make a difference in her life financially. Despite her background, or perhaps because of it, Jessica sees education as a pathway to a better life. However, despite the poverty she herself has experience, she does not talk of her own life as motivation, but the poverty her grandparents and great-grandparents’ experienced as a motivation for going to college.

I have more of a desire and a hunger for [education] because, you know, I… I’ve sat down with my grandma and my grandpa and you know, my great-grandma, whatever, and I’ve listened to their stories of how they literally had to hunt food and they had mud huts that they literally had to rebuild if it rained too hard and that, you know, they didn't have any screens on their windows, it was just holes in
the walls, and dirt floors and, you know, all this stuff they had to go through and how hard it was just to get here and to get established. … So, I guess I'm going to stay in school (chuckles), and you know a funny thing is my family especially, I think I'm fourth generation American, maybe three. Anyway, I, they're really big into the American Dream, you know… going to school, making a lot of money, owning a house, having a car, you know... and my family originates from Ponce (Puerto Rico) and it's really bad there, you know, you know mud huts and… no air conditioning…. And it's, so I'm…it… you know, I have always been told like just to go for everything, and ever since I was a baby, you know, my mom's always told me always… let me say it right, "Always shoot for the moon because if you don't make it you'll always land among the stars" or something like that. (Jessica)

For Jessica, education is her way of “shooting for the moon.” She hopes to complete her associate’s degree at UCC, transfer to a four-year institution, and move on to graduate school after earning her bachelor’s degree. She has big hopes for higher education.

I want to go get a Ph.D. I want to get two Ph.D.s (chuckles). If I don't get one Ph.D., if I don't get two then I'll at least get one. I want to be an editor and editors, I looked… I… actually I was curious. I went into Career Builder and I saw what the average editor salary. It was like $140,000 a year… I was thinking of newspapers or magazines but I don't care if it's textbooks or anything like that. I'll do anything. I just… I just like the written word... (Jessica)

Can Student Motivation Overcome Financial Challenges?

These narratives reveal strong levels of motivation and high educational aspirations. Elena’s motivation is strong, but like the others, her educational experience includes significant financial challenges. The tuition bill is only a small part of her financial picture. The combination of family commitments, tuition, and lost income while in school make it challenging. For Elena, who is eligible for government financial assistance because she is a United States citizen, that assistance has provided her with the opportunity to persist in her pursuit of a degree. Others, Jessica and Tonito, for example, have also been able to take advantage of government financial aid program. However, since neither of them completed high school in the state, they are not eligible for state based merit scholarships.

The open door to the community college is regarded by community college advocates as a democratizing agent of American higher education; open doors are assumed to translate into open opportunity. In a 2010 address at the White House Summit on Community Colleges, U.S. President Barack Obama called community colleges “the
unsung heroes of America’s education system” (Bradley, 2010). According to Obama, “They may not get the credit they deserve. They may not get the same resources as other schools. But they provide a gateway to millions of Americans to good jobs and a better life” (Bradley, 2010). But for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, the community college’s open doors may not be enough. The stories of these students show that, despite low tuition costs, overcoming the struggles of poverty, including basic survival, continue to compete with their dreams for an education.
CHAPTER FIVE

CULTURAL PRODUCTION WITHIN
THE CONTEXT OF THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

The narratives of access and affordability provide a foundation for the second strand of themes emerging from these rich narratives of the students. This second strand focuses on cultural production. These students are navigating their community college experiences and forming their educational aspirations as Latino students in mainstream American culture. In addition to the formal curriculum found in the courses and academic programs in which they are enrolled, the students are also involved in another important aspect of education. They are producing their own cultural identity and agency as students and members of their own families and social groups.

Three major themes emerged around this topic. 1) Students are pursuing their educational goals within the context of strong family relationships. These relationships shape their educational aspirations and exert a concrete, practical influence on their educational choices. 2) The students in this study are navigating their educational experiences as foreigners, adapting to different cultural norms and expectations, often acquiring English language skills as part of this process. 3) Students are producing their own cultural identities within the context of vastly different gender roles and expectations. These values directly influence their educational choices.

La Familia – Education for My Family

My kids are a big part of [my motivation for going to college] … my family's a big part of that, too. So, I try to encourage my kids, you know. I want to do this for them, too, because I want to be an example to them. I want them to follow my steps, you know. I don't want them to uh, work two jobs, you know, like I do in order to go to school. (Alberto)

I would like to become a professional dentist. And the reasons why I want to accomplish that, I guess, is because first I would be the second one in my family to become a professional. So, that’s a big honor, I think, for my family and second, I guess for… also thanks for my mom that was there for me all this time and third, probably for my own family. (Aurelia)

The students hold strong family bonds, across generations, and they pursue their educational goals because they believe it will benefit their families. Their decisions regarding persistence in higher education are greatly influenced by their connections with
their families. The educational narratives in this study are grounded in strong family commitments. These students are pursuing their educational goals because they believe education will allow them to provide a better future for their families. They are not going it alone. They have their families (spouses, parents, siblings, and grandparents) who support their educational goals.

The participants are not alone in the high value they place on education. National research shows that Hispanic parents value higher education and have high aspirations for their children. In fact, they place stronger importance on higher education than do parents of other ethnicities: 86% of Hispanic parents believe their children would be “better off going to college” in contrast to 54% of all other parents (McGlynn, 2009, p. 25).

“Hispanic parents place a very high value on college, and they are more likely than other parents to believe that a college degree is necessary for a decent job and middle-class life” (McGlynn, 2009). Hispanic students tend to agree with their parents, reporting strong hopes for completing college.

This narrative research allows us to explore the motivation that influences human agency. According to Maynes et al. (2008), we must consider,

how individual actors come to understand their options, the varied meanings and orientations people take from their past experiences and bring into new situations, the components of their choices that are driven by emotions or dearly held values rather than by interests more narrowly or broadly conceived, and, at a deeper analytic level, how social actors understand their own capacity to act in a given setting. (p. 23)

**Strong Family Commitment to Education**

This strong belief in the value of education results in strong family support for the students’ participation in college. The participants in this study all intend to earn a bachelor’s degree after completing their community college work. Their families support these goals.

Oh, they’re all for it. That’s their expectation. When I said I am going to college their like, “Oh, you’re getting a bachelor’s degree?” You know? Yeah, I guess. That’s what I am going to do… that’s what I want to do, you know. I don’t know. When it comes to education I just don’t think there’s... You can just keep going and that’s probably what I am going to do… My mom, my grandma, my whole family has always been like you need to continue your education...from early on its like you know they tell you elementary school, middle school, high school and some stop there, but my parents were always like you’re going to college. And my mom just always knew – I have a younger sister – she’s two years younger than
me, but she’s two or three years behind me graduating or whatever, but she just always instilled in us you have to go to school. (Elena)

Elena’s mother provided an example for her, earning a degree part time while Elena was still in high school.

As a teenager, my mom went to school. My mom came here to UCC and she took her prerequisites and then she went to nursing school … She struggled a lot. She had a family to take of…her mom, my grandmother was dying and my mom took care of her and stuff, but just seeing her, she still continued to go to school. Was it stressful? Yeah. It wasn’t just stressful on her, it was stressful on everybody because she wasn’t there and my mom is the focal point of our family, so for about two years she was pretty much like school and part-time work and she wasn’t home very much because she had to do all her studying and everything but I just remember it … I just remember when my grandmother did pass away, my mom was down and just like I don’t know if I can do this and that’s when the family rallied around her and we’re just like, “No. You got this far, you’re so close, you know, you need to do this.” So, she got her degree in nursing…an associate’s degree…my mom, even after high school when we lived in Connecticut, she went to school and got an associate’s degree in business administration so she could start doing something …You know she’s just always gone to school. My dad, my dad tried to go to school and I guess it just wasn’t for him. Some people are … it’s just for them and some people it’s not. And my dad just stressed too much, but he would just always encourage us to continue our education. He just knew it was the better thing. It was what’s best, so … I guess that’s kind of where all that…my drive came from my parents. Because my dad, even though he didn’t go to college he graduated. He graduated with honors from a school in Michigan. (Elena)

Aurelia is the first generation in her family to go to college – but she has much more on her mind than simply providing a better future for herself. She sees it as a big honor for her family – and a way to build a foundation for her future children to go to college, too (even though she is not planning to get married any time soon).

I want them to have an education and be well off and have the things that maybe I didn't have or I couldn’t have when I was a child and that’s it. I want them to continue to… to start this cycle of… education in the family … I know that my parents couldn't go to college because obviously there wasn't enough money but I want to be the one that starts where education is a process and, you know, that ever since you’re little you're going to college. And that’s your future. Kind of like a lot of American families already know that their kids are going to grow up and they’re actually going to go to college. That’s how I want my family to grow up, too. (Aurelia)

Hispanic community college students are part of relational networks that generally include their families (with whom they live) and often include extended family,
their Hispanic peers, and the broader educational and peer community of the college. Many of them, particularly those who attend community colleges, continue to live with their families during their college years. Latino students have a stronger commitment to living at home than do other students (Kurlaender, 2006). The traditional-aged students in this study lived at home. Both Alberto and Tonito were older: Alberto lived with his wife and children, and Tonito (in his 30s) lived alone. Tonito is not married and his family lives in Cuba.

Latino parents offer strong moral support and encouragement of their students (Auerbach, 2006; Hurtado-Ortiz & Gauvain, 2007). See Valencia and Black, 2002, p. 94, for an overview of qualitative studies that have explored the “cultural strengths and assets of Latino families” including one study by Suarez-Orozco, C & Suarez-Orozco, M. (1995) that showed that “immigrant parents had a fierce desire for their children to achieve academically.”

For families of first-generation college students (and immigrant families) the support provided is unique. While the family support often does not come in the way of concrete information regarding the college process, or advocacy on their behalf with school administrators, research shows that these parents offer strong indirect support through their conversations with their students, including “verbal encouragement, cautionary tales, and other consejos (narrative advice)” (Auerbach, 2006, p. 276, italics in original). “The tendency of immigrant parents to offer moral support on the sidelines while leaving the navigation of educational pathways to their children is not only an artifact of their social location, cultural models, and family dynamics but also an adaptation to their ecocultural niche or habitat” (Auerbach, 2006, p. 286).

Aurelia came to the United States with her family. They left a strong community in Mexico and came to a place where they knew nobody. She remembers this as an important time for her family. It was one in which they developed a strong connection that she doesn’t see in the families of many of her American friends. She values the tight-knit relationships she has with her parents, particularly her mother. She says these bonds were cemented because of their immigration experience.

There’s gifts, and it’s not just economical gifts of course those are great but also as a family we had so much time to spend together. Our dinners were only my mom, my dad, my brother and me; that’s it. Friends? We had no friends, we had
so much fun as a family. It brought us together and I don’t think there’s a lot of American families that can relate to that. We’re so together in everything we do and I don’t think you can get a family that is so tight. There’s so much trust. There’s so much nice thoughts about our family, you know? (Aurelia)

In fact, Aurelia’s close relationship with her parents has sometimes made her stand out among her friends. She is faced with different cultural norms regarding parent/child relationships, independence, and parental roles.

I am always made fun of because I do have so much respect for my parents and that’s something I guess here it’s not common but where I’m from it’s always your elders. You know, you have to respect them because they are older than you. They know more you know than you do.

We will have a good relationship because there’s nothing better than having a good relationship with your parents. I mean, it’s awesome to tell them everything you do, you know? Just for there not to be any secrets between you and it’s awesome. (Aurelia)

From a strict social reproduction theoretical perspective, one would expect these Latino parents (as immigrants with a low socioeconomic background, and new to mainstream American culture) would not be able to offer much social capital to their children. However, Latino parents do in fact make many contributions to their children. Valencia and Black (2002) argue that much of the literature caries an assumption that they term “deficit thinking.” This is the belief that Latino parents pass on low expectations because they do not value or support higher education (Auerbach, 2006; Valencia & Black, 2002). Some argue that lack of achievement (in this case low Latino transfer rates) is simply a result of low aspirations. This perspective is linked to achievement ideology, which is prevalent in American society (MacLeod, 1995) and higher education, in particular. “In this view, success is based on merit, and economic inequality is due to differences in ambition and ability … Since education ensures equality of opportunity, the ladder of social mobility is there for all to climb” (MacLeod, 1995, p. 3). From this perspective, success is based on aspirations and value for education and therefore, any problem with inequity in educational outcomes can be linked to the individuals or, in the case of deficit thinking – culture, from which they come. “The legacy of deficit thinking has ingrained the erroneous assumption that Latino parents do not care about education” (Auerbach, 2006, p. 276).
Deficit thinking “asserts that poor schooling performance of students of color is rooted in the students’ (alleged) cognitive and motivational deficits, while institutional structures and inequitable schooling arrangements that exclude students from learning are held blameless” (Valencia & Black, 2002, p. 83). “Deficit thinking refers to the idea that students, particularly of low-SES background and color, fail in school because they and their families have internal defects, or deficits, that thwart the learning process” (Valencia & Black, 2002, p. 83). However, Valencia and Black (2002) argue these claims are not grounded in research data, but are instead illogical arguments. Lower attainment, they argue, does not prove lower value of education (Valencia & Black, 2002). “To attribute the persistent and pervasive achievement gap between Mexican American students and their White peers to a value orientation of Mexican American indifference to the importance of education is baseless, irresponsible, and racist” (Valencia & Black, 2002, p. 92).

Other scholars argue that not only is this belief a fallacy, in fact, the opposite is true; Latino families have stronger values and support for higher education than do families of other ethnic backgrounds (Immerwahr & Foleno, 2000; McGlynn, 2009). “Higher education is important for all Americans, but it is especially important to African American and Hispanic parents, who are significantly more likely to emphasize higher education than either White parents or the population as a whole” (Immerwahr & Foleno, 2000, p. 4). In particular, Immerwahr and Foleno (2000) found that Hispanic parents placed the highest value on higher education of any ethnic group, with 65% choosing a college education as the most important thing that will help young people succeed in today’s world. In contrast, 33% of white parents and 47% of African American parents chose college as the most important.

They think it's a great idea. They think… I mean, I… you know, that… that’s just… I… I guess something I was taught, you know, or maybe I guess my family told, you know, “You go… you go to college, you go… you go for two years and you're not doing anything, you've got to go for at least four. You have to get a bachelor. You have to.” You know what I’m saying? (Columbian)

Aurelia started at UCC in the dental assistant program. Her goal was to become a dental assistant so she could work to fund the rest of her college education. When Aurelia chose this program, her mother was disappointed. Aurelia’s mother wanted more for her
daughter than this program could offer and she knew Aurelia had much bigger dreams. Her mother didn’t want to see Aurelia set her aspirations too low.

My mom wasn’t very excited about that. She thought I would just stay as a dental assistant, she was like, “Well, you know, it’s not very great.” I mean she just wasn’t very happy about it … She didn’t really take that much importance on that. She just… For her it was more just starting a job at Home Depot or (a grocery store) or something. I mean, she wasn’t really… I don’t know. I could see that she wasn’t really happy, but I finished it and it was easy. The classes were easy because they were only about the dental assistant part, instruments – we had to learn the names of the instruments – and then the material. How to do certain things. How to know … how to take x-rays and everything. So… I mean, frankly that was easy. Yeah, I think I graduated with a 98. (Aurelia)

Because immigrant Latino parents are less likely to be directly involved in their students’ educational experiences by attending events with them, their support is often less visible to educators and may be overlooked. “Because moral support is intangible and takes place in the home, most likely in Spanish, it is consigned to invisibility. What counts as parent involvement to most educators is practices traditionally associated with White, middle-class parents, like homework help and attendance at school events” (Auerbach, 2006, p. 276-7).

Valencia and Black (2002) argue that throughout the scholarly literature, theoretical foundations for educational research have been developed that continue to perpetuate “deficit thinking” without foundation. In particular, the “cultural deprivation” literature, and the “at risk” literature explain inequalities in educational persistence by attributing the outcomes to the individuals and families themselves. This research disregards inequalities in educational structures and funding, family economic resources, or issues of racism that contribute to these inequalities. (For an overview, see Valencia & Black, 2002, pp. 85-9). The literature surrounding cultural deprivation emerged in the 1960s, offering the perspective that Mexican American children of low socioeconomic status were socially disadvantaged because of their “(allegedly) socially pathological family and impoverished home environment” (Valencia & Black, 2002, p. 85). Latino students of low socioeconomic background were also described as “at risk.” This term emerged in the 1980s and became foundational in much of the education literature in the end of the twentieth century. While Valencia and Black (2002) acknowledge that some of the literature on “at risk” students focuses on institutional and societal influences (i.e.
poor school environments and racism or lack of opportunity), the stronger focus in this literature has focused on familial and individual characteristics that put students at risk (i.e. race, poverty, poor self-esteem). “Part of the problem with the concept of at risk is that it tends to overlook any strengths and promise of the student so labeled, while drawing attention to the presumed shortcomings of the individual” (Valencia & Black, 2002, p. 87).

In fact, despite “deficit thinking” and the “at risk” literature, many Latino families provide significant support for their students’ education. Studies have shown that Hispanic family support comes more in the form of encouragement than in negative consequences for poor performance. “Although Mexican American parents encouraged their children to earn a college degree these parents did not help their children with class assignments nor did they become angry with their children when they did not perform well academically” (Hurtado-Ortiz & Gauvain, 2007, pp. 188-189). Additionally, many families supported their students by relieving them of household responsibilities or the need to have employment while they were enrolled in school.

A growing body of research has explored the influences of Latino family networks on high school achievement. This research, aimed at identifying ways in which families support or impede Latino student educational achievement in high school, has not yet been applied in depth to an exploration of community college students. However, the participants’ narratives were rich in their description of the important influence families play on educational goals, motivation, and decision making. The findings of this study indicate the need to understand more about the family’s role in pursuing educational goals and the relational contexts within which Hispanic students make educational decisions. Researchers have also begun to explore the correlations between the academic persistence and success of students and their siblings’ success. Having navigated the educational pathway before their younger siblings, older siblings are thus able to offer information and support to their younger siblings. Hurtado-Ortiz and Gauvain (2007) found that “older siblings, particularly those who have had successful experiences with the U.S. school system and are proficient in English, may help bridge the gap between home and school when children reach the postsecondary level” (p. 182). Successful siblings can also model effective academic behaviour and provide their
younger siblings with information related to the educational process (Hurtado-Ortiz & Gauvain, 2007).

Peer relationships also provide a vital source of social capital for students. More recently, researchers have explored the ways in which minority students develop social ties that serve to facilitate the sharing of important cultural and social resources (Ream, 2005). Mexican-American students in particular benefit from strong, trusting peer interactions, termed by anthropologists as “confianza en confianza” or “trusting mutual trust” (Velez-Ibanez, 1998). These interactions are based in the strong, intimate, interactions within their families which serve as the foundation for the development of strong, intimate relationships with peers.

While family support has been essential to these students, it is also important to recognize that family commitments can hinder the pursuit of educational goals. Alberto’s family commitment extends beyond his wife and children to other relatives. That commitment recently challenged his ability to pursue his degree.

Well, what it is, is that I ran into a problem where I had some siblings in Virginia came over and they kind of left me with a debt of $7,000 that I had to pay off. I work full time and I had to get a part-time job to pay that off. I worked for almost eight months. I was working from 7:30 – 4:30 every day and then a part-time job from 5:00 – 1:00 or 12:00…. And then study school at night and it was… And luckily I only had two classes at that time – and it was history of [the state] and it was a computer class – which I did well on that one – but on history I barely passed. I got a D grade on that and I felt very disappointed. (laughter) But I couldn’t help it, I’m just glad that I passed. (Alberto)

Alberto pushed through this challenge, but not without a personal cost to himself and his family (financially) and to his educational goals.

**Education for my Family**

Grounded in the support they receive from their families to pursue their educational goals, the participants in this study believe education will provide them with the opportunity to provide for their families. This includes their current families of origin as well as their children (or future children). The students talked about their education in the context of their families, frequently citing their families as the motivation for pursuing their education, despite the inherent challenges involved. They want a better future for their families (including both their families of origin and their current or future spouse and children). Tonito sends money to his grandmother and brothers in Cuba – and
wants to send more. Alberto wants a better life for his children. Jessica wants to end the

cycle of poverty experienced in her family. Elena, like the other participants, believes
education can change things, not only for her, but also for her daughter. She wants to

provide a better future for her young daughter.

She’s eight, and I guess I’ve pretty much always taken classes ever since she’s
been in school…. For her it’s just normal. … My daughter’s come into the world
hearing about college. So I think that’s a good thing. That was another reason…

That was just one more reason I wanted to go to school and, like, definitely finish
with a bachelor’s degree. Because I want her to feel like that’s what she needs to
do too. So… and that’s what I got from my mom, and I think that’s what my sister
got from my mom, too … And my grandparents all my aunts and uncles who’ve
gone on to college or you know tech school and furthered their education in some
way, shapes, or forms. So, we’ve just always been encouraged to do that. (Elena)

Helping My Extended Family

Tonito came to the United States to earn money for his family and hopes

education will allow him to do that. Growing up in poverty motivates him to secure a

better financial future for himself, but he still struggles with being so far away from his
family.

I can't stop thinking about my family because I'm here because of them. If there
was just myself I'd prefer to be there even though I had economic problems. You
know, you know everybody, it's your city, your weather, you know, it's your life.
It's your life. … I just think about my family. You know, I'm not looking… like it
appears most of the time people have like a hero, a person, idol. My family is my
– the main reason. Sometimes I don't want to wake up in the morning. I just think,
you know my grandma – because I don't have any parents. My mom passed away
a few years ago. I saw my dad two times in my life. So it's like he never exist. We
don't have any type of connection or anything like that. So, every time I see my
grandma, I remember her when I was in high school. She used to cook with wood
on the back of the house. We didn't have any gas. We didn't have electricity to cook –
so, we didn't have any gas. So, just close my eyes and thinking of my grandma
doing that – you can imagine. (Tonito)

Before she passed away, Tonito’s mother asked him to take care of the family. He
tries to follow her example of working hard and putting family needs first. Like many of
the other students, Tonito spoke very highly of his mother and the difficult challenges she
faced in order to take care of her family. It is this example that Tonito is trying to follow.

I was with her at the last moment and I just remember, you know, last time I was
with her [she was] in bed and she told me, “You know you have to take care of
your family. Just do what I did for my family. Do the same. Don't do better than
we was.” She always support her kids, my grandma. She was always there for us,
all the time. Just didn't matter the time, the problem at all. She was there. So I learned a lot from her. She was the best person, the hardest worker I ever met, and the sweetest person at the same time. She was tough. She was a hard worker. She was a good friend, good mom. So, when you have those parents you learn a lot of things – you are a baby until you know … I still remember the day she was, she passed away. I was with her so I didn't have anything sad inside me, so I was happy for everything, you know she does, what I learned. You know, everything I learned. Just at the last moment, you know, I, you know, when I tried to let her behind, you know that was tough but I have such a great future because every time that I think hard work, her, I do it for her. (Tonito)

Tonito said he learned his first important lessons from his mother and that, even though she passed away, his desire to pursue his degree – to persevere – comes from her.

So, my mom was my best friend. So, she was always next to me. Whatever I decide to do, she was always next to me. All the time. So she'd say, "Never let that your emotions would control your attitudes." So whatever is, whatever happens, whatever happens for you, you know, never try to respond to the world, you know, the way you was treated. Just learn from that. So, I'm learning. You know, I'm still learning. The learning process is from the day you're born until your last day on earth. (Tonito)

A Better Life for My Children

Alberto works a full-time job (forty hours a week at least) and sometimes works part time on the weekends. He is taking classes in the late afternoons and evenings. It’s a challenge to juggle everything – especially with children. But the children are part of his motivation to continue in school and earn his degree.

I think (education is) going be a big part of my future just because, (sighs) I want to be able to offer something better to my kids and that’s one of the main reasons… that’s one of the things that keep me going at school. Sometimes when I am tired or when I feel like I just want to let it go, I just think about it and that’s what keeps me going. I think education is not only going to be a big part of my future but their future also.

My wife supports me. I wouldn’t be able to do this without her. She is a real, real big help, especially because of the kids. She understands me and it’s working out pretty good.

They are a big part of this. You know, it's… I get back home and by the time I get back home they've already had dinner, so we'll all sit down at the table and all of us start doing homework, even the little… even though the little one is not in school yet, you know, I'll print papers from the internet or whatever, you know, and I try… As a matter of fact, my seven-year-old daughter can do, like, equations, like first degree equations and all that. I've been trying to teach her stuff like that. The five-year-old knows how to read and… and learning how to write now. (Alberto)
Alberto seems reluctant to say it, but in addition to the support he gets from his wife, and the desire to provide a better life for his children, he also has a deep, internal motivation that keeps him working toward his degree.

It's just the… the support that I get from my wife. It's… it's what's helping a lot, too. You know, it's something that I have to… we know that it's not going to be going on, you know, for a long time, you know, just until I am able to… to get a degree and…And be able to earn more money and…

Question: Is that the main motivation you think?

Alberto: (Sighs) I probably would lie if I say that that would… that it is the main motivation. I think everyone does things be… for their own. I think the main motivation it would be… or one of the main motivations that I do it is just because I want… I wanted to get it done. I… I want it for me. And… and but of course, I mean, my kids are a bit part of… my family's a big part of that, too, so. I try to encourage my kids, you know. I want to do this for them, too, because I want to be an example to them. I want them to follow my steps, you know. I don't want them to uh, work two jobs, you know, like I do in order to go to school.

(Alberto)

Family: Motivation and Support

The students place a high value on education because of the opportunities they believe it will provide for their families. Their dreams of a better future are deeply rooted in the strong relationships they have with their families – particularly their mothers or grandmothers. Despite her dreams of a six-figure income, Jessica is quick to say that her family matters more to her than degrees or a big salary.

In the Hispanic community it's about your… like your family and like enjoying your life and like… I'm not saying like be a Bohemian but I'm saying, you know, not be so obsessed with what I can get and what I have and you know, what other people think of me, you know? (Jessica)

Jessica’s grandmother is her inspiration. Despite the lack of stability in her life, she feels rooted in her heritage and strong connections with her family.

I told you about my grandma was like my biggest friend. She died actually… December 2007 and it was painful… Because that, even though that was my blood, that was my… my heri… my ancestry and for me, losing that was worse than any lay-off… any, you know, foreclosure…Any… anything, you know. You know, all of that is material, you know. That isn't, you know, when you leave this life nothing's going to matter except for your family. (Jessica)
**Education as a Foreigner, English as a Foreign Language**

I was on my own two days. I don't have any family. I don't have any relatives. And that was the hardest day – my hardest day in U.S. – when I went to Miami airport and nobody was waiting for me. And I didn't know how to do. (Tonito)

There is a lot of trust. Yes, a lot of trust. And I think that all my teachers and students, you know, in my classroom are really surprised by that. Because I am like, “If you got a 60 on your test you could tell your mom, you know, that you got an A.” But it’s very important to let your parents know – even if it’s bad – to give them that right for them to be your parents and tell them absolutely everything. You’re going to feel better as a person and they’re going to trust you more. (Aurelia)

The students are navigating an unfamiliar education system, often in a foreign language. Their educational experiences are made even more challenging because of the need to learn a new language. As they experience education in another language, they are actively engaged in the production of their own cultural identities. Navigating the process of immigration and acculturation is a unique experience for immigrant students. While many Latino students are not recent immigrants to this country (for example, at least one of Jessica’s grandparents was born in the United States and Elena was born here), for many Latino students the educational experience includes the additional challenge of acculturation and, frequently, language acquisition. For Aurelia, Tonito and Alberto, their educational experiences were framed with the problems inherent in learning a new language. Additionally, these students shared experiences of acculturation and adjustment to a new cultural environment, all factors that incur stress.

Caplan (2007) outlines three categories of stressors related to immigration and acculturation: instrumental/environmental, social/interpersonal, and societal. Instrumental/environmental stressors include: “financial, language barriers, lack of access to health care, unsafe neighborhoods, unemployment, lack of education.” Social/interpersonal stressors include: “loss of social networks, loss of social status, family conflict, intergenerational conflicts, changing gender roles.” Societal stressors include: “discrimination, stigma, legal status, political/historical forces” (Caplan, 2007, p. 96). Arbona et al. (2010) found that “separation from family, lack of English proficiency, and endorsing traditional values all contributed unique variance to higher levels of extrafamilial stress” (p. 377). All these stressors are evident in the students’ narratives. Their immigration experiences – whether experienced as a child or adult – were
meaningful and important experiences in their lives; they vividly described the ongoing process of adjusting to a new country, language, and culture.

**Immigration Experiences**

Immigration experiences are as unique as the students themselves – an element of the students’ educational pathways that cannot be adequately captured in statistical data. In fact, Arbona et al. (2010) found only two studies that explored anything related to psychological wellbeing among Latinos. An understanding of this critical element in the personal narratives of immigrant Latino students is essential to deepening our understanding of Latino students and their educational pathways. While many Latino immigrants have legal immigration documentation and/or achieve citizenship, approximately 19% of the 47 million Latinos in the United States do not have legal documentation (Pew Hispanic Center, 2009). “Researchers have proposed that the difficulties associated with undocumented status may intensify immigration-related challenges such as language difficulties, cultural differences, and acculturative stress among undocumented immigrants” (Arbona et al., 2010).

As I designed this study, I chose not to ask the participants direct questions regarding their immigration status, in order to protect the students from having to discuss anything related to legal documentation. Researchers working with Latino students often choose not to discuss immigration status with their participants in order to establish trust (Arbona et al., 2010). I found, however, that the students readily discussed the process through which they or their families came to the United States. Some of them specified whether they came illegally or legally; others simply said they came here.

Alberto came to the United States after quitting high school in Mexico. He earned his GED in the U.S. before enrolling in community college. Tonito came to the United States from Cuba when his ex-girlfriend won the immigration lottery. Columbian immigrated with his family when he was in high school. When Aurelia moved here with her parents as a child, they were initially undocumented, but have since become permanent residents. Elena and Jessica were both born in the United States. Despite the common experience of transitioning from one country and culture to another, their narratives reflect the diversity of immigration experiences.
Alberto grew up in a family where education was valued by his parents. His father reinforced getting good grades and doing well. But his immigration story originates within a family fraught with problems.

I was only able to study until the third semester of high school because of family problems. It would be a long story. Besides a teacher, he had, he has a problem with alcohol and that kind of created problems with me growing up and not being on the same page, I would say, with him and created problems. I couldn’t attend school any more. I had to quit. (Alberto)

For Alberto, escaping this difficult family environment ultimately meant leaving his country as well. He left Mexico and moved to the United States, hoping for better opportunities.

I lived on the streets for like a year before I could come over to America. Came to America. Learned English by watching TV with the closed captioned on it. I learned how to read and write it. You can ask me about any kind of movie and I can tell you. … All I cared about was the English. (Alberto)

Alberto originally lived in Virginia, where he met his wife before moving to the Ohio Valley, where he later earned his GED before beginning college. Unlike Tonito and Aurelia, who provided vivid, emotion-filled accounts of their immigration experiences, Alberto spoke only briefly about his move to the United States, instead exercising his power as a narrator to choose the stories that he would share. He said, “It would be a long story,” but ultimately it was a story he chose not to share. The stressors he described included instrumental stressors (financial, language barriers, unemployment, and lack of education), as well as the social stressors of losing family networks (Caplan, 2007).

For Tonito, immigrating to the United States was literally like winning the lottery. Each year, the United States offers potential immigrants the opportunity to submit their names to an immigration lottery, the Diversity Visa Lottery Program, which awards visas to 50,000 people annually from countries that have low immigration rates to the United States. (For more details see www.travel.state.gov/visa/immigrants/types/types_1322.html.) Tonito’s ex-girlfriend won. They got married so that he could take advantage of the immigration lottery, too. Tonito believes he was fortunate to win the opportunity to immigrate when so many do not have that option.

Well, for me it was not difficult. But it's really difficult to get here. Ah, the, we call it the “raffle.” There's a raffle for visas every year. So, the woman I was with
in Cuba – she won that. I didn't. So, we got married and she brought me here. (Tonito)

Although Tonito’s experience is not unique (there are 50,000 “winners” chosen annually), odds of winning the immigration lottery are very low. In the 2011 Diversity Lottery program, for example, there were over 12.1 million qualified applicants. I said to Tonito – “It's amazing to win that raffle! It never happens.” Tonito’s response:

Well, almost never happens! So she did, and we came together in 2006. She lives in Miami. You know, I live here without any communication. We broke up before … We broke up before she got it, so even though you know, we were already, you know we finished the relation, you know she brought me. So, I came 2006 because of that raffle business…. There is 11 million Cuban people by now. 5 million apply for it. So it's really difficult to get in your number choosed between 5 million people. (Tonito)

Tonito’s immigration experience has included many of the instrumental stressors described by Caplan (2007), including financial and language barriers, unemployment, and loss of social networks. When he arrived in the United States, Tonito spoke only a little English. He was alone and knew no one in the country. He carried with him some books, the clothes he wore, and a copy of his bachelor’s degree.

And I came with my books, my title, and the clothes I was wearing. I didn't have any clothes, just the shoes I was wearing. Nothing else. … I had a bag with my books and my title. My degree. Yeah, we call it a title. Here it's a degree. You know, it's like a paper that shows you. So, that is everything I brought from Cuba. I didn’t have no money in my pockets. No I did have twenty bucks. I had twenty bucks. Yeah, just 20 dollars. Everything I had… nothing to wear, no money. (Tonito)

Tonito immediately connected with other Cuban immigrants who were also trying to find their way around the airport – and find a place to live. Despite what he described as very limited English skills, he still spoke more English than they did.

So, I was there, U.S. … So, I was the only one who speak a little. So, I had, like, five more families behind me. Wherever I went, they were behind me. So, it was kind of, they didn't know what to speak about, so they were just helping me and I didn't have anybody waiting for me so I didn't have any help. So I had to give it to them. (Tonito)

After wandering through the airport for almost two hours, Tonito and the other immigrants found someone who called World Church Service.

So, they came here, say, “Who has a relative?” All the other people had a relative in another state. He called each relative and they sent the money to buy the
tickets. So, I was the only one who stayed there. ... I didn’t have nobody else to call. I had nowhere to go. (Tonito)

Like many immigrants, Tonito experienced the loss of a strong family support system. “Social networks and familism serve as a buffer to moderate acculturative stress and are viewed as a major stressor in its absence” (Caplan, 2007, p. 102). With no family or particular destination, the representative from World Church Service took Tonito to a big warehouse where they helped him with paperwork and provided him with some clothing. He was tired and hungry.

They brought me to that place. They have a big warehouse. Um, so, they took the papers, we walked around until like one in the morning. I was really hungry because my body was supposed to be – it was in the day, but I couldn’t eat in the morning because I had to fly. So it was one in the morning, we were doing the papers, no food, I was starving and, you know, they brought me to a small plaza they gave me, you know, one jeans, one shirt, a big coat. I didn’t know why I needed – a really big coat, a pair of tennis shoes, um, so and in the way up to the airport we stopped in a Cuban restaurant and he say, okay, what you want to eat? So, I tell him, I don’t know, whatever you want. I was so starving that you know, everything looks perfect for me, so. He bought Cuban sandwich, really big Cuban sandwich and you know, I stayed in a hotel that night.

Tonito did not have a plan and did not know where he would end up. The representatives at World Church Service gave him some options. Because he knew one of his friends had previously moved to the Ohio Valley, he chose this area.

After two days, they sent me over here. They say, where do you want to go? We have Texas. We have Syracuse, you know, we have, you know, offices in different states. So, I had a friend who moved here a long time ago, so, I knew just a little about [this city) so okay, I know one person there. So, they sent me there. (Tonito)

Aurelia’s family was initially undocumented when she came with her parents to the United States as a child. Her narrative includes many of the instrumental, social, and societal stressors discussed by Caplan (2007). Unlike the others, one of the main strands in Aurelia’s narrative was acculturating to different roles. Additionally, she described financial and language barriers (instrumental stressors), loss of social networks, intergenerational conflicts (social stressors) and societal stressors related to discrimination and legal status. Her family was fearful of being identified as “illegal.” “My family we were actually illegal in this country... we just got our residency three
years ago. But we had our work permit a year before our residency. And we were so – it made us be so responsible” (Aurelia).

Aurelia’s parents were cautious, doing everything they could to stay out of the spotlight. They were careful with their finances, driving, and anything else that might get them noticed. While she did not say this explicitly, this appeared to be based on a fear of deportation. Arbona et al. (2010) found that this fear of deportation is common, both among documented and undocumented immigrants. “Although undocumented immigrants reported higher levels of the immigration challenges of separation from family, traditionality, and language difficulties than documented immigrants, both groups reported similar levels of fear of deportation” (Arbona et al., 2010, pp. 362-363). Their study found that “fear of deportation contributes the most to acculturative stress among Latino immigrants. This fear is associated to increased acculturative stress in both the extrafamilial and intrafamilial context above and beyond the stress associated with immigration-related challenges such as separation from family, traditionality, and language difficulties” (Arbona et al., 2010, p. 379).

My mom had never gotten a ticket because she was so cautious. She didn’t want to do anything wrong because she, we were here. We were learning and everything was straight, everything we got was in cash, everything. And then when we got our residency we could start taking out loans and everything, and it’s so amazing. My mom, her social security number just started three years ago and she has perfect credit and her interest rates are so low because of how good her credit is and you just are amazed because people in this country that have all their years to start this credit and be responsible about it have very bad credit. And my mom has had hers for three years and its perfect, she has never missed a bill, she’s so informed on interest rates and a bill and six months no interest but she knows that after those six months interest is going to go so high and she’s so informed and she is a smart women I just can’t believe how responsible she is and now we have so much so if we had to go through that five years ago and get this I would so do it again. It’s awesome. (Aurelia)

The immigration experiences of these students are diverse. They came to the United States on disparate pathways, yet these paths have ultimately led each of them to the community college. Alberto came to the United States as a young adult without a high school education. Tonito came with his bachelor’s degree in hand. Aurelia came with her parents and is the first generation in her family to attend college. Their immigration experiences, virtually unnoticed and invisible in the quantitative research studies, cannot
easily be measured, yet it informs their narratives, their educational experiences and thus, their lives.

**English as a Foreign Language**

Perhaps one of the most noticeable and visible elements of the immigration experience is the process of acquiring a second (or in many cases third or fourth) language. The experience of learning a new language – whether a student in elementary school (as Aurelia was) or a college-educated adult (in Tonito’s case) – often remains unacknowledged in the literature. For example, statistical studies which focus generally on measurable demographic factors such as ethnicity, gender, and SES, ignore the often substantial challenge of learning a new language.

The students in this study shared a common experience: learning and studying in a foreign language was a significant challenge. “Language is one of them [the challenges], just because that’s not my primary language and I still don’t understand everything” (Alberto).

Columbian, who seemed to struggle with communicating throughout the interview (both understanding and speaking), said that the language was the biggest challenge to his success in college.

> English is definitely like my biggest [challenge], you know. ‘Cause there are many words, you know, history, geographical, you know any… any kind a subject that I'm like… and… and they won't say it like it's nothing and I'm okay oh, okay, I just said yeah and like… and then it's just like when I come back and read it through I'm like I have no idea what this is. I've got no kind of worries about it exactly. …. Yeah, there's… there's a lot of… yeah, there's a lot of words I'm like oh, I don't know. But somehow I make them connect… (Columbian)

Aurelia came to the United States with her family when she was in second grade. It was an easy transition in terms of language because most of her education was in Spanish. But it wasn’t what she needed to prepare her for continuing her education in English.

> So, second grade I was in San Antonio, Texas which was fairly easy because they had Spanish teachers. Everything was taught in Spanish and my mom put me in this program called “ESL” and basically I had all my classes in Spanish and then I had a certain class… 30 minute class … of English. So, basically I didn’t learn any English whatsoever when I was in elementary school. (Aurelia)
When she moved to the Ohio Valley from Texas, Spanish was not nearly as prevalent. Aurelia attended a private Catholic school, with excellent teachers, but she was immersed in an education system where nobody spoke her language.

The difficult part was when I came (here) and I was going into fifth grade and I came here and no one spoke Spanish. Absolutely no one. Classes were everything in English. I had a Spanish class but it was totally different than how it was in San Antonio. It was horrible. I mean, it was so frustrating. (Aurelia)

The students embraced the challenge – and indeed it was a challenge – of learning English, often making personal choices that would allow them to immerse themselves in the English language and American culture. It was the immersion that ultimately resulted in increased comfort with speaking and understanding English. In particular, they listened to English radio and watched television in English.

I don't have like Hispanic TV or Hispanic Radio. I watch TV and radio in English. So, my first six months here, that helped me out a lot, especially with listening, that helped me out a lot. So that was the best way for me. I learned a lot from TV or films or radio … I live by myself so I decided not to get Hispanic TV. Most of the Hispanic people don't learn because they have Hispanic TV … You know, I always try to, you know, like internet, I never choose the Spanish, so I always choose English. (Tonito)

For Aurelia, being in an area where there were few Hispanic people meant she had to learn English quickly in order to communicate at all. As with many immigrants, Aurelia found that immersion was perhaps one of the most effective ways of learning another language.

I have to admit it did help me because being in an environment where you don’t get any Spanish whatsoever. I mean, there was no radio in Spanish. In 1999, I think we got it. There was no Spanish in radios here. I mean, nothing. Nothing in Spanish. There’s a very small community of Hispanic people which we frankly did not know. So, everything was in English – everything! You know, people – American people – just talk to us in English and everything so, it was really, really hard time, but it helped me because I learned English fairly fast I think and so, it was okay. (Aurelia)

Even without the challenges of living in and adjusting to a new culture, studying in a second language can pose a serious challenge. Aurelia struggled in school when she moved from Texas, where Spanish was pervasive, to the Ohio Valley. She was reluctant to say it, but admitted she did not get very good grades, which made this a difficult period for her. After being an honors student in San Antonio, she now had to work to get C’s. Despite great teachers, the challenge of schooling in a foreign language was significant,
and the subsequent academic struggle can have a negative impact on academic self-efficacy.

At the end of the school year (in San Antonio) we used to get recognized and I would come home with like certificates of you know, A student, very good at math or you know things like that. And I came here and I was C’s and a lot of conferences with the teachers and my parents and the teachers telling my parents, “Your daughter’s doing really bad in school you know. You need to help her out a little bit.” So, I did have tutors. (Aurelia)

Tonito, who came to the United States with a bachelor’s degree in marine biology, spoke Spanish and French, but had limited English skills. Despite previous academic success (and continued good grades) he still wonders about his language skills, and feels the need to continually improve his pronunciation.

It [the language] makes it almost two times more challenging. I don't have any problem listening, writing, or reading, but sometimes my pronunciation, you know, is … That is the hardest part for me – just pronunciation. That’s the worst side of the English language for me. But, I don't have any other problem with like listening, writing, reading, or when you have to read a book and say what from the book. I don't have any problems with that. But you know, personally I feel like, you know, I need to improve fifty percent more. It takes time. I know, I know with the time you, you know, you go getting better and better. But, it takes time. It's just a matter of time. (Tonito)

Aurelia continued to study hard, despite the academic struggles earned B’s and C’s in her sophomore year – still not quite up to her own standards for herself.

I had really good teachers I think. I think that’s what really helped me, the teachers. Instead of like looking at you know you didn’t speak any English and just like being rude to you, they were actually very nice. They took their time, they spoke slowly, they tried to actually make you understand what they were trying to say, which was actually very awesome. I mean, I never thought that there would be very nice and understanding teachers. You know, it really helped a lot. (Aurelia)

Aurelia persisted and by the time she graduated she had earned a grade point average of 2.9, which was still a disappointment to herself. In college, she has done even better, earning a 3.4 at UCC.

Like many immigrants who are successfully learning both a new language and a new culture, Aurelia’s accomplishments in learning a second language went unrecognized. The girls in her school earned awards for their accomplishments in Spanish class. However, Aurelia, who was studying completely in a language foreign to her, did not get the same recognition.
And you know, I would complain about that because in high school the girls that were in Spanish class would get honors for you know acquiring the Spanish language … at a high school level and I would think to myself, “Well, where’s my, you know, diploma for... because I had to do everything in English and I still know my native language.” They got the grammar part. They got maybe how to speak simple conversations and I had to start learning advanced words because all in high school the only thing was like, “What are you going to do for college,” you know. In college you’re going to have to study chemistry. So, I would know words in the chemistry class that Spanish students taking Spanish would not know in Spanish. So, it was a little unfair but like I said I am not complaining. I mean, that was our option of coming to the United States and that’s part of wanting to come here but it is hard. (Aurelia)

In particular, the students shared experiences of struggling with spoken English. They had some early exposure to English in books and have thus developed at least a foundational comfort level with reading in English. Although they all spoke English well, and I found them easy to understand, they expressed some anxiety regarding their conversational skills.

Some other students have told me that the conversational stuff is easy for them but when they get into some of the more technical terms, the learning new terms in their classes that’s when it becomes a bit more of a challenge … For some reason, I remember when I was little I used to read books in… in English just… like, math books and from like physics and stuff like that and… and I guess I learned a lot of those terms in English and in Spanish without me knowing and it made it kinda easier for me. So uh, to me it's easier to listen to the new terms and… and understand them than having a conversation (chuckles)... (Alberto)

The students struggle as well with written communication – facing the challenge of communicating their thoughts in a foreign language and finding vocabulary to express thoughts and information in English.

I am a better writer than I am speaking. And usually when I write a paper, let's say it's a 10 page paper, I have to start working on it like a couple of weeks before so that I can work on it a little bit at a time and learn more words and rephrase things and… to make it sound better, so… and it's not like… uh, I actually know people that can write a paper in, you know, two hours, whatever, you know (chuckles). I wish I could do that but I haven't got to that point yet. (Alberto)

For Aurelia, sometimes it is simply impossible to find a word in English that represents the thought or concept she is trying to express – even when she knows there is a perfect Spanish word that captures the concept.

There's certain words that you just… you have that research paper in Spanish and it sounds so good but there's that word that you cannot come up with and it's in English and you just have to make up for it. (Aurelia)
Language learning goes both ways. Once the students learn new or technical words in English, they may not know the Spanish equivalent. Aurelia’s work experience has helped her in this process. She works in a dental office where the dentist speaks Spanish – which has been great for her. Otherwise, she probably wouldn’t know the words for dental procedures or instruments in her native language. “Root canals is (speaking Spanish) *atravente conducta.* Where if I would have just gone to a regular dentist uh, I wouldn’t have known what that is” (Aurelia).

For these students, the diverse population of the community college provides a safe place in which to learn a foreign language. On a regular basis, they encounter others who also speak English with a foreign accent. This has been a liberating experience for Aurelia, who says she feels more comfortable in this environment speaking English.

You feel more secure about yourself and you feel that you can talk to anybody. A lot of people have accents and I remember I hated speaking in high school and in middle school because I felt that I had this strong accent and no one was going to understand me… so I tried not to speak then and I would always try not to open my mouth and just close and listen. But here it’s like you find people speaking English even though they have an accent and you’re like, “Well, why can’t I speak? I speak it really good.” It brings more security to yourself. There’s a lot to relate. For one, we all speak another language other than English. We all speak our native language and sometimes we even speak more. You know, you start hanging out with them and their culture and you start picking up on their language. So now you’re tri-lingual and you’re more diverse which I think it’s wonderful. Everyone should be more diverse. You know, there’s so much to learn and you just have fun. I’ve learned so much. I think our friends, my friends, just make college seem less stressful. (Aurelia)

**Acculturation: Proud of their Hispanic identity**

The students were proud of their Hispanic identity. The students described their own actions and attitudes – as well as those of their family and culture – as being superior to mainstream American culture (particularly white culture). They identify as Latinos – but not just as Latinos, but as Latinos living in the United States, and thus compared their experiences, thoughts, beliefs, and values to those of “Americans.” This included study habits, view of money, sense of responsibility, commitment to family, and work ethic. They articulated differences between themselves and mainstream American students, often revealing a sense of pride for their values and actions.

Well, I think that everybody knows we are Latino because we are friendlier. We are really friendly people. We talk in class. We show more respect, I can say that,
for the professors. The way education is in Cuba is not the same here. So, you have to show respect for your professors. It's not like here that – I don't know, I don't know how to explain that but most of the time students, American students, don't show respect for the person who is in the classroom. We grow up in a way that we show respect for our professors. We also show that we are hard learners. You can see a student, they don't know how to speak very well, and they are in the same class and they always pass their classes. You see also American student – they speak the same language and they don't pass the class. Yesterday it was funny because I was in one of my classes, four of my classmates, four of the classmates who sit nearby me – that was in my American government, so they're supposed to know about their government – they got on the third test, they got less than 40 points – all of them! And I got an 88 and I didn't even study for the test. And they said, "How do you do it?" I say, "I just remember what is the professor teaching." Because I didn't – honestly, I didn't even study for the test and I got an 88 and all of them failed that test – I mean an easy test about the government. And sometimes you show that – It's not that you show that you're a better student, it's to show that you work harder than they. You work harder in order to get wherever you want to go. (Tonito)

Columbian sounded proud of being Latino, echoing Tonito’s thoughts about Latinos being friendly, participating in class, and working hard.

We're, I mean we're ethical, yes? Latinos are, I guess, we, we participate in classroom a lot. I see that … I see in most… I say in classrooms, you know, people they participate. I'm pretty sure they're… they're all mostly Christians, so… you know, they're… they're real, you know, they're not… they're good behavioural. Well, not all of them. Most of them are… But uh, they're real friendly people. You know, they all… and they talk to all their classmates, no problem. I'm not sure. I guess they just don't… you know, they're not like racist or nothing, or say racist or… (Columbian)

For these students, the process of acculturation to the United States extends past the day-to-day live to the classroom. After earning his GED, Alberto entered the community college with a mixture of excitement and nervousness.

At the beginning, the first semester, I had a feeling of excitement, but also I was nervous at the same time, just because it was a totally new world for me. I had never attended school in America and it was totally different from what I was used to. After the first semester I started feeling more comfortable, you know, with school and interacting with other students and all that and it’s been working out great ever since. (Alberto)

Navigating through a new culture, the students make conscious and subconscious decisions about what they will integrate into their own lives, and what aspects of their own culture they hope to maintain. This becomes, then, a process of acculturation, navigating areas of separation with integration (Caplan, 2007).
I just wrote a paper about this. It talks about culture… And on my paper it says that when we as foreigners or as persons from other countries come to (in this case America), we should all try to learn the culture so that we can fit in and… you know, with the rest of the people and… and basically that’s what I try to do. You know, I try to follow the rules just like everybody else would. (Alberto)

Aurelia anticipates going through the process to become a United States citizen. She knows that she will be held to a higher standard than native born Americans, who may or may not be able to pass the citizenship test she will be required to take.

I think I have gone through so much that there is a lot of things that people living here don’t know, like whenever you become a citizen, they don’t know what it takes to become a citizen. They don’t know that you have to learn even more that they know. When you’re born here you’re automatically a citizen and they don’t have to take the test. And the weird thing is that you can go out on the street and ask a question that’s in the citizenship test and they won’t know the answer to it. And someone from another country knows more stuff about this country than the people living here. Because we have to know how many states, how many stars in the flag … branches of government, and it’s really, I don’t know, it’s just they don’t know that. And I am not blaming them. It’s not their fault, but still they don’t understand how much we have to go through. Or the typical question I got, “Are you an illegal immigrant?” Or “Do you have your green card?” They don’t know all the procedure. They don’t know that first you have to have work permit and then you have to apply for you residency. Which is kind of like a green card but then you have to wait five years to become a citizen and you can only take it, three years, if you don’t pass it the first test you have to wait three years and retake it again … A thousand dollars for the test, so you know, it is very, it’s a lot more stuff that we have to do … And finger prints and it’s so expensive. (Aurelia)

Students as Cultural Interpreters/Brokers

Many students develop their English language skills more quickly than their parents, which leads to both students and parents playing nontraditional roles, as students are often called to serve as interpreters of both the English language and American culture. In many ways, Hispanic students whose parents are immigrants serve as advocates and gatekeepers of their own education. Because of their parents’ lack of cultural capital, as well as limited English skills, these students are less likely to be pushed by their parents to participate in programs or gather information. Instead, they are more likely to pull their parents into the educational process. In a qualitative interview study of Latino college students, Auerbach (2006) found that Latino students “are accustomed to managing their own school decisions, just as they were accustomed to
serving as cultural brokers for immigrant parents – both roles that confer serious responsibility” (p. 285).

Immigrant Latino parents, many of whom have limited English language skills, may feel less comfortable than English-speaking parents at college functions, where English is the predominant or only language used. Auerbach (2006) found that Latino parents who accompanied their children to college fairs were less likely to talk with college representatives (even when Spanish was available) than white, Asian, and African American parents, who actively advocated for their children. Auerbach (2006) calls on educators to reach out to parents of Latino students, involving them in the process by expressing appreciation for their moral support, providing opportunities for parents to connect with other parents, and to inform and engage parents in the educational process.

Like many children of immigrants, Aurelia’s English language skills are much more developed than her parents, who often call on her to translate for them.

My mom speaks fairly good English. She is a little slow in English and I mean, she does understand more than she speaks and my dad does not at all whatsoever, um it was really hard. The good thing is that my mom’s employer helped us out a lot. She was the one that was paying for my school. She was the one that you know had us tutored and everything so, that was very helpful. (Aurelia)

Aurelia, who wants guidance from her parents in understanding college terms and processes, often find herself explaining things to them. Combined with the language barrier, the challenge of being a first generation student is even larger.

I sometimes find my mom asking me, “Okay so, you know what are the semesters? I don’t understand.” And I have to explain to her you know so she kind of understands a little bit of what I am doing. It’s really weird because me as the daughter has to explain to the mother you know how to do things. (Aurelia)

But Aurelia knows that, despite the power that comes with her knowledge of English, she is still her parents’ daughter, so she is honest with her parents, even when she could take advantage of their lack of English language skills.

And I mean, it was weird because I would tell them I would get a 60 and I would get grounded and all of my friends would be like, “Why did you tell them? You know, you could have just said you got an A.” It’s like, “No” because they have the right to be parents. They are the parents, you know, and they deserve that trust. I just wanted to give it to them. … They’re parents. They’re my parents and they have always done things for me so, it would be so rude of me to not trust them enough as my parents so… (Aurelia)
Aurelia’s parents were not really equipped to help her in any practical sense; they supported her success in education and wanted to help her with school work, but they simply did not have the language skills needed. At parent-teacher conferences, a Spanish teacher was called in to translate.

My mom helped a lot in the study in San Antonio and Mexico because she knew the language. She would spend time with me. She would sit down and have like an hour you know, “We have to do your homework.” And she would be there but since it was her language, you know, she would help me out a lot. And I would bring home literally 100’s. Nothing in a test that was wrong. Straight A’s. And then when we came here it was like… I don’t blame her. It was not her fault. She did not have that opportunity to, you know, sit down and help me out and she did – she tried to – but it was not the same and that was kind of difficult because in school a lot of girls were like, “Well, my mom will help me out.” I did not have that. I had to do it myself or I would have my brother to help me out but he was in the same dilemma and he was older so, of course it was even more harder for him to start, you know, the English language. It went okay. I wouldn’t say it was horrible. (Aurelia)

**Immigration Documentation**

While the impact of documentation on transfer perceptions remains virtually unexplored in the transfer literature, factors regarding legal documentation may play a significant factor in student decisions about transfer. Many Hispanic students do not have legal documentation and are therefore ineligible for most types of governmental and institutional financial aid, which has been consistently linked to persistence (Nora, 1993). Even for legal immigrants, access to financial aid may be limited; many financial aid programs are now linked to high school academic success, which is unavailable to college students who have graduated from high school in another country, and/or those who take a long break between high school and college.

Most of the Latinos here, they are high school graduates, so they have the [state scholarship for high school students], they have their parents, and so, just, I don't know, one or two of them they are like you know, grown people, like other people, that they are paying by themselves, or they have a job like in a hospital [unintelligible] where they get financial aid to pay for the classes. But most of them are high school graduates, you know, that they don't have those factors that, you know, go against them. (Tonito)

Students who have been in the United States longer and/or have integrated more fully into American culture are more likely to believe they will have the financial means to attend college. In a recent study by Hurtado-Ortiz and Gauvain (2007), the authors
found a positive relation between acculturation and student perceptions of college affordability. While some of this may be explained by an increased awareness of financial aid programs, scholarships, federal loans, etc., they also posit that there may be a link with immigration status. “It may also be true that less acculturated adolescents, if they are not legal U.S. residents, understand that college affordability is a major issue because their postsecondary education options are limited and they are ineligible for most types of financial assistance” (Hurtado-Ortiz & Gauvain, 2007, p. 189).

**Acculturative Stress Impacts Educational Choices**

The immigration experience and process of adjusting to life in a new culture produces high levels of acculturative stress among these participants. “The dimensions of acculturative stress are interrelated and dependent on the unique experiences of the individual; however, there are also many common threads for most Latino immigrants” (Caplan, 2007, p. 104). In addition to the challenges of education, these students experience financial challenges, language barriers, lack of educational preparation, loss of social networks, intergenerational conflicts, changing gender roles, discrimination, and legal status issues (Caplan, 2007, p. 96). These stressors, although overlooked by the quantitative studies to date, have an undeniable impact on student decisions related to educational participation and persistence. Future research focused on the interplay between acculturation, immigration experience and educational persistence is critical to deepening our understanding in this area.

**Latina/American Woman:**

**Navigating Latina/o Gender Roles in American Culture**

Culture is definitely one thing that I’m really trying to fight, because in Mexico of course, a girl is supposed to, you know, start marrying at least at 21, 22 and… That’s early and of course, they’re not thinking of her education. They just want her to be a mother, the housewife… (Aurelia)

The students are navigating cultural and gender roles in the context of American cultural norms. This can include a meaningful struggle with culturally-based gender role expectations. Being Latina in an American community college means navigating two cultures, two sets of expectations, and some very specific ideas about how one should behave. What it means to be an “American woman” is often very different from
expectations Latinas experience from their families and culture. One of the central themes in Aurelia’s narrative is the navigation of these contrasting cultures; she is aware of the cultural struggle and finds herself attempting to integrate values from both cultures. For Aurelia, strong Hispanic cultural values result in her being protected with tight rules and guidelines, in contrast to most of her female friends in college who experience much more independence. As they seek to maneuver through the educational system, many Hispanic students experience differences in social style, cultural backgrounds, and speech patterns, as well as negative assumptions about their racial or socioeconomic background (Cushman, 2007, p. 45). For many Latino students – who are not only first-generation students but also come from immigrant families – the social capital challenges are significant. “Latinos have different educational experiences from whites and other racial and ethnic groups. This is especially true for Latino immigrants” (Flores et al., 2006, p. 72).

**Latino/Latina: American Man, American Woman**

Like Aurelia, Hispanic students often feel like they are navigating two cultures and two sets of expectations that are at odds with each other – the Hispanic culture they experience at home, and the American culture they experience at school. The differences between those two experiences are strongest for those whose parents are immigrants.

Fiebig, Braide, Ross, Tom & Princzo (2010) found that “first generation, more so than second-generation students, are more tied to their culture of origin. The effects of being second-generation are less for women than men – especially for the oldest female in the family” (p. 857). They also found that Hispanic students who are the first in their family to go to college also have lower levels of acculturation (Fiebig et al., 2010, p. 858). In particular, for Hispanic women “the personal discomfort toward the dominate Anglo culture (values and beliefs) is an attitudinal component of acculturation and outweighs the behavioural aspects of acculturation in terms of influencing distress” (Castillo, Conoley & Brossart, 2004, as cited in Fiebig et al., 2010, p. 850). Multiple research studies indicate that Latinas experience greater levels of stress in educational settings than do Latinos (Quintana et al., 1991). They found that high stress was “associated with (a) low levels of acculturation, (b) biculturalism, (c) preference for marrying only within
the Latino culture, and (d) ethnic identity attitudes reflecting resistance to Anglo culture” (Quintana et al., 1991, p. 163).

Aurelia, who came to the United States with her parents when she was in elementary school, talked at length about her family experience and how it differs from those of her American friends from other cultural backgrounds. Growing up, her family was very close-knit. As recent immigrants, they did not know many people, and she spent most of her free time with her family, never developing any close relationships with those in her class at school.

I mostly did school, I have to admit. I had friends…I should say acquaintances, but I didn’t really go out that much outside of school. I didn’t have like best friends, just a couple but it wasn’t like I knew everyone in the class and oh my God, I wasn’t the party animal in class or something. Everyone knew me, no. I kind of did stay on the low. Went home and spent time with my family and basically that was it. I did not have a lot of friends per say. (Aurelia)

The tight connection Aurelia has with her family is common in Hispanic families – and particularly between female students and their parents. Research indicates this can also result in higher success rates. “For female Hispanic students, the more time spent with the family positively correlates with a higher GPA and lower levels of school-related stress” (Sy, 2006 as quoted in Fiebig et al., 2010, p. 850). In college, Aurelia lives at home with her parents, an arrangement she knows is very different from that of many of her college friends who are beginning to live independently. Living at home means she still follows her parents’ rules – but in her mind, it’s a practical arrangement; she doesn’t have to pay bills.

You know it’s so weird because I have a curfew. I have to be home by nine at night or ten sometimes, but no longer than that. And I’m 20 and all my other friends are like but, “You’re 20. You can go out. What can they do? You can move out.” And I’m like, “But I have to be smart about this,” you know? I cannot move out right now with just working as a dental assistant and you know paying for college. I have to pay for the water bill. I have to pay for electricity. I have to pay for cell phone. I have to pay for insurance. I have to pay the apartment, which is around 500 and my car loan and everything. How can I make a stupid decision just because my parents don’t let me go out later than ten, just decide to move out? I’m not going to do it. And what it’s going to end up doing… I am just going to have to return back to them. If they say by nine, I’m there by nine. Period. And that’s something like they always say, “Five minutes late is nothing.” And I’m like, “No,” because if I give them trust I will receive more and they will trust me even more you know and we will both win you know. It’s something. (Aurelia)
The trusting relationship she has with her parents is important to Aurelia – much more important than the independence her friends think is so important. She has a long-term goal in mind – her degree and financial success – and her narrative is one of acceptance. Staying close to her family, following her parents’ rules, and staying grounded in her faith, are values she speaks about with passion.

When you let them know that you can be trusted they will trust you even more and I am pretty sure there will be a day where I am allowed to go out until one you know. If I want to, you know, but for now I’m okay. I don’t have a need to go out and get drunk or… And I know that. I just... I would feel horrible to let them down. You know, that’s just me. And you know I always think, “What are the people my age doing at one?” You know? Just, I don’t know. They’re probably not studying, you know? They’re probably drinking alcohol or smoking and I already gone through that list and like, “Why do I need alcohol?” I just don’t need it you know. Why do I need to smoke? I just don’t need to smoke. There’s so many things in life that we don’t need but people make us believe that we need it, which is not true.

As a first-generation college student – and an immigrant herself – Aurelia showed a strong need for kinship with her family. “Students who are the first in their family to attend college have significant expected kinship scores” (Fiebig et al., 2010, p. 859) as well as lower acculturation levels. However, in their study of Hispanic college students, Fiebig et al. (2010) found that second generation women showed lower needs for kinship. “Males wanted more family support while these second-generation females were moving away from their need for family support” (Fiebig et al., 2010, p. 859).

**Education or Family: A Choice to be Made**

Aurelia is focused on her future – her education and providing for her family. She knows this focus is unique for someone her age. While her drive and focus was shared by other participants in this study (most notably Elena, Tonito, and Alberto), Aurelia was unique in the fact that she was pursuing her college degree immediately after high school. Her future focus provided the foundation for the discipline needed to make decisions today.

You always have to be smart about all the decisions you make and you know there’s always this… I go to church every Sunday so, there’s…our pastor always tells us, “The decisions of today affect our future.” So, even if it’s a little thing that you think not going to affect it will some way or another it will affect it so if you want to have a good future and especially for my kids. (Aurelia)
Like many Hispanic women in their late teens and early 20s, Aurelia really wants to have children, and although she expects to have them later than other Hispanic women, most of her American friends from other cultural backgrounds are not even thinking about starting families at this age.

It’s really weird… I’m always thinking about my kids and people are like, “But you’re 20 and we don’t think about children until we get into like 30’s.” And it’s like, well you know it’s weird but I am thinking of getting education for my kids because for who else should I do it? I’m going to do it for me, but the most important people I think are going to be my children and I’m going to give them the best that I can just like my parents gave me the best. You know, I don’t want them to… You know, I want them to be like me … have everything in life and tell them that it is possible to be everything and you know, show them a good example. If I go out and drink tonight what example am I going to give them when they’re my age? And I know I want to be like my mom. You know, she’s exactly kind of like the way I am. So, it’s not like I’m going to be a hypocrite and like, “Don’t do this” and then I did it you know? I just like to be straight, you know? (Aurelia)

Aurelia’s values are also grounded in her faith, including strong moral values which serve as a foundation for her family relationships.

I guess religion also helps. I’m a very…I’m a Christian so you know I know what’s right and what’s wrong. A foundation… I mean, I think were forgetting that. Religion actually does give you the values and morals to continue you know and to keep in mind. I said Christian I believe in God and I believe that you know he is with us every day and you know we just need to ask him you know, “What do you have planned for us today?” You know, “What do you want me to do? What is in for your glory?” You know, and everything like that and I think it’s very important. People don’t have that anymore and. (Aurelia)

While Aurelia is pursuing her own goal to earn a degree this aspiration is at odds with her cultural values which promote family over career, especially for women.

“Acculturate indirectly influences one’s educational goals and vocational expectations by influencing levels of family commitment” (Fiebig et al., 2010). Aurelia is focused on her dream of earning her degree and going to dental school. It’s a big dream for anyone in their early 20s – but Aurelia is also struggling with her identity in a culture that tells her she should be focusing on marriage and starting a family. She speaks about this struggle openly. Her strong ties with her family make it challenging – but at the same time, it’s that strong commitment to family that is fueling her dream. She wants to provide for her children – when she does have them, even though she hopes that is a few years down the road. So, while Aurelia has made peace with her parent’s conservative family values
(including an early curfew and rules against smoking and drinking), she feels some tension with the cultural forces pushing her towards early marriage.

Culture is definitely one thing that I'm really trying to fight, because in Mexico of course, a girl is supposed to, you know, start marrying at least at 21, 22 and… That’s early and of course, they're not thinking of her education. They just want her to be a mother, the housewife, and that’s the part that is having… getting me in trouble, because I know that I'm not going to be able to marry a male Hispanic uh, with no education--and not because I don't want to but because Hispanics feel that the male has to be the one bringing all that money into the household, so they… they don't want to date me anymore. I've actually had (chuckles) people not want to date me just because of that reason or they want me to stop school and get married, which I really don't feel like doing, so… That is a very big thing, and also like having children. I do want to have children but definitely in the future, my 30s, in my early 30s, and that’s not something that my culture allows and it's not very welcoming to those thoughts of waiting to have a family or raise a family. (Aurelia)

Aurelia’s experience in the United States has changed her. She now sees an alternative to marrying young and starting a family right away. But she knows many other Hispanics who still hold the strong values of marrying and having children at her age. Like many Latinas, she feels herself being pulled in multiple directions. French and Chavez (2010) found that this push to conform to both Latino culture and mainstream American culture can add to student stress. French and Chavez (2010) found that, when feeling little pressure to conform to ethnic group norms, being comfortable around other ethnic groups was protective of well-being. However, there was a clear disconnect for students facing a great deal of pressure to conform. These students were comfortable with other ethnic groups, yet they felt that they were being pulled in the other direction by their ethnic peers who pressured them to be ‘more Latino,’ including hanging out with or dating only other Latinos. This disconnect or conflict between their own desires and their ethnic peer group’s desires led to a sense of loss of control. In such a case, they would likely benefit from a stronger bicultural orientation to protect their well-being. Ideally, if they could still embrace other groups without rejecting their own, they may be more likely to feel a sense of control over their own lives. (French & Chavez, 2010, p. 425).

Aurelia’s perspective has changed. However, she knows this is a slow process for her as for others. Values and gender roles are deeply rooted in culture and they are slow to change, particularly when they are so strongly interwoven in family relationships.

They still have a lot of influences from their parents, grandparents, and even though they live here… I think it will take a long time for that to go away. I think, if they grew up like that then probably they're going to also put some of that same
culture into their kids and I don't... I don't really know when it's going to stop. (Aurelia)

Aurelia says she wants things to be different for her children; she wants them to have more freedom to make choices for their lives that are not so gender-based.

I feel that whenever I become a mother I'm going to let my child – whether it's a girl or a boy – decide what he wants to be, he wants to do with his or her life because it is her or his life, so... that's their option, their... I mean, what they're supposed to be. So that is one of the struggles. (Aurelia)

By pursuing her education instead of an early marriage, Aurelia is experimenting with a value from mainstream American culture, but not without a struggle. In particular, her mother, who thinks she should get married soon and raise children while she is still “young and healthy.” Her mother is also concerned that Aurelia might end up earning more than her husband, which would be incongruent with her cultural values.

I feel that in my culture I'm... I'm getting behind, getting at 20 and not getting married. That's just like, you know, not good but that's something I want and it doesn't matter what other people think. I have to just block my ears from any comments and just keep moving (chuckles). So, yes, the culture is definitely... and especially with uh, my mom, too. I mean, she... when I tell her it's like I don't want to get married until later. She's like “Well, you know, that's not healthy...” Blah, blah, blah, you know? “A girl's supposed to,” you know, “raise their kids and...” You know? “Are you going to support your husband” and all that stuff and it's like well, right now I'm not really thinking about that, you know. The time for marriage will come one day. (Aurelia)

Right now, the focus Aurelia has on her educational goals seems at odds with early marriage. She doesn’t appear to consider of the possibility of getting married while attending school and waiting to have children later. For Aurelia, it seems that marriage and children are a package deal; when she discusses marriage, it is always “marriage and family” or “marriage and kids.”

I would actually love to start a family at 27... But I know that can't be and it's... it's your dream. You know, I've always wanted to be a mom at a young age but I know that I either have to choose school or giving my kids a better life or just going with my dream of having them early, and I know that if I have them early I won't be able to finish my school and I won't be able to give them everything that they need, so I'm just... three more years. It's not a lot (chuckles)... But I really do... I mean, it's part of my culture. It's been engrained in me ever since I was little, so yes, there's a little temptation of starting a family early but I just stop and think that it's not what I want and I have to be strong, too. (Aurelia)
Aurelia has friends from many different cultures – and this exposure to diverse cultural traditions informs her perspective on marriage age; she knows that traditions can widely vary across cultures.

Because, you know, I do have, in the Turkish, I guess, culture girls are getting married at like age 15, 16 and that’s… and especially if they're Muslim. I must clarify that. If they're Muslim then that’s the age they get married and they get married to 24 year old guys, 26 year old guys, and it's like well, some of them are really lucky to where the husband makes them like go to school and, you know, still have an education but, you know, it… there's similarities and then there's differences. Of course in my culture you don't have to get married at fifteen but there are a lot of women in Mexico that get married at fifteen. I have an aunt who got married at fifteen. My mom got married at eighteen. So it's… everything eighteen or older. And I have a cousin who is my age and we were born the same month and she's getting married this October. So it's… I'm already out of the picture (chuckles). (Aurelia)

Aurelia perceives that she must make a choice: either earn her degree now and wait to get married, or get married now and never have a career. She continues to struggle with these two paths, which to her cannot be combined. She was engaged but did not get married. She attributes the end of that relationship to a difference in beliefs about gender roles. She doesn’t want to fill what she perceives to be the role of a Hispanic wife – a role that would have been imposed upon her by her then-fiancé. She can’t see herself in that role and broke off the relationship, resulting in censure from those she knows.

I was engaged to get married actually this October. But the situation didn't work out. Like I said, Hispanic men are used to a different way of thinking and even though you like them and you love them and you want to spend the rest of your life, you know that you have to choose between being that household wife bringing everything to the husband and you know, just being there for him, or do you want to live your life like you want to. And be happy with yourself. So I chose to be happy with myself, and I got criticized a lot for it but it's, like I said, it's my life and I don't think anyone should focus that much on me. (Aurelia)

When she does marry, she wants to find someone with a similar cultural background, but also someone who shares her values in waiting for a family. She wants to marry a Hispanic man, but knows she will need to be with someone who shares similar values as her and won’t be threatened by her income. She thinks it’ll be difficult to find a professional Latino man who shares her mix of Hispanic values and the gender role values she has adopted from mainstream American culture.

I know that a lot of people that came in my age – like eight – have just finished high school and start working at construction companies, roofing, even though
they know English, that’s just where they go. So it's really hard to find a Hispanic who's looking to become a professional and has those same ideas because even though they want to become professionals, sometimes they still have that idea. (Aurelia)

From Aurelia’s perspective, even those Hispanics who have become somewhat “Americanized” (to use Aurelia’s term) often maintain gender roles that place limitations on what role women should play in terms of work. She thinks she will continue to encounter Hispanic men who think it’s acceptable for them to pursue educational and career opportunities and expect women to fill the role of wife and mother, to the exclusion of a career. She expects they will say,

“Well, I want to become a professional but I don't want a… a wife as a professional. I want, I guess, a high school diploma, maybe two year of college wife who knows and is educated but is not… is not going to bring a threat to me as an income…” and things like that. Because in Mexico it's really important – income, you know? A guy has to be the… I guess it's because of the religion where the husband brings everything to the table. I guess that’s it but yeah, it is very…It brings their ego and their masculinity down when they are not the ones that basically bring the food to the table and I don't believe in that and a lot of people do and … Unfortunately that does interfere with my thoughts and my beliefs and what I want to do, so… (Aurelia)

**Latino/American Man**

Closely linked with the struggles of Latinas acculturating to American culture, Hispanic men are also faced with different gender roles. Some research has shown that men more quickly adopt the values of American culture. “Hispanic community college men will have higher acculturation scores than their female counterparts. This underlines, perhaps, a cultural trend where males in these collective societies are encouraged or rewarded for acculturating to the dominant Anglo culture; whereas attachment patterns for females focus on females remaining psychologically close to their family” (Fiebig et al., 2010, p. 858). Although Hispanic men may more quickly acculturate themselves, from Aurelia’s perspective, the Latino men she knows also maintain traditional Hispanic cultural expectations for women.

I know that a lot of Hispanic girls… In my culture, Hispanics aren't supposed to drink, girls especially. Not guys, but girls aren't supposed to drink. They're not supposed to smoke. You know, they're supposed to be very quiet, very… not outgoing with males. So I think I… I am a little bit like that. I do tend not to… I feel that I'm not… I… I don't think I could ever actually be so tight with
American friends because what they do is so much different from what I'm used to or how I'm supposed to behave in a certain way. (Aurelia)

The Next Generation

Aurelia fully expects that her children will be more acculturated than she is. She expects that when she does marry, she will marry a Hispanic American who has also acculturated to some extent.

I know that my kids are going to be more Americanized than I am just because I'm already semi-Americanized, so I'm guessing that if I marry someone that's also semi-Americanized my kids are going to be completely, you know, they're going do everything… if they have… if they're here ever since kindergarten then of course they're going pick up on all these customs… (Aurelia)

Aurelia has mixed feelings about this. When I asked her if this made her happy or sad, she responded:

A bit of both. Sometimes even though it is your culture, sometimes you realize that it's not always right, or it's not always the right thing. Like for example, the marriage thing. I don't think it's always a necessity for you to get married before 20. So I think if they decide to continue their education instead of getting married I would… I would be really happy instead of sad. But I mean, also I guess I would get a little sad just because there's a lot of liberty here and that’s... it's something that has to happen but it's just one of those things that you just wish they would do healthy-wise. I mean, they would know what's right and wrong, and give them their liberty. (Aurelia)

Aurelia is actively engaged in thinking about her ethnic identity and struggles with determining for herself what it means to be Latina American. In a recent study, French and Chavez (2010) found that “ethnic identity was positively associated with well-being” (pp. 424-425).

Aspirations for other Hispanics

In addition to the culturally-based gender roles, Latino students also experience other aspects of acculturation, including both hopes and concerns for other Hispanics in the United States. The students not only believe in education for themselves; they also believe it is the answer for other Hispanic immigrants. They expressed strong educational aspirations for other Hispanics.

I really dream… I… I really hope that more and more Hispanics know the importance of education. That’s just… oh, I know it's a crazy dream, I guess. But I really... I mean, whenever I hear people that are Hispanics and, you know, they… they're going to college I get really, really excited, just because I know like a lot of problems Mexico has and a lot of stereotypes that, you know, people
have on Hispanics and I just, you know, whenever I see someone doing good things I just get really, really excited. (Aurelia)

Tonito has met many other Hispanics who have immigrated to the United States, many of them professionals, who have been held back by limited English skills. He thinks education would open many doors for them.

I know people. I know doctors they came five years ago; they're still working in a factory. They are doctors. They are engineers. They are mechanics. They are, yeah. I know them. I know them... I talk to them. I tell them, “Look. Just try to learn English. It's everything you have to do. It will open doors.” Just learning English it’s a career here. You know a bilingual person -- got a lot of places today asking for bilingual people because they know the Hispanic population is growing. Spanish is the second language. Everybody needs to learn Spanish. So, that was my decision the day I got here. So, I'm a newborn. I want to see after ten years, I'm going to go back to the same neighborhood and look and say you know, the person who was there in 2006, the person who's going to be in 2016. (Tonito)

Stereotypes and Statistics

When I met with the students in this study, I let them know I was talking with Latino community college students because I was interested in learning about the role education plays in their lives. Their personal narratives were deeply rooted in the cultural contexts. They knew the views people have of Latinos; they had experienced them first hand. And they knew the statistics for Latino educational attainment are low. Alberto knew he was one of a small percentage of students who would graduate – and his thoughts jumped quickly to his children and the dreams he has for them.

You see the statistics on… on Latino uh, community, especially on the kids attending school. It's not very good, you know. Out of 10, only a couple of them graduate and, you know… and that’s another thing. I don't… I don't want my kids to be part of those statistics, you know, I want them to… to go beyond that. (Alberto)

Jessica spoke specifically about the stigmas she has experienced throughout life because of her cultural background. Jessica’s grandfather was from Puerto Rico and her grandmother was from New Jersey. Her mom grew up in a Hispanic community in New Jersey and her father is Creole from Louisiana.

We moved to California and they heard my mom's dialect and stuff, I was like beat up like every day, you know and…I didn't really understand what the beef between Mexicans and Puerto Ricans were. You know, my grandpa always told me, “Never get in a crowd with a Mexican. Never eat Mexican food, never…” you know, and I don't understand it. (Jessica)
She is Hispanic, with dark skin and dark hair. She has been incorrectly identified as African American throughout her life – even other Hispanics have mistaken her for an African American.

The stigma that is placed upon the Hispanic community … and you know, it's bad. It's bad for me because I… I'm dark Hispanic and so I get… for African American, because people mostly treat me as African America and I get it from Hispanics. … And a lot of times they look at me and they're like "Well, you're… you're black" or whatever and it's not fair (chuckles). You know, and… and it's funny because part of LDS culture is to do your genealogy up to five generations and I've looked beyond it because, like I said, I'm a bookworm, and I check with my friends and I'm like, "I have yet to find the African," you know (laughs). "I can't be African American," not obviously. But, I found a Frenchman (chuckles) but not the African yet. I'm sure he's in there somewhere (chuckles). (Jessica)

In their study of Latino community college students, French and Chavez (2010) found that students who were under higher pressure to conform to their ethnic group, were more likely to experience loss of control. In turn, these students experience a lower sense of “public regard” resulting in concerns about how people of their ethnicity are viewed by others. “Students with a lower public regard essentially believed that people from other ethnic groups view their ethnic group negatively, therefore when they were simultaneously pressured to conform to their ethnic group, it was not surprising that they would feel a greater loss of control” (French & Chavez, 2010, p. 426).

It's kind of like in the news, whenever you hear news and you're like oh, wishing, you know, “Please don't let it be Hispanic, please.” Cause one ruins it for everyone. Entire groups, and it is true. I mean, that’s why I don’t like to see news, because you know, it's… it's different living in another country because I guess what people don't get is that there's bad people in every culture. You know, you can like, stereotype a culture as, “Oh, that’s a very good culture,” I mean everywhere you go there is some bad people. Everywhere you go there's going to be criminals and I just… but it does ruin it. So, yeah, I just wish they would continue their education and just do good things. (Aurelia)

Gender Role Expectations Influence on Educational Persistence

The students’ narratives described the challenges of acculturation and, in particular, navigating gender roles that are often in contrast to each other. For Latino students attending the community college, the cultural adjustment may be mitigated to some degree. First-generation Latino students who attend community colleges will find themselves in good company – community colleges are the entry point for many minority and first-generation college students. “Two-year colleges enroll the highest proportion of
students of color, new immigrants seeking educational opportunities, and part-time, commuting students who hold down full- or part-time jobs while pursuing an education,” (Boswell, 2004, p. 24). In their study of Latino community college students, French and Chavez (2010) found that “centrality of ethnic identity to students’ self-image and the feeling that others believe Latinos were good, were associated with lower levels of depression, whereas being comfortable with other ethnic groups was related to lower depression and lower loss of control” (p. 425).

Like many others, Aurelia is working out her own ethnic identity in the context of the community college. In their study, French and Chavez (2010) found that students experienced emotional stability when they were able to both maintain their ethnic identity and interact comfortably with members of different ethnic groups. “It was clearly protective to be comfortable with members of other ethnic groups, and believe that others think Latinos are good, yet still maintain their Latino identity as an essential part of their self-image” (French & Chavez, 2010, p. 425). Aurelia’s narrative demonstrates a woman who is consciously considering her own ethnic identity.

Much of the research related to Hispanic student adjustment has, understandably, focused on the financial challenges these students are seeking to overcome. However, as more becomes known about the financial challenges, more researchers are calling for exploration of the cultural experiences. Quintana et al. (1991) call for additional research that explores the psychological dimensions of Latino cultures. “Students’ psychological experiences of ethnicity are not well understood” (Quintana et al., 1991, p. 166). “An important agenda for achieving psychological well-being in Latino American students within this acculturative context is essentially negotiating the belongingness to their ethnic group while also adapting to and functioning in the larger cultural context that may stress different norms or cultural values” (French & Chavez, 2010, p. 427).
CHAPTER SIX  
EDUCATION IS LIKE A MAGIC CARPET:  
PERSONAL AGENCY IN THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

You get a degree and it’s like a magic carpet. You can just hop on it and it just takes you far. (Elena) 

I was talking to my wife the other day and... and I told her, “All I need is the knowledge, you know. And once I get the knowledge I... I know I'm going to do something. I don't know what but I just need to get... get that knowledge.” (Alberto)

The student narratives in this study focus our attention on the power of personal agency within the context of the community college. The participants in this study show a strong sense of personal agency and have confidence in their abilities to reach their educational goals. This conviction is intertwined with a belief that education will allow them to create a better future for themselves and their families. Without exception, the students articulated a desire to complete their work at the community college. Their dreams and plans included transferring to a university to earn a bachelor’s degree (and in some cases graduate or professional school) even if those plans were not fully developed yet.

The stories shared by these students underscore the importance of individual choices, a missing piece in the literature on Hispanic student transfer which focuses primarily on institutional or demographic factors that predict transfer. This corroborates the value of narrative analysis as an effective research methodology. “…Well-crafted personal narrative analyses not only reveal the dynamics of agency in practice but also can document its construction through culturally embedded narrative forms, that, over an individual’s life, impose their own logics and thus also shape both life stories and lives” (Maynes et al., 2008, p. 2). These narratives illuminate the power of self-efficacy within the context of the community college and, in particular, the interrelatedness of self-efficacy and transfer aspirations.

The Students Believe in Themselves

Human agency can be generally defined as the power of an individual to make a choice and take action. The participants in this study all exhibited a strong sense of agency. From their perspectives, they were participants in their own destiny and education was the magic carpet that would take them to their own destination. Don’t tell
these students that the community college is a brilliantly-designed hoax to trick them into thinking they have a shot at a better life, as the strongest community college critics argue. These students are counting on their belief that education will open doors to a better life.

A students’ belief about their abilities to transfer and the educational pathways that are open to them can influence their educational behaviour and transfer choice, as well as how they respond to the challenges they face during the transfer process. That sense of agency results in persistence, even when confronted with challenges.

I am determined. There’s just nothing… Coming to class, being in school is number one to me as in, like, these are my priorities. This is the main thing I need to get done… I am a hard worker. Whatever I set my mind to do, I do it 150%. I think those are important strengths to bring to the table when you’re in education. You know sometimes you got to be… I don’t know the right word. Sometimes, like I have gotten a test back and I am just like ―Oh!‖ But then I have this mindset like, “You know what? My next grade is not going to look like this.” So, I just try harder. (Elena)

The student narratives included a strong sense of self-efficacy, which will be necessary if they are to pursue their goals of transferring and earning a bachelor’s degree. “Such [efficacy] beliefs influence aspirations and strength of commitments to them, the quality of analytic and strategic thinking, level of motivation and perseverance in the face of difficulties and setbacks, resilience to adversity, causal attributions for successes and failures, and vulnerability to stress and depression” (Bandura et al., 2001, p. 187). The students discussed their strengths readily.

I am not afraid to ask questions. I am very vocal obviously. And I feel like I communicate well. I feel like that is a strength I bring to the classroom. My teachers know me by my name because I am asking questions or because I am contributing to class lectures. I’m not always on time. That is not a good one. I was going to say my promptness, but that’s not good. (Elena)

A number of the students discussed early positive experiences with education. According to the self-efficacy literature, positive experiences like this can provide a foundation for a stronger sense of self-efficacy and thus achievement. “Gaining knowledge and skills that enable one to fulfill personal standards of merit tend to heighten interest and a firm sense of personal efficacy. Success in attaining desired outcomes through challenging performances can further verify existing competencies” (Bandura, 1982, p. 133).
I loved school. As a child, all through school….I loved school. I’ve always excelled while in high school…actually in middle school is when I started doing extracurricular activities. Little clubs…I was in choir all three years in middle school. Went into high school, AB student…I graduated with honors … always loved to learn…I mean….my parents instilled in me…I mean you don’t stop there….get a degree, get a degree, get a degree. (Elena)

I think I have a passion for learning. I think that’s a great foundation for anything. I think that I… I can relate to the material. I… when I read something I can actually envision in my head it happening. … I know for students I feel like they're given this material and… and it’s just a bunch of gobbledygook and you know, it’s just regurgitation for their education. You know, “They tell me, I tell them, and then I forget it,” you know. And I feel like I really want to know, you know, I mean it’s not just me going to school for a degree and it’s not just me going to school to make money. It’s me going to school because I want to know. (Jessica)

The student narratives also included positive accounts of their current educational experiences in the community college, which they said motivated them to pursue further education and work toward their goals.

(School is) It’s something fun to me. I really like it. And I just think it’s neat whenever I learn something that I didn’t know before. Like kind of right now I’m taking some like my math class is a refresher course but there are some things like we are working on word problems that I am learning about, like, “Oh, I could take this and use it here in the world tomorrow.” (Elena)

I also think as a student in the classroom that I think I'm a good student for professors, especially here in UCC, because a lot of kids are mute and they don't really say anything… I feel like it's good that I am familiar enough with what we're learning and that I'm interested enough in what we're learning that I actually ask questions … (Jessica)

Every year you know things are changing. They find out new things … I definitely will continue my education. I’ll probably always take a class even when I am an old, old person. I’ll probably always take a class just so I can be “up there” with everyone. Just so I know… I just want to know… I just want to learn and know things and just be able to apply that into my life and just... maybe I could do something you know? Help someone else because I know more you know? (Elena)

When Alberto began studying at UCC he had some concerns, but his coworkers encouraged him to go to college and have provided ongoing support throughout the process.

I was very nervous the first time. I was encouraged because I work with many engineers and that kind of encouraged me to be someday like them. They are very smart people that I can look up to and that’s one of the reasons that I decided to
pursue it. … Just because I work with them, I’ve learned a lot and they noticed that I got to a point where I couldn’t go any higher because I didn’t have a degree. In terms of job promotion and all that. So, that’s another thing that kind of encouraged me and that’s when they started telling me, you know, “You should go to college. It’s going to make a big change in your life.” At the beginning I didn’t think it was but now that I’ve been in college for – I think this is my fourth semester – I’m loving it. I don’t think I’m going to stop. (Alberto)

“Cooling out” Revisited

Despite community college critics like Clark (1960) and Zwerling (1976), who argue that, to some extent, the community college diverts student dreams (either intentionally or unintentionally), these students maintain a passionate commitment to their educational aspirations and in their stories, at least, tell of a strong commitment to their educational goals. These students, similar to the “lads” in Willis (1977), “perceive themselves as having power and control over their own existence” (Gordon, 1984, p. 106). Only Tonito, who lived as an adult in a very different economic and political environment in Cuba, discussed how the American economic environment and structure can make it very difficult to achieve his goals.

In Cuba, you make $10 a month. If somebody tells you, "I'm making $20 an hour" you say, "Wow!" So, you start dreaming … And then when you get here, you just make one thousand dollars for real a month. So, it's not you are making $20 an hour. You can be making twenty-five hundred, three thousand dollars a month, but after you pay everything, you have one thousand dollars a month and you need to buy shoes, you need to buy this, you need to buy that. You need to help your family and it goes on. It goes on. So, it's not the way you think it is. (Tonito)

From the students’ perspectives, the potential barriers to them achieving their goals of earning a bachelor’s degree were external to the college and included time, financial resources, and family commitments. Elena briefly mentioned the challenges of accessing student services during the evenings when she was going to school part time and Jessica was concerned about UCC putting more funding into nursing programs than her major (journalism). However, these comments were limited. In general, their voices shared a story of strong determination with an acknowledgement of potential barriers related to finances, family commitments, and balancing their other commitments with their schoolwork.
Tonito was the only student who acknowledged that this educational system might not be designed to help him succeed. He earned his bachelor’s degree in Cuba, after graduating from a top military school. In Cuba, all of his education was paid for.

In Cuba, everybody goes to college, or at least is able to go to college. Education is free, so you don’t need to pay for it. College is free. You don’t need to work. You can’t even work anywhere you know legally if you’re (in) 9th grade, or 12th grade. You need to at least be 21 years old. (Tonito)

Tonito scored high on his tests in middle school, earning him the opportunity to attend military school. Tonito earned his bachelor’s degree in Cuba, a degree that was completely funded by the government.

It was a high standard school. Everybody was B+, A student. So to that school the government used to send their best careers in the entire country. So, they used to send military careers but they used to send regular careers. So you decide be a military or just be a regular person. But the standards were so high that we used to get most of the careers that we want. So, if you wanted to a marine, you could go just to the navy, or if you wanted to be a professor, you can go just to educational school. If you want to be a doctor you can go to military doctor or regular doctor, so it’s easy for us to get any career that we want. (Tonito)

Tonito acknowledged that the educational system in the United States includes some barriers to persistence (most notably the costs for tuition, living expense, and the taxes taken from his paycheck). However, like the others Tonito demonstrated a strong determination to reach his goals as well as a strong belief in his own ability to succeed. Despite having already earned a degree in Cuba, Tonito was determined to earn a second bachelor’s degree in the United States.

I am not a tough guy, but when I make a decision you know like to go towards something, I always keep my word. I work harder. I'm a really hard worker. So I wake up early in the day in the morning at 6:30 and I go to bed at 1 in the morning, and the next day I don't have any problem waking up. So my decision is to get a bachelor's degree… My goal is to get a bachelor's degree. The day I got here – I forgot to tell you – when I get to the Miami airport I say, “I'm a new born.” So, I was a new born. I got into a new place. Everything's new. So I'm not the same marine biologist from Cuba. I’m not the person who used to know a lot of people, who used to do this, do this. So, I'm a new person. I have to go through a learning process. So it takes five to ten years if you're going to be successful. (Tonito)

Despite the significant financial challenges they face, the students in this study articulated a strong sense of agency as they perceived their role in defining their future. Gordon (1984), in her review of Willis (1977), argues that this sense of autonomy and
self-determination may simply be a “perception” and may not equate into actual autonomy or upward mobility. “Through the exercise of their perceived autonomy within the system – a perceived state which, in the short term, leads to a great deal of actual autonomy – the lads develop a sense of superiority over the conformist working class. They see themselves as having a free choice over their present and future activities” (Gordon, 1984, p. 106).

**The Students Believe in Education**

The stories of these students were as unique as the students themselves, yet underscoring each of these stories was a common belief: education is the gateway to a better life. They believe higher education will take them to a better future. To a certain extent, education holds a magical quality for these students – it promises a better life than the one their parents lived. It is the great hope, a promise for a better future. They value education for the knowledge and wisdom it could give them, as well as the potential for better employment and increased earning power.

[Education is] a way to get where I would like to go. There is a certain quality of life that I’d like to have in the future. You know, so, and I have always been told and taught to be more educated means you’re wiser. And you’ve got more. You’ve got something with you that you can take with you forever. (Elena)

I think my education is more… it's just… I'm going to get more education because it's just… it gives me more opportunities … Like better jobs. (Columbian)

The community college also provided them an opportunity to understand the value of education. According to Bandura (1982), intrinsic interest can be developed though self-efficacy built through success. Applied to the educational experience, this means that students who succeed in college will develop a stronger interest in it, even if they entered with limited interest. “Most of the things people enjoy doing for their own sake originally had little or no interest for them. But under appropriate learning experiences, almost any activity, however silly it may appear to many observers, can become imbued with consuming significance” (Bandura, 1982, p. 133).

For Alberto, the community college did not “cool out” his dreams. Instead, through his experience in postsecondary education, he developed a greater understanding of how education could change him as a person and expand his professional opportunities.
Education to me means a lot. Actually before I started attending college, I used to read the little things that they’ve had posted on the… on the walls or commercials, whatever, you know, that used to say, “Education makes a difference,” you know. All that critical thinking stuff and I'm like, “You know, that’s not… I don't think it makes a big difference,” you know? But after the first year, you know, I notice all that… “Yeah, that is true.” The… education has changed the way I see things … has changed the way I've talked, the way that I… see the world now. It's just different, you know. It has changed a lot. (Alberto)

Although he entered higher education with a belief that it was something he had to get through to create a better life for himself and his family, Alberto now says education has changed the way he sees things.

I just want to make a difference now … I was talking to my wife the other day and… and I told her, “All I need is the knowledge, you know. And once I get the knowledge I… I know I'm going to do something. I don't know what but I just need to get… get that knowledge,” you know. I just need someone to teach me how to use it, how to program and once I have that knowledge it's just going to be all me … I just want to get that foundation, like you say, and… and once I get that nobody's stopping me. (Alberto)

Discussion

In the voices of these students can be heard a sense of hope and confidence in their future. It is a confidence grounded in two strongly-held convictions – a well-articulated belief in their own abilities to persist toward their education goals, combined with a belief in the value of education and the opportunities education will provide for them. It is a resounding response to scholars who claim low transfer rates at community colleges are a direct result of low transfer aspirations or low self-efficacy. These students show just the opposite. However, the problem of low transfer persists. Despite these firmly articulated goals and confidence, statistical research findings would predict that few of these students will transfer. These narratives suggest that if these students do not transfer, it will not be due to low self-efficacy or low transfer aspirations. Those they hold in abundance. The students in this study believe in higher education; their narratives are a combination of strong educational aspirations and significant roadblocks that may prevent their successful attainment of a bachelor’s degree.

The findings in this study add a level of knowledge regarding the individual experiences of six community college students at an urban community college in the Ohio valley. For education administrators, policy makers and community college
researchers seeking to increase the transfer rate of Latino community college students, these narratives provide a richness and depth lacking in the mostly quantitative studies to date. This deeper understanding of the experiences of these six students offer us a window into the world of Latino community college students. This is a qualitative study and the findings of this study cannot be generalized to the Hispanic student population as a whole. However, the results do offer us an increased knowledge at a depth not available in the current research.

Despite the many challenges these students face, they maintain strong educational aspirations. This is not a longitudinal study, so their educational persistence and attainment is not measured. Based on the statistical data we have, it is unlikely that all of them will achieve their bachelor’s degree. However, at the time of this study their transfer aspirations are strong. The realities of poverty, acculturation, immigration status, and cultural expectations may merge to form low educational persistence. Ultimate decisions regarding continuation in higher education will likely continue to be influenced by these challenges, which have the power to thwart their educational persistence despite their strong aspirations and agency. Their eventual transfer behaviour may not reflect their aspirations.

Foundational to this study is an understanding of the role the community college plays in providing educational access to the associate’s degree and serving as a pathway to the bachelor’s degree through transfer. In this sense, the community college is the gateway to the American Dream. Proponents of the community college argue that the community college is uniquely positioned to address inequities in educational achievement, primarily through open admissions and low tuition rates which, they argue, makes higher education accessible to all. Critics, on the other hand, argue that the community college (whether intentionally or unintentionally) serves primarily to perpetuate the existing social structure. In this argument, “the organization of schooling differentially educates upper-, middle-, and working-class students, training students from the upper classes to assume positions at the top of the social ladder while socializing working-class students to accept positions at the lower end of the economic structure” (Valadez, 2000, p. 214). (These arguments are described in detail in Chapter 2).
The narratives of these students are consistent with both these arguments; their narratives are deeply rooted in a belief that education can take them anywhere. Edington (2000) in her study of community college students enrolled in a social assistance program that provided scholarships, found that students in her study “believed in the American Dream ideology” (p. 152). The same can be said for the individuals in this study. With the exception of Tonito, whose life experience had exposed him to contrasting ideologies of democracy and communism, capitalism and socialism, the students’ narratives were devoid of awareness of how existing social and economic structures might, by design, thwart their success.

**Implications for Practitioners**

**Can I Afford the American Dream?**

The students’ optimistic view of higher education and its potential for offering a better life was built on an underlying theme of poverty and the persistent question of whether they would have the resources available to persist in higher education. Despite personal goals and strong work ethics, the realities of poverty are strong. This theme underscores the quantitative research findings that SES is the strongest predictor of transfer. However, it provides an insight that goes far beyond a statistical finding. Until administrators and policy makers can fully grasp what it means to be poor, programs geared at low SES students will continue to be inadequate at best. Although student financial aid programs such as Pell grants do offer some financial relief, the effects of poverty far surpass the costs of tuition, fees, and textbooks. Programs geared toward working students must be designed with an awareness that goes far beyond the current understanding that these students have other commitments beyond their schooling; they must understand foundationally what it means to be poor, to have financial and familial responsibilities, and to feel the pull between educational aspirations and familial commitments. Valadez (2000) recommends student involvement in the creation of what he describes as a “participatory curriculum based on the democratic ideals of student involvement” (p. 277). “It would include topics such as child care, transportation, and time management, and would move toward more long-term needs such as academic and career planning” (Valadez, 2000, p. 227).
**Education for My Family**

The students hold strong family bonds, across generations, and they pursue their educational goals because they believe it will benefit their families. The aspirations of these students are deeply rooted in a strong commitment to their families, often including family members who remain in the countries from which they immigrated. Their families believe in them and in their education, and in turn, they want to make their families proud. They want to provide financially for their grandparents, parents, children, and future children. However, these family commitments at the same time serve as both a motivator and a challenge. The students believe educational attainment will help them better provide for their families yet their financial commitments to their family often impact their ability to persist in education, attend classes full time, etc.

**English as Foreign Language/Education as a Foreigner**

The students are navigating an unfamiliar education system, often in a foreign culture and a foreign language. While researchers and community college administrators are increasingly acknowledging the challenges faced by first-generation college students, immigrant Latino community college students are navigating cultural differences long before they step foot on a college campus. While their parents may strongly value higher education, they may be unable to assist their students in navigating the cultural differences in mainstream American culture, much less the bureaucratic processes of admissions and enrollment to the community college. Programs designed to increase educational attainment among Latino students must acknowledge the challenges related to acculturation and the experiences of students as they navigate a foreign culture, including adjustment to different value systems and often acquisition of a different language. However, it is important to note that these challenges do not indicate a deficit. Students bring rich cultural backgrounds with them to their educational experience. Ideally, educational programs would honor that background and “would gain relevance by taking account of… backgrounds, culture, history, and current needs” (Valadez, 2000, p. 227). It is also important to acknowledge that “social and cultural constraints play significant roles in determining what students decide to do … Whether it is the student’s own life experiences or various formulations of social and cultural constraints, all have
been implicated in how students form their perceptions regarding their futures” (Valadez, 2008, p. 838).

**Latino/Latina: American Woman, American Man**

One significant aspect of acculturation stress is the navigation of disparate gender roles. In particular, Latina students interested in furthering their education experience strong cultural expectations that they should marry early and dedicate their time to raising a family. Additionally, there are deeply-held expectations that they should marry a Latino and expectations that a man should hold a higher position and earn more money than his wife. These expectations are difficult to navigate for Latina students, who are often faced with different gender roles and expectations among fellow students and professors. Educators must acknowledge these challenges and assist students in navigating these disparate and contradictory expectations which can be a significant cause of acculturative stress and may influence educational persistence and the development of aspirations.

**Education is Like a Magic Carpet**

Despite these challenges, the student narratives in this study were narratives of personal agency; the students believe in a better future and that education provides the open door to that future. Although the students openly discussed the barriers they perceived to stand in their way, they spoke of the opportunities with much enthusiasm. They want to be professionals, earn more money than their parents did and complete bachelors and advanced degrees; they believe education will allow them to decrease the financial stress in their lives. These students see the community college as the open door to the American Dream. They defy the claim among researchers and policy makers who argue that low transfer rates are due to low aspirations. Their optimism and determination can and should be targeted by educational administrators, faculty, and policy makers as a foundation on which to build future educational success.

**Theoretical Implications**

The themes that emerged from these student narratives capture, at their essence, the complexity of cultural production; it is critical to acknowledge both the role that existing structures exert on these students’ lives, and the personal agency of the students within those structures. Much of the transfer literature has focused on either the
institution (structure) or the individual (agency). This is what Foley (2010) describes as the “ageless structure-agency debate” (p. 223). Cultural production offers an alternative, acknowledging that, while structural forces indeed influence educational outcomes, personal agency is also a powerful force at play.

MacLeod (1995) argues that aspirations exist in between the competing forces of structure and agency. “At the interface between structural determinants and human agency, aspirations offer the sociologist a conceptual bridge over the theoretical rift of the structure-agency dualism” (MacLeod, 1995, pp. 22-23). However, aspirations are not immune to structural forces and are influenced by the structural context within which they are developed. This influence tempers the power of these aspirations. “Occupational aspirations, as a mediating link between socioeconomic structures (what society offers) and individuals at the cultural level (what one wants), play a crucial role in the reproduction of class inequality” (MacLeod, 1995, pp. 22-23).

To refine this perspective, I argue that the link between aspirations and opportunity mirrors the interplay of human agency and structural forces. While the student narratives contain strong aspirations (developed within the context of their own experience related to structural forces), their capacity to realize these aspirations will undoubtedly be tempered by the structural forces at play. Certainly, their academic persistence has already been influenced by outside forces, as exemplified by choices regarding full- or part-time attendance, time away from schooling, etc. Additionally, their individual choices and experiences have also influenced their educational attainment (having children, working sending money to family, etc.)

Looking at transfer from the perspective of cultural production provides a new understanding to the limits of viewing the inequalities of educational outcomes as a dualistic conflict – one where we either blame society (and the schools) or the students themselves. Instead, cultural production bridges that divide and allows us to see the problem as the process of individuals navigating those structures. Cultural production, according to Foley (2010), is the result of “fusing cultural and class theory into a new interpretive paradigm” (p. 215). We must consider both the agency of these individuals and the structural limits and opportunities they encounter. “Aspirations mediate what an individual desires and what society can offer” (MacLeod, 1995, p. 7).
Despite the strong narratives of opportunity and hope shared by these students, community college critics argue that the community college by function or through insidious design, simply delays students’ awareness that the American Dream, for most, is a myth. In fact, from a strict social reproduction perspective, one would argue that the community college provides, at best, the illusion that there is hope for students like them to break free from poverty. From this perspective, the students in this study are like the students in MacLeod’s (1995) study. “For them the American Dream, far from being a genuine prospect, is not even a dream. It is a hallucination” (MacLeod, 1995, p. 4). From this perspective, the “magic carpet” is an optimistic, compelling story, but in the end simply a fairy tale. Edington (2000) argues that the American Dream serves to transfer any responsibility of success or failure onto the individual, thus absolving societal structures of any responsibility or role in producing success or failure.

The American Dream is highly individual, in that it leads one to focus on people’s behaviors rather than on economic processes or political structures as the causal explanation for social structure. That focus, especially when reinforced by the leader of the country, carries a moral message—that there must be something wrong with the individual who cannot achieve success. The message implies that people are born a blank slate, no reproduction of anything, brand new where anything is possible. The focus makes it difficult for Americans to see that everyone cannot achieve success. (Edington, 2000, p. 152)

Indeed, the students’ narratives are grounded in the belief that anything is possible. Furthermore, they believe that education is essential to making their dreams possible. Edington (2000) argues that the students in her study were “both victims of social appeasement and accomplices of social reproduction” (p. 152).

After all, if the working-class are not complaining, and, in fact, if they seem to be disciples, would not this provide justification to the wealthy for the continuation of this type of domination? Not only is society being reproduced, it is being insidiously reproduced through the technique of social appeasement whereby the victims of social reproduction have been unwittingly appeased into silence. (Edington, 2000, p. 153).

In a similar study that focused on rural community college students, Valadez (2000) found that the students were faced with both the promise of a better future offered by the community college and the reality of the challenges they are facing in their lives. “Do they follow and accept the rhetoric of the institution that claims that the path out of poverty can be found through hard work and sheer determination?” (Valadez, 2000, p.
The students in his study, who were involved in a work education program, were told that hard work and persistence would lead to success.

A conflict emerges, however, between the professed ideology of the institution and the structural barriers of race, gender, and class bias that students face daily. It is possible for students to achieve success, but their academic and occupational decisions must be analyzed within the context of a society that severely constrains their choices. (Valadez, 2000, p. 225)

Arguably, the students in my study have been given an opportunity to participate in postsecondary education that they might not have in many other countries that require significant educational achievement in high school, combined with high tuition rates, to enter higher education. (Notably, Tonito’s experience in Cuba is one significant exception). The American community college does serve to ensure that higher education is not just a privilege of the middle and upper classes. However, the statistical research shows that, the open door of the community college is often a “revolving door” (i.e. all students are admitted but few graduate or transfer). There is another option, however, than to accept as true the critics’ argument that the community college is subtly – but intentionally – serving to “cool out” students’ dreams and coerce them into becoming complicit with existing social structures. In fact, in many cases the community college serves to disrupt the social structures, serving an important role in changing the face of American high education – providing access and success to students, particularly minority and low-SES students. Not all of them succeed, but the narratives of these students show that the elements that often prohibit success are often external to the community college.

The student narratives support the most recent statistical data that shows SES as the highest predictor of transfer. The stories of poverty that emerged show how limited financial resources influence persistence. Existing inequities in wealth continue to perpetuate throughout American society. For generations, Americans have been concerned with the seemingly true adage that “the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.” Whether this is a function of society, government, capitalism, or a combination thereof, is arguable (and much discussed). However, to lay the blame on the community college is illogical. Revisiting the “cooling out” argument in 1980, Clark further expanded on his earlier work, positing that it is unreasonable to think that all students, all the time, will succeed in postsecondary education (whether at a community college or
other educational institution). His more recent argument is that societal structures in various countries and cultures have some point at which students are tracked into certain classes of society (Clark, 1980). In American society, the diversion of dreams is delayed well beyond other countries. What is different, perhaps about America, is the strong cultural belief in opportunity and being able to far surpass one’s parents’ level of income or education. It is a widespread American ideology. When this ideology fails to hold true, as a culture we look for someone to blame. The prevailing perspectives in the literature continue to ascribe blame to the individual or the institution, with some scholars approaching the problem from a sociological perspective who assign blame to our existing societal structures and forces.

Ultimately, where one assigns blame is foundational to the generation of solutions. If the individual is the problem, interventions will be most effective when applied to individuals; if the problem is community colleges, then the community college must be fixed and solutions, therefore, must be rooted in programs and curriculum at the community college level; if social reproduction is the explanation, the solution will only come with drastic and sweeping changes in societal structure.

The narratives of these students indicate the problem of low transfer rates lies not in individual beliefs, motivation, or hard work. Although the students are perhaps not as consistently dedicated and hardworking as their narratives would indicate, their lives show strong evidence of persistence despite problems; they have overcome considerable challenges in order to attend and persist in their schooling including financial obstacles, acculturation challenges, language acquisition, and managing multiple responsibilities within their families. They have internalized the American Dream and believe it is their own responsibility to succeed.

Similarly, the students do not blame the community college for the obstacles they are facing as they pursue their degrees. In contrast, some of them are in college as a result of outreach programs provided by the community college. Despite some challenges with accessing services outside the classroom (particularly in Elena’s case when she was attending school part-time in the evenings), the students speak highly of their educational opportunities. Whether this is because, as Edington (2000) argues, the students have become complicit actors in the process of social reproduction, or because the community
college is designed to provide such opportunities to students is, perhaps, still up for
debate. However, I would argue that the community college is providing opportunities for
these students and their ultimate success in achieving their goals does not appear to be
thwarted by this institution.

Furthermore, American societal structure may, in fact, perpetuate the existing
social classes. However, by no means is it the ultimate determinant. For every story of a
student who remains trapped in poverty, there are others who are able to navigate their
way through poverty to the top levels of society. What is true is that this happens less
than the American Dream would have us believe.

Rather, the most significant problem lies in poverty and its derivatives. Despite
deeply held values for higher education, rooted in strong commitments to family, many
Latino students fail to make it through the educational pipeline to earn bachelor’s
degrees. Although the stories of these six students cannot be generalized to the entire
Latino population, for these students the biggest barrier to higher education persistence
was most certainly poverty.

The ideological message promoted by the college highlights the idea that
discipline and hard work lead unproblematically to educational attainment and
prosperity … A glaring omission of this message is the lack of attention it gives to
the effect of social and economic structures such as limited occupational
opportunities… as well as the historical legacy of race, gender, and class
discrimination. (Valadez, 2000, p. 227)

In fact, there are multiple problems and challenges that lie between educational
aspirations and educational outcomes. Individuals and institutions (agency and structure)
do exert influence on transfer rates, and therefore are among the contributors to the
problem. However, this research shows that the problem is far greater and an individual
or an institution.

The problem lies not only in the individual; it is not a character flaw to choose
food over education or sending money to a grandmother instead of taking a fourth course
that semester. These students are not victims without choices; they are individuals
exercising their personal agency. The problem lies not only in the community college.
Although there are many improvements yet to be made, many community colleges are
intent on continuous improvement of the services and curriculum. The problem can be
attributed to society, although whether one believes the perpetuation of social structures
and class is an intentional, insidious force or an unfortunate byproduct of capitalism that can be contained, to a degree, through government and private interventions is a political issue with a scope that surpasses the focus of this study.

What remains true is that these students desire a better life. They are willing to work for it, yet their position in life and the poverty they have and continue to experience may become insurmountable. The solution at its most simplistic is money. Less naively, interventions on behalf of the community college that focus on helping students navigate the challenges of limited financial resources, combined with increased financial support that far surpasses the cost of tuition, may serve to help alleviate the perpetuation of this problem. However, such a proposal will, without doubt, lead quickly to the argument that this is not fair, because we know that in order to give resources to one group of people (in this case, impoverished Latino students, many of whom are recent immigrants to this country), we must take from another (American citizens with more financial means, many of whom are white and long-time citizens in this country).

How we define the American Dream will also play a role in solutions. If the American Dream is simply defined as equal opportunity, then some would argue that we have already opened the doors to higher education. However, if we define the American Dream (applied to postsecondary education) as equal outcomes (i.e. if 30% of our entering community college students are Latino, then 30% of our graduates will be Latino), then we have a long way to go.

**Summary**

As with any effective research study, although this study illuminates the experience of six Latino students resulting in new knowledge and explanations of the low Latino transfer rates, it also generates further research questions. In particular, this study clarifies the need for further exploration of how socioeconomic status impacts Latino community college student decisions about higher education participation. Additionally, further studies on the experiences of students navigating the process of acculturation would further illuminate the student experience and how it impacts persistence.

What can be said from this study is that these students deeply value higher education. They believe it can make a difference in their lives, but they are less tentative
in their assertions that they will be able to overcome the financial obstacles they experience in order that their achievements would match their aspirations. They are navigating a cultural and economic system that offers them a paradoxical situation: an open door to higher education without the financial means to persist. They hold high aspirations for their families, their education, and their lives but the outcome may be that their transfer behaviour may not reflect their aspirations. This is the story – not of all Latino community college students – but of six students who chose to openly share their narratives of opportunity and challenge, navigated within American culture and America’s “great hope,” the community college. It is the story of their cultural production.
APPENDIX A: FIRST INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Introduction: Thanks for meeting with me today. I’m looking forward to getting to know you and learning about your experiences as a Latino community college student. I want to learn about your experiences in education so far, what your experience is like here at UCC, and what you think about education in your future. All of what we discuss today will be confidential, and I’m going to go over this form with you that explains this study in a little more detail. (Review consent form.)

1. Grand tour: Tell me about your early experiences in education.
   
   *Probe: What kind of student were you? What did you think of school?*

2. What kind of student were you in high school?
   
   *Probe: Did you love to study? Did you hate school?*

3. Tell me what happened when you first thought about going to college.
   
   *Probes: What did your family think about your interest in college? What did your friends think about you going to college?*

4. What process did you go through to become a college student?
   
   *Probe: Who did you talk to? What institutional structures did you take advantage of? What was the most helpful?*

5. Tell me about your experience here at UCC.
   
   *Probe: What is the environment like? What has the experience been like for you?*

6. Tell me about your academic experience in college.
   
   *Probe: Has it been more academically challenging than you expected? Easier than you expected?*
APPENDIX B: SECOND INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Thanks for meeting with me again today. I enjoyed our first discussion and hope to learn more about you and the role education plays in your life. As a reminder, all that we discuss today is confidential.

1. When you think about your future, how does education fit into it?
2. What strengths do you bring to your educational experience?
3. What challenges have you faced in the educational process?
4. Each student brings their own set of characteristics to college – their age, values, beliefs, ethnicity, etc. As a Latino student, what unique characteristics do you bring to being a college student?
5. Do you plan to continue your education after UCC?
   Probes: Are you planning to transfer to a four-year university to earn a bachelor’s degree? What has led you to this decision?
6. What would influence your decision about transferring to college to earn a bachelor’s degree?
   Probe: Family considerations, immigration experience, delaying income, etc.
7. What have you done to prepare to transfer to a four-year institution?
   Probe: Who have you talked to? What UCC services have you used? How has your family been involved in this decision?
8. What would it take for you to transfer to a four-year institution?
APPENDIX C: BIOGRAPHICAL QUESTIONNAIRE

Part 1 (Completed by the student at the beginning of the first interview)

1. Name
2. Age
3. Major
4. Full- or Part-time Student
5. Start date at the college
6. Enrollment status since then
7. Married?
8. Children? (#, ages)
9. Educational goals: degrees would like to obtain
10. Educational plans: degrees expect to obtain

Part 2 (Completed at the end of the first interview based on the information provided by the student. I discussed this information with the participant for verification)

1. Place of birth
2. Citizenship
3. Date and grade student began education in the United States
4. Language(s) spoken at home
5. Date participant and/or parents came to the United States
REFERENCES


VITA
Catharine Mary Anne Penfold Navarro

April 28, 1972
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

EDUCATION
Ph.D. in Higher Education Studies (In progress)
University of Kentucky, Lexington, Kentucky, 2011

Graduate Studies in Counseling
Asbury Theological Seminary, Wilmore, Kentucky, 1996-2003

Master of Education in College Student Affairs
Azusa Pacific University, Azusa, California, 1999

Bachelor of Arts in Communication
Roberts Wesleyan College, Rochester, New York, 1993

PROFESSIONAL POSITIONS

Director of Student Success
Valencia College, Orlando, Florida (2009 – present)

Director of the Transfer Center
Bluegrass Community & Technical College, Lexington, Kentucky (2007-2009)

Director of Student Services, College of Pharmacy
University of Kentucky, Lexington, Kentucky (2005-2007)

Academic Advisor, Central Advising Service and Transfer Center
University of Kentucky, Lexington, Kentucky (2003-2005)

Director of Community Life
LCC International University, Klaipeda, Lithuania (2001-2002)

Resident Director: Community Service and Leadership Housing

Assistant Director of Communications: Photography and Electronic Publishing
Asbury Theological Seminary, Wilmore, Kentucky (1996-1999)
Features Editor

Student Association President

SCHOLASTIC AND PROFESSIONAL HONORS

Nominated to attend Association for the Study of Higher Education’s Graduate Student Policy Seminar, Jacksonville, Florida (November 2008)

Governor’s Award for Outstanding Volunteer Service. Aldersgate Commons honored by Kentucky Governor Paul Patton. (2003)

Recognized by the American Cancer Society for newspaper coverage of Breast Cancer Awareness month. (1995)


PROFESSIONAL PUBLICATIONS


________________________
Catharine Penfold Navarro
Student’s Signature

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May 2, 2011
Date