

DISSERTATION

PERSISTING LATINO STUDENTS AT COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY: THEIR  
MENTORING EXPERIENCES

Submitted by

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## ABSTRACT

### PERSISTING LATINO STUDENTS AT COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY: THEIR MENTORING EXPERIENCES

This study examined the experiences of 17 Latino students who participated in the El Centro Resource Leaders Mentoring Program (ERLMP). The El Centro Resource Leaders Mentoring program at Colorado State University focuses on assisting incoming Latino/a freshman and transfer students with the transition to college by providing academic and cultural resources, involvement and leadership opportunities, and mentoring support. The purpose of the program is to assist Latino students to be successful and eventually graduate from Colorado State University. The program has been in place since 1994. All the participants in this study were currently serving or had served as Resource Leader Mentors within the last five years. The goal of the research was to understand the lived experiences of the students and their own perceptions of the reasons for their academic success and persistence.

This study used an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) of qualitative inquiry. Personal one-on-one interviews were conducted revealing thematic connections and interrelatedness of thoughts, patterns, and experiences that helped identify the essence of participants' experiences. The IPA approach allowed the researcher to explore the underlying meanings and experiences of undergraduate Latino students. The majority of the participants were first generation college students attending Colorado State

University. Four major themes emerged from the data: Participants' Common Challenges, Participants' Common Experiences, Participant Benefits of Program, and Participants' Lessons Learned. The experiences of Colorado State University Latino students who had participated in the ERLMP provided valuable insights in understanding their mentoring experiences and what contributed to their persistence.

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Fiate de Dios de todo tu corazon, y no te apoyes en tu propia prudencia. Reconcelo en todo tus caminos, y El enderezara tus veredas.

Proverbios 3:5-6

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## **DEDICATION**

The completion of my PhD is dedicated to my Shero—my mother Maria Alvarez Salas. My Mother Mary passed away during my doctoral journey, however, I know how proud she would be of this accomplishment. Mom, you taught me to value education in and out of the classroom. You taught me to be resilient and to never give up on anything I set out to do. Your great example and demonstration of the importance of faith in God, of our faith in each other, and your example of our faith in our families, are some of the most important lessons I will ever learn in life. Mom, I love you and I have faith that I will someday see you again.



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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The Latino<sup>1</sup> population in the United States is the largest and fastest growing minority population in the country. The U.S. Census Bureau (2008) projected that the Latino population will continue to grow more than any other group and that by the year 2050, one in four people living in the United States will be Latino. The Latino population is a diverse group, consisting of both native born and immigrant people from many different countries including Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, and the countries of Central and South America.

The projected growth of this population will impact many sectors of American society. One of the most important consequences, and an area where the impact is already being felt, is the effect on the education system. According to the Pew Hispanic Center, the number of Latino students enrolled in U.S. public schools doubled from 1990 to 2006 (Fry & Gonzales, 2008). Due to this incredible growth, Ream (2005) asserts that “no group will do more to change the nation’s schools at all levels in the next quarter century than the new ethnic mosaic of Latinos, the largest and fastest growing population in the United States” (p. 201). Significant changes in the education system are necessary to address the needs of this growing segment of the student body.

The benefits of improving the educational success of the growing Latino population are not simply the improved opportunities for the group or the individual. A

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<sup>1</sup> For this study *Latino* will be used as a pan-ethnic term encompassing Latino people, males and females, of all different origins and cultures following the dominant usage found in current literature. However, when reporting on research in other sources, the authors/researchers’ terminology will be used.

special report by Solana (2008) asserted that a more educated, workforce-ready population is a more powerful national populace and is therefore vital to national interest. The report suggested that education enable greater achievements; it enhances not only private aspirations, but also social and economical prosperity. Simply put, Latinos' increasing importance for the nation's workforce implies that their levels of educational attainment must increase if the United States expects to maintain and improve its economic competitiveness in the global marketplace. Latino student success is an essential component to national success.

While success at all levels of education is crucial, this study is concerned with post-secondary education of Latino students at four year colleges. As the Latino population has increased, there has been a subsequent growth in the number of Latino students enrolling in institutions of higher education. From 1983 through 2008, college enrollment rates among Latinos tripled (Santiago, 2008). Lane (2001) predicted that Latino undergraduate enrollment would increase in the United States to one million before 2015. However, Foster (2004) reported that 1.5 million Latino students were enrolled in American colleges and universities by 2004, accounting for 15.4 % of the population in higher education. Thus, the increase in Latino student college enrollment has outpaced earlier growth predictions.

While the number of undergraduate Latinos attending institutions of higher education has been increasing, there has not been a concomitant improvement in the graduation rates for Latino college students. Latino college students are graduating at lower rates than non-Latinos (Kuh, Kinzie, Cruce, Shoup, & Gonhyea, 2006). The U.S. Department of Education (2004) reports that compared to other groups, Latino students

experience a lesser degree of success, as defined by graduating from college. Therefore, the retention of Latino students is a problem that needs serious attention and calls for new retention approaches, because current retention approaches are clearly not adequate.

Many scholars in the last 25 years have focused on Latino student college retention-related issues from the perspective of student failure (Padilla, Treviño, Gonzalez, & Treviño, 1997). However, focusing exclusively on the failures of students misses the opportunity to learn from Latino students who have overcome barriers and achieved success at the college level.

Before moving to address the issue of retention, this chapter first explores the changing demographics and the implication of those changes for the nation, the Latino population, and the nation's education system. It further addresses the challenges that inhibit educational success as defined by degree completion.

### **Demographic Changes**

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2006), Latinos are the fastest growing racial/ethnic group in the United States. They accounted for 12.6% of the total population in 2000 (Table 1), and are projected to increase to 20.1% of the population by the year 2030. At the same time, the percentage of non-Hispanic Whites is projected to decrease from 69.4% to 57.5% of the population.

Table 1

*Projected Population of the United States by Race as a Percent of Total Population:*

*2000-2030*

Race	2000	2010	2020	2030
Hispanic	12.6	15.5	17.8	20.1
Black	12.7	13.1	13.5	13.9
Asian	3.8	4.6	5.4	6.2
All other races <sup>a</sup>	2.5	3.0	3.5	4.1
White (not Hispanic.)	69.4	65.1	61.3	57.5
Total %	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

*Note.* From U.S. Census Bureau, 2004, U.S. Interim Projections by Age, Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin. <<http://www.census.gov/ipc/www/usinterimproj/>>

<sup>a</sup> Includes American Indian, Alaskan Native, Native Hawaiian, other Pacific Islander and two or more races.

Latino populations are unevenly distributed across the U.S. and some regions are experiencing faster growth than others. According to the Almanac of Latino Politics (Andrade, 2008), 80% of the Latino population is concentrated in 10 states. In 2006, the three states with the largest Latino population were California (13,074,155), Texas (8,385,118), and Florida (3,642,989). New York (3,139,590) came in a close fourth. The state of Colorado, according to the same source, ranked eighth (934,410).

Additionally, Latinos are the youngest racial/ethnic group in the United States. In fact, according to the U.S. Census Bureau (2010), the Latino population is much younger than the U.S. population as a whole, with a median age of 27.7 years in 2008, compared with 36.8 for the total population. Furthermore, 34% of the Latino population is under 18;

only 6% are age 65 or older. The corresponding percentages for the total U. S. population are 24% and 13% respectively.

### **Implications of Demographic Changes**

The changing demographic profile of the United States will also change the demographics of the educational system (Fry, 2005) suggested that by the year 2020 approximately two-thirds of the K-12 student population will be members of an ethnic minority group (African American, Native American, Hispanic, or Asian American), 20% of those students are projected to be Latino. This represents a 60% increase for Latino students over current K-12 school enrollments. The U.S. Census Bureau (2005) projects that by the year 2025, 25% of school-aged children, or K-12 students, in the United States will be Latino, and 22% of the college-aged population will be Latino.

This changing face of America makes the achievement of Latino students at all levels of the educational system increasingly relevant to the success of the country. Thus, the United States faces the challenge of identifying best practices to support this population's academic achievement in K-12 and beyond.

Latino educational also influences U. S. economic success. The U.S. Census Bureau (2009) projected that by the year 2012 there will be a 33% increase in jobs requiring an undergraduate degree. One of the ways in which the U.S. can fill the demand for jobs requiring at least an undergraduate degree is to increase the college-bound Latino population.

Swail (2008) suggested that as a nation, we need to focus on what we can do to elevate the educational opportunities of our nation's fastest growing minority population

for several good reasons. He noted that “Latinos’ educational success will positively impact all segments of our society” (p. 9). Swail (2008) suggests “Improving educational levels will contribute to improved workforce opportunities, empower Latino youth for more upward mobility, and improve economic standing within the Latino population. Failing to meet the needs of Latino students will have negative consequences at home and at the global level as well.”

### **Current Latino Educational Attainment**

Despite rapid growth, the Latino population remains one of the least educated subgroups in the United States. The Pew Hispanic Center (2006) survey of educational attainment of adults 25 years and older found that Hispanics were the least likely of any group to have graduated from high school or earned a bachelor’s degree (Table 2).

Table 2

*Educational Attainment by Race/Ethnicity (%)2006<sup>a</sup>*

Race/Ethnicity	Less than 9 <sup>th</sup> Grade	Attended 9 <sup>th</sup> -12 <sup>th</sup> Grade	High School Graduate	Some College	College Graduate <sup>b</sup>
Hispanic	23.8	15.8	28.2	19.9	12.3
Black	5.9	14.6	34.2	28.5	16.9
Asian	8.3	6.0	17.4	18.7	49.6
Other	6.0	11.2	30.9	31.6	20.3
White	3.5	7.7	30.7	28.3	29.9
All Groups	6.5	9.4	30.2	26.9	27.0

*Note:* From Pew Hispanic Center tabulations of 2006 American Community Survey, retrieved on February 21, 2009 from <http://pewhispanic.org/files/factsheets/hispanics2006/Table-21.pdf>

<sup>a</sup>Population surveyed was 2006 resident population age 25 years and older.

<sup>b</sup>College graduate refers to a person who has attained at least a bachelor’s degree.



For example, the percentage of Hispanics surveyed with less than a ninth grade education or who attended high school without graduating was 23.8% and 15.8%, respectively. In comparison, very few White adults have less than a high school degree (3.5% with less than a ninth grade education and 7.7% who attended high school without graduating). Additionally, 12.3% of Hispanics reported graduating from college, compared to 49.6% of Asians and 29.9% of Whites. Overall, 27% of all survey respondents graduated from college.

The National Hispanic Leadership Agenda (2008) reports that although there is no more important issue for the future workforce competence of the United States than education, more than any other group Latinos lack the opportunities for, and access to, quality, comprehensive education. The same report indicates that while 60% of Latinos have at least a high school diploma, 89% of non-Latino Whites have the same level of education. Among those 25 years and older, 13.4% of Latinos have bachelor's degrees, less than half that (30.6%) of non-Latino Whites.

Although the desire to succeed and to obtain an education exists for a large percentage of Latino students, Latinos have lower high school completion rates and higher high school dropout rates compared to other groups (Table 3).

Table 3

*United States High School Completion and Dropout Rates by Ethnicity (%) 2006*

Race/Ethnicity	High School Status Completion Rate <sup>a</sup>	High School Status Dropout Rate <sup>b</sup>
Hispanic	70.9	22.1
Black	84.8	10.7
Asian	95.8	3.6
White	92.6	5.8
More than one race	89.7	7.0
All Races	87.8	9.3

*Note:* From National Center for Education Statistics, Dropout and Completion Rates in the United States: 2006, retrieved on March 6, 2009 from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2008/2008053.pdf>

<sup>a</sup>Status completion rates measure the percentage of 18-24 year olds who are not enrolled in high school and who also hold a high school diploma or equivalent credential (GED). Those still enrolled in high school are excluded from the analysis.

<sup>b</sup>Status dropout rates indicate the percentage of 16-24 year olds who are not enrolled in high school and who lack a high school diploma or equivalent credential.

Latinos' lower educational achievement continues at the college level. According to the College Board (2009), for every 100 kindergartners in the United States, 12 Latino students will complete a bachelor's degree compared to 34 for White students and 18 for African American students.

Latinos currently have the lowest college matriculation and college graduation rates of any major population group (National Hispanic Leadership Agenda, 2008). The National Center for Education Statistics (1996) reported that 25.1% of all students complete their bachelor's degree within five years of initial enrollment (Table 4); the

five-year completion rate for Hispanic students (15.2 %) remains well below the overall rate.

Table 4

*5-Year Bachelor's Degree Completion Rate<sup>a</sup> by Race/Ethnicity (%)*

Race/Ethnicity	1989-1990	1995-1996
Hispanic	17.8	15.2
Black	16.9	14.5
Asian	34.4	35.7
White	27.3	27.8
All Groups	25.8	25.1

*Note:* From National Center for Education Statistics, The Condition of Education 2004: Indicator 19, Retrieved March 6, 2009 from <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/2004/section3/indicator19.asp>.

<sup>a</sup>The percentage of 1989-90 and 1995-96 beginning postsecondary students by their status at the end of 5 years.

In the 1999-2000 academic year, Latino students earned 9% of all associate degrees, 6% of bachelor's degrees, 4% of master's degrees, 3% of doctoral degrees, and 5% of first-professional degrees (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2004). In 2007, 13.4% of Latinos age 25 years and older had received a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 30.6% of comparable non-Latino Whites. In addition, before enrolling in college, 28.2% of Latino 12th graders had expectations of attaining a bachelor's degree compared to 35.1% of White 12th graders (NCES, 2004).

Latino enrollment in colleges and universities increased 16% between 1980 and 2000 and has continued to increase (NCES, 2004). At the same time, however, the percentage of Latinos who complete high school and enroll in higher education has

remained lower than that for Blacks and Whites (Table 5). In 2006, 57.9% of Hispanics who completed high school entered college, whereas 68.5% of White high school graduates entered college.

Table 5

*College Enrollment<sup>a</sup> by Race/Ethnicity (%) 1996-2006*

Race/Ethnicity	1996	1998	2000	2002	2004	2006
Hispanic	50.8	47.4	52.9	53.3	61.8	57.9
Black	56.0	61.9	54.9	59.4	62.5	55.5
White	67.4	68.5	65.7	68.9	68.8	68.5
All Groups	65.0	65.6	63.3	65.2	66.7	66.0

*Note:* From National Center for Education Statistics, The Condition of Education 2004: Indicator 19, retrieved March 6, 2009 from <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/2004/section3/indicator19.asp>

<sup>a</sup>Percentage of high school completers who were enrolled in college the October immediately following high school completion and includes students from age 16-24 years in a given year.

### **Latinos and Higher Education Completion**

Despite many challenges and obstacles, the number of Latinos pursuing post-secondary degrees is rising. Latino college student persistence through graduation, however, has not kept pace with the enrollment increases. As the Latino student population in college has grown, Latino college students continue to graduate at lower rates than non-Latinos (Kuh, 2006). White high school students are twice as likely as their Latino classmates to graduate from college with a bachelor's degree. Of those Latinos who do graduate, 46% complete their education within six years compared to 56% of White students (Kuh, 2006). Although the number of Latino students graduating is on an upward trend, graduation rates still lag behind other groups.

According to the U.S. Department of Education (2004), compared to other groups, Latino students experience a lesser degree of success when success is defined as graduating from college. More than two decades ago, the National Longitudinal Study (NLS) and Current Population Survey (CPS) estimated that 31% of Hispanic students and 42% of African American students completed their college degrees (Astin, 1984). A decade later, data showed degree completion rates within six years at 40% for African American students and 47% for Hispanic students (Tinto, 1993). Although the rate for Hispanic students has improved, it lags behind the 58% rate for White students. Even today, too many minority students continue to leave college and universities before completing a degree (NCES, 2003).

The failure to increase graduation rates for Latino students raises questions about whether current post-secondary education retention models and strategies adequately address the needs of this population and suggest a need for more effective retention strategies and programs directed specifically towards the Latino population. Such focus or direction requires a better understanding of the specific needs of Latino students and the challenges they face in their quest for a college education.

### **Challenges for Degree Completion**

Latino students face a variety of challenges within American society that influence their experiences in education. Challenges to successful college completion include entering college academically underprepared; low socio-economic family backgrounds; first generation status; lack of culturally relevant support systems on

college campuses, especially at predominately White colleges and universities; and a limited understanding of Latino student needs on the part of educational institutions.

**Academic preparation.** Many Latino students grow up in poverty and attend resource-poor schools. Latino students often experience low expectations and are frequently tracked into less demanding high school curriculums (Hurtado, 2000). For those who do make it to college, they often are not prepared for the expectations of college level classes.

**Socio-economic status.** Higher education is the gateway to the middle class or higher status for many Americans. Students from low socio-economic backgrounds, however, find it more difficult to enroll in college, and more difficult to complete a degree when they are able to enroll (Fry, 2007). The income level of all parents, regardless of race or ethnicity, is one factor that can determine the likelihood of completing some college (College Board, 2009). In fact 75% of all young people 24 years and older complete some level of college, as opposed to 9% of young people 24 years or older who are from low income families.

A large proportion of Latino students come from low economic status families (Fry, 2007). This is a key factor in the challenges Latino students face to be successful at the college level. According to Nora (2001), low-income parents of Latino students prepare financially for college much later in their children's academic careers. Thus Latino students on many occasions need to work to help make ends meet.

Furthermore, low-income Latino families face more barriers and have fewer resources to achieve their educational aspirations. Fry (2007) reports that rising costs and capacity constraints are diminishing access to higher education, especially for those

populations who have historically been underserved and for students who come from low income backgrounds. Latinos fall in the categories of not only being historically underserved, but of also being underrepresented in higher education.

**First generation status.** One of the important factors affecting successful college completion for Latino students is that many are first generation college attendees; the majority of Latino college students are the first in their families to attend college (Nora, 2001). For first-generation students, the transition from their world to the academic world is often difficult and not always pleasant. Latino students are faced with the challenge of not only making a transition to the college environment, but also being separated from their home communities and families. This may result in isolation of the student, and a failure to socialize into the campus community. In addition, families may not be supportive because they have no experiences with college themselves. (Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000).

Additionally, first-generation students tend to come from families with lower incomes and have lower levels of engagement in high school (Terenzini & Pascarella, 1996). Both low-income and low levels of engagement are related to how successful students will be in college.

Moreover, according to Kuh (2006), students attending college today are different from their counterparts of three and four decades ago. Women have outnumbered men for more than 15 years, and participation rates for historically underrepresented groups have made impressive gains. Kuh (2006) suggests that some form of postsecondary education is now within reach of virtually everyone in the United States, but not all students are equally likely to succeed. They assert that helping students who are first in their families

to go to college is challenging for many reasons. One of the more important reasons is that many first generation students do not engage in the wide range of academic and social activities that the research shows are associated with success in college (Kuh, 2006). This appears to be a function of students' educational aspirations and their choice of where to live during college.

**Culture-family support.** Latino students who enter college come from a variety of backgrounds. However, many have a cultural background that differs in some respects from mainstream American culture. Many of the students come from families that are more recent immigrants to the United States. With parents or grandparents coming from Mexico, Central, or South America, these students possess the distinct cultures of their countries of origin. Differences can be reflected in language, religion, family values, or worldview. Other Latino students come from the U.S. Southwest, where some cultural aspects also remain distinct from mainstream American cultures. For some, the primarily White college campuses may appear to be an alien environment that ignores or dismisses the differences among students. This can lead to Latino students having a difficult time feeling accepted or comfortable in an environment where their unique characteristics are not valued (Rendón, 2000).

A great deal of research has been conducted to identify the characteristics of first generation, low-income Latino students and the issues they deal with as they interact with college and university social and learning environments (Rendón, Garcia, & Person, 2004; Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000; Rendón 1998; Terenzini & Pascarella 1980; Zwerling & London, 1992). These studies suggest that the factors discussed above combine to create challenges for Latino students.



## **Improving Retention**

When it comes to addressing the needs of Latino students at the college level, many institutions of higher education are continuing to invest their resources in the same way that they have in the past, even though demographics have changed and the needs of Latino students have evolved (Santiago & Brown, 2008). Colleges and universities must assume the task of improving retention for Latino students who face both academic and cultural challenges as college entrants. Higher education institutions must be able to identify factors that contribute to low retention rates and implement student-centered actions designed to meet the educational and related needs of Latino students (Santiago & Brown, 2008).

One failure is a lack of understanding of Latino students' expectations, experiences, and issues. Some studies conducted to understand factors that contribute to Latino student retention have solely focused on academic factors including test scores, grade point averages, and overall academic preparedness. While these are important factors that play an integral part in Latino student college retention, these factors do not address other potential key predictors that may contribute to improving the Latino college retention rates. Further, most studies have focused on assessing failure rather than seeking to understand what factors contribute to student success. It is clear that retention strategies need to be improved in order to increase Latino student success in college and that further research is needed to identify effective strategies.

Pike and Kuh (2006) recommend that while institutions of higher education cannot change the lineage of its students, they can implement interventions that increase

the odds that first generation college students “get ready,” “get in,” and “get through” by changing the way those students view college and by altering what they do after they arrive (p.59).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to contribute to the understanding of best practices that encourage Latino student retention. This study approached the issue from a perspective different than that usually taken to investigate student retention. First, the study focused on successful students, and second, the study applied a phenomenological methodology. The intent was to examine the lived experiences of persisting Latino students who have or were (at the time of the study) participating in the El Centro Resource Leaders Mentoring (ERLMP) program at Colorado State University. The study examines the issues of low retention rates of Latino students in general, and addressed the issues by focusing on what factors contributed to success, rather than what factors contributed to failure for this group of students. This focus on the lived experiences of the students and their own perceptions of the reasons for their success provided a basis not only for understanding that success, but improving experiences for students in general to improve chances for success.

The subjects of the study were students who participated in ERLMP at Colorado State University. The program has been in place since 1994 and has seen a high rate of successful degree completion among participants. The sample of students was drawn from the Peer Mentors (upperclassmen) who work at El Centro.

The participants' experiences provided valuable insights into the factors that contribute to their persistence. This study used an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) that allowed the researcher to explore the experiences of undergraduate Latino students, and in the process, to identify factors that students felt contributed to their persistence.

### **Research Questions**

This study explored the following research questions:

1. What meanings did Latino students ascribe to their experience in the El Centro Resource/Mentoring program?
2. How did the students in the El Centro Resource/Mentoring program experienced their academic program at Colorado State University?
3. What effect did participation in the El Centro Mentoring program had on their persistence?
4. Were there common experiences, stories told, and/or factors Latino students described as participants in the Resource Leaders/Mentors program?

### **Significance of the Study**

This study contributed to an understanding of factors that encourage and increase retention of Latino undergraduates, leading to higher graduation rates. On a more practical level, it helped evaluate and potentially improve programs for retention at Colorado State University. Exploring how to better serve undergraduate Latino students who participate in the ERLMP program was one of the goals of the study. Some undergraduate Latino students at Colorado State University, although successful

academically, fall through the cracks and drop out or stop attending college (Office of Budget Institutional Analysis [OBIA], 2008). Exploring and improving the experience for students who participate in the ERLMP program is essential for improving retention at Colorado State University.

Furthermore, the study provided a method for assessing retention programs and strategies at other educational institutions, and for developing or improving mentoring programs. In addition, this study added to the literature that addresses the need for more appropriate and culturally relevant models and strategies for the retention of Latino students.

### **Study Limitations**

Study findings were limited due to differences at schools in terms of the makeup of the student population, the nature of existing retention programs, differences in university priorities and funding, and differences in the staff that serve students. The effectiveness of a program in one setting may not be exactly replicated in another. In addition, the findings of the study were limited because:

1. The findings of the interviews were dependent upon the honesty and objectivity of students participating in the study and the interpretation of the researcher.
2. The sample focused on Colorado State undergraduate Latino students who have either participated in the ERLMP program as mentees and/or mentors rather than on the broader Latino population.

The research project also began with several assumptions that may have limited the findings of this study.

### **Assumptions**

1. The ERLMP played a key role in undergraduate Latino students' persistence at Colorado State University.
2. Undergraduate Latino students who participated in the ERLMP, either as mentees or peer mentors, had a higher persistence rate at CSU than undergraduate Latino students who did not participate in the program.
3. Latino students have varied experiences and perceptions.
4. The experiences, voices, and perceptions of CSU undergraduate Latino students will add a new dimension to the literature about factors that contribute to undergraduate Latino student persistence.

### **Researcher's Perspective**

For the last 15 years I have worked directly with undergraduate Latino students at Colorado State University. As the Associate Director for El Centro, I have had the opportunity to work with students regardless of background, but in particular, I have worked with undergraduate Latino students. One of my primary responsibilities is to oversee and supervise the ERLMP. Both undergraduate Latino mentors and mentees have come to me seeking advice, guidance, and assistance with personal challenges they face at CSU. These challenges range from students feeling isolated, to lacking a sense of belonging, to wanting to be involved but not knowing where they fit in. Other challenges

these students share include missing family members; struggling with financial situations; experiencing racism on campus and in the community; experiencing cultural shock, identity, and cultural awareness issues; and struggling with academic performance. It is important to note that I have had a wonderful experience meeting with students and listening to their stories of success and achievement. I have found undergraduate Latino students to be successful when the three constructs of social integration, cultural awareness, and a sense of belonging have been enhanced and incorporated in the ERLMP.

Throughout my personal experience at El Centro, I have observed students' needs change. The change is due partly to complex immigration debates that often times have a negative impact on how Latino students are viewed on campus. Racial profiling and hate-filled remarks, both on and off campus, have negatively impacted some undergraduate Latino students' perceptions of themselves as either being accepted or unaccepted by their peers. Unacceptable treatment has a lasting negative impact on all students in general, but in particular on students of color attending a predominately White institution. I have served on several occasions in the role of student advocate and have attended meetings to address negative experiences and treatment of both undergraduate and graduate level Latino students at CSU. These negative experiences compound what many times Latino students, as well as other students of color, have to deal with. In many instances these negative experiences discourage students from continuing their education and they drop out or transfer to another college.

Although I strive to help all students be successful at Colorado State, it is my personal belief that El Centro can do a better job by providing undergraduate Latino

students with a more equal and balanced support mentoring program. The ERLMP currently aims to support undergraduate Latino students as they strive to develop a sense of belonging, cultural awareness, and social integration. However, I was interested in learning more from mentors and mentees about how we may be able to enhance the ERLMP. Perhaps these mentors and mentees can help inform what makes a difference in the persistence rates for all students at CSU. I believe the three constructs—a sense of belonging, cultural awareness, and culturally relevant social integration that validates Latino students’ mentoring experiences—can be enhanced and equally developed with one another to create a more comprehensive student support system for undergraduate Latino students.

Finally, as I reflect back on my own undergraduate experience at the University of Northern Colorado (1977-1982), a university with approximately half the student enrollment of CSU, I realize that the Center for Human Enrichment’s mentoring program provided me with a sense of belonging, cultural awareness and development, and social integration opportunities. For me these vital pieces contributed to my persistence and ultimate graduation from college.

### **Definition of Terms**

1. **Academic Success:** Student with a minimum cumulative grade point average of 2.0 (on a 4.0 scale). Colorado State University defines students with a grade point average of 2.0 and higher in good academic standing (Colorado State University General Catalog).
2. **Attrition:** Withdrawing from an institution without formally completing a

program of study.

3. Biculturalism: Existence of two distinct cultural groups for a student.  
Bicultural students in this particular study identify with core elements of their culture of origin as well as the dominant culture.
4. Chicano: A citizen or resident of the U.S. of Mexican birth or descent; Mexican American.
5. El Centro: One of seven Student Diversity and Programs offices at CSU (formerly known as CSU-Advocacy Offices).
6. ERLMP: El Centro Resource Leaders Mentoring Program.
7. Familia: Spanish word for family.
8. First Generation: Neither parent of student has earned a four year college degree (Department of Education, 2007).
9. Hispanic: A person of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, South, or Central American origin, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race.
10. Latino: For this study Latino will be used as a pan-ethnic term encompassing all different origins and cultures of people, males and females, because that is the usage of the current literature. When reporting research authors/researchers' terminology will be used.
11. Mexican American: a citizen or resident of the U.S. of Mexican birth or descent; Chicano.
12. Persistence: students who have continued anywhere in postsecondary education, including those who have transferred from one institution to another, with the intent to earn a bachelor's degree (NCES, 2000).



13. Resource Leader: Undergraduate selected Latino student peer mentors who mentor and do outreach to first year undergraduate Latino students in the CSU ERLMP program.
14. Retention: Students who remained at the same institution where they started until they completed a program of study (NCES, 2000).
15. White: Term used for non-Hispanics, or people who have original origin from Europe.

## **CHAPTER TWO:**

### **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Retaining students of color in predominately White colleges and universities has been an enduring problem since the late 1960s and early 1970s. According to Laden (2000), the civil rights movement opened college doors to students not previously found in higher education. These new students were soon labeled nontraditional because they did not fit the traditional picture of college students. Nontraditional students, for example, were more likely to be first-generation, academically underprepared, older, female, racially and ethnically diverse, disabled, or from low-income households (Laden, 2000). These factors contributed to high attrition rates for these students, which finally led higher education institutions to employ a variety of strategies to increase nontraditional students' retention and completion rates. Even today, these efforts continue as institutions seek more effective strategies to provide positive learning experiences and increase retention rates, especially for students from minority, racial and ethnic backgrounds (Laden, 2000). These strategies emerged from a growing body of literature concerned with student retention.

This chapter presents a review of literature related to college student retention and specifically, Latino retention. The first part of the chapter discusses studies that focus on student retention in general and then raises questions about the applicability of those models and strategies to minority populations. The next section discusses studies that have specifically addressed the issues and barriers to Latino undergraduate student retention and college completion. The review is organized around seven constructs

identified in the literature: social integration, cultural development, sense of belonging, family support, institutional support, mentoring support, and goal development.

Finally, this chapter suggests a need for new approaches to understanding student persistence. Most studies (Rendón et al., 2000) that have attempted to evaluate the needs of Latino students to improve student retention have used tools such as surveys and questionnaires, applying a top down strategy. Others have called for a different approach to studying Latino student retention, one which applies a bottom up, or student centered approach. A phenomenological research design is proposed as an approach that may offer new insight into this issue. According to Webster and Mertova (2007, p. 25), “Stories are the substance of generations, history and culture. They reflect our journey through life.” They suggest stories may also prove to be an important research tool since traditional empirical research methods cannot sufficiently address issues such as complexity, multiplicity of perspectives, and human centeredness (Webster & Mertova, 2007).

### **General Theories and Models of College Student Retention**

The literature on student retention has identified several theories and models that relate to student retention. These theories and models include the Development Theory of Student Involvement (Astin, 1984), the Sociological Model of the Dropout Process (Spady, 1970), the General Causal Model (Pascarella, 1985), the Student Departure Model (Bean, 1980), and the Social Integration Model (Tinto, 1975, 1993, 2000). These theories and models have created a conceptual framework through which many other researchers have examined the phenomena of college student retention.

Spady (1970) was the first to propose a widely-recognized model for the process of college student dropout. His sociological model of the dropout process proposed five variables (academic potential, normative congruence, grade performance, intellectual development, and friendship support) that contributed directly to social integration preventing dropout. Subsequently, Bean (1980) developed the student departure model. This model describes a psychological process to explain the factors contributing to student attrition. Bean's (1980) model posited that "the background characteristics of students must be taken into account in order to understand their interactions within the environment of higher education institutions" (p. 158). These theories and models focused on student attributes as key factors for understanding the dropout process.

Astin's (1984) developmental theory of student involvement identified factors in the college environment that significantly influence college student persistence. These environmental factors include academic involvement, faculty interaction, and student-peer involvement. Pascarella (1985) integrated concepts from Spady, Bean, and Astin for the development of a general causal model. Pascarella suggested that causal modeling could be used to understand how the postsecondary learning climate influences student persistence. In this model, student background and pre-collegiate traits directly impact how students experience the college environment.

Tinto's (1993) social integration model is generally considered the seminal framework for understanding student persistence in higher education. Tinto's research shows that social integration is an essential component of academic persistence for all students. Thus, students who feel lonely and are not connected to a social network are

likely to leave college regardless of their academic performance. Tinto's work continues to inform current retention practices for all students.

Thus, a number of theories and models about student retention have been proposed and utilized over the past 30 years. However, Berger (2002) recognized that these individual theories and models cannot be viewed as either right or wrong, but as providing direction for creating a more holistic approach to student retention programs. Current practices in student retention include key elements from each of these theories and models, including recognizing student attributes, measuring academic preparation, fostering social integration, and providing a quality collegiate environment.

### **Limitations of General Models for Latino Student Persistence and Success**

Latino students face several challenges in completing four year degrees. Researchers have attempted to identify ways that the challenges can be addressed in college programs. Much of the literature that addresses college retention lacks suggestions on how colleges and universities can utilize the cultural characteristics Latino students bring with them to college. The literature also lacks suggestions on how to positively apply these characteristics to retention programs and strategies (Hurtado & Carter 2004; Rendón, 2002). Often the cultural characteristics of Latino students are viewed from a deficit perspective (Valenzuela, 1999) rather than from an asset perspective, where students are valued and accepted for the unique perspectives and attributes they bring to the college environment. An alternative to the deficit approach would focus on how Latino students overcome oppressive environments, deal with racial conflict, interact with different groups, and overcome cultural attacks such as

discrimination and negative stereotyping. To fully understand success for Latino students at the college level requires a deepened consciousness and understanding of educational and social inequalities, unspoken assumptions about students who do not seem to “fit” traditional postsecondary institutional environments, and the unique factors that shape the success of underserved students (Rendón, 2002).

Rendón (1994) argued that the missing ingredient in Latino student persistence is validation, which is described as “an enabling, conforming and supportive process initiated by in and out of class agents that fosters academic and interpersonal development” (Rendón, 1994, p. 44). The validation theory is an asset model that embraces and supports students in several ways.

The first element of the validation process places the responsibility for initiating contact with students on institutional agents such as counselors and faculty. When validation is present, students feel a sense of self-worth and are more capable of learning. This is essential for students who lack self-confidence in their abilities to be successful college students. According to Rendón (1994), students are more likely to get involved and feel confident after they experience academic and/or interpersonal validation on a consistent basis. Rendón notes that validation can occur in and out of class with multiple agents such as faculty, classmates, family members, advisers, tutors, mentors, and others actively affirming and supporting students and/or designing activities that promote academic excellence and personal growth. Validation is a developmental process as opposed to an end in itself. Finally, Rendón suggests that validation is especially needed early in student’s college experience, especially the first year of college and the first few weeks of class.

Rendón (2002) points out that there are some qualitative differences between validation and involvement theory. For example, Astin's (1984) theory of involvement proposes that highly involved students are likely to devote considerable energy to studying, working on campus, participating in student organizations, and interacting with faculty and peers. Rendón, however, suggested that "Although getting involved in the social and academic life of the college is important for persistence and academic growth, students from low income backgrounds and who are first in their family to attend college usually find it difficult to get involved on their own" (Fry, 2007).

Thus retention of Latino students requires more than colleges and universities providing orientation, transitional programs, and tutoring services focusing on the academic needs of students. Similarly, programs for social integration are important, but may not reach Latino students because of the various factors discussed above. Retention models that focus on the academic needs or social integration without validating the cultural background of Latino students are well intended, but will produce more of the same unfavorable results—Latino college students not completing their degrees. Instead, numerous instances of validation throughout the course of time can result in a richer academic and personal experience of Latino college students (Rendón, 2002).

Latino college success should not be left to chance, rather further studies that take Latino students' culture into account are important to better understand their needs. On a positive note, a common theme found in the literature is the importance for all students to feel they belong and are validated regardless of the cultural background they come from. However, utilizing students' cultural characteristics as a way to engage them in their

educational journeys and contribute to their overall success at the college level appears to be missing from many retention programs (Rendón, 2002).

### **Latino College Student Retention Studies**

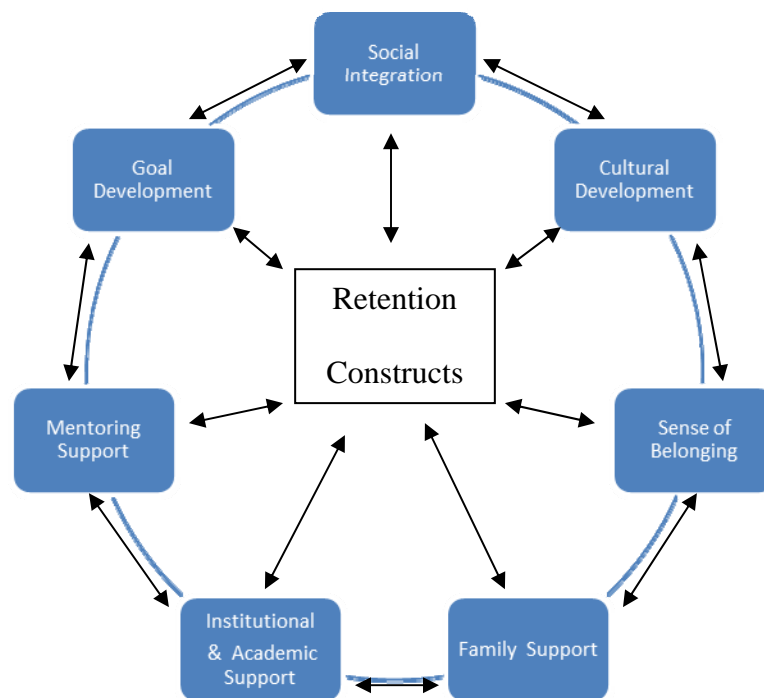
For several decades, researchers have studied the reasons students leave college (Padilla, Trevino, Gonzalez & Trevino, 1997). In the last 20 years (since about 1990), retention studies have been conducted to examine and better understand the experiences of undergraduate Latino students. These studies have provided insights into potential factors that could contribute to and play a key role in the persistence of undergraduate Latino college students (Becerra, 2006; Velasquez, 1999).

Researchers and retention experts have a wide array of opinions on which strategies are most effective at retaining students. Within the body of literature there are several constructs or themes that can be identified. Although these constructs are relevant for all students, some may be more relevant to Latino students and some may need to be adapted to accommodate the unique backgrounds and needs of Latino students (Rendón et al., 2000). These constructs form the basis of strategies that are applied at schools to encourage success; they need to be examined more carefully to see how they apply to Latino student experiences. The following section uses a framework of these constructs as a basis for examining various studies and the strategies that evolve from those studies. It should be noted that many studies focus on more than one construct, but dominant themes can be identified.

### **Retention Constructs**



Overall, retention strategies utilized by institutions of higher education can be broken into seven constructs: social integration, cultural/personal development, sense of belonging, family support, institutional and academic support, mentoring support, and goal development. These constructs are shown in Figure 1. Categorizing retention strategies into constructs helps to understand the needs of college students. Some strategies, such as mentoring, can serve a variety of students' needs.



*Figure 1: Retention Constructs*

The retention constructs shown in Figure 1 are not ranked in any particular order. However, some may be more important for individual students, or groups of students, than others. It must be kept in mind that students are a diverse population who arrive at college with very different needs. Also, at times the constructs may overlap and provide students with more than a single benefit.

**Social integration.** Social integration is intended to provide activities and involvement so students become a part of groups and feel they can better navigate the campus. Tinto (1975, 1993, 2000) has long argued that social integration to campus is as important as academic integration.

Tinto suggests students' interactions with social systems at a university positively correlate with retention. In other words, when students interact with peer groups or participate in extracurricular activities, they increase their "integration" or sharing of attitudes, values, and policies with members of the institution.

One of the challenges is that, although sometimes unintentionally, many colleges and universities marginalize minority students by failing to accommodate their needs, validate their culture, or create an inclusive, welcoming climate (Olivos, 2003). Strategies involving social integration facilitate development of subcultures for Latino students. For example, Latino students receive a sense of family support through Latino Greek organization involvement and multicultural centers (Guardia & Evans, 2008).

Minority students often find it difficult to integrate into an institution with a large White population (Tinto, Hurtado, Rendón, 1993, 1997, 2000). Forming a subculture consisting of a critical mass can allow students to feel as though they fit within an institution even though they may not share characteristics of the majority of students (Tinto, 1997). For example, many colleges and universities across the U.S. have Latino fraternities and sororities. These Latino-based student organizations help students become more socially integrated, especially at predominantly White institutions (Jerez, 2004). Greek organizations serve as a home away from home for students and provide on campus camaraderie and support networks that are important to the academic, social, and

cultural lives of Latino college students (Jerez, 2004; Mejia, 1994). Latino fraternities and sororities play an important role in members' ethnic identity development as well as provide students with a sense of familial (*hermandad*) atmosphere on campus. Many of these Latino based student organizations provide academic support through organized study groups as well (Guardia & Evans 2008). Latino students come from varied subcultures (Fry 2007). Therefore not all Latino students have an interest in joining Latino Greek organizations. Further research is required to understand if where a student comes from geographically determines interest in Latino fraternities and sororities.

Programs and services that address social integration can contribute to the retention of Latino and other minority students (Molock, Kreston, & Mikiko, 2006). Such programs and services offered through advocacy offices or multicultural centers can help establish or develop relationships among students or between students and faculty or staff. Strategies are most effective if they foster interactions with members of the same culture—this encourages subculture formation.

Best practice retention strategies in the social integration construct include supporting cultural and social organizations, community involvement and volunteerism, learning communities, employing a diverse faculty and staff, and facilitating mentoring relationships (Tinto, 2000). Thus, there are multiple factors that contribute to attaining social integration for many colleges and universities.

**Cultural development.** Cultural development is intended to provide students with identity development and validation and a cultural support system (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). It is possible that within any group one may find a wide breadth of cultural competencies. Latino students, as any other students from diverse backgrounds, may

experience cultural disconnect especially if they attend a pre-dominantly White institution (Santiago, 2008). Cultural development and awareness strategies help students learn more about their own culture and the culture of others (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Such events are primarily held in a welcoming environment where students can feel safe acting as themselves and showing pride for their culture.

Perceptions of a negative campus racial climate can lead to attrition among Latino students (Rendón, 1997). According to one study, some Chicano students at primarily White universities often feel marginalized (González, 2001). Latino students need to create pockets of their own culture within the campus community to feel welcome. Tinto (1993) refers to ethnic clubs, groups, and organizations as “social enclaves.” It appears that recognizing the importance of social interactions and social support that is culturally appropriate can be a tool to combat lack of integration and isolation. Furthermore, cultural development support systems and offices have been found to contribute to the persistence of Latino students and perhaps may prevent early departure from the institution (Tinto, 1993). Multicultural and advocacy offices often contribute by playing familiar music, displaying flags, and participating in cultural celebrations that reflect their identity.

**Sense of belonging.** For Latino students and other underrepresented populations, a sense of belonging is an important predictor of their retention at pre-dominantly White institutions (Hurtado, 2000; Rendón, 2000; Gonzalez, 2001). The adjustment and persistence of Latinos in higher education must also be looked at through a historical lens. Due to the political climate and the social-cultural experiences of racism and internal colonialism, educational outcomes for Latinos have remained significantly lower

than for U.S. White students (Acuna, 1988). First generation students, along with other students such as Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender students, and members of certain religious affiliations, are faced with unique challenges as they try to overcome unjust treatment and racism (Acuna, 1988).

Velasquez (1999) examined the relationship among Latino students' sense of belonging, their cultural development, and their subsequent persistence. In this study a questionnaire was given to a random sample of 687 Latino students at three institutions of higher education in San Diego, California. An additional 47-item questionnaire measured students' cultural responses; 4 items measured their sense of belonging. Analysis of the data indicated a high degree of biculturalism and significant but modest contributions to a sense of belonging indicated by the cultural response factors. The data reflects the likelihood that Latino student perceptions of their campus experiences and their subsequent persistence may be affected by students' degree of biculturalism.

Tinto's (1993) theoretical model is generally considered the framework of student persistence in higher education (Braxton, 1997; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001). Tinto recognized that a number of "subcultures" exist among students in most postsecondary institutions, and that such subcultures form an effective base from which underrepresented students can construct their niche and subsequently achieve an effective level of integration and persistence. Although Tinto addresses several issues related to the more complex persistence process of students of color (e.g., sub communities, critical mass, and marginalization), there remain questions about the degree to which the elements of integration explain persistence for students of color in Tinto's model.

Hurtado and Carter (1997) offered several critiques of Tinto's model that focus on the persistence of students of color. One such critique involves the concept of incongruence, which underlies Tinto's model. Tinto (1993) suggests that students of color often drop out of college due to their perception of incongruence or their inability to "fit in" with the intellectual and social norms of a White institution. However, Hurtado and Carter argue that the normative assumptions embedded in incongruence are also reflected in Tinto's major concept of integration. The implication that students of color must assimilate to mainstream, dominant institutional cultures contradicts the research findings that biculturalism and a well-developed ethnic identity are positive factors in the educational adjustment of students of color (Darder, 1993; Torres & Baxter Magolda, 2004). Hurtado and Carter also emphasize that Tinto, while describing the importance of the institutional core values, did not place institutional conditions as a component of his theoretical model. This is critical for Latino students, who often have additional pressures to not only understand the college experience, but also attempt to explain it to their parents if they are first generation (Torres, 2003). Furthermore, the ability to create a cognitive map that allows Latino students to envision how they can succeed in college is an important aspect of transitioning to college and having a sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

**Family support.** Family is an important element of Latino culture. Furthermore, family support is an important ingredient for Latino students' success. When Latino students are attending colleges and universities that are located far from their home communities, an extended family support system can be beneficial. Miranda and de Figueroa (2000) assert that the demands of college life create a unique set of priorities

and needs for Latino students. Many of these needs are centered on the importance of family and family life, language, religion, and the ability to retain one's own cultural identity. According to Miranda and de Figueroa, Latino students often felt they were not embraced or understood by White or Black traditional fraternal organizations on college campuses. This resulted in Latino and Latinas forming their own fraternal organizations that were culturally meaningful. During the 1970s and 1980s, the creation and development of culturally based Latino and Latina Greek organizations played a vital role on college campuses in providing a place for the free expression of students' culture and a place that provided support and sense of family.

Guardia (2007) found powerful relationships between membership in a Latino fraternity and ethnic development. Guardia goes on to state that participants described joining their Latino fraternity because they sought an organization that embraced the Latino culture and provided students with a familial (*hermandad*) atmosphere on campus. According to Guardia, for many students of color (including Latino and Latina students) involvement in ethnically-based student organizations positively reinforces self-worth and pride in their backgrounds and the importance of family.

Latinas who encounter family resistance to college find support and cultural connections through Latina sororities (Stuart, 2008). Regardless of the size, names, and diverse make up of Latino Greek organizations, a common thread exists among their missions: academic achievement, community service, brotherhood/sisterhood, culture and traditions, and pride. "The Latina sorority becomes a family support group," according to a survey of more than 300 students across the country that found membership helped students with their social adjustment to college and boosted their commitment to their

schools, both important factors in deciding whether to stay in school (Stuart, 2008, p. 2). A common theme found in the literature suggests students who join minority fraternities and sororities are provided with a built-in campus family.

**Institutional support.** Institutional support is necessary to provide students with financial aid and academic support. Institutional support also includes orientation programs for assistance with transitional issues, resource acquisition, and personal support systems.

For Latino students and other students of color, the integration into the campus environment, as well as academic success, can be very difficult, especially at majority White institutions (Rendón et al., 2000). Even though predominately White institutions are where a large percentage of Latino students attend college (Santiago, 2008), much of the existing research on institutional support for student retention was conducted before minority students became a “critical mass” on college campuses. Consequently, the research was often based on White male students experiences (Belenky, 1986; Tierney, 1992) and produced a monolithic view of students devoid of issues of race/ethnicity, culture, gender, politics, and identity (Hurtado, 1997).

A recent study focused on social class and college choice found that social class was a significant factor in college choice, attendance, and persistence (Paulsen & John, 2002). According to Fry (2007), family income rather than scholastic achievement has become a significant determinant of college selection and access. Institutions can improve retention by increasing financial aid to Latino students and by providing more information on how to access financial aid. Institutional support includes student work-study employment opportunities as an effective method of providing financial support.



Carter (2006) found that Latinos students receiving work study had higher retention rates than those who did not receive financial support.

Institutional support for students of color can also be demonstrated through transitional services and inclusion of orientation, first year, and small living and learning communities. For example, orientation programs aimed at helping students make a smooth transition to the university are important for Latino students and their families (Hurtado, 1997). Based on existing research, it is clear that institutional support does in fact play an important role in the retention of Latino students and other students of color.

Some Latino students enter college with lower levels of college preparation and test scores than White students due to lower levels of funding to predominantly Latino schools, less access to academically challenging courses, and unqualified teachers (Sciarra & Witson, 2007). Moreover, academic performance plays a significant role in college success for all students, and according to Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), grades may be the best predictor of persistence and degree completion. Strategies for providing academic support include offering test-taking classes, study skills courses, basic skills development courses, tutoring, time management skills, understanding different learning styles, and precollege programs.

Several colleges and universities around the country have created small living/learning communities for students to support the transition to the university and to provide an academic support system (Thayer, 2003). Studies have indicated that students of color who participate in these small living/learning communities have performed better than those who have not (Thayer, 2003; Tinto, 1997). This critical institutional support provides students with academic support and social integration opportunities.

At many institutions of higher learning, strategies have also been developed to address other barriers Latino students may encounter. Identifying at-risk students early in the college educational system is important to offering needed services. Faculty involvement in activities outside the classroom can help validate students, making them feel welcome and important in the educational environment (Rendón, 1994). On most university campuses there are offices whose purpose is to support students in their academic pursuits. These offices provide services ranging from psychological counseling, to tutoring, to club-like activities, which provide social integration, primarily via peer support, that keeps students in their programs (Tinto, 1993).

Some services are specifically directed at minorities for whom sub-cultural and academic challenges could be synergistic (Molock et al., 2006). In providing services, student-support offices implicitly presume that the students make broad-range adjustments to the demands of campus life, much as Tinto (1993) contends.

Multicultural affairs centers and advocacy offices at many college campuses around the United States have been beneficial for minority students (Molock et al., 2006). The realization that students of color had different needs than White students contributed to the creation and support for these offices (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education [CAS], 2006).

Multicultural affairs centers and advocacy offices were established to improve students' ability to succeed academically and to provide students of color needed support and mentoring in other areas. Today, advocacy offices advocate for student success by working to change "policies, practices, and attitudes of the campus and its students and employees that inhibits students' confidence and success" (CAS, p. 257). They also

implement many of the retention strategies previously discussed. Institutions can increase cultural awareness by helping students develop skills for coping with racism, creating an accepting environment, providing cultural diversity and sensitivity training for the entire campus, fostering community involvement, employing a diverse faculty and staff, and mentoring (Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

Seidman (2005) believes the key to improving retention is the early identification of at-risk students and the provision of intensive and continuous support services for them. Institutions can utilize mentoring, form student clubs for minority groups, develop pre-college programs for minorities, establish multicultural centers, and provide financial support to improve retention. In addition to providing mentoring and support services, the retention of minority students may also be improved by teaching students to cope with racism, providing and promoting community involvement, integrating activities with all students groups, and improving the environment for minority students (Boylan, Bonham, & Tafari, 2005). Retention programs may include “advising, counseling, tutoring, basic skills development, first-year orientation, faculty involvement, study skills courses, test-taking clinics, and career advising” (Carter, 2006, p. 40).

**Mentoring.** Mentoring support is intended to provide college students with faculty, staff, and peer role models. Mentors provide positive support and a commitment of time, energy, and resources to help mentees identify and achieve their goals for the future (Miller, 2006). Institutions provide mentoring programs with coping support to address barriers students encounter when entering college. These barriers may include leaving a supportive family environment and lacking cultural support (Padilla, Trevino, Gonzalez & Trevino, 1997).

Support for Latino students can be offered through self-esteem and positive image building activities, counseling, cultural awareness, leadership development, and mentoring. Peer mentoring relationships are frequently identified as retention strategies. Mentoring can help students overcome academic struggles and may encourage students to become involved in campus organizations and activities (Dumas-Hines, Cochran, & Williams, 2001). Establishing a mentoring relationship can improve Latino students' perception of the university (Bordes & Arredondo, 2005).

At many colleges and universities across the country, mentoring programs have been employed to address the problems of attrition. More specifically, Pope (2002) identified factors positively impacting minority students' retention and academic performance, among which include the presence of social and academic networks including mentoring programs.

An effective mentoring program is Bowling Green State University's Students of Color Mentoring Aiding Retaining and Teaching Program (S.M.A.R.T. Program) (Davis, 2005). The S.M.A.R.T. Program was developed by the Office of Residence Life to attract and retain students of color while helping them succeed academically. The mission of the program is to match first-year students with successful residential upper class students who can aid the first-year students in making a successful transition to college life. This mentor relationship serves as a foundation for retaining and ultimately graduating students of color on campus (2005).

Mentoring programs are important retention strategies at some colleges (Davis, 2005). However, according to Knoche and Zamboagna (2006), although mentoring program operation specifics are helpful and necessary for program duplication, understanding the experiences of mentors and others involved in the mentoring process is of additional

value. One study conducted by Knoche and Zamboagna (2006) focused on a group of college student mentors involved in a mentoring program for Latino youth and families, the Latino Achievement Mentoring Program (LAMP). LAMP is a culture-specific program that was developed, and continues to be implemented, by a group of faculty and students from a Midwestern university, and staff from a community center that serves the local Latino population. The aim of LAMP is to match Latino college students (or students identified to be culturally-sensitive) with disadvantaged Latino youth from the community.

The study found that the meaning of the mentoring experience for mentors included developing personal relationships between mentor-mentee, forming mentee family relationships, as well as opportunities for personal growth and development (Knoche & Zamboagna, 2006). Furthermore, mentors participating in the LAMP program identified personal development as an important dimension of their mentoring relationship. Specifically, mentors reported developing or acquiring skills in personal and professional domains. Reinforcing cultural ties and understanding was particularly important for the mentors of Latino backgrounds (Knoche & Zamboagna, 2006).

**Goal Development.** The construct of goal development highlights the need to provide Latino college students with the confidence and motivation to develop realistic goals, and pursue and achieve their academic, social, and personal goals. One goal of a majority of Latino college freshman is to become the first in their families to graduate from college. Latino freshmen are more than twice as likely as White freshmen to be the first in their family attending college (Schmidt, 2003). Few Latino students have parents who have graduated from college to help them set realistic goals. Latino students remain the racial/ethnic group with the lowest parental educational attainment levels (Higher

Education Research Institute, 2006). Institutions can help Latino students' succeed by helping them find direction in college.

According to Thayer (2003), first generation students, irrespective of background, face different types of challenges in making the transition from high school to college. Latino students are no exception; they often enter the college environment with few tangible expectations and do not know what to ask for if they need assistance. The lack of mentors, role models, or advisors may influence their self-regulatory and self-reflective capabilities. These capabilities impact a student's self-efficacy toward being able to make it in college. Oftentimes these students have erroneous beliefs and information. Many Latinos students fail to recognize the long-term benefit to attending college due to the high cost associated with college (Schmidt, 2003).

To maintain some congruence, students conform their behavior to erroneous thoughts such as lacking ability to succeed in college or feelings isolated (Bandura, 1986). The ability to help students create positive images and capacities is critical to their ability to reconstruct their self-image and change their behavior to assure success and achieve their goals (Torres & Baxter Magolda, 2004). Goal development strategies include career advising, culturally appropriate academic advising, mentoring, time management workshops, and new student orientation and transition programs. These strategies help students structure their learning environment to keep on track and motivate them to graduate from college. Additionally, the transitional phase from high school to college can be smoother and less intimidating. Achieving goals and fostering motivation to complete college is positively correlated with retention (Allen, 1999).

## **Conclusion**

Clearly there are many potential factors that can influence positive outcomes for Latino students during their college experience. Choosing which strategies or combination of strategies to pursue can be difficult. Given limitation of resources at most schools, it is important to know which may be most effective or of most benefit. Recent retention literature implies that some of these constructs may be more important than others. When social integration, sense of belonging, and cultural awareness and development are integrated with Latino undergraduate college students' experiences, there is a correlation with higher persistence and retention rates (Chacon, 2002; Immerwahl, 2003; Rendón, 2006; Tinto, 2000). Retention studies that have investigated these three constructs as they relate to minority student college experiences suggest they influence whether students remain enrolled in college or not (Hurtado, 1997; Rendón, Garcia & Person, 2004; Santiago, 2008). However, the relative importance of the three, and specific methods to incorporate these constructs into the college experience, remain elusive. In addition, there may be other factors that are important that have not been identified. One way to address this lack is to use the perceptions, experiences, and voices of persisting students to examine whether social integration, sense of belonging, and cultural awareness development, are considered by students to be the most important contributors to their success.

## Summary

As the review of literature suggests, the issue of retention of Latino students in higher education is complex and there are many different ideas about necessary components of successful retention strategies. The Latino student growth rate will continue to have an impact on many aspects of American society, especially an impact on higher education. Unfortunately, most colleges and universities do not have the luxury of designing and implementing programs that are focused on all diverse students' needs. Thus, the attention given to the rapid growth of the Latino population will be critical to the success of American society. Simply put, Latino student achievement in higher education is crucial for not only Latino communities, but for every segment of our country.

The results of this literature review are a reminder that access to and success in higher education can no longer be defined in terms of college enrollment, and that retention and adaptation are equally important issues especially for Latino students. While not conclusive, research in the field of retention suggests that other factors may enhance or hinder student Latino persistence (Boylan et al., 2005). Most existing models and theories described in this chapter do not provide specific information about other potential factors affecting Latino student persistence; however, these models and theories do provide a framework for understanding student persistence in higher education.

It is apparent from the high Latino student attrition rates that educational institutions need to familiarize themselves with the diversity in their student populations. If positive changes are to take place, colleges and universities must not only recognize there is a need for more research to assist in designing the most effective retention



programs, but begin to implement culturally relevant programs aimed at increasing Latino student retention.

Finally, this literature review gives credibility to the purpose of this study and the research questions posed for investigations. Therefore, Latino student persistence is studied with hopes that the findings refine or add to the body of knowledge on Latino student retention programs.

## **CHAPTER THREE:**

### **METHODOLOGY**

This chapter describes the research methodology used in the study. It includes an overview of the qualitative paradigm and an explanation of phenomenology. In addition, this chapter provides a rationale for selecting a phenomenological research approach, describes the study's participants and the setting, and discusses the research questions, the data collection process, and data analysis methods.

#### **Overview of Qualitative Paradigm**

Creswell (1998) defines qualitative research in the social sciences as an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore social or human problems. This methodology operates on the assumption that experiences and actions can best be understood when they are relevant to a study and observed in the setting where they occur. As Merriam (2001) explains, "Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how they make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world" (p. 6).

According to Merriam (2001), qualitative research includes the use of methods that are interactive and interpretive, uses inductive analysis, holistically explores social phenomena, and develops a rapport with participants. The strengths of qualitative research lie in the researcher's opportunity to be exploratory and flexible (Merriam, 2001). For example, qualitative research allows the researcher to ask questions of different people in different ways and to modify the questions and data collection methods to explore topics that are not initially deemed important or may have not been

explored in depth in the past. Researchers use qualitative methods when they believe the best way to construct a proper representation is through in-depth study of phenomena (Ragin, 1994). A qualitative approach can build holistic pictures of participants' words and views in context specific settings, therefore allowing for a more complex and accurate interpretation (Creswell, 2003; Patton, 2002).

### **Rationale for a Phenomenological Research Design**

A phenomenological study describes the meaning individuals derive from their lived experience of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). Phenomenology asks the question of what is the nature or meaning of an experience. In this study, I was interested in exploring the common experiences of Latino students participating in the ELRMP at Colorado State University. Phenomenology was an appropriate approach to take due to my interests in not only exploring the common experiences of Latino students that contribute to their persistence, but also the detailed examination of individual lived experiences (Willig, 2003). The direct, individual, and collective experiences Latino students experience in a mentoring program have the potential to better inform and further explain the phenomena that is or that is not contributing to their persistence.

The phenomenological approach attempts to eliminate everything that represents a prejudgment in order to reach openness (Moustakas, 1994). A phenomenological design can be used to capture the voice of the research participants. This approach allows the researcher to perceive the participants' reality and make sense of the lives and experiences in which they are engaged as they reflect and share aspects of their personal experiences. Moreover, a phenomenological study can provide researchers the

opportunity to collect data that are descriptive, authentic, and assist with exploring and understanding processes or phenomena in new ways.

In telling their stories, participants may reveal unanticipated information about their lived experiences (Caple, 1991; Manning, 1992). On many occasions, researchers have used this methodology to examine or focus on phenomena that they believe have been misrepresented by researchers using other approaches, or perhaps not represented or found in the literature (Ragin, 1994). Focusing on Latino students who have participated in the Resource Leaders/Mentor Program allowed me to explore their perspectives, experiences, and beliefs about what events, actions, and meanings did or did not contribute to their persistence.

Moreover, a phenomenological approach is valuable for this study because much of the retention literature focused on the outcomes, and disregarded the importance of the experience itself. Improvement of the experience must rest on understanding what does and does not work. Latino college students' experiences matter, and can be part of the problem solving process to address retention and persistence.

Personal stories or *cuentos* are a very important oral tradition of Latino culture (Rendón, 2006). Specifically for Latino families, where oral histories that have been passed from one generation to the next. Therefore, a phenomenological approach allowed the participants to share their *cuentos*, a process that is culturally relevant. This approach helped me better capture the whole story and experiences of the participants. While not all Latino students share the same culture and traditions, storytelling and the importance of family are common themes among most Latino subgroups.

This study is necessary because examining and exploring the lived experiences of Latino students in the ELRMP has the potential to contribute to the retention rates and success of Latino students at Colorado State University. Using a phenomenological approach, students described their experiences and perspectives as participants in the program. This research focused on the lived experiences of a core of successful students. The goal was to explore the truth and understanding of the participant's experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell, 1998). This approach allowed for a new and deeper understanding of the factors that help Latino students succeed.

A phenomenological study provided an effective method of capturing past and current experiences and stories of Latino students at Colorado State University. By using this methodology, I sought to better understand student experiences and views, which are sometimes complex and interwoven. The goal of phenomenological research is to identify and examine phenomena through the lived perspectives of those who personally experience the phenomena (Creswell, 1998). Researchers who use this approach, "search for the essential, invariant structure (or essence) or the central underlying meaning of the experience" (Creswell, 1998, p. 52). Finally, the approach was selected so that I could move from reflective thought to identifying and interpreting the unique perspectives of those students participating in the research.

The study was grounded in a constructionist paradigm that guided how interpretations were made of participants' meaning in the ERLMP program at Colorado State University. The underlying assumption of this paradigm is that reality is not discovered but, instead, socially constructed and shaped by actors (Crotty, 1998; Esterberg, 2001). More specifically, I was interested in exploring and learning from El

Centro Resource Leaders/Mentors Latino students' stories what contributed to their persistence and success.

### **Study Research Questions**

This study explored the following research questions:

1. What meanings do Latino students ascribe to their experience in the El Centro Resource/Mentoring program?
2. How have the students in the El Centro Resource/Mentoring program experienced their academic program at Colorado State University?
3. What effect has participation in the El Centro Resource/Mentoring program had on their persistence?
4. Are there common experiences, stories told, and/or factors Latino students describe as participants in the Resource Leaders/Mentors program?

### **Study Setting and Participants**

The research setting for this study was Colorado State University, which is a land grant institution and a Carnegie Doctoral/Research University-Extensive. CSU is in Fort Collins, a city located in northern Colorado at the western edge of the Great Plains and at the base of the Rocky Mountains; the city has approximately 145,000 residents. CSU has an enrollment of approximately 25,000 students enrolled as undergraduate and graduate students in one of nine colleges. Enrollment consists of students from every state; with 80% of the students from Colorado (OBIA, 2007). Ethnic minorities make up 13.6% of

CSU's overall population (OBIA, 2007). Enrollment for students of color is 6.9% Latino, 3.1% Asian American, 2.3% African American, and 1.5% Native American.

In an effort to support, recruit, and retain students from underrepresented populations, advocacy offices were established through the implementation of Project GO (Generating Opportunities) in the 1968-1969 academic year. The El Centro office is one of four ethnic Student Diversity and Programs and Services offices at Colorado State University. The overall mission of El Centro is to provide an inclusive learning environment that welcomes all students. El Centro supports and strengthens the academic and cultural experience of students by providing workshops, leadership opportunities, and Latino/a cultural awareness programs (El Centro, 2009).

#### **El Centro Resource Leaders Mentors (ERLMP) Program**

Established in 1994, the primary purpose of the El Centro Resource Leaders Mentors Program (ERLMP) is to connect upperclassmen Latino students (mentors) with first year undergraduate Latino students (mentees) in an effort to retain students and help mentees have a smooth transition from high school to college. Latino student mentors provide assigned student mentees with information about services and resources offered through El Centro and other campus programs and offices. Mentors encourage mentees to use the services, programs, and resources as a means to contribute to their overall positive and successful experience at CSU. El Centro mentors send information to all mentees via email, phone calls, and letters. Mentees self-identify as Latino students through the CSU admissions application. Additionally, both mentors and mentees in the program receive information regarding scholarships, academic workshops, cultural enrichment programs, and leadership and volunteer opportunities. At least once per week throughout the

academic year, mentors visit mentees at residence halls for personal contact and communication.

Participants in the study were Colorado State University Latino students who had served at least one full academic year in the capacity of a Resource Leaders/Mentor through the office of El Centro. Up to 30 participants who served in the capacity of Resource leader/Mentor through the office of El Centro in the last five years were solicited by email and follow-up phone calls. An email invited students to participate in the study and provided a description and purpose of the study. The follow-up phone call described procedures of the interviews; a consent form was sent to all students interested in participating in the study.

### **Participant Selection Criteria**

The criteria for the selection of participants included:

1. Students must have served or were currently serving in the role of a Resource Leader/Mentor through El Centro.
2. Students had to be in good academic standing with a minimum 2.0 GPA or must have maintained a 2.0 while serving as an El Centro's Resource Leaders/Mentor.
3. Students must have completed a minimum of two years or earned 60 credits at CSU.
4. Students could be male or female. Approximately 15 males and 15 females CSU Latino students were identified as potential participants in the study.



## **Sampling Procedures**

The El Centro Resource Leaders/Mentors student list includes the first and last name, year in school, contact information, and student's GPAs; the list was requested from the Director of El Centro (Guadalupe Salazar). After the student list became available, an email was sent to students who met the criteria to participate in this study. A description of the study, as well as dates, times, and location of interviews was included in the email sent to students. The email provided potential students participating in study with my phone numbers and email address as well as contact information for my primary advisor, Dr. James Banning, in the event students had any questions about the study and their participation. After the selected students were contacted via email, the researcher followed up with phone calls to ensure students were interested and willing to participate. Once the contacts were made and students responded, 17 total students decided to participate in study. A sample of between 5 to 25 individuals who have had direct experience with the phenomenon being studied is an appropriate number (Creswell, 1998). A brief informational meeting was held with each interested student before the interviews began.

## **Data Collection**

Data was collected from El Centro Resource Leader/Mentors through one-on-one interviews. Sixty minutes was allocated for each personal interview. All interviews were audio recorded. The interviews were professionally transcribed. A second round of interview's followed to provide the study participants with the opportunity to elaborate on ideas, experiences, and perceptions about the themes identified in first round (Creswell, 1998).

## **Data Collection Procedures**

An informed consent form to interview students and conduct and record one-on-one interviews was obtained from each participant. A follow-up (second round) interview was conducted with each participant for clarity and verification of information. For validity purposes, the researcher provided the participants with a copy of the first round interview transcription for review and feedback on any misunderstanding of transcriptions.

## **The Interview Process**

The researcher did everything possible to bracket or set aside his experiences regarding the phenomena being studied. Additionally, the researcher made every effort to set the interview stage to be welcoming, comfortable, and appropriate for the one-on-one interviews. This was achieved by allowing participants to make suggestions and work closely with the researcher to determine ground rules. Participants were provided the opportunity to share about their families if they chose too. By establishing a safe and welcoming environment, study participants felt like they could speak openly, honestly, and freely about their experiences. Participants had the option to discontinue as participants at any time.

## **Individual Interviews**

Interviewing is one of the most powerful and widely used tools of the qualitative researcher (Willig, 2003). Individual interviews were conducted using open-ended, semi-structured questions. The validity and reliability of the interviews explored participants' direct experiences and captured their views and stories. Prior to participating in

individual interviews, participants were provided the opportunity to review the consent form and were given the opportunity to ask questions about anything related to the research or interview questions.

### **Interview Questions**

Interviews conducted in phenomenological studies provide participants the platform to tell their stories and experiences. The interview questions were not necessarily the only questions asked. For example in the process of interviewing students, the researcher explored other topics requiring more detail; additional questions emerged as a result. The initial interview questions were as follows:

1. What stands out most for you about your experience as a Resource Leader?
2. What have been some of your challenges at CSU?
3. As a Latino/a student do you feel your experiences and challenges differ, are the same, or are unique to Latino students?
4. As a woman/man participating in the El Centro Resource Leaders Peer Mentors program, what have you found to be more useful for you?
5. How do you think your experiences in the El Centro Resource/Mentoring program influence your academic achievement?
6. How would you describe the academic support you have or have not received at CSU?
7. What has it meant for you to be academically successful at CSU?
8. What lived experiences as a participant in the El Centro Resource/Mentoring program has contributed to your persistence at CSU?

9. How do you view your experience in comparison to a Latino friend who is not in this program?
10. Describe how you experience your culture at CSU?
11. Tell me about a time when you felt overwhelmed at CSU? What was that like for you?
12. Tell me about your experience of first coming to CSU, what was it like to be away from family?
13. Describe your overall experiences in the El Centro Resource Leader/Mentoring program. Does any experience stand out for you?
14. Are there any other questions I have not asked you about your participation or experience in the El Centro Resource/Mentoring program that you would like me to ask?

Once interviews began, the researcher found that other pertinent questions emerged as important elements to capture participants' experiences. However the original set of interview questions served as a guide for the researcher to uncover the stories, views, and experiences of Latino students at Colorado State University. Care was taken so participants did not feel like they were being led or that the meaning of their experiences, views, or stories was implied. After completing the interviews, themes were recapped and participants asked to review their respective transcript to provide participants the opportunity to clarify any misinterpretations.

## **Data Analysis**

As a researcher, it was important to begin with a full description of my own experience of the phenomenon. This initial process was done with an attempt to set aside my personal experiences and focus on the lived experiences of the participants (Moustakas, 1994). The analysis began with Epoche, which involved an extensive examination of reflective notes that were taken prior to, during, and following the data collection process. Reviewing the notes helped to acknowledge the thoughts, assumptions, and preconceived biases that the researcher held, allowing the voices of the participants to emerge (Creswell, 1998).

Interpretive phenomenological data analysis (IPA) focuses on lived experiences of the participant. It attempts to make sense of the meaning of events, experiences, and stories of the participants themselves (Smith & Osborne, 2003). Even though IPA aims to explore the research participant's experience from his or her perspective, it recognizes that such an exploration must necessarily involve the researcher's own view of the world as well as the nature of the interaction between researcher and participant (Willig, 2003). In other words, IPA recognizes that the relationship and interaction between the researcher and the participant, and the researcher's world view, is present and active in the study. Interpretive phenomenology allows the researcher to look at transcribed narrative texts of the participants' experiences and pull out data about the phenomenon being studied. Furthermore, IPA allows the researcher to explore what the experience means to the participant and to articulate the meanings and practices of those lived experiences. This process required sorting and reduction of emergent themes.

Willig (2001) describes four stages involved in the analysis of data. The first stage of the data analysis process began with reading the text (transcripts). Willig (2001) suggests deep familiarity with the text by reading and re-reading. At this early stage of analysis, initial notes and observations were recorded. These observations and thoughts included questions, associations, and comments on language use, key words, key phrases, descriptive labels, and summary statements (Willig, 2001). After making notes, observations, and reading and re-reading the text of the interviews, the second stage began to identify and label themes that emerged (Willig, 2001). This stage of analysis required a closer recognition of what the text was saying. For example, the themes identified should try to capture something about the essence found in the text. The thematic labels identified through closer attention to the text helped the researcher move to the third stage of the interpretive phenomenological analysis process.

In the third stage of IPA, themes from the second stage were clustered together. Clustered themes were then labeled in a way to capture the essence of the group of themes. These specific labels came from terms used in the texts, descriptive labels, statements, or quotes students made. Willig (2001) cautions that “it is important to ensure that clustering of themes identified at this stage make sense in relation to the original data”(p. 55). Willig further suggests that “the connections between themes identified on paper need to be reflected in the detail of the respondent’s account” (p. 55). This process required a constant and careful review of the different themes and the text to ensure accuracy and consistency. This step was followed to remain true to the meanings of the participants’ lived experiences.

For the fourth stage, the researcher created a summary table of the structured themes identified. These structured themes included participant's quotes from the text that supported them. According to Willig (2001) "The summary table should only include those themes that capture something about the quality of the participant's experience of the phenomenon under investigation" (p. 55). In a nutshell, all the themes in the summary table were directly related to the research questions.

The final stage required the researcher to write up a summary narrative describing the report of the themes in relation to the research questions of the study. This analysis process helped the researcher to discover the essence of the participants' experience in the ERLMP. By constructing meaning from the data collected from the interviews and the emergent themes and sub-themes, it helped the researcher better understand the participants' experiences, views, and stories as they related to their persistence at Colorado State University.

### **Trustworthiness and Validation**

Credibility was established and present throughout the entire study. To ensure trustworthiness, credibility or internal validity was established. Establishing credibility included several key elements such as reflexivity, member checking, and peer examination. These elements were critical in the process of establishing credibility or trustworthiness (Creswell, 1998).

The first step toward validation was to follow Creswell's (1998) suggestion to document personal reflections through keeping a field journal. The recording of a field journal helped me as a researcher gain insight into the feelings, thoughts, and impressions

of participants' experiences. As part of the journaling, I used index cards to highlight and note participants' body language and personal reflections. Another step in establishing validation included allowing the participants the opportunity to verify the transcripts. Before conducting the second round interviews, the participants were provided with a word for word copy of their individual transcriptions. After allowing the participants plenty of time to review transcripts, each participant was asked for feedback or comments on the accuracy of the transcripts.

This process of member checking established increased confidence in the credibility of the research. In addition, member checking helped determine the accuracy of the findings through sharing the final report of themes with participants. The participants then had the opportunity to review findings and themes for accuracy (Creswell, 2003). The follow-up interview with each participant for clarification and accuracy purposes was valuable in establishing credibility of the research.

Peer examination was the third step taken to establish credibility. Peer examination allowed the researcher to discuss and review the study with other colleagues. Dr. James Banning, my doctoral committee advisor, reviewed the work and provided feedback and suggestions. Lincoln and Guba (1985) define the third party as a person who is a "devil's advocate," or an individual who will help keep the researcher honest, raise questions regarding meanings and interpretations, and provide a neutral lens to view study findings. I took Dr. Banning step by step through the data collection procedure, data analysis process, and emergent themes found in my research.

In writing up the analysis of the data, it was important to clarify any biases and prejudices that may have impacted the findings. Past experiences, biases, prejudices, and



orientations that could have shaped the interpretation and approach were commented on (Creswell, 1998). I accomplished this by keeping a journal and reflecting on it daily.

Triangulation was also used as a tool of analysis. Merriam (1998) refers to triangulation as the process of collecting data from many different sources. Study data was collected from interviews, field journals, and my participants' profile backgrounds. In addition, information from the first round of individual one-on-one interviews was compared against the second round interview information. Triangulation also requires the researcher to refer to or compare to other studies for the purpose of shedding light on themes or perspectives from the collection of data. This was accomplished through comparison to studies discussed in the literature review.

Merriam (2001) suggests that reliability in qualitative research has to address one key and central question: are the results of the study consistent with the collected data? Creating and keeping an audit trail assisted the credibility of my study. An audit trail allowed evidence that was collected to be available to others to review. The audit trail for my study included recorded interviews, transcripts of the interviews, and field journal notes/index cards.

### **Summary**

Chapter Three provided a close inspection of the phenomenological approach the researcher used as the methodology for this study. It described why the researcher decided on this approach to explore the lived experiences of persisting Latino students participating in the El Centro Resources Leader/Mentors program, and to better understand what experiences contribute or do not contribute to their persistence.

Additionally, this chapter justified the reasons why the researcher chose the phenomenological approach to explore the research questions.

The phenomenological approach also allowed the researcher to explore the significance of participants' personal and collective experiences, views, and stories told in this context. Chapter Three included an overview of the qualitative paradigm and an explanation of phenomenology. Finally, Chapter Three provided a rationale for selecting a phenomenological research approach, described the study's participants and the setting, and discussed the research questions, the data collection process, and data analysis methods.

## **CHAPTER FOUR:**

### **FINDINGS**

#### **Introduction**

This study utilized a phenomenological approach. The study attempts to understand the lived experiences of Latino/a students who have served as Resource Leader/Mentors in the El Centro Resource Leader Mentoring program. Chapter One introduced the purpose of the study and demographics of the Latino population in the United States. Chapter Two covered the literature on general theories and models of college student retention, and retention constructs to include mentoring. Chapter Three covered the methodology and described the research design framework. Chapter Four

provides insights into the findings from this phenomenological approach, and revisits the purpose of this qualitative research paradigm.

Chapter Four is designed to reveal participants' experiences in ERLMP. The goal of this study was to gain insight into four primary research questions: What meanings do Latino students ascribe to their experience in the El Centro Resource/Mentoring program? How have the students in the El Centro Resource/Mentoring program experienced their academic program at Colorado State University? What effect has participation in the El Centro Resource/Mentoring program had on their persistence? And, are there common experiences, stories told, and/or factors Latino students describe as participants in the Resource Leaders/Mentors program?

The Director of El Centro (Guadalupe Salazar) assisted in identifying and selecting participants for the study. The director provided researcher with a list of Latino/a students who were currently participating or had previously participated in the ERLMP. The researcher and director met and reviewed the list. After discussion of the Colorado State Institutional Review Board criteria participants had to meet, the director recommended a total of 24 current and past students to participate in the study. The basis of this recommendation was made on the contact information availability for students who had served as El Centro Resource Leader Mentors in the last five years, had earned at least 60 credit hours or more at Colorado State University and had a G.P.A. of at least a 2.0. Once the list was provided, the researcher proceeded to contact the students via email and followed up with phone calls to invite them to participate in study. Within two to three weeks of the initial email sent to potential participants for study, 17 out of the 24 students responded either by email or phone to indicate they were interested and willing

to participate in the study. Of the 17 students who participated in the study, seven had already graduated from Colorado State University and were either attending graduate school or had entered the workforce. A total of nine men and eight women participated in the study. All participants signed consent forms and agreed to be tape recorded. The researcher scheduled interview dates and times with each student.

The 17 students who had participated in the ERLMP in the last five years were then individually interviewed. Approximately three to four weeks after the personal interviews were conducted, 13 participants were again interviewed a second time. Of the initial 17 participants of the study, two participants had health and family issues and therefore decided not to continue participating in study. One participant became academically unable to continue in the study and returned to his hometown community.

A total of 13 questions provided the focus for the first one-on-one interviews. For the second interview, six questions were asked to provide participants the opportunity to elaborate on their responses to their experiences of the first round interview. The questions included general impressions and insights about their experience in the ERLMP. Questions regarding participants' academic success, challenges, and lessons learned were included in both first and second round interviews.

Both first and second round interviews were conducted at the Lory Student Center in conference rooms 232 and 234. The conference rooms were a location familiar and comfortable to students and had few distractions. The first round one-on-one interviews were 45 to 75 minutes long. The second round one-on-one interviews ranged from 30 to 60 minutes in duration. All interviews were audio taped with a digital recorder to capture the full communication and assist in recapturing the essence of the interview for clear

data transcription and analysis. Before the second round interviews were conducted, the researcher provided each participant's with a general summary of their first interview responses. This process allowed each participant the opportunity for review and also allowed participants the opportunity to provide researcher input for clarification purposes of the meaning of their experiences.

Field notes, index cards, and summaries of interviews were also part of the data collection process. The first and second round interviews were transcribed using Microsoft Word. Responses to interview questions were organized using a spread sheet system. The spread sheet system allowed the researcher the opportunity to read and re-read specific individual and group responses for each interview question, and helped identify key words, key phrases, frequency of response categories, code data, and identify patterns and emergent themes.

The researcher elected to use the principles of the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis to analyze the data (Willig, 2001). Themes emerged in each participant's transcripts and were organized and interrelated to help establish the participants' common experiences, common challenges, lessons learned, and benefits of ERLMP. This analysis resulted in a framework through which the researcher could identify and establish the participant's common themes across all the transcripts. Moreover, the analysis also provided the researcher the ability to discover the essence of the participants' experiences in the ERLMP.

### **The Participants**

Following is general background information on each participant who participated in both first and second round interviews. While these are quick snapshots, they do

provide the reader the opportunity to become more familiar with the participants. To protect the process and the confidentiality of participants, their identities have been masked by using pseudonyms. The participants are all Latino/a students who were participating in the El Centro Resource Leaders mentoring program, or had participated in the program in last five years, as a Resource Leader/Mentor. All participants self-identified as Mexican American, Chicano, Hispanic, or Latino. The majority of the participants were the first in their family to attend college. Each brief participant profile includes year in school, major/minor, the length of time they have participated in the ERLMP, and general information about their interest or family.

**Enrique.** Enrique is a junior at Colorado State University. He is majoring in sociology with a concentration in criminal justice. Enrique has served as a Resource Leader/Mentor for two years. He is a first generation college student. Enrique is very close to his family and goes home to Denver, Colorado, every opportunity he gets.

**Maria.** Maria is a senior at Colorado State University. She is double majoring in ethnic studies and human development. Maria has served as a Resource Leader/Mentor for two years. Her family is from Mexico. She is a first generation student. Maria attended high school in a small community outside of Denver, Colorado.

**Andres.** Andres is a junior at Colorado State University. Andres is from a large city in Texas. He is majoring in biology with a double minor in chemistry and biomedical sciences. Andres is a first generation college student. He has served as a Resource Leader for three semesters. Initially, Andres was happy to be away from family and on his own; however, Andres gradually experienced a feeling of missing his family and not being able to “just get up and go” since the drive home takes approximately 20 hours.

**Dora.** Dora is a senior at Colorado State University. She is majoring in human development and family studies. She has served as a Resource Leader/Mentor for one year. Dora is a transfer student from a prestigious college. She is a first generation college student. Almost every weekend, she goes home to visit her family in a suburb of Denver, Colorado. Dora is excited to graduate and get a job working with Latino youth.

**Samuel.** Samuel is a senior at Colorado State University. He is a double major in political science and international studies with a minor in Spanish. Samuel is an out-of-state student and served in the ERLMP during the 2008-2009 academic years. Samuel is a first generation college student. Samuel is very close to his mother but only gets to visit her twice a year while in school.

**Berta.** Berta is a senior at Colorado State University. She transferred to CSU from a community college. Berta is majoring in human development and family studies with a minor in early childhood education/teacher licensure. Berta served one semester as a resource leader. Berta is a single parent and a non-traditional student. Her interests lie in education and she would like to become a teacher.

**Ernesto.** Ernesto graduated from Colorado State University in 2010. He earned a Bachelor of Arts in political science and a Bachelor of Science in psychology with a certificate in Chicano studies. Ernesto served as a Resource Leader/Mentor for three years while a student at Colorado State University. He is a first generation college student and was raised in a small community in southern Colorado. He is currently enrolled in a master's programs in the Midwest and would like to someday work in student affairs in higher education.

**Alexis.** Alexis is a senior at Colorado State University. She is majoring in business administration with a concentration in marketing and a minor in Spanish. Alexis is earning her Secondary Teachers License and has served as a Resource Leader/Mentor for three years. Alexis comes from a bi-racial family and did not have much exposure to Latino culture until college. She is from a Denver suburb and is interested in entering the teaching field after graduation. Alexis has plans to get married as soon as she graduates.

**Salvador.** Salvador graduated from Colorado State University in the spring of 2006. He majored in psychology with a minor in Spanish. Salvador also earned a certificate in Latino Studies while at Colorado State University. He served as a Resource Leader/Mentor for two and a half years. Salvador was a first generation student while attending CSU. He is from Texas and went on to earn his master's degree from Harvard.

**Dan.** Dan graduated from Colorado State University in 2008. He majored in economics, with a minor in business. He served as a Resource Leader/Mentor for two years or during the 2005-2007 academic school years. Dan comes from an upper middle class family where both his parents have earned advanced degrees. Dan had limited exposure and involvement with the Latino community until his involvement with the El Centro program.

**Concepcion.** Concepcion graduated from Colorado State University in 2009. She is a first generation college student and transferred to CSU from a community college. She served as a Resource Leader/Mentor during the 2007-2008 academic school years. Concepcion is currently a graduate student at Colorado State University and is the mother of two young children. Her background includes a mixture of Native American and Mexican American cultures.



**Rico.** Rico graduated from Colorado State University in 2010. He majored in history with a minor in ethnic studies. Rico served as a Resource Leader/Mentor for three years during the 2007-2010 academic school years. Rico comes from a military family background and considers himself to be very independent. Rico is currently a graduate student at Colorado State University and is very proud of his Puerto Rican culture.

**Diego.** Diego is a junior at Colorado State University. He is majoring in health exercise science with a concentration in sports medicine. He has served as a Resource Leader/Mentor for one and a half years or from 2010 to the present. He is from a small rural community located outside of Denver, Colorado. Family is very important to Diego and he goes home as much as possible on weekends. Diego aspires to have his own dentistry practice after completing his advanced degree.

**Esteban.** Esteban graduated from Colorado State University in 2009. He majored in business with a concentration in finance. Esteban served as a Resource Leader/Mentor for two years or from 2007-2009. He is from a small rural community located outside of Denver, Colorado. Esteban comes from a traditional Mexican family where hard work and the value of family is emphasized. He is working in the banking field and plans to begin a master's degree in 2011. He enjoys playing futbol/soccer on his spare time.

**Amparo.** Amparo graduated from Colorado State University in 2008. She double majored in political science and sociology with a minor in criminology. Amparo is currently employed by a legal firm in Colorado. Amparo served as a Resource Leader/Mentor for three years from 2005-2008. Amparo comes from a bi-racial family with her father being Mexican and her mother being of Asian descent. She is not close to

her family and had very little exposure to Latino culture until becoming involved with the El Centro program.

**Paula.** Paula graduated from Colorado State University in 2009. She double majored in Spanish and journalism and technical communication. She served in the role of Resource Leader/Mentor for three semesters or from fall of 2008 to fall of 2009. Paula is from an upper middle class family who resides in a mountain community located west of Denver, Colorado. Paula comes from a bi-racial family with her mother being White and her father being of Mexican American descent. Paula is now residing in California where she co-anchors a television program.

**Ash.** Ash graduated from Colorado State University in 2009. She majored in social work with a minor in business and Spanish. Ash served as a Resource Leader/Mentor from 2006-2009. She is from Denver, Colorado, and frequently went home on weekends to visit her family. Ash is very close to her parents. She comes from an upper middle class traditional Mexican American family. Ash is currently employed by a legal firm in Colorado and is thinking about applying to law school in a few years.

### **Individual Interviews**

After the participants provided general information about their majors/minors and how long they had served in the role of El Centro Resource Leader/Mentor, they were all interviewed one-on-one by the researcher. Each of the participants was asked a total of 13 questions, with one additional question. The additional question of the first round interview process provided the participants the opportunity to ask the researcher if there were other questions he had not asked of them about their participation or experience, either positive or negative, in the El Centro Resource/Mentoring program.

## Themes

Four main themes were present throughout all the interviews: common challenges, common experiences, benefits of ERLMP, and lessons learned. These themes emerged from the analysis of the transcripts and described how the phenomena was experienced. As the participants answered the interview questions, they shared their mentoring experience in the ERLMP and their responses formed the themes. The following is a general summary of the participant's responses to the interview questions. A table has been included in each section to relate the interview questions to the respective research questions.

### **Research Question # 1: What Meaning do Latino Students Ascribe to Their Experience in the El Centro Resource Leaders Program?**

Table 6.

#### *Interview Questions Related to Research Question #1*

<b>Question Number</b>	<b>Question</b>
Q# 1	What stands out most for you about your experience as a Res. Leader?
Q# 4	As a Woman/Man participating in the El Centro Res. Leaders program, what have you found to be more useful for you?
Q# 9	How do you view your experiences in comparison to a Latino friend who is not in the program?
Q# 13	Describe your overall experiences in the El Centro Res. Leaders Mentoring program. Does any experience stand out for you?

**Question 1.** The majority of the participants felt that what stood out most for them about their experience as a Resource Leader was the opportunity to network and be able to interact with other Latino students. Response categories for interview Question 1 included “Building Relationships and a Sense of Community” (76%) and “Leadership/ Mentorship Role Contributed to Gaining Better Resource Awareness” (71%). What also stood out about their experience was that being able to serve in this leadership position helped them help other Latino students connect with resources, such as scholarship information, leadership opportunities, and the transition to college life. In her interview Dora said: “what stands out to me most is being able to network with Latinos from different backgrounds.” Ernesto added

What stands out the most for me would probably be just the daily contact I had with students, knowing that I was in a leadership role to make an impact with students and help students transition into the college environment, working with predominately Latino students. I myself being a first generation student, I felt I was able to really relate to students as far as transition issues that might come up, whether it was being first time away from home, or being the first in the family to attend college.

Several participants felt that while serving in the role as a Resource Leader they were able to learn more about campus resources and that the El Centro program provided them with a sense of belonging. One student, Concepcion said

My experience as a Resource Leader, I think it helped me be more connected to the community. I’m in a Latina sorority so that helps but to have the sorority and be involved through the El Centro program both together drew me in and made me feel, like part of the community as a collective whole.

Dora added “It’s definitely the ability to be able to help students connect to campus especially Latino Hispanic students, definitely just giving Latino students the resources and inviting them to a place where they can belong.”

Some participants felt that their experience as a Resource Leader helped them become more involved on campus and mentor other students. Maria responded

I think as a resource leader it really helped me, not only, well personally especially helped me be more involved with the campus, but it also helped me to mentor other students and I think just allow them, you know, just a support system.” She went on to say “I know college can be super difficult, it was really tough for me my freshman year. It just meant a lot to me to be able to be there for other students, especially other minority students like myself.

**Question 4.** The primary emergent theme participants reported to be useful as male or female participants in (ELRMP) was a sense of community. Eighty-two percent of the participants reported having a sense of community was what they found to be more useful for them. During Dan’s interview he said

I guess the most important resource I got out of it as a male is a sense of community, and I guess like a home base, and an area on campus that I felt comfortable in, and an area that I knew had plenty of resources both in you know the accessibility on campus it had study areas.

Secondary themes for question number four included learning about resources and being able to improve participant’s academic achievement. Sixty-five percent of participants reported they found that the leadership position helped them acquire skills for academic achievement. Alexis said,

As a female working with other males, it kind of pushes me to want to get good grades so that I can tell you guys I’m doing great, I aced this test. And it really has kind of along (sic.) with me learning about the resources on campus, has helped me to utilize those more so that I can improve my academics.

**Question 9.** All of the participants felt there were significant advantages to being in the program compared to Latinos or Latinas not in the program. Participants in ERLMP were significantly more involved on campus, participants were more “plugged in,” they formed important relationships, had more networking opportunities, were

exposed to more resources, received more motivation, were provided with a sense of belonging, had a positive experience mentoring other Latino students, and had a better sense of direction in life. Berta commented by saying

I feel Like I have more of a sense of belonging and more of an identity in campus because I have spoken to other Latinos that are not really affiliated with some of the same groups of people affiliated with El Centro or any groups on campus for that matter and are just kind'a here as students and go home on the weekends or don't get involved much.

Berta went on to say

I feel like the ELRMP has made my experience more fulfilling and has I don't know if it makes more sense to say, more meaning because it is hard to say or to compare that, but for me it's, it's given me more motivation to know that I can share my experience with other people and to be able to help somebody else you know who is facing similar challenges and when you are not connected in that way, then you are just kind'a on your own so I feel there is a disconnect there with people that aren't involved with the ERLMP.

Ernesto answered Question 9 by saying

My group of friends that were Latinos my first year, a lot of them weren't involved in El Centro or the peer resource mentor program. I really just saw that the majority of them, most of them didn't get involved in campus events, most of them didn't get involved in community events, most of them didn't utilize some of the services and programs that were offered in El Centro and by extensions by the academic support and services that El Centro also serves to promote, I just didn't see, I guess the same level of involvement in the university for those Latino/a students and to me, I feel that that level of involvement and the level of involvement that I was able to get through El Centro, which I was able to get involved in a lot of different areas but again I feel kind of like the whole hub of my involvement and my experience at CSU was through the peer resource leaders mentors program and through El Centro, so it is because it was kind of through El Centro that I branched out to everything else.

**Question 13.** Overall, all of the participants said their ELRMP experience was positive. A majority of respondents felt that building relationships and gaining a sense of community was what stood out the most as a significant benefit of the ERLMP. Some

students also felt that the self-improvement through being in an El Centro leadership position was another standout experience. Most participants (82%) felt that their participation in ERLMP provided them the opportunity to build relationships and that the ERLMP gave them a sense of community. Slightly more than half (53%) of the participants described their experience in ERLMP as one that provided them with self-improvement through serving in a leadership position. Dan said

My overall experiences in the El Centro Resource Leaders program were very, very positive it was great to establish relationships with like minded people, people who had the same values, people who were often academically focused, people who were also involved on campus and it also gave me an opportunity to see how El Centro catered to all grade levels, it got to give me some positive role models to look up to so I felt the people who had been in college for 3-4 years or 5 years or whatever the case might be, and I saw what they were doing, I saw what they were accomplishing and I saw what they were involved in and that really allowed for me to participate in those same things.”

Dan went on to say

On the flip side my most touching moment is the resource leader experience my junior year, and I established close friendships with freshmen or just students I was reaching out to and I had some really warm conversations with a couple of students that really looked overwhelming and these conversations showed that my friendship meant a lot and my guidance meant a lot and they really looked up to me and the profound feeling that someone looks up to you is so insightful and such a redeeming moment and so, that moment in particular, a couple moments in particular along with the experience in general is very, very touching.

Rico said

Overall, it was a positive experience. It put me in contact with a lot of people, for two reasons. For one, my role as a role model, my experience as a role model, I was able to help others, that is always a good thing for anybody. And I believe that, and the other would through this leadership position, it put me in contact with other groups of people so this experience helped me self improve at many levels.

Rico went on to elaborate

It could be with the all diversity offices training, it put me in contact with other offices and their role models, their resource leaders or peer mentors. I made friends, like, people I still talk to, to this day.”

Alexis said

yeah it was really hard for me my first year working here. I don't really like talking on the phone and that was the hardest thing for me. I know we were trying to get a lot of students for the Somos Rams retreat and I kind of pushed myself to get on the phone, call students. I didn't get a lot of students to come I had one student come out of all of them. But that one student and I, she still comes in the office, she's still involved and it kind of showed me the importance of kind of putting myself out of my comfort zone I guess, because it does work. Even if it's just for that one student, I know that she has still talked to other students who have then come into El Centro. And I think it just, I've realized, they may not answer back but they know about it. And that's what we're trying to do. We're showing them that when they do get into trouble, they have that resource there.

According to Maria, her overall experience was good.

Overall I had a really good experience. I feel like, it's been really helpful not just from what I've been able to provide for my students that I have mentored, but what I have learned for myself. I feel like it's given me more of a sense when I first you know decided to apply to El Centro, and work for El Centro. I didn't expect to get a role where I was actually was gonna do more than just you know sit at a front desk, or you know stuff that maybe I expected before. I feel like I've had, I've worked a really good amount of different jobs throughout you know since I've been able to work. And I feel like this is a job where it's actually, beneficial to myself growth, when it comes down to it, I grow from it because I'm able to see things on a different perspective, and see how students come in you know in the ways that I came in. And, knowing that if I could've changed and changed my ways and I grew from that, like it makes easier for me not to just be like they're just ignorant freshman, because I know that I was like that at one point. So I feel it's really really empowering for me personally, and I feel like it actually pushes me even more to think about going into higher education, when you know when I do my master's and stuff like that so.



**Research Question #2: How Have the Students in the El Centro Resource Leaders Mentoring Program Experienced Their Academic Program at CSU?**

Table 7.

*Interview Questions Related to Research Question #2*

<b>Question Number</b>	<b>Question</b>
Q# 5	How do you think your experiences in the El Centro Res. Leaders mentoring program influence your academic achievement?
Q# 6	How would you describe the academic support you have or have not received at CSU?
Q# 7	What has it meant for you to be academically successful?

**Question 5.** A majority of participants perceived being in a position of leadership gave them the opportunity to lead by example and develop their leadership skills. ERLMP provided participants the opportunity to perform better academically. Feeling a sense of family and community also helped motivate students to perform better academically. Eighty-eight percent of the participants felt that holding a leadership position in ERLMP helped them acquire skills for academic achievement. Additionally, 41% of participants felt the ERLMP provided them with a sense of family and community, which encouraged participants to do better. Andres said

Just to know the fact that I am a resource leader, I do know of different services out there to help with academic support. Whether it's the writing center to help me write a paper for my lab reports or the TILT building that has free tutoring or the AAC at Gibbons, just different support systems that you wouldn't normally know about if you weren't active on campus or in this position.

Andres goes on to say

“And it’s all free to us with our student fees, like, we are paying a fee for it so why not use them? And so I have taken advantage of that since I have become a resource leader.”

Concepcion said

I think it influenced my academic achievement in a positive aspect because it, not only because of the resources that I was exposed to and became familiar with, but because of the peer support and the social support that I had built and because it just helped me reach that comfort level so that I was able to concentrate on my academics more.

Concepcion continued to say

Once I became comfortable, I kind of just became more at ease, and was able to focus a little bit more, where I wasn't so nervous or you know my first semester I left campus everyday between classes. So once I had a place where I belonged and where I could come, I could go there in between classes, and it saved me time as a place where, I got more done academically.

**Question 6.** All of the participants felt that academic support at CSU was available if you took the initiative to utilize it. Participants described several academic support systems they had benefitted from through involvement in El Centro and other advocacy offices. Esteban said

The academic support I would say is available for the students that are looking for it. I know in my case when I sought academic support, I found it, a lot of times academic support could also mean interviews, could also be education on different classes, mentorship programs, and that kind of thing. I know El Centro they do provide that, so all around it's a concentration of a lot of exactly what it is its resources. But through the El Centro program and other advocacy offices a very (sic) a small group of students get very specialized individual support. I think that helps quite a bit.

Dora said

I think overall it's been really good through you know advising, through tutoring, through meeting with T.A's and again having El Centro. Just overall the academic support at CSU it has been great.

**Question 7.** Most of the participants reported that being academically successful means earning good grades and is measured by GPA. One participant said to be academically successful was measured by personal effort. Another participant said her academic success was measured by graduating and getting a job. Dora said

It's (sic) definitely means a lot. I'm a first generation so it's a huge accomplishment for me to be here, to be a senior at C.S.U. and so just because of my background I know my family expects it of me, everyone expects it of me so it's huge, it's huge to be academically successful and earn good grades.

Alexis said

I'm a really big stickler for As and Bs so when I'm not getting As and Bs, I freak out. If I get a C on an exam, I'm like calling my mom crying because my GPA has always been something that's important to me. My sister is really smart so I always tried to compete with her but especially at CSU, I've wanted to, like, get above that 3.0 because my first couple of years wasn't the greatest...

A few students said graduating and getting a job is how they measured success. Amparo said

My academic success at CSU is not, not so much the grade point average, but I did feel that I was successful by graduating and knowing that I had a job afterwards. I think for me that was my success.

Andres also said

For me, it's not necessarily grades. I mean, I can make an A in a class and still feel like I'm not being academically successful. Because if I know I'm not doing my best, then why is it being successful to me? I mean, to me, to do my best, if I do my paper and get a C on it, then I know I did my best. So, I mean, I will be happy with the grade I get.

**Research Question #3: What Effect has Participation in the El Centro Resource Leaders Mentoring Program had on Participant’s Persistence?**

Table 8.

*Interview questions related to Research Question #3*

<b>Question Number</b>	<b>Question</b>
Q# 2	What have been some of your challenges at CSU?
Q# 8	- What lived experiences as a participant in the El Centro Resource Leaders program have contributed to your persistence at CSU?

**Question 2.** The response categories and emergent themes for Question 2 included: “Cultural Shock” (71%), “Transitioning and Adapting to College” (65%), and “Time Management” (17%). Three students’ additional challenges included a lack of sense of belonging, financial hardship, and time management. For example, Salvador said

Well, I mean, you know with, as with a lot of different situations you find yourself in as a Latino student, is that fact that you are a minority among, you know, a very large student body and I believe when I was there the numbers were around 3 percent or so, if I remember correctly.

Salvador went on to elaborate

And that was a factor, you know, just trying to be able to find my niche and, you know, be able to be comfortable in that kind of environment. And I think this resource leader mentor program was something that really helped me not only find my niche and be comfortable at the university, but once I became an actual resource leader myself, then being able to reach out to others, manage my time better and kind of make the transition more smooth for me too.

In response to Question 2, Diego said

The hardest would be just being away from family. That’s the hardest part, going back to our culture, being Hispanic or Latino, we all know that family plays a huge part, so not having my parents up here or anyone close. Yeah, I could go home on the weekends and I try, but I think that’s the most difficult thing about being at CSU.

Diego went on to say that

also, having to do with that culture shock, you know that there aren't many other people that I can relate with on campus as much as my high school where I went and there were many Latinos, and here there's scarcely any.

**Question 8.** The emergent themes for Question 8 suggest that several different participants experiences contributed to their persistence. The lived experiences include the ELRMP providing a sense of belonging and community and the leadership/mentorship experience. Additionally, being recognized for academic achievement and acquiring skills in a resource leader position also contributed to their persistence. The response categories included "Sense of Belonging/Community" (%) and "Leadership/Mentorship Experience" (71%). Forty-seven percent of participants said they acquired skills that helped them through the leadership/mentorship experience.

Enrique said

my freshman year was a tough time adjusting to college life and my environment, away from my family; I feel El Centro helped to provide a support group, even possibly a family that I could feel comfortable around but not replace my family in general. It just, it played a pretty big role for me to stay up here. Without El Centro I don't think I would have ended up staying up here.

Esteban's lived experience as a participant in the ELRMP was a little different, he said

when you are getting that experience, it starts making, it doesn't make school easier just makes it more accessible, it makes it attainable to actually complete the university stuff and graduate. Looking back now, I know that sometimes, that's what it was for me, and so a lot of times I feel like in the beginning when you don't have that support, when you don't have those skills, you feel, I felt a little bit isolated. Once I started acquiring the skills the techniques, those personable skills, the doors started to open on their own and so it makes the University itself more accessible and you feel comfortable enough to stick around until you complete your degree, I don't know, that is what my experience was.

**Research Question #4: Are Their Common Experiences, Stories, Told And/Or Factors Latino Students Describe as Participants in the Resource Leaders/Mentors Program?**

Table 9

*Interview Questions Related to Research Question # 4*

<b>Question Number</b>	<b>Question</b>
Q# 3	As a Latino/a student do you feel your experiences and challenges differ, are the same, or are unique to Latino students?
Q# 10	Describe how you experience your culture, your cultura at CSU?
Q# 11	Tell me about a time when you felt overwhelmed at CSU, What was that like for you?
Q# 12	Tell me about your experience of first coming to CSU, and what was it like to be away from family?

**Question 3.** The emergent theme for question three suggests that overall, participants’ shared similar experiences and challenges. Seventy-one percent of the participants shared a similar experience that was different from other cultures. More specifically, as Latino students they shared a range of similar experiences that included feeling discrimination, being an out-of-state student, having concerns and reservations regarding the campus climate, suffering financial disadvantages more so than non-Latino students, and being the first in their family to attend college. Ashley said

I think my experiences are similar, in the fact that it comes by our culture. We all shared that similarity of you know food, having that home feeling, importance of family, just you know, kind of struggling in classes and not feeling that you know we have the same help there is that is offered compared to other students. So I think my experiences and challenges are very similar.

In response to Question # 3, Concepcion said

I think a majority of Latino students that come up here are first generation as well and that's how I formed a lot of my friendship bonds because we're kind of, like, struggling through this whole academic process together. A lot of the other students that I see, their parents were here before and they're kind of at an advantage, and they don't share in the same discrimination experiences as Latino student do sometimes.

Fewer than 18% of participants reported that their experiences and challenges were different due to being out-of-state students, coming from a multi-cultural or bi-racial family, and not growing up with Latino/a culture as the dominant culture in their upbringing. Amparo provided an example; she said

For me it was very difficult because I was not just only Latino/Latina, I am also multi-cultural. So, being Mexican and Korean, I had to deal with, not necessarily deal with, but I came from two different cultures. And, coming to CSU, I felt that I was a bit different than other Latinos because, I came from two separate backgrounds that were totally different from each other and I didn't really feel like I had a place to go to, to relate too.

**Question 10.** A majority of participants attributed being involved with ERLMP and/or being involved with other student organizations as the primary way they experienced their culture at CSU. Some participants reported that experiencing their culture was done through a personal means, such as educating self and increasing personal awareness about their own culture. Three students felt experiencing their culture at CSU was challenging due to their unique and diverse Latino cultural background (i.e., Tejano, Puerto Rican, Mexican/Korean). Most participants (82%) experienced their culture through involvement in ELRMP or other student organizations; 24% of the participants said they experienced their culture through education and gaining awareness; and 18% of study participants said it was either challenging or different to experience their culture at CSU. Berta said she experienced her culture by

just sharing the biggest part I think is sharing experiences with other students that are specific to our culture. It is family, the importance of family or traditions or things that we share that we just get that we understand and we don't have to say much about. Like we say one word and everybody laughs or nods and I think that is the biggest way, I mean and then there are other smaller ways that our culture is represented in some things like that but I think that is the biggest way I experience it.

Andres said

My culture at CSU is very different, I would say, because with, like, the Latino culture in Texas is more like the Tejano style culture which is very different from, like, people I've met here that are from, like, Mexico. And so, it's like I would meet some like other Latino students and they would start listening to all this Spanish music. I never heard it before so I would play my Spanish music, and they were like, "wait, what is that?" And I would say it's Tejano music and like "what is Tejano?" and I would have to explain to them what my own culture was. And so, I know there are some people from Texas here, but Texas is such a big state, that it's very rare you'll find some from the same area. So I do think it was challenging you know, kind of, do feel alone in that my culture as a Tejano was not expressed here at CSU.

Ernesto elaborated on Question 10, he said

I didn't really fully understand what it meant to be Latino until I went to CSU. Which to me, I kind of look back and I feel is kind of ironic and different that I had to go to a predominantly white institution to not necessarily get tied within my culture but to fully understand what it meant to be Latino, because it was just I guess you could use the analogy of a fish out of water, you know, like I was in my hometown which is in southern Colorado which is a predominantly Latino community you know, to something that I was completely unaware of.

Ernesto continued,

So my ethnicity and my culture... at the time because when I walked around campus I saw a lot of people that didn't look like me, that didn't share the same experiences, a lot of the same history and past as I have, and it was that involvement in El Centro program and making that contact in El Centro that really kind of made me realize, like, you know there's more people like me over here and there's people I can connect with and there's people here too that I can share my stories with and share my experiences with. So I think as part of that, I was able to participate and volunteer in a lot of, celebrations whether that be Cesar Chavez day, uhh, Dia de Los Muertos, Cinco de Mayo, Las Posadas, you know, really any



of that. That was something that wasn't celebrated in my hometown and my community. So to go out there and first understand you know what those holidays meant, how they are celebrated and what not, to me was very important. It was very enriching for me because it was something that I had never been exposed to before.

**Question 11.** Many participants reported feeling most overwhelmed when transitioning and adapting to college, as well as when facing academic challenges. For many participants it was difficult being away from family. Moreover, making the transition to college and dealing with financial and time management issues caused participants to feel overwhelmed at CSU. Most participants (88%) felt overwhelmed transitioning and adapting to college life; nearly half (47%) felt overwhelmed at CSU due to a lack of diversity and a feeling of cultural shock. Alexis reported

I mean definitely with classes and just having so many exams all at once. I think finals week freshman year was the most stressed out I've ever been. My very first finals week was hard because I hadn't really gotten involved with anything I just kind of hung out with the people on my floor, I wasn't really involved with any orgs and I was kind of just left to fend for myself. And I was freaking out about my grades and I don't know, it was really stressful. I got sick and stressed out and it wasn't very enjoyable.

Ash said

I would say a time I felt overwhelmed was just when I first started, again experiencing that culture shock I mean I went to a school a high school that was majority Caucasian but there was still a good amount of Hispanics and minority students and I was involved in a lot of groups like clubs for like for multiculturalism. When I first came to CSU it was like you still have the big classrooms and I pretty much you know you can still be singled out as the only Latino in your classroom so I would say that was overwhelming and made me feel left out.

Berta added

My first semester was really overwhelming like I said earlier, I left campus after class because I, it was just overwhelming, I just didn't know where to go where to go, I just felt out of place really uncomfortable, and I had to leave to get anything done, I just felt it was really lonely and kind

of frustrating because I was taking so much time to leave campus and come back and leave and come back and I think that is mostly it, lonely and frustrated.

Enrique said

Well, I guess a time when I was feeling overwhelmed was when I was on academic probation. It was my fault for being there in the first place for not taking charge of what I had to do, but I was very overwhelmed in trying to get above a 2.0 to be able to stay here, in school. It got to the point where, I considered the fact of considering the option of just dropping out of CSU and then picking up maybe in Denver at a community college and then applying to Metro or something. It brought up, like a lot of discouragement. I was stressed a lot, I was very sad at that point. Not only was it the academic probation influencing that crossroads, also family ties and other personal aspects of my life, such as relationships, and finances that were hurt by me being up here.

**Question 12.** The majority of participants felt that their experience of first coming to CSU and being away from family was challenging. Moreover, the experience was emotional and caused a sense of uncertainty. Some participants felt that the experience of first coming to CSU and being away from family made them feel disconnected. Nearly all of the participants (94%) felt emotionally challenged and did not have a sense of belonging or community. Only 6% of participants said their experience of first coming to CSU and being away from family was not difficult. Two students reported that being away from family gave them a sense of independence. However, the majority of participants had a difficult to being away from their families.

Paula reported

Yeah, that was actually incredibly difficult for me. Like I said, I'm a really family oriented person so it was really tough, you know, leaving. Although my parents were probably an hour and a half from the university, it was just really difficult for me to be away from them. And just transitioning into a whole new lifestyle, it wasn't just academically harder, it was a completely different lifestyle living in the dorms, and just things like that I'd never experienced before. You know, it was incredibly difficult.

Maria said

I feel like it was, personally at first I was excited, just because you know everyone likes to be away from home every now and then, and on their own. I feel like it did make it really hard because I feel like sometimes our family just sees it as your leaving them, and you don't want to live with them no more, and you don't want to go visit them. And I feel like that really puts a lot of pressure, for me personally it did. Hearing of all the stuff like always talking to my mom and you know she would tell me like oh your little brother did this and he's in trouble and your sister did this and she's in trouble and your older brother is not taking care of this, stuff like that. And like, having to hear "you know you're over there in Fort Collins, and you, I feel like you don't want to help me cuz you don't visit or you don't really care because you don't call as often."

Maria went on to say

I feel like it's really really hard, and it just takes awhile to kind of explain it to your family. And not just that, but kind of get them to understand and get them to, you know, understand that you have to balance it out, but that you still like obviously love them just as much and kind of find that support within them, that even if it's not something that they can relate too, I just felt disconnect from them for a while.

Ernesto experienced cultural shock when first coming to CSU, he said

Ok, yeah coming to CSU my first day was a complete culture shock. I mean, I remember one of the initial things that attracted me to CSU was opening a view book and it seemed like every other page I turned to, you know there were students of color, there were Latinos, there were people that looked like me, so I came in with the perception that it was going to be diverse, you know really diverse population, really diverse campus. When I first came onto campus, I was really, really shocked. As I mentioned earlier that you know I was walking around campus and you know more than 9 out of 10 people didn't look like me so to me that was very, umm, in one aspect it was a shock on the cultural and ethnic side.

Ernesto went on to say

Another thing that was really kind of shocking to me was, I came from a really small community; I came from a town of 1000 people. So I went from having as many people in my dorm room, which was just one of those residence halls on campus at the time, so I had more people in my dorm room than I had growing up in my hometown so yea it was tough being away from my familia, I kind of felt uncertain about being here.

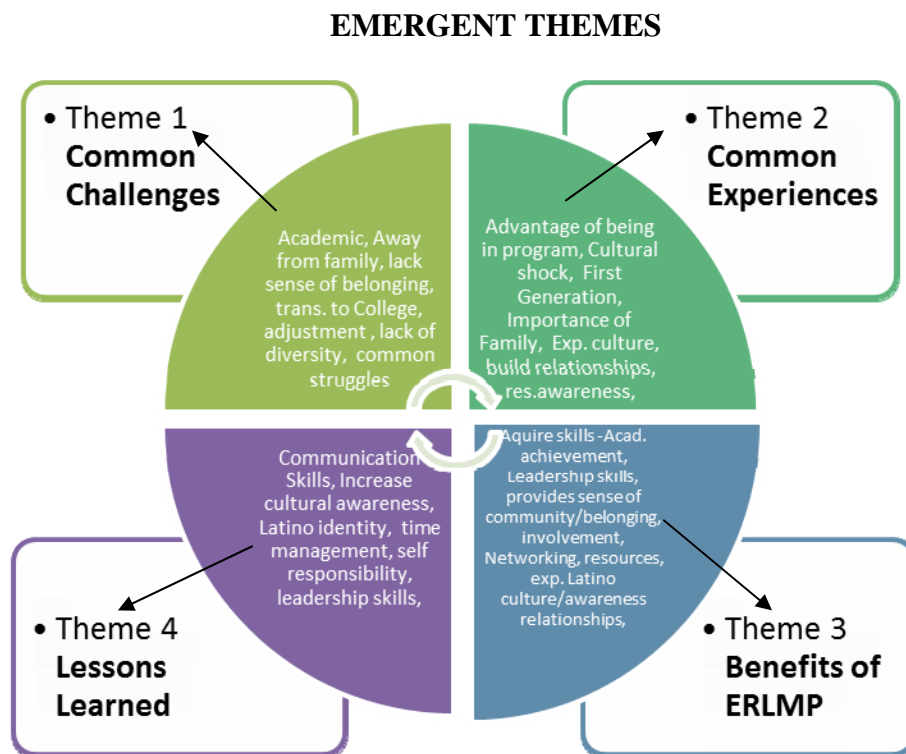
## **Second Interviews**

The one-on-one interviews provided the researcher with an initial look at the experiences of participants in the El Centro Resource Leaders Program. The study's research questions were answered by the first round individual interviews. The second round individual interviews provided participants the opportunity to expand and more closely examine themes that evolved from the first round individual interviews. The second round individual interviews also provided the researcher the opportunity to identify redundancy in responses in the process of identifying emergent themes and patterns.

In summary, the first and second round interviews described many factors and experiences that impacted the participants' lives in the ERLMP as well as their overall experience at Colorado State University. Both first and second round interview responses supported that the ERLMP provided participants with a sense of belonging and a "home away from home" feeling. In addition, participants felt that the ability to serve as a Resource Leader/Mentor provided them the opportunity to gain academic skills, form positive relationships, improve communication skills, and overall, provide participants with a forum to network and benefit from leadership opportunities.

A deeper and richer understanding of the phenomenon was achieved by exploring the categories, patterns, and emergent themes from the participants' responses to both first and second round interview questions. The participants' responses to the set of interview questions provided the themes that emerged from the study.

Figure 2 illustrates the four major themes found in this study. Key words and phrases from the rich text of participants' first and second individual interviews helped the researcher identify and develop the emergent themes.



*Figure 2.* Emergent Themes

## Summary of Themes

### **Theme 1: Common Challenges**

This study sought to understand the meaning Latino students ascribe to their experience in the El Centro Resource/Mentoring program. Participants described and shared several common challenges. Common challenges also overlapped with the theme of common experiences. Some examples of both common challenges and experiences

included academic challenges, being away from family, lacking a sense of belonging, and difficulty transitioning to college both academically and socially. Sub-themes found in my study included participants experiencing culture shock, a difficult time transitioning and adapting to college life and lacking a sense of belonging.

Additionally, in the area of common challenges and experiences, a majority of participants felt that CSU lacked diversity in terms of race and ethnicity. Perhaps one factor that could potentially be seen as contributing to participants' common challenges and common experiences was that the majority of participants were first generation students. The lack of cultural capital appeared to hinder participants in the area of what to expect and prepare for in college. For a majority of participants being a first generation student surfaced as a common challenge as well as common experience in adapting and transitioning to college. One participant, Andres, said

I have no family here in Colorado whatsoever. The first day I was walking thru the LSC plaza I was like where are all the brown people so, my biggest challenge is the distance from my family that I didn't really think of until coming here.

Another student, Alexis said "Not really having any family around, that's a big one that stands out for me."

Academic challenges were also a part of participants common challenges, for example Diego said

It was a challenge for me to concentrate on school, all the homework and adjust to the new environment... My challenges were just being a first generation Latino student on a predominately white campus. I needed extra help with my classes-college classes are different than in high school.

Several other examples of common challenges emerged from the text. (Appendix A Common Challenges Pipeline).

## **Theme 2: Common Experiences**

The theme of common experiences provided insights about participants' experiences in the ERLMP as well provided insights of participants' common lived experiences at Colorado State University. The majority of participants in this study felt that being in the role of Resource Leader/Mentor gave them an advantage over Latino/a students not participating in the program. Sub-themes reported as common experiences included overall participants shared a similar and positive experience as participants in the ERLMP, common experiences of finding academic support through participant's involvement in the ERLMP and the advocacy offices. Participants also reported that their academic success was measured by earning good grades and their GPA, and having the opportunity to build relationships with other Latino students.

Moreover, participants in this study described the experience of "cultural shock" at Colorado State University. For example, Diego said

Coming to college was a huge culture shock for me, culturally but also academically. Coming in, I never had to study I never had to do much work to get an A. I was just that kind of student. And coming to college, I needed to learn, I needed to teach myself how to learn and to study.

This is one of several examples of the overlapping of the common challenges and experiences participants reported. Some participants expressed that the El Centro program provided them with an extended family "home away from home" type of atmosphere. Dan said "It's definitely been that sense of family that I couldn't find it anywhere until I went to El Centro." Alexis, said

Ok, It was definitely a challenge I, I think academically I struggled to say the least my first semester there was a feeling of home sick I felt, I don't

remember the exact month I think it was October of 2006, that almost bordered my depression just because it was such a life changing experience from being at home with parents to being on my own being around a new social group, so having El Centro there really helped me deal with this.

While Dora said

Well, I feel like I'm more content, more satisfied with overall in my life you know I can always have somewhere to go back to and talk to people about you know, my academics and people who will understand where I'm coming from. So definitely that's a huge support for me and just knowing that I have that family that I can belong to and share those similar experiences.

Participants reported other common experiences as Resource Leaders/Mentors.

For example, many participants said that being involved with ERLMP provided them with the opportunity to network and build relationships with other Latino students.

Berta, said

What stood out most was the networking we had to do and all the different Latino students that we got to meet in the student center and in the dorms.

Enrique said

The ability to network with other Latino students and be a mentor for new and transfer students, be a resource for them has been a great experience for most of us.

### **Theme 3: Benefit of Program**

The third theme focused on what participants said about the benefits derived from participating in the ERLMP. Several subthemes that included acquiring skills for academic achievement, having the opportunity to build positive relationship and experiencing a sense of belonging were reported as benefits of the program. Additionally, participants felt that they had an advantage compared to those students who did not



participate in the ERLMP. Finally, participants reported that they experienced self improvement through this leadership position was a positive experience for them.

Esteban said

The ERLMP helped me be more involved on campus. I know college can be really difficult, it was really tough for me my freshman year.

Other similar experiences from participants in relationship to reaping benefits from participation in ERLMP included Samuel's sharing the following,

Being a Resource Leader/ Mentor made me feel important that I was a role model to other Latino students, like a lot of freshmen at the time were looking up to me, and I still have relationships with those students.

The opportunity to serve as a mentor was mentioned several times by participants.

Another student, Paula, said

As a resource leader I had the opportunity to connect with incoming students. It was tough on me, so I liked helping them out better transition into college, be like their mentor

An additional example related to benefits of program included what Salvador said

The ability to network with other Latino students, be a mentor for new and transfer students, be a resource for them

The most common benefit of being involved with the ERLMP was that El Centro provided participants with a sense of belonging and an extended family support system.

Esteban said

I had the experience, like the fortunate experience of having family, who was associated with El Centro before. So walking into El Centro was almost like I knew the place cuz they treated me as though I had been there before, like family

Enrique said

Like I said, my freshman year was a tough time, adjusting to college life and my environment, being away from my family. I feel El Centro helped to provide a support group, even possibly a family that I could feel

comfortable around but not replace my family, in general it just, it played a pretty big role for me to stay up here. Without El Centro I don't think I would have ended up staying up here.

Salvador gave another example of ERLMP's benefits

I think to answer the first part of the question, my overall experience of the program was completely positive. Like I stated here through these other questions, being involved through the El Centro mentoring program was one of the most significant things I could have done for myself to ensure my success at Colorado State

Salvador continued

You know, teaching me about my own professional development. And then the, I think the culmination of all that was the, the awards ceremony that is held every year that, you know, I ended up, when I was graduating I ended up being a part of, you know, a recipient of the awards that are bestowed on graduating Latinos. And I think that experience for me was, you know, was a culmination of all my efforts that I had dedicated toward my successes at Colorado State and also, the different contributions not only that I made to El Centro through that resource leader program, but also that you know, that El Centro guided me through as a student and to help me be successful at Colorado State.

#### **Theme 4: Lessons Learned**

According to the participants in this study, the ELRMP provided them with a “home away from home” and a sense of belonging. Likewise, the ERLMP program appears to have empowered participants with a wide array of experiences that contributed to developing communication skills, increase cultural awareness, help with Latino identity, time management, being responsible, networking skills, building relationships, learning how to navigate the campus and learning about resources. Participants also reported they had learned lessons on how to organize programs and enhance their personal mentoring and leadership skills.

All of the participants felt that the ERLMP program provided them with the tools, resources, and support system needed to be successful students at Colorado State University. A few participants felt that through their participation in the ERLMP, they learned many valuable lessons that helped them after graduation. For example, Salvador said

So right after college, I participated in a summer conference, upward bound summer conference through the Access Center, I believe that is what it's called now, and that was through the summer and then following that I, I worked briefly with the San Antonio Independent School District as a bilingual teachers aide, for 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students and then following that I ended up going to the, I served in the peace corps. I worked on a health and education project for indigenous communities in the western highlands of Guatemala and that was about a 2-year project that I worked on out there.

Salvador continued

And then through that experience I ended up, applying to graduate school in international development at Harvard University and went ahead and successfully completed my Masters out there, and then now I'm currently at, I guess its best referred to as a niche consulting firm. It's a non-profit organization that works as a government contractor to implement education reform in developing countries throughout the world, and that's where I'm at right now, so in retrospect I learned a lot of valuable lessons through my experience in the El Centro program- you know the tutoring program we used to do for kids and organizing cultural and academic workshops, that kind of thing you know has helped me even today.

## **Chapter Summary**

The research questions in this study sought to understand the common experiences, common challenges, common benefits, and lessons learned from participants in the El Centro Resource Leaders Mentoring Program. This chapter provided insights about findings from a phenomenological approach, revisited the purpose of the

qualitative research paradigm, provided an account of the procedure for collecting data, provided general information of participants, presented a diagram with the emergent themes and summary of themes, showed how the interview questions were related to the research questions, and provided a chapter summary.

The data findings show the ERLMP has made a positive impact on the mentoring experiences of Latino students at Colorado State University. A vast majority of the participants shared similar experiences that ranged from common challenges, common experiences, benefits, and lessons learned. Furthermore, a majority of the participants were the first in their families to attend college. In this chapter, the participants allowed the researcher to hear the essence of their lived experiences as participants in the ELRMP. From their voices, the researcher has gained a more holistic understanding of Latino/a students' ability to persist through their mentoring experiences at Colorado State University. Chapter Five will address how these findings relate to my research questions, a review of the literature compared to the data, a personal perspective, recommendations for further research, and a conclusion.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Introduction**

This chapter presents a summary of my study, *Persisting Latino Students at Colorado State University: Their Mentoring Experiences*. In this study, I examined the lived experiences of Latino students who had participated or were currently participating in the El Centro Resource Leaders Mentors Program (ERLMP). My research examined Latino students' experiences from their perspective. From their interviews, I was able to identify the challenges, experiences, the benefits, and the lessons learned from participating in the El Centro program.

The research questions that guided my research were:

1. What meanings do Latino students ascribe to their experience in the El Centro Resource Leaders Mentoring program?
2. How have the students in the El Centro Resource/Mentoring program experienced their academic program at Colorado State University?
3. What effect has participation in the El Centro Resource/Mentoring program had on their persistence?
4. Are there common experiences, stories told, and/or factors Latino students describe as participants in the Resource Leaders/Mentors program?

I interviewed 17 Latino students. Each participant had earned at least 60 credits at Colorado State University and was in good academic standing. I listened to the voice of each participant as he or she shared the stories, thoughts, and feelings that made up their

experience. I applied Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to the transcripts and in the process identified key elements to the participants' experiences. The four primary themes emerging from participants' experiences included: Common Challenges, Common Experiences, Benefits of Participating in the El Centro Program, and Lessons Learned. Together, the four informed the essence of the study and in the process I was able to find the answers to my research questions.

Chapter Five is organized in five sections. In the first section I start this discussion by stating some of my biases and assumptions as I approached this research. Furthermore, in this section I relate my findings to my research questions. Section two discusses the relationship of my findings to my literature review of Latino student retention in higher education and a summary. Section three provides my perspective and critique on the outcome of my study. In section four I present my recommendations for practice and research. I end the fifth section with my conclusions and personal reflections.

### **Researcher Assumptions and Biases**

Reflection and clarification of the researcher's biases is essential in a phenomenological study. According to Merriam (2001) the researcher is instrumental as the means through which data are collected. Consequently, it is important to be conscious of the assumptions and biases of the researcher as the human instrument used to conduct the research and generate findings.

My personal and professional experiences led me to this research. I was a Latino student with many of the characteristics of my participants. I was a first generation student. I was very close to my family. I lacked of a sense of belonging when I began

college. I experienced many of the same challenges the participants experienced in this study, including feeling isolated and alienated while in college. Moreover, I experienced many other common challenges and experiences the participants reported, including the lack of financial support from my family, the feeling of cultural shock at a predominately White institution of higher learning, and the challenge of transitioning and adapting to college.

As a participant in a similar college mentoring program during my undergraduate experience, it was difficult for me to separate my experiences with those of my research participants. In fact, I anticipated hearing about all the positive contributions and benefits the El Centro Resource Leaders Mentors program had on participants' experiences before the study even began. Likewise, I expected to hear that the students had been provided the appropriate training and orientation to be effective mentors themselves. I also expected to hear some of the same challenges that I had experienced when I was an undergraduate. Ultimately, as my study progressed, I became more aware of my assumptions and the biases I held.

In the process of self-reflection, it is evident that my personal experiences and my professional experiences as my research participants' supervisor prompted several assumptions and biases; through the interview process, many of my assumptions and biases came to light. Some of my biases and assumptions were valid, while others were not. As the research instrument, I created the interview questions that may have influenced my research participants' responses. As the researcher, I was continuously challenged to set aside my assumptions in order to better hear the participants' voices.

In phenomenological research methodology, the process of Epoche is very

important (Moustakas, 1996). Epoche is the process I used to clarify my assumptions and biases as I interviewed my research participants. According to Moustakas, in the process of Epoche, “the everyday understanding, judgments, and knowing, are set aside, and phenomena are revisited, freshly, naively, in a wide open sense” (p. 33). In order for me to learn more about what my participants were saying about their experiences, prior to each interview I would engage in the practice of Epoche. Moreover, throughout the interviews and data analysis process, setting aside my judgments enabled me to separate myself from my professional role and personal experiences. As a researcher who was not only close to the participants but also had similar mentoring experiences as an undergraduate student, the application and practice of Epoche allowed me to engage the participants with a fresh perspective, which in turn allowed me to be open to their experiences and better learn from them. Recognizing that my role as the participants’ supervisor could influence how participants responded to my interview questions, I conducted interviews in a location away from the work environment. I did this for the purpose of separating from my role as their supervisor so as to be seen by participants in the role of researcher. This was important in the process of establishing a neutral and comfortable environment for participants.

### **Findings in Relation to the Research Questions**

The central question that guided my study was “what effect has participation in the El Centro Mentoring program had on participants’ persistence?” This study was designed with the goal of exploring the mentoring experiences of Latino students at Colorado State University. Likewise, I was interested in understanding what common experiences and challenges Latino students credited with influencing their academic



achievement. I will begin this section with my discussion of findings and their relationship to my study's research questions by providing an overview of my assumptions and biases.

### **What meanings do Latino students ascribe to their experience in the El Centro Resource/Mentoring program?**

The first research question was designed to better understand the meaning Latino students attributed to their experiences as participants in the ERLMP program. The four emergent themes identified in chapter four addressed this question. The recurring, interrelationship, and overlapping of these four emergent themes helped inform the participants' experiences, challenges, benefits, and lessons learned.

The four themes that emerged from the individual interviews help shape the common experiences of the participants. Furthermore, these themes shaped the framework of their common experiences. The participants reported having a positive overall experience as Resource Leader Mentors in the El Centro program. The ERLMP appeared to have provided participants in this study a sense of belonging and validation. The program also provided participants with opportunities to network with other Latino students and serve in the role of Resource Leaders and Mentors. This employment platform also provided study participants with the opportunity to mentor other Latino students and gain skills they did not have prior to serving in this role.

The participants also perceived having an advantage over Latino students who had not participated in the El Centro program. Participants consistently shared that they experienced more support, increased access to resources, and a greater sense of community as Resource Leader Mentors in the program. In general the participants'

sentiments toward their participation and experiences in the El Centro program were positive. The lived experiences of Latino students in the El Centro Resource Leaders Mentoring program appeared to be positive and beneficial for their personal growth and development.

**How have the students in the El Centro Resource/Mentoring program experienced their academic program at Colorado State University?**

The second research question was designed to draw out the participants' experience in relationship to their academic performance. As I developed this question, I was interested to find out how participants felt their ERLMP experiences contributed to their academic performance, and in what ways. The opportunity to learn about academic support services and programs was mentioned often and surfaced as a core reason participants felt the El Centro Resource Leaders Mentoring program provided them the academic support they needed to be successful.

A majority of the participants were first generation college students; therefore, they shared a common background in their respective family's academic experiences. Due to this commonality, the participants could identify with each other and therefore supported each other as they strove to attain good grades. Each of the participants noted that the ability to learn about campus academic resources and services empowered them to succeed in their respective academic programs. Moreover, the weekly one-on-one meetings they had with their supervisors appear to have encouraged and motivated the participants to stay focused on achieving their personal academic goals. As Resource Leaders/Mentors, the participants shared that having a place like El Centro—where they

felt they belonged, where they felt a sense of community, and where they were supported—was beneficial to their academic performance.

**What effect has participation in the El Centro Resource Leaders Mentoring program had on their persistence?**

The participants noted several examples of the effect their participation in the El Centro Resource Leaders Mentoring program had on their persistence. The overarching effect was the validation of their Latino culture and the opportunity to have a place they felt supported. Each participant noted that they initially felt uncomfortable in their first year at Colorado State University due to a lack of diversity and a feeling of cultural shock. However, the participants identified their participation in the El Centro Resource Leaders program as an important reason they were able to better transition and adapt to the university setting.

Because participants often felt isolated—they were often only one of a few Latino students in class—the El Centro program served as a “home away from home.” The participants also expressed that they felt disconnected with the institution when it came to the institution validating Latino students and their cultural backgrounds. Many of the participants felt that if it were not for the El Centro program, they would not have had a way to celebrate their Latino culture and traditions. Several participants mentioned the institution had made improvements to support Latino students and other students of color by supporting and funding cultural enrichment programs that were important to them.

Another reason participants felt they had been able to remain at Colorado State University after feeling isolated or feeling that they did not belong was the ability to have a place like El Centro to just hang out, feel welcomed, and safe. Closely aligned with this

feeling, participants reported that they had the opportunity to meet other Latino students who came from similar backgrounds and experiences. All the participants recognized that participation in the ERLPM had a positive effect on their persistence.

**Are there common experiences, stories told, and/or factors Latino students describe as participants in the Resource Leaders/Mentors program?**

A majority of participants felt that their experience of first coming to Colorado State University and being away from family was challenging. Moreover, the experience was emotional and caused a sense of uncertainty. Likewise, some participants felt that the experience of first coming to CSU and being away from family made them feel disconnected. Additional common experiences and stories expressed by participants included feeling overwhelmed most when facing academic challenges and the difficulty of being away from family. Other common factors reported by participants included the challenge of making the transition to college and dealing with financial and time management issues.

A majority of participants believed that being in a position of leadership gave them the opportunity to lead by example and develop their leadership skills. Participants felt that participating in ERLMP helped them be more successful in academics and in their social networking ability. Having a sense of family and community, along with feeling culturally validated, was also seen to help motivate students perform better academically. This common trait contributed to participants having a better overall experience at Colorado State University. Participants felt that building relationships and having a sense of community is what stood out the most as a significant benefit of the

ERLMP. Although some of the participants had slightly different experiences and reported a few unique stories, overall participants had a positive experience.

### **Summary of findings in relation to research questions**

Findings in this study represent the lived mentoring experiences of persisting Latino students at Colorado State University within the framework of the ERLMP. For the most part, the responses participants shared were expected. The participants made it clear that the ERLMP provided them with a sense of community and a “home away from home” environment. Moreover, the participants felt that through participation in the ERLMP they were able to learn more about their rich Latino culture and traditions. Participants also reported learning about the importance of the similarities and differences of the wide array of Latino cultures and identities.

The participants also learned to network, build positive relationships, better navigate the campus environment, and use their personal stories and experiences to reach out and mentor other Latino students. Furthermore, participants believed the wide range of experiences and skills gained through serving in the ERLMP had made them stronger leaders and individuals. Many of the participants who have graduated from Colorado State University credit their participation in the ERLMP as the reason they have been/were successful in graduate school or experienced success in their respective professions.

The responses I received from the participants allowed me to better understand the essence of their experience in the ERLMP. In some instances, I was surprised to learn that something as simple as having a place like El Centro to hang out, where participants felt comfortable and validated as a Latino student, was what many students

attributed to their persistence. However on a few occasions I was disappointed to hear that some of the same challenges participants serving as Resource Leaders/Mentors were trying to help other students overcome or work through, had become overwhelming for them and had caused participants in this study to struggle. It appears that some of the struggles and obstacles participants faced and experienced were as a result of their own making and unwillingness to practice what they were advising the students they themselves were mentoring.

However, in terms of mentoring, the majority of participants felt that they had developed positive relationships and experiences and were themselves mentored by the directors of the ERLMP. On several occasions, the participants referred to the directors as being mentors for them. Some of the participants even went on to say that the directors were like having an uncle or aunt or a second set of parents. The positive relationships formed through weekly interactions and the one-on-one meetings held by participants and the ERLMP directors created a strong bond and trust that helped participants ultimately overcome the challenges they experienced while students at Colorado State University.

Finally, for the participants, the ERLMP provided them a place of employment, a home away from home, a place where they felt safe and welcomed, and a place where they were able to foster positive relationships with other faculty, staff, and Latino students. The participants were empowered by their common challenges, experiences, and benefits received as participants in the ERLMP. Moreover, participants were able to persist by the lessons learned as a result of their individual and group mentoring experiences.

## Findings in Relationship to the Literature

In Chapter Two I reviewed the literature addressing the context and rationale for my research on retention of Latino students in higher education. The following section considers the relationship of my findings to that literature. More specifically, one of the areas where the review of literature relates to the data from this study is that social integration, sense of belonging, and cultural awareness and development are pertinent to the persistence and retention of Latino college students. In fact, the literature asserts that when these three constructs are integrated with Latino undergraduate college students' experiences, there is a correlation with higher persistence and retention rates (Chacon, 2002; Immerwahl, 2003; Rendón, 2006; Tinto, 2000).

Participants in this study felt that having the opportunity to socially integrate, and having a place like the El Centro program to provide them with a sense of belonging was crucial for their persistence. All the participants in this study mentioned that participating in the ELRMP contributed to their overall positive experiences at Colorado State University. Enrique said

My freshman year was a tough time and umm, adjusting to college life and my environment, away from my family. I feel El Centro helped to provide a support group, even possibly a family that I could feel comfortable around but not replace my family in general. I just, it played a pretty big role for me to stay up here.

Additionally, Dan reported

So I think as far as my cultural awareness and development goes, it would be almost a non factor if it wasn't for El Centro... And so for me participating in the cultural events and putting on events, um celebrating the Latino um festivities and holidays and traditions, um that was an integral part of my position at El Centro that I really got to experience my own diversity and also at the same time, learn a lot about my own traditions that I did not know before.

The participants in this study felt that culturally relevant social integration opportunities that involved celebrating family values and learning about Latino culture and traditions was an important element that helped them have a positive experience and helped participants do better academically. In supporting this claim Salvador reported

Umm, you know there were not only the resources available through academics within the resource leader program, but they also encouraged cultural exchange of differences, through different programming such as brown bag specials and I think that was very beneficial for me and allowed me to feel a lot more comfortable, umm, on the campus, and to be able to be more successful in my academics.

Tinto (1975, 1993, 2000) has long argued that social integration to campus is as important as academic integration. Social integration opportunities for Latino college students was found to provide participants with activities and involvement opportunities to become a part of a larger group and feel they could better navigate the campus. Tinto (2000) further suggests that students' interactions with social systems at a university positively correlate with retention. Ernesto said

Umm I think overall it was just, umm, developing a sense of belonging honestly to the university. And I think both being a participant in the ERLMP my first year as a freshman and then continually staying involved with activities as a volunteer, umm, umm ... I think was really instrumental for my success and completing my degree at CSU, and I think it kind of just attests to the fact of you know, El Centro's being a home away from home for many Latino students.

The literature review discussed the importance of providing Latino students a "home away from home" through multicultural centers or non-traditional Greek organizations. In fact, on many college campuses Latino and multicultural Greek organizations serve as a home away from home for students and provide on campus camaraderie and support networks that are important to the academic, social, and cultural



lives of Latino college students (Jerez, 2004; Mejia, 1994). Moreover, Latino fraternities and sororities play an important role in members' ethnic identity development as well as provide students with a familial (*hermandad*) atmosphere on campus. Furthermore, many of these Latino-based student organizations and multicultural centers provide academic support through organized study groups as well (Guardia & Evans, 2008). Strategies involving social integration facilitate development of subcultures for Latino students.

Salvador said

You know, I was heavily involved in other student organizations, including my Latino fraternity Sigma Lambda Beta and all those experiences combined, you know, just really allowed me to gain and to learn about what it is to be a Latino. And it was something that was very beneficial for me which I don't think I would have been able to experience had I not been involved with that program.

However, one of the challenges to providing Latino students social integration opportunities at many colleges is that, although sometimes unintentionally, many colleges and universities marginalize Latino students by failing to accommodate their needs, validate their culture, or create an inclusive, welcoming climate (Olivos, 2003). This was certainly true of the experiences the participants of my study reported.

Rendón (1994) argues that the missing ingredient in Latino student persistence programs at colleges and universities is validation, which is described as "an enabling, conforming and supportive process initiated by in and out of class agents that fosters academic and interpersonal development" (Rendón, 1994, p. 44). The validation theory is an asset model that embraces and supports students in several ways. The findings of this study assert that validation of one's own cultural background positively contributed to the participants' college experience. One participant, Bertha, spoke to the importance of validation when she reported

I think sharing experiences with other students that are specific to our culture uh, it is family, the importance of family or, uh traditions or things that we share that we just get that we understand and we don't have to say much about, uh we say one word and everybody laughs or nods and um, I think that is the biggest way I mean and then there are other smaller ways that we feel valued and how our culture is represented in some things like that...

Rendón (1994) notes that validation can occur in and out of class with multiple agents such as faculty, classmates, family members, advisers, tutors, mentors, and others actively affirming and supporting students and/or designing activities that promote academic excellence, cultural pride, and personal growth. In other words, when validation is present students feel a sense of self-worth and are more capable of learning and succeeding. The participants in this study attested to this important point of feeling validated on several occasions.

Validation is especially essential for Latino students who lack self-confidence in their abilities to be successful college students and who come from first generation backgrounds. Many participants reported being the first in their family to attend college. According to Thayer (2003), first generation students, irrespective of background, face different types of challenges to effectively make the transition from high school to college. Furthermore, first generation students need assistance due to not having anyone at home that has experienced the college process. The lack of mentors, role models, or advisors may influence their self-regulatory and self-reflective capacities. These capacities impact a student's self-efficacy toward success in college.

One participant, Maria, said

I feel like my biggest challenge was just seeing how I guess personally how unprepared I was, and just for college in general, umm, not having anything at home or in high school that really, I guess pushed me towards something like that and then, having to be here on my own as a first

generation student and not really being able to relate to anyone umm the transition was hard for me, that is why I utilize El Centro.

### **My Perspective and Critique**

My findings reflect a majority of the literature on the retention of Latino students. More specifically, the literature supports the findings that experiences such as being a first generation student and coming from low income backgrounds contribute to the lack of knowledge or financial support Latino students need to be able to succeed in college. Furthermore, the challenges for first generation students face transitioning and adapting to college life coincide with the findings of my study.

However, contrary to the literature review, for a majority of the participants in my study their first generation and limited income backgrounds appeared to serve as an asset rather than a deficit. For many of my study's participants, being first generation and from poor families appeared to motivate them to overcome their challenges and stay at Colorado State University until they graduated. Although some research predicts low academic achievement for first generation, low income students, these characteristics, based on the participants' common experiences, did not appear to hinder their ability to persist.

While not conclusive, the findings of this study in relationship to the literature on Latino retention suggest that factors such as experiencing cultural shock and cultural awareness and development may enhance or hinder Latino student persistence. Most existing models and theories described in the literature review do not provide specific information about other potential factors affecting Latino student persistence. However, the findings of this study indicate Latino students' mentoring experiences could help

guide or inform colleges and universities in enhancing their existing retention or mentoring programs. At the very minimum, the findings in this study provide a framework for understanding the mentoring experiences of Latino students and what they ascribe to their persistence at Colorado State University.

It is apparent from the high Latino student attrition rates across the country that higher education institutions need to familiarize themselves with the diversity of their student populations. If positive changes are to take place, colleges and universities must not only recognize there is a need for more research to assist in designing the most effective retention programs, but they must also begin to implement culturally relevant social integration programs that validate the unique characteristics of Latino students. Moreover, recognizing that the cost of earning a college degree is becoming more expensive, Latino students must be able to have the financial support and resources they need from institutions so they are able to concentrate on their academic achievement and not have to worry about how they are going to pay for their education.

### **Recommendations**

As I reflect on my own personal and professional experiences, and reflect on the literature and the findings of my study, I find myself in the position to offer recommendations toward increased effectiveness and increased practice of Latino college mentoring programs. One thing is clear for me, that Latino college students are capable of succeeding in higher education with effective support systems in place. In fact, in my more than 15 years in higher education, working directly with Latino students, I have found that Latino students thrive and have a better experience when they feel validated, when they possess a sense of belonging, and when they are provided with social

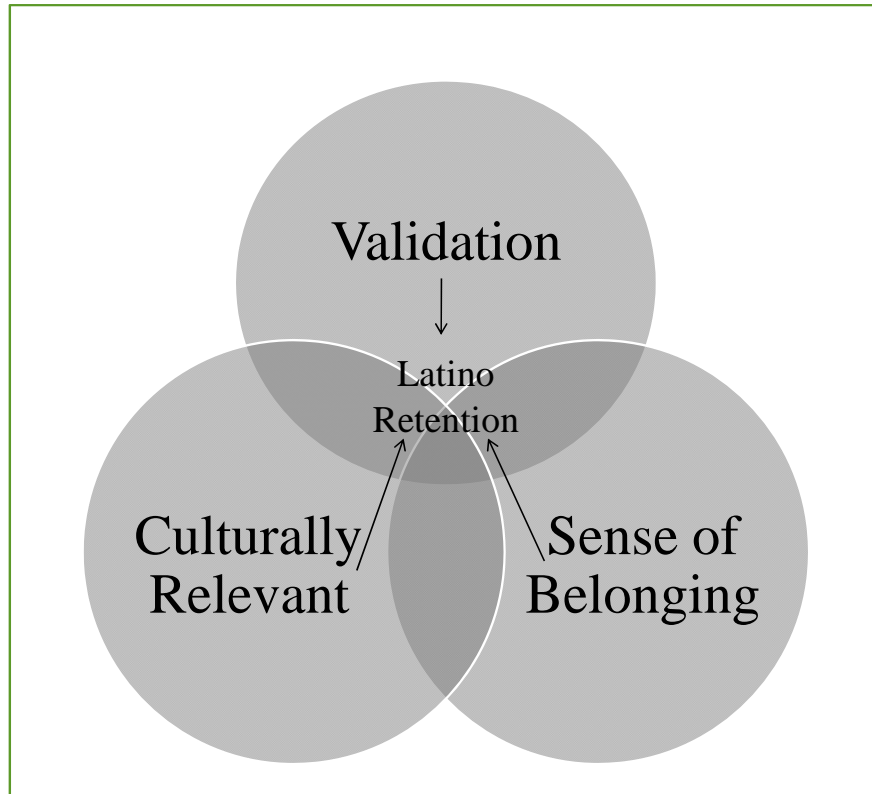
integration opportunities that are culturally relevant. There is no doubt in my mind that the literature is correct by suggesting that the test scores, grade point averages and the overall academic preparedness and ability of college students strongly influence the chances for success and earning a four year college degree. In fact, there is very little argument that the above factors do not increase the chances of earning a college degree. However, I feel it is important that predominately White institutions of higher learning enhance mentoring programs and support systems for the fastest growing minority in the United States—Latino students. On many colleges and universities the negative campus climate, especially for Latino students, is preventing our students from succeeding. Despite the many wonderful innovative and progressive orientation and transition programs being implemented at many colleges and universities, if Latino students do not feel safe, welcome, or validated, they will not stick around.

Colorado State University has many wonderful orientation and academic focused programs and services. The need for Latino students to feel safe, welcome, and validated will increase their chances taking advantage of these programs and support services and contribute to Latino student's success and graduation from college. Perhaps the one great "AHA!" moment I have experienced conducting this study was that the participants in this study gave emphasis that their Latino culture and heritage matters to them. The participants in this study also reported that having an extended family support system, like being able to celebrate their cultural heritage and having a place like El Centro, had been essential and contributed to having an overall positive experience at Colorado State University. Furthermore, the participants felt the ERLMP provided them with a sense of validation, a sense of belonging, and social integration opportunities that were important

factors contributing to their persistence at Colorado State University.

Social integration mentoring programs that include intentional and direct elements of the three constructs, validation, sense of belonging, and cultural relevance, are what participants said can be effective strategies for the retention of Latino students at CSU.

On the basis of the data collected, which included the stories and lived experiences of the participants, the Salas Social Integration Mentoring Model (Figure 3) illustrates the concepts that form the foundation of my recommendations. I believe that these concepts are critical to the implementation and ultimate success, graduation and retention of Latino students at Colorado State University. Participants in my study felt validated by having the opportunity to organize activities and programs that promote cultural pride and personal growth. Furthermore, participants reported examples of feeling validated through the ERLMP by being able to be directly involved in culturally relevant celebrations and programs.



*Figure: 3. Salas Social Integration Mentoring Model*

The following are my recommendations:

1. Provide ERLMP participants with more extensive training and orientation before they begin mentoring other students. This could involve a 3-4 day training on getting to know each other; building community; learning about Latino culture and traditions; learning more about academic support resources, campus, and community resources; and providing mentors with training on effective ways to communicate, listen, make phone calls/compile emails, and other means of contacting new and transfer Latino students assigned to them. A section of the training should provide the participants of the ERLMP with culturally relevant skills or examples on how to use

language that validates and recognizes the strengths of the Latino students they are trying to reach. This in turn would provide mentees with a sense of validation, a sense of belonging, and a sense of being approached in a culturally relevant way.

2. Provide training and support on how to create programs and events that go further in depth regarding Latino values, multiple identities, and diverse Latino traditions and celebrations. This specific training and support would be aimed at engaging and raising cultural awareness, and providing mentee's with culturally relevant or Latino-based social integration mentoring involvement and opportunities.
3. Develop an ERLMP Manual. The manual could provide mentors with examples of academic support services and resources, tutoring programs, cultural enrichment programming ideas, examples of phone/email scripts, and contact information to effectively make referrals. A section of the manual could include a list of campus and community resources and provide Resource Leader/Mentors with information on how to keep track of documentation and contacts with mentees.
4. A recommendation that I cannot stress enough is the need for Colorado State University administration to increase the level of funding presently granted to the ERLMP. By providing increased funding for the ERLMP, El Centro could hire more Resource Leader/Mentors so each mentor does not have a student list of 60-90 students they are responsible for contacting; rather the Resource Leader/Mentors could focus on working on a more personal level



with a more manageable list of 25-30 students. This specific recommendation could play a vital role in the outcome of what the program is charged to do—retain Latino students at Colorado State University.

5. Identify upperclassmen Latino/a students to serve as Resource Leader/Mentors on a volunteer basis. These students would serve as ERLMP volunteers for one full year and be provided a list of 10 new/freshman or transfer students to work with. The 10 students the volunteers would work with would create the opportunity for ERLMP's volunteers to build trust and community in the process of assisting students with making the transition to the university. The student volunteers would be required to participate in all the training and orientation programs provided for and required of other paid Resources Leader/Mentors. The idea behind this recommendation is that volunteers would gain “hands on” experiences, build communication skills, and learn about academic, cultural, and other resources needed to be effective ERLMs. After one full year of volunteering, this cohort of student volunteers would be in a position to be hired the following year and serve in the ERLMP.

Based on the participants' experiences, the above recommendations are some potential ways the ERLMP could be further enhanced and Latino students could have better overall experiences at Colorado State University. The Salas Social Integration Mentoring Model (Figure 3) was created by drawing important elements from the participants stories and lived experiences. The three constructs of validation, sense of belonging, and cultural relevancy have the potential to enhance the ERLMP and

ultimately contribute to the increased persistence and retention rates of Latino students at Colorado State University.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

This study provided insight into the experiences of 17 persisting Latino/a students at Colorado State University who had or were participating in the ERLMP. Conducting this study affords me the opportunity to make recommendations for further research in this area. The following are recommendations for potential future research:

1. Conduct more research on the differences between the mentoring experiences of male and female Latino students. Although participants in this study did not allude to any significant differences in their mentoring experiences as males and females, further studies that focus on gender characteristics could potentially inform higher education practitioners on how to devise college mentoring programs with different elements that focus on needs of male and female Latino/a students. Latina female students are more likely to attend and graduate from college, therefore further research could explore what factors or variables contribute to females experiencing higher academic achievement and success, and ultimately better understanding this disparity. A further study that examines Latino/a gender issues and how gender issues impact persistence in higher education merits attention to the fastest growing population in the U.S.
2. Conduct further research on the concept of culturally relevant social integration approaches and programs. Potential findings may inform practitioners of different ways to incorporate cultural aspects for mentoring or

retention programs. The participants of this study found that culturally-based student organizations and programs contributed to their overall success and experiences at Colorado State University. The participants also found that the ERLMP provided them with a sense of community, a feeling of family support, and the opportunity to learn about their cultural backgrounds, which was something they valued and benefitted from. The findings of further research in this area may better inform practitioners about other culturally-inclusive approaches to effectively retain Latino college students.

3. Conduct a mixed-methodology study on the ERLMP. The study would focus on measuring the importance of what Latino College students assert or say contributes to their persistence. This type of research design may be able to measure or inform the importance or non-importance of incorporating cultural factors and variables and the lived experiences of Latino college students into college mentoring and retention programs. The participants of this study reported that several culturally related experiences, stories, and factors contributed to their persistence. The findings of a mixed-methodology study has the potential to further unfold or examine to what extent culture matters for Latino students that attend predominately White institutions.
4. It appears there is a need to further study the experiences of first generation Latino/a college students. Further studies could potentially better inform colleges and universities about the specific needs and challenges this group faces. A vast majority of the participants in this study were first generation students. Many of the participants reported a lack of parental or family

support. A further study could examine ways in which parents and family members of first generation students may become more proactive and involved in their student's education.

5. Conduct a comparative study of Latino-based college mentoring programs to examine if there are certain characteristics or best practices incorporated in such programs that influence students' academic achievement and retention rates.
6. Conduct a study on the experiences of non-traditional college students who participate in mentoring programs with traditional students. Two particular participants in my study shared a few examples of the different experiences they had. One participant was a single, non-traditional parent and the other participant was a student who was closer to the age of 30. Such a study may provide insights and revelations into the differences and needs for traditional and non-traditional Latino/a students.

### **Conclusion and Closing Personal Reflections**

The participants in this study have been an inspiration for me. Despite the challenges and barriers the participants of this study faced, they were able to persist and overcome them. I firmly believe that when Latino students at all levels of their educational journeys are encouraged, validated, and held to high standards they will succeed.

Based on the participants' personal stories and lived experiences shared with me

throughout this study, it is clear that the participants have been encouraged, validated, and held to high standards. As a result of their determination, resiliency, and commitment to achieving their educational goals, the participants have been able to persist at Colorado State University.

Perhaps there are practitioners that argue that academic performance and ability are deciding factors that most contribute to the retention of Latino college student. No doubt these are key factors; however, mentoring programs that focus on building community, providing cultural awareness, providing students with a sense of belonging, and encouraging and validating Latino students for who they are have proven to be important factors in the ERLMP. Furthermore, there may be some administrators and practitioners who believe that studies that focus on examining the lived experiences of Latino college students have very little validity and credibility if any, much less believe such studies can potentially influence, inform, or impact Latino college student retention rates. However, one thing is certain, the participants of this study have attested that their common challenges, their common experiences, the benefits they experienced participating in the ERLMP, and the lessons they learned, have proven to be vital to their persistence and success at Colorado State University.

Many of the participants of this study have been able to look back a few years since they graduated from Colorado State University. In their reflections they have recounted many stories and lived experiences that affirm that their participation in the ERLMP provided them with a place to go, with a sense of community and belonging that encouraged them, and contributed to their success. In my personal reflection of this study, the overarching argument that has emerged from both the participants who have

graduated, and the participants who were current students while this study was being conducted, is the notion of validation being very important for their persistence.

In spite of what the literature asserts, that 50% of Latino students in higher education do not complete their degree (Nora, 2000, Fry 2007), the 17 Latino students in my study reported having benefited from the ERLMP and thus far in their college careers are persisting. With the appropriate support systems in place, Latino students are very capable of succeeding at Colorado State University and at other institutions of higher learning.

Having a sense of validation and sense of belonging has positively affected this study's participants' academic achievement, their self-worth, their identity and cultural awareness, and their leadership and goal development. Yes, again in my closing comments, I declare my bias as the participants' direct supervisor who himself was a first generation Latino student, who came from a low income background, and who participated in a similar mentoring program while an undergraduate college student. It was an ongoing challenge to separate my experiences from those of the participants. However, the findings revealed in this study provide us with a rich description of the participants' stories, lived experiences, and feelings whose importance cannot be dismissed.

Finally, it is clear, and supported by the participants in this study, that the ERLMP is a program that has made a positive difference in their lives. The lived experiences, stories told, and feelings shared, of the 17 study participants impart a guide or road map for other Latino students to follow for success at Colorado State University.

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## **APPENDIX A**

## Theme 1: Common Challenges

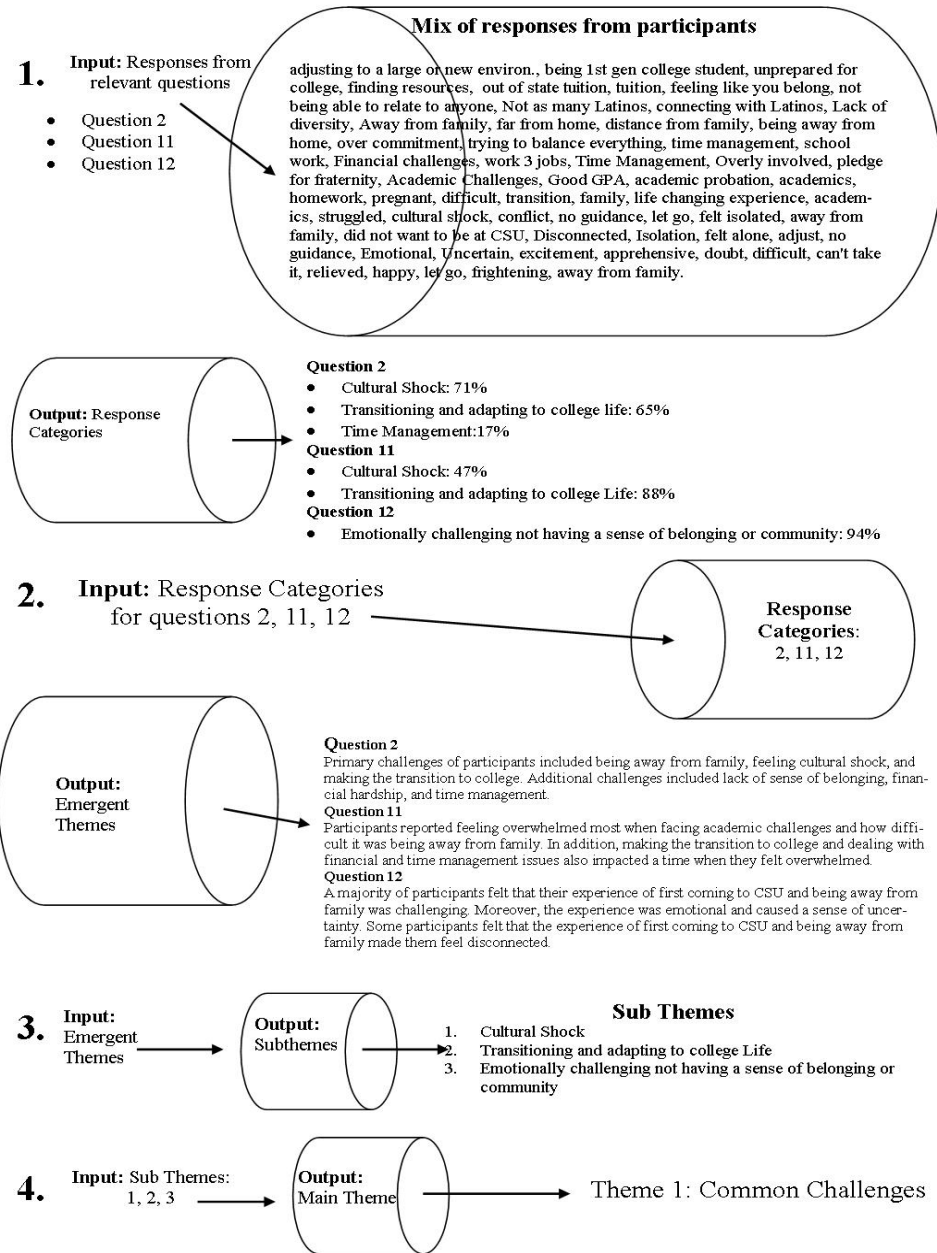


Figure 1.1 Pipeline

## Theme 2: Common Experiences

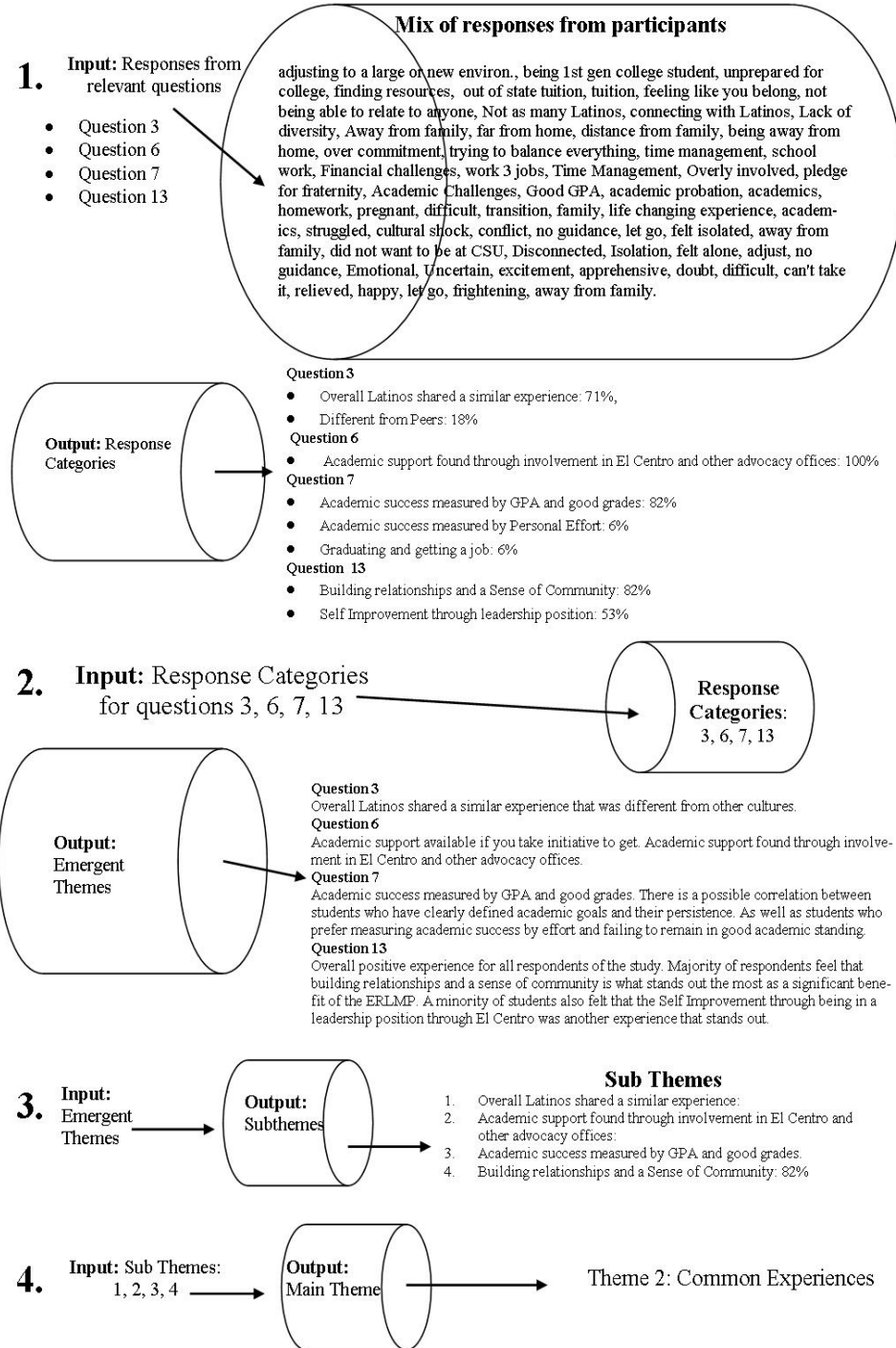


Figure 1.2 Pipeline

## Theme 3: Benefits of ERLMP

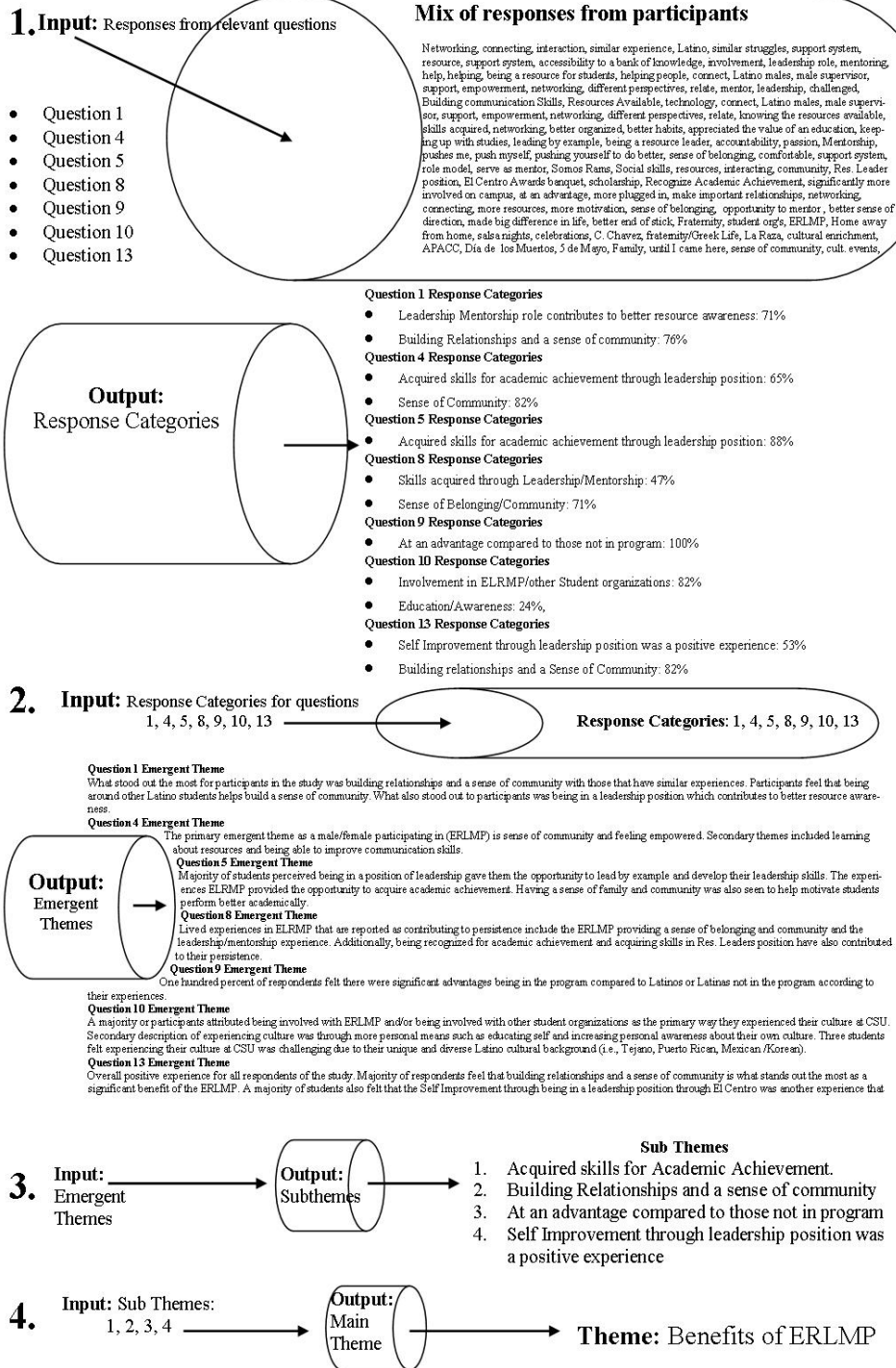


Figure 1.3 Pipeline

## Theme 4 Lessons Learned

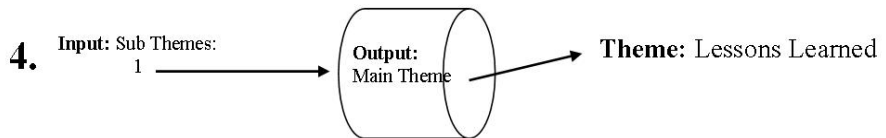
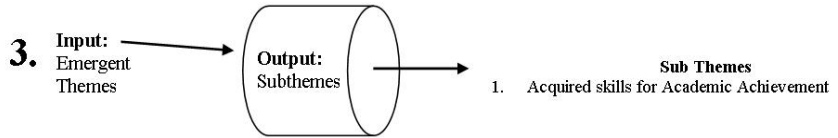
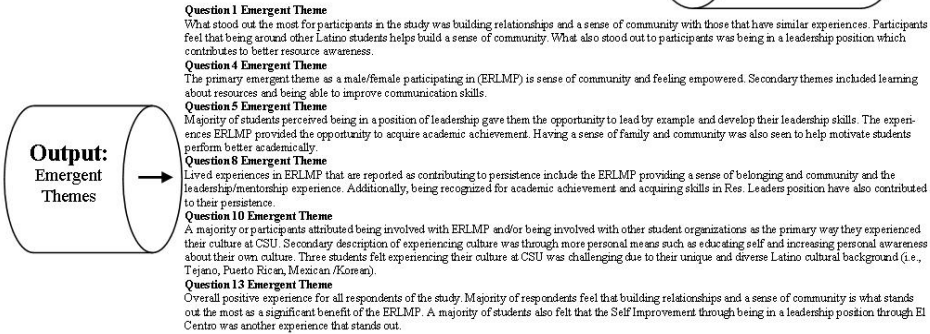
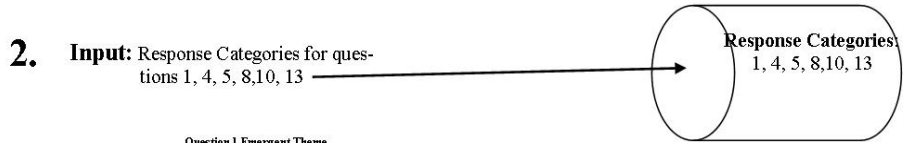
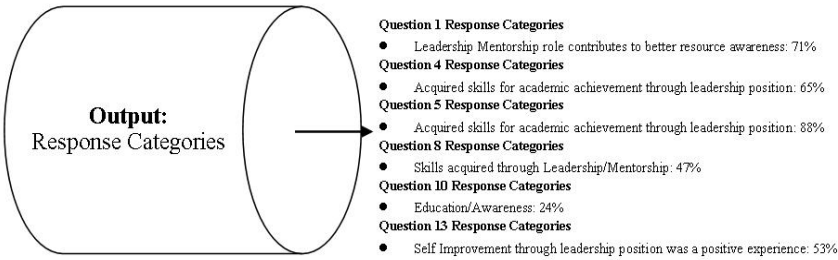
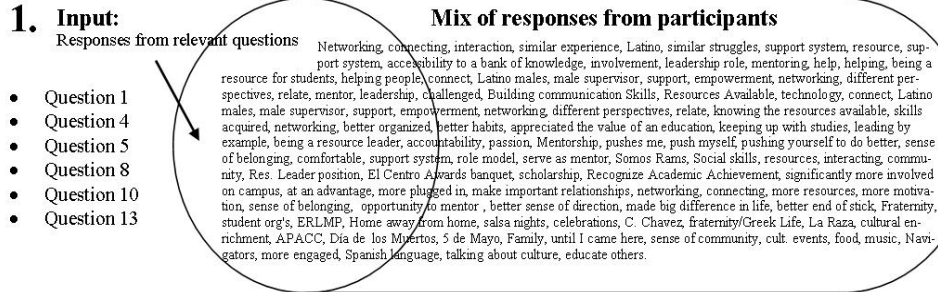


Figure 1.4 Pipeline

## APPENDIX B

Email Script of Recruitment

Dear \_\_\_\_\_:

The purpose of this email is to extend an invitation to you to participate in a research project I am conducting for my dissertation in Educational Leadership in the School of Education. I am personally concerned about the retention and success of Latino/a students at Colorado State University. Although there is plenty of research that suggests why Latino/a students drop out of college, I am interested in researching what Latino/a student's say is contributing to their success and persistence at Colorado State University. I believe this study will contribute to the literature and benefit Latino/a students like you who are currently participating or have participated in the El Centro Resource Leaders Mentoring program. Your experiences are important in gaining a better understanding of this topic.

I serve as the Associate Director of El Centro. However, your participation or non participation in this study will not have an effect on your relationship with El Centro. In fact, your participation is voluntary. I will serve the Co-PI for this research under the close supervision and guidance of Dr. Jim Banning in Education at Colorado State University. Dr. Banning can be reached at 970-491-7153, email, [james.baanning@colostate.edu](mailto:james.baanning@colostate.edu) My contact information is 970-491-0590 or [rsalas@colostate.edu](mailto:rsalas@colostate.edu). Upon completion of this study, the data will be shared with El Centro in an anonymous format. In other words, your name will be kept confidential. Please contact me if you are interested in participating in my study.

Sincerely,

Rich A. Salas

## APPENDIX C

### Phone Script of Recruitment

Hello \_\_\_\_\_

My name is Rich Salas. I am calling with the purpose of extending an invitation to you to participate in a research project I am conducting for my dissertation in Educational Leadership in the School of Education. May I have 5 minutes to share what my research is about? I can call back if this is not a good time. (Call back when it is a better time/date for student or proceed with script below if student is willing)

Thanks for allowing me the opportunity to tell you what my research is about.

Name \_\_\_\_\_ I am personally concerned about the retention and success of Latino/a student's at Colorado State University. Although there is plenty of research that suggests why Latino/a students drop out of college, I am interested in researching what Latino/a student's like you say is contributing to your success and persistence at Colorado State University. Your participation or non participation in this study will not have an effect on your relationship with El Centro. In fact, your participation is voluntary. I will serve as the Co-PI for this research under the guidance of Dr. Jim Banning in Education at Colorado State University. Dr. Banning can be reached at 970-491-7153 or email at [james.banning@colostate.edu](mailto:james.banning@colostate.edu) My contact information is 970-491-0590 or email at [rsalas@colostate.edu](mailto:rsalas@colostate.edu). I also serve as the Associate Director for El Centro. Upon completion of this research, the data will be shared with El Centro in an anonymous format. In other words, your name will be kept confidential.

I believe this study will contribute to the literature and benefit Latino/a students like you who are currently participating or will participate in the El Centro Resource Leaders Mentoring program in the future. Name \_\_\_\_\_ your experiences are important in gaining a better understanding of this important topic.

I would like to know if you are interested in participating in this project. If at all possible I would like to know if you are interested in participating by Date \_\_\_\_\_. Do not hesitate to call me or Dr. Jim Banning if you have questions.

Thanks for your time.

Sincerely,

Rich A. Salas

## **APPENDIX D**



**Consent to Participate in a Research Study  
Colorado State University**

**TITLE OF STUDY:** Persisting Latino Students: Looking at their Experiences of Mentoring

**PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:** JIM BANNING, SCHOOL OF EDUCATION, PHD, 491-7153

**CO-PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:** RICHARD SALAS, School of Education, Doctoral student, 491-0590

**WHY AM I BEING INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH?**

This study seeks to explore and understand the experiences of Latino/a students participating in a college mentoring program. Your input into this project based on your individual experience as a peer mentor is critical for improving retention programs at Colorado State University.

**WHO IS DOING THE STUDY?** Richard A. Salas, doctoral student in the school of Education under the guidance of Dr. James Banning. Richard A. Salas is also the Associate Director for El Centro.

**WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?**

The purpose of this letter is to extend an invitation to you to participate in a research project I am conducting for my dissertation in Educational Leadership in the School of Education. I am personally concerned about the retention and success of Latino/a students at Colorado State University. Although there is plenty of research that suggests why Latino/a students drop out of college, I am interested in researching what Latino/a student's say is contributing to their success and persistence at Colorado State University. I believe this study will contribute to the literature and benefit Latino/a students like you who are currently participating or have participated in the El Centro Resource Leaders Mentoring program. Your experiences are important in gaining a better understanding of this topic.

**WHERE IS THE STUDY GOING TO TAKE PLACE AND HOW LONG WILL IT LAST?**

Your interviews will be held in the Lory Student Center at a location convenient for you. Each 1 on 1 interview (2 total) with you will last approximately 60-75 minutes each or approximately 2.5 hours in duration for both interviews.

**WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO?**

With your consent, I will record your interview to accurately transcribe your responses. The researcher will ask you to answer approximately between 12-15 questions about your experience at Colorado State University and your experiences as a peer mentor/mentee in the El Centro program.

**ARE THERE REASONS WHY I SHOULD NOT TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?**

There are no known reasons for you to not participate in this study.

**WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS?**

There are no known risks associated with the procedures of this study.

It is not possible to identify all potential risks in research procedures; however the researcher has taken reasonable safeguards to minimize any known and potential, but unknown, risks.

Dr. Elena Estanol, counselor at CSU Health Network will be available to meet with you if you may feel uncomfortable or become upset due to the questions asked in interviews.

**ARE THERE ANY BENEFITS FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?** There are no direct benefits to the study participants. However, the overall potential benefit from conducting this study is to better understand both the negative and positive experiences of Latino/a students participating in the El Centro program. The findings from this research will be provided to El Centro using pseudonym names to protect you from being identified.

**DO I HAVE TO TAKE PART IN THE STUDY?** Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you decide to participate in the study, you may withdraw your consent and stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

**WHAT WILL IT COST ME TO PARTICIPATE?** There are no monetary costs for you to participate in this study, but there is a small time commitment to participate in the interviews.



## APPENDIX E



CSU Health Network  
Care for Body and Mind  
8010 Campus Delivery  
Fort Collins, Colorado 80523-8010

September 29, 2010

To Whom it may concern:

My name is Dr. Elena Estanol. I serve as Senior Staff Psychologist at the CSU Health Network. I have agreed to meet with students participating in doctoral candidate, Rich A. Salas research. Rich's work is under the guidance of Dr. James Banning from the School of Education at Colorado State University.

More specifically, I am available and willing to meet with participants who may feel upset or may become emotional as a result of the questions asked in the interviews. I welcome the opportunity to meet with students who would like to discuss or vent about both their negative and positive experiences as participants in the El Centro Mentoring program.

I have 9 years of counseling students and have worked as a liaison to El Centro during my tenure at Colorado State University. Students will have the opportunity to set up a meeting with me based on my office hours and availability.

Feel free to call me if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Elena Estanol".

Elena Estanol Ph.D., M.F.A.  
Senior Staff Psychologist  
Sport Psychology Consultant  
CSU Health Network