THESIS

UNDERSTANDING FIRST-GENERATION, LOW-INCOME, LATINX STUDENT NETWORKS: AN EXPLORATION OF STUDENT SUPPORT AT A MODERN LAND-GRANT UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis employs qualitative analysis of social network data and interview transcripts to explore the social networks and support systems of 18 first-generation, low-income, Latinx students at Colorado State University (CSU), an Emerging Hispanic-Serving Institution (eHSI) and land-grant university in Northern Colorado. Framed by intersectionality, critical race theory and social network theories, the study investigates how students establish connections on campus, the nature of these connections, and how students make sense of how their networks support them in pursuit of their educational goals. The findings highlight the centrality of peer relationships and the critical influence of mentors and campus programming in fostering student engagement and persistence. The thesis underscores the importance of culturally responsive institutional support and promoting an inclusive educational environment and ends with brief recommendations for institutions including expanded and resourced programming to further support diverse student needs and aspirations.

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INTRODUCTION

While first-generation students are not new to higher education, their presence and increased enrollment has continued to capture the attention of institutions of higher education as well as scholars in various disciplines. Within the contemporary, capitalist society, postsecondary education has become a new standard to be competitive within the job market and students at modern universities often encounter numerous barriers when applying for, entering, and persisting through higher education. Research suggests that students of color, first-generation students, and students from low-income backgrounds face compounded disadvantages in entering and persisting through college when compared to their peers (Jehangir 2010, Nuñez 2009, Reyes and Nora 2012). These barriers include a number of increased difficulties which result from both structural and interpersonal factors including stigma surrounding socioeconomic status, racial discrimination and marginalization (Schuyler, Childs, & Poynton 2021), limited knowledge on postsecondary processes, and a need for improved institutional capacity to respond to the needs of first-generation both pedagogically and emotionally (McCallen and Johnson 2020).

This thesis is informed by concepts and understandings proposed by Gina Garcia (2019), who notes that empirical research in the field of higher education has produced a dominant narrative based on whiteness and since our knowledge of institutions has historically been white, it has solidified whiteness as the foundation of our ways of knowing. In order to understand how best to support student populations that have been marginalized, it is imperative to consider the historical and structural impacts that have marginalized them and focus on student assets and strengths they bring to higher education. More attention needs to be paid to student experiences and how their engagement, or lack of, with institutions can bolster, or potentially limit, their opportunities for success, exploring these connections and how these inform their experience. Garcia (2019) also notes that “there is a need to center a racialized narrative that disrupts the white ideologies grounded in research based on white institutions” (p. 46). This thesis hopes to add to the current work that uplifts student voices while recognizing structural and institutional barriers that have historically marginalized students of color.

According to McCallen and Johnson (2020), “Ensuring success in public higher education among underrepresented students is integral to social equity in the United States today” (p. 320). As educational attainment has become one of the most salient predictors of employment and higher pay for young adults (NCES 2015), the number of individuals applying to, enrolling in, and graduating from colleges and universities is the highest it has been in the U.S. since 1940 when they began collecting this data (US Census 2017). Recent Census data (2022) highlights that between 2011 and 2021, the percentage of the population aged 25 and older who have completed a bachelor’s degree or higher increased from 30.4% to 37.9%. During this same time period, the percentage of Latino/Hispanic adults that held bachelor’s degrees or higher increased from 14.1% to 20.6%. While these higher levels of educational attainment are generally associated with outcomes such as employment and higher pay, college degree attainment is unequally distributed among students (Redford, Ralph and Hoyer 2017). As the United States’ second largest racial or ethnic group, Hispanic/Latino Americans accounted for about half of the U.S. population growth from 2010 to 2020 (Pew Research Center 2022). As this population continues to grow, it’s important to consider not only their educational attainment but how they understand and make sense of their experiences within the system of higher education.

Many scholars have identified various ways that first-generation students face distinct challenges to obtaining a college education. According to Brown-Nagin (2015), these constraints fall into three main categories: financial, socio-cultural, and academic. If universities are intending to promote social mobility, they must recognize the need for enrolling and retaining first-generation students, particularly students of color who come from low-income backgrounds. Brown-Nagin (2015) goes on to say that universities that wish to ameliorate educational disadvantage must do more than recruit a diverse student body, and that the structure of higher education today provides invaluable context for understanding the variety of factors that affect students. In addition to enrolling and retaining these students, institutions must consider how students experience their university, build connections, and understand those connections in relation to their efforts to further educational and life pursuits. Most research has focused on first-generation college students as a group (Dennis, Phinney & Chuateco 2005) without specifically focusing on the intersectional identities of first-generation students of color who come from a low-income background. In order to more fully understand how best to support this population, more research should consider the intersectionality of this group and amplify their voice in efforts to improve their outcomes and experiences.

Over the past two decades, the Latino population within the United States has accounted for more than half the population growth, and yet this population continues to face barriers in the pursuit of postsecondary education, such as higher financial stress while in school and attempting to support their families, potentially working part- or full-time during college or living with family rather than on-campus. First generation students are also more likely to report low levels of academic integration (Reyes and Nora 2012). While there has been more focus on Hispanic Serving Institutions, which play a key role in bolstering Latino student success in higher education, persistence and completion rates remain low. Even these institutions have lower college completion rates for Latino students compared to their white peers, despite promising persistence rates and college units earned (Contreras & Contreras 2015). In Colorado, more specifically, the gap in educational attainment between white adults and Latinx adults is even larger, at 59% of white adults having attained at least an associate's degree, compared to 28% of Latino adults (*Excelencia* in Education 2021).

While Latino/x/é and Hispanic are used interchangeably in this paper, I recognize that discourse related to these terms is complicated, and identities are intersectional and complex ("Why Latinx/é?"), and that there are many ways that individuals describe themselves. Folks, both institutionally and as personally, use various terms – Hispanic, Latino/a, Latine, Latinx – to refer to people of Latin American Descent and from Spanish-speaking countries. Students in this study self-identified as Latino or Hispanic in their institutional documents. As a result of sociohistorical factors, including educational segregation and restrictive language policies, the processes of enrolling, persisting in, and completing higher education are more complex for Latinx students, and all students of color, than they are for white students (Garcia 2018). Understanding the intersectional experiences of Latinx, first-generation students and how they function within the institutions, sometimes even despite the institution, can help us move toward policies and practices that the institution can implement in efforts toward providing a space for students to thrive. As Garcia (2019) notes, people of Mexican, Latin American, Caribbean, and Spanish descent historically have been oppressed in the United States – educationally, economically, socially, and politically. In creating the term Hispanic, this minoritization becomes more tangible, as the outcomes, specifically educational, could be highlighted.

While outreach to low-income and typically underrepresented students may be well-intentioned, it does not constitute a comprehensive response to the structural crisis in higher education or promote social mobility (Brown-Nagin 2015). Thus, it is imperative that we continue to investigate the ways that these students are functioning on campus and promote further engagement in attempts to understand how best to support this population. Brown-Nagin (2015) also points to the issue that colleges prefer to admit the students perceived as the easiest to educate, and that the admission of truly impoverished students is costly and less attractive candidates to admit, even when this decision is in contrast to their goals of promoting diversity and social mobility. Brown-Nagin (2015) suggests that "institutions can directly address disadvantage by prioritizing first-generation, Pell Grant Eligible status in admissions, financial aid, and institutional outreach" (1). For the purpose of this paper, low-income students are designated by their Pell Grant eligibility.

In educational research, there are many different outcomes considered by scholars as success measures for students in higher education, from the time that students enroll, through their persistence, retention and graduation rates. While these can be considered indispensable measures for many institutions, Garcia (2019) argues that in order to effectively serve Latinx students, specifically, we must move from simply enrolling them to recognizing, embracing, and enhancing their racial and cultural ways of knowing. In considering how to serve these, and all, students, it's paramount to consider the connections that they are making on campus and how this contributes to their experience within the institution.

Students who hold multiple marginalized identities of 1) being in the first generation of their family to attend college 2) being a racial minority and 3) coming from a low-income background face compounded disadvantages when entering, persisting through, and completing their college education. Glass (2023) points out that the main reason for the increasing disparity in college success among low-income, first-generation students is the lack of access to information and knowledge about navigating the college process but finds that mentoring and institutional culture plays an important role in their on-time enrollment in college. When considering how these students gain access to knowledge about the college-going process, it is clear this knowledge is not only presented through institutional materials or shared literature, but shared amongst people including their peers, staff and faculty, and others. This knowledge can be integral to the students' understanding of their resources and opportunities within the institution.

In this thesis, I explore the support networks of First-Generation, Latino/a, low-income students at a land grant university in the Western United States. I document 1) How do first-generation, low-income, Latino/a students build connections on campus? 2) Who are these connections? and 3) How do students describe the importance of their networks in supporting their educational goals? Through qualitative analysis of interview transcripts with 18 First-Generation, Latinx students and a theoretical framework stemming from Critical Race Theory, I identify what support measures and programming are currently taking place and identify opportunities for expansion and development at the university.

This thesis begins with a broad exploration of the literature on each intersection of Latinx, First-Generation, Low-Income students. This is followed by an overview of the theoretical frameworks that guided this inquiry including Critical Race Theory, social network theories, and the role of Institutional Agents. I then provide a discussion of the methods used to collect the data which informed this thesis, and an outline of the qualitative analysis of the interview transcripts that informed my understanding of these students' social networks.

Through this research, I found that first-generation, low-income, Latinx students at Colorado State University build connections primarily with and through their peers, while also growing their network through intentional programming and outreach efforts, connecting them with institutional agents that play critical roles in their engagement and success. Institutions have the unique opportunity to provide intentional programming that works to increase student engagement and foster further development of their networks, promoting persistence and completion rates. In exploring student's on-campus connections, we can investigate how their network potentially influences persistence and completion rates by following up with data and identifying those students within the sample who persisted to graduation. Institutional programs that facilitate access and information, specifically providing resources on navigating the landscape of higher education, provide the opportunity for students to feel empowered to maneuver this novel experience.

LITERATURE REVIEW

> First-generation students are by no means a homogenous group; rather, their educational journeys represent an intricate juncture of place, aspiration, and access to American higher education… They all do not have the same story, but aspects of their narratives weave together to form a pattern reflecting both the richness they bring to campuses and the obstacles they encounter in academia (Jehangir 2010:2)

Background

In this chapter I first introduce some background information on first-generation students and the defining characteristics, exploring key differences from continuing generation peers. I then briefly discuss Latinx college students and then the intersection of first-generation, Latinx students. I also go on to explore the multiple intersecting identities of first-generation, low-income Latinx students at the university level and the specific barriers faced by this population. I then explain the theoretical framework that underpins my understanding of this work, namely Critical Race Theory, institutional agents, and racialization of institutes of higher education, informed primarily by Garcia (2019), Delgado and Stefanic (2017) and Stanton-Salazar (2011).

First Generation College Students

There have been multiple studies (Ward, Seigel and Davenport 2012; Peralta and Klonowski 2017) that have discussed the different conceptualizations of “first-generation college student,” and point to the inconsistency between definitions that create difficulty in understanding generalizations and comparing information across this group. In their study, Toutkoushian, Stollberg, and Slaton (2018) found that depending on the definition used, who gets counted as a first-generation student varied from 22% to 77% of the sample. Peralta and Klonowski (2017) recommend the use of a standardized definition: “An individual who is pursuing a higher education degree and whose parents or guardians do not have a postsecondary degree” (p. 635). In keeping with definitions from prior research that informed this review, and in line with the institutional definition, the students in this study are pursuing a degree at Colorado State University and their parent(s) do(es) not have a postsecondary degree.

When compared to their continuing-generation peers across racial and socioeconomic lines, first-generation students are less likely to be involved in activities or extracurriculars that would normally be positively associated with retention and are more likely to experience circumstances negatively associated with college completion. These circumstances include working longer hours, residing at home, and personal and family related stress (Rondini, Richards and Simon 2018). First generation students are also less likely to take advantage of study groups, office hours, tutoring, writing coaches, and other support services (Chen and Carroll 2005).

Much of the research that has been done on first-generation college students (Jehangir 2010) discusses ways that this population often feels pressure to separate themselves from their cultures and family life to succeed at the institution, potentially causing them to experience isolation or marginalization. Reyes and Nora (2012) suggest that rather than attempting to eradicate these cultural differences, educators and institutions must find ways to help students maintain their sense of identity and develop them into unique strengths that contribute to their success. This thesis operates under the recognition that there is a necessary institutional shift from deficit mindsets to asset-based approaches. Whitley, Benson, and Wesaw (2018) suggest that institutions are uniquely placed to shift this negative narrative to an asset-based lens that celebrates the unique strengths of these students and that this cultural shift will benefit individuals, the campus, and the wider communities.

While much of the work examining first-generation college students has been quantitative in nature, examining the numbers and running models to demonstrate various forms of disadvantage, more qualitative work is necessary to discover and investigate the personal experiences of these students and how their networks are influencing their connection to campus and eventual success as a college graduate. Beard (2018) points out that while there is an abundance of quantitative studies examining factors that influence college departure, there is a need for more qualitative studies that explore how first-generation students of color overcome obstacles to persist and complete bachelor's degrees.

Latinx College Students

In the United States, enrollment in postsecondary institutions for students identifying as Hispanic or Latino has seen an exponential increase over the last few decades, partly reflecting this population's rapid growth as a share of the overall population in the U.S. Enrollment of Hispanic students at postsecondary institutions has more than doubled in the last two decades. This data includes students of all ages and both two- and four-year institutions; Hispanic students make up a growing share of all students enrolled in postsecondary institutions and now represent one-in-fives students in these institutions (Mora 2022).

As Latino students continue to enroll in postsecondary institutions and their share of the student population has increased, scholars and federal law have identified specific language for those colleges and universities which enroll a specific percentage of Latino students. Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) first received federal funding in 1995, three years after first being included in the Higher Education Act and are defined in federal legislation as, "accredited, degree-granting public or private nonprofit institutions of higher education with 25% or more total undergraduate Hispanic full-time equivalent (FTE) student enrollment" (*Excelencia* in Education 2024). Hispanic Serving Institutions provide a place where Latinx students can feel linguistically, culturally, and racially connected to peers and faculty, which can lead to student's feeling a sense of belonging as well as persistence and graduation; both outcomes and culture are essential for HSI's organizational identity. Additionally, by teaching and learning about the plight and struggle of Latinx people in the United States, we can simultaneously recognize the struggle of other racial groups in this country and the impacts this has had on education, more specifically (Garcia 2019).

Latino, First-Gen, Students

Vega (2016) utilized an interpretative phenomenological analysis with a purposeful sample of first-generation Latino college students to understand their experiences at a Hispanic Serving Institute. She sought to tell the success stories of these students and their resilience through a number of barriers in attending and completing their postsecondary education. She found four main factors that influenced the participants' postsecondary enrollment and persistence: academic rigor, support networks, internal motivation, and responsibility as a first-generation college student. Within their support networks, students primarily discussed school personnel, family, and friends and the impactful efforts that bolstered their success.

Bordes-Edgar et. al (2011) conducted a 4.5-year longitudinal analysis of Latina/o student persistence, finding that self-beliefs and mentoring predicted academic persistence and college GPA, and that students who graduated had more mentoring and positive initial academic persistence decisions. This study demonstrated that having a mentor or someone on campus who believed in them became a key factor influencing persistence and suggests that higher education professionals should be concerned about the initial self-beliefs and social connection through friends on campus of incoming freshmen. They also recommend developing programs and outreach that provide young Latina/o students with support from faculty and staff as ongoing sources of support and encouragement (Bordes-Edgar et. al 2011). As noted by Beard (2018), much of the educational research on persistence in higher education has focused on barriers for Latino students or first-generation college students, but there is still room and need for the intersection of these identities to be explored.

Padilla (1996) argues that most of the literature on student retention focuses on what students do wrong, and that there is much to be learned from studying success in higher education. They present a study to uncover the strategies that successful minority students employ to overcome barriers to academic success. Ultimately, Padilla (1996) contends that racially minoritized students are often provided fewer supports needed for their success in college; and that successful students are those who learn how to get the support they need, creating personal and environmental support that their institution lacked in order to confront the challenges they faced in college. Unlike prior research on high-risk students, which has been conducted primarily from a deficit model and has focused on the specific struggles and difficulties faced by students of marginalized communities, researchers like Schreiner, Noel, Anderson and Cantwell (2011) shift the lens to highlight factors that contribute to their success. Whitley, Benson, and Wesaw (2018) explain this shift as "Simply, how can we help first-generation students utilize their strengths and talents for greatness rather than simply focusing on the barriers to success they each may face?" Joining these scholars, this thesis operates under the recognition that there is a necessary institutional shift from deficit mindsets to asset-based approaches. While recognizing the strengths and assets that students from different backgrounds bring to an institution provides an affirmative and supportive lens, it is also evident that we must recognize the structural and societal impacts that have impacted this population and consider how students utilize their networks and resources in order to persist even amongst difficulties.

Latino, First-Gen, Low-Income Students: Intersectionality and Student Success

While the previous articles reviewed likely included students that represent varying socioeconomic backgrounds, it is important to consider how socioeconomic status and coming from a low-income background impacts students in addition to generational status and ethnic or racial identity. Crenshaw (1991) originally identified this overlap of identities and the impacts they have on material conditions, noticing that the violence experienced by many women is often shaped by other dimensions of their identities, such as race or class. She explores the various ways in which race and gender intersect in shaping structural, political, and representational aspects of violence against women of color. While she focuses on the intersection of race and gender, the idea of intersectionality highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed (Crenshaw 1991). In the context of student support, intersectionality is critical because it acknowledges that individuals' experiences are shaped by a complex interplay of factors, including but not limited to race, gender, socioeconomic status, and generational status. For first-generation students of color from low-income backgrounds, intersectionality highlights the need to understand how these various dimensions of identity interact and intersect to influence their experiences in higher education.

As Beard (2018) points out, “Just as intersectional identities cannot be unraveled, neither can the intrinsic mechanisms students use to succeed in college” she goes on to say that “awareness of students’ multiple identities and compound strategies for problem-solving gives credit to students’ funds of knowledge and community wealth” (321). Through this research, it was incredibly important to recognize the students as producers of knowledge and the strength of qualitative understanding comes from their vulnerability and willingness to participate.

Students in this study were considered low-income if they were eligible for Pell Grants, which are usually awarded only to undergraduate students who display exceptional financial need and have not earned a bachelor’s, graduate, or professional degree. A Federal Pell Grant, unlike student loans, does not have to be repaid. The amount that students receive through Pell Grants depend on expected family contribution, the cost of attendance, full or part time student status, and plans for attending a full academic year. Students can receive the Federal Pell Grant no more than twelve terms, roughly six years (Federal Student Aid 2023). These grants are often critical for students who wish to attend college but don’t have the funds to meet their necessary cost of attendance. *Excelencia* in Education (2024) argues that financial aid is critical to the access of success of Latinos in postsecondary education.

Using data from the U.S. Department of Education, The Pell Institute produced a report that examines the current status of low-income, first-generation college students in higher education, discussing barriers as well as strategies that colleges can pursue to address these and work towards closing the gaps in both access and success that exist for this disadvantaged population. According to another Pell Institute study (Cahalan et. al 2016), the percentage of first-generation, low-income students who obtained a bachelor’s degree within six years of enrolling was 21%, whereas students who are neither first-generation nor low income demonstrate a 6-year graduation rate of 57%. While graduation rates are an important outcome to consider for students, Garcia (2019) notes that while some scholars suggest that certain academic outcomes are the best indicators of success and effectively serving Latinx students, there are also nonacademic outcomes, such as sense of belonging, enhancement and affirmation of identities, racial and other, and workforce development.

Latinos are one of the fastest growing racial/ethnic groups in postsecondary education and when considering the conflation of racial and economic backgrounds; while most Latinos (74%) applied for and received financial aid in 2015-2016, Latinos overall received the lowest average financial aid award among all racial/ethnic groups. While overall awarded financial aid for these students is lower, Latinos received a slightly larger average Pell Grant than most other racial groups, except Asians, and almost half of all Latino students received a Pell Grant (*Excelencia* in Education 2024). Data from organizations like the Pell Institute (2022) and *Excelencia* in Education (2024) highlight the challenges faced by Latinx students, including those who are in the first generation of their families to attend college and receive Pell grants, in accessing and succeeding in higher education. By considering the intersectionality of students' identities and addressing the barriers they face, institutions can work towards closing the gaps in both access and success for these populations that have been historically marginalized, ultimately fostering efforts that can help create more equitable and inclusive higher education institutions. According to Deborah Santiago of *Excelencia* in Education (2024), achieving the nation’s educational attainment goals and ensuring the nation's prosperity is impossible without significant improvements in the postsecondary completion rates of Latino students.

Student Social Networks

Research on the social networks of college students has grown over the past decades and especially within the last years, becoming a key way to understand how students are making and maintaining relationships that support their progress toward goals, both educational and overall. University and college campuses are semi-closed spaces, where students’ interactions are conceived as rather simple, primarily with faculty and peers, with interactions with faculty focused on study while peer relations are the main source of social communications (Chen and Chen 2021). While their peers provide a social outlet, they also can, and often do, provide connections to significant sources of knowledge, including college-going knowledge. Ream and Rumberger (2008) used a national longitudinal database study to show that behavioral and social aspects of school are linked to the process of school completion and dropout rates and note that resources found within friendship networks are often accumulated and exchanged in a manner that influences persistence and completion.

Scholars in education have studied the importance of social networks, uncovering the web of connections between individuals, mapping networks and comparing structures, often finding that this structure influences outcomes such as health, emotional states, and education (Christakis and Fowler 2009). McCabe (2016) found that friendships that are considered "tight knit" among students from disadvantaged backgrounds can help reduce racial and socioeconomic gaps in grades and graduation rates, and provide tremendous social support, although these tight-knit networks did not always pull students up academically. McCabe (2016) found that while individual characteristics certainly shape the friendships people form, friendships and network connections are also shaped by one's experience within specific contexts, including race and class-based isolation on a predominantly white campus. She also found that young adults were more likely to maintain friendships with socially and academically supportive friends than other types of college friends. Rios-Aguilar and Deil-Amen (2012) utilized social network and qualitative analysis to examine key components of college trajectories of Latino students, finding that most ties facilitated social capital relevant to getting into college, fewer ties engaged capital relevant to strategizing success in college, and even fewer provided capital useful for planning career or professional trajectories. While recruitment and transition programs are crucial, it is evident that students continue to need support throughout their educational and professional journey in order to access resources and capital.

Theoretical Framework

In this section I will outline the theories that guided my understanding and analysis of this research. I will first introduce Critical Race Theory and how it provides a foundation for this exploratory research. I then go on to discuss racialization in higher education and the role of institutional agents and social capital. Finally, I will talk a bit about the social network theories that helped to inform my understanding.

Critical Race Theory

Critical theory perspectives are concerned with empowering human beings to transcend the constraints placed on them by race, class, and gender, wherein researchers should acknowledge their own power and use theory to interpret or illuminate social action (Creswell 2013), asking questions that highlight and recognize the broader structures while critiquing society and envisioning new possibilities (Fay 1978; Morrow & Brown 1994). Critical Race Theory (CRT), in particular, focuses theoretical attention on race and how deeply embedded racism within the framework of American society, directly shaping the institutions such as the education and legal systems (Parker and Lynn 2002). Critical race theory's purpose, according to Hiraldo (2010) is to unearth what is taken for granted when analyzing race and privilege and the profound patterns of exclusion that exist in the United States. In higher education, racism should be analyzed through a lens that examines the structural impact, recognizing the existence of systemic racism while implementing diversity initiatives. It is important to consider how well intended institutional processes and initiatives could potentially promote racism while working to improve equity and inclusion (Hiraldo 2010).

An important component of CRT is uplifting voices of folks who have been marginalized; this lens provides a way to communicate the experience and realities of the oppressed, which Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) say is the “first step on the road to justice” (58). They make linkages between CRT and education to contend that the voice of people of color is required for a complete analysis of the educational system (Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995). Critical Race Theory (CRT) provides a framework for understanding the intersectional experiences of Latinx, first-generation, low-income students within higher education institutions. At its core, CRT examines how race intersects with other social identities, such as class and gender, to perpetuate systems of oppression and inequality. Delgado and Stefanic (2017) define critical race methodology as a theoretically grounded approach to research that foreground race and racism in the research process while simultaneously challenging discourse on race, gender, and class by showing how these elements intersect to impact students of color. Critical Race Theory also challenges the traditional research paradigms, texts, and theories and works to offer liberatory solutions focused on the racialized and classed experiences of students of color through an interdisciplinary knowledge base. This critical race methodology in education challenges white privilege, rejects notions of so-called race-neutral research and exposes deficit-informed research (Delgado and Stefanic 2017). Critical race theory builds on the insights of previous movements including critical legal studies and radical feminism, particularly the feminist movement’s insight into the relationship between power and the construction of social roles and habits that make up types of domination. One tenet of critical race theory that recognizes the importance of studying this particular population, is the movement beyond binary thinking, which focuses on just two groups – usually whites and one other – which can conceal racial progress and hide the way dominant society often casts minority groups against one another to the detriment of each. This binary thinking can induce a minority group to identify with whites at the expense of other groups (Delgado & Stefancic 2017).

Critical Race Theory has become an increasingly popular theoretical lens for educational researchers seeking to examine varied opportunities, climate, representation, and more, looking to CRT and a tool to help analyze the experiences of historically underrepresented populations across the educational pipeline. CRT also has a commitment to intersectionality, recognizing that oppression and racism are not unidirectional. Critical Race Theory in education illuminates that we cannot truly assess, respond and promote educational research and praxis devoid of the entrenched nature of white supremacy in the United States (Ledesma and Calderon 2015). The purpose of a critical theory of race and racism is to move forward our understanding of racial and racist dynamics in ways that bring us closer to ending racial oppression (Golash-Boza 2016).

Part of Critical Race Theory's purpose is to unearth what is taken for granted when analyzing race and privilege and can play an important role as higher education institutions word toward becoming more diverse and inclusive. When predominantly white institutions, in particular, work toward increasing enrollment of diverse students without institutional change, it is simply insufficient. Focusing campus climate efforts on hiring – and retaining – culturally competent and diverse staff, faculty, and administrators is a more effective way of becoming diverse and inclusive. If the institution does not make necessary changes to make the campus climate more inclusive, it will have a difficult time maintaining diversity (Hiraldo 2010).

Yosso (2006) provides us with the concept of community cultural wealth as a critical race theory designed to challenge traditional interpretation of cultural capital, shifting the lens away from a deficit view of Communities of Color and instead focuses on and learns from the cultural knowledge, skills, abilities possessed by marginalized groups that often go unrecognized and unacknowledged. She describes various forms of capital fostered through cultural wealth including aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant capital, drawing on the knowledge that Students of Color bring with them from their homes and communities into the classroom, This specific approach to educational research involves a commitment to acknowledging the multiple strengths of Communities of Color in order to serve efforts toward social and racial justice.

CRT and LatCrit, or Latino Critical Theory in educational research center the ways that race, class, gender, sexuality, and other forms of oppression manifest in the educational experiences of People of Color. LatCrit, in particular, can be used to reveal the ways Latinas/os experience these identities while also acknowledging their unique experiences with immigration status, language, ethnicity, and culture. LatCrit theorists acknowledge that educational structures, processes, and discourses operate in contradictory ways with their potential to oppress and marginalize and their potential to emancipate and empower (Huber 2010, Solorzano & Delgado Bernal 2001). LatCrit scholars have called attention to issues such as immigration, language rights, bilingual schooling, internal colonialism, and census categories for Latinos. This vein of critical theory also works to oppose the English-only movement and engage in discussions about passing and assimilation (Delgado & Stefancic 2017). This framework is appropriate for the investigation of my research questions as I am focusing specifically on the Latino/a population, allowing me to apply this additional theoretical framework to inform my understanding of the data.

Racialization of Institutions of Higher Education

Gina Garcia's (2019) work, *Becoming Hispanic Serving Institutions* provided a foundational framework for my understanding of the experience of this population and the process of racialization, which Omi and Winant (2015) describe as a subjective process of making up racial categories based purely on ideological notions that are influenced by history, economics, culture, and politics, and their concept of Racial Formation has served as the basis of much work on racial identity and meaning. Garcia (2019) argues that an institution's race is engrained in its organizational structure and reinforced by societal standards, and that this racialization process leads to an othering, where some races are assigned value, and others are diminished. While racialization has mostly been studied at an individual and group level, Garcia describes the racialization of organizations, since postsecondary institutions have been racialized.

Garcia (2019) also argues that racial inequities across the educational pipeline are grounded in this racialization process of society, where educators and educational systems reinforce this hierarchy, and institutions that are racially minoritized are often disregarded, even though they provide access to students of color, playing an important role in this stratified system. As Vega, Liera and Boveda (2022) argue, conceptualizations of servingness at HSIs must include an understanding of how racial ideologies shape these institutions. They found that whiteness operates as a credential, often legitimizing unequal resources and diminishing agency among minoritized groups. If institutions are to serve Latinx students, they should not only recognize minoritized students' ways of knowing and being but provide opportunities for these students to enhance their sense of belonging, engagement, and their intersecting identities. Garcia (2019) also challenges institutions to consider what it means to serve Latinx students beyond the federal designation and graduation rates; while recognizing that retention and graduation rates can be important indicators of institutional effectiveness, she suggests that an organizational identity for serving students is far more complex than traditional progress and outcome indicators. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (1997) defines the concept of racialized social systems as "societies in which economic, political, social, and ideological levels are partially structured by the placement of actors in racial categories" (p. 469). Bonilla-Silva (1997) places emphasis on racial hierarchies and points to how they influence all social relations, differentially allocating economic, political, social, and even psychological rewards to groups along racial lines. We can consider how the racialized nature of these institutions impact the network of students and their agency within this network.

Institutional Agents and Social Capital

While the definition of social capital has evolved, it is typically understood as the information, resources, and support that people can utilize from their social networks to secure benefits from their connections (Bourdieu 1986, Coleman 1988). This thesis utilizes Stanton-Salazar's more specific definition of social capital as "high-status institutional resources embedded in social relationships and social structure" (p. 1068). As noted by Glass (2023), everyone has social capital and the ability to access it within their networks, but due to historical exclusion, access to institutional cultural and social capital is limited and differentiated by race and class.

Stanton-Salazar (2011) discusses the concept of institutional agents, which are high-status, non-kin agents who occupy relatively high positions in the multiple dimensional stratification system and who are well positioned to provide key forms of social and institutional support. These individuals occupy hierarchical positions of authority and are situated in the social network of students, in this case. These institutional agents manifest their role when they act directly to transmit or negotiate the transmission of highly valued resources. This concept of social capital allows us to explore how students gain access to vital resources through relationships with these institutional agents situated within their social networks. It is through building human connections and networks that individuals learn how to be in new spaces and fields; trusting relationships can open new doors to social and cultural capital (Glass 2023). In conjunction with the critical perspective, Stanton-Salazar (2011) notes that the reality of development, and thus life chances and the ability to build instrumental relationships, occur within the context of interlocking subsystems of social stratification. The provision and utilization of resources never operates in a cultural or political vacuum, and the development of supportive relationships with eligible institutional agents and access to key forms of institutional support are not only crucial but complex and often problematic. Although social capital is often used as a mechanism of privilege and domination, and many institutional agents are socialized into rule of hierarchy and gate-keeping, other institutional agents are poised to enable the empowerment of individuals from historically oppressed communities (Stanton-Salazar 2011).

Social Network Theories

Granovetter (1973) describes the analysis of social networks as a tool for linking micro and macro levels of sociological theory, and specifically discusses the cohesive power of weak ties and asserts that more people can be reached through weak ties, which can be acquaintances or infrequent contacts that serve as bridges between different social groups and often provide access to information and opportunities not available through stronger ties or within one's immediate social circle. Networks are located as the meso-level, between individual and the institutions, and assume an interaction between individuals and their networks, with the focus on relationships and their structures. In addition to attributes such as age and gender, they focus on the embeddedness of individuals in their social environment (Gamper 2022).

Social network theories are used to study the social structures by examining different ties linking individuals and how, through these ties, people can gain access to resources and opportunities. Exploring networks, according to Wellman (1983) begins with the simple notion that sociologists should focus on social structure, deemphasizing why people act as individuals and emphasizing structural constraints on their actions.

DATA AND METHODS

In this thesis, I explore the current support measures and institutional resources used by First-Generation, Low-income, Latino/a students. I drew on a sample of 18 students. I use qualitative research methods to document how first-generation, low-income, Latino/a students build connections on Colorado State University's campus. I identify how we can continue to support and develop institutional resources in attempts to support this population. First, I describe my research setting, Colorado State University, before moving to a discussion of my research design, data collection, and data analysis.

The Case of Colorado State University

As one of 241 land-grant institutions across North America, Colorado State University (CSU) aims to cultivate a campus environment wherein minority students feel supported and embraced across campus, while also recognizing that their cultural backgrounds are unique, and their understanding of the world is valuable to the broader community. There is an important leadership role for these universities in providing equitable education to historically—and continuously—educationally marginalized groups. At the core of desired diversity outcomes is support for diverse cultures and aims to serve a wide range of stakeholders within the university system (Sternberg 2014). The Office for Inclusive Excellence (OIE) on CSU's campus, according to their website, is committed to embracing diversity through the inclusion of individuals within populations that have been historically underrepresented or excluded from participation in higher education, reflecting the university's role and mission as a land-grant institution ("Inclusive Excellence" 2023). To explore what this commitment looks like across the division, and at the university more broadly, additional resources and efforts are needed to gather student feedback and involvement within and across the office's centers.

Land Grant Institutions

Colorado State University was established in 1870 and while the original focus of the institution was agricultural and natural resource sciences, today there are over 25,000 students enrolled across nine different colleges. As a land-grant university in the twenty-first century, part of CSU's mission includes the following: inclusion, opportunity, and success, transformational research, service to society, education to meet the challenges of today and tomorrow, and excellence above all (CSU 2018, 2019). The original mission of these institutions, as set forth by the Morrill Act, was to teach agriculture, military tactics, and the mechanic arts as well as classical studies so members of the working classes could obtain a liberal, practical education (APLU 2018). While many land grant universities are still known for these roots, some have little agricultural identity and students are rarely from farming backgrounds as compared to past decades. A series of legislative acts endowed these colleges with a three-part function of encompassing teaching, research, and extension (National Research Council 1995), all three of which are practiced and emphasized on Colorado State's campus. Land-grant institutions were established while segregation was still predominant in the United States, while 'separate but equal' was the norm, which lead to the creation of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU), and as we have progressed closer to equality within our education system, more and more students are entering higher education and pursuing postsecondary degrees.

In 1984, CSU became the first university in the nation to offer scholarships specifically for first-generation students; for decades, about 25 percent of students attending CSU have been in the first-generation of their families to earn college degrees (CSU 2024). There are currently four subcommittees with membership across campus working to advance student success for this population, including: Faculty and Staff Engagement and Mentoring, Communications, Student Engagement and Events, and First-Generation Research, Data, and Strategies. I hope that this thesis will contribute to the research, data, and strategies that can inform understanding that contribute to closing the achievement gaps for first-generation students at CSU.

The Access Center, consistent with CSU's land grant mission to make education accessible to all persons and groups, provides educational access to underrepresented populations, such as first-generation, low-income, ethnically diverse students. This is done through services and programs funded by the university or broader federal programs that have been adopted by CSU. The Access Center at Colorado State University encompasses multiple programs including programs that work to utilize effective practices, providing quality services to communities, individuals and institutions working towards student success and programs guided by an ethic of community at project accountability. Some of these programs include Upward Bound, Bridge Scholars, Educational Talent Search, LDZ, and the Alliance Partnership, which provide opportunities for students who are beginning to explore postsecondary options or ready to start their university journey and explore residential life on campus. The goal of the Alliance Partnership is to work together with the community to raise the expectation that all students can pursue an education beyond high school, listening to the needs of each community and responding by providing the necessary tools and resources to students, families and schools ("Alliance Partnership" 2024). The Access Center also works closely with partners from the Community for Excellence who promote student success through collaboration across departments and divisions. This collaboration specifically supports students who come to CSU from partner organizations by promoting participation in the Community for Excellence ("Our Partners" 2024)

CSU is considered, by *Excelencia* in Education (2024) and the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, to be an emerging Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI). While there is currently no federal definition for “emerging HSIs,” *Excelencia* in Education (2024) describes itself as an organization that promotes Latino student success in higher education, identifies emerging HSIs as institutions with an undergraduate FTE Hispanic enrollment between 15 and 24 percent. Freshman enrollment numbers for Hispanic/Latino students at Colorado State University increased from 325 students in the fall of 2007, to 899 students in the fall of 2022. When considering first-generation and low-income status, the numbers are even smaller. In the fall of 2022, 479 of the 899 (~53%) of the Latino students enrolling are first-generation. When compared to white students enrolled the same term, 3867 students were enrolled with only 663 (~17%) of them identifying as first-generation students (CSU IRPE).

Due to CSU’s position as a land grant university and emerging Hispanic Serving Institution, as well as its’ strong commitment to diversity and inclusion, it provided an ideal research setting for studying the experiences of Latinx, first-generation, and low-income students. With significant increases in Hispanic/Latino student enrollment, particularly among first-generation students, CSU's initiatives like the Access Center and participation in programs like TRIO highlight its dedication to addressing the needs of historically marginalized groups in higher education. However, there is a continued need to identify sources of student support and implement suggestions for improvement to further enhance the success of Latinx, first-generation, and low-income students at CSU.

Research Methods

The findings presented in this thesis are based upon data from a larger project, which compares the social networks of first-generation students and their continuing generation counterparts in a longitudinal study. The initial data that was available for this sample was from the office of Institutional Research, Planning and Effectiveness (IRPE) at CSU and included demographic and personal information about each participant, including their gender identity, college, ethnicity/minority status, if they live on campus, if they are first-generation, and their cumulative grade point average. Some of this information, such as ethnic identification, is identified by their undergraduate application materials, while others such as residential information and cumulative GPA were collected as the student entered and remained on campus through at least the first semester at CSU. The participants self-identified various demographic information, including race/ethnicity from the following options: Multi-racial, Hispanic/Latino, White, Black, Asian, or international. This thesis utilizes a subsample of this data, where all participants identified as Hispanic or Latino. There are limitations with this data considering participants were only able to select one of the options, and there are important updates necessary within data collection, particularly within the racial and ethnic categories.

Data Collection

This larger project collected social network and qualitative data from a sample of 77 students between 2017-2022. In this thesis, I draw from a subsample of 18 students in 2017 and focus my analysis on in-depth interview data, rather than social network data, to document 1) How do first-generation, low-income, Latino/a students build connections on campus? 2) Who are these connections? and 3) How do students describe the importance of their networks in supporting their educational goals?

Data for the larger project from which my sample was derived was collected from 2017-2022; the data I utilized was from the students' first year at CSU in 2017. During Spring 2017, the internal data office provided a random sample of first-year, continuing generation student emails and a random sample of first year, first-generation student emails to receive the recruitment email, which had a subject line of, “Recruiting 1st-Year Students for Research” and stated that the researchers wanted to interview them about their personal and academic networks this spring semester with a following-up each of the following three spring semesters. They also included information about up to a $50 incentive, with a $20 gift card for the first year, and $10 every year after that. Researchers noticed most participants responding were female and worked to increase male participated by posting flyers around campus and recruiting through flyer and email reminders. In Spring 2017, they interviewed 77 students, and the study had intentionally oversampled first-generation and students of color (mostly Latine). The gender representation was similar to the 2017 overall student cohort.

I gained access to this data from the investigator who conducted the larger research study, a PhD student who was, at the same, in the same department. This researcher shared with me the institutional data, the network maps, the transcriptions of interviews, and interviewer field notes, all of which informed my analysis. We completed an additional IRB protocol which was initially approved in March 2021 and is valid through March 2025.

I identified a purposeful sample by selecting students who were identified through institutional reporting, from their own identification on admission materials, as first-generation, Latino/Hispanic, and Pell grant recipients. Purposeful sampling is used in qualitative research to select individuals and sites for study because they can inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study (Creswell 2013) I identified students who met these criteria and collected their materials for analysis including their network maps, interview transcripts, and demographic information.

Student participants coordinated with research assistants to schedule interview times to meet and completed the interviews at various locations across campus. All participants signed a consent form to participate in the study. After reviewing the consent form, each interview began with a question asking if the students considered themselves to be more of an introvert or an extrovert, followed by asking them to share their definition of a network and how they would describe their network at CSU. This is followed immediately by the participant being asked to fill out the network map with themselves in the center, and they are asked to generate names to answer the question listed at the top: “Who do I go to for academic or personal help/support at CSU?” Once the participant completed their network map, the interviewer went through and asked the same set of questions for each person listed: “Who is this person?” “When and where did you meet them?” “What types of support does this person provide?” “How often do you go to them for support?” “What makes you stay connected to this person?” and “Why are they in this location on your network map?” The average interview length was 45 minutes 3 seconds.

Network maps are a research tool where participants are given a blank circle and asked to fill it with their networks, with themselves in the center. The social network approach done for this research incorporates an egocentric analysis. In this approach, the individual is the center of the visualization (in this instance a network map or netmap) and the names listed are the ones that relate to that individual. The network map used was a physical piece of paper with a large circle, and the respondents were asked to fill in the circle with any names that answer the question, “Who do I go to for academic or personal help or support at CSU?” Respondents were also asked to put them in relation to themselves on the netmap, with people closer to the individual being listed closer to the middle of the circle, and people not as close to the individual would be on the outer sides of the circle.

The original qualitative social network data includes information from netmaps and in-depth semi-structured interviews, contributing to work in this area on "understanding egocentric networks and revealing how individual actors construct meaning and are constrained inside those networks" with a goal "not to perfectly represents participants' ties, but rather to delve into how the ties operate" (Frith 2014:295). To analyze the 18 students in the sample, I reviewed their netmaps to orient myself to the project and provide some insight into the structure and questions asked in the interviews but did not further analyze the network map data. Rather than analyzing network data quantitatively, I focus my analysis on the interview data to provide an understanding of first-generation Latinx student networks and their lived experiences. The primary analysis for this thesis was from qualitative analysis of the semi-structured interview transcripts which contained thorough descriptions of the student's network map.

Qualitative Research Methods

Qualitative methodology has its own set of assumptions, including that researchers must draw from sources available and use their skills to determine the best path forward, which Frith (2014) recognizes as a messy process, while also arguing that "it can also lead to nuanced understandings of the meanings of network formations that are not available from more generalizable quantitative approaches" (296). In addition to in-depth interviews, the broader project also collected social network data. Social network analysis (SNA) is "focused on the social connections people make and how those connections both enable and constrain behavior" (Frith 2014: 289). Rather than arguing that this population acts the same because of various demographic characteristics, SNA allows us to look at how people act and shape each other's actions, recognizing that agency is networked and relational (Marin and Wellman 2010). While Frith speaks in terms of lacking connections, this thesis works to take an asset-based approach and explores how students' connections are made and in what ways they receive support from their network.

Qualitative methodology has its own set of assumptions, including that researchers must draw from sources available and use their skills to determine the best path forward, which Frith (2014) recognizes as a messy process. However, "it can also lead to nuanced understandings of the meanings of network formations that are not available from more generalizable quantitative approaches" (p. 296). Qualitative research is appropriate when issues or topics need to be explored, in which variables cannot be easily measured, or to hear voices that have been silenced. We also conduct qualitative research when we need a complex, detailed understanding of the issue and we want to empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices, and work to minimize the power relationships that often exist between researchers and participants (Creswell 2013).

Researcher Positionality

White privilege refers to the myriad of social advantages, benefits, and courtesies that come with being a member of the race that has been deemed valuable (Delgado & Stefancic 2017). I acknowledge my privileged social location as a white, college-educated, cisgendered woman. I hope to contribute to fighting individual and structural racism through my research practice and continue to center race as important in my personal life as well as in my daily work. As Bergerson (2003) illuminates "white scholars committed to centering race and recognizing white privilege have an important role in advancing the tenets of CRT through questioning and confronting the actions of friends and colleagues that perpetuate racism" and then going on to warn that "We must not assume to speak for people of color. Our role is to use our experiences as white to increase awareness of how racist actions, words, policies, and structures damage the lives of our students, friends, and colleagues of color" (p. 59).

Bergerson (2003) also suggests that white scholars must understand that CRT is a framework developed by people of color to understand and explain their experiences and to move toward social change and racial equality. In utilizing a critical theory approach, I can allow the central tenets to inform my understanding of race while acknowledging my privilege as a white individual, and to challenge myself to reflect on implicit biases and how this identity shapes my experience and interpretation of our social work. Centering and illuminating their experiences through my analysis, I will work to privilege the voices of the students of color through this work. While I recognize my various privileged identities, I am also a first-generation, Pell grant recipient and worked my way through my undergraduate career with little financial support from my family. This position has allowed me to understand some experiences of first-generation, low-income students and some of the fiscal and social struggles that may accompany this social position.

Reflexivity, according to Creswell (2013), is how researchers position themselves in a qualitative research study; this is how researchers convey, throughout their work, their background, how it informs their interpretation and what they have to gain from the study. Through this work, I recognize my potential implicit biases and how these could inform my understanding and analysis. This includes my position as both a graduate student and employee of the university at which this study was conducted, as well as a white woman analyzing the reports from students of color. I also worked to exhibit theoretical sensitivity, which is a personal quality of the researcher indicating awareness of subtleties in the meaning of data. Researchers come to data with varying degrees of sensitivity depending on previous reading and experience with or relevant to the data. Theoretical sensitivity refers to having insight, the ability to give meaning and understand data and separate what is pertinent and not (Strauss and Corbin 1990).

Research Questions

In order to explore the current support measures and institutional resources used by First-Generation, Low-income, Latino students, I focused my exploratory inquiry on the following three questions:

1. How do first-generation, low-income, Latino/a students build connections on campus?
2. Who are these connections? (i.e. peers, faculty, staff, etc.)
3. How do students describe the importance of their networks in supporting their educational goals?

Data Analysis

In order to answer these questions, I began with a read through of the network maps, transcriptions of interviews, and fieldnotes by interviewees to understand the broader themes and areas that I wanted to focus on within the data. While browsing the transcriptions, I began pre-coding (Layder 1998) by circling or highlighting significant participant quotes or passages that struck me. I then conducted first and second round coding, developing themes from the various codes that are found within the data, utilizing code mapping as I moved through this process. A qualitative code is a researcher-generated construct that symbolizes or 'translates' the data and thus attributes interpreted meaning for purposes of categorization and theory building (Saldana 2016). After this initial reading, I began manually coding on hard-copy printouts using various methods such as In Vivo, Process, Descriptive, Emotion, and Values coding. I piloted this coding technique with a few interviews and adjusted strategies as needed. After I completed initial coding, I then moved to electronically coding the second-round codes in pattern/focused coding to categorize my data and move towards developing analytical themes (Saldana 2016). This electronic coding was conducted through the qualitative data analysis program, NViVo.

As I worked through the coding process, I discussed developing codes and emergent themes with one other graduate student researcher, as discussion provides opportunities to not only articulate my internal thinking process, but also to clarify my ideas and possibly make new insights (Saldana 2016). This did not involve the identification of participants nor discussion of any identifying data in these interactions. As I moved towards analysis, I maintained a codebook, a compilation of the codes, their content descriptions, and a brief data example for reference, working with this codebook and adjusting it as my study moved closer to a final report, using this as an analytic opportunity to organize and reorganize the codes into major categories and subcategories, as suggested by Saldana (2016). I kept this codebook in a word document on my computer as well as incorporating some features of the qualitative analysis software NVivo as my analysis developed.

While initially combing through the data and working to determine the direction of the study, I took preliminary jottings wherein I wrote down any ideas or specific threads that seemed important or that they will be helpful in reminding me of small details to include in my discussion. Throughout the research process, I continued to write and work through analytic memos to understand my own thought processes and emerging ideas. According to Saldana (2016), coding and analytic memo writing are concurrent qualitative data analytic activities, because there is a reciprocal relationship between the coding system and the understanding of a phenomenon. These memos informed my understanding by providing insight into my thought process during this study while also theorizing and allowing me to brainstorm about the data in a comfortable, personal setting. Virtually all qualitative methodologists concur that when anything related to and significant about coding or analysis of data comes to mind, one should stop what they are doing and write a memo about it immediately (Saldana 2016), I practiced this as I moved through the data analysis of this thesis.

Limitations

While the data utilized in this thesis provides extremely valuable information in terms of understanding the network experiences of First-Generation, Low-income, Latinx students at Colorado State University, there were a number of limitations to this study and there is still more work to be done to understand the experiences of this population. One prominent limitation is the use of secondary data analysis; as a qualitative researcher, an important part of the process is developing the study and working to shape methodology and inquiry based upon the specific questions. Although this data provides key insights into the questions I am asking, this is an existing limitation that I was not able to ask specific questions or conduct these interviews as the researcher. The research assistants who conducted the interviews had varying levels of interview experience and limited training, practiced limited probing, mainly sticking to the interview questions, lacking in-depth exploration consistently throughout the transcripts. While I based my research questions loosely on the data set and information available for exploring this inquiry, it would be crucial for future projects to be conducted with more focused questioning as well as further investigation into students' experiences as it relates directly to their intersectional identities within the institution.

FINDINGS

Through analysis of 18 interview transcripts with first-generation, low-income, Latinx students at Colorado State University, I sought to answer how these students are building connections on campus, who these connections are, and how these understandings could inform best practices for institutional support. I found that the relationships that bring students to campus initially or introduce them to the university are incredibly impactful and likely lasting relationships. Institutional and federal programs that intentionally recruit first-generation, low-income, students of color and provide them with support through their entrance and persistence through higher education provide invaluable support that students identify as influential in their success and persistence. Students identified their peers as a significant source of academic and personal support, and as critical members of their network that helped as they maneuvered higher education.

Peer mentoring is an especially impactful practice, and, like all programming, should be culturally responsive and relative. I also found that Access Programs at CSU provide a pipeline for students to build connections with peers as well as institutional agents on campus. These programs provide a number of resources and referrals to scholarships, volunteer, and work opportunities. Programs like Key Communities provide intentional outreach and recruitment of students from diverse backgrounds and proved to be a place where students expand their social networks. These networks included peers, staff, faculty, and other institutional agents who provided critical support through proactive outreach and connections that affirmed their experiences and provided non-judgmental support. Students report feeling more comfortable working with others when the other party reaches out first or initiates contact, whether that is a professor, TA, peer, etc. After this initial outreach and connection, students report that they feel more open and willing to ask for help when they need it. Students also shared being more likely to connect with instructors in courses with smaller class sizes.

The Impact of Peer Support

Students report significant levels of support from their peers, with all students in the sample listing at least one peer in their network, and many listing multiple peers with this being their primary category compared to faculty, staff, etc. Participants reported receiving support for academics, including sharing class notes and institutional knowledge such as course scheduling and anecdotal experiences of opportunities such as studying abroad, mentoring programs and more. As noted by Ayalas and Contreras (2018), Latinx students in particular who possess an empowered view of their racial or ethnic group are more likely to persist to college completion. Students, (who are identified with pseudonyms, as are any individuals referenced) including Michael and Marisa, both discuss the importance of relationships with peers who understand, validate, and reinforce their ways of knowing, especially as it relates to social justice and social movements:

> "Ruby is so passionate about like Black Lives Matter and like that whole movement, and like being a Latino like there is interest there, but not until I came to CSU, I didn't care about it like, oh it's just like another group, like that's just another race, but she has opened up my eyes so much to like, social justice issues within that community, and she, she has making you so aware of like the world around us and like how it works, and through her academically and personally I'm able to count on her because I've been writing so many essays on like social justice issues and how it has affected like the Black community or like the Latino community, and like she tells me her theories about like the whole hierarchy she believes" – Michael

> "I'm not a DACA student myself but I do have other friends that are DACA students and I just, it's incredible to see how she has like this flame inside her that she wants to do all these crazy things with her life about social justice and how she wants to change the world within that and I feel like that's why we're friends." – Michael

Critical race theories contain an activist dimension, working not only to understand the social situation but to change it, setting out not only to discern how society organizes itself along racial lines and hierarchies but to transform it for the better (Garcia 2019). As described by Michael above, when asked why he remains connected with certain friends, he explains that they have a "flame" inside of them and have goals to promote social justice and "change the world." Marisa, below, also describes venting to a friend/peer who is another person of color at a predominantly white institution, illustrating the trust and involvement in movements such as Black lives Matter:

> "Whenever I have a question or just want to talk about something or vent, like if something happened during the day, but also like we're both people of color in a predominantly white institution and we're both just first years so we're both kind of facing the same struggles. She's not a first gen, but um but still like, it's still rough to be here so far from home, and she's definitely like um into like the Black Lives Matter movement so it's like really cool to meet someone who's just as passionate about like social issues so that I can go to her whenever like, for whatever, like she always comes to me if like she's had a rough day because someone was saying something ignorant and things like that, so it's definitely like, I don't know like, facing similar social issues makes you like a lot closer, she's definitely someone I know I can go to." – Marisa

Marisa goes on to describe how she has a friend who is passionate about Black Lives Matter, but wonders if this friend would be as passionate about her rights as a Latina, reflecting that her friend was so willing to learn about it, even discussing the differences between Latino and Hispanic with Marisa and is willing to make corrections and share knowledge about their understandings of the world with one another:

> "at first I wasn't sure if like because again she's very passionate about Black Lives Matter movement and I wasn't sure if she would be as passionate like say about my rights as a Latina, and she's just so willing to learn about it, and like, she's like before, basically before I became her roommate she's like I didn't know the difference between Hispanic and Latino, and I'm like, and she's like willing to learn it and like make that correction.

> Just little things like that mean a lot, so I think just her willingness to learn about other issues and just other peoples’ identities is like, made me really realize she's a really important person in my life.” – Marisa

As Marisa and Michael described, they shared similar values around social justice movements, demonstrating values homophily. As McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Cook (2001) explain, the homophily principle, the idea that similarity breeds connection, structures network ties, including friendship, support, information transfer, exchange, and other types of relationships. The result of this can be that people’s personal networks are homogenous with regard to many characteristics which they warn may ultimately limit one’s worldview. With the increase of communication worldwide in the 21st century, people have the opportunity to engage with many different views and while homophily is still present, as shown, the engagement with various worldviews continues to grow.

Peer Mentoring

Students in this study report that their peers play an important role when learning to maneuver higher education institutions, including information about which classes to take – and when – and providing access to opportunities such as volunteer work or scholarships. Mentoring programs that display intentional efforts to connect students have proven to be impactful, especially during students' first year(s) at the institution. As noted by Glass (2023) mentoring has been a popular and useful intervention to a variety of social challenges, and their work demonstrates that gaining social capital to navigate the college process could come from a mentor, especially if the student is a first-generation college student. The depth of support that students get from their peers cannot be overstated. Students are meeting their peers and building meaningful relationships, often facilitated through intentional programming such as Key Communities and cultural centers like El Centro via their La Conexión program. Providing opportunities and space for students to engage in mentoring relationship building, and even culturally enhancing programs that highlight their traditional ways of knowing and orienting the participant. Students said the following about their peer mentors:

> "First semester I was struggling quite a bit just transitioning and she was like literally like a big sister to me" – Grace
>
> "Her being a student instead of being like let's say a professor or a director and stuff, really helped me connect with her just a little bit more"' – Victoria
>
> "a program I joined it's for first generation students and it's a business mentor program uhm and we actually got paired together and I like I came here uhm expecting for her to like help me a little bit but not as much uhm and she played like a big role for me here at CSU so like that's why I put her name one of the first names that I put down uhm because like she not only helps me emotionally like she helps me academically a lot" – Jasmine
>
> "She makes me feel welcome like I know other mentors that don't really show that their passionate about helping the students and she really helped showed me that she's interested in like helping me uhm graduate or find my major" – Alexa

Students demonstrated aspirational capital, which refers to the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future in the face of real and perceived barriers, demonstrating resilience and fostering a culture of possibility (Yosso 2006)

> "And me and her get along really well and cause she's a sociology major she's really helped me with like how to figure out like when to study abroad, or and I want to be a key mentor too, and she was telling me what's the best time to [be a mentor] as well, so she's really helped me with that." – Marisa

Yosso (2006) conceptualizes this as Navigational Capital, which refers to skills of maneuvering through social institutions, acknowledging that these institutions were not created with communities of color in mind and that there is agency within institutional constraints but connecting social network facilitate community navigation through spaces including institutions of higher education (Yosso 2006).

> "She will be graduating this year and uhm she's like a really good person to guide me through like that major because I'm majoring in business and uhm she tells me what classes to take uhm also like I been trying to like be involved here at CSU like I was at high school so like she was know what I should be involved in and what's going on and what I should join she's a really good for all of that" – Alexa

In the quote above, Alexa describes trying to be involved at the university, similar to how she was involved in high school, and shares how a peer mentor guided her through her major, telling her what classes to take and exploring potential opportunities for involvement. In the following quote, Jasmine describes how coming to college was difficult because of financial struggles, and how a peer walked with her to the financial aid offices and talked with her during difficult times:

> "Coming here was very difficult for me just because I didn't know like how I was going to pay for it and she walked with me to like the financial aid offices and she like one day I was like crying because I couldn't take it like I just like maybe it's just too tough for me, uh, she came at like one in the morning and talked to me" – Jasmine

Robert, below, describes how he plans to remain connected with the (access) program with which he was involved, explaining how it gave him a great opportunity to help other students, to teach them, to give them resources and even states how it might be very hard as a first-generation student:

> "the feeling of like being helped so much throughout like high school, middle school, and even now, um, it's given me this great opportunity to be a mentor and be part of the program for the summer, I think is really good and I plan to be in touch with them for a long time because doing that kind of helps students and I want to help do that too, help them know, or tell them, teach them, give them a bunch of resources to be successful and knock it out of the park. You only have college one time, I mean it might be very hard for some sometimes, as a first-generation student, and you kind of feel a big weight on your shoulders to do it right the first time." – Robert

Peer Academic Support

Students in this study often described their peers as supportive in their efforts to meet their academic goals. As McCabe (2016) describes in their 2016 piece, college students' friendship networks are associated with specific social and academic benefits, and their friends are both resource and liability in academic achievement. Students in this thesis mostly discussed their friends in a positive manner as it related to their academic goals:

> "It's nice to be able to talk to her about certain things and the classes, um since she has taken a lot of the classes that I am taking, so she has helped me connect with other people and she's even passed on notes that she took in those classes." – Emily

In this quote, Emily describes being able to talk with a peer or friend about the classes they have both taken, and even passing on course materials. In the following quote, Marisa describes how another student also shared course materials and provided help and support in regards to academics:

> "She actually gave me an old lab notebook that she had that I needed for the same class but she didn't use so it's like little things like that that are really helpful, um so I definitely feel like I can reach out to her whenever and she always has, she always helps me out." – Marisa

Intentional Institutional Programming

Of the 18 students interviewed, 9 mentioned at least one of the programs facilitated through the Access Center at Colorado State University, including the Alliance Partnership, Bridge Scholars, Educational Talent Search, LDZ/NHI, and Upward Bound. Students report feeling empowered through these experiences and the connections built, to navigate the institution: .

> "TRiO and Bridge, that's how CSU became a big playground for me [laughs] was thanks to her in Bridge, I gave up my senior summer but I would do it again… if I had the chance. Yeah she's a really good person, kind of gives you a bunch of wise words, um, connects you with other people, um, and the TRiO program I did it since middle school, it's kind of like Upward Bound type summer programs at CSU, so I've kind of been connected over summers at CSU too, kind of in and out, and Mia was the person who kind of uh, who was making all this happen. And I have her on my phone!" – Robert

> "I've been working or in the program so they know my face, I know their faces, with the staff, I kind of just met with Mia this past summer, so that closeness of what TRiO has done for me and what kind of doors they have opened for me and the bridges they've connected, kind of what they've taught me, to teach my parents as well, obviously I didn't know what the university could hold for me, so I kind of had to teach that to my parents as well cause they didn't know, so um yeah. It's been a great help." – Robert

LDZ and other Access Programming

The National Hispanic Institute (NHI) recognizes the Lorenzo de Zavala (LDZ) Youth Legislative Session as an outstanding program that provides model government sessions providing high school students the opportunity to understand organizational culture and procedures in efforts to support them in becoming effective community leaders, meet and collaborate with new friends, reflect on issues and practice leadership ("LDZ" 2024). Students reported remaining connected with folks they met through this program. One student in particular, Marcus, identifies how the LDZ program supported the growth of their network:

> "I have a few NHI friends that I kept really close with that I know I can talk to as well… especially my NHI family like there's really close connections that I made with people and I'm like we never talk you know but whenever we do talk it's just like like it's been forever but like we had just seen each other like just recently and so the connections still there" – Marcus

In this quote, Marcus uses the word “family” to describe his network within the National Hispanic Institute, and goes on to explain how these connections have provided him with avenues to discuss important and exciting topics:

> “someone to talk to someone to reflect with someone to be excited about stuff with uhm because NHI is very exciting for us so if we can talk about it together it’s just even better” – Marcus

Cultural Centers and Programming

Cultural centers have the opportunity and often provide intentionally responsive and informed programming delivering an outlet for students of color to connect with one another, build and share knowledge and understandings of themselves and their institution.

Cultural Centers as spaces for connections, where students have the chance to meet others, build their networks, and connect even further with individuals already within their networks. In the following quotes, Robert and Alexa mention networking with others within El Centro, whereas Victoria describes connecting with others already within their network. Jasmine shares how El Centro provides a connection to her Hispanic Roots and that is why she remains connected with the center:

> “El Centro is a place where I do, like network with other people. If I have like 30 minutes between classes I go there” – Robert

> “We go into the into El Centro and she sits there like you know she’s like doing her own homework or whatever so yeah she is like open enough that if you have any help that we’re able to go and talk to her at that point” – Victoria

> “I could also go to El Centro, I’m planning on going more often cause there’s a lot of people that uhm I connect to my network as well” – Alexa

> (on their network) “I would say that it’s primarily Hispanic… El Centro… My parents have like always instilled how culture is very important to us and how like I need to keep connected with my roots so that’s why (I stay connected)” – Jasmine

Culturally informed programming, including recognizing the importance of students feeling seen, valued, and appreciated for the strengths, talents and ways of knowing that they bring to the campus community. Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso 2006) challenges the assumption that students of color come to the institution or classroom with cultural, or any, deficiencies, and highlights the forms of capital that these communities bring, including aspirational, familial, linguistic, resistant, and navigational capital. Jasmine, above, describes what we could identify as familial capital, or cultural knowledge nurtured among family that carries a sense of community, history, and engagement with this form of wealth. Jasmine, in the quote below, goes on to describe the experience of coming to a predominantly white institution and city, and how the programming at CSU not only acknowledged this, but provided resources and support for navigating the institution:

> “Coming to CSU I didn’t realize just how different it was; [student’s hometown] is really diverse and there’s a lot of people who look like me or people who are different. But coming to Fort Collins was predominantly white and I didn’t notice immediately till like a couple days in to the school year and so I felt like key helped me kind of uhm stay like grounded like not worry too much uh they often have like lectures about how yeah you might be the only like Hispanic (student) in your class…and there’s going to be a lot of predominantly white… white people around you, but at the end of the day, it’s like, you share something with those people and like aspire to get educated” – Jasmine

Victoria describes being part of La Conexion, a program through El Centro, and that, while being on a predominantly white campus, which she notes can be overwhelming, this program provides a place for her to connect with folks from a similar background:

> “And I’m also part of La Conexion in El Centro so that’s um… how do I say this? Tougher for me because those are the people with the same, like similar background. So

> like being on campus that's predominantly white, sometimes it can be a little overwhelming, so for me that network is like just people I can relate to and understand because we have similar backgrounds and experiences." – Victoria

Student Support through Key Communities

Of the 18 students in this study, 13 mentioned their involvement and how they built connections through their Key Community. Students who are mentored through programs such as the Key Communities, are often inspired to go on to become mentors themselves, consistent with previous research within Colorado State University that has identified an important aspect of student experience is having the opportunity to give back to their communities, exhibiting aspirational and community capital. The Key Communities at Colorado State University are "Learning communities for first year, second year, and continuing students designed to honor the identities and strengths of each student to foster students' transition to and through the University" ("Key Communities" 2016). Pike & Kuh (2005) found that living on campus is a significant factor in developing peer networks, and that incentivizing this population to live on campus may improve their success at the university through programs such as learning communities or themed housing. Students identified a number of benefits of participation in a key community at CSU and reported their Key Mentors to be extremely helpful resources for different aspects of their identities, including being students of color and first-generation.

> "I met through key and if need like academic support then I can go to him and ask questions because he's in the same classes as me" – Jamie

> "Rachel definitely helps you out a lot within like Key communities and I feel like she embodies everything that has to do with what Key does and like its purpose, and through Rachell I was able to connect to this whole other network on here to other staff and things like that, and I was able to get a job through her and things like that" – Michael

Key Connecting for Opportunities

> "Every couple weeks cause she sends me like a mail, like not mail but an email and then she's like oh here are all these opportunities I we can just we can email her saying like oh this is interesting what's it about, more information" – Jamie

Jamie, in the quotes above, describes how individuals he has met through Key have connected him with opportunities, including jobs and academic support.

Institutional Agents and Social Capital

Advisors play a key role in providing institutional resources including helping students understand the expectations of their degree programs and determining course scheduling each semester while setting goals and longer-term planning. Garcia (2019) says that "having multiple advisors—and multiple people to care for students—is important" (p.103). Advisors, imagined broadly, play a critical role in the persistence and success of students.

> "I usually go to him for all the questions I have and like, I meet with him quite often actually and he just kind of explains to me what I need to do, or what classes I should take for certain things, and he's been super helpful this entire semester." – Emily

Emily, above, describes how she meets with her academic advisor "quite often" and that he explains what classes she could take, describing him as super helpful.

> "I would definitely go to her for academic support, but also like when I was really trying to figure out my major I asked her like a million questions and she was like willing to answer them, but she gave me a lot of resources, she's like these are the types of jobs you can get with this one, this one, and things like that. And I know when I would talk to other, with my friends about like their advisors they'd be like they're not really that cool I don't know if I like trust their judgment and I'm like I love Melony, she's so helpful and she really just wants to um see me succeed, honestly." – Marisa

Advisors are key for logistical support (registration, course and major selection, potential career paths though they have a large caseload generally and provide many referrals to campus resources. As asserted by Granovetter (1973) more people can be reached through weak ties, such as advisors, who provide a large number of students with resources and support throughout their academic journey, while maintaining a trusting relationship where students can reach out when they have questions, as described by Marisa above, though multiple students describe helpful yet infrequent contact with advisors.

On one of their faculty members with a shared racial identity, Michael shared the following:

> "I feel like the moment I saw him I reflected myself in his shoes, he presented like this very well character, very well put together, and he, the class he was teaching had to do a lot about like social issues and service that goes with it and like broke down different points, and immediately I saw myself in him and I was like wow, like I want to be like this person" – Michael

Gina Garcia notes that:

> "hiring more diverse faculty, staff, and administrators can contribute to the development of the overall HSI organizational identity, as racially minoritized groups bring with them their own ways of knowing, being, teaching, and leading… HSIs must be proactive in recruiting, retaining, and promoting faculty, staff, and administrators of color, and the federal government must encourage this. (135)

Although social capital frequently functions as a tool of privilege and domination, with many institutional agents being conditioned to uphold hierarchies and act as gatekeepers, there are other institutional agents who are prepared to empower individuals from historically oppressed communities (Stanton-Salazar 2011). Faculty, staff, and other institutional figures have the prime opportunity to empower students and provide key information or support that may be instrumental for the student. When students see themselves reflected in institutional leadership and faculty members, as Michael describes above, they are empowered to achieve their goals, recognizing these agents as individuals they can "be like" as Michael states.

> "Our professors… one of their jobs is kind of like to obviously reach out to students to teach them uhm so it's kind of just easier to come to the ones that reach out to me like personally… they know like my well not all of them bigger classes are kind of hard to keep tabs on one student or whatever but uhm like with smaller classes I know that I'm going to keep, with smaller classes I'm able to talk to the professor a little bit more be able to a little less intimidated" – Victoria

Stanton-Salazar (2011) argues that the capacity of institutional agents to empower others is largely dependent upon the structure and resourcefulness of their own social networks and their networking effectiveness. In the case of CSU, it will be essential for the institution to continue to provide faculty, staff, and other institutional agents with the resources and support to then support their students. Victoria, in this quote above, describes how it is easier for her to connect with professors who initiate contact and feel more comfortable talking to professors who teach smaller classes, noting that she felt less intimidated. Faculty, staff, and other institutional figures have the opportunity to empower students to reach their potential, to connect with them in a personal basis and provide knowledge about not only their courses but potentially overall knowledge about college-going, graduate school, and career opportunities.

Importance of Affirming Connections

Connections that students make through or near the end of high school that are influential and encouraging, persist. Students feel connected to individuals that are supportive of their goals and understanding of their backgrounds and struggles:

> "When she first emailed me uhm I noticed that there was like she asked for pronouns and stuff which being that uhm being open to the LGBT community about something that I always like uhm I trust a person a little more because of that uhm also she's really understanding whenever I message her like I've had a bad day I can't come to study hours and she's like okay let me know if I can do anything for you" – Victoria

This reinforces the minoritized identities of students, faculty, and staff, who then feel validated and confirmed in the space. The presence of actors with multiple ways of knowing and being transforms the institution, as they become the institution. (Garcia, 2019:92) Victoria describes how a staff member, when communicating via email, asked for their pronouns, which to the student demonstrated that she was open to the LGBT community and this allowed her to trust the staff member, as well as being understanding and supportive.

> "Just the fact that she didn't make me feel stupid in the summer like she, she really showed me that she cares and like she wouldn't make fun of me and tell me that I wasn't good enough to not study so she told me to uhm go to office hours and I did and then she would like go like she wouldn't tell me what to do she would go and and ask me if I need help or if I needed help studying" – Alexa

Alexa describes why she stays connected to a peer who "didn't make [her] feel stupid" or make fun of her, encouraging her to go to office hours and asking if she needed help studying. Marisa, in the quote below, describes how a staff member at a transition/orientation program treated her, feeling as if she might be treated differently as the only brown person in the room. Marisa discusses her thoughts about being treated unequally, or with pity, but describes how the staff recognized that she is there for a reason and wants to help with academics:

> "From orientation when I just automatically thought that um, because I was the only brown person in the room that maybe she would act different, like not even in a bad way, that she would like treat me, I don't know, like unequal, but maybe she might treat me with pity or something like that. But she was just, it was the same, and I was like OK she obviously knows that like I'm here for a reason, like not someone to pity, or to like treat wrong. I knew that she just wanted to help me with my academics" – Marisa

Continued funding and efforts for mentoring programs, especially those that incorporate cultural components and provide crucial information about the college process (Glass 2023) and support relevant to the context at the specific university or institution. Gina Garcia (2019) suggests that we must decolonize our institutional structure which requires us to decentralize decision making and allow across campus autonomy, recognizing this necessitates hiring and retaining more people of color for faculty, staff, and leadership positions. While institutional agents and folks that provide important resources and support are crucial to students who may need more support navigating the institution or university, there must be a good mix of people across campus who diverse racial, cultural, and indigenous ways of knowing and incorporating reward structures so these folks be recognized for doing work that is anti-racist, anti-nativist, decolonial, and anti-oppressive, recognizing that the institution was not founded for low-income students of color. Addressing the ways in which we the infrastructure operate provides opportunities to disrupt these structures and create more inclusive environments.

CONCLUSION

After four years, eight of the eighteen students in this study had graduated with their bachelor's degree. Within six years, thirteen of the eighteen students had graduated. Currently, one student from the study is still enrolled at CSU, and the remaining four students are no longer enrolled. Nationally, the six-year graduation rate for Hispanic students at four-year institutions was around 52% for students who started in fall 2015 (Excelencia in Education 2021) The six-year graduation rate for Latinx, first-generation, low-income students who began in fall 2017 at CSU was at about 50%, compared to 66% for the overall student body (CSU IRPE) The six-year graduation rate of about 72% for this specific sample of first-generation, low-income, Latinx students at Colorado State University is not only higher than the institutional and national rates for Hispanic students overall, but is especially impressive when considering the spring and 4-year graduation semester for these students was during the onset of the COVID pandemic, underscoring the resilience and persistence demonstrated by these scholars.

When asked, "What works for Latino students?" Deborah Santiago (2024) of Excelencia in Education shared the following as examples: academic advising with tailored guidance, career readiness and civic leadership, mentoring with trusted individuals who can help them navigate higher education, financial aid assistance, and culturally responsive programming that allows Latinos to bring their authentic selves as they traverse the college landscape, in turn enhancing academic rigor. Santiago, Arroyo, and Cuellarsola (2024) also emphasize the importance of institutions reflecting upon how to ensure Latino students are thriving, to question what it means to authentically serve these students, and all students of color, and to explore and critically assess how these understandings can manifest in the institution's data, programming, and leadership.

First-generation, low-income, Latinx students at Colorado State University Fort Collins build connections on campus primarily through their peer networks, building lasting connections with other college students who often share similar values. Although it is crucial for increased representation in faculty, staff, and administration across identities, racial and other, the acknowledgement of various identities and how power and privilege may impact these relationships and dynamics can be impactful for students. Garcia (2019) remarks that "faculty, staff, and administrators from dominant groups must be on board with an agenda for justice and have the skills necessary for disrupting oppressive organizational structures (p. 117). Consistent with previous research in the field, this thesis found that students see themselves in faculty and staff with shared racial identities and this fuels their goals and aspirations. Institutions of higher education have the unique opportunity to engage with students in a way that empowers them to utilize resources and exercise their support networks toward efforts to achieve success.

Santiago (2024) proposes action items through *Excelencia* for Education's Tactical Plan for Latino Student Success which includes the following facets: designing a national acceleration plan for Latino students in higher education, building a community of common cause, advocating publicly for raising Latinos' degree completion, aligning and delivering educational support efforts to institutions, tracking degree completion goals and measure of progress, increasing support and accountability for institutions internationally serving Latino students, replicating and expanding institutional practices that are working for Latino students, and evolving efforts to support institutional transformation as trusted intermediary. While this plan is a large undertaking for the national landscape, individual institutions should also develop and implement tactical plans for Latino success and work to understand what that means and how to achieve it within their context. This plan should include heavy collaboration with cultural centers on campus and further research into what success means for this student population and what programming and advocacy they want to see from the institution. For CSU specifically, this will include collaboration and support for El Centro and all the Cultural Resource Centers within the Office for Inclusive Excellence. Only by continuing to support these centers – with primarily financial resources – and their programming, can we see the possibilities. In providing resources for these centers and programs, they can allow them each to identify what is most important for their students and prioritize their needs and goals.

Garcia (2019) provides six suggestions for institutions to consider as they reframe their practices for serving Latinx and all students of color. These six recommendations include 1) Providing curricula and programming grounded in justice and equity, 2) hiring faculty, staff, and administrators committed to justice and liberation, 3) valuing and embracing nondominant input, processes and outcomes, 4) reinforcing bilingualism and the preservation of the Spanish language, 5) providing high-touch practices for students, including advising and experiential learning, and 6) providing students with a diverse financial aid package. I argue that CSU's Cultural Center's, specifically El Centro, is providing opportunities for enhancing campus climate, community engagement, and should continue to prioritize programming grounded in justice, equity, and liberation. The institution as well as the government more broadly should continue to provide resources and support, financially and symbolically, by taking responsibility for the socio historical mistreatment and structural inequities that have informed our modern landscape (Garcia 2019). Ayala and Contreras (2018) also note that higher education administrators should work to recognize that the inclusion of Latinx students, and all students of color, is an asset and step toward transformation. This is consistent with previous research and findings of this thesis; students see themselves in faculty and staff with shared racial identities and aspirations

Colorado State University is in a unique position with tremendous opportunity. The findings in this study highlight the critical importance of intentional support networks for first-generation, low-income, Latinx students. These students engage with and rely on peer relationships, access programming, and supportive institutional agents to navigate their college journey. This research underscores the significance of culturally responsive mentoring, proactive outreach from staff and faculty, and the creation and continuance of inclusive spaces that affirm students' identities and experiences. Implementing the efforts to support this population will not only provide opportunities and resources for these students, but enrich the overall campus community and climate by promoting diversity and inclusion, including checking back in with the students to understand what opportunities and support they want to embrace.

As a top three Hispanic enrolling institution in Colorado with 15% of undergraduates identifying as Hispanic/Latino as of the 2021-2022 academic year (*Excelencia* in Education 2023), Colorado State University has a unique opportunity and ultimately a responsibility to support Latinx students, first-generation students, low-income students, and all the additional identities that bring diverse perspectives, ways of knowing and understanding the world and how to improve both the material and ideological frameworks that ultimately guides our perspectives as we aim to make sense of the constructs and context from which our awareness stems. I contend that we must, in accordance with Garcia's (2019) guidance, stress the importance of HSIs, and ultimately all institutions, centering the experiences of racially minoritized people. I ask readers to consider whether it is acceptable for an organization that enrolls a large percentage of racially minoritized students to operate from a race-neutral perspective. (129) Foregrounding race and the understanding that while institutions of higher education were not designed for Latinx students (or any minoritized populations), as Gina Garcia (2019) argues, we have reached a moment in time when we can disrupt the historical legacy of exclusion and move toward a model of inclusion, a decolonized institution, and a place for all students to truly thrive. Moving forward, the institution much continually assess and adapt its support structures to meet the evolving needs of this student population. In doing so, CSU can foster a more equitable educational environment that empowers students to reach their potential and enrich the academic – and overall campus – community with their perspectives, experiences, and knowledge.

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