Testimonios of Transformation:
The Experiences of Latina/o Community College Students in Washington State Redefining Achievement and Success

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Abstract

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This qualitative study looks at the personal and academic experiences of Latina/o Community College Students in Washington State and the implications of their lived experiences on how they define achievement and success. This study employed Critical Race Theory (CRT), Latina/o Critical Theory (LatCrit) and Chicana Feminist Theory to examine how numerous identities that include, but are not limited to, race, gender, class, sexuality, language and immigration status in the U.S. intersect and shape the experiences of Latina/o Community College Students. To this end the participants shared their *testimonio*, a tradition rooted in Latin American storytelling and political struggle to shed light on their experiences and how they experiences society and the educational system that leads them to community college. This work is an important contribution in that it (re)defines achievement and success from the experiences of community college students. Knowing how community college students define these terms can assist policy makers, educators and administrators to think differently about how policies and programs they implement can support Latina/o and all community college students reach their academic and personal goals.

Dedication

To those who stand for dignity and respect
To those who stand in solidarity
To those who have stood with me
I love you

We must keep moving
Forward

When we go back to places
Where we create new spaces
Possibilities
We find our hearts beating life
Love
From below and to the left
Desde abajo y la izquierda
We find the strength
To continue

We will keep moving
We will make this world a better place
For Quetzal
And for all those who come next

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Background

***Testimonio*: I am here.** "I am here". That is often my response when I meet with Professor Angela Ginorio. I remember the first time she asked me, "Irene, how are you doing?" or rather, in the soothing and familiar language of Spanish "*Irene, como estas*?" I would respond in English "I am here" and sit down on a chair, letting out a deep exhale. After taking her course, Women of Color in Academia in fall 2010, during one of many challenging turning points in my academic journey, I reflected on the significance and power behind what I was saying when I said these words. I also reflected upon my use of *testimonio* in my work since my undergraduate years, by constructing my own for the final in her course.

Testimonio is rooted in Latin American traditions of oral history, and speaks to political struggle and against injustices (Booker 2002). Perez Huber (2009) stated that there is no universal definition (or should be) but rather elements to respect when using testimonio. *Testimonio* then is authentic, focuses on life experiences and injustices one has endured and allows the individual to reflect on past experiences in order to transform their future (Perez Huber, 2009, p. 643). *Testimonio*, according to The Latina Feminist Group (2001), is a way to theorize through the writing and reflective process on feminism and how to and theory based on lived experiences. These traditions of *testimonio* are rooted in Latin American social movements and oral history traditions of storytelling as way of empowerment and documenting voices (Latina Feminist Group, p. 8). I later

explain in my research trajectory learning more about *testimonio* in my Chicana/Mexicana oral history class at the University of California, Santa Cruz and how it was the method I used for both my BA and M.Ed. theses. I will describe in more detail what *testimonio* is in Chapter 3, but for now it is only appropriate then that I begin this dissertation and the end of this Ph.D. journey with my own.

I am here. My name is Irene Monica Sanchez. I was born in Bellflower, CA November 22, 1982. My parents were both born and raised in East Los Angeles, CA. My grandparents are from Mexico. I come from a very large immediate and extended family. Although my family has been here in the United States for a couple generations, we are working class, and many family members have not gone on to pursue or complete higher education. I am the first in my family (immediate and extended) to attain a Ph.D.

In my K-12 schooling experiences I don't remember doing well. I know that a series of academic and personal experiences led to feelings of frustration and disconnect. As early as elementary school, I remember racism and acts of discrimination and aggression from other students and teachers. In middle school, I witnessed some friends enter gangs and do drugs. I look back and am thankful I had the opportunity to be involved in community activism. Through this activism, I met people who became mentors that would later encourage and guide me. This involvement in the community changed my life. Although I was involved in the community and school activities throughout middle school and high school, I was not doing well academically in school. At Rubidoux High School, I was involved in three varsity sports, student government and even voted the football homecoming queen. The same semester I was voted homecoming queen I was told I would be sent to continuation high school as I was failing English. I ended up

receiving the two points for a passing grade, a move my teacher later told me was my chance to prove myself. After having the highest grade in the class for one month the challenges again made me wonder what was the point if I was going to community college. I passed second semester with a C. Upon graduation, I was awarded enough scholarships to pay for my first two years of community college because of being so involved in the community. People believed I had potential.

I began Riverside Community College (RCC) in the fall of 2000. In the middle of the semester, I had to move out of my parents' home the day I turned 18 years old. I found myself trying to balance working full time and going to school full time. I also married my high school boyfriend soon after. This decision brought support that assisted me to attend school from him and his parents, but also challenges as him and I learned to navigate being in college as two young first time college students.

The first year of college I learned I was underprepared for college level coursework. I was placed on academic probation and then dismissal. In other words, I was kicked out of community college. I lost all the scholarships I had been awarded. During that forced year off, I joined Americorps to earn the educational award at the end in addition to working multiple jobs. When I returned to college, I became involved with the community and at my school I joined student government and Movimiento Estudiantil Chicana/o de Aztlán (M.E.Ch.A.), a Chicana/o student organization that dates back to the Chicano movement of the 60s and is committed to working for the liberation of Chican@ communities. I had met a number of outstanding professors in community college including my M.E.Ch.A. adviser and a Chicana/o studies professor who helped develop my interest in Latin American studies and politics. Alfonso Gonzales, who we

affectionately called “profe” had been a student at RCC too and came back to teach us for a one-year temporary position before moving on to a Ph.D. program. He gave us an example of what could be possible for students coming from our community and motivated many of us in M.E.Ch.A. to continue on with our schooling. After I returned to college, while taking two Chicana/o studies courses with Profe and repeating a freshman level English course, I earned straight A's for the first time in my life.

In this process of learning to navigate through academic and personal challenges, I reaffirmed my purpose to serve others and found a new one. I decided I needed to work to open up the doors of access for higher education for people like me and the friends I grew up with who were not provided with adequate pre-college information, preparation and guidance as well as the academic and personal support needed to do well in school.

During my last year of community college, I read a research report published by the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center. In the report, researchers reported that only .02% of the doctorates awarded in the U.S. every year go to Chicana/os. Out of that .02%, 25% of those Chicana/os began their higher education in a community college. (Solórzano, Rivas and Velez, 2005). I found hope in these numbers and decided I would pursue a Ph.D.

After five years at Riverside Community College, I transferred to UC Santa Cruz in 2005. I immediately sought opportunities that would connect me with faculty, staff, programs and services to help me prepare for graduate school. Upon conclusion of my first year, I participated in a research program at UCLA with Professor Daniel Solórzano. Working with Professor Solórzano that summer of 2006 in the UCLA Summer Program for Undergraduate Research was transformative. I authored a research paper on the

experiences of Chicana/o community college students in CA. These experiences of reading Dr. Solórzano's research and having him as my mentor the summer of 2006 impacted me greatly and are the reasons why I have grounded much of my research using CRT and LatCrit in Education.

Throughout this fifteen-year journey in higher education, I went through many transformational and life changing moments. In this time period, the life decisions that led me to get divorced in the summer of 2007 stands out. At the time I felt that in order to pursue my dream of attaining a Ph.D. I had to make this decision to separate from my high school sweetheart because of how our relationship had changed. The week after I filed for divorce, I emailed Professor Frances Contreras at the University of Washington. That same week, I also decided I would stay a third year as a transfer student at UCSC to write a new thesis on the experiences of Latina/o community college transfer students at UCSC. During fall quarter of 2007, along with being in school full time on independent study, I worked full time as a GEAR UP College Facilitator leading the opening of the first college center at Pájaro Valley High School in Watsonville, CA. Later that quarter, after saying I wouldn't leave California, I applied to the University of Washington to work with Professor Frances Contreras. I was accepted to the University of Washington at the end of February 2008, a week after my divorce was finalized in court. These events took place over the course of the year, but what I have learned from being an educator and a student is that one moment can transform everything including one's journey. I graduated with my Bachelor's degree in Sociology and Latin American/Latino Studies at UCSC in June 2008. In August, I packed my car with whatever could fit and moved to Seattle.

Since the day I first stepped foot on to the University of Washington for prospective student days in March 2008, I was often in disbelief I made it here to this university. I didn't come from an elite four-year university experience or go to a 4-year college straight after high school, like I soon learned many of my peers did, but I am here too. I didn't get good grades in high school; I almost got kicked out of high school my senior year, but I am here. I had left my parent's home without emotional and financial support to attend college at age 18, but I am here. I had married my high school boyfriend and later decided to divorce mainly so I could pursue graduate school. I am here. I was kicked out of Riverside Community College my first year, first placed on academic probation and dismissal, but I am here. I have survived many things in my life. Professor Ginorio as well as others around me who were close to me on this journey would soon learn the significance of the struggles I endured. With these three words she knew I said so much more, I am here and I had a dream to pursue and finish a Ph.D. so I may continue to work for social justice and change.

I continued to walk around the University of Washington and gaze up at the old buildings, look at the trees, breath the cool air, feel the gentleness of the rain and whisper to myself, I am here. Sometimes when I drove from where I lived in Beacon Hill and through downtown looking at the skyline of the city I would be in awe, filled with a mix of happiness and disbelief. How did I move 1,000 miles away from where I grew up to pursue a Ph.D.? I had received messages I was not supposed to make it here often throughout the entirety of my academic journey, but here I was in Seattle and in a Ph.D. program in the College of Education at the University of Washington. I am here.

When I think of transformation, I remember how the area where I was raised in Jurupa and the rest of the Inland Empire (Riverside and San Bernardino) transformed quickly from the time my family moved there in 1989 to a few years later. And look at it today. Jurupa went from dairy farms and citrus groves to track homes and warehouses in free trade zones. There was dirt, tumbleweeds and air pollution. There were and remain limited opportunities. Looking back I saw many of us tried making the best of what we had. Growing up with limited opportunities teaches one how to survive and resist, but I look at my old friends and classmates and know by chance I am lucky and therefore it is my responsibility to keep working for those who come next. My hometown, Jurupa, was one of my earliest classrooms where I learned how flowers would bloom even under the harshest conditions. Growing up in Jurupa and the challenges I endured early on prepared me for the unknown challenges I would encounter in higher education. I am the impossible. I am here and I am here to fulfill this purpose. I have stories to share. They are stories told by 14 Latina/o community colleges students in Washington State. They are about how they are here. I am here. We are here.

Research Trajectory

This work is part of a trajectory of research that I began as a Xicana community college student at Riverside Community College from 2000-2005. As a community college student who was underprepared for college level coursework and placed on academic probation and dismissal my first year of school, I learned that students need support that sometimes is not readily available.

By establishing friendships and networks with my peers I began to learn how to navigate through school to fulfill my first goal of transferring to attain a Bachelor's

degree. I gained access to a network first year of community college in a program called Puente. Puente provided a cohort model and a focus on Latina/o literature and experiences for the English course. We also took Introduction to College and Career Exploration. Although this was also the year I was kicked out, when I returned back to school the connections I made that first year proved to be important. With the support of peers, counselors, professors and staff members at RCC I was able to stay in school. Through involvement in M.E.Ch.A, student government, as well as directing and organizing my schools first Vagina Monologues performances to raise money to end violence against women for the VDAY campaign, I further was vested in my experiences as a student inside and outside the classroom.

In the Spring 2003 a friend named Crystal I first met in Puente and later in M.E.Ch.A., encouraged those in our family-like group of M.E.Ch.A friends to apply for a program she had participated in during the summer of 2002. I then applied to UCLA's Summer Intensive Transfer Experience (SITE) and was accepted even though I was on academic probation. SITE is a weeklong program through UCLA's Center for Community College Partnerships. At SITE, participants stayed for a week at UCLA attending workshops to learn about the transfer process from admissions, financial aid and other support programs. SITE participants are strongly encouraged to apply to transfer to UCLA, but overall the focus is on the UC system in general. After my participation in this program, I was determined to go to a UC school. Later, due to the time it took to complete my math courses and a desire to get out of RCC sooner, I did not pursue applying to UCLA because their Sociology program required math at a pre-calculus level.

I continued to be engaged with UCLA throughout community college and went to the campus for events and to attend its annual transfer information day called STOMP. Later, UCLA's Chicano Studies Research Center began educational summits around Latina/o issues when I was in my last year of community college. I attended the first one and learned about the research of Professor Daniel Solórzano and saw the report that inspired me to pursue this path. In this report, the researchers had stated that only .02% of Chicana/os get a Ph.D. in the U.S. and out of that .02%, 25% of them began their higher education journey in a community college (Solórzano, Rivas and Velez, 2005). The information contained in the report, inspired me and changed my life. I decided I would pursue a Ph.D. That summer, in between transferring from RCC and starting school at UCSC, I was 1 of thirty Latina/o students from the country selected for a congressional internship with the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute in Washington, D.C. During the free time on my internship, I researched UCSC and the programs they offered. I knew coming in as a transfer student trying to prepare for a Ph.D. would be difficult to do with limited time, but I was determined.

Upon my arrival to UCSC, I was hired as a research assistant to Professor Rosa-Linda Fregoso, the then chair of the Latin American/Latino Studies department. In one of my two positions with her, I was in a program called the Undergraduate Research Apprenticeship Program where I was assigned a graduate mentor, a Ph.D. student in Social Psychology Mrinal (Ranu) Sinha. Ranu's adviser was Aida Hurtado, a Chicana Psychologist and interactions with both of them, especially Ranu and my peers in this program helped me prepare for graduate school. Ranu helped me navigate and explore my research interests. I saw what a research project and dissertation could be since he

was researching Chicanos, education and feminism for his dissertation. Ranu was a good resource and mentor and made a big impact on me. It was at this point I started to attend the annual meeting of the National Association of Chicana and Chicano Studies regularly because Ranu would attend with Professor Hurtado and the rest of her research lab. At this conference, my peers at UCSC and I continue to support one another when one of us presents.

At the end of the first school year at UCSC I learned about the Summer Program for Undergraduate Research at UCLA and knew I needed a mentor to accept me. I wanted to work with Professor Solórzano. The Latina/o education summit was nearing and I drove the six hours to Los Angeles to participate in it. That day I ran into Alfredo Herrera who was the director of the UCLA Center for Community College Partnerships. Mr. Herrera introduced me to Professor Solórzano and I was later accepted to URAP to work with him as my mentor.

That summer in URAP I researched and authored a paper on the Experiences of Chicana/o Community College Students in CA. Working at UCLA, I had access to the Chicano Studies Research Center where I conducted the research for my paper. By learning more about Professor Solórzano's research, I was further exposed to use Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Latina/o Critical Theory (LatCrit) in Education.

I traveled for school during the fall of 2006 to conduct a field study in Mexico on Social Movements and wrote a senior thesis based on the field study to be able to graduate from UCSC within two years. When I returned UCSC, I was uneasy about what to do next for graduate school because I wanted to pursue a Ph.D. and continue the work I was doing around community college student experiences. In the spring of 2007, I took

a course called Chicanas/*Mexicanas* where I learned oral history method and was exposed to *testimonio* with Gabriela Arredondo as my professor. In the course we read a portion of a book Telling to Live: Latina Feminist *Testimonios*, by the Latina Feminist Group (2001). One of my closest professors/mentors own *testimonio* was featured in it. Reading the *testimonio* of Patricia Zavella was a powerful moment for me because I learned that as a Xicana and Woman of Color I could theorize my own experiences in education and academia through this form of writing. Through *testimonio* I saw the possibility that I could make sense of my life, experiences and processes of transformation. This book showed me a way to conduct research by centering lived experiences, including my own. I later learned that centering my own experiences in relation to research was described by Delgado Bernal (1998) as Chicana Feminist Epistemology. In Chicana FE, research is informed and shaped by our own lives as Chicanas. For my final exam in Chicanas/Mexicanas, the class was assigned to conduct an oral history. I interviewed a Chicana in a Ph.D. program and learned a lot from her lived experiences that I carried with me to graduate school. I participated in graduation ceremonies that June of 2007, but later that summer due to a transformative series of events, I held my thesis and decided to write a new one on Latina/o community college transfer student experiences at UCSC. As I described in my background, this decision to apply and come to UW occurred within a week of emailing Professor Frances Contreras.

Upon my arrival to UW in 2008 to first pursue my M.Ed., I planned to focus on Latina/o community college student experiences and issues, but often felt pressure to take on the transfer portion of the "pipeline". For my master's thesis I decided to wait on conducting new research due to time limitations. Instead, I bridged the community work I

did with high school students in a community based empowerment program. I heard the *testimonios* of three young women in the program who were graduating high school and pursuing community college upon graduation. I reflected on their stories as young women who saw the community college as a stepping-stone to a university, just as I had. I then realized a pattern in previous and emerging research on Latina/os and in general research on students of color in higher education. In the research on community college students, the focus was on particular stories and voices and mainly on students who had transferred. In the research I was exposed to I felt that a student's voice was not deemed as valuable until they transferred out of a community college and earned a Bachelors degree or graduate degree. These narrowly defined pathways reinforced meanings of achievement and success that are also narrowly defined and based on the end point being a degree. I felt my commitment to social justice and humanizing education, as well as my engagement in the community colleges and with Latina/o students did not match these stories. My own experiences and those of my friends did not match these stories. These narrowly defined notions of achievement and success then further marginalize Latina/o community college students' lives and experiences.

I have now served on the Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Council at Edmonds Community College for a year and on the Latina/o advisory committee to the president at South Seattle College for three years. I have conducted workshops with students at community colleges and participated at events on panels and as a keynote speaker. In the fall of 2014, I was an adjunct for Edmonds Community College teaching Race and Ethnic Relations and in the fall of 2013, I was an adjunct instructor of Multicultural Studies at Shoreline Community College.

All of these experiences informed my research for this dissertation. I wanted to hear from current Latina/o community college students, how they described their academic and personal experiences and particularly how they defined achievement and success in their lives. This research was informed by my own experiences, but being in a privileged position now of having attained a high level of formal schooling, I knew what needed to be done and it was what I came here to do: the voices of current Latina/o community college students had to be heard. In the next section, I outline why a qualitative study using *testimonio* as method is necessary.

Statement of the Problem

Historically, the role of community colleges in the U.S. was to provide educational opportunities and different pathways to universities and reinforce an ideology that there are ladders of ascent in society. Education is the great equalizer of opportunity in the United States. (Brint & Karabel, 1989). Education in the United States is also seen as a way to attain upward social and economic mobility. For Latina/os, having access to higher education then becomes more critical. It remains crucial that the doors of opportunity remain open through the community college system for Latina/os and that clear pathways are identified that assist students in meeting their goals.

The U.S. Latina/o Educational Pipeline

According to the "The Condition of Latinos in Education: 2015 Factbook" published by *Excelencia* in Education Latina/os are the second largest racial/ethnic group in the United States. The population of Latina/os is expected to increase to represent thirty one percent of the total U.S. population by 2060, while Whites will represent forty three percent. The majority of Latinos in the United States are Chicana/os of Mexican descent

(64%), Puerto Ricans being the next group (9%), Central Americans (8%), South Americans (6%), Cubans (3%) and "other" (9%) (Santiago et. al. 2015).

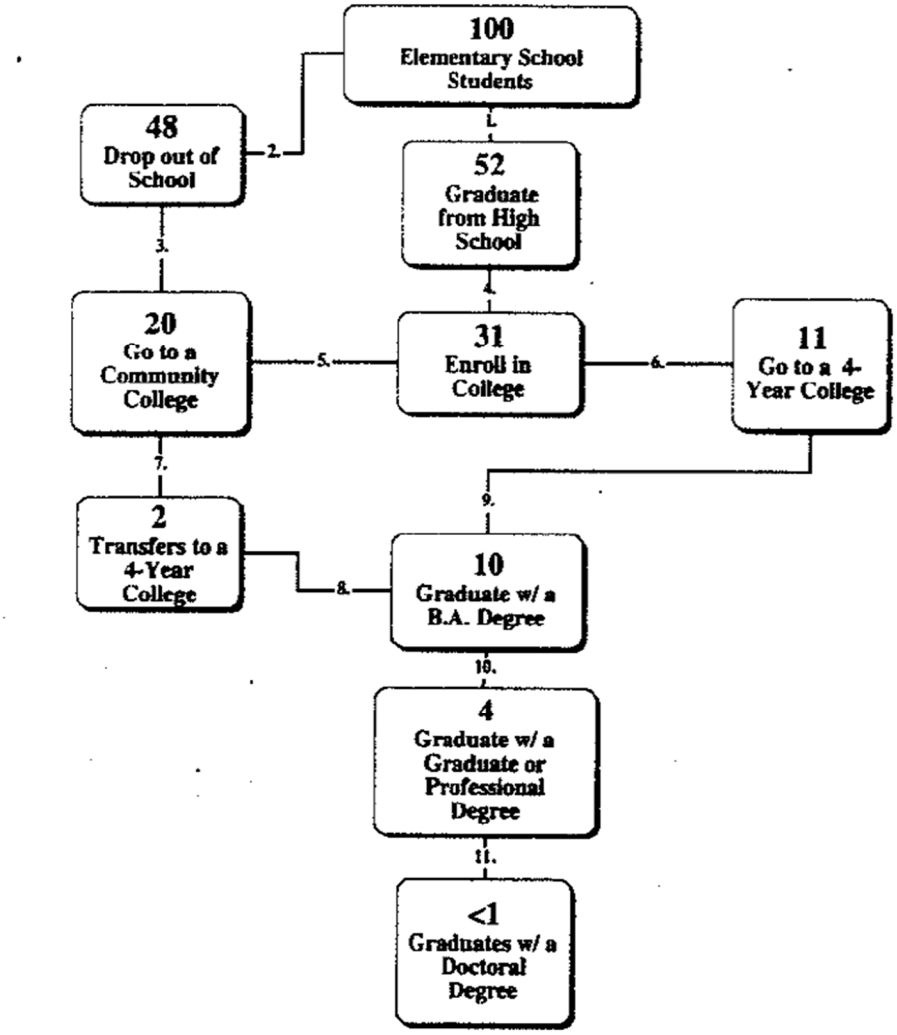
As of 2012, thirty-three percent of households with Latina/o children under the age of eighteen are living below the poverty line. Despite being larger portions of the population, Latina/o educational attainment levels have not been as high, as Santiago et al. state, "Hispanics had lower levels of educational attainment than other groups. In 2013, 22% of Hispanic adults (25 years and over) had earned an associate degree or higher, compared to Asians (60%), Whites (46%), and African Americans (31%)" (Santiago et al. 2015, p. 4).

Historically, Chicana/os or those of Mexican origin have the lowest educational attainment levels although they make up sixty five percent of those in the United States. Out of one hundred Chicana/os who begin elementary school half will not finish high school and only eight will graduate from college (Villalpando, 2010). This trajectory is visually represented in the Latina/o educational pipeline. The pipeline focuses on three main transition points along the educational trajectory of students, this includes preparing students for college, community college students for transfer to a 4-year university, and university undergraduates for graduate school (Yosso and Solórzano, 2006). What the Latina/o educational pipeline does not address is that one's educational journey is not always a direct or linear pipeline from high school to college. Instead there are different pathways that students take. Pathways that a student may take before entering a community college include: Adult Basic Education, GED programs, Continuation/Alternative High School, English as a Second Language programs, Certificate programs and Vocational programs. Identifying other pathways recognizes the

multiple ways a student comes to a community college. There are some students that also attend four-year colleges, stop, and then return to a community college. There are students who are immigrants who perhaps did not graduate from high school in the U.S. or sometimes a student attended college prior to coming to the U.S. in their country of origin. The Latina/o educational pipeline is centered on navigating school in the United States and because it is centered only on experiences in the U.S., it then privileges specific milestones and limited pathways to college.

Yosso and Solórzano (2006) raised questions concerning possible leaks in the Latina/o Education pipeline, particularly for Chicana/o students because of having the lowest educational attainment levels nationally (Yosso and Solórzano, 2006). Villalpando (2010) looked at educational attainment levels of Latina/os and the types of changes that may be seen in the future in their educational attainment. He found that there are differences in educational attainment by Latino national origin. Villalpando (2010) also looked at the educational attainment of Latinos as a whole and found that out of one hundred that begin elementary school; fifty-two of those students graduate high school, but only thirty-one enroll in college. Out of the thirty-one that enroll in college, twenty will go to community college and eleven will go to a four-year university. Out of the twenty that attend a community college only two will transfer to a four-year college. Out of the total thirty-one who attend college, ten will attain a Bachelor's degree; four will graduate with a professional degree and less than one will attain a Ph.D. (Villalpando, 2010). (See Figure 1).

Figure 1: The Latina/o Educational Pipeline



Source: Villalpando, 2010, p. 240

A report published by the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center that revisited the Latina/o Education Pipeline is titled "Still Falling Through the Cracks" (Perez Huber et al. 2015). In this report the authors state that the gaps are widening for U.S. Latina/o student educational attainment and not narrowing. This means that Latina/os have made little progress in attaining degrees and are facing similar if not worsening challenges while doing so. (Perez Huber et. al, 2015).

Understanding the national context of Latina/os in higher education helped me understand how these conditions impact Latina/o community college students in Washington state. With a growing Latina/o population in Washington state focusing on educational attainment becomes priority to learn about their presence in schools as well as inequalities that continue to be faced and ultimately what needs to be done to work towards equity. Research on Latina/o community college students from other states help to fill in the gaps, but more research is needed on Latina/o community college student experience in the Washington state.

The Importance of Community Colleges for Latina/os in Higher Education

The entrance point into higher education for many Latina/o students is the community college system. As of 2012, nationwide Latina/os are the most likely to enroll in a community college than all other ethnic groups. As the Factbook states using data from the U.S. census over a period of ten years from 2004-2013, Latina/os earn more associates degrees (increase of 78%) compared to Bachelor's degrees (65%). In addition over two-thirds of Latina/os enroll in community colleges that are designated as Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI's) (Santiago, et al. 2015).

Rivas, Perez, Solórzano and Alvarez (2007) investigated the critical role of the transfer process for California for Latina/o students. Although there is a high population of Latina/os in California they found limited research focusing on the experiences of those currently in community colleges (Rivas et al. 2007). They then focused their research on those who have attained the level of Bachelor's or Doctoral degrees to understand qualitatively the full trajectory of Latina/o transfer students (Rivas et al. 2007). The authors called for more research on current Latina/o community college students, but in their work and call for more research prioritized those who wish to transfer or are currently on a transfer pathway (Rivas et al. 2007).

Levin (2007) called community colleges the "have not" institutions because of how community colleges are positioned in the hierarchy of higher education. There is a divide between prestigious universities and community colleges. Similarly there are rankings or hierarchies within the community colleges. Levin states, "The have-not" or low salient institutions and program include those colleges without wealth, prestige, and social and economic impact and those programs that are undervalued. For low prestige institutions, such as community colleges, undervalued programs are those with little overt connection to university or transfer occupations, such as English as second language (ESL), Basic Skills, Adult High School and vocational certificate programs" (Levin, 2007, p. 2). Furthermore, Levin (2007) explains that traditional students are typically seen as students who have continued their education directly from high school to college, placing them at a specific age range and assuming they take a full time course load. Students fitting these characteristics are viewed as the norm. In addition, traditional students are seen as having

English as a first language, living on campus, and as having someone in their family who attended college prior to them (Levin, 2007).

Levin further describes how "Traditional students" are also viewed as full time students, students who live on campus, those come from at least a middle class background, have family members that went to college before them, and English as a first language (Levin, 2007). Considering Rivas et al. (2007) and the push for more Latina/os to transfer and reach the highest levels of educational attainment, defining narrow pathways of achievement and success be seen that there is a push for Latina/o and community college students as whole become more "traditional" or fit into a pre-determined mold of what is traditional as they make their way through higher education. The Latina/o pipeline then reinforces that there are narrow pathways one must follow to "succeed" and that in order to do so, one must earn a Bachelor's degree, Master's degree and then ultimately the most "successful" are the few who attain the level of a doctorate.

Solórzano, Rivas and Velez (2005) stated that Chicana/os are the most underrepresented group with doctoral degrees in the United States. With an important finding related to community college participation,

> "A distinct feature of Chicana/o doctorate production: nearly one-fourth of Chicana/o doctorates first attended a community college, more than two times the overall rate for all doctorates. In fact, studies show that about two-thirds of all Latina/o students begin their postsecondary career in community colleges" (Solórzano, Rivas and Velez, 2005, p. 1).

Chicana/os desire to transfer when they enter a community college, but relatively few will do so. Although community colleges serve three primary functions such as

vocational/certificate programs, Associates of Art/Science degrees, and transfer opportunities for students, these institutions provide the most direct pathway for many Chicana/o students to go to graduate school (Solórzano, Rivas, and Velez, 2005), but looking at the numbers of those who do go on to graduate school, Chicana/o degree attainment as a whole remains low.

The Washington State Context. In Washington there are 34 community colleges according to the Washington State Board of Community and Technical Colleges (WSBCTC). The Washington Community and Technical College Act in 1991, reaffirmed that colleges must "offer an open door to every citizen, regardless of his or her academic background or experiences, at a cost normally within his or her economic means" (RCW 28B.50.020(1)). In this system there is more local control and those colleges that are solely technical colleges are not required to offer a transfer pathway (sbctc.edu/history) Recently a report published by WSBCTC titled " Community and Technical College Student Access and Success by Race/Ethnicity and Socioeconomic Status", states the Latina/o population as a whole in Washington is currently 11.2 percent and is expected to increase by nineteen percent by 2022. (SBCTC, 14-1, 2014). Only fifty three percent of Latina/os have achieved a level of education ranked at high school or less (SBCTC, 14-1, 2014). This report sought to measure success in terms of degree attainment. The SBCTC views community and technical colleges as essential to accessing higher education for a large portion of WA residents (SBCTC 14-1, 2014).

There are many critical findings for Latina/o students enrolled in community and technical colleges in Washington. One is that Latina/os have the lowest rate of all racial and ethnic groups in college coursework completion. In addition Latina/os are more

likely to be enrolled in adult basic education in Washington and left with limited opportunities to move beyond courses labeled as "basic skills." Latina/o students are overrepresented in developmental or "remedial" courses in Washington. In math courses, Latina/os are less likely to have "success" in completing college level math. This means that in Washington State Latina/o students are less likely to transfer at rates comparable to other racial groups particularly Asians and Whites (SBCTC, 14-1, 2014). According to *Excelencia* in Education, nationally over half of Latina/os in community colleges enroll in developmental coursework (Santiago et al. 2015).

Immigrant and refugee students in Washington are more likely to be enrolled in adult basic education (ABE) programs. Students of color who are under-represented report the lowest socioeconomic status. These students are more likely to be in adult basic education regardless of race and ethnic background (SBCTC, 14-1, 2014). The data found in Washington state statistics supports research done by Levin (2007) where he found that higher education literature often defines community college students as "disadvantaged". According to Levin, "In many respects, the disadvantage can be tied to economic status, but it also includes social, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds and conditions, as well as mental and physical functioning" (Levin, 2007, p. 11). In his research Levin sought to redefine the definition of "disadvantaged" in a way that would do justice to community college students (Levin, 2007).

Describing school and educational issues in a way that does justice to marginalized students and educational inequities seems to be a priority that the state of Washington sought to take on with the creation of the Educational Opportunity Gap Oversight and Accountability Committee (EOGOAC) through Second Substitute Senate Bill 5973. The

committee was created to implement the findings of five racial and ethnic group achievement gap studies done in 2008 as stated in the 2015 report from EOGOAC titled "Closing the Opportunity Gap" (EOGOAC 2015). In this report, EOGOAC explains their reasoning for using the term "opportunity gap" instead of "achievement gap." Achievement gaps are symptoms of school systems that provide unequal and inequitable opportunities. On the other hand, opportunity gap recognizes structural issues embedded in systems that lead to these inequitable outcomes. The differences in the terms are that the achievement gap places the blame on students and their families and suggests deficiencies in individuals rather then the system. The term opportunity gap acknowledges institutionalized racism that lead to disparate educational opportunities and therefore differences in treatment and opportunities for students of color (EOGOAC, 2015, p. 5). While this report focuses on K-12 education in Washington State, there is a growing movement with researchers that questions the ways terms are defined that are used in higher education and education research overall.

Washington state defines student progress and success at the community college level based on a number of factors including: 1) Adult Basic Education (ABE) transition rates, 2) percentage of pre-college students completing college math, 3) the retention rate of students, 4) professional technical program completions and 5) academic transfer degree completion. From 2012-2013, the transition rate for Latina/os moving beyond ABE is at six percent, the lowest of all groups. Transitions from English as Second Language to transferrable college classes are found to be more challenging. (SBCTC, 14-1, 2014, p. 15). The transition from pre-college math to college level math remains difficult for many students as rates indicate that underrepresented students and those of

lower socioeconomic status complete college level math at lower rates than Asian or white students (SBCTC, 14-1, 2014, p. 16).

In terms of retention, under-represented students including Latina/os are less likely to return to college for a second year (SBCTC, 14-1, 2014, p. 17). Those who are enrolled in professional technical programs report higher post college earnings, but Asian and white students were found to exit "college ready" more so than other student groups making it more likely that their college education will result in a degree (SBCTC, 14-1, 2014, p. 18). Lastly, among students who transferred, Latina/os earned a transfer degree at 19% statewide. Earning a transfer degree does not indicate a student transfers to a four-year university, but that they are eligible to transfer to transfer to a four-year university (SBCTC, 14-1, 2014, p. 19). This report while lacking in numbers of those who transfer to a four-year university does provide insights to look more closely at the experiences of Latina/o community college students in Washington State by conducting qualitative research. Conducting qualitative research would put stories behind the numbers that are reported in state reports.

In a report commissioned by the Washington State Board of Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC) titled, "Investing in Our Collective Futures," Contreras (2013) states that the State of Washington ranks 12th in the nation for Latina/o residents and this number of Latina/os is expected to increase. Although the population has increased, the number of Latina/o attaining the level of Bachelor's degrees has not (Contreras, 2013, p. 16). These limited educational opportunities equate to limited options for socioeconomic mobility for Latina/os as a whole in the state of Washington (Contreras, 2013, p. 16). In rural areas of the state, where larger numbers of immigrant

and migrant student populations live, Latina/o students are found to have limited opportunities for educational attainment and social mobility (Contreras 2013, p. 17). Poverty remains a barrier for the Latina/o community across generations. College access programs provide crucial bridges for Latina/os in Washington. Programs such as GEAR UP, TRIO and AVID provide Latina/o students with academic support and expose first generation students to social capital that is needed to navigate higher education (Contreras 2013, p. 18).

College graduation rates among Latina/os as a whole are not up to par across the state. Latina/o students are more likely to be enrolled in remedial courses when they enter college. The reasons for Latina/o starting college with limited opportunities is due to their lack of preparation in their pre-college years. Many students have inequitable access to honors curriculum and courses. Support for students in ELL programs across the state is also lacking (Contreras 2013, p. 18).

Many of the issues that have been raised from national studies and from the state of Washington require new language as well as definitions to describe the educational experiences of Latina/o students. Also, solutions to inequities that exist for all students are desperately needed. New research would require including students voices in the process of advocating for justice in the education system. Contreras (2013) states "These data represent both a challenge and opportunity for raising college completion rates, given that many students who enter community colleges do not transfer to four-year institutions" (Contreras 2013, p. 30). Thus, community colleges must move beyond focusing solely on numbers to measure success to ensure that Latina/os students are

prepared to reach their goals and are provided with opportunities to expose them to more career and educational options.

Moving forward with this work, in order to learn from current Latina/o community college students in Washington on how they: a) described their academic and personal experiences, b) how they defined achievement and success, required a qualitative approach that went beneath the surface level of the data. Most qualitative research on the experiences of Latina/o community college students is California-centered. This research shows that Latina/o students are often not provided with the support they need to navigate community college institutions in order to meet their goals (Contreras et al., 2008, Contreras, 2009; Malagón & Alvarez, 2010;Ornelas & Solórzano, 2004; Perez Huber, Huidor, Malagón, Sanchez, & Solórzano, 2006; Yosso & Solórzano, 2006). Less is known about the pathways of Latina/o students outside of California. The focus of this study is to center the experiences of Latina/o community college students in Washington State.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of my study is two-fold, I wanted to: 1) extend the research on Latina/os in community colleges by looking at pre-college and community college experiences and how these experiences shaped the career or major goals of students in WA state and 2) understand the ways in which students define achievement and success and how understanding of these beliefs impacted student's aspirations while enrolled in community college.

The desire to redefine achievement and success is central to my work as research on Chicana/o and Latina/o students continues to focus on students from community colleges

after they have transferred or attained a bachelor's degree and beyond. However, many Chicana/o and Latina/o students who enrolled in community college will not reach their goals of transferring (Solórzano et al., 2005, p. 1). In addition, there is a gap in the research literature on Latina/o community college students as successful because the research tends to focus only on those students who have transferred to a university or are now in graduate school. Malagón and Alvarez (2010) attempted to challenge definitions of "high achieving" by including the personal qualities that students possess in overcoming barriers and challenges. In their article, they state, "Students who persist through such obstacles—enrolling at a community college, transferring to and graduating from a four-year university and then pursuing graduate studies—deserve recognition as high achieving, but are more often than not defined as low achieving" (Malagón & Alvarez, 2010, p. 150). Although the authors problematize the binary of student achievement, I wish to explore the boundaries of achievement and success to encompass the experiences of those who are enrolled as community college students. Another interest is to understand what community college students define in their lives and schooling as success and achievement. By continuing to only recognize achievement and success as the transition from a community college to a university and then to graduate school, researchers and policymakers further reinforce the idea that achievement and success can only be found in those transitions or in degree attainment. These narrow definitions don't allow room for recognizing that achievement and success take place along the entire educational journey. Therefore, it is necessary that the experiences of current Latina/o community college students and their definitions of achievement and

success be heard and included in educational research in order to implement policies that will address their needs.

Through this study I intended to:

1. Understand how pre-college experiences shape Latina/o community college student's goals.
2. Elaborate an understanding of Latina/o community college experiences including their personal and academic support.
3. Learn from community college students on how they define and see achievement and success in their personal and academic experiences.

Research Questions My investigation of the literature, coursework taken on route to the Ph.D. as well as my own personal experiences as a Chicana community college student informed the following three research questions:

1. How do Latina/o community college student's pre-college experiences influence and shape their educational goals and how they experience community college? Are their specific courses or experiences that impact their trajectory before they enter and while they are students at a community college?
2. What do Latina/o community college students experience academically and personally while attending a community college? How do these experiences shape their career or major goals?
3. How do Latina/o community college students define achievement and success? In what ways do they describe their achievements and success thus far in their personal and academic lives?

I wanted to learn more about how Latina/o community college students navigate the

community college and what they perceive as their challenges and barriers to attending a community college. The first question focuses on students' aspirations and on the support they received or not in the process of reaching their academic, career, or personal goals. I also wanted to learn where students found support on campus and in their personal lives. While the research literature has indicated that most Chicana/o and Latina/o students aspire to transfer, I wanted to see if transferring was the goal for the small sample of students in the state of Washington— because little to no research has been done on Chicana/o and Latina/o community college students in the state. Also, Latina/o students make up 10.2% of the community college student enrollment in Washington (Contreras et. al. 2008). My study seeks to fill a gap in literature on Latina/o community college student experiences by also contributing perspectives from Washington State. I also seek to identify the ways in which Latina/o students approach barriers and challenges regardless of their end goal. For example, do all students face particular courses that may be challenging? Does their institution provide resources and support, if so, how? If the institution does not provide support directly through services, where do students find the support they need?

The second question is very important because the research literature on community college student experiences continues to reinforce the notion that community college students aren't successful until they transfer, attend a university or make it to graduate school. Malagón and Alvarez (2010) pointed out that transfer students or former community college students are always seen as less than those who followed the pipeline by doing well in high school and then beginning their higher education at a four year university even if the community college students do transfer or attend graduate school.

The authors called for recognizing that former community college students were successful in overcoming the challenges faced along all the transitions they made in their education.

The third question, examines the ways current Latina/o community college students define achievement and success. Malagón and Alvarez (2010) show there has been research done on recognizing that former community college students are successful in overcoming the challenges they faced along transitions to a four year university or to graduate school, but nothing is said to recognize current community college students as successful while they still are in community college. Research in education tends to leave the terms achievement and success undefined, but what is implied in the work is often based on ideas of meritocracy. Making assumptions that achievement and success are limited to those who follow the narrow trajectories of the Latina/o educational pipeline is dehumanizing, harmful and further marginalizes students who are deserve recognition, respect, support and resources to have a chance to reach their goals too.

Significance of the Study

(Re)defining Achievement and Success Through *Testimonio*. Through this research, I sought to fill the gap between what we know in higher education about community college student experiences and how researchers, policy makers and practitioners talk about achievement and success. The use of *testimonio* as method is a way to gain new and different knowledge that might allow for marginalized students' voices and perspectives to be heard. This effort of redefining achievement and success is important because programs and policies are often created and implemented based on how these two concepts are defined. If these concepts continue to be defined and

unquestioned in higher education, researchers, policy makers and practitioners are doing a disservice to those we serve, especially the students who remain the most marginalized in higher education, community college students.

Redefining these terms, achievement and success from a Latina/o community college student perspective allows researchers, policy makers and practitioners to think about how research, policy and practice are developed from the bottom up. For example, there are many initiatives being created that talk about raising student success or promoting student success, but these decisions about what programs and policies to implement often are made by those who don't have the experience of being a community college student or even make space to include the voices of the students they are serving. I wonder how do we know we are doing what is best for community college students or what is needed if we don't ask them.

In order for this study to be informative, I called for the use of *testimonio* as method, which is explained more fully in Chapter 3, to learn from the experiences of Latina/o community college students in Washington State. It is my hope that this research will contribute to the field of higher education and more broadly to education by providing a better understanding of student's experiences in order to provide better resources and support to Latina/o community college students. By focusing more resources on Latina/o community college students, it could impact the retention and then create a sense of belonging so that they can go on to complete their educational goals. This dissertation is the first study of its' kind in Washington state. In addition, research on community colleges is lacking on Latina/o community college student experiences as well as research on investigating the meaning of achievement and success in higher

education.

Previous research on achievement and success, while not overtly negative, has placed an emphasis on transferring as the end goal (success). A look at currently enrolled community college students may shed light on other possibilities. While transferring can be viewed as an achievement and as a success, it should not be the only way that researchers write about. Students should decide how they wish to define themselves, their lives and their futures.

Definitions

In this dissertation, I use Latina/o broadly to encompass those who are from Latin America. In my work, I asked participants to self-identify their background by identifying what they prefer to call themselves. Most identified as Latina/o, but others identified in other ways. Originally, I was going to include the term Chicana/o as, but didn't want to exclude those of Mexican descent who perhaps don't identify as Chicana/o.

One issue with using the term Latina/o is that it has historically been used to refer to an identity rooted in a Latin based language, in this case mainly Spanish. This is problematic for a number of reasons as it often implies a hierarchy in language that erases other languages, mainly those of already marginalized indigenous peoples of the Americas. As Espinoza (1998) states "The story of social hierarchy has been one where the language of social power reinforces that power by muting other languages. Trying to hold on to disempowered identities causes dysfunctionality in the use of the newly learned language of power and assimilation" (Espinoza, 1998, p. 18). The goal of my research, like my life work, is one committed to social justice and change, but I recognize I am also trying to unlearn and undo a colonial history at the same time and so I made a

mistake in my protocols.

Conducting this study, I asked a question around language in my work, but framed it in a way that placed Spanish and English as the *only* two possibilities. I listened to the *testimonio* of one young woman towards the end of data collection where I asked her question about language and provided only two choices. She responded that she learned neither Spanish nor English as a first language. Her first language was Purépecha. She is part of a community of people from her village that lives in Western Washington and preserves their indigenous ways, beliefs and traditions. The Purépecha are an indigenous group that lives in present day Michoacán, Mexico. As a person who practices indigenous ways and culture through Aztec/Mexica dance, as a Xicana and Mestiza I am disconnected from the experiences of what indigenous people live even though I have limited knowledge from danza and from living and studying in indigenous communities in Mexico. I tried not to be hard on myself for this mistake, but at the same time, I realized that there are layers of colonialism at play as a result of being in the U.S. for two generations and also being disconnected from my own roots, but also because of the ways in which my higher education has helped me learn to adapt and sometimes unintentionally take on dominant ways of knowing and thinking in order to survive in the ivory tower. Knowing that I did this also made me aware that I must think and continue to actively resist.

If I am seeking to decolonize methodologies as a researcher by using *testimonio*, it is important for me to be critical and reflect on my ideas and practices. Smith (1999) states that decolonization is a process that requires a researcher to seek a more critical and layered understanding of themselves and how assumptions, motivations and values

play out in their own research practices (Smith, 1999, p. 20).

Latina/o remained a problematic term for me, especially while conducting this research, but I could not find a better term to broadly describe our diverse community that includes descendants of Indigenous, African, European and other ancestries. The colonization of Latin America changed the way indigenous people are viewed and how their history is erased or rewritten. Latina/o as a term continues to exclude indigenous peoples. I do not use the term Latina/o typically to define myself. I am Xicana and from California, but moving to Washington state almost seven years ago I recognize that most people here prefer Latina/o on broad terms and that Chicana/o is looked at as term used mainly by Mexican-Americans rooted in the Chicana/o movement of the 1960s.

I wonder then if there are ways to add to these current definitions of the words we use, disrupt the power structures and perhaps invent something new. For example this has happened recently with terms I am learning more about after writing much of this dissertation that are gaining more widespread use. The terms Xicanx or Latinx are now being used to replace Xicana/o or Latina/o where they x is used to replace the a/o which reinforces a binary of gender identity and limits them to only two. I wonder if the same can happen so that other identities aren't excluded or marginalized. I have learned from conducting identity development workshops with Latina/o students this past year at a few local community colleges and at the University of Washington for La Raza Student Commission, that the terms we use to identify ourselves with, can reinforce oppression or marginalize others and perhaps put up barriers for us to work together. In my research though, I asked the students, "What do you identify as and why?" I posed this same question during the workshops and had students do an exercise around it. When we

dialogued about the terms we chose, we focused on the "why" and the commonalities between us. The reason for doing this exercise was to recognize our history, culture and our family no matter what term was used. Although I don't have a catch all term at present other than Latina/o, perhaps recognizing the drawbacks of privileging Spanish language as an identifier for being Latina/o one can imagine new possibilities that are more humanizing to the diverse experiences and backgrounds of those whose families have roots in a place known as the Americas.

Outline of Dissertation

The rest of the dissertation is outlined here. Chapter two is a literature review. Chapter three is dedicated to explaining my theoretical framework, research design and methodology. Chapter four, five and six are each dedicated to a research question that I sought to answer in this dissertation through students' *testimonios*. Finally, chapter eight is my conclusion where I describe limitations, what I learned, and the implications of this study for future research in higher education.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review: Pre-college Experiences of Latina/o Community College Students, Aspirations and Factors that Influence Goal Completion for Latina/o Community College Students, and Current Definitions of Achievement and Success in Higher Education

The following literature has informed my knowledge and understanding of the relationship between the educational systems, schooling, and lived experiences of Latina/o students who enter higher education through community colleges. In this section, I highlight; (1) pre-college experiences of Latina/o students that impact their higher education trajectory (2) the aspirations of Latina/o community college students and factors that influence goal completion; (3) Lastly, I look at research on Latina/o and other underrepresented student groups that defines and shapes the way achievement and success is thought of in the field of higher education as well as in Washington State and beyond.

Pre-college Experiences of Latina/o Community College Students. Many studies have revealed distinctions in pre-college experiences for Latina/o youth (Cammarota, 2004; Cammarota, 2007; Ceja, 2006; Contreras et al., 2008; Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Kao & Tienda, 1998; Perez Huber et al., 2006; Solórzano, Ledesma, Perez, Burciaga & Ornelas, 2003; Solórzano & Ornelas, 2004 Valenzuela, 1999; Yosso & Solórzano, 2006). For example, Valenzuela (1999) looked at the schooling of Mexican American high school students in Texas. She found that caring in Mexican culture is embodied in the way Mexican culture sees education/*educación*. Valenzuela draws a distinction between education and *educación*, as *educación* provides a foundation on how one should live in the world. This exchange is most evident in the relationship between a teacher and a student because a student who is shown they are cared for is more likely to

reveal their authentic self. Reciprocity is then needed to establish caring relationships between teachers and students. Valenzuela (1999) also found that at the high school where she conducted her research, it was difficult to for teachers and students to build reciprocal relationships (Valenzuela, 1999) She found that teachers would often require students to care about school when the students wanted to be valued and cared for as people first (Valenzuela, 1999). Valenzuela found that when Mexican-American students feel devalued for being who they are and what they bring culturally and linguistically, schools subtract these identifications and essentially dehumanize them (Valenzuela, 1999). Students then become stripped of their culture and identity in the school system in the U.S. In addition, a student's culture is not seen as a resource or strength

Although Valenzuela (1999) points out many ways in which the U.S. schooling system is subtractive for those of Mexican descent, studies have shown how students resist being marginalized and dehumanized in the school system (Cammarota, 2004; Cammarota, 2007; Fernandez, 2002). Fernandez (2002) provides examples of students who resist schooling by cutting classes. She also highlights the tension between developing vocational traits and college skills. Fernandez (2002) highlights the case of Pablo to demonstrate that even a student on a college track can be inadequately prepared for college as well because of a weak curriculum or grading system. In the example, she described how Pablo began to cut class, but still earned good grades and points how school was not something Pablo saw as serving him well (Fernandez, 2002). By highlighting the reasons why students cut school, Fernandez recognized students' agency in the practice of cutting school because students' prioritized other needs they saw as

essential to their existence like taking care of family and working or their own well being if they were tired of school (Fernandez, 2002).

Cammarota's (2004) study, speaks to how transformation through education can occur particularly for Latinas. The significance of a high school diploma for Latinas "usually means that she has achieved more than any other woman or man in the family. This achievement offers a status change that Latinas can translate into better opportunities and more control over their lives" (Cammarota, 2004, p. 65). Cammarota's (2007) research demonstrates how a socially relevant curriculum in high school can serve to empower and humanize students in the school system, especially those most deemed "at-risk." Therefore, the overarching goal of a socially relevant curriculum is to promote students' critical consciousness and their active engagement in social justice activities. To achieve this goal, students learn Chicano studies, critical social theory, and participatory action research, along with requirements for U.S. history and Government" (Cammarota, 2007, p. 88). This research shows that a curriculum that is engaging and relevant to students' lives helps to empower students and keep them in school as well as prepare them to participate effectively in public and political realms.

Research has focused on factors that impact a students' academic trajectory. This includes the influence of the family (Ceja, 2006; Kao & Tienda, 1998). Kao & Tienda (1998) found that although youth of color display high aspirations at any given point in pre-college experiences, they are less likely to maintain these high aspirations throughout high school (Kao & Tienda, 1998). In their study, Latinos students were encouraged to go to college by their families, but often due to lack of information and resources, students would experience a disconnect between what they needed to do in order to prepare for

college (Kao & Tienda, 1998). Ceja (2006) looked at the college choice process for Chicana students. He found that although Mexican-American parents hold formal schooling as a high value, parents couldn't assist much in their daughters' college choice process. As Chicanas in the study began to navigate the process, their parents were limited to providing emotional and financial support (Ceja, 2006).

Studies have also shown that tracking in schools, lack of access to advance placement courses (AP) and lack of academic enrichment programs in secondary institutions limit the post-secondary options of Chicana/o and Latina/o students (Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Solórzano & Ornelas, 2004; Solórzano et al., 2003;Valenzuela, 1999). It is also important to note the ways in which social class, gender, and racial inequalities impact student aspirations and motivations (Cammarota, 2004; Contreras et al., 2008, Contreras, 2013; Solórzano et al., 2003).

To illustrate the importance of access to AP courses in preparing for college, Solórzano & Ornelas (2004) conducted a Critical Race Theory (CRT) analysis of advance placement courses in a high school and found that Chicana and Latina students are most directly affected and because college admissions focus on merit-based factors of college acceptance including a high GPA. Chicanas are then at a disadvantage if they cannot access AP courses because AP/honors courses can weigh heavily in GPA's for college admissions (Solórzano & Ornelas, 2004). This added disadvantage for Latinas begins long before high school. Solórzano et al. (2003) also point out that Latinas are least likely to be enrolled in Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) during elementary school years. From kindergarten until 12th grade, Latinas attend schools with limited curriculum

offerings and under-qualified teachers in schools that track students into remedial instruction and are poorly funded (Solórzano et al. 2003).

In another study on Latina/o student achievement in Washington and pre-college experiences, Contreras' (2013) found that one in five kindergarteners in the state of Washington identified as Latinos. She also pointed to statistics of how the Latino population was growing in the state (Contreras, 2013). During high school, ELL students face numerous challenges, including limited opportunities to academic support and therefore are less likely to pass the high school exit exam (Contreras, 2013). Latina/o students are also least likely to be college ready in the state of Washington. Less than half of all Latina/o students in Washington transitioned to college between 2007-2009 (Contreras, 2013).

In previous research, Contreras et al. (2008) found how socioeconomic status plays a role in the schooling of Latina/os. Latina/o students are more likely than their peers to have parents with lower levels of parental education (Contreras et al., 2008, p. 44). Sixty-five percent of parents reported that their family income levels were $30,000 to $35,000 (Contreras, et. al. 2008). They found that 67 percent of the Latina/o parents expected their child to finish a Bachelor's degree or higher. This indicates that parents cared about their children's education (Contreras et al. 2008).

Other pre-college experiences by Latina/o students in Washington indicated that racial profiling and discrimination occurred in schools, often by police and staff (Contreras et al. 2008). Despite challenges throughout their schooling experiences, almost 80% of the Latina/o students in this study aspired to attend college (Contreras et. al. 2008).

In summary, pre-college experiences have shown to have a great impact on Latina/o student's entry point into higher education with the majority attending a community college out of high school; thus, impacting who will go on to receive a Bachelor's degree and beyond (Perez Huber et al., 2006; Yosso & Solórzano, 2006). Contreras' (2013) research indicated similar in that the majority of Latina/o students in higher education in Washington State attend a community college out of high school (Contreras, 2013).

Aspirations and Factors that Influence Goal Completion for Latina/o Community College Students. Many studies have shown that Latina/o students have aspirations to transfer and earn a Bachelor's degree and higher, but there are many factors that influence goal completion. Often students lack transfer information, institutional commitment to transfer students, preparation courses for college in pre-college experiences, and lack of support for undocumented students. (Contreras et al., 2008, Contreras, 2009; Malagón & Alvarez, 2010; Perez Huber, Huidor, Malagón, Sanchez, & Solórzano, 2006; Ornelas & Solórzano, 2004; Rivas et al., 2007; Solórzano, Villalpando & Oseguera, 2005; Yosso & Solórzano, 2006).

An important reseach contribution on Latina/o community college student aspirations by Ornelas and Solórzano (2004) state that although a good number of Latina/o students enter the community college, a disproportionally low number of them will transfer to a four-year college or university (Ornelas & Solórzano, 2004). In their case study of a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI), the researchers found that many Latina/o students aspired to transfer, but found many barriers along the way to their goal. These barriers ranged from a lack of institutional commitment to fulfill its' transfer

function, lack of transfer information, inadequate pre-college schooling experiences negatively impacting their experiences as community college students, as well as having multiple responsibilities to balance in their personal lives (Ornelas & Solórzano, 2004). Students also had a strong desire to "prove them (society) wrong" (Ornelas & Solórzano, 2004). This is significant because students are aware of their position in society and how Chicana/os and Latina/os in community colleges are viewed as inferior even when they are in institutions of higher education. This marginalization continues to be justified because of the ways in which community college students are viewed and how the institutions exist and are funded in higher education.

Yosso and Solórzano's (2006) research shows that out of 100 Chicana/o elementary school students, only 46 complete high school, 26 enroll in college, and 17 will attend a community college with 9 going to a four-year college. Out of the total 26 who enrolled in college, 8 graduate with a Bachelors' degree. Looking only at the 17 students who attend a community college only 1 will transfer, two Chicana/os will go on to earn a graduate or professional degree and only 0.2 will earn a doctoral degree (Yosso & Solórzano, 2006).

Perez Huber et al. (2006) looked closer at college going statistics and showed that out of the broader group of Latina/o students (including Chicana/o students) there will be 100 first time Latina/o freshmen, 75 will attend a community college, only 7 will transfer. Out of those 7, 1 will attend the highly selective University of California and 6 will transfer to the less selective (still competitive) California State University. Although this research indicates that Latina/o students want to transfer, educational institutions are

not doing enough to meet their needs and assist them in reaching their goals (Perez Huber et al., 2006).

Solórzano, Villalpando and Oseguera (2005) research indicates that a challenge for Latina/o students to reach their goals could be that the community colleges serve multiple and sometimes conflicting missions. For Latina/o community college students, being at a school that may emphasize one function over the other could have a significant effect on the type of career and educational aspirations a student develops or keeps (Solórzano, Villalpando, and Oseguera, 2005). Rivas et al. (2007) found that there is often a mismatch between students' aspirations and a community college's level of support for a student to meet their goals. Some schools do offer support programs such as Puente, or transfer specific programs, but there is a greater need to institutionalize more of this academic support at more community colleges in order to help students meet their goals (Rivas et al., 2007).

Contreras et al. (2008) state that Latina/o students in Washington State high schools aspire to obtain Bachelor's degrees and many of them end up in community colleges. Even among Latina/o high school students who may be academically qualified to gain acceptance to a university from high school, they found that many students, particularly undocumented students, had unanswered questions about the college application process and going to college (Contreras et al., 2008). Contreras (2009) interviewed undocumented Latina/o undergraduate students in Washington State and found that students experienced different barriers based on institution type. Undocumented Latina/o students who attended community college were more likely to feel isolated due to working longer hours, thus limiting time on campus and the

likelihood of knowing about resources and offices on their college campus. Although financial assistance to undocumented students is limited in general, it is even more limited in community college as some undocumented students in the study received private scholarships to attend a four-year university (Contreras, 2009).

Contreras (2013) found that community college is the primary pathway for Latina/os in higher education in Washington State. Latina/o students who begin in community colleges compared to Latina/o students who begin their higher education in four-year universities are less likely to complete a Bachelors' degree (Contreras, 2013). Many Latina/os who attend community colleges in Washington also indicate that they wish to transfer to a four-year university echoing much of the research previously conducted in California. Many students in community colleges enroll in career and technical programs enabling these students to meet Washington State's workforce demands, but there is a gap in fulfilling high skilled positions (Contreras, 2013).

Chicana/o and Latina/o community college students' aspirations and motivation for higher education are influenced by feelings of responsibility to their families and community as well as a resistance to society's perceptions of Chicana/os and Latina/os (Campa, 2010; Ornelas & Solórzano, 2004). In their case study of community college students, Ornelas and Solórzano (2005) interviewed a Latina student who saw her parents as her role models. Other students in the study also echoed the same sentiment. To highlight this point, Ornelas and Solórzano stated, "This passion was often inculcated by the motivation the students received from their parents, their appreciation for their parents and by the understanding of their place in society that marginalized them on the basis of their race, class and gender" (2005, p. 237). Another researcher, Campa (2010)

interviewed a student who recognized the opportunities his undocumented single mother provided for him by setting an example and making sacrifices for the well being of her children, as she returned to school to get her GED and a certificate in cosmetology (Campa, 2010). Most participants in Campas' study also indicated that one of the most important funds of knowledge was the *consejos* that they received from their families.

Support along the educational journey for Latina/os in community colleges is essential to helping students navigate the institution, transferring, and impacts the numbers of Latina/o students attending graduate school (Campa, 2010; Contreras & Gándara, 2006; Malagón & Alvarez, 2010; Malcolm, 2007; Ornelas & Solórzano, 2004; Solórzano, Rivas, & Velez, 2005; Watford, Rivas, Burciaga, & Solórzano, 2006).

Solórzano et al. (2005) found that Chicana/o students are the most likely to reach the doctorate by way of the community college. For example, 23% of Chicana/os with doctorates begin their education in the community college (Solórzano et al., 2005, p. 2). Contreras and Gándara (2006) state that Hispanic Serving Institutions and other "non-selective" institutions such as community colleges need to raise achievement levels in order to provide greater access to the doctorate for Latina/o students (Contreras & Gándara, 2006, p. 108). Watford et. al (2006) explain that the Latina pathway to the doctorate is one with additional barriers. In particular Chicanas are most underrepresented groups in earning doctorates (Watford et al., 2006). Malagón & Alvarez (2010) explain that is it critical for community colleges to recognize the role of Chicanas coming from diverse educational backgrounds and that the pipeline to graduate school for Chicanas students doesn't necessary fit traditional views of how someone can transition to various levels of academia. Sometimes students can come from non-traditional

institutions such as Continuation High Schools (Malagón & Alvarez, 2010). The community college then plays a critical role in the numbers of Latina/o who make it to graduate school.

Latina/o community college students who pursue degrees in STEM fields face particular challenges, especially women (Malcolm, 2007; Reyes, 2011). Malcolm's (2007) research showed that although some researchers see community colleges as an uncommon path to STEM fields, for Latina/os this pathway is essential to increasing numbers of Latina/os in STEM. Malcolm states, "Increasing resources designed to stimulate interest in STEM fields among Latina/o community college students and providing the academic and institutional support necessary to facilitate transfer and degree attainment will likely widen community college pathways to STEM fields" (Malcolm, 2007). Reyes (2011) found that women who transferred in STEM built off social networks to stay in school, in particular finding a community was essential to their completion of their degrees (Reyes, 2011). Furthermore, transfer students found that learning was different and based on regurgitation in their courses. This type of change in learning, for the Women of Color interviewed, led to disconnect between what they were learning (Reyes, 2011). In addition, Women of Color in STEM experienced isolation because of their status as transfer students. This led to them to feel like they didn't belong (Reyes, 2011). Finally, due to a lack of information about graduate school opportunities that are passed through networks and word of mouth, women of color transfer students were at a significant disadvantage in not developing relationships with peers and faculty early on (Reyes, 2011).

To summarize, this literature shows that Latina/o community college students face many barriers to accomplish their goals, but undocumented students face additional and unique ones. This is important to recognize because not all financial aid that is available to students is available to undocumented students and because of their status they may be less likely to seek support at the risk of outing their status.

Current Definitions of Achievement and Success in Higher Education. While there is literature in higher education that mentions achievement and success, the studies that I have looked at do not define these terms explicitly. In this section, I seek ways to work towards defining and re-defining achievement and success. This re-imagining can fully occur more completely with the *testimonios* of the focal students in this study, but this is where I begin. First, I share the research in higher education on Latina/os that speaks to achievement and success. Next, I share literature that has guided me to think differently about achievement and success. I incorporate ideas of power to help me think about achievement, success and education. Finally, I conclude this section with research that has challenged the ways achievement and success is defined and how my work will hopefully lead to develop this vision with those who participated in this research.

Looking at who is seen as high achieving in education literature, Conchas (2006) defines high achieving youth of color in *The Color of Success: Race and High Achieving Youth* (2006). In his book, Conchas describes high achieving Latino students as students who enroll in AP classes, that is, the most rigorous and intellectually challenging courses at the school. In addition, the AP students had a one hundred percent acceptance rate to elite universities directly after graduating high school (Conchas, 2006, p. 66). In order to be in this group of high achievers, these particular Latino students conformed to the

school process and developed competitive values that they believed led them to success (Conchas, 2006, p. 68).

Gándara and Contreras (2009) echo Conchas' (2006) perspectives that there are differences between Latina/o students who "make it" and those that do not. In a section they title, "Who makes it to College?," the authors highlight their perspective on who is successful in school Latina/o students who are described as successful are those who could make it to a four-year university. According to Gándara and Contreras (2009) these students were different from their peers who weren't viewed as "educationally successful." Some of the differences between these two groups of Latina/o students were having parents who were college educated and their families having a higher socioeconomic status (Gándara & Contreras, 2009). In addition, the authors define high achieving Latina/o students as those with high grade point averages, enrollment in honors and Advanced Placement courses. Another characteristic the authors use to define high-achieving Latina/os was participation in extra-curricular activities like their white peers (Gándara & Contreras, 2009).

In a study by Contreras et al. (2008), in which I participated as a research assistant, we studied Latina/o student achievement in Washington State. We asked student participants about their perceptions of their achievement levels and about what they felt their teachers would say about them. Many students responded that they believed their teachers wouldn't rate them as high as their peers. Achievement in this study was linked directly to grades. If a student had an "A" they were labeled a "high achiever", a "B student" would be an "above average student", a "C student" would is labeled as "average", a "D student" was labeled as "below average" and a "Failing" was

labeled as in "need intervention" (Contreras et. al. 2008, p. 46). Contreras et al. (2008) like Conchas (2006) based their definitions of achievement and success on grade point averages and whether a student gained admission to a four-year university directly after high school.

Conchas (2006) takes it a step further stating that students who were successful conformed to certain norms while Gándara & Contreras (2009) reinforced that in order to be deemed high achieving Latina/os had to be on par with their "white peers." This type of language privileges meritocracy, and narrowly defines achievement and success based on GPA, test scores and whether one conforms or assimilates to the dominant or white culture in order to be "high achievers" or "successful".

Towards (Re)defining success. Next, I highlight literature that speaks to the power of definitions in education and in society. Memmi (1967) writes of the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized and defines both. The power in definitions lies in the colonizers' ability and power to create an image of those who are colonized. To highlight how definitions are shaped by those in power, Memmi states, "Constantly confronted with this image of himself, set forth and imposed on all institutions and in every human contact, how could the colonized help reacting to his portrait?" (Memmi, 1967, p. 87) Memmi then continues to develop the idea that the colonized then begin to internalize the ideas of who the colonizer says that they are. "Just as the colonizer is tempted to accept his part, the colonized is forced to accept being colonized" (Memmi, 1967, p. 89). If the school system like Conchas (2006) and Gándara & Contreras (2009) indicated that in order to be labeled a high achiever or successful requires conformity to the dominant white culture in some ways then are we just reinforcing deficit models of

thinking about ourselves and in many ways reinforcing the colonization that Memmi (1967) speaks of.

When thinking of *testimonio* and in the tradition of Latin America, I think of the recently deceased author Eduardo Galeano and what he stated in an interview with the Guardian newspaper about who is forgotten in history. In the interview, he stated, "It's a system of power that is always deciding in the name of humanity who deserves to be remembered and who deserves to be forgotten … we are much more than we are told. We are much more beautiful." (Interview with Eduardo Galeano, The Guardian. July 23, 2013) From Galeano, I am reminded of humanization as written by Paolo Freire in the classic text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* where Freire speaks of power and how the oppressed can become empowered in their struggle against their oppressor. This struggle to fight is also fighting against the system of power that defines who and what we are.

Freire (1970) writes about the process of dehumanization and how it begins with a distortion of history, but how in the struggle to reclaim and regain our humanity we as people and educators can re-imagine something different. Freire states, “In order for this struggle to have meaning, the oppressed must not, in seeking to regain their humanity (which in a way is to create it), become in turn oppressors of the oppressors, but rather restorers of the humanity of both” (Freire, 1970, p. 44). This means that there is a possibility that in the struggle for the oppressed to gain their humanity, they do not have to resort to the same tactics or tools of oppression as the oppressors, but that the oppressed can imagine new possibilities that also liberate those who have oppressed them. Escobar et al. (1994) interviewed Paulo Freire in the book, *Paulo Freire on Higher Education*. In the dialogue, Freire speaks of the power relationship in education and the

ways in which we can chose to reproduce dominant ideologies. Freire states that an educator who seeks transformation in society is one who dreams something that hasn't happened yet.

> If you take strategy, for example, aware of the place where you are putting your dream, the possible dream that is not yet materialized, I think that what we have here is still a dream that is yet to come true-that of the transformation of present time. If your dream is in your strategy, the purpose of your struggle, you have to find the ways that will make the materialization of your dream possible, and those ways are precisely the tactics, the means, which you even have to create (Escobar et al., 1994, p. 32).

When I searched for studies that challenged or expanded on existing definitions of achievement and success, I found in Malagón and Alvarez' (2010) article where they examine the ways in which achievement is defined and how it is often not used to include the challenges that students confront along their educational journey and their personal qualities they may develop. They explained how the definition of "high achieving" should be expanded to include students (Chicanas in particular) who attended continuation high school, enrolled in community college, transferred to a four-year university and then went on to graduate school. (Malagón & Alvarez, 2010).

Research conducted by Cammarota (2004) points to how transformation through education can mean a personal transformation and can be a success in itself and does not necessarily have to include college degree attainment. He does highlight that success can occur through attainment of a formal education, but he also recognizes that achievement

doesn't have to necessarily be about Latina/os going to college. In particular, when Latinas earn a high school diploma, it can be labeled as an achievement.

> Through the opportunity of education, Latinas can become part of a new generation of women who will achieve for themselves and attain a higher status. Graduating high school is a crucial step in this project of generational, cultural and societal change. A high school diploma for a second or first generation Latina youth usually means that she has achieved more than any other woman or man in the family. This achievement offers a status change that Latinas can translate into better opportunities and control over their lives (Cammarota, 2004, p. 65).

In his research, Cammarota cites Anzaldúa (1987) who stated that Chicanas have new opportunities through education and careers by becoming self-autonomous persons. According to Anzaldua, "Today, some of us have a fourth choice; entering the world by way of education and career and becoming self-autonomous persons. A very few of us" (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 17). To Anzaldúa then education is a way for Chicanas to have a voice and gain autonomy. Education in the way Anzaldúa (1987) speaks of is similar to what Valenzuela (1999) speaks of as the difference between education and *educación*, "Although *educación* has implications for pedagogy, it is first a foundational cultural construct that provides instructions on how one should live in the world. With its emphasis on respect, responsibility, and sociality, it provides a benchmark against which all humans are to be judge, formally educated or not" (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 21).

This way of knowing or transformation through education for me is tied to the process of *conocimiento* that Anzaldúa (2002) writes of because *conocimiento* is a way to learn from our lived experiences

> You struggle each day to know the world you live in, to come to grips with the problems of life. Motivated by the need to understand, you crave to be what and who you are. A spiritual hunger rumbles deep in your belly, the yearning to live up to your potential. You question the doctrines claiming to be the only right way to live. These ways no longer accommodate the person you are or the life you're living. They no longer help you with your central task-to determine what your life means, to catch a glimpse of the cosmic order and your part in that cosmovision and to translate these into artistic forms (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 540).

In Chicana Feminist Epistemology (Delgado Bernal, 1998) through the use of *testimonio* as method opportunities to define what one's life means and what they who define as achievement and success. Using Latina/o community college student voices we can then begin to redefine achievement and success from their perspectives and lived experiences.

Summary of Research Literature

The literature indicates that Latina/o community college students face many different challenges throughout their educational journeys. To begin with, Latina/o in their pre-college years face inequitable opportunities in terms of course access and preparation for college. ELL students are at a greater disadvantage. When students do enroll in college many will never complete their goals. Because community colleges are the main entry point into higher education for Latina/o students, it is necessary to see students complete their goals, but it is also urgent that we learn from and value students' lives. While the research literature speaks of aspirations, the main focus is on students who wish to transfer to four-year universities. However, students who transfer four-year universities are not the only type of students who attend community college. I wonder

why it is that researchers privilege the voices of community college students who enter four-year universities. I wonder about the students who are excluded such as students who wish to complete a class, certificate or associates degree while they are enrolled in community college? Or those students whose stories and lives we know little about. What do we know about the barriers they face in completing their goals? Are they similar to those who aspire to transfer? For example, do all students struggle in specific subjects? From my own experience Math and English are two courses that can add time to a so-called two-year degree because these courses have contributed to students not pursuing their goals and/or leaving school. This literature allowed me to focus on what I believed were the most pressing questions to ask to fill in the gaps in the research on Latina/o community college student experiences. I therefore center my research on the experiences and voices of Latina/o community college students to hear directly from them what they believe to be the most pressing issues they face and how educators and institutions can better support them.

CHAPTER 3

Theoretical Framework, Research Methodology and Design

In this chapter, I explain my research methodology and design, beginning with the theories that have informed this study. In my research, Critical Race Theory (CRT), Latina/o Critical Theory (LatCrit) and Chicana/Latina Feminist Theory were essential for understanding the experiences of Latina/o community college students and their definitions of achievement and success. Next, I explain *testimonio* as method and how utilizing *testimonio* helped me provide detailed layers and analyses of the students' academic and lived experiences . I then discuss the research design beginning with recruitment and selection of participants. Lastly, I conclude this section with the ways in which I analyzed the *testimonios*.

Theoretical Framework

The use of Critical Race Theory (CRT), Latino Critical Theory (LatCrit) as well as Chicana and Latina Feminist Theory in my research provided valuable lenses to learn more about and analyze the lived experiences of Latina/o community college students. In addition, these theories allowed me to look at multiple intersections of student identities, including race, gender, class, immigration status and language.

CRT and LatCrit in Education. Scholars have found ways to utilize CRT in education in order to better understand the experiences of Chicana/o and Latina/o students from high school to graduate school (Fernandez, 2002; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Solórzano & Ornelas, 2002; Solórzano & Yosso, 2000; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001; Solórzano, Villalpando & Oseguera, 2005).

One way that scholars take up CRT is informed by Solórzano and Yosso (2000). According to Solórzano and Yosso (2000) CRT in education began as work by progressive legal scholars of color who sought to eliminate racism and other forms of subordination. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) were some of the first education scholars to explore CRT's role in Education. Solórzano and Yosso (2000) later outlined five a framework that inform the use of CRT in education, they are: 1) centering race and racism and considering the intersections that race and racism make with class and gender; 2) challenging dominant ideology and traditional claims in the educational system such as meritocracy, objectivity, color-blindness and more; 3) a commitment to social justice and to work towards eliminating racism; 4) centering of experiential knowledge. By centering lived experiences, CRT recognizes that the experiences of Women and Men of Color are real and legitimate; and 5) utilizing an interdisciplinary approach allows research to recognize the ways in which forms of oppression intersect and how they have changed or not changed over time (Solórzano & Yosso, 2000).

Solórzano and Yosso (2002) state that when research theory addresses issues of race and racism it has the potential to answer problems in a way that challenges traditional research and approaches of explaining the experiences of students of color. Furthermore, using CRT and LatCrit helps to use an interdisciplinary knowledge base in research as these theories are rooted in Ethnic studies, Women's studies, sociology, history, humanities and law. (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 24).

In CRT, specifically LatCrit, many studies have looked at the educational experiences of Chicana/o and Latina/o students. For example, Solórzano and Yosso (2000) outline institutional barriers and interpersonal challenges that Chicano students

experience in college that can lead to negative educational outcomes (Solórzano & Yosso, 2000). Solórzano et al. (2005) state that in order to understand the conditions that exist for Latina/os in the higher educational system, one must look at the low transfer rates and retention rates of Chicana/o and Latina/o students in the community college (Solórzano et al., 2005). According to Solórzano et al. (2005), "The reasons for their inability to transfer often result from institutional structures that fail to support their academic needs and professional goals and aspirations" (Solórzano et al., 2005, p. 282).

Fernandez (2002) explains how the methods used within CRT can be transformative not just for the narrators, but others in the community as well. Fernandez (2002) states "Narratives, storytelling, and counter-stories can be transformative and empowering for educators, students, and community members. These methods can make public what many already know, but have not spoken out loud: There are futures and lives at stake in the process we call education." She continues to state that recognizing what we already know is important in education in order to realize the knowledge we already possess and by centering race we can better understand educational processes as transformational ones (Fernandez, 2002).

Solórzano and Yosso (2001) explain how CRT and LatCrit in research are not only about developing theory, but also about how theory informs the research methods. One way that theory informs research methods is through the use of counter-storytelling to share the experiences of Chicana/os in graduate school and to challenge dominant discourses about student experiences. Counter-stories serve many functions including: building community and humanizing the experiences of those who exist in the margin,

challenge and transform established belief systems, showing that those who live in the margins are not alone in their existence (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001).

By utilizing CRT and LatCrit in Education, scholars have found ways to challenge dominant frameworks and provide new ways of explaining the educational experiences of Chicana/o and Latina/o students. Educational experiences then serve to provide a critical analysis of the intersections of identities such as race, class, gender, immigrant status, language and many more. Also, CRT and LatCrit are used to create ideas that serve to empower communities through recognizing knowledge gained from lived experiences. (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Fernandez, 2002; Perez Huber, 2009; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Another scholar who has theorized about recognizing knowledge that people already possess is Delgado Bernal (2002). In her research she states that part of better understanding educational practices comes from recognizing students of color as holders and creators of knowledge, and that we as researchers must question, what is considered valid forms of knowledge. According to Delgado Bernal (2002), "Although students of color are holders and creators of knowledge, they often feel as if their histories, experiences, cultures and languages are devalued, misinterpreted, or omitted within formal educational settings" (Delgado Bernal, 2002, p. 106). One way to recognize students of color's experiences and lives is to let them speak for themselves. Through a Chicana feminist lens in conjunction with CRT and LatCrit we can see how recognizing our lives as knowledge is accomplished through sharing stories. "Chicana feminist ways of knowing are partially shaped by collective experiences and community memory. Community and family memory is taught to youth through legends, *corridos,* and

storytelling" (Delgado Bernal, 2002, p. 113). This is why *testimonio* to me is critical in understanding the experiences of current Latina/o community college students.

CRT and LatCrit have provided valuable contributions to education as a whole; however, much of this research is usually found in concentrations where people explicitly are either professors or students in programs that focus on race and ethnicity and not in the field of higher education. CRT and LatCrit provide valuable lenses that apply to higher education in theory and practice. Although CRT and LatCrit do address intersectionality, as Solórzano and Yosso (2002) outline in their work, there is more research that can be done to make valuable connections to fill in missing gaps in higher education research where student's voices continue to be marginalized. In order for marginalized students to bring their voices to the center, Chicana feminist epistemology and Chicana/Latina feminist theory in education are necessary because they allow for a more in-depth examination of how intersectionality of identities can inform research about students lived experiences.

Chicana/Latina Feminist Theory in Education. Gloria Anzaldúa has greatly contributed to the area of Chicana feminism by conceptualizing new theories, while living and writing about borderlands (Anzaldúa, 1983; Anzaldúa, 1987; Anzaldúa, 1990; Anzaldúa; 2002). Many Chicanas/Latinas in education have looked to Anzaldúa work to describe their experiences in academia or to use as a lens for their own research. Bridging ideas that Anzaldúa contributed such as *conocimiento* and the concept of borderlands has allowed new ways of imagining education and transforming research methods and methodologies in fields aside from Gender, Women and Sexuality Studies or Feminist Studies.

Anzaldúa (1990) argues that theory (in general) needs to be re-conceptualized in order to transform academia. "*Necesitamos teorias* that will rewrite history using race, class, gender and ethnicity as categories of analysis, theories that cross borders, that blur boundaries—new kinds of theories with new theorizing methods" (Anzaldúa, 1990, p. xxv). The challenge becomes finding the ways to break the silence of marginalized groups of people in order to rewrite their own stories. A necessary component to breaking this silence is *conocimiento* and the forms in which it can take place. According to Anzaldúa (2002), *conocimiento* is "a form of spiritual inquiry, *conocimiento* is reached via creative acts-writing, art-making, dancing, healing, teaching, mediation, and spiritual activism-both mental and somatic" (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 542). One way of applying *conocimiento*—ways of knowing, seeing, and being—to other areas, including education is by looking at *testimonio* as a type of art through storytelling and the storytelling then can also be spiritual inquiry.

Chicanas and Latinas inspired by Gloria Anzaldúa's work as well as other Chicana/Latina feminist thought have developed ways to apply and create Chicana/Latina feminist epistemologies in education (Calderon, Delgado Bernal, Perez Huber, Malagón, Velez, 2012; Castillo-Montoya & Torres-Guzman, 2012; Cruz, 2001; Delgado Bernal, 1998; Delgado Bernal, 2001; Rodriguez, 2006).

Delgado Bernal (1998) explains that using a Chicana feminist epistemology (Chicana FE) in educational research makes explicit the relationship between a researcher and methodology that goes beyond the use of qualitative or quantitative methods. Delgado Bernal (1998) states that, "Therefore what becomes crucial in a Chicana feminist epistemology goes beyond quantitative versus qualitative methods, and lies

instead in the methodology employed and in whose experiences and realities are accepted as the foundation of knowledge" (Delgado Bernal, 1998, p. 558). Chicana researchers provide a unique perspective that Delgado Bernal calls cultural intuition. Cultural intuition can be informed by personal experiences, existing literature, professional experience and the ways in which we approach the research process. Cultural intuition is also informed by collective experience, community memory and by research participants having a voice in the analysis of data (Delgado Bernal, 1998).

One central focus in approaching this dissertation with a Chicana feminist epistemology is to bring the whole self into the research process. While in the past it may have been required for Chicanas, Women of Color and other marginalized people to leave who they are at the gates of the institution, Chicana feminist epistemology seeks to humanize our experiences by centering our voices and lives Delgado Bernal (2001) states many of the challenges confronted by Chicanas on their educational journey have largely been ignored in social science and Chicana/o studies literature despite Chicana/os being the second largest ethnic/racial minority group in higher education in California (Delgado Bernal, 2001). A large part of what informs the experiences of Chicanas is learning that has occurred outside of school, particularly the home. Pedagogies of the home help bridge the ways in which cultural knowledge and language can help us better understand the home and community (Delgado Bernal, 2001).

Another important theorists whose work I draw from, Cruz (2001), discusses that for the Chicana researcher, our narratives often become the "messy" texts of research and writing (Cruz, 2001). Cruz also reminds researchers that the body cannot be separated from the whole self and the location one is in. Instead, researchers must question, how do

these locations impact critical inquiry? Researchers cannot and must not disconnect the personal/political from the research praxis. We must remain whole. She states, "Situating knowledge in the brown body begins the validation of the narratives of survival, transformation, and emancipation of our respective communities, reclaiming histories and identities. And in these ways, we embody theory" (Cruz, 2001, p. 668).

Calderon et al. (2012) examines scholarship that has drawn upon Chicana feminist epistemological perspectives over the years since Delgado Bernal's (1998) work was first introduced. In doing so, Calderon et al. find that Chicana education scholars have been guided by Gloria Anzaldúa's work and maintain a commitment to anti-oppressive social justice research (Calderon et al., 2012). Through their review of the research these scholars found that scholarship translates to a way of life. A way of life that Chicanas use to understand themselves as scholars in education considering all of our being is essential to knowing where we stand as researchers and our positionality.

> The process of decolonizing our education research and practices is a complicated and never-ending journey with no exact destination. Chicana feminist scholarship is charting new paths on this journey. It is contributing to and allied with other forms of critical race, feminist and decolonial scholarship. Yet, this work is uniquely Chicana in that it draws from the borderland experiences of Chicanas and the theoretical ideas—that emerge from those experiences (Calderon et al., 2012, p. 535).

Chicanas and Latinas have applied ways of knowing or *conocimiento* to areas such as Education by using *consejos*, *cuentos*, *dichos*, and *testimonios* to tell stories about their lives and the educational experiences of Chicana/o and Latina/o students (Delgado-

Gaitán, 1994; Espinoza-Herold, 2007; Latina Feminist Group, 2001; Perez Huber, 2009; Villenas, Godinez, Delgado Bernal, & Elenes, 2006). There are many intersections to these theories, my own lived experiences and research trajectory, which have informed my decision to utilize *testimonio* as method.

In incorporating these theories as my lenses for this study, I seek to provide a more in-depth analysis of Latina/o community college student experiences. These theories will also allow me to look at multiple intersections of identity and consider more than the usual three commonly used, race, gender and class categories. I have sought to humanize my own experiences through a transformative educational journey by using *testimonio* as method in my previous work and have found it to be essential to understanding one's place and knowledge they hold. From *testimonio* I have learned why it is important to listen to lived experiences and center them in research as valid forms of knowledge. This is why it is important to me to hear from the lived experiences of current Latina/o community college students. *Testimonio* as a method then became essential to understand lived experiences.

***Testimonio* as Method.** For my methodology, I also draw from Chicana/Latina Feminist Theory to understand *testimonio* as method in research (Anzaldúa, 1983; Anzaldúa, 1987; Anzaldúa, 1990; Anzaldúa, 2002; Calderon, Delgado Bernal, Perez Huber, Malagón, Velez, 2012; Castillo-Montoya & Torres-Guzman, 2012; Cruz, 2001; Delgado Bernal, 1998; Delgado Bernal, 2001; Rodriguez, 2006;), Critical Resilience (Campa, 2010), CRT and LatCrit (Solórzano & Yosso, 2000; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Solórzano & Ornelas, 2002; Fernandez, 2002; Solórzano, Villalpando & Oseguera, 2005). In order to seek a deeper level of

understanding of students lived experiences, I utilize *testimonio* as method. *Testimonio* attempts to center the experiences of those who are sharing their stories and lived experiences. As previously mentioned by Perez Huber (2009), *testimonio* allows for collective stories to emerge rather than individual stories. (Perez Huber, 2009). Delgado Bernal (1998) also explains that in Chicana Feminist Epistemology (Chicana FE) (as well as *testimonio*), the relationship between the researcher and the methodology is explicit (Delgado Bernal, 1998). For me this relates back to my own experiences of being a Xicana community college student and wanting to know more about the experiences of those currently attending one.

My relationship to what I am researching has to be placed in the context of what I also experienced in my own life. I make it explicit as I explain through my own *testimonio*, that the journey I have taken from community college to where I am now. My own educational journey in higher education is guided by the need to know the world around me and stems from questions posed by Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970)*. When I read this book in community college it influenced the way I thought about education and how a person has knowledge informed by their lived experiences. The following quote capture this sentiment, "For apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other" (Freire, 1970, p. 72). For me, this quote allowed me to see how a person needs connection and community to learn and make sense of the world. At a later point in my life, when I read Gloria Anzaldúa's texts on *conocimiento*, I understood that this desire to know and learn about one self is

also guided by the ways in which we reflect on lived experiences. This process stems from a desire and necessity to know ourselves better to be able to connect with others pursue this path of becoming more human.

In anthropology, researchers have explored ways in which families interact and talk about schooling. Delgado-Gaitán's (1994) research finds that through *consejos*, families present stories of educational aspirations or desires for their children (Delgado-Gaitán, 1994). The Latina Feminist Group (2001) also sought to create their own spaces when they found that traditional research methodology did not allow them to fully explore their identity (Latina Feminist Group, 2001, p. 2). The Latina Feminist Group (2001) states, "Latinas have contributed to empowerment efforts through literacy and giving voice, documenting silenced histories. *Testimonio* has been critical in movements in Latin America, offering an artistic form and methodology to create politicized understandings of identity and community" (Latina Feminist Group, 2001, p. 3). I interpret this to mean that *testimonio* is a way to uncover ones own positionality and can inform the ways in which we work for social justice inside and outside of the academy. In Villenas et al. (2006) the authors present a framework that works to challenge dominant ways of thinking so that the stories of Chicanas/Latinas are not only heard, but applied to other forms of teaching and learning. Villenas et al. (2006) states:

> We look to these different yet ordinary sites of knowledge construction with the hope of proposing different possibilities and theories of pedagogy, epistemology and education-indeed mujer-centered articulations of teaching and learning, along with ways of knowing-rooted in diverse and everyday living of Chicanas/Latinas

> as members of families, communities, and a global society (Villenas et al., 2006, p. 3).

Perez Huber (2009) states that while *testimonio* has a place and a purpose, the importance of its use is necessary in research "A Chicana feminist epistemology allows Chicana researchers and participants to utilize our multiple sources of knowledge to inform the research process-from the research questions we ask, the theoretical frameworks we use, the methodologies we employ, to how we write about our findings" (Perez Huber, 2009, p. 646). Using a Chicana feminist epistemology in education thus allows one to draw upon multiple locations of knowledge as well as experiences of the collaborators and researcher. Perez Huber (2009) explains that by using *testimonio* as methodology in Latina/o Critical Race research in education provides a direct challenge to dominant ideologies such as meritocracy, individualism and color blindness. The uses of dominant ideologies in education have continued to oppress students of color, "Additionally, *testimonio* can contribute to the growing scholarship on critical race methodologies which seeks to disrupt the apartheid of knowledge in academia, moving toward educational research guided by racial and social justice for Communities of Color" (Perez Huber, 2009, p. 640). One way to challenge these dominant ways of "doing" research is to incorporate new methods. By using *testimonios*, Perez Huber notes that a person has the urgency to voice injustice through their story. She states,*"Testimonios* are usually guided by the will of the narrator to tell events as she sees significant, and is often an expression of a collective experience, rather than an individual" (Perez Huber, 2009, p. 644).

I have learned that *testimonio* consists of seeking narratives that uncover deeper

understandings of experiences in people's lives and recognizing that those experiences are not isolated, but rather impacted by social, political and economic forces in societies. For these reasons, I sought to learn from the students who participated in this study in a way that brings me closer to knowing and understanding even my own experiences to better understand theirs. While a dissertation or research may not be traditionally called a "creative" act, it is. In addition it is also a spiritual one. I also believe that research can be a way of knowing and learning how to reclaim a collective humanity through *conocimiento* by utilizing *testimonio* as method.

In my undergraduate years at Riverside Community College to UC Santa Cruz, I was exposed to Freire, Anzaldúa and many other scholars/texts in Latin American studies. I developed my senior thesis at UCSC using *testimonio* as method primarily by using oral history methods I learned from a class with a Chicana historian professor and applying them to education along with my own knowledge of being a transfer student. This knowledge I brought, I didn't know at the time, draws upon what Delgado Bernal (1998) called cultural intuition. I began speaking with Latina/o California Community College transfer students who shared their stories about their educational journeys and how they came to be students at UC Santa Cruz. I combined the knowledge I gained from conducting my final project in Professor Arredondo's course with what I had gained as a mentee of Professor Daniel Solórzano's at UCLA during the Summer Program for Undergraduate Research (SPUR) in 2006 where I learned about community college issues, policy, CRT and LatCrit.

In order to learn more about *testimonio*, for the past five years, I have been presenting at conferences by writing my own *testimonios* about myself and sharing them

publicly as research at *El Mundo Zurdo*, which is an annual meeting for members of the Society for the Study of Gloria Anzaldúa. If I am to ask students in my research to share these deep and personal aspects of their lives, I knew that I must be willing to look at my own experiences, put them into context and seek a better understanding of my place in the world as well.

Research Design

In this section I explain my research design beginning with the recruitment and selection of participants. I provide charts in this section with select characteristics of the students and their family backgrounds. Next, I explain the use of *testimonio* for this particular study. Lastly, I conclude this section by describing my data analysis.

Recruitment and Selection of Participants

My study centers on the experiences of current Latina/o community college students in Washington State. I began recruiting students at the end of May 2014 and continued through of August 2014. I reached out to existing contacts I had made at different community colleges and sent emails to these individuals. Contact with the participants was mainly facilitated through word of mouth and email exchanges with people I knew from established networks. I selected participants for this study by using the following criteria. The participants had to be students who had been enrolled in community college at least a year. The time enrolled in community college included non-consecutive time in school which would allow for breaks in attendance. I established these requirements for participants so that they could have more experiences to reflect on while also providing for participants to take a number of courses and experiencing their campus or campuses for a period of time. This was especially important for students who

came directly from high school to a community college because I wanted to make sure they had enough time in a community college to reflect on their experiences. I did not seek participation from students that had been in community college for less time than a year and any student who was a participant in Running Start because students from Running Start are in high school and many are taking these courses to be ahead when they begin a four-year university. I met all student participants at mutually agreed upon locations that they identified as suitable for their comfort level. I would then take time to explain the study. In addition, in order to participate in this research project, the students had to broadly identify as Latina/o and be current community college students in Washington State at the time that they shared their *testimonio*.

From June 2014-October 2014, I heard and collected the *testimonios* of fourteen Latina/o community college students in Washington State. The average length of the *testimonios* was one hour. Some *testimonios* extended to an hour and a half and one was nearly two hours in length. The reasons that their *testimonios* lengths varied is that some students felt more comfortable sharing more details that led some students to expand upon certain questions in my research protocol more so than other students (See Appendix A: Protocol *Testimonio* Sample Questions).

After recording *testimonios* from students, I transcribed all fourteen *testimonios* using transcription software, Express Scribe. While I transcribed the *testimonios* I also wrote memos in order to triangulate the data. These memos were used to draw out major themes in the *testimonios*. Transcriptions of these *testimonios* were completed in December of 2014. During the time I transcribed the interviews, I also began initial analysis using Dedoose, an online mixed methods analysis program. I began coding for

themes and let my research questions guide my analysis. Using the memos I drew out the major themes. By using Dedoose I was able to make subcategories and organize them under these major themes. I then went back to sort them by my research questions. This is also when I decided to include their written *testimonios* as a supplement to the last research question on achievement and success. So from the *testimonios*, both written and oral as well as my own analysis from the memos and Dedoose, I was able to do an in-depth analysis of my data.

I reached out to the students every month to keep them updated on my progress. I also requested a written *testimonio* from the participants, using a prompt that asked them to share an additional story about achievement and success in their lives to which only four students responded. I use the written accounts as a supplement in chapter six because these brief written *testimonios* were not enough data to stand alone as a separate data set. As an incentive for students sharing their time, I offered a small amount of compensation of ten dollars for their time. Many students would not accept this compensation although the letter said they would be compensated. In addition in my recruitment letter, I offered all students an equal exchange of time where I could assist and/or support them in their educational endeavors. For every minute they provided me, I owed them the same amount of time in assistance and support. As a result, I reviewed essays for students, college applications, assisted students in applying for financial aid, had coffee with some students, and developed friendship and mentoring relationships.

Structure of *testimonios*

Perez Huber (2009) states that there is no one-way to use *testimonio* as method and agrees that she doesn't think there should be. I also agree that there is no one-way or

right way, because depending on the researcher and project; different uses of the method could be called for based on the researchers positionality. I also do not believe that a tradition that is rooted in Latin American struggles for social justice and change and has been used as a way for the oppressed and/or marginalized people to have their voices heard should be solely used or defined by so-called "experts" or "researchers' in academia. This defeats the purpose to me of seeing how our own lives hold knowledge. Putting it up to an outside opinion leaves room to invalidate lived experiences. I do believe processes should be defined though for how a researcher comes to using it in academia now because we are in the position of power to claim something for our own that doesn't belong to only us. For the purposes of my study, I drew upon my own lived experiences using Delgado Bernal's concept of cultural intuition (Delgado Bernal, 1998). I also looked back to my previous work where I used *testimonio* in Latin American studies and oral history courses in addition to drawing upon my interdisciplinary background in Sociology, Ethnic Studies, Feminist Studies and the Humanities. I also drew from my background in Education to formulate my research protocols. The Latina Feminist Group (2001) utilized *testimonio* to explain knowledge and theory based on their own experiences. Villenas et al. (2006) explain that Latina educators/researchers must develop our own ways of doing research in order to explain how we experience educational institutions, share our methods of survival and beyond. Along with centering marginalized voices in our work, we should also be critical. For me this centering of student voices and lived experiences of those currently in community college requires redefining and expanding upon definitions of achievement and success.

In this study, *testimonio* serves as a tool to seek a critical understanding of

specific issues at a particular point in community college students' academic and life journeys. I wanted to know how participants saw themselves and their impression of what shaped their academic and personal experiences. In addition, this work is guided by Chicana/Latina Feminist Theory, CRT, and LatCrit. These approaches recognize the significance of various aspects of identity, including the intersections of race, class, gender, language and immigration status in students' lives and how these factors have impacted their educational experiences and goals. In privileging the voice of the students, the findings are derived from the educational and life experiences of current Latina/o community college students.

The *testimonios* in this research are framed by questions, but there was space during the time the students shared with me to dialogue and add anything they felt was important for me to know about their experiences. All *testimonios* with students generally followed the same protocols. The protocol (See Appendix A: *Testimonio* Sample Questions) included questions that focused mainly on U.S. based schooling experiences. I then had to make a couple of modifications to protocols early on to account for pre-college experiences that were not based in the U.S. These modifications were allowed and approved under my classification with Human Subjects as an Exempt research project as long as I stayed true to the original intention and research questions I had in the research project. This was problematic for me to see my error because I want the work I do in the academy to value lived experiences, meaning people's lives, especially those voices that have been marginalized in higher education. My views on education, I realize now, have largely been shaped by my own formal schooling experiences in graduate school. The use of *testimonio* as method and research status, however, allowed me the

flexibility to be able to self reflect on my own views and how perhaps they have been shaped and informed since community college to now. I have felt out of place in graduate school, but I also accepted the idea that certain students were the norm, while I was not. The Latina/o community college students in this dissertation who shared their lives reminded me of the people I knew going to community college and the diversity of experiences both we the students who participated in my research and my peers/friends from community college had. After I interviewed the one student who had an immigrant experience and who was also the oldest student to participate in the research project, his story reminded me of the diversity of people I knew in community college and reminded me of how impactful my own experiences were. I then made sure I looked at the questions I had and adjusted them because his story did not fit under what I asked since his pre-community college schooling had been in Mexico and also included him attending a university in Mexico.

In the protocol I also asked questions about the student's background, families, early childhood experiences and experiences in school at all levels until the present. The questions focused heavily on their precollege experiences as well as current experiences as community college students. The last set of questions focused on the student's definitions of achievement and success and how they defined achievement and success in their own lives.

Coding & Analysis

All *testimonios* were digitally audio recorded and transcribed beginning in August 2014 and concluding in December 2014. Utilizing a process of interpretation (Saldaña , 2013), I analyzed and identified themes by organizing them around the original research

questions of this dissertation so that each question would eventually form it's own chapter that I could organize based on sub-topics. Along with wanting to answer each research question individually, the key for my analysis was also seeing the ways in which there was overlap between all three questions and then separating them in order to provide a rich analysis. Making these connections was essential, but I had to begin with taking each research question one at a time before I could see how pre-college experiences, for example impacted a students path in community college and therefore how they also saw achievement and success at this point in their lived and educational journey.

I listened to the students' *testimonios* at least three times, once while they shared them, the second time as I listened to *testimonio* to transcribe, and the third time as I went through my process of analyzing the *testimonios*. As I began to code for themes, I wrote analytic memos. Saldaña (2013) sees memos as useful tools for analysis in qualitative research. According to Saldaña (2013) memos are useful because as a researcher writes them, they can also reflect on their own position as a researcher to draw connections and humanize the research process. Saldaña (2013) states, "Reflect on and write about how you personally relate to the participants or phenomenon. Establish connections between yourself and the social world you are studying. Sympathize and empathize with the participants' actions to understand their perspectives and worldviews. In what ways are you similar to them?" (Saldaña, 2013, p. 43). Memos traditionally have been used in grounded theory and were the first systematic way to code qualitative research. (Saldaña, 2013).

I used the online program Dedoose to assist me in this process. I uploaded the

memos on each student and each transcription from each student and began to code for themes. I pulled quotes and passages that would fit under a particular code. I identified particular themes through this and I grouped these codes accordingly. For the community college experiences for example, I created a code for "support" and then was able to break down the type of support the students identified they had or needed. Thus, personal and academic support became sub-topics under "support". Under "personal" and "academic" more sub-topics were developed. "Support" included family, peers and personal level mentors. Academic support included programs at their schools, counselors and professors.

There are different ways to code, but the best way to describe my process was the use of hybrid coding. Given that I used multiple theories to inform my methods and that *testimonio* has intersectional roots, hybrid coding or combining different coding methods seemed the most appropriate for my analysis. For example, the coding methods I used in my first cycle are descriptive, in vivo, and values coding. In my analysis I coded what the students were describing in the first cycle. Then I looked at what the words meant. Values coding is helpful because it allows one to see what is important to a student. The reasons I selected these coding methods is because of my research questions ask personal questions about both their educational and lived experiences and ask students to describe what is important to them in their lives as a whole. Saldaña (2013) states the coding methods chosen as appropriate for a research study should align with the research questions and because my questions seek to understand the nature of students lived experiences as well as address theories of knowing and understanding I had to use multiple coding methods (Saldaña, 2013).

As themes emerged from the codes, I placed them into categories and moved to what is called "theming the data." I also collected written *testimonios* from four of the fourteen students who shared an additional story about achievement and success in their lives. Although the original intention was to have fourteen stories, one from every student, representing all fourteen stories was not possible. I used *testimonio* as my primary data and the four additional written stories were used to add more detail to understand achievement and success. The four written testimonios were helpful though because it allowed the student to reflect on their own time outside of the time they shared their *testimonio* in person on the short prompt they could do when they felt comfortable (Appendix B).

The fourteen *testimonios,* when analyzed, prioritizes the themes that emerged from the stories, in alignment with my theory and use of Chicana Feminist Epistemology (Chicana FE). Delgado (2002) writes, "Therefore, adopting a Chicana feminist epistemology, will expose human relationships and experiences that are not visible from a Eurocentric epistemological orientation. Within this framework, Chicanas and Chicanos become agents of knowledge who participate in intellectual discourse that links experience research, community and social change" (Delgado Bernal, 2002, p. 113). For example students shared how they experienced "challenges" in their academic and personal experiences. Students opened up and shared personal family stories and stories of violence and trauma that often are not heard or seen in education literature, at least not in detail. These challenges are part of human experiences that are normalized or dismissed in our society that places an emphasis on meritocracy and individual drive as opposed to looking at the ways in which oppression is embedded in systems and impacts

students lives and ability to be well and reach educational goals.

I also analyzed the *testimonios* by centering the concept of cultural intuition I previously mentioned in this chapter when discussing Chicana FE. Cultural intuition can be informed by personal experiences, existing literature, professional experience, and the ways in which we approach the research process. Cultural intuition is informed by collective experience, community memory, and by research participants having a voice in the analysis of data (Delgado Bernal, 1998). To this extent, I kept consistent contact with most of the fourteen participants of this study through email, phone and in person interactions and send them monthly updates on the progress of the research. For example, one of the students contacted me to talk to me more about how the experiences of growing up as a daughter of an undocumented single mother has impacted their trajectory in school. It made me see how there was more than one student who had this experience in this study and there is systemic inequality that their mothers face in not being able to access basic resources and services due to their immigration status or how services or resources are often only advertised in English. Thus children of single mothers and particularly children of single undocumented mothers, face additional barriers in attending school such as more pressure to support their families in various ways including financially. While I had seen there was more than one student with this experience, even if it was just one student, the student reminded me to look at the ways in which the issue is larger than their experience but is a result of a system that places values on people and oppresses through laws and policies, continuing to uphold and reinforce inequities that ultimately impact students pursuing higher education.

Looking at the first research question on pre-college experiences was essential to

understand how the students became community college students, but also to understand the experiences that shaped their ideas on education in their earlier years. The second research question allowed me to see how their community college experiences were unfolding and to better understand their aspirations for the future. The third and final research question focused on understanding the participants' ideas about achievement and success as informed by their academic and personal experiences. In doing research on Latina/o community college students experiences, I also wanted to know if the students experienced any "cooling out" According to Clark (1960), "cooling out" is the process in which a student is re-directed from their original goal in attending a community college to one that a counselor or other administrator deems more of a fit for them. In doing this research, I also wondered if I would hear from any undocumented Latina/o community college students. I wondered what specific challenges they might face in pursuing higher education and how these challenges differed from other Latina/o students. I also wanted to hear what other challenges the students faced in their personal lives that impacted or inspired their academic trajectory.

Although I began initial analysis while transcribing, the layered approached I took began when all transcriptions were complete in December 2014 and continued until February 2015. I first wrote memos on each student to capture a snapshot of each student's background and early childhood experiences. I then coded for themes after printing out all memos and transcripts from the *testimonios*. I utilized an online program for qualitative research organization called Dedoose to assist me in coding as well. Before I get into answering the research questions in the following chapters, I will introduce the fourteen students who shared their *testimonios*.

The Participants: Introduction to the Fourteen Latina/o Community College Students in Washington State. I was honored to meet each of the fourteen students that shared their *testimonios*. Some of the students I knew from years ago, some of them I met through mutual contacts. Other students I had never met before and responded to the call for research participants from emails that I sent through existing contacts at their college campuses. Each student was unique and they all reminded me that we all have something to learn from one another. As agreed upon in my human subjects application and consent letters, all names of the students and of their community colleges are pseudonyms. The students are introduced below in no particular order.

Student # 1: Ximena, Cedar Community College.

Ximena is 19 years old and was born in Edmonds but grew up in the Lynnwood area of Washington State. Her family is from Michoacán, Mexico. Her mother completed middle school and her father completed elementary school. Her mother cleans houses. Ximena was raised by her mother and knows little about her father. She is not the first in her family to attend college. Her brother attends Cedar Community College as well. In school she qualified for free and reduced lunch, which is an indication of a low-income household Ximena currently works at Cedar Community College. She identifies as Latina.

Student # 2: Jennifer, Cedar Community College

Jennifer is 21 years old and was born in Distrito Federal (D.F.), Mexico. She grew up in California. Her parents were both formally educated to a college level in Mexico. Her mother was a chemist in Mexico and now works cleaning houses and selling Mary Kay cosmetics. Her father was going to college as well in Mexico, but dropped out when

Jennifer's mother became pregnant. Her father now does floor installation. Jennifer works by helping her father do floor installation to pay for her schooling. She is an undocumented student. Jennifer identifies as Latina and Chicana because she only lived in Mexico for a year before her family immigrated to the United States.

Student # 3: Cecilia, Cedar Community College

Cecilia is 29 years old. She was born in Cuernavaca, Morelos, Mexico. Her family is also from Morelos. Her father is a lawyer and her mother studied at a technical school. Cecilia immigrated to the United States almost four years ago and was undocumented. She got married in New York and moved to Washington State with her husband's family. She is now separated from her husband after being homeless and living in a domestic violence shelter. She currently works as a hostess full time at a Mexican restaurant. Cecilia went to school in Mexico, studying law at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Mexico (UNAM) in Mexico City despite her father's protests. She had to leave school after not having anyone to look over her son who was a toddler at the time. Her son lives in Mexico with her father and she hopes to bring him to the U.S. soon. Cecilia began her community college journey in the United States as an English as a Second Language program student.

Student # 4: Alexis, Cedar Community College

Alexis is 20 years old. She was born in West Covina, California and grew up in La Puente, California as well as Everett, Washington. Her family is from Mexico. Her father is from Michoacán and her mother is from Jalisco. Her father went to school until his freshman year of high school and her mother got through eighth grade. Alexis is currently a preschool teacher, but previously worked at Cedar Community College as the

Diversity Coordinator. Her father is the lead janitor for a fish company and her mother works for a laundry service. Alexis qualified for free and reduced lunch in school, demarcating her low-income status. She identifies as Chicana.

Student # 5: Luis, Pine Community College

Luis was born in Chiapas, Mexico and grew up in Tonalá, Chiapas, México. His family then moved to Mexico City and he stayed there until he was 22. Then he went to Guerrero and Michoacán before he came to the United States. Luis is 56 years old. His parents studied through elementary school and worked jobs cleaning motels and his dad as a delivery driver. In Mexico, Luis attended college and was involved in political movements. His involvement in political movements took priority in his life at the time so he did not finish college. He first attended school to be an electrical engineer. His siblings are formally educated in Mexico, one brother is a lawyer, a sister is a psychologist and his older brother is an engineer. Luis has two daughters and two sons and was married twice. He came to Pine Community College following an accident that left him unable to work and originally wanted to be retrained in a different field. Luis identifies as Mexican since he was born in Mexico.

Student # 6: Jessica, Pine Community College

Jessica is 20 years old, was born in California and was raised in Seattle. Her family is from Mexicali, Mexico. Her mom got a high school education and works as a nanny. She does not know what her father did since she was raised by her mother. She is the first in her family to attend college. Jessica says her family is low income and during her K-12 years qualified for free and reduced lunch. Jessica identifies as Chicana because she was born here in the U.S. and speaks both Spanish and English.

Student # 7: Nancy, Pine Community College

Nancy is 26 years old. She was born in Seattle, and grew up in White Center. Her parents are both from Zacatecas, Mexico. Her father graduated high school and her mother went to middle school. Her father is a retired construction worker and her mother is a housekeeper. During school in K-12 she qualified for reduced lunch. Currently, Nancy doesn't work and receives unemployment. She identifies as Chicana.

Student # 8: Miguel, Pine Community College

Miguel is 19 years old. He was born in Yakima, Washington and grew up in Seattle. His father is from Michoacán and his mother is from Guerrero. His mother made it through middle school and his father made it to fifth grade. When his parents came to the U.S. they both earned their GED's through Job Corps. Both his parents are disabled. His father was in a construction accident in 1994 and his mother was recently disabled from work as well. He describes his family income level as low and said he qualified for free and reduced lunch during his K-12 schooling. Miguel identifies as a "Native Mexican" because his father is indigenous.

Student # 9: Claudia, Pine Community College

Claudia is 19 years old and was born and raised in Seattle, Washington. Her mother is from Colombia and her father is from Jalisco, Mexico. Her parents never graduated from high school. Her mother cleans houses for a living. Claudia works at her school's cultural center. She identifies as Latina. During K-12 schooling she qualified for free and reduced lunch. Claudia identified a struggle going through middle school that deeply affected her life with the arrest, deportation and later murder of her father in Mexico.

Student # 10: Kelly, Spruce Community College

Kelly is 21 years old and was born in Yakima, Washington. She grew up in Seattle. Her family is from Mexico. She knows little about her father since her mother raised her alone. Her mother had formal schooling up until third grade and currently works cleaning houses. Kelly works in a retirement home assisting in general office duties. She says her income level is low and she qualified for free and reduced lunch while in K-12. Kelly identifies as Chicana because she is Mexican-American and knows she can't claim to be Mexican based on things her family has said about her being a "güera" from the North (United States).

Student # 11: Griselda, Spruce Community College

Griselda is 27 years old. She was born in Los Angeles, California and grew up in Seattle's Central District. Her family is from Sinaloa, Mexico. Her parents went to school up until middle school. Her mother currently works for a laundry factory and her father has his own business. Her mother used to be a housekeeper. She describes her family's income as low and qualified for free and reduced lunch while she was in K-12 schooling. Griselda is a single mother. She identifies as Chicana. She attended an alternative high school and graduated from there.

Student # 12: Gabriela, Fir Community College

Gabriela is 25 years old. She was born in Mexico and grew up in Louisiana. Her family is from Mexico. Her parents had no formal schooling. Currently Gabriela is a tax preparer. She is married and has one son. At the time she shared her *testimonio* she was expecting her second son. She is the first in her family to attend college and the first from her indigenous community to attend college. She identifies as Mexican, but she is also

indigenous because she is Purépecha and her first language is Purépecha. Currently, Gabriela is an undocumented student with papers pending for residency as a result of being a victim of a violent crime when a store that she worked at was burglarized. Being a victim of a violent crime qualified her to apply for a U-Visa, but even with this status, she cannot access financial aid until her application is approved completely. Gabriela began community college in the English as a Second Language Program.

Student # 13: Felicia, Fir Community College

Felicia is 29 years old. She was born in and grew up in Colombia. She came to the U.S. five years ago. Her mother is from Colombia and her step-father is from Peru. Her step-father (whom she calls her dad) has a welding company and her mother stays home. In Colombia, her mother was a dentist and her dad used to be a fisherman in Alaska. Felicia works at the transition center as a work-study student at Fir Community College. She describes her family as working class. She identifies as Colombian because "…that's where I am from and that's my culture, my family". Felicia also identifies as gay (lesbian). Felicia began community college in the English as Second Language Program.

Student # 14: Chris, Alder Community College

Chris is 27 years old. He was born in Mexicali, Baja California, Mexico and grew up in Olympia, Washington. His mother is from Mexicali as well and his step-father grew up in Olympia. His stepfather has a Bachelor's of Science in Civil Engineering. His mother earned an administrative degree in Mexico and currently works part time at a clothing store and stays home as a mom. Chris is a full time student and works at Alder Community College for the College Student Life office. He is a dad of twin boys that are three years old and is separated from the mother. Chris identifies as Mexican because he

was born in Mexico. He says his income level is at poverty level, but he lives with his family and thinks they are middle class. Chris did not go straight to his community college after high school and also participated in job and technical training programs before returning to school.

From these brief descriptions on each student, I wanted to demonstrate that while there are many similarities, there are also different struggles and challenges that they experienced depending on the student's family background, immigration status, identity, gender, sexuality and more. Their lives and identities are layered. Both their experiences and identities impacted the ways the students viewed and experienced their education from precollege until community college.

Table 1: Student Participants and Select Characteristics of their Background, Identity and Education.

Name	Family Background	Place of Birth/Immigration Status	Sex	Age	Class	Identity	Precollege Education	CC attended
Ximena	Raised by single mother who is undocumented; two siblings; first in family to go to college. Lives with her mother.	Born in Washington U.S. Citizen	F	19 years	Poor	Latina	U.S.	Cedar
Jennifer	Raised by two parents who were college educated in Mexico; came to the U.S. at age 1,	Born in D.F., Mexico/Undocumented	F	21 years	Working class	Chicana	U.S.	Cedar
Cecilia	Raised by a single mother; became a mother herself at the age of 16 in Mexico. Lives on her own. Son is in Mexico with her father.	Born in Cuernavaca, Morelos, Mexico Previously undocumented, now a U.S. resident	F	29 years	Poor	Mexican	Mexico	Cedar
Alexis	Raised by two parents who are from Mexico. Lives with parents.	Born in West Covina, CA U.S. Citizen	F	20 years	Working class	Chicana	U.S.	Cedar
Luis	Luis attended college in Mexico. Siblings formally educated in Mexico. Has two daughters and two sons.	Born in Chiapas, Mexico	M	59 years	Working class	Mexican	Mexico	Pine
Jessica	Raised by a single mother who is undocumented. First in family to attend college Lives with mother.	Born in California. U.S. Citizen	F	20 years	Poor	Chicana	U.S.	Pine
Nancy	Raised by both parents. Lives with parents.	Born in Seattle.	F	26	Poor	Chicana	U.S.	Pine

		U.S. Citizen		years				
Miguel	Raised by both parents. Parents earned GEDs. Lives with parents	Born in Yakima, WA U.S. Citizen	M	19 years	Poor	Indigenous Mexican	U.S.	Pine
Claudia	Mother is from Colombia. Father was from Mexico (deceased). Lives with her mom	Born in Seattle, WA U.S. Citizen	F	19 years	Poor	Latina	U.S.	Pine
Kelly	Raised by a single mother who is undocumented. Lives with a family member.	Born in Yakima, WA U.S. Citizen	F	21 years	Poor	Mexican-American	U.S.	Spruce
Griselda	Raised by a single mother. Now is a single mother herself. Lives with a family member.	Born in Los Angeles, CA U.S. Citizen	F	27 years	Poor	Chicana	U.S.	Spruce
Gabriela	Raised by both parents. Lives with her own family now, husband and children.	Born in Michoacán, Mexico Undocumented	F	25 years	Poor	Mexican	U.S. and Mexico	Fir
Felicia	Raised by her mother and step-father. Lives with them.	Born in Colombia U.S. resident	F	29	Working class	Colombian	Colombia	Fir
Chris	Raised by mother/stepfather in the U.S. Now has two young sons (twins). Lives with parents	Born in Mexicali, Mexico Raised in the U.S.	M	27 years	Poor	Mexican	U.S.	Alder

Next, in Chapter 4 I begin my findings chapters by first looking at the precollege experiences of the participants.

CHAPTER 4

Pre-College Experiences of Latina/o Community College Students

How do Latina/o community college student's pre-college experiences influence and shape their educational goals and how they experience community college? Are there specific courses or experiences that impact their trajectory before they enter and while they are students at a community college? Focusing on schooling experiences does not mean that I have left out their personal experiences; instead, their personal experiences are woven into the *testimonios* the students shared. I begin in a semi-chronological order starting with early schooling experiences in elementary school/middle school. Next, I discuss high school experiences and end with pre-community college schooling experiences to highlight the other schooling experiences Latina/o community colleges had prior to beginning community college in Washington State.

Early Schooling Experiences: Elementary and Middle School. When I originally did my research, I assumed a U.S. focused schooling experience. Thankfully, I adjusted my protocols slightly to accommodate for this discrepancy. It was important to learn about the participants early experiences in school and life to see how these experiences contributed to the pathway that led them to later attend a community college.

During the early years of schooling, many students described what it was like to learn English or be in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. Out of the fourteen students, four were in English as a Second Language courses during their time in Elementary School in the U.S., these students include Kelly (Spruce CC), Nancy (Pine CC), Griselda (Spruce CC) and Chris (Alder CC).

Two students moved from other states to Washington during elementary school

and described the transition. Chris explained that being in ESL as "isolating" because although his elementary school in Arizona was more than half Latina/o students, it was only he and one other student whose first language was not English. When he came to Washington, there was no ESL program so he ended up being integrated into an English only environment. Chris changed schools multiple times because his family moved often.

Griselda described being kept in ESL until second grade and having to repeat second grade twice after moving from LA to Seattle. She states:

> I repeated the second grade because in LA it was very Spanglish, the education and so I went to kindergarten and the first half of first grade in California. Then when I started here the second part of first grade I was in second grade they told me I had to be held back because of my English. And that's something I was kind of like confused. Like I'm not dumb I just don't speak your language… (Griselda, personal interview, May 28, 2014).

It wasn't that she wasn't capable of learning; it was just that the material was being taught in a language that she didn't understand and without the support needed to assist her in the process of learning a second language.

Nancy describes her elementary ESL experience in the Seattle area as unsupportive.

> I think it was like 94-95 they didn't have a really good ESL program where I went to school so they just threw me in class with a bunch of English speaking kids and I remember the teachers weren't very helpful. I kind of feel they were frustrated with me…I just don't think they were that helpful. I think I was failing a lot of my subjects, but they never stopped me to help me. They just kept pushing me

forward and it didn't help at all. (Nancy, personal interview, July 2, 2014).

In this passage Nancy described something that Griselda referenced earlier. Nancy found no support. Nancy implies that she was just moved along despite the fact that she was failing. While in Griselda's case she was held back a grade, Nancy was pushed forward failing multiple subjects without support in helping her comprehend the material.

Four students, Luis (Pine CC), Cecilia (Cedar CC), Gabriela (Fir CC), and Felicia (Fir CC), were educated during their early years in Mexico and Colombia and described their elementary and middle school experiences based on an equivalent age range to elementary and middle school in the U.S. Luis recalls that he was an excellent student in elementary school in Mexico and that is what stood out the most. Felicia stated that she struggled in school in Colombia from an early age, "…I wasn't a good student at all. Actually I always failed in math and English". (Felicia, personal interview, July 31, 2014).

Cecilia, who was educated in Mexico, spoke to a painful memory that has stayed with her since elementary school. She stated:

> You know what you meet a lot of people friends, good friends, but something that marked my life was kind of painful. I was in fourth grade I was like ten years old and something I mean even almost twenty years later, I can remember what a professor told me. She told me something like, 'Cecilia, in Mexico we dance for mother's day and stuff.' And she asked me about the glass because we were dancing with a glass on our heads. And she said, 'Cecilia, do you know where's your glass?' And I said, 'No, I don't know.' And something that was so painful to me was her answer, (the teacher said) 'You never know anything' (Cecilia,

> personal interview, October 17, 2014).

Cecilia recalled this painful experience with her eyes beginning to tear up saying years later she felt as if she wanted to cry. I asked her why she thought that this instructor treated her in that manner and Cecilia responded, "I don't know, but after that I learned if someone is mean to you, you don't need to take it personal" (Cecilia, personal interview, October 17, 2014).

Cecilia ended up excelling in her classes with that teacher and got first place in her group after the incident. She wanted to prove to the teacher that she did know something. This drive to continue on through life challenges and obstacles continues to motivate Cecilia to reach her life goals by continuing her higher education.

Gabriela, who went to school in elementary school in the United States and middle school in Mexico recalled the struggles of learning two different languages in each place since her first language was as she calls it a "dialect", Purépecha. On her experiences in elementary school in Louisiana she says,

> I remember when I got to school, first, I didn't know how to speak English and it was really challenging for me. I didn't know how to read. I didn't know my colors. I didn't know anything so it was kind of hard and I was always the one having more difficulties catching up with everyone because of my language and my parents didn't go to school so they couldn't help me with anything (Gabriela, personal interview, August 8, 2014).

Gabriela started middle school and said she was doing well in school, but then her family went back to Mexico where she had to attend middle school. She described the challenges of learning Spanish, because while living in the United States, all she knew

was her first language, Purépecha. She then learned English. She thought learning Spanish was similar to learning English and she had to start all over from basics. When she identified the most challenging parts of her experience in middle school in Mexico, she describes the bullying. She states:

> Another problem over there again was the bullying because I couldn't speak Spanish. They would be like you're Mexican and you don't know how to speak Spanish? It was like discrimination there because they discriminate a lot of indigenous people. And I knew how to speak dialect and they can tell if you're like from the city or you're from a native village. So they would be like, so why don't you speak dialect. And I would be like I know how to speak it, but I don't know as much as the people where I'm from speak it. I speak it with an accent. So there was a lot of bullying. That's one of the reasons I came back. I was like I can't be there anymore. My own people treat me bad (Gabriela, personal interview, August 8, 2014).

What Gabriela described happening in elementary school relates to issues of identity and language. What makes a person Mexican? Who can call themselves Mexican? What languages were being valued? In her response, Gabriela also touches on the ways in which indigenous people are discriminated against and how she experienced feelings of not belonging at a young age. Experiences with bullying led her to convince her parents to return to the U.S.

Felicia also describes early incidents of being bullied during elementary level education in Colombia, but she had a good friend helped her. Felicia recalled, "Well I remember that I had a best friend and I remember that some of my classmates were

making fun of me and I don't even remember the reasons why, but he was always helping me a lot with my classes and yeah I think that's the most thing I remember" (Felicia, personal interview, July 31, 2014).

The remaining six students were educated in the United States during elementary and middle school. Although they share some similarities in experiences, some experiences are different between them as some of them experienced ESL and some did not. Here, I highlight the stories of Jennifer (Cedar CC), Alexis (Cedar CC), Jessica (Pine CC), Miguel (Pine CC), Claudia (Pine CC) and Ximena (Cedar CC).

Jennifer considers herself Chicana, having grown up in the United States after arriving from Mexico when she was one year old. She remembers her parents always working throughout her childhood. In Los Angeles she had to do an afterschool program because her parents worked. According to Jennifer, the program was helpful because it was like an extension of school. She ended up being a part of drill team and later quit to pursue her love for playing soccer (Jennifer, personal interview, October 5, 2014).

Another student who was educated in California during her early years, Alexis, described how easy it was to speak Spanish and English. However, when she started to lose her Spanish, her parents did not allow her to speak English at home. When her family moved to Everett, she described feeling like she didn't fit in. She recalled her first day of middle school being a culture shock, coming from schools in California that were close to one hundred percent Latina/o to being a part of a small handful of Latina/os on her campus. Alexis stated, "I walked in and I expected to see a bunch of Hispanics everywhere and I'm just like where are they at? Seriously where are they at?! And I remember walking in seeing all these blonde people and I'm like what's going on? I felt

so out of place…" (Alexis, personal interview, October 5, 2014).

Later Alexis did find a group of Latina/os but most of them were involved in partying and gangs. According to Alexis, "They'd be skipping [school], going out drinking, smoking, eighth graders! No eighth graders should be doing that, but it was kind of an influence and the whole try to stay Hispanic and brown pride and all that stuff. I mean I like that part, cause they reminded me of home, but part of me knew it wasn't me…" (Alexis, personal interview, October 5, 2014).

The last four students attended elementary and middle school in the Seattle area. They described experiences learning English, bullying and similar to Alexis struggling to "fit in" socially and culturally. Jessica recalls struggling with learning after being tested and told she had a learning disability. She was often separated into groups and recalls this experience of feeling singled out. "I just remember I always struggled and teachers would sometimes put me aside because it would take me a while to understand things and that's really it" (Jessica, personal interview, July 11, 2014).

Jessica tested out of Special Education during high school, but said she didn't remember how she got put in there to begin with,

> I don't remember actually a lot of how it happened or how I got put into there, but I think it's just how elementary school works to where they test you and things like that and if you're able to do. Basically just test you at what kind of levels you're at in certain things. And I think that's kind of where I got placed into those types of classes (Jessica, personal interview, July 11, 2014).

Miguel talks about elementary school and being bullied. Most of the time, the bullying came from other "Hispanics." He later went through puberty and grew to be

bigger than the other boys who would pick on him so he started fighting back. Miguel recalled:

> From K through elementary school I just remember, I mean reading was fun and all but the experiences like getting bullied, having to watch out, having to not only take care of myself, but also my brother. Watching out that's one of the experiences that stays with you no matter what. The whole [time] watching your back, keeping your back to a wall, watching around that's something that sticks with you even now (Miguel, personal interview, July 14, 2014).

When Miguel described why he thought other Latinos picked on him, he stated that it was because he didn't know the games as a little kid. He felt like he was socially awkward because he was forced to work from a young age. He entered middle school and described it as being calmer, but there were still fights and students carrying weapons. During middle school, because Miguel had outgrown the other boys, the bullying lessened. The end of the constant bullying allowed him to focus on school and learning, which he described as being fun, "We learned. My teachers were great" (Miguel, personal interview, July 14, 2014).

Claudia attended a majority white elementary school in Seattle where she felt like she didn't fit in socially with other Latina/os and ended up making friends with mainly African Americans. Then when she went to middle school. She found herself for the first time surrounded by other Mexicans and described being around them as being "home". Claudia recalled, "…I wouldn't talk to them because I didn't know how to really interact with them [Mexican students] but I'd always stand with them and like, 'Oh, this is my group, this is who I belong with'" (Claudia, personal interview, July 18, 2014).

Ximena was one of few students who shared a positive experience during elementary school. Here she describes how her math teacher made an impact on her life. She states:

> Once I enrolled in his class it was by choice because I remember in sixth grade you got to pick your own teacher. So I picked him because he was especially good in math. So I wanted to better my skills in math and ever since then he's just been really positive in the things I do. Really supportive, so it's nice to go back and talk to him (Ximena, personal interview, October 10, 2014).

Although Ximena had a positive experience in elementary school, she also remembered the struggle to fit in and how there was no support for Latino students during middle school. She then turned to skipping school and "hanging out" thinking it didn't matter if she messed up in middle school because it was high school that counted. She recalled:

> Sometimes I didn't go to class. Sometimes I just didn't do homework and you know I didn't try hard. So once I got to high school, because someone told me in my middle school that it didn't really count, that it was just high school years. So I mean that I got in the habit of thinking that it doesn't matter if I'm mess up because it's not going to count. But what I didn't think was you know if I'm messing up now I'm not going to be ready for high school. So I realized that once I got into high school (Ximena, personal interview, October 10, 2014).

Ximena described her earlier schooling experiences realizing that all they did connect and impacted where she would ultimately go after high school. They were building off of each other to prepare her for high school. The pathway she was leading would eventually lead to college and thankfully she saw that in middle school. Often times many Latina/o

community college students did not see the connections from pre-college experiences or believed it was too late, however, community college opened the possibility that pursuing an education was never too late to continue.

High School in the U.S.

The Latina/o students in this study also shared their overall experiences in high school. This included experiences in courses, involvement inside and outside of school, family responsibilities and expectations from teachers and counselors. Some students were pushed into alternative education schools and had to deal with difficult life challenges. All of these experiences shaped their pathway into beginning their higher education at a community college.

Eleven students attended high school in the U.S. at some point. These are the students that are included in this portion of the findings Three students ended up being pushed out of high school and completing their education either by earning their GED or by graduating from an alternative high school. Four students were in AP/Honors courses. These students described that their pre-college experiences in high school were influenced by a number of factors including family responsibilities, expectations and challenges in their lives. The students also identified support from many people in their lives during high school. This included family, teachers and counselors. Student credited these people with planting the seed about attending college.

Jessica (Pine CC), a Chicana, experienced troubles early on during high school, but turned had a transformation when she became a leader in a cultural club at her high school. She remembered her first year skipping classes a lot. She recalled, “High school? I honestly don’t remember a lot. It was hard because freshmen year I actually barely went

to school. I would skip a lot with my friends and go hang out and things like that" (Jessica, personal interview, July 11, 2014). Although Jessica wasn't sent to an alternative school, she ended up having to go to summer classes to do the PASS program to catch up academically so that she could graduate high school. Later in high school she helped start the "Latino club" at the end of her freshmen year after teachers and counselors warned her and her friends they wouldn't graduate if they didn't get their act together. She thought it was important for Latina/os to have a space at her high school. She stated:

> My best friend and I actually started a new club, a club at our high school called Latino club and we did that our freshman year and I feel like that brought a whole bunch of Latinos and Latinas to have a space, have our space to actually talk to each other and talk about what's going on around us and in our community and in school. And that's kind of like where I was in high school and what helped me a lot (Jessica, personal interview, July 11, 2014).

Claudia (Pine CC), a Latina, described troubles during school mainly stemming from issues around the murder of her father when she was in middle school. Claudia recalled:

> I became an alcoholic and I started freshman year and I was in the drug thing doing everything. Like the third day of school I was drinking and got pulled over with my friend. Well she got pulled over so I was really stuck in that whole mess, like I was a really lost child. And then I think after sophomore year you know I met my boyfriend but he was my friend at the time. And you know he talked to me a lot and he'd tell me how bad it was to smoke. How bad it was to drink and

> would say there's more to life than that. And so I just it kind of inspired me to do more for myself and see that I can't just get stuck in this bubble of depression and stay down. I have to move forward for myself and for my dad that's what he would've wanted me to do (Claudia, personal interview, July 18, 2014).

Claudia then described how she went on to see therapists at her school and eventually recalled the point where education led to some form of transformation in her life. She made up the credits she was missing and went to a summer program to earn her CNA license before she graduated high school. She credits her counselor with helping her make this transformation. Claudia recalled:

> …we would talk about everything, like everything and she'd tell me how strong I was for, cause she talked me from freshmen year to senior year so she knew. She saw all my growth and she actually helped me graduate on time because I was so behind on credits that I think I needed to make up like ten of them and it was going to be impossible to do that. She hooked me up with this summer program that was for me to get my CNA license and I was one of the best in the class. I got a 3.8 and this is a college course and I out of all the students only three people passed their actual test including me. Like she was really impressed I did really good right there and ever since then I started doing really good in actual school (Claudia, personal interview, July 18, 2014).

Claudia's *testimonio* is a unique example of overcoming many personal challenges and using school as a way to transform her life by realizing her [academic] potential and working towards building a skills and a career in the health field. Claudia also provides an example of the importance of having support, hers coming from her counselor that

played an important role to assist her in improving her health and academics.

Ximena's (Cedar CC) *testimonio* shared moments of a transformation in high school as well. While she was transitioning from middle school to high school she remembered failing classes. She identified that freshman year she was hanging out with many of the same friends she had before. It wasn't until her sophomore year when she met a social worker and became more involved in the community that her life changed. She stated:

> So my sophomore year I started talking more with the social worker. She told me she was seeing potential in me and because of that I started volunteering more with her and then I started getting involved in a club we had on campus, Colores Unidos. So when I first joined it was just, everybody was just hanging out, it was just a hang out after school and that pretty much sucked. And then junior year, I became vice president cause of the group of my friends I was the one saying hey let's do our homework or let's try you know actually getting good grades, trying to push everybody because it could've been easy for me to say, 'I'm going to do this por mi cuenta and just forget about them' (Ximena, personal interview, October 10, 2014).

Ximena went on to participate in statewide Latina/o leadership trainings and institutes in addition to becoming more involved in her high school campus. Although she credits the social worker for helping her get involved, she also credits her single mother for her constant involvement and as the reason for her doing better academically. Ximena recalled, "She was always butting into the things I was doing at school, making sure I was on top of my things. I really, now that I look back at it, I must, I really did get

frustrated during the time, but now I think about it like I'm thankful for her" (Ximena, personal interview, October 10, 2014).

Kelly (Spruce CC), the daughter of a single mother who cleaned houses said that during high school her role at home was that of a "housewife". Her involvement in school was limited as she had to be home to take care of her younger brothers. Kelly remembers that, "I definitely took care of my brothers. Like if I wasn't doing softball I had to come home straight after school, pick up my brothers from elementary from their school, go home, cook food for them, do homework with them. Like my stuff always came last. Their stuff always came first and my mom's stuff always came first" (Kelly, personal interview, June 6, 2014).

Despite the multiple responsibilities and roles Kelly held in her family, she excelled in her academics as best as she could. She credits Upward Bound, her history teacher and her mom, to a degree, for assisting her in getting through high school. It was also during this time that Kelly and I met. I worked for Upward Bound in the summer of 2009. In the interview, she mentioned that about the time we met I pushed her to go to college. When she talked about extracurricular activities she mentioned participating in the Seattle Young People's Project for a quarter and then doing "fandango" for a little while. The Seattle Fandango Project is a community-based son jarocho music group that holds weekly workshops. After I met Kelly, I tried to get her more involved in the community and prepared for college. Her mother was supportive of our interactions after we met and started to become a less strict in terms of what she demanded from her daughter.

When Kelly talked about the high school she attended she described a different

type of high school. She went to a school that was an academy. The school district split the high school into three smaller schools to combat violence and low graduation rates. There were many students of color and even though there was a focus on students going to college, at least in theory, she pointed out that hardly any students would go to college. Kelly recalled:

> There was ten Latino/Hispanic people that graduated with us out of 40 or 50 people that graduated from my class. And originally there was a lot more Latinos that started at the school and the majority of them ended up pregnant or they dropped out. And they just by I don't know how we all made it. It was really interesting to see how out of ten of us Latinos that graduated, I still keep in contact with them, only me. I think only three of us have continued to go with education (Kelly, personal interview, June 6, 2014).

In the passage above, Kelly alludes to the reality that many Latina/o students did not graduate from high school. At her high school, many of the Latinos that started as freshmen did not make it to high school graduation.

Chris (Alder CC) attended two different high schools. One he described as more traditional and the other was a new charter school where he applied for admission. When he described the difference at the traditional school and the types of support available to him, Chris stated:

> Yeah with the traditional school, I didn't know who my counselor was. I never saw them or spoke with them once. I wasn't aware that I even had a counselor because my resources, my access to people wasn't really like demonstrated or even reiterated to me. So, like you know, if people don't know what's available to

> them they don't use it or are aware so that was basically it. And for the most part my interactions with teachers in the traditional high school were kind of negative (Chris, personal interview, August 2, 2014).

Chris applied to the alternative school, which had a different method of teaching. Instead of grading, he described a go at your own pace approach to coursework, smaller classes and a more interactive teaching environment. This differed from what he described at the traditional high school in that the teachers and students seemed to be disconnected from each other. About the alternative school, Chris recalled:

> …I got average B's and got A's a lot of times, but so that experience, that transition was important I think. Having a more interactive learning helped me and that's what kind of got me to think of education differently, academically wise as well. And the traditional setting didn't work too well especially with all these social affects, learning all these cultural things and language (Chris, personal interview, August 2, 2014).

This transition to the new alternative high school was a critical turning point for Chris in deciding that he liked learning and school and would later pursue higher education.

AP Courses. Alexis (Cedar CC) and Jennifer (Cedar CC) discussed at length the coursework they took during high school. They attended the same school and were both enrolled in honors and AP coursework. During high school Jennifer was very involved in school and took many AP and honors courses. Jennifer recalled:

> High school, most of my classes were honors and AP classes. The only AP class I didn't want to take was the U.S. History one because I suck at history and I took European history for AP and I actually did ok in that class. I also did leadership. I

> did French for four years I had five math credits because I took algebra in middle school so credit wise I did five years of Math and what else? I took Biology, Earth and Space, I took Chemistry and I did acting. I did leadership and Math… (Jennifer, personal interview, October 5, 2014).

Jennifer credits her French teacher with helping her navigate high school because she couldn't rely on her family on support when it came to school. Jennifer states:

> And my French teacher she was kind of like my mentor in high school cause my parents what are they going to know about me taking credits and stuff like that? So like she was the one who helped me balance out getting involved in school with schoolwork because I took a lot of AP and honors classes and I did a lot of. I did soccer in high school. I did leadership, acting all that stuff so it got overwhelming, but she helped me balance it out and she helped me with college applications and stuff and yeah (Jennifer, personal interview, October 5, 2014).

Although Jennifer was eligible for entrance to a university while in high school, she couldn't go and did not apply because she was unsure of how to access resources as an undocumented student. When Jennifer sought assistance on a visit to a local university, she was turned away when she told them she didn't have a social security number. Jennifer states:

> So I really wanted to, but when I talked to admissions representatives like they would be like so what are your grades. What's this? And I guess they would like what I would tell them. But then when they would ask me about how I would pay for school like it's kind of like of never mind, because I don't have a social security number and they couldn't offer me any financial help or anything

(Jennifer, personal interview, October 5, 2014).

One of Jennifer's closest friends is Alexis. Alexis is a talented singer and performer. During high school she was the only Latina who made the Washington State Choir and was recruited by her dream music school, Julliard. She was involved in high school and took many honors and AP courses. When asked about her interactions with teachers and counselors in school she responded with a story about her chemistry teacher. She recalled:

> I'm the kind of person that if you give me a piece of paper and a book, I will analyze everything. I will understand everything. But if you try to talk to me in person and try to make me understand just by talking, I'm like what? Like can you please write that and he kind of like at moments, I felt like he bullied me. I get it I'm not the brightest cookie sometimes, but I can analyze anything better than you. Like can you please not be mean to me and it was kind of those moments he took me like I was stupid. Also cause we are female (Alexis, personal interview, October 5, 2014).

Alexis said that although her chemistry teacher was not helpful and often displayed sexist beliefs, she knew herself enough to know she needed a different learning style. But in some ways she internalized that maybe she was seen as being less intelligent because she's a woman. Her choir teacher and her history teacher would help her with school and those are the two teachers she felt were most supportive. She described her history teacher and the things she felt he valued from students, "He made us memorize the world. Like we had to draw the world by hand, by memory that was our final. I loved it. I'm pretty sure I didn't pass that part, but he still gave me an A. He knew. He actually

valued effort and he always taught me to pass everything, to analyze" (Alexis, personal interview, October 5, 2014).

Although Alexis was involved in choir and very talented, her mother did not want her to go straight to a music school. When music schools recruited her during high school, including her dream school of Julliard, Alexis didn't go to the audition because her mother urged her to find a foundation, or another career/field of study that she could fall back on instead of music if she was to go to college,

> My dream was to go to Julliard. I got recruited last minute I didn't end up going cause my mom was like you need a solid foundation. You know focus on, you know, something that you know will be for sure then you can go big cause you're not going to lose your voice. Hopefully so… (Alexis, personal interview, October 5, 2014).

Alexis regretted not trying to go to audition for music school because it was her dream. She recalled that, "Music was my life. It really was. I would wake up to music. Go to sleep to music. Performance after performance, competitions, award ceremonies, meeting big people in music. I mean I feel like I could've made it. But I don't know, sometimes it does hurt, knowing I could've made it into music…" (Alexis, personal interview, October 5, 2014).

Alexis made a decision to not pursue music based on her desire to make her family proud and not take for granted the sacrifices they made for her. Although she was conflicted, Alexis did agree with her mother that she should find another field of study and that perhaps the music would always be there. Alexis overall thinks she made a good decision and based it on her mother's desires wishes because her mother has made many

sacrifices for her. She wanted to show she was able to stand on her own two feet and in some ways thinks her mother was right to encourage her to go down another path.

Alternative Schooling Experiences. Three students in this study attended alternative schools, which differed from the schools that Chris and Kelly described. The students who attended continuation schools, earned a GED or did not finish in a traditional high school offer a different perspective on experiences in the pre-college years.

Griselda (Spruce CC) attended a continuation high school during her senior year of high school. She described her experience in a continuation school as being awesome and that the teachers understood where the youth were coming from. Two teachers in particular made a big impact on Griselda. From that experience, Griselda recalls:

> …They were two amazing souls, they really cared about the youth and they really cared about what was going on. More so than just academically but looking at your outside or your holistic life to understand, like, why are you in an alternative school? And why have you fallen through the cracks? This whole time and nobody noticed or cared and it's like they gave us a speech that was kind of encouraging us… (Griselda, personal interview, May 28, 2014).

In the passage above, Griselda discussed that she knew when teachers cared, especially in the continuation high school. She also mentioned that in traditional high school, the only class she really liked was her humanities course because it opened doors to learning more about her identity as a Chicana. Griselda stated:

> High school, my humanities class definitely stood out because it was like social studies and that's kind of how I learned about different cultures and focused a lot

> on that was actually the first time in that class I learned about the brown berets ever in high school. And I was kind of pissed about that because I was kind of like, oh my goodness, like my whole education in this system we were never taught Chicano history or Chicano studies. And it's not until I get to high school do I know that, I mean I had heard about the black panthers and such, but just barely and then for me to finally find out about the brown berets, it was enlightening, but it was also very infuriating in ways. But my humanities class definitely had an impact on me because it opened a lot of doors to my identity as a Chicana (Griselda, personal interview, May 28, 2014).

For Griselda, to learn more about her culture and identity was engaging and important for her. She also believed that this type of ethnic studies curriculum should be central in high school education because it was relevant to student's lives. To highlight this point, Griselda followed by stating, "Well now that I know about these things, I look back and I'm like what kind of education is this if it's all Eurocentric and focused on these, the suffering of the so-called pilgrims and such right? It's like, ok, what about us? So then thinking critically about my education it was really nothing, sadly".

Two students, Gabriela (Fir CC) and Nancy (Pine CC) did not complete high school. Instead they were pushed out and later earned a GED. In looking back on her high school years, Nancy reflected, "I wish I would've done a lot better. If I would've done better in high school I think my life would be a little different right now" (Nancy, personal interview, July 2, 2014). During high school Nancy would often skip classes and hang out with her friends. She described herself as a "party girl". She also did not remember taking a math class at all during high school. She stated, "I mean the

counselors were there to assign you classes, your schedule and I swear to god, I never had a math class in high school. That's strange now that I think about it" (Nancy, personal interview, July 2, 2014). In the end of her junior year, Nancy realized she wouldn't graduate so she earned her GED that summer. Although Nancy doesn't describe many positive experiences with high school, she did identify some caring teachers. Of those teachers, she recalled, "There was a couple teachers that I met that I just really like and I clicked with and I can tell they were concerned with me. It wasn't just like sit down and do your homework, they'll sit down ask you how are you? What's going on? I just felt they really cared" (Nancy, personal interview, July 2, 2014). One teacher in particular encouraged Nancy to go to college. She stated, "I think he was the one who put the thought in my head, my junior year and I was like I'm not even going to graduate high school, I never thought about going to college" (Nancy, personal interview, July 2, 2014). Nancy points out that caring teachers will also seek to know what is going on with a student personally. For students to do well in school it is important for them to know they are cared about and supported.

Gabriela mentioned previously that her family had left the U.S. to go back to Mexico and returned to the United States during her junior year of high school. Since her first language was Purépecha, she learned English when her family first immigrated to Louisiana during her elementary school years. However, her family returned to Mexico where Gabriela learned Spanish. When she returned to Washington State during high school, Gabriela had forgotten all the English she had learned early in the U.S. She was pushed out of high school right before her senior year was due to begin. She moved out with her boyfriend (now husband) and had her son. She told her parents she wanted to go

back to school. Another important aspect of Gabriela's experience was that she says in her culture, a woman is not supposed to step out of the bounds of what is traditionally done. With immigration to the U.S. of more people from her community she says people have developed the idea that women who pursue an education is not a positive thing to do. Gabriela stated:

> If you go and live with your boyfriend that's considered marriage. You're married and no way can you be going back to school, cause who knows what you'll be doing there. That kind of like at first, my parents didn't allow me to. I told my parents you know I need one more year and they were like you should've thought about it. I talked to my husband and he would be like, it's not me, I would let you, but my parents don't want to and it's more what your parents say (Gabriela, personal interview, August 8, 2014).

These family dynamics that Gabriela describes are different from Alexis because there is tension to do what is right in the eyes of the community. For Gabriela and her husband, who supports her going to school, they are seen as being wrong, but Gabriela continues to go to school anyway. Alexis on the other hand felt pressure, but more from her mother and not a larger community. These cases are different though because Alexis' mother still wanted her to go to college, while Gabriela's did not see the point of it since she is also undocumented. They worried how she would get a job to use the degree and often told Gabriela she was wasting her time. Gabriela ended up going back to get her GED later which helped her transition to college.

What can be seen from the student's *testimonios* about their high school experiences is that there were some differences between those who were preparing for

college and those who didn't at first, but almost everyone identified a caring person that helped plant the seed that they could go to college.

Parental support and encouragement remained important for many students during high school. The common experiences related to students' involvement in activities, clubs or cultural activities where they felt like they belonged and had support. As a result these students did better in school and overcame life challenges that they encountered along the way. Although I highlighted Alexis and Jennifer taking honors and AP courses, Chris also took an AP English course at his second high school. Claudia was not in honors or AP but had decided on her own that she wanted to apply to be in the International Baccalaureate (IB) Program at her school that would provide her with a more challenging learning environment that she desired.

From the diverse experiences of these Latina/o students, some commonalities and differences during their high school years can be observed. Across all of these students' *testimonios*, the students identified important transformational points in their education. In particular, these transformational points occurred in high school when students developed their identity and decided to make changes academically and personally in their lives. These academic and personal transformations later led them to enroll in a community college. In the next section, I look at the students who experienced education outside of the U.S. during their pre-college years and college in other countries.

Pre-Community College Schooling Outside of the U.S. Some students in this study spent their high school years in Mexico or Colombia. There were also students in who were college educated prior to beginning their community college journey in the United States. Luis (Pine CC) and Cecilia (Cedar CC) were educated in Mexico and

attended college there. Luis studied to be an engineer and Cecilia studied law for two years at UNAM. Felicia (Fir CC) had spent most of her life in Colombia and went through the *secundaría* (junior high and high school) there.

Luis, who was the oldest participant in the study at 56 years old, described how different the education system was in Mexico. He stated, "Well the education in Mexico is different because we only go here nine years and university we go there three years so after those nine years we can go to college and over here you have to finish twelve years to go to college so I don't know if we can compare them" (Luis, personal interview, July 1, 2014).

Luis remembers being a good student and always having done well in math courses, which led him to decide to study engineering in Mexico. He recalled, "I was good in math. I remember when I went to college I was studying electronic, and I loved electronic and I started doing better in English at that time. And I was doing math, but I had to work. And I was part of the political movement so I had to take a lot of time so I didn't finish" (Luis, personal interview, July 1, 2014). Here Luis was referencing being part of a collective house in Mexico where the tenants studied Marxism and labor organizing. Being engaged in ones community and working against injustice is essential. He described his college education in Mexico and his political organizing as two different kinds of education before he entered community college in the United States many years later. Luis' role as a student in these early experiences was where he learned to engage with others while working for social justice. These two realms for him could not be separated when he was younger and they aren't now. Luis is a student and an organizer and his commitment to supporting social justice causes as a community college student

continues today.

Cecilia went to the *secundaría* (junior high and high school) in Mexico where she grew up in Morelos. When she talked about subjects she enjoyed when she was younger, she spoke about loving math. Then she got pregnant when she was sixteen years old with her son and left school. Later, Cecilia decided to go back to school when her son was a year and a half old. Although she separated from the father of her son with the help of her dad she went back to school. She recalled:

> It was so difficult I couldn't make it, but I decided, I need to do it. My son was like one year, a year and a half because I got separated from his dad. And I told my dad, 'Please help me go back to school'. I got enrolled in a normal school. I was with kids that were like fifteen years old. I was like nineteen and they called me señora. This was so funny. They respect me. It was different, but really nice. And yeah I did three years over there and I got the first place. I had like ten. My grades were perfect. It was really cool. My son was at the daycare (Cecilia, personal interview, October 17, 2014).

Cecilia's father was a lawyer and she expressed that she wanted to go to *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Mexico* (UNAM) to study law. UNAM is the most prestigious and largest public university in Mexico. Prior to going to UNAM and before she had her son, Cecilia was accepted to a technical university in Monterrey while still attending *secundaría*. Her parents did not allow her to attend even though she was awarded a partial scholarship. She remembered going to the technical university in Monterrey when she was fifteen to do a campus visit. She visited alone and described her experience feeling unsupported by her parents. Cecilia stated:

> I saw all the people. All the kids with their parents having that support and I felt so bad. And even that and they offered me with my grades seventy percent off. It was a scholarship and when I went to my dad he said, 'No, no, no we can not give enough for that.' So that depressed me and was like painful. So I felt so bad and when I had, I even got an appointment to get my, to get through the process and my dad refused to go. I felt like he put me down. So yeah I lost an opportunity but I continued. I wanted something good. I didn't go to the university in my state. I went for the big, the UNAM. I said I would study and take the test and I got into the University (Cecilia, personal interview, October 17, 2014).

Although Cecilia's dad was a lawyer, he didn't support her decision to pursue college. Cecilia's mother was mainly out of the picture because her parents separated when she was young. The reason why Cecilia moved out of her mother's home and ended up with a boyfriend was because she was looking for support. Also, her mother got into a bad relationship and became an alcoholic. Cecilia stated, "It was really what I didn't want. I mean I don't regret it because I have a wonderful son. And he's my life, my motivation right now. But I think that's something that changed my life" (Cecilia, personal interview, October 17, 2014).

When Cecilia started to attend UNAM to study law, she left her son with her best friend and her family in Morelos. She woke up early to catch a bus that left at 6 am to another city and then make it to Mexico City. She only attended classes on the weekends. The reason why she had to stop attending UNAM was because her best friend's family experienced a death of a family member and she could no longer help Cecilia take care of her son. It was at this point that Cecilia decided to immigrate to the United States to

support her son and search for better opportunities.

Felicia grew up in Colombia. She remembered that in school she didn't do well particularly in Math and English. She described the difference between high school education in Colombia and the United States and the fact that there were no counselors or people who helped students plan a career path. Felicia recalled, "The teachers well we don't have the... In my country we don't have the opportunity to have advisers and all that kind of support. So it's basically you decide you career goals or your academic goals by your own. Or your parents or like you figure it out by yourself, but we don't have that support" (Felicia, personal interview, July 31, 2014).

The classes that Felicia remembered enjoying the most in high school were art classes and sports. English courses in Colombia were to give students a basic understanding of a foreign language. Felicia also recalled that many of activities in English classes were spent watching movies and doing summaries. The last math class Felicia took was pre-algebra and she remembered that she did not do well. It wasn't until Felicia came to the United States as an adult that she was encouraged to go to college classes after being in ESL at her current community college.

Pre-College Experiences in the U.S. Outside of High School. In addition to the three students who attended school and college in their home countries, a two other U.S. born students attended college during high school. Claudia was encouraged to do Running Start and she credits the program with helping her get on a good path. She earned her CNA certificate before she graduated high school. This proved to be helpful to her since she had experienced a lot of personal challenges early on in middle school with the death of her father and having the opportunity to do running start helped her graduate

high school on time and leave high school with a certificate that would allow her to work and continue to attend college.

Chris attended community college at various points in his life prior to attending the community college he is at now. Chris also did Job Corps, which is a federally funded job-training program. He describes job corps as a positive experience in high life where he learned vocational skills, but later returned to community college following the birth of his twin sons to pursue a transfer degree. These pre-college experiences outside of high school for both Claudia and Chris gave them the chance to learn skills that enabled them to get jobs and skills that they could utilize while pursuing transfer degrees.

Summary: Pre-Community College Experiences

In this chapter, I showed how students' pre-college experiences influenced and shaped their educational goals. From their academic and personal experiences, several transformational moments occurred. Some transformational moments dealt with family and personal experiences. The personal transformations that the students went through had an effect on their college trajectory.

When students described elementary and middle school experiences, the transformational moments they identified involved those difficult experiences where student's learned that their culture or language or who they are as humans are not valued in society due to race, language, or gender. We can see the examples with the students who spoke about their experiences in ESL classes. In many ways the students, Griselda and Chris resisted by identifying the tensions they experienced early on in ESL classes. Some students' like Miguel, described bullying they endured and how it impacted them in school. There were students who experienced being held back in school, like Griselda

and Nancy. Other students like Cecilia, Felicia, and Luis had to learn to navigate a new country and learning a new language. Many students identified simply not receiving the academic and personal support they needed to do well in school as a barrier to them.

During high school there were many moments of transformation that impacted the educational pathways each student took. Some of these transformational moments involved students struggling to fit in culturally and socially. Other transformational moments included: the quality of courses taken, involvement in school activities, teacher or counselor relationships, and specifically positive ones. Students also negotiated family responsibilities and expectations. Many students identified mentors that encouraged them to pursue academics. These same mentors also supported these students with personally challenges. These experiences with caring mentors during pre-college years represented positive transformational moments. In these experiences, the students felt that when they had people around them (family, mentors and others) who genuinely cared about them and their academic future, inspired and motivated them to transform.

In the next chapter, I examine the experiences of the participants of the study as community college students.

CHAPTER 5

Latina/o Students in Community Colleges: Academic and Personal Experiences

This chapter examines Latina/o student's experiences in their academic and personal lives while in community college through the *testimonios* of the fourteen students in the study. In the first section on academic experiences, I discuss the Compass Placement Test and how it affects a students' sense of academic potential before they even begin college. I then look at traditional versus non-traditional students and show how community colleges students are classified as non-traditional make up the majority of students in higher education. Those students who are typically classified as non-traditional within a community college are also broken down. This category typically refers to students who are in ELL, ABE, vocational, and technical programs. In the second section on personal experiences, I look at challenges that students have experienced while attending a community college. To end this chapter, I discuss the issues faced by undocumented students because their challenges to attend school are different mainly due to being unable to access basic support and services because of their status in the U.S. they are denied financial aid and access to opportunities. Support is also limited because undocumented students are careful as to whom they reveal their status to. Although the students' *testimonios* and words are weaved throughout, it was important to highlight the differences that undocumented students face when navigating community college.

Academic Experiences of Community College Students

In this section, I focus on the experiences of the fourteen Latina/o students in my study while they attended community college and how these experiences affected the ways in which students navigated through school. The Latina/o community college students first explained how they took circuitous routes to get to where they are in community college and how they made their way through community college to reach their goals. The route to achieve their goals begins with an entrance or "placement" exam that determines what classes a student will be able to take based on a set of questions that includes subjects such as English, math and reading comprehension. In Washington State the placement test is called Compass.

Compass. The Compass test is the entrance placement exam students take in Washington State before enrolling in community college that places them into courses depending on where they test. Potentially the Compass test could save a student time and money if a student places higher thus avoiding paying for remedial courses. Compass is a product of and was developed by American College Testing, inc. (ACT) to evaluate and place students into courses in community colleges. It is an adaptive test, meaning that questions will either become more challenging or easier depending on a student's response. To place in college level courses requires preparation from pre-college experiences, although some students stated that any student could study and re-take the test. More often than not a student may place into courses that are deemed "developmental" or below college level (Clark, 1960). When a student places below college level, it can take longer for a student to move towards the classes they need in English, Math and Reading. To highlight this section on Compass, I draw from the

experiences of five students, Kelly, Griselda, Claudia, Nancy, and Miguel to illustrate students' experiences and feelings about the Compass test. In particular the students explained feelings that they did not do as well as they thought they should, or that they left the test feeling that they were not "smart" enough for college level course because they had to begin in developmental courses. These courses often take more time and money for a student to reach their goals.

Kelly described her experience taking the Compass test as,

> So I took the Compass test after I graduated high school. I placed below math 98, which is the math level you need to get your AA. And I placed below English 101, which is really shocking because I passed all of my language arts and reading classes with A's. And like I'd get decent grades on my essays like A's and B's. So when I took the reading and writing Compass and saw that I placed under 101. And I was shocked and I mean I expected it from math, cause I'm not the best at math, but when I placed low in writing. I was like I'm not a good test taker as it was. My school was not big on tests. That's one thing I don't know how to take tests (Kelly, personal interview, June 6, 2014).

In this quote Kelly, reflected on how she was shocked that she did well in high school, which was a smaller school and how she believed that she would place at the college level in at least English because she earned above average grades in high school. She had already internalized the idea that she was not good at math, but then Kelly reflected on how her previous schooling did not prepare her to take these sorts of tests.

Another student, Griselda, who graduated from an continuation high school in Seattle, remembered that she took Compass following high school, but after a break in

college following a car accident that left her with a traumatic brain injury, she re-took Compass in 2011, she explained,

> I remember in 2007, I placed pretty like not way above average, but in a good place and then I went into English 101 and math and whatever. I got in all these college-level courses. But in 2011, I was kind of like dang, I'm dumb, it's like woah! People were like it's ok. You haven't been in school in so long. And I was like, 'No, don't try to make me feel better about myself, especially with math'. I placed low. I decided I started with one plus one and two plus two. And I was like oh my god this is so embarrassing pero whatever. And it worked out especially after my traumatic brain injury. My neurologists were like take it easy because you know your brain is still healing and all that stuff. So and then in English I placed in, whatever it was, under English 101. But I was like forget this and I was like I know I got this. And I was reading and writing and all this stuff is my life, so I did well (Griselda, personal interview, May 28, 2014).

In this passage, Griselda described how when she first took the Compass test she left with the feeling that she was "dumb". She also expressed the idea, similar to Kelly, that perhaps she was not good at math. However, she didn't feel that she should be in a basic math class either. These example shows that there is a discrepancy in the ways in which students perceive their academic ability and the ways in which the test measures this ability. Assessments say one thing about a student's performance on a standardized test, but students feel like they should do better because as their stories demonstrate perhaps these tests aren't the best way to measure their abilities or predictors to how they will do in community college courses.

Another student at a different community college, Claudia remembers taking the Compass test twice and preparing for the second test with workshops and practice tests. She recalled,

> So the first time I took it was when I was taking those two math classes at once. So I was really good at math, but really low at English and usually it's the other way around. So they told me take a few Compass test and workshops. And then I did, but I didn't take the Compass test again until a year later after. And then it was the opposite. Now, I was really low on math and really high on English so at least I was placed in an English class. But then like my math was low…(Claudia, personal interview, July 18, 2014).

Claudia believed that if she took the Compass again after studying that she would do better in both subjects, but she was surprised when she scored lower in math. She was surprised because she originally scored higher in math.

Nancy who earned her GED at age 16 and didn't return to college until her early 20s, described her Compass experience as one of disappointment in herself. She recalled,

> I took the Compass placement test the first time and I did awful. I wasn't able to take any of the college level classes and with the English classes I think I had to start at the beginning. Same thing with math and I was disappointed in myself. I wasn't too surprised because I did awful in high school so I mean I wasn't going to come here and score high or expect to score high (Nancy, personal interview, July 2, 2014).

Nancy took the test and left feeling badly about herself because she knew that she had to start community college courses from the beginning. She also felt that she had performed

better. Even then, Nancy wasn't surprised because she didn't do well in high school. She didn't expect to score high but in some ways she hoped that she could do better to escape the stigma of underperforming.

Miguel knew that he would be taking Compass to get into vocational and technical programs so he didn't really have expectations on the results but described how he felt physically after taking Compass. He explained,

> I don't remember how I placed, but I knew that when I, all I know is that after taking it, I felt really tired. I felt really exhausted because well for one, the computer screens are really old so they are really glaring. You can hear the whirring (how the computer sounded) and the fact that I was looking at a screen for at least two hours, I was kind of, that kind of drained me out so once they showed my results, I don't recall how I did. But I know I did well on the two, and any technical program they got here I can get in (Miguel, personal interview, July 14, 2014).

Perhaps sitting in front of a screen for two hours was not the best way to measure students' potential in community college. Miguel points to the way he physically felt, which was something other students didn't address. Miguel wasn't as concerned to place into higher levels of math or English, but was happy to be able to get into any technical program the school offered.

In short, the Compass placement test set the tone for how these students perceived their ability to do well in college. Students felt that before taking Compass they should have more preparation and also that pointed to the fact that sitting in front of a computer for two hours isn't good physically especially before taking a test that has the potential to

impact a students course of study in community college. What may be a new start for these students who have not done well academically during academically in their pre-college experiences is often limited by the placement test. Community Colleges are a new start to develop academically and if students have to be reminded of past performance in their pre-college years that wasn't positive, it impacts their mindset beginning college. Where students place on Compass could potentially impact the way in which they chose their future goals based on the courses they begin college with. In addition, the courses they place into could also impact students financially if they have to take more developmental courses in order to get to courses that count towards their certificate, degree, or transfer.

To summarize, the Compass test created anxiety and self doubt in these students' abilities to do well academically in college. For these students, the Compass reinforced negative ideas that these students developed about themselves earlier in their schooling. These included 'not being good at math' or feeling 'dumb.' Enrollment and assessment then can serve as obstacles/barriers for students who may have previously struggled academically or who have not traditionally scored high on standardized tests.

Views on Community College Courses. Students in this study described courses that they found challenging and courses they enjoyed. In particular students discussed their experiences with English and math courses as challenging. Sometimes with other courses, there wasn't a clear separation as some students found challenging courses enjoyable, especially when the instructor made the courses engaging and empowering.

The students in this study speak the fact they have developed the idea that college courses could be challenging (in a negative way) based on their past performance of

scores on the Compass. Here, I share the experiences of Cecilia, Jessica, Luis, Gabriela, and Jennifer, Kelly and Claudia because these students speak about their courses that are challenging, but in a good way. When courses and faculty challenge students in a way that supports them to do better academically and sets expectations as high, it encourages students to do better and helps them to think about themselves and their education in ways they didn't expect.

Cecilia is one of the few students who decided to pursue a course of study in a STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) field. While other students had internalized beliefs they were not good at math and others displayed an interest in math or science, they did not pursue these interests in community college. Cecilia described her experiences in her math and programming courses, "I love programming. My major is computer engineering. I love it. It's extremely challenging right now. I feel like I want to cry every time I have lab. It's something I enjoy." Although Cecilia was partially joking about crying in lab, she felt grateful to be in college as she discovered her passions through her coursework, "I want to finish as much as I can because I would love to get a minor in linguistics. And yeah, I think it is important having another language. I love computers, but I also discovered last quarter that I love designing, putting my hands on things and probably mechanical engineering won't be so bad" (Cecilia, personal interview, October 17, 2014).

Jessica, a student who struggled in her early years in special education classes and later transitioned/tested out during high school, shared how she felt some math courses were challenging, but that sometimes it depended on the teacher's engagement and

enthusiasm. When she had a positive experience with a math teacher, she surprised herself when she ended up liking math. She recalled,

> Since I started college, I feel like some of the math classes, believe it or not, were kind of enjoyable. It would kind of depend on how the teacher made them and I had a teacher for a while that she was great. She was amazing. She would help every student in their own way because we clearly learn in different ways and towards the end of certain math levels she would start making videos online. I feel like that helped a lot so at some aspect I like math, but then again when it's hard, it's really not good, but right now I like biology. I think it's really interesting (Jessica, personal interview, July 11, 2014).

Luis who was the oldest person in the study and an immigrant from Mexico had taken many courses during community college and shared that he liked most of his classes because he likes to learn. He stated, "I like knowledge. I like accounting. I like English. I like math. I like statistics. I like business and law. I think I did very good in and the teacher encouraged me to become a lawyer. She said I would be a very good lawyer, a good advocate for others" (Luis, personal interview, July 1, 2014).

Jennifer, an undocumented student who was eligible for a four-year university out of high school, surprised herself when she liked her physics course, much like Jessica discovered she found math "enjoyable." Here Jennifer describes her experiences in the classes she enjoyed. She stated,

> Well right now my favorite class is my physics class, which is kind of weird because I usually don't like science. But it's my favorite class right now and I really like that one. All the labs, all the interaction with everybody, it's pretty cool. I also really like

> my psychology class, which the teacher she's pretty cool. Yeah and then I have, I took this series of what are they called? They're kind of humanities credits and English credits, but the first one is series of three classes for the whole year. And the first one is English, Greek and Roman Mythology, the second is Medieval, the third one is modern European literature. So the same teacher throughout the whole year and she's amazing too (Jennifer, personal interview, October 5, 2014).

Kelly, who attended a smaller academy high school, described her experiences in anthropology as positive due to the way her teacher engaged with students. She stated,

> I really enjoyed anthropology because of the teacher. He was Saudi Arabian, but his way of teaching anthropology, I mean I don't know what to expect. I never took another anthropology class. I took biological anthropology with him and what I really liked was his way of teaching. He did offer quizzes but he's also offer essays we'd have to turn in each week. And his way of teaching biological anthropology wasn't all just science based. I mean, yeah he showed us the scientific part, and everything, but the last four weeks of the quarter were dedicated to apply how our biological, how we grew biologically affects us. How we are today and how he applied it in a way that would make you want to become like an activists or to make you aware or why we should care about what goes on. And I took cultural anthropology with him and it was the same concept. The way how we've developed, as a people culturally should be how we are today. How I think that's the class I've definitely learned and taken the most from. He got into your head. I mean at least I think he got into a lot of people's head in that class because his way of just presenting to you. Just speaking the facts it just made sense. So cultural anthropology and biological anthropology, I definitely

> enjoyed, which were classes I never thought I would (Kelly, personal interview, June 6, 2014).

Kelly demonstrates how it was not only the course content she was surprised by enjoying, but it was the teachers energy and enthusiasm for the subject and creating a classroom where she felt there were multiple options to demonstrate comprehension of the subject matter such as quizzes and essays.

Some students did not have positive experience in their courses. As Claudia talked about how she felt "stupid" for not understanding certain course materials. In particular, Claudia had negative experiences taking math courses, which led her to repeat a math class. Claudia recalled,

> So last quarter I failed my psychology class and it was because of attendance really. I was getting in trouble getting here on time for me. But now I feel like I'm taking, I'm retaking it online. And then I'm taking my math class and I think that was one of the hardest right now because like I had a mental breakdown like the night before my test cause I felt like I just wasn't getting it. And I just kept telling myself, 'I'm stupid' because I don't understand it you know. I felt like everyone else understands it and I felt bad like I didn't want to ask my boyfriend. He didn't go and kick it with his friends because I had homework to do. And I really wanted him to go out and have fun but really I did need help on my homework. But I just felt bad to ask him for help. Like I felt like he shouldn't have to you know. I should already understand this so it was really just me feeling like I couldn't catch on fast enough (Claudia, personal interview, July 18, 2014).

The students' experiences in college courses reflect diverse experiences. In some cases, students were surprised that they enjoyed classes they perceived as challenging. This impacted the ways in which they chose future courses, such as Kelly taking multiple classes with the same instructor. Her story shows that teaching methods and classroom environment matter. Math and Science courses were seen as being challenging, but when students such as Claudia, Kelly and Jennifer had professors who taught material in an engaging way and connected with the students, they felt better about their courses overall and tended to do better because they were engaged. While students like Claudia internalized feelings of "failure" that Cox (2011) discusses, Claudia also demonstrates that when a person feels supported in school, they will ask for help even if they have to go outside for the support. Her story shows why peer networks/support are important and critical because when the college or classroom does not provide this support, peer support is one that can keep a student from giving up.

Next, I discuss the experiences of students who are deemed non-traditional students because they enter community college through Adult Basic Education (ABE) and English as a Second Language (ESL) courses and programs.

The "Non-Traditional" Student as "Traditional". Typically, in higher education students who are enrolled in Adult Basic Education and English as a Second Language courses and programs are not viewed as "real" college students in community colleges and in higher education in general. This perception exists partly because many academic programs at community colleges are segregated.

This divide between students and their programs reinforces a hierarchy of programs and thus ranks the students in them. This segregation of programs is unequal because

certain programs receive more funding and support based on their prestige and not necessarily on the number of students in these programs. This unequal funding and opportunity is an internal caste system within higher education as a whole with community colleges and students being placed last. Within the community colleges though, there is another caste system that places hierarchy on certain programs that also exists. In society, hierarchy is based off of a perceived value or worth of people. Similarly, higher education places value on certain types of institutions and therefore the people that attend those institutions. Making distinctions between institutions represents a process of dehumanization because it places value on the people who attend them and assumptions about their academically abilities based on their identity as community college students. I often ask myself, how students recognize their humanity in spaces that dehumanize them? It is my belief that the process of humanizing can begin through *testimonio* and the sharing of stories.

While there were fourteen students in this study, the stories of Gabriela, Felicia, Cecilia, Luis and Miguel highlight the experiences of students who completed the GED and/or participate in ABE, ESL and Certificate or Vocational programs. According to Levin (2007), students participating in these programs make up the majority of students in higher education and community colleges. From their testimonios, I will show the ways that community college students navigate their higher education. I will also show that often times their pathway to their goal completion does not follow a narrowly defined pipeline that only recognizes college students as those who graduate high school and enter college directly after graduating from high school

Gabriela, a mother and wife, who is currently undocumented and grew up in a Purepecha community in the U.S. and Mexico, completed her GED after getting pushed out of high school. She described her experiences transitioning to "mainstream" college classes out of Adult Basic Education. She stated,

> Well they would always be saying you know what you're doing. You have to stop thinking you're not ready cause you are and then I would be like, I just feel like I'm not. They kind of pushed me. Just go, you're ready. Then the first classes that I took the first quarter. The first two quarters that I started taking the college classes I was like this is not for me. I'm not smart enough you know because I would be the only one raising their hand. The only one with questions and sometimes I wouldn't understand the vocabulary that they spoke and I would see everyone just writing their notes. And I wouldn't know how to write it in my own words. I didn't even understand it. So the second quarter I was going to give up. I was like I can't. My parents are right. I'm wasting money. I'm not going to make it. I don't even know what they're talking about, but then after I would get my grades and then I got my at the end of the quarter I got my overall grade and compare it with the friends I made. I would be like how come I did better? You guys knew what the teacher was talking about. Second quarter same thing happened you know I would struggle studying. I would study a lot and whenever I would get my grades from the test it was like getting back all that energy you need. So that's how I kind of made it through (Gabriela, personal interview, August 8, 2014).

In this passage, Gabriela's experiences reflect those of a student who has transitioned from ABE and ESL to mainstream college courses. She felt that she was not smart enough when she started college because she didn't complete high school and because of the ways in which her parents put her down about going to school. She also felt bad for being the student to always ask questions in her classes because she didn't see other students asking questions. She perceived that when other students didn't ask questions it must be because they understood everything. She also compares herself to other students who appeared to be better prepared, however, Gabriela was surprised when she earned better grades. Gabriela learned she just thought they were better prepared because they didn't ask questions or seek support. When Gabriela returned to earn her GED and later transitioned to mainstream courses it was thanks to the support she had from her college's transition to college program that provided classes for free She stated,

> I took that class and then the teacher was like would say, 'I don't know what you're doing here, you're ready to take those classes (college transferable courses)'. But I took it anyways. Then that same teacher told me how to register. Taught me how to fill in the papers and stuff and then that's how I got in (Gabriela, personal interview, August 8, 2014).

Encouragement from this teacher was important because it boosted her confidence that she wasn't receiving from her family. Also, this instructor showed her how to register and didn't just send her to another location on campus to figure it out on her own. This relationship between Gabriela and her teacher demonstrates caring.

Another student, Felicia, who spent her pre-college years in Colombia, described how she thought that college would be tough because she wasn't that good

at English. She also immigrated to the U.S. in her mid-20s, which she felt placed her at a disadvantage. She recalled,

> Well the challenges were a lot because when you start thinking about well when you start thinking about education. You start thinking about money so you have to decide. You can work and go to school at the same time, but it's tough. Or I don't know. So I think that was really tough for me, but before that it was the language because I was able to communicate in English, but my English wasn't that good to be able to subsist in a college level. So I think the language was the higher barrier that I had and the money, but I was able to get financial aid so…(Felicia, personal interview, July 31, 2014).

Here Felicia described some barriers she faced in being in community college, mainly not knowing English. She then talked about money being a challenge too but because she had access to financial aid, unlike undocumented students, she viewed learning English as being a bigger challenge to overcome.

Cecilia started ESL coursework when she immigrated to New York as an undocumented student. Later she began ESL classes at her community college in Washington. She later asked and was supported to skip one ESL course to avoid having to pay more money for an additional course. Thanks to the support of her ESL teacher she was able to figure out how to skip the course and transition to college level courses. She recalled,

> They were so nice at the ESL office. You can go to ESL 97 or take 98, but you will have to pay 600 bucks. So I took a 97, my professor saw my improvement, what I was able to do and I was helping classmates when I took it with him.

> Wonderful professor, wonderful, wonderful person and I said to the professor, I don't want to take 98, that is not college level. Do you think I can skip it and take 101 next quarter and he said, 'Yes'. He gave me a letter to go directly to 101 (Cecilia, personal interview, October 17, 2014).

Luis started community college in ESL, but later enrolled in GED and continued on with schooling because started to socialize with other students., learn many new trades from vocational programs and he began to get involved in clubs on campus. His experience as the oldest participant in the study shows that there is a wide range of generational experiences that Latina/o community college students could have. Luis recalled,

> I started learning English as a Second Language so I was practically four days a week taking night class and I like it. I liked socializing and getting involved in clubs and things like that. So after I learned English I decided to keep going. So I started taking some classes, take a GED class, preparation for GED, preparation for the Compass test. I kind of like college classes. I was part of the different apprenticeship programs, the roofers, the drywallers, the carpenters, that's college class too. They had a good deal when I finished as a general carpenter. They offered me I could take four more classes and get my associates degree and I did it. I took four more classes after that and my first associates degree and then because English is important in this country I decide to take English classes and writing. English 101 and those classes. Math is also important so I took some Math classes again to refresh myself (Luis, personal interview, July 1, 2014).

Luis points out that the all the classes he took were official college classes because he was taking them at a college. He didn't define college classes based on the course being transferable to a four-year university because at a community college people chose to attend them for different reasons, but it doesn't make one student better than the other because they choose different goals.

Like Luis, Miguel decided to pursue two different vocational and technical programs. He believed vocational and technical programs would help him in the future by teaching him a skill and securing a good paying job. Miguel set a personal goal to become an aviation technician. He came to that decision after meeting a man in the Veteran's Center at his school during a smoke break. Miguel was already in the culinary arts program at his college, but changed his mind on his career goal when he saw that there could be more opportunity in aviation, especially in the state of Washington. He stated,

> So the way I see it, we're not going to stop flying airplanes anytime soon. If you want to look at it that way you can do the same with mechanics. We're not going to stop driving cars anytime soon, but mechanics with airplanes will pay better and have more benefits so I put that as my goal… (Miguel, personal interview, July 14, 2014).

According to Miguel, he reasoned that chose his course of study and goal as very strategic and practical. He saw college as a way to a career that would be a consistent way to earn money.

The students in this section on academic experiences, show that their reasons for attending college are varies, but when they are supported and have resources, they do

better academically. Their experiences differ from in that there is a wide range of experiences because they came to a community college for different reasons and at different points in their lives. Their pre-college experiences also impact their course of study when they begin community college. These students show that where a person begins in community college is not necessarily where their academic journey ends. For examples, these students' experiences show that even when students start in GED, ABE or ESL courses their transition to college transferrable courses as well as enter vocational and technical programs is possible. Some students' stories showed that making a living took priority over school or decisions to chose the goals they chose, like Miguel deciding to get a certificate in a field that is in demand. Students had had family responsibilities that required them to continue to be employed whether it was their own children that needed support or their parents and siblings. These students' experiences also show that there is no clear direct way to get through school because everyone has their own unique pathway that they are defining.

Although there are no clear boundaries between academic and personal experiences, because students don't leave parts of themselves outside of a higher institution when they enter it, in this section I discussed the academic experiences that stood out the most as distinctly related to school experiences. These experiences included how students felt when they entered community college from the moment they took the Compass test. I then highlighted how students experienced courses that they may have perceived as challenging or courses in which students described good experiences. More specifically, students described experiences in STEM related courses, with many identifying math as a challenging subject. Lastly, students who shared their *testimonios* about experiences in

ABE, GED, ESL and vocational and technical programs provided examples on the wide range of experiences Latina/os students in community college have, but that are often not heard from.

In some cases, when students were treated with respect and encouraged, as the *testimonios* of Gabriela and Cecilia illustrate, students felt empowered in their academic abilities. These students also developed confidence to do well in other college courses. Consequently, students may have pursued different opportunities that were not so attainable, including transferring to a university. In the next section, I discuss personal experiences of the Latina/o community college student participants that provide better insight to what they experience while attending college.

Personal Experiences of Community College Students

Looking at personal experiences that go beyond what a teacher, administrator, counselor or others can see, can potentially provide insight as to a student's motivation for attending community college and why some students complete their goals or change them. One way to look at how this happens is to identify challenges the students may face in their personal lives. Having support from mentors or role models or peers was a crucial factor that all students identified as having an impact on their aspirations. Having support motivated students to continue attending community college even while they experienced challenges in their lives. In this study, I also found that undocumented students, or those students without documentation authorizing them to be in the United States, face unique personal challenges that differ from their peers in community college. Personal experiences can be defined as what a student experience outside of school in their day-to-day life that has some relationship to how a student approaches their academic

experiences in school. Personal experiences then shape the academic trajectory. A clear separation between the two does not exist.

One way to look at personal experiences was to identify the challenges these students faced in their personal lives. Having support, in particular having financial support, was an issue that many students struggled with while attending college. This was the case for most students in this study because they came from poor or working class backgrounds, and attended to families, or to other responsibilities that required them to work. Another challenge that students identified was the lack of family support at certain moments of their schooling. This was a specific issue for some of the women in this study. In addition, there were students in this study who experienced violence in their personal lives. They shared how they survived and the impact that violence had on them being able to attain their goals and/or trajectories while attending community college.

Where students spoke to the importance of personal support, they identified that having mentors or role models inside or outside of school was critical to their ability to get through college. Students also identified their inspirations and motivations to continue going to community college even while experiencing challenges in their lives. In this study, undocumented students face unique personal experiences.

Challenges to Attending College

The Latina/o community college students in the study identified common challenges. Some of these challenges were financial barriers to remain in school, lack of family support, racial discrimination, and experiencing/surviving violence. Although all the students experienced most of these challenges, certain challenges affected some students more than others due to their immigration status, socioeconomic status, or their

pre-college formal schooling.

Financial Barriers. Many of the students identified financial barriers to attending college as a result of coming from poor and working class backgrounds. In addition, many did not have access to the information needed to navigate paying for college. The *testimonios* of Gabriela, Jennifer, Kelly and Chris highlight some of the challenges that come with paying for community college and pursuing their educational goals.

Kurlaender (2006) found that Latina/o students chose a community college based on their socioeconomic status. "Latino college students are more likely than their white peers to be financially disadvantaged. Thus, they may be more likely to choose institutions with low tuition and classes that can be scheduled around work and family commitments" (Kurlaender, 2006, p. 11). For many Latina/o students, higher education can open up doors of access in U.S. society, including an increased income and employment and career opportunities for the students, their families and communities.

Gabriela who is undocumented also has a husband, a son, and is currently pregnant with her second child, described the financial struggles of attending school by stating,

> The challenge is the income. Even though I work and my husband works we have family in our country and that's another cultural thing you know. That's the way I saw my parents sending money to my grandparents you know and my sisters that are over there. And I think I just got used to seeing my parents do this so that's the same thing I do. I mean I don't send them every month you know, but sometimes I do and my husband has his mom. My mother in law is over there and she's sick so you know he has to be sending money over there to take care of

> her. Rent and water and bills and then I like taking my son out sometimes too so our income goes pretty, goes away pretty fast and then paying tuition, that's a lot. I don't even make that much as much as I have to pay (Gabriela, personal interview, August 8, 2014).

Gabriela stated that although her family works, it is still not enough money to pay for all expenses because she has the responsibility to provide for her immediate family, but also the responsibility of providing for her and her husband's family in Mexico. Attending and paying for school then is something she feels is necessary, but in light of other priorities, her priority attending school competes financially with the other ones.

Jennifer described her struggle to pay for school as being linked to having undocumented status and having to work long hours installing flooring with her dad. She stated,

> I think my biggest challenge has been not knowing what I want and paying for it financially. Not knowing what I want is going to overcome, or just keep going I guess like it's just going to happen I don't know. It'll get, I guess like will take me where I have to go and then financially, the whole commercial (installing floors) working with my dad. That's been a really big help. That's the only reason I can pay for college myself (Jennifer, personal interview, October 5, 2014).

Jennifer took a year off of school in order to save money to pay for school. She learned enough now about installing floors that she is able to do jobs on her own. Sometimes the work is inconsistent, but lately since her father was able to secure more consistent employment, Jennifer has continued working and paying for school.

Kelly was raised by her single mother who has undocumented status, while Kelly

is a U.S. citizen. Her mother's employment options are limited and she often works long hours cleaning houses, Kelly was left to care for her brothers, acting as a second mother. As a result, she felt a tremendous pressure to take on a motherly role and it affected her plans to attend college. Being at home meant conflict between her personal challenges and her academic aspirations. Kelly recalled,

> Money, that was the biggest thing as to why I wasn't able to attend university. Living at home was definitely a challenge for me being able to attend school after high school as well but money definitely was the biggest challenge. That's why when I worked, my whole intention was to save up money and to be able to at least do community college and be able to pay bills in case of an emergency of something (Kelly, personal interview, June 6, 2014).

Here Kelly makes reference to how living at home was a challenge because of the relationship she had with her mother, but at the same time she also wanted to pursue her own goals and attend college. With limited resources, students must make a choice. Eventually Kelly made the decision to leave home even though it cost her more financially. But because of the time she dedicated to raising her brothers at home and the tension with her mother, Kelly did not want to put her educational future at risk.

Chris was pursuing a degree in social sciences. He has a strong desire to pursue a degree in science field, but feels it is financially out of reach. He knows he would have to take more pre-requisite courses, which will cost him more time and money. As the father of twin toddler boys, Chris felt that pursuing a degree in science was something that he could not do at the moment. Chris states,

> I'm interested in this field but it's not accessible to me because like financially to

> take these classes and fail them would be devastating. So when I have more when I'm set to invest more money into those classes then I will. It would be on my own, because after the Bachelor of Arts I won't have financial aid. Because there's a time limit on that so I'm pretty much out of my own pocket (Chris, personal interview, August 2, 2014).

Chris' example shows that he may have not received accurate information because he believed that he could not pursue a degree in his field of choice at this moment. Although there are resources and scholarships, Chris believed that having his sons meant that he needed to hurry his studies to get a job.

These stories highlight the personal challenges Latina/o community college students' face when paying for college. Even for students who receive financial aid such as Chris, because of the developmental or pre-requisite courses he may have to take, he believed that he had to adjust his educational goal because he'd run out of financial aid. Jennifer and Gabriela who are undocumented students were not eligible for federal aid thus putting them at a disadvantage. For this reason, they sought alternative ways to pay for school and to find support for childcare and other family responsibilities. Although many college students who are Latina/o are from poor and working class backgrounds and experience challenges paying for school, in their *testimonios* these Latina/o community college students were more likely to juggle multiple responsibilities, like working jobs while they attended school. Being undocumented and not having access to federal financial aid or receiving misinformation about state aid undocumented students are eligible for in the State of Washington made paying for school more difficult of a process to navigate.

Lack of Family Support. I highlight the *testimonio* of Gabriela here because she spoke extensively about how she wanted to go back to community college to enroll in the GED program. Because she was married at a young age, along with the cultural expectations of her community as a Purépecha woman (indigenous person from the area known as Michoacán, Mexico), she was expected to stay home and not attend school. She recalled what her parents told her when she decided to go back to school by stating,

> You're married and no way you can be going back to school, cause who knows what you'll be doing there. They kind of like at first, my parents didn't allow me to. I told my parents you know I need one more year and they were like you should've thought about it. I talked to my husband and he would be like, it's not me. I would let you, but my parents don't want to and it's more what your parents say (Gabriela, personal interview, August 8, 2014).

Gabriela continued to talk to her husband about how going to community college would help her earn a better salary at work. She explained how she wanted to go to college by stating,

> It took me a while because I dropped out before the five years and again it was challenging just coming back to get the GED. I was like you know with that maybe I can get a higher-level position here at work and it took me like a year and a half to get it, but I got it. After that, I would see guys with their backpacks and stuff and I would be like man I wish I could do that! Why did I get married so young? Or why did I drop out? After everything all the challenges here and challenges there and all for nothing? I would talk to my husband and he would be like just go back and see… (Gabriela, personal interview, August 8, 2014).

In this passage Gabriela described her desire to continue to learn. When she went to her husband to ask him to continue studying beyond the GED, he supported her, but Gabriela faced the challenge of convincing her parents because returning to school meant defying the roles that women are supposed to serve in her community. Her parents would often put her down when she decided to go back to school. Gabriela recalled,

> You know again it's challenging, but what keeps me going again is my culture again at the same time. It can bring you down pretty bad you know, that's just the way it is and my parents even them, like instead of them saying you can do it, they'll bring you down. They'll say how much did you pay this time and then you tell them and then they'll be like, 'Oh it's all going to the trash and this cause then at the end you're not going to find a job.' And this and that and those words like sometimes they make me kind of believe them and say, 'You know they're right! What am I doing?' But at the same time they make me mad. And I'm like you know I can do it and I will get a good job. My husband, he also he doesn't like me always with the books and he's always like you're just a perfectionist. You want to get good grades and stuff like that, but at the same time, he's happy for me. I can tell you know in the way I talk to him, he likes to learn things too. My son he's like the big one that makes me keep going (Gabriela, personal interview, August 8, 2014).

In this passage, Gabriela referred to her undocumented status and how her parents thought because of her status she wouldn't be able to use any degree she attained. Her parents would tell her what good would come of her earning a degree if she could never use it. At times her parents attitudes would personally affect Gabriela's self esteem so

much that she would began to think her parents were right about her not returning to school. But her resistance to he parents' belief would bring her back to believe in herself and her strong desire to create a different future for her son and her family.

Gabriela's conflict with her family parallels what Ornelas & Solórzano (2004) found in their study with Latina/o students at a community college in California. In their study, students sought to change perceptions that people had of them by going to college. For example, "students expressed their feeling as a strong sense to 'prove them (society) wrong', a sense of responsibility to become role models to their younger siblings or their children and a commitment to their community to succeed" (Ornelas & Solórzano, 2004, p. 238). Gabriela's story illustrates that desire to prove her family wrong, particularly her parents. At the same she expressed the desire to not give up even when the words her family said hurt her. She was encouraged by the support her husband showed and mainly the desire to be a good role model to her son.

Racism and Discrimination. Another important theme that emerged from my analysis was racial discrimination that students experienced. Through the *testimonios* of Felicia, Nancy, and Luis, it is clear that students in this study didn't solely identify racism as a difficult challenge. Instead, these students pointed out how racism and discrimination impact the intersectionality of their identities, mainly race, class, gender and sexuality.

In her research, Cruz (2001) identified intersectionality by using the experiences of Chicana lesbians' bodies and how they are viewed in education research. Cruz (2001) states that in order to move towards a Chicana critical practice of education, systems are required to look at the critical practice of education research and how the education system portrays the brown body. "Subsequently, we must ask how the brown body is

regulated and governed in schools and other social institutions. How does a regime of a given society discursively make the Chicana lesbian body?" (Cruz, 2001, p. 664). This regulation and governance can be seen in how people of color are expected to behave, speak, look and be in schools and society. Cruz (2001) describes intersectionality in a way that shows the possibility of recognizing the multiple identities that one holds as Latina/os. (Cruz, 2001)

In the following example, Felicia described the layers of the discrimination she experienced in her life and how it is intertwined with her other identities. Felicia stated,

> Well I think we all have stereotypes. For example, one of my sister's friends, one day he asked me, I don't remember what was the question and he told me like are you in... but I told him yeah I'm taking, I was taking English 101 and he was like oh! Do you know enough English to be in that class? And not only well I get discriminated for being Latina, but being gay, and being female so it's not only one thing, it's discrimination, it's out there. Not in the school, because we are, our environment, it's academic, the school also promotes diversity and social justice at school there is not much discrimination, but outside I think it's huge (Felicia, personal interview, July 31, 2014).

Felicia talked about her experiences with discrimination that revolves around the intersection of her identities. Her *testimonio* lends to support the idea of how one cannot separate pieces of themselves in the education system or in the larger society. Her identity includes multiple parts of herself that cannot be separated, particularly her ethnicity, gender and sexuality.

Nancy talked about how she felt white people perceive her when they meet her

and how it's a challenge for her to connect with people. Nancy was unsure if it was because of her ethnic background, but knows that these interactions make her uncomfortable. She stated,

> I've noticed in my own experience. I've noticed that like white people sometimes feel uneasy and uncomfortable around me. Like at the beginning I don't know, like maybe they think I'm aggressive. Or I'm going to be loud. Or I'm going to be rude and it's not until like a couple days go by and they get to know me. And then they just kind of mellow out like oh she's cool. But sometimes I think I don't know white people. Like they just think I'm going to be rude or loud or in your face. It's not the case. I think I'm the complete opposite, I'm really quiet, shy, and respectful (Nancy, personal interview, July 2, 2014).

Nancy sees that not only is she stereotyped on her ethnic background, but also as a woman. She alludes to the stereotype that Latinas are loud or rude and then how when her co-workers saw she didn't fit the stereotype they began to talk to her.

Luis was the only one who spoke of his age and discrimination based on age. Luis has the unique experience being the oldest student who participated in this study and shared in his *testimonio* an incident in which he was discriminated against based on his age when he was participating in a competition as part of a team for his school. Luis recalled,

> We had this competition the school against a university and I was invited. I was the only one who was more mature. And I was there competing, trying to do my best and there was this instructor who come to me and asked me not to compete because it was for younger people and I felt discriminated. I don't think it was

> right. I definitely said no and I tell him I was part of the team. Luckily, a couple of the teams, they support me so I went to the competition so definitely sometimes there was discrimination there (Luis, personal interview, July 1, 2014).

Although Luis believed that the discrimination in this case was mainly due to age, he perceived that the discrimination he experienced was also about him being a Mexican immigrant, male, and a native Spanish speaker. I'm led to believe that all of these identities are a play because of how discrimination works. For this reason, Luis works hard to build community at his school among Latina/o students and as a member of M.E.Ch.A at his community college.

While all the students identified some aspect of experiencing racism and discrimination on their campus or outside of school, for the most part they felt their campuses were welcoming and inviting to Latina/o. This reality allowed some students to feel a separation between what happens on campus and beyond their college campuses. In the students' *testimonios*, some mentioned their college's commitment to diversity and equity, but the support they found at school mainly came from staff, particularly Latina/o staff. Not one of the fourteen students identified any Latina/o teachers or professors that had made an impact on their academic or personal experiences.

Experiencing/Surviving Violence.

In conducting the research for this dissertation I didn't anticipate to hear very personal stories. Here in this section, students discussed the times they experienced and survived violence in their lives and how it impacted them in college.

Although Miguel identified surviving rough situations in his younger years from being involved in a gang and later getting out, he also faced some challenging situations

while in community college. While he was in a culinary class, he described a situation where another student pulled a knife on him. He reacted and pulled a knife of his own from his culinary tools. He said the conflict with other students in culinary classes often began because other students would make disrespectful remarks about women he said made him uncomfortable. When he voiced his discomfort other students made fun of him. He recalled,

> I was raised to be respectful to women, never raise a hand against them. The whole old school kind of chivalry thing and to see that sudden change, sudden different atmosphere while I've been seeing it all elementary, middle, and high school, but seeing it to such extreme, to such an extreme was kind of new (Miguel, personal interview, July 14, 2014).

He thought that by confronting the other student that perhaps that could put an end to the way they talked in front of him or in the classroom. The other student ended up taunting him and it escalate to the point the other student pulled a knife on him in the classroom (culinary classroom). The end result of the confrontation was that both students were suspended from the program for fighting, but other students reported that the other student pulled a knife on Miguel first and that Miguel was just defending himself which allowed Miguel to continue the culinary program. Miguel recalled,

> I would've been devastated from being kicked out but at the same time it's not my end goal. So I wouldn't have been bothered that much by it. But instead they just suspended me for a week. They suspended him for longer, for the rest of the quarter, I'm not sure (Miguel, personal interview, July 14, 2014).

In the passage above, Miguel expressed his concern about being kicked out of the

program, although his plan was to enter the aviation program, he would've been devastated. Although completing the culinary program wasn't his final goal, he had still invested a lot of time towards the program. He knew he wasn't at fault for what occurred and felt he acted in self-defense. Miguel had been taught from a young age to never back down as a result of being bullied in his younger years and later joining a gang. This resulted in him fighting back when faced with confrontation in a classroom at his college. He did not anticipate that this decision to confront the other student for making the classroom environment uncomfortable would escalate and could lead to an academic punishment for him.

Gabriela's story, unlike Miguel's that takes place at school, took place at her work. Gabriela was the survivor of a violent robbery at her workplace. Although she was undocumented she was recently able to obtain a U-Visa which will put her on the path to obtain permanent residency in two years. She expressed the challenges and trauma that came with the way she became eligible for her residency by describing the robbery and how she was hospitalized. Her parents did not show much sympathy or support, which made Gabriela feel worse. When her father found out that she was also working without his knowledge, she recounted what her parents told her, "They were like that's why, see what happens to you? That's why girls aren't allowed to work. And it was kind of like saying you asked for it, for not respecting tradition. So that's how hard it was" (Gabriela, personal interview, August 8, 2014). The way a person in the United States can obtain a U-Visa is by surviving a violent incident and cooperating with police and legal authorities to arrest and convict the person responsible for the crime. This requires having a form signed by law enforcement agency to give to immigration. Gabriela described

being in the hospital for two weeks because of the robbery and how later her husband heard she could apply for a U-Visa. She recalled,

> I just got it like two years ago again my husband would be the one like you should apply you know. I heard on the radio and heard this and then again the income you know. We don't' have the money to pay for a lawyer and then I just went one day. He said just go and I'll pay for it. And I went and they said, 'For what happened to you, you will get it'. They said after three years you can apply for residence. So I have one more year to go (Gabriela, personal interview, August 8, 2014).

Surviving violence in her situation meant understanding that the situation was not her fault for not listening to her parents or abiding by certain norms that she shouldn't be working. It also meant learning to navigate a process of paperwork and legal hoops that would eventually give her residency. While this may seem like a positive outcome to some, for Gabriela it was a traumatic experience and she remembered how she was hospitalized and in very bad shape and how she could've been killed. Gabriela went through events that no one should have to no matter ones' status.

Cecilia's experience with violence happened in the home. Cecilia who was educated in Mexico and spent some time studying law at UNAM, was undocumented until recently. She experienced domestic violence. She described how she survived and how school gave her hope to hold on to the possibility to make a different future for herself. I highlight how she viewed her ability to overcome challenges in greater detail in chapter seven. Cecilia recalled,

> I think these five months have been crucial to me because after leaving a bad

> relationship, I felt strong and I was homeless for a month. A couple of friends said you can come to my house and we can share the bed. And I said, 'No, I don't want to bother you.' And I decided to go to a shelter for a domestic violence situation and it was painful, but I said ok I have to learn something from this experience and I did. I did. I didn't leave college. I was going everyday to college, to work there. That was for months after I could move out. I shared an apartment with a couple students. It didn't work because they invited a lot and I went to Mexico to see my son for two weeks and it was wonderful because it filled me with energy. And I came back and I was homeless again. I went with a couple of friends for two weeks and I got a job. All of this was getting right. I got a job here. I have a place to stay and a room. I'm so happy. I mean little probably stupid things I didn't have before. Like getting a bed. Getting a couch at Goodwill. And I said, 'I am getting something for myself.' And that made me happy (Cecilia, personal interview, October 17, 2014).

Although Cecilia was going through challenging circumstances and tried to hide them, her counselor and teacher took notice and offered her a place to stay in their home and offered other forms of support. Due to her involvement at school, she also gained support from friends. In many ways school became the safe place that Cecilia needed and empowered her to keep going to school even while she was homeless and living 'couch to couch' or in a domestic violence shelter.

Another important finding in these *testimonios* is that students longed to feel supported in their schooling. This support meant addressing personal issues and challenges that can interfere with their schooling. If Miguel didn't have the support or

backing of some of the students in his program, he would've been kicked out for defending himself. In Gabriela's story, she gained support from her husband. He looked for ways to help her navigate the legal and immigration process and by supporting her to stay in school. From Cecilia's experience, having a safe place as a domestic violence survivor helped her seek supportive people who could direct her to the resources she needed to stay in school and to become financially independent. While little is known about how students experience violence or how they survive while they are in school, these 3 examples provide some insight to how violence could affect a student's life. Miguel's *testimonio* describes how violence and unsafe learning environments relate to school. From Gabriela's *testimonio*, one can see how acts of violence in society may affect someone in a workplace. Lastly, from Cecilia's *testimonio*, she describes domestic violence, a type of violence that is often hidden, but is very common in society as a whole. These challenges that the students describe in their personal lives, does impact the progress they make towards their goals. Challenges of various types can hinder their trajectories greatly if the support isn't there to assist them.

Academic and Personal Support

Having support in multiple ways is crucial to navigate school and life. In the previous section, support from others meant providing emotional, financial or informational/navigational support while a student dealt with school and life. The following excerpts are about the places and the people Latina/o community college students find support from. I highlight examples from the *testimonios* of Cecilia, Gabriela, Kelly, and Ximena.

Cecilia's programming professor and her counselor were both engineers and were

married to each other. When they found out that Cecilia had separated from her partner/husband, they didn't know she was leaving an abusive relationship but they offered her support. According to Cecilia, they stated,

> They were like hey Cecilia, do you need a place? You can stay at our place. What do you need? Do you need a table? Do you need a bed? They were like more than professors. They were like friends and I am so thankful to them and I mean they know. They knew I did badly in a quarter because I was all down. But they were always supporting me, like hey this is your quarter. And do this and do that (Cecilia, personal interview, October 17, 2014).

Although Cecilia's teacher knew she was going through a hard time personally and that she was having difficulties in school, they did not shame her. Instead they created a safe space for her to build community and thus remain in school and feel supported during a challenging time. Her teachers provided critical support when she needed it most and it made the difference because she stayed in school.

For, Gabriela, her husband and sister supported her by assisting her with her son's caretaking and by providing financial support. Gabriela recalled,

> Well my husband, everyone wants their wives to be with them and I'm always with my books and he helps me to take care of my son. My sister you know ever since I started the one that's younger than me, she's been babysitting my son. She's like just bring him over here. If I didn't have my sister, I mean I have my husband, but he goes to work too and again I'm always with the income. I'm barely making enough to pay for tuition and I would give her some income for babysitting but if I had to pay someone to babysit you know I wouldn't be able

> to afford it. I tried to go to daycares, but again they're pretty expensive so again I would say my husband and my sister (Gabriela, personal interview, August 8, 2014).

Here Gabriela described the support of her husband. While her parents did not support her, her husband saw her commitment and dedication to school and was proud of her. He was willing to support her despite cultural norms placed on their relationship. He also dared to defy Gabriela's parents because even though he had reservations, he saw how important school became to her.

Kelly, (whom I have known since she was in high school) identified the person that she felt offered her support in an informational/navigational way. This mentor was me (the author). She explained how I assisted her by being a role model and being honest in my own process of attending community college previously and under challenging life circumstances. Kelly stated,

> Well you played a big role. I mean definitely when I first met you cause you helped me and like you helped me when I was struggling with personal situations at home. And to hear your story and how you spent so long in college and have taken advantage of the fact you're able to take out loans and go to school. I like I always think about that. You know there's people. I always think about the fact that you say there's people fighting to be able to take out loans because they're not documented. And there's people that are afraid to take out loans when they're able to do. And so you definitely played a big part in me continuing education. I mean you would randomly hit me up like, 'Oh, are you back in school? Are you back in school?' And you know I feel bad to say, 'No, I'm not in school! So it's

> like you know what, I'm going to go back to school!' (laughs)" (Kelly, personal interview, June 6, 2014).

Kelly's *testimonio* on support demonstrates a commitment some educators take on that was also highlighted in Cecilia's *testimonio* when Cecilia described her college professors. Higher education sometimes reinforces a disconnect, that for educators the work is supposed to be separate from our own personal lives, thus it is pushed it should be separate from who we are as human beings. hooks (2003) speaks about what it means to teach with love, "When we talk about loving our students, these same voices usually talk about exercising caution. They warn us about the dangers of getting "too" close. Emotional connections tend to be suspect in a world where the mind is valued about all else, where the idea that one should be and can be objective is paramount" (hooks, 2003, p. 127). What this means in the context of support is that emotional support and connection is necessary not just for the students, but sometimes this relationship can be reciprocal depending on the positionality of the educator and how they see their own role and work. Perhaps aside from changing students lives, it also give our own meaning, building community with the students we work with invites the possibility that educators learn something as well.

There is much at stake when supporting young people pursuing higher education, especially those who begin at community colleges. Community colleges are often under resourced as it is. Looking at the issues potential community college students face (students who I have worked with while they were in their high school years), required me to also reveal parts of my own story to them so I could help establish a relationship. I met Kelly while working as her teaching assistant one summer for a college summer

preparation program. When I revealed to her my own challenges about trying to go to school and having to move out of my own parents home to pursue my education, I did not reveal my experiences to reinforce the idea of "if I can do it, you can too". I shared my experiences to show that there were other choices in life. Perhaps you can't see all of your options in the moment, especially if a student is going through a challenging time personally, but the options are there and it's important for me when I have worked as a counselor, adviser, teaching assistant or instructor to let them know that if they come to me for support. I shared with Kelly that may seem hard to leave the familiar environments we are used to or raised in, but if we want to make a change, a person has take a risk, make some changes and define it for themselves. Thankfully my words did have an impact, as Kelly later moved out of her mother's home to pursue her own path and define her own life for herself.

Ximena, the youngest participant of this study, talked about the support her family provided, especially of her wanting to do well in school because she felt she owed it to her mother who raised three children on her own. She talked about the moral support and solidarity her mother provided to her even after long days cleaning houses. She recalled,

> I would have to say my family. I'm really family oriented especially my sister because I want to be a good example for her even though I feel like she's more mature than me sometimes so. And then my mom too. I mean just the way she looks at me? Sometimes when I am studying late at night. She always stays up with me though I tell her go to sleep. She's like, 'Oh no, I'm watching a movie!' Or something. And I'm like I know you're waiting for me (laughs) so I mean just yeah. Just her because I tell her and she's helped me so much. She's been both

> parents. How do I repay you? She's like you know just watching you succeed that's all (Ximena, personal interview, October 10, 2014).

Ximena's mother displayed a tremendous amount of support in actions, such as staying up with her daughter while she did her homework. These actions could be seen as small but these actions are acts of solidarity and love because it was a way that her mother showed she supported her daughter going to school and it seemed they both recognized the personal and physical sacrifice of what it took to do well, including staying up late at night.

Many students identified family as a source of support and strength, but sometimes family was not the best place to find support as the *testimonio* of Kelly illustrates. In other cases perhaps one could be navigating school and life in isolating circumstances as the *testimonio* of Cecilia demonstrates. Cecilia as a survivor of violence was isolated a little in her community, but also because of immigration status and money she is separated from her son who lives in Mexico with Cecilia's father. Cecilia is trying to complete school as an immigrant student far from family and with little community except for her teachers at school. These cases above that speak to the types of support a student finds in trying to complete school. These types of support include, family, and peers, as well as teachers, counselors, and other support staff at their community college. at school. By attending a community college, students begin to uncover who can help them navigate school, but also through challenging times in life.

Undocumented Students. In this section, I highlight the experiences of undocumented students (or those who recently were undocumented while in community college). There were three students in this study who identified past or current

experiences as undocumented students.

Jennifer has lived in the U.S. since she was one year old. She considers herself Chicana for many reasons, but one reason is that she has lived between two worlds because she came to the United States at such a young age. While putting herself through high school and community college, she learned how to install floors from her dad. Being employed allowed her to pay for school. She describes how she decided to go to community college after taking a year off from high school, although she was a student who took honors and AP classes in high school,

> Well the proximity to home was the big one because I told my dad I really wanted to move out and get away from the whole family. And he was like yeah, you can't even pay for college, how you going to pay for rent? (laughing) So the fact that I was really close to the house, fifteen minutes for me like that was a huge plus. But mostly the cost too because when we were in high school, my dad worked mostly in residential homes. It didn't pay as well as commercial and now that year I took off, he started working not residential, but commercial. And so like he was getting bigger checks and he was like you know what I can actually afford this. And if you are working we can do this together so like that kind of like, he pushed me to do it again because I guess I kind of got like nah! I don't know what to do now. So school was my life and still kind of is and without it I don't know what I'm doing. So the cost and proximity to the house was big ones (Jennifer, personal interview, October 5, 2014).

Jennifer's *testimonio* points to the fact that unlike other students who are documented, she can't just access certain resources to stay in school. Simply if there is no money,

school is not a priority to pay for if a person or their family has other priorities including rent and food. It wasn't until her dad started to get commercial contracts for the flooring business that Jennifer worked at installing floors that she could afford to pay for school. Other students who are struggling financially have the option to go to financial aid and take out loans and many of those options for undocumented students do not exist.

Another student, Gabriela, who identifies as an indigenous person from Michoacán, spoke Purépecha as her first language. When she came to the U.S. she didn't speak Spanish or English. While going to school, she has experienced many challenges while attending college, but has not let the hardships stop her from pursuing her goals. She sees her son as motivation and the idea that she can make a difference in her indigenous community and the ways women are viewed and treated. While her immigration status is currently being adjusted, she remains undocumented. The U-Visa she obtained after surviving a violent crime does protect her from deportation. She left high school and went to community college first to obtain her GED. She then continued with her studies and transitioned to ESL courses and later to transferrable college courses. The most challenging part she describes from being undocumented is paying for college because she is not eligible for many forms of financial aid that residents and citizens are eligible for. Gabriela states,

> I don't get financial aid because I have a work permit only which doesn't qualify me to get financial aid. And then here the way that I got a scholarship here was based on my grades and they gave it to me like after a year though. Like one whole year I had to pay all school almost everything. And then the second year I was like why don't I get scholarships. I'm one of the, I'm probably one of the best

> ones in school. I went to talk to the president here and I was like I've applied online, I've asked everywhere and I don't qualify for no where. And she was like well it's your status and that's all she said. She's like I can't do nothing about it. So I was like damn that was not no help, but then I was like ok. And then my husband was taking GED classes and then he spoke to his teachers. He was telling them about my situation and then he said you know tell her to come and then I'll help her out (Gabriela, personal interview, August 8, 2014).

Gabriela had thought if she did well in school that she could be rewarded for her grades in terms of scholarships. Educational achievement is looked at as being individual and a student is rewarded when they perform well in terms of grades. Gabriela did all that and more, she attended school under challenging circumstances, but because of her status she was denied opportunity. Even when she went to the president of her college, the president was unsure of how to help, or perhaps didn't want to get involved and this points to a disconnect between staff and faculty on many campuses where people don't have the information to provide support to undocumented students.

Gabriela ended up getting help from her school's college foundation after many hurdles. She had to go from office to office and reveal her story and her status, which could put her at risk of being deported, depending on the person's attitude towards immigrants. She went to the college president to plead her to assist as well. Then she was directed to a person through her husband who was taking GED classes at the time. That GED teacher connected her directly to the college foundation. Her story demonstrated that community college students might have additional hurdles to jump through not only if they are undocumented, but if they begin their community college experience in ABE

or ESL courses because students in these programs aren't typically seen as being college students.

Cecilia also started community college in an ESL program. She came to the United States in her mid 20s. She attended ESL classes in New York when she immigrated there and worked as a nanny. She met her husband in New York and later moved to Washington, but ended up leaving him after an abusive situation. Her status was recently adjusted, but she still struggled with personal and financial challenges to pay for living expenses and to stay in school. When Cecilia described her income as pretty low, she maintained her life in perspective,

> Well I can not complain. I am paying for my own things, I am total independent. I am paying for my own room. Well I have to clarify that I got separated six months ago so I was homeless for a month and I had to live in a shelter and right now I have a job. I got a car. I am so proud of myself and I am continuing college (Cecilia, personal interview, October 17, 2014).

Cecilia highlights that more than the money, for undocumented students there is little safety net especially if they are here without family or other supportive people. Due to her separation from her husband she was homeless and then living in a shelter. Throughout all the challenges she endured, she continued college and it gave her hope. I wanted to highlight the *testimonios* of these three women because their stories show how undocumented students face not just different or magnified financial challenges, but also a lot of risk in sharing their status with others in order to get support. Sometimes when they do reach out for support, like Gabriela's *testimonio* shows they are left with people putting up their hands saying there is nothing that they can do. Jennifer's

testimonio shows that when there are other needs a family has such as rent and food, school is put off until it can be afforded. Left with no other option, Jennifer took a year break and continued to work installing floors when that happened. Lastly, Cecilia's *testimonio* gives an example how isolating the experience of an undocumented student can be especially if they are far from family and friends. Due to not having a safety net, Cecilia was homeless and living in a shelter, but still continued to attend college.

Summary: Community College Experiences

From the first section on academic experiences, the students' testimonios show how they saw themselves relative to where they placed on the entrance placement exam Compass and how it can have a negative impact on a students self-esteem especially as it relates to their perceived ability to do well in community college. Students also spoke their positive interactions with their professors. They described these positive interactions as times when instruction took on various methods of teaching. Caring teachers were those who demonstrated excitement about what they were teaching and also took an interest in personally knowing their students. Students also pointed to learning from courses they thought were difficult and often surprised themselves when they did well in Math or Science courses. Doing well in courses that the students perceived as challenging, boosted their self-esteem and they sought to take more classes from the same faculty. From these students' experiences, it is evident students in ABE, ESL and professional or technical programs need greater exposure to programs that could support their transition to other opportunities at the community colleges they attend. Often these students are isolated and separated from the rest of the programs and services at a community college. If these students were exposed to more information and

opportunities, it may impact or change the ultimate educational pathway they decide to take.

In the section on personal experiences, I highlighted the challenges that students face in their lives while attending community college. Most, if not all, students identified paying for school as a struggle. Some students described having a lack of family support, but then developing the attitude and determination that they would, as Gabriela's *testimonio* demonstrates, "prove them wrong". Jessica also took on the attitude that she needed to prove people wrong because of her pre-college experiences in Special Education. She saw college then as an opportunity to define her own potential. Next, students described their experiences with racism and discrimination. For example, Felicia described how the discrimination she experienced because of her race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality impacted her in school. She points to a situation where she was made to feel bad for not speaking English "properly". In conducting this research I did not expect students to reveal the experiences they did because most students I had not met before and we didn't interact much before they began sharing their *testimonios*. Three students identified personal challenges and described situations where they survived or are currently surviving violence. These stories of violence remind me about the larger issues around violence that occurs in society can happen everywhere and college students are not immune from them.

The students shared many challenges, but also spoke about support, where they found it and the people who provided the support. In some cases, it was from their own family members, but not in all the cases. Sometimes for geographical reasons and as a result of immigration status, one can find support from caring people in their community college.

For example, the support that Cecilia received from her professors allowed her to feel supported and cared for and remain in school. Since she was far away from her family (which she shared didn't provide much support in Mexico either) she is extremely isolated. She also found support from her peers and friends she made at school and having these types of support and relationships are the main reason why she is able to continue with school.

Cecilia's *testimonio* demonstrates a type of commitment by these professors that is often not rewarded in colleges and universities as part of the work of teaching. hooks (2003) describes the ways in which a teacher can build community through, "Committed acts of caring let all students know the purpose of education is not to dominate, or prepare them to be dominators, but rather to create the conditions for freedom. Caring educators open the mind allowing students to embrace a world of knowing that is always subject to change and challenge" (hooks, 2003, p. 92). Cecilia's professors and many other professors are likely not to get rewarded or recognized for how they care or build community, but these acts of caring make huge impacts on students lives.

Lastly, I highlighted the *testimonios* of the three undocumented students in this study. While their stories are also weaved throughout this dissertation, I also felt I needed to create a separate section to provide more detail. Their experiences demonstrate the fact in society and in higher education a caste system exists that places value on who is more valuable by limiting who "deserves" opportunity. Gabriela was a student who did well and needed support, but because of systemic inequalities that deny access of certain resources to undocumented students it is accepted that nothing can be done to support undocumented students. I created the section on undocumented students after analyzing

the unique circumstances they face because of systemic inequality. To further disrupt the apartheid of knowledge that Huber Perez (2009) describes, "In the field of education, dominant ideologies of meritocracy, individualism and color-blindness can mask the complex struggles of Students of Color and the systems of oppression that create the conditions for those struggles" (Huber Perez, 2009, p. 640). I believe similar can be said for when researchers speak for the experiences of undocumented students and fail to critique the systems that keep these oppressions in place.

In this chapter I sought to answer what Latina/o community college students experience academically and personally while in community college and how these experiences impacted their goals and trajectory. I found the ways in which support can be re-defined. I also found the ways in which students need the people that are around them to know about their personal lives in order to get the support they need to do well in school and life. In this next chapter, I look at the entirety of their *testimonios* to demonstrate how these fourteen community college students define achievement and success in their lives.

CHAPTER 6

(Re)Defining Achievement and Success

This final analysis chapter looks at the question: How do Latina/o community college students define achievement and success? In what ways do they describe their achievements and success thus far in their personal and academic lives? The examination of this question here does not mean that ideas of achievement and success is disconnected from the rest of the experiences the students highlighted in the previous two chapters, instead it builds upon and further sheds light on how those lived academic and personal experiences shape the ways in which achievement and success is defined.

For this chapter, aside from analyzing the fourteen *testimonios*, I received supplementary written *testimonios* from three students, at the end of 2014. This written *testimonio* was in response to a prompt asking the participants to share a short story about achievement and success in their lives. If I would've received all fourteen written *testimonios*, then that would've been another set of data that could've stood on its own, but since not all research participants responded, I decided to include these written *testimonios* to this chapter where appropriate, along with their spoken *testimonios*. The three students that provided written *testimonios* were: Kelly (Spruce CC), Chris (Alder CC) and Ximena (Cedar CC). Although these students sometimes described the terms of achievement and success in similar ways or saw them as related, I separated their ideas here to illustrate the differences. I have divided this chapter then into two sections, achievement and success with subsections based on my analysis of the *testimonios*.

Achievement

Here, I highlight the portions of the *testimonios* where students described and defined achievement in their lives. First, I discuss how students described their achievements as proving other people as wrong. Next, I explore how students overcome personal challenges and learn from their lived experiences. I then discuss achievement as doing well or improving in school. Lastly, I center how the students defined achievements for their future.

Achievement as "Proving Them Wrong."

There are students who discussed achievement as a way to prove people or society wrong. These students felt they were judged on past performance or that people who judged them based on their backgrounds discouraged them from attending school. The students who saw achievement as "proving them wrong" are Jessica (Pine CC) and Alexis (Cedar CC).

When Jessica described her definition of achievement, she reflected on the struggle she has faced in her academic and personal experiences. She recalled,

> I feel like achievement to me is going back to my struggles and seeing the people that told me I couldn't do what I wanted to do and yet proving them wrong. So I feel like that to me is the big thing and basically showing them you know my college, my finished AA certificate. And showing them, you, I didn't do this for you, but I know you didn't have much faith in me to where it's like I did it because you said I couldn't in a way. So that kind of is where I'm going to achieve my goals and to show the people that thought I couldn't do it (Jessica, personal interview, July 11, 2014).

Jessica explained how she overcame struggles and refused to listen to the negative things people told her. Although Jessica wasn't solely motivated by proving people wrong, this passage is an example how negative experiences can result into academic and personal transformation because a student wants to defy the expectations that were placed on them and decide for themselves what their achievements could be.

Alexis provides an example from high school about how she had to prove people wrong based on the fact that she came from what she called a "non prestigious background" and lacked "white privilege". She became a mentor for other young women and saw that collectively students could prove stereotypes about Latina/os wrong

> I think when I saw my first group of girls graduate cause we mentored and tutored a group of eighth grade girls we thought would drop out, their grades and everything and seeing them actually diplomas and sit like seeing them walk is like if you actually give them attention and actually let them know someone believes they can make it. And it's like seeing them going to high school. I still keep in touch with them everyday and seeing them actually make something of themselves…(Alexis, personal interview, October 5, 2014)

In the passage above, Alexis shows her belief that people need to feel cared for and given attention in order for them to do well. Although she experienced challenges she believed that if she made a difference in just one life, those stereotypes that are imposed on people from where she grew up would be forced to fade. She believe that her specific contribution to this is accomplished through mentoring young women and establishing positive relationships with them to set an example and also support them in their academic and personal lives.

Achievement as Overcoming Personal Challenges. In this study, some students defined the achievements that they had already accomplished in their lives as examples of how they had learned from their lived experiences. In this section, Jessica (Pine CC), Kelly (Spruce CC) and Griselda (Spruce CC) describe achievement as learning and as a process of transformation. As Jessica stated, "I feel like it's (achievement) also learning right from wrong. Like we all have to go through experiences to know and feel what they are and coming over them. And making sure you don't do the same mistake again". (Jessica, personal interview, July 11, 2014).

Jessica described how in order to overcome challenges one must make mistakes so they are not repeated. For example, she explains how this might mean learning right from wrong. She continues to describe the times she felt she achieved something in her life thus far,

> Three achievements I have made so far. Well graduating high school is one of them just because I figured that just knowing the things I did I felt like I was never going to (graduate high school). So that was one. Getting into college was actually another one. I figured that with what I've done could've impacted me as a person and people would see me a lot different and not want me there and another one is kind of knowing what I want to do. I know what I want to do. I know who I want to be. And I know that it's going to take some time for me to actually do that so I can't rush it. I can't rush it so I need to take my time and take my, make sure I stay on the path I kind of was with everything (Jessica, personal interview, July 11, 2014).

In describing her achievements, Jessica reflected on how she had to overcome personal

challenges in order to engage in a process to learn more about herself and the path that she wanted to be on in life. For example, Jessica points out how graduating high school is an accomplish that should be recognized.

Kelly viewed achievement as a blend of overcoming academic and personal challenges and doing well in school in light of them,

> Achievement to me is reaching what your, reaching your goal. The fact that I graduated high school like that was a major achievement for me because of the barriers I faced going through school. Whether it was because of going through school or at home situation, the fact that I've been able, that I'm able to attend college and being so close to graduating is definitely an achievement. But I think an achievement is what you set your mind on and being able to accomplish it (Kelly, personal interview, June 6, 2014).

For Kelly, it was important to recognize the personal challenges that she overcame to attend school. She wanted to recognize how important it is for many students to graduate high school. Graduating high school is a major achievement for Kelly because she was the first in her family to accomplish this goal. In her written *testimonio*, Kelly described the home situation she was raised in, "I was raised by a single undocumented mother, with three younger siblings. We grew up poor relying on welfare, food stamps and the few bucks my mom made taking care of kids to help pay rent and bills. My education was priority, but in my Mexican culture being a woman and the oldest required me to be my mother's second hand including taking care of my brothers" (Kelly, personal correspondence, 2014). Aside from describing the conditions at home, Kelly describes the roles that were imposed on her based on her mom's immigration status, race, class

and being a woman and what that means in her family.

Griselda talked about achievement as the goals an individual sets, but also recognizes the day-to-day struggle that it takes to get to a goal. Griselda states "Achievement to me is when you set a goal and despite anything that is in the way whether it takes you a year or twenty years or however long it takes you like if you overcome the obstacles that have unexpectedly or you kind of knew they were going to come up and you overcome that and you achieve that goal or that finish line that is what achievement is to me"(Griselda, personal interview, May 28, 2014). She continued to describe the times she felt she achieved something was when she earned her Associates degree,

> I was like oh my gosh! This is an achievement, two years and a quarter because of math (laughs) of like all this hard work. Like the lady at the supermarket by the bus stop to go to school, I went and told her I had finished my [degree?] and she's like what! I would see you at the bus stop in the rain and shine, sometimes with your little boy. Sometimes early in the morning, you missed your bus sometimes and all the things you had to go thorough of not eating sometimes because there's no time. You don't get to eat or do anything really and looking at my books and all that sweat and tears that went into these things because I was so stressed for finals or some stuff, that's achievement. Oh my gosh like all these struggles and obstacles, but you know what I put on my armor and I conquered it (Griselda, personal interview, May 28, 2014).

Griselda continued to think about the achievements she already made in life and recognized being a mother in college as well as getting a divorce was what drove her to

get out of her comfort zone. Getting out of her comfort zone was the force that drove her to keep moving to earn her associates degree. Next, students described how achievement can also be found in the process of the journey one undertakes towards their goals in school.

Achievement as Academic: Doing Well or Improving. In this section I explain how students described achievement as doing well or improving in school. Achievement for them, is tied to academic experiences. Gabriela (Fir CC), Kelly (Spruce CC), Jennifer (Cedar CC),

Gabriela sees her achievement as setting academic goals. She describes how the first goal she set for herself was going to college

> Achievement for me is like having a goal and then getting to that goal. I always wanted to be in college, and when I got accepted, I was like I achieved! I got in then I was like I'm going for my associates. Then I achieved that so it's getting something that you want, that's your goal"(Gabriela, personal interview, August 8, 2014).

For Gabriela returning to school again was enough to make her feel like she achieved something because being accepted to college level courses for her meant a transition from ESL courses. Gabriela also mentions the acceptance to college all the way to completing her AA felt like achievements because she decided a goal and got what she wanted, what she originally had set her sight on.

Kelly described achievement as graduating high school. As previously mentioned in achievement as overcoming personal challenges section, Kelly spoke about how she grew up with many circumstances impacting her role in her family and the fact her family

is poor. She states,

> Achievement to me is reaching your goal. The fact that I graduated high school like that was a major achievement for me because of the barriers I faced going through school. Whether it was because of going through school or at home situations, the fact that I've been able to attend college, and being so close to graduating is definitely an achievement. But I think an achievement is what you set your mind on and being able to accomplish it (Kelly, personal interview, June 6, 2014).

Similar to Cecilia, Kelly spoke about her achievement as the ability to accomplish things that others may see as small. Kelly also points out how transitioning from one situation to another proved to be critical turning points in her education and life journey.

Jennifer described her achievements and stated that she didn't feel like she had accomplished much yet, but like Kelly also discussed how graduating high school could be seen as an achievement. Jennifer stated,

> I don't' feel like I've done many achievements yet. I feel like yeah graduating from high school was an achievement, but I don't feel like that's the end of the journey so I don't really want to count that. But I can say I feel like I'm succeeding in life because I'm still going after something I really want and I did give up for that first year after I graduated. But like I got back on the horse so I don't feel like I failed yet. At first I did feel like I failed myself by not being able to go to a university and everything cause my whole idea was set on moving out into a dorm and all that kind of stuff. So I did feel failure hit, but afterwards, like I don't feel that way anymore. I feel like I'm back on track even though my track is

> a little slower that I first had thought of (Jennifer, personal interview, October 5, 2014).

Although she felt like a failure for not going to a four-year university directly after high school Jennifer began to recognize she was forced to take a different path that has her move slower or differently through higher education than she would've liked. But she no longer feels like a failure. Jennifer's definition is important because she has higher expectations of herself than just thinking college is for going to school and living in a dorm and has different plans for herself now. Jennifer like Kelly recognizes that graduating high school is an achievement that should be acknowledged but often is dismissed or downplayed.

Achievements for the Future. In this section, students describe the achievements they wish to make in the future and explain how these forthcoming achievements are both academic and personal. Students whose voices are highlighted are Jessica (Pine CC), Gabriela (Fir CC), and Felicia (Fir CC).

Jessica discussed and defined the achievements she has made so far in her life and some she would like to make in the future. She states,

> I would have to say finishing community college of course and getting into a university and finishing there with a degree. And another one would have to be having, getting a job that I want instead of doing it for money. I want to be happy in where I am. Third, one would have to be probably paying my mom back for everything she's done. I feel like once I settle down with my work and you now kind of am into my career working for a few years I feel like I should pay her back and you know do all the things she's basically done for me (crying) (Jessica,

personal interview, July 11, 2014).

Jessica described how one of her biggest achievements is not only defined by going to school and earning a degree, but also by what this accomplishment would mean for her family, especially for her mother. This deep desire that Jessica has to repay her mother back for her sacrifice and hard work is a driving force that keeps Jessica moving forward.

Gabriela believes that achievements can be small or big, but in moving forward with college, she wants to keep going to school to have better opportunities for herself, her family and serve her community. She states,

> I'm going to get my Master's at least. If I can make it to the Bachelor's, get a Master's at least. Working a job where I don't have to put in a lot of extra hours to have a good income. And third one would be getting the Latino people, well not just Latino, but I would like to focus more on people from native villages and help them with whatever I can to believe in themselves and go back to school so that would be three (Gabriela, personal interview, August 8, 2014).

For Gabriela who is from an indigenous immigrant community, earning a job with a good income is the minimum she hopes to attain. This way she wouldn't have to work a lot and sacrifice time away from her family. She also sees serving her community and focusing on Indigenous Mexicans as important work. She would also like to increase the numbers of indigenous people from Mexico graduating high school and going to college and thinks from her example and if she becomes a counselor could help support changing the way people from her community think of women's roles or their overall views education in the U.S.

Felicia described the goals she would like to achieve in the future and how they

are tied to her dreams of family and community, "…I would like to have a family. I would like to have two kids in the future. I don't know what will be my path, but I want to keep helping Latino and immigrants in general that's what I want." Felicia sees how achievement for her isn't just about herself and isn't only tied to school, but how on a personal level it means whatever a person defines as important and central to their lives and happiness.

Success

In this study, I have sought to both counter notions of academic success for community college students as based primarily on their transfer to 4-year institutions and to uncover how Latina/o community college students themselves determine being successful. First, I discuss the meanings of success based on how the fourteen students in my study define them. Second, how these students perceive success as a process in their development as students in college. Next, I highlight how the students see success as a responsibility either to themselves, family or community. Finally, I conclude with how students see success as a transformative process that can be found all along their educational and life journey.

Messages of Success. Students describe how they define success and where they have seen success mentioned and defined around them in society, their community or family. Through the *testimonios* of Alexis (Cedar CC), Jennifer (Cedar CC), Chris (Alder CC), Luis (Pine CC) and Claudia (Pine CC) we see how these students define success and how they see success measured personally and academically.

Alexis described how other people view success as one's ability to make money and to choose careers that facilitate one's ability to make money. She states,

> They care more about money. They care so much about the money for society everything is about commodity. Like being comfortable. Having a big house, having all the little stuff. They don't really focus on keeping themselves. So I feel people tend to go for the jobs that's just going to give them more money, not something they're actually passionate about and you see it everywhere like on the billboards for colleges and stuff and universities and pamphlets and all that stuff (Alexis, personal interview, October 5, 2014).

For Alexis, the messages around her about success are tied to one's ability to make money and choosing a career solely based on the ability to make money. She sees success as when a person chooses to do a career because it is something they are passionate about. She describes how she doesn't agree with the idea that success is based on one's ability to make money because she thinks it means a value is being placed on people and their careers. She then describes her experiences working as a preschool teacher.

> So it's kind of like I feel like the jobs that really matter are the jobs that are pushed aside. Yeah we need doctors, we need engineers, we need all that, but the people that help us out on a daily basis are kind of taken like you know, they're not really appreciated. That's what I'm trying to say (Alexis, personal interview, October 5, 2014).

In the end though Alexis describes how success is really happiness and obtaining a goal without losing oneself. Losing one's self means losing the core values of what a person stands for and compromising them for something that doesn't contribute to ones happiness or get them closer. This perspective is important because it contradicts the messages that are popular in society about success being about money or one's ability to

earn money and prestige. She states, "Success to me is reaching an achievement without completely losing yourself. So it's kind of like not losing yourself and being happy with where you are and who you are and who's around you. So that's success for me, being happy" (Alexis, personal interview, October 5, 2014).

Jennifer sees the ways in which other people try to enforce their definitions of success on people and how often this comes in the form of labeling. She then provides the example of being in community college and how people perceive her,

> Like the community college, just because I'm going to community college like I'm not succeeding or when I tell them that I've been there for three years, then that's not succeeding. But in my eyes, for me that's succeeding just because I'm still there and I'm figuring out what I want to do as opposed to dropping out and giving up on it (Jennifer, personal interview, October 5, 2014).

Success then to Jennifer means that it's a process that one has to come to on their own and not necessarily follow some timetable that society imposes. For example, the term four-year university is used a lot, but sometimes students take longer than four years to complete college. Similar is said about community colleges. Community colleges is often substituted by some as two-year colleges. This imposition is accepted as the norm and when students internalize that they should hurry up and finish or if they take a longer length of time than the standard to accomplish their goal of a college degree then they may not be seen as or begin to feel as if they aren't successful. Success, according to Jennifer, cannot be measured in terms of time but as the process one undertakes to learn more about what they want to do as they figure out their life.

In his written *testimonio,* Chris described success and how it is defined and

measured. According to Chris, "success is best measured by the ability to affect others in a positive way, through the work that one has achieved through their process to make the world, a community, or a town a better place" (Chris, personal correspondence, 2014). In this definition, Chris sees success similar to Jennifer in that success is seen as a process to work towards creating a better community and world, not just for personal reasons, but for others.

Luis views success as improvement and as a process of improving and learning. He feels like he is has already been successful. When asked when he felt successful, Luis responded "All the time". As he talked about success he spoke about how school success shouldn't only be measured by grades as there are outside factors that impact whether a student can complete a course or earn a particular grade and all of that reality should be recognized,

> I'm being successful already. I think. The things I have done. Sometimes I stopped being in school and struggled and not getting the best grades. But just by being in school and finishing one class, you're doing sometimes better than others. Sometimes other people don't even try. I think that's success, you're doing it, even if your grades aren't the best. I don't think grades are the best tool to evaluate a person because it's not, it depends on your situation, your economic situation, your moral, your status, it depends on many stuff. So normally the knowledge you need to accomplish a job, you're going to get it when you need it. You're going to look in books, so by doing your best, you're already successful (Luis, personal interview, July 1, 2014).

Success for Luis means recognizing the process of working towards a goal even if it is

just one class at a time. Luis believes that a person can be successful simply if they try and do their best with the knowledge they have at the time and then continuing to learn and do better each time.

Claudia made a similar distinction between achievement and success that others alluded to, but she pinpointed some differences. Like others, Claudia sees success as a never-ending process,

> Achievement and success are so much alike, but yet different. I guess success is kind of like that pat on the back that you're doing good, you're doing good. You're not stuck. I do believe in taking breaks, but I also believe in keep on going. You know take a little breather now if you need to, but keep going, keep going and I feel like success is you're still going. It's never ending. I don't think success has a point whereas achievements are points you reach (Claudia, personal interview, July 18, 2014).

Here, Claudia states how she believes achievements are points you reach, but similar to Luis, Claudia believes that success is a process. Sometimes the process does include breaks or times for reflection, but she feels that even if a person is moving slow or takes a break that is an indicator of success.

Success as Student Development. In this section, I highlight Ximena (Cedar CC) who described the ways in which she learned new skills and pushed herself out of her comfort zones by participating in college through classroom experiences, activities, and clubs. Here, she shared active involvement proved valuable to her personal and academic development. Involvement in college life helped her succeed and the transformation that resulted from these experiences can be seen as a form of success.

Ximena began to get involved on campus and in her community during high school after meeting a social worker. She continued to be involved on campus at her community college. She then described success as being open to new experiences and pushing herself to grow as a student leader on her campus,

> I still have times where I'm public speaking, even for M.E.Ch.A. It's sort of getting me out of my comfort zone during our club meetings. It's a lot of officers talking to the members, but I decided I wanted to hear members talk too you know. So I opened up discussion for them. I know yesterday when we met I had them discuss, what does it mean to be American? Or how do you define America? And how did everybody discuss about that. And since it was my first time doing a discussion I was really nervous with public speaking and I got through it and a lot of people gave me positive feedback about it and I look forward to making more open discussions about that (Ximena, personal interview, October 10, 2014).

Ximena further reflected on her experiences in community college in her written *testimonio.* She found that being involved with helped her stay on path to reach her goals,

> During my first quarter, I only attended my classes and went home right afterwards. In result of that I missed out on campus events and club activities. However, during my second quarter I slowly started visiting the Outreach, Diversity and Equity Center. I was introduced to more students by one of my favorite advisers and because of him I was getting more involved with a club called M.E.Ch.A. Not only did getting involved help me out socially, but academically. My academic status was improving since I have been building connections with students and exchanging information on how to receive help

(Ximena, personal correspondence, 2014).

Here Ximena credits her involvement in school activities, particularly M.E.Ch.A. and the Diversity and Equity Center to helping her improve academically. Being involved in these groups and organizations allowed her to build connections, to exchange information with other students, and to build a community of support.

Success as Responsibility. Some students spoke of success in relation to a responsibility they carry for themselves, their families and communities. I use the *testimonios* of Ximena (Cedar CC), Kelly (Spruce CC), and Gabriela (Fir CC) to show specific examples of success as responsibility to one's family or community.

For example, Ximena described her motivations for success coming from being a role model to her sister,

> I mean mainly just transferring that's my big concern right now and then all I really care about is helping my sister because she didn't grow up a lot with my dad so she really didn't know much about him. So I feel like, I'm not like obligated, but I feel like I have to help her in a way you know. I don't know really how to describe it, but either way to her I'm a role model even though she seems like a tougher person than me. But I can see where there's times when she really does need support (Ximena, personal interview, October 10, 2014).

Although Ximena mentions that her sister seems like a tough person, Ximena understood that her sister did not have someone to look up. She also thinks that one of the best things she can do to support her sister is to set an example. Thereby, ensuring that her success of transferring and earning a degree is not something that only impacts her life, but her family's as well.

Kelly spoke about success and how she saw the struggle that her mom went through coming to the U.S. from Mexico related to her desire to work for a better life to honor her mother's sacrifices,

> Success, I guess it is different for everybody. For me success would be because of the background that I'm living with my mom. My mom being a single mother and living off of welfare and side jobs. For me success is to be able to achieve a different life than what my mom gave me (Kelly, personal interview, June 6, 2014).

Kelly knows what it is like to be poor and to have constraints and although she spoke extensively of the challenges and contention she and her mother experienced at times, she also knew her mother sacrificed a lot to give her children the best as a single mother. There were times when her mother didn't understand why she was going to school, but Kelly still continued with her plan with the hope her mother would understand one day.

Gabriela viewed success as a responsibility to her community as she discussed in the section on achievements for the future. She hopes to encourage more people from her community to go on to finish high school and attend college. But when she spoke about her success thus far, she discussed the impact that going to school has made on her son.

> Well when I got my GED, I got my associate's, again grades and my son because the way he talks and you know let's say. Especially my psychology or biology classes I've taken. I would study with him. I would use flashcards and say, 'You know read me this and then the answers are going to be in front of you and then if it matches up you say if I'm right or wrong.' And he actually got some stuff out of it too. You ask him a question and he will elaborate a lot of things about it, which

> makes me wow! Look what I've done to him! That makes me happy. (Gabriela, personal interview, August 8, 2014).

Responsibility to Gabriela has different meaning. To her, it's not only about her community, and her family, but also about her son. During the time Gabriela shared her *testimonio*, she was pregnant with her second child, but was prepared to transfer. She repeatedly speaks of how she wants her son to be proud of her which he has already expressed when he tells others people about how his mom goes to school.

Success as Transformation. *Testimonios* also show how success can be defined as transformation. The process of transformation is more than the ways students navigate through school, but also how students navigate through life. Success then is related to both academic and personal experiences. The *testimonios* that illustrate success as personal transformation are Miguel (Pine CC), Kelly (Spruce CC), Claudia (Cedar CC), Felicia (Fir CC), and Cecilia (Cedar CC).

Success for Miguel is described as personal transformation and how he navigated through particular challenges like discrimination and how he overcame other obstacles he encountered.

> I went from bullied to top dog. I faced discrimination. I faced all these different situations, I faced, in middle school. I was kind of involved in a school gang. I got in that and got out of that and managed alright. I've beaten addiction to cigarettes, I've beaten addiction to alcohol. I mean it wasn't to the point to where everyone knew that I was, like withdraw, but I'd say so, I've overcome obstacles, I've overcome myself, my addictions, my personal ego, demons, pride, what not, for what I've convinced myself at the moment was for the better good. But yeah I'd

> say so (Miguel, personal interview, July 14, 2014).

Here, Miguel discussed being addicted to smoking and alcohol and how many people didn't realize he struggled with substance abuse. Miguel described that transformation came when he decided he wanted to overcome the personal challenges, like his addictions and for him it meant giving up old patterns. Transformation for him meant to do something different.

In her written *testimonio*, Kelly shared how she knew when she achieved success. She stated, "True success occurs when you have come closer to realizing the best version of yourself while overcoming obstacles, yet doing something you love. Furthermore, during the process, the skills and tools are obtained that enable you to help and empower family, friends, society and the self" (Kelly, personal correspondence, 2014). In this definition of success, Kelly described success as being tied to a process of becoming a better person and doing things you love to do. She recognizes that there are tools a person can pick up throughout life that will assist them to empower themselves and the people around them either directly or indirectly. For example, possible tools that a person can acquire include leading by example. When younger siblings see how going to school makes a positive impact on a person, it may inspire those watching her to pursue their own path.

Claudia views success as personal transformation because she feels empowered in her abilities as a student and recognizes the growth she has made personally from being in school. Claudia states,

> Like I'm not stuck, I'm not in one place. I see the growth that I can and I do stuff to get there like I go to tutoring after class. I'm more involved in my community.

> I'm more committed to my self-defense class that shows me I'm dedicated to something that is going to give me an achievement later on you know? (Claudia, personal interview, July 18, 2014).

Earlier, Claudia described how success was a process that is ongoing and sometimes requires a period of reflection where it appears that a person is stopped or moving slower. According to Claudia, as long as an individual did not give up and kept moving towards their goals, they can be seen as successful. She also made the distinction between achievement and success and how they differ in that achievement is a point you reach, but success can be a never-ending process as long as a person keeps moving towards their goals.

Felicia briefly described success as a process of transformation because of her desire to go to school, even though she used to doubt what she would get out of it.

> So before, I guess behind all the dreams and the barriers that I had before pursuing higher education, I always wanted to go to school. But I didn't know how and I also didn't find any interest because I don't like any, if you ask me, I pretty much don't like any subject (laughs). So I was like ok. I don't like school. I don't like reading. I don't like writing. I don't like science but I love learning so I think when I open my mind and I say, I ok I am going to try new things, I can not have a fixed mindset, I got to try (Felicia, personal interview, July 31, 2014).

Felicia makes the distinction that learning does not always take place in a school setting. She didn't always like school, but she likes learning and this was enough for her to allow herself to be open to new possibilities. Success for her then came from being open to new possibilities and continuing with higher education despite her reservations.

When asked about the times she has felt successful, Cecilia described a recent experience and how her life changed quickly in a matter of months. She talked about in the end of chapter 6 how she experienced violence and thought success was the little things and how she overcame Success then to Cecilia means that she managed to survive the personal challenge of dealing with a domestic violence situation. Success was found in the little things and in the everyday joys of appreciating "the little things" such as having a roof over her head, a bed, buying her own couch and buying her own car. Cecilia views success as a process of transformation that is found in the journey through life. If institutions of higher education, and those who work there, do not work to welcome students to bring their whole selves and to realize the best versions of themselves, then how well are these institutions serving students? And what are the institutions reinforcing and what are the students learning about the ways they can be successful?

Summary: (Re)Defining Achievement and Success

In this chapter, I focused on the ways in which Latina/o community college students define and perceive achievement and success based on their academic and personal lived experiences. Many times the definitions of achievement and success were based on academic and personal experiences throughout their lives. Below I summarize these findings.

Achievement

Students expressed a strong desire to prove people wrong. Jessica (Pine CC) stated that she wanted to prove "them" wrong, but "them" was more specific to the people that told her that she couldn't do well in college based on her past experiences in

school. Alexis (Cedar CC), found herself working with young women trying to motivate them to reach beyond the limits that she felt were imposed on Latina/o students in the community where she attended school. In order to prove "them" or to prove the misconceptions and stereotypes wrong, Alexis believed it was necessary that students have examples of good role models. She also believed that students needed support from people who genuinely care for them.

Some students in this study, also indicated how achievement can be found in the ways or how a person overcomes personal challenges. Jessica (Pine CC) described achievement as a process of learning. She described the process of learning as a process of transformation. Transformation is learning from one's mistakes and learning from mistakes or rather past experiences is never ending.

Griselda described achievement on a personal level and as being blended with her academic achievements. She talked about how earning her Associates of Arts Degree could be seen as an achievement. She also saw achievement as things she did on a day-to-day such as getting by as a single mother going to college and challenges with transportation to school by bus, finances and caring for her son.

When achievement is only seen as getting a high GPA or attaining a degree, it becomes easy to dismiss the ways in which students over come obstacles and learn important lessons in places outside of school. It also dismisses the ways in which academically an achievement can be improvement over time. Gabriela (Fir CC) described how she set an academic goal and reached it. Once she would get to a point of the first academic goal she set, she would set another goal and keep going. For example, Gabriela pointed out to how she transitioned from ESL classes to college and university

transferable courses and once she reached that achievement she continued on to set and work towards new goals.

Kelly (Spruce CC) and Jennifer (Cedar CC) defined of their achievements as graduating from high school. Kelly previously described that, given her background as the oldest in her family and the first to go to school in the U.S., that graduating high school was a challenge, but she accomplished the goal. In another case, Jennifer used to see herself as a failure. Although she was enrolled in AP courses throughout high school, due to her undocumented status, she was denied scholarships that were previously offered to her to attend a four-year university. Looking back and reflecting as she shared her *testimonio*, she shared that graduating high school represented a huge accomplishment and she was happy with the way her path turned out.

In the last sub-section for achievement, the students in this study defined the achievements they would like to make in the future. Jessica (Pine CC) discussed finishing school, getting a job and being able to support her single mother and to "repay" her. Gabriela (Fir CC) described the big and small achievements she wanted to make for her family. These achievements included attaining a Bachelors degree and at minimum a Masters degree. Gabriela also described an achievement as supporting her family and being able to serve her community that is composed of indigenous Mexicana/os. Felicia (Fir CC) echoed that family is central to her idea of responsibility More specifically, she defined achievement as having a family of her own one day. She also expressed an interest to continue to work with and serving the Latino immigrant community.

Success

The messages of success that students describe indicate a disconnect from what

these students perceive society imposes on them and how students perceive themselves. Alexis (Cedar CC) observed that society places value on money and prestige. She also pointed out that in higher education students are assigned value based on what they study or the profession they pursue. Alexis resisted this definition and stated that she saw success as reaching an achievement or goal without 'losing yourself' and being genuinely happy with the life one lives.

Jennifer (Cedar CC) saw success as a process measured in how a person changed for the better. Chris (Alder CC) further described success as the ability to affect other people and one's community in a positive way. Luis (Pine CC) also stated that success is process of working toward your goals. Due to success being a process, Luis then felt successful all the time. Claudia (Pine CC) described success as a never-ending process. She viewed success as being never ending, even if a person gets stuck they can take the time to reflect and then move forward. Success then means that a person does not give up and keeps going. Success then is a process that has no end point. When compared to achievement, achievements are described as having endpoints that mark where a goal was attained. Success is ongoing, it can be found in moments of reflection, when a person is moving towards a goal, academic and personal or it can be found in overcoming the challenges one experiences on a day-to-day.

Ximena (Cedar CC) shared how when she first began school she wasn't involved, but in the second term she enrolled, she became involved with M.E.Ch.A. Being involved with M.E.Ch.A and the diversity and equity center was important for Ximena because it helped her stay connected. Through her involvement she found community and support More importantly to her she established peer networks with students who shared

information about how to navigate school. She used the support and information to navigate through her community college. As a result, her grades improved and she remained a student leader on her campus.

Students also viewed success as a responsibility to ones family and community. Ximena (Cedar CC), Kelly (Spruce CC) and Gabriela (Fir CC) all described success as being a role model to younger siblings, or in Gabriela's case to her son. Ximena saw her role as paving the way to higher education for her younger sister expressed a strong desire to make her single mother proud. Kelly, like Ximena, was also raised by a single mother and although there was tension in their relationship about Kelly attending college, Kelly still felt responsible for doing in well in order to help her family.

Gabriela described an experience where her son was helping her study and in reading her flashcards was learning what she was learning. She was emotional when describing this experience. Her son then drives her to continue on her path and process of transformation as she continues to defy family and community limitations imposed on her as an indigenous Mexican (Purépecha) woman. Gabriela also saw her responsibility to her community as doing well and setting a good example for other young women to follow. More importantly to Gabriela she felt responsible to do well because of her son.

CHAPTER 7

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to extend the research done on Latina/os in community colleges by looking at pre-college and community college experiences and how these experiences shaped students' educational goals. It also sought to examine Latina/os community college students' definitions of academic achievement and success from their perspectives. The desire to redefine achievement and success was central to my work because education literature continues to reinforce particular processes Latina/o students must take in order to be considered successful (Conchas, 2006; Gándara and Contreras, 2009; Malagón and Alvarez, 2010). Therefore, it is necessary that the experiences of current Latina/o community college students be heard, especially where and how they define what success is in their lives.

To do so, I adopted the conceptual framework utilizing Critical Race Theory (CRT), Latina/o Critical Theory (LatCrit) and Chicana Feminist Theory. By utilizing *testimonio* as method, I was able to draw upon a tradition rooted in social justice through storytelling in order to hear the voices of those who are marginalized. In the case of my study, this research looks at the life experiences of students who remain among some of the most marginalized in higher education, Latina/o community college students.

This study is based on the experiences of fourteen Latina/o community college students in Washington State. I sought to understand their personal and academic experiences throughout their lives. I specifically wanted to understand the schooling experiences, including before these students attended community college, whether they attended school in the United States' K-12 or their country of origin. I also wanted to

gain a deeper understanding of what the students experienced while in community college. This required looking at both their academic and personal experiences. Finally, I sought to redefine achievement and success based on their lived experiences by understanding how they defined achievement and success in their own day to day lives. My interest in this last part was to redefine the way achievement and success are defined and measured in higher education by incorporating students' own perspectives and goals.

While much of the research in higher education claims to focus on the successes rather than failures of Latina/o high school and college students, the definitions of success and achievement often leave high school and community college students to be defined as unsuccessful or low achieving. (Gandara and Contreras, 2009; Conchas, 2006) For example, in Gandara and Contreras (2009), they looked at a group of Puente students who were in high school. They divided the ways in which they spoke about these students into four categories with high achievers being in "Category 1," "Category 1 students are high achievers with good grades, generally good test scores and other evidence of good effort". The lowest category, or " Category 4" they defined as "Finally, Category 4 students commonly have a history of low performance as well as low effort, but their teachers or counselors believe that with help they are capable of performing at a higher level" (Gandara & Contreras, 2009, p. 152). Although they looked at a particular program in a high school, the ways in which the authors defined who makes it to college is concerning, "Latino students who defy expectations and make it to a four-year college equipped to complete a degree differ in many ways from their Latino peers who are not as educationally successful" (Gandara & Contreras, 2009, p. 246). The authors point out that perhaps Latina/os who go to a four-year college directly after high school come from

a higher family socio-economic status. Reinforcing these types of narrow definitions doesn't allow room for other definitions of what achievement and success means to students who are marginalized or those who don't fit into these narrow categories or definitions.

Freire (1970) talks about how through education the oppressed can rise and work for the humanization of not only themselves, but also the oppressor. To me this is the hope that *testimonio* provides, the possibility of humanizing our collective experiences. I utilized *testimonio* as method in order to gain a deeper understanding of these students lived experiences. Through *testimonio*, I sought to better understand challenges students faced and the support they identified in their lives. Finally, I wanted to redefine achievement and particularly success from the students' perspective and how the students see success in their lives.

Through this research I found that students experience many transformational moments in their pre-college experiences. These transformational moments inside and outside of school influence the path a person takes towards their academic and personal goals. Martin (2007) calls these moments, educational metamorphoses in order to recognize that change is a process.

Chapter Four. Chapter four on pre-college experiences looks at the students experiences prior to community college. Students described many transformational moments that indicate how these students have resisted dehumanization or the moments they have felt they were made to feel less than others due to their race, gender, sexuality, immigration status or language. For example, in early experiences in ESL courses feelings of dehumanization are prevalent. ESL courses and programs are described as

isolating and lacking in support. Thus from these experiences, it can be seen that more support needs to be offered to students in ESL programs and in their transitioning to classes that can assist them in preparing for community college.

In high school, these students struggled to fit in culturally and socially. Students also struggled to find where they belonged as Latina/os. Some of the students in this study, for example Felicia, felt bullied due to their immigrant status or knowledge of English. The struggle to fit in culturally as Alexis described led students on different paths. Some found solace in their peer groups. Many students identified the importance of a caring counselor, teacher or family member. Claudia's experience of having a counselor notice her struggling due to the death of her father and encouraging her to do Running Start is one example of a caring relationship between a counselor and a student.

The mentors and supportive people the students identified included family members, teachers, counselors, school staff and friends. People who supported these students early on speaks to the importance of having caring individuals in students' lives. According to Valenzuela (1999) caring individuals can make a tremendous impact on the lives of Mexican-American students. Claudia (Pine CC), along with other students in this study, experienced academic and personal challenges. After the murder of her father during middle school, Claudia believed that if it weren't for her high school, which believed in her and provided information for a different path, she wouldn't be where she is today. These caring individuals in student's lives consistently planted seeds in order to help guide, motivate and inspire many of these students to be where they are today.

This finding of the importance of having caring individuals in a student's life was consistent across these students' experiences whether they were enrolled in AP courses,

left school and returned to finish a GED (as was the case with Gabriela (Fir CC) and Nancy (Pine CC) or were students who primarily completed schooling in another country. Support from caring individuals was necessary for these students to navigate school and life in order to make the transition to community college. Support particularly from parents or family was also an important finding. As Ximena's *testimonio* described how her mother would stay up late while Ximena studied was a display of solidarity, caring and love. Ximena was raised by a single mother, but she wasn't the only student who was. Kelly, Griselda, Jessica, and Claudia were all also raised by single mothers and even when Kelly for example described how her mother wasn't supportive in ways she would like, Kelly still felt a responsibility to her family and to make them proud. Other students who describe their family identified support from siblings, uncles, aunts and friends who were like their family. Cecilia, as an immigrant from Mexico who doesn't have any family close geographically, identified her counselor and teacher, a married couple as people who provided her support and cared for her. When she describes the relationship with them and how they offered her shelter and food alongside the academic support, she described them as being like her family. Support and care can come from a variety of places and people, but it is one of the most essential ingredients to ensure that a student is doing well academically and personally.

Chapter Five. In chapter five, students shared their experiences in community college, both academically and personally. The students in this study doubted their abilities based on their past academic performance in high school, their performance on the Compass placement exam or because they came from ABE, ESL or GED programs. Again, caring individuals in student's lives can make a tremendous difference on whether

a student stays in college or not. This was the case for Cecilia who dealt with a domestic violence situation. The people that supported Cecilia were her teachers in community college.

Having teachers in community college that encouraged learning and growth from their students was transformational in helping students to learn to believe in themselves. Students spoke to how they would gain more confidence in themselves and their academic ability because they were challenged in a good way. Kelly's experience with her Anthropology teacher is a good example of how a teacher used various methods and engaged with students. This teacher also was excited about what they were teaching and tied it back to students in a personal way by always relating the subject matter to social justice. This experience moved Kelly to continue taking classes with the same professor. These types of transformative learning experiences affected students in a positive way and gave them new confidence in their abilities. Students also learned about new possibilities to study as they moved along in their schooling in community college.

As for community college experiences, special attention needs to be given to students in programs like ABE, GED and ESL. The reason that students in these programs need more support is that they make up the majority of students who attend community college, but are often marginalized and seen as separate from the community college experience. Looking at what can be learned from students' lived experiences and the ways terms are defined in higher education is essential to understanding the ways in which certain groups of underrepresented students are marginalized further in higher education. Levin (2007) questions the term "nontraditional student" in his research on community colleges (Levin, 2007, p. 5). Community college students are often

marginalized and called nontraditional students and assigned a status based on this classification (Levin, 2007, p. 11). "Nontraditional students are the rule, not the exception. These students actually comprise the majority of community college students in credit programs. In some sectors, nontraditional students are defined as those over age twenty-four who are engaged in some form of post-secondary learning activities--a definition synonymous with "adult learners" (Levin, 2007, p. 23). From the students' *testimonios* who went through these particular programs, it can be seen that when they are given opportunities and information, they often transition into university transferrable courses.

Finally, like Chapter Four that looked at pre-college experiences, the importance of caring individuals is also seen in Chapter Five when students described community college. I wanted to see how they navigated through college and learn more about their personal lives. Students shared how they often faced challenges like struggling to pay for school, facing racism and discrimination, dealing with violence, as well as learning to navigate through community college.

When looking at the students who shared stories about violence, I reflected. I did not anticipate that students in this study would be very open about their personal lives that involved experiencing or surviving violence. There are some topics that we as students, researchers, and educators don't talk about in higher education research, namely, about what students face in school and what students undergo in their personal lives. It is expected that students not bring their personal experiences inside the classroom or leave them at the gates of a university in many instances. But keeping silent may prove costly for many students, impacting their personal and academic lives and futures if they

were to drop out of school, but mainly if they don't receive the support they need. The silence around violence can be noticed when a student stops attending class for no reason. When a student isn't aware that support or resources exist on a college campus or if they have no safety networks at school with peers, staff or faculty it is easier for no one to notice. When faced with certain societal conditions, people who attend college (at any level of education) are not immune to experiencing injustice, inequality and violence in our society. Although I did not ask questions specific to experiencing or surviving violence it was a theme that came up for some of the students. Even if it was only one student, I believe this matter needs addressing because it is significant when a student speaks about violence and lets it be known. This also means there are many more students who won't speak or ask for help. If we are to better support Latina/o community college students, it requires learning more about where they are coming from and what they are going through while in college.

For undocumented students, an additional layer is added as community college students are already marginalized within the caste system of higher education. For undocumented community college students, the marginalization and dehumanization is felt deeply because opportunities continue to be systematically denied no matter how much an individual student, like Gabriela, does well and strives to do better. Financial resources are limited for these students. In addition sharing one's status in order to receive support and assistance can be too big of a risk to take.

Community college students are marginalized in higher education, but the stories of those who are undocumented are further marginalized. The voices of those who are "undocumented" are often not heard, especially if they attend a community college.

While there has been increased literature and research in higher education in the area of undocumented students in Washington (Contreras, 2009), sometimes the literature takes on an individualistic approach that reinforces meritocracy by deciding and defining who is more deserving of help and support. The research also emphasizes or focuses on undocumented students who are undergraduates at four-year universities. By using meritocracy to define who is deserving of legalization, it leaves out those who may not fit these narrow definitions of *achievement* or *success.* By not critiquing the system in place or these definitions, including the research in education that demarcates "good" students/immigrants, undocumented students' voices are and will continue to be marginalized.

"Good" undocumented people, particularly students, are then portrayed as those who have "played by the rules," "were brought here at no fault of their own" and mainly associated with being in a four-year university. For example, Contreras (2009) describes undocumented students who go to college as those who figured it out and succeeded. She states, "Undocumented students who are savvy enough to navigate high school and complete the requirements for college are still left with the considerable challenge of financing their higher education" (Contreras, 2009, p. 611). She continues to describe the accounts she will share as those that represent resilience and success Of the seven community college students in Contreras' study, six ended up transferring, including one who was in the process of transferring (Contreras, 2009, p. 615). While transferring is one way to look at success, there are others ways that undocumented students themselves can define achievement and success and I believe that through these three students who shared their experiences of being undocumented, those differences can be seen. For

example, Jennifer described graduating high school as an achievement, although she was eligible for a university out of high school. Although she would get down on herself for not attending one, she also expressed how she knew that not going straight to a university was her desire. There were other factors at play that prevented her from going to one, including institutional barriers and larger societal ones. To place the blame on any individual student for not trying hard enough reinforces meritocracy and is unfair because it fails to recognize systemic and structural inequalities in place that reinforces oppression of marginalized groups, communities and students.

Chapter six. In chapter six, I sought to learn more about the ways in which Latina/o community college students defined achievement and success in their lives. From their *testimonios*, I observed a theme throughout all of their *testimonios*. Success is an ongoing process of transformation.

While I attempted to redefine achievement from the student's experiences, the best way that achievement can be described is as goals reached or challenges overcome along the journey. Some students defined achievement as "proving them wrong." This is similar to what Solórzano and Ornelas (2002) highlighted as a motivation for community college students in their study. The idea of "proving them wrong" was rooted in these students' desire to change perceptions that family, teachers or society as a whole had placed on them/us.

Achievement was seen as doing well or improving grades while one is in school. Examples of this included when a student transitioned from ABE, GED or ESL into college transferrable courses, like Cecilia and Gabriela's *testimonios* demonstrate. When a student completed a course or when a goal was reached that students had set for

themselves are other examples of this type of achievement. Claudia provided an example of this when she completed her CNA certificate, but then decided once she reached that achievement she could set a new goal and keep going. Gabriela took a similar approach, for instance when she completed her GED, she decided she would continue on to do ESL courses and then transitioned into university transferrable courses, once she finished her AA, she set her sights on transferring and kept going

An important achievement that Latinas in this study identified from their pre-college experiences is the fact that they graduated high school. For Kelly, being the first in her family to graduate from high school was a huge accomplishment. Jennifer who is undocumented also identified high school graduation as an achievement. Jennifer stated that she used to see herself as a failure but realized that she had accomplished a lot even though she didn't go straight to college after high school. She was forced to take a year off after high school graduation in order to work and save money to attend community college. This achievement was important to recognize because when the dominant ideas of who is more valuable in society based on institutions of higher education they attend or the prestige of an institution is tied to their value as humans, it is harmful.

When the students in this study were asked to define success, many stated they saw achievement and success as similar, but all students had more to say about their thoughts and ideas around success. Their ideas have provided a more detailed and multi-layered redefinition of success than the one I provided for achievement. From their *testimonios*, success can then be defined as: 1) a never-ending process of transformation; 2) the work one engages in to be the best version of themselves; 3) Pushing oneself out of their comfort zone or trying new experiences; 4) the ability to effect other people, one's

family, one's community, and the world in a positive way; and finally 5) when a person keeps moving towards their goals and never gives up.

While all students described how success is a process, it was Claudia (Pine CC) who stated success is a "never-ending" process. Success, in this light, means that even if mistakes are made, one can learn from them and keep going. The work one engages in to be the best version of one's self is seen as the desire to learn more from life not only from school. Ximena (Pine CC) specifically defined these moments as her process of learning to become a leader in her school and community. All the students displayed some example how school experiences through pre-college experience or their community college pushed them to get out of their comfort zone and try new experiences. Success can be seen as, according to Chris (Alder CC), the ability to make a change even in a small way. Even small changes show if a person is successful. This change can begin within oneself and spread like a pebble dropped in a pond. Transformation and change has a ripple affect not just on the person, but one's family, community and beyond. Finally many students saw success in the very fact that they keep going to school and did not give up in light of the challenges they all faced to get to community college. For these fourteen Latina/o students, success is a responsibility to uplift themselves and others in their transformational journeys as they continue schooling through the community college. No matter if their schooling ends, without a degree or certificate or with one, their successes need to be recognized, heard and celebrated.

Limitations

This project is a qualitative study of fourteen Latina/o students and focused on one geographical area of Washington State. I recruited students from community colleges

where I had connections and these community colleges only reflect experiences from students at five community colleges in the greater Puget sound area. This meant that the students in this study are generally from the western part of Washington State. Thus, I can't imply that these experiences apply to all Latina/o community students or all community colleges, however, these stories are significant in showing that the academic and personal experiences of Latina/o community college have commonalities and differences. In short, my study is not generalizable to all Latina/o community college students, but it can be used across the United States to improve the practices that institutions, faculty, and staff employ when working with Latina/o community college students to support them and move them towards their educational and life goals. For example, what would a placement test look like if policymakers were to develop a more fair way of assessing students.

Research on Latina/o community college students, is virtually non-existent in Washington State. There are large populations of Latina/os in the Eastern part of Washington that have lived there for generations including newly arrived immigrants. Although my intention was to do a broader study and include students from Washington's eastside, I did my best under the time constraints and geographical limitations. In order to understand the experiences of Latina/o community college students on a statewide level required more community college student's voices. As a whole, research on Latina/o community college students is lacking across the United States. The research it typically is not qualitative in nature. While a mixed methods study could've provided a broader look at Latina/o community college experiences, by reaching more students through a survey and supplemented with the stories of Latina/o students, I

believe that listening to these in-depth stories is important work. This qualitative study, which used *testimonio* as method, provided a rich and layered analysis of Latina/o community college students' experiences to better understand their current experiences. While this study has limitations, it is important to recognize this study's importance and contributions to higher education moving forward.

Implications and Future Directions for Research

In this study, I examined the experiences of fourteen Latina/o community college students in Washington State to gain a better understanding of community college students' lived experiences inside and outside of school. I specifically wanted to learn more about the educational trajectory that led them to community college as well as what they experienced while being currently enrolled community college students. As I've mentioned throughout, higher education research typically does not center the voices of those who are currently in community college.

From these students' pre-college experiences, more information needs to be available to ESL students to reduce and eliminate any possible isolation in their early schooling experiences. Students also indicated they felt bullied or that they didn't fit in to cultural or social groups. It would be interesting to look more into what is being done to train teachers and school staff to facilitate creating safe and welcoming learning environments and look at schools that are doing transformative work in this area. What supported students in doing well in school was having caring individuals along the way, thus more should be looked at to support students in their personal lives and connect them and their families to resources in the community.

When some of the students in this study shared their community college experiences, I saw the great need to support students in GED, ABE and ESL programs. These programs are often seen as separate and lower in status compared to courses and programs that encourage transferring to a university. More resources need to be dedicated to these programs because they are critically in supporting students who may decide to pursue a goal they didn't ever think of previously. Information on how students can transition to other courses or programs should they chose to do so also needs to be available. The students in GED, ABE or ESL classes have limited options when it comes to decide upon a career. If there are not systems in place to ensure that they receive information in a timely matter, students will either stop out or disconnect from school. Information on how to apply and prepare for college needs to be readily available.

When students doubt themselves, they may be more likely not to persist in their college classes. If there were different tools for student assessment in entrance placement exams and a move towards providing more information and counseling to students early in the process, rates of completion of classes in programs would improve. If standardized tests are the basis of judging where a student should place, students should have preparation for these tests and multiple opportunities to take these tests. For example, Cecilia's story showed that her professor supported her bypassing a class she should have taken. Perhaps instructors can be given authority to recommend a student to skip a class or petition for a different one. Ultimatley assessments of this type shouldn't be used to test a students' potential.

Community College students need real support from the institutions they attend. Real support means quality counselors that are culturally competent and aware. Hiring

practices for community college instructors needs to be more focused on encouraging diversity at the level of full time tenured faculty. This would ensure that students have teachers that they can identify with. Ethnic studies should be offered at the community college level as well as during K-12. If community colleges are the most diverse and their administration speaks to committing themselves to diversity and fostering a welcoming community for its students, resources, funding and curriculum offerings are needed to back up their efforts.

This study suggests that more work needs to be done around redefining achievement and success in higher education in order to move towards policy efforts that encourage students to be able to succeed in ways that are important to their lives. This work can hopefully influence community college leaders to adopt more holistic approaches to their counseling and teaching practices in order to create more relevant, meaningful and humanizing educational experiences.

The work to redefine the definitions of achievement and success is necessary to show that there are multiple pathways that a student can take in pursuing their higher education. To redefine these terms also means that definitions that reinforce meritocracy and narrow pipelines do not work for many underrepresented students, particularly community college students. There are no easy ways to draw these boundaries; the diversity of the experiences and lives of the students that shared their *testimonios* are as diverse and complex as Latina/os identity is in the U.S. Community College students begin their higher education journey in different ways, but what remains clear is that there is no direct pathway or "right way" to succeed.

Levin (2007) questions the term "nontraditional student" in his research on community colleges (Levin, 2007). Community college students are often marginalized and called nontraditional students and assigned a status based on this classification (Levin, 2007). "Nontraditional students are the rule, not the exception. These students actually comprise the majority of community college students in credit programs. (Levin, 2007, p. 23). This means that even terms that are widely used and unquestioned should be examined and possibly redefined.

The definitions of achievement and particularly the term success, including the way these are measured, do not capture the full picture and stories of Latina/o students in community colleges. If their voices are included in defining these terms, perhaps the approach institutions take to measuring achievement and success as well as providing support and services would shift. Previous research on Latina/o community college students captures the stories of students mainly when they transfer to a university or when someone who came from a community college attends graduate school (Rivas et al. 2007). This research is also important, and while not negative, it does place an emphasis as transferring being the success. Other possibilities are not discussed from the perspective of community college students. While transferring can be viewed as a success, it is not the only way that success should be defined. Students should decide for themselves how they wish to define themselves, lives and their futures and institutions would benefit from adopting broader measurements of student success. One way to do this is that institutions should look to adopt qualitative studies into their institutional measurements on retention and student success. The best way to learn about how to best work for these priorities is also to include student voices in the process.

To summarize, Latina/o students in community college face unique challenges in navigating their ways towards their educational goals. Due to the fact many community colleges students place into remedial classes, the time to degree is extended and students may not have the support they need academically to do well. In addition, students who do well in navigating their community college institutions have had support in various forms from teachers, counselors and peer networks. When thinking about what achievement and success means it is important to ask Latina/o community college students because their unique experiences are often not reflected or seen in higher education literature. The research on Latina/o student experiences while in community college becomes essential because too little is known and the majority of Latina/os in higher education are in community colleges across the U.S.

Due to the limited ways that achievement and success is often defined and measured, it is necessary to question these definitions, re-imagine them. Success should not only be defined based only on grade point averages or course completion. I asked myself when formulating this research, what is it that the numbers and statistics don't capture? During my time in the College of Education at the University of Washington, I took a course titled Race, Democracy and Transformative Education taught by Professor Deborah Kerr, I was challenged by her to ask when conducting research, "What is humanly at stake?" I also looked back to one of the essential texts that transformed my life, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* Paulo Freire (1970). Freire (1970) states that dehumanization is a process in which humanity is stolen and marks in a different way those who have stolen it. A distortion occurs that causes a struggle between those who feel less human. According to Freire, "In order for this struggle to have meaning, the oppressed must not, in seeking to

regain their humanity (which is a way to create it), become in turn oppressor of the oppressed, but rather restorers of the humanity of both" (Freire, 1970, p. 44). Furthermore, Freire (1970) argues that a classic relationship between the oppressed and the oppressor is an imposition of definitions or ideas the oppressed are often forced to internalize. The oppressed then internalize an image created for them by the oppressor (Freire, 1970,). While I am not stating that perhaps this is the intention of research done by some researchers in higher education who write about achievement and success, I believe that one can unintentionally use oppressive language and beliefs of the system that is embedded with inequalities. Often times this "buying in" is sub-conscious, but comes with real consequences. These consequences have meant using deficit language to define people and their experiences. Experiences, reinforcing dominant ideology about what achievement and success is in U.S. society, and also how upholding meritocracy and how opportunities for achievement and success are placed on an individual in the U.S. education system.

In addition to furthering the work I have begun, I want to develop a study that looks specifically at the experiences of students in community colleges who are enrolled in ABE, ESL and GED courses and programs in order to learn more about their educational trajectory and current experiences. As Levin (2007) showed in his work, showing that non-traditional students are truly traditional, researchers should continue to question and redefine terms such as traditional student and other terms that are commonly used in higher education. I came across Levin's work later in my dissertation process, but his research helped me see the importance of what I was doing in my own work. My research

gave me hope that through questioning and redefining what achievement, success and higher education is now something different is possible for our future.

Research as a Transformative Process for Equity and Social Justice

Through this journey as this dissertation shows and my own *testimonio,* I have been greatly influenced by the work of Professor Daniel Solórzano at UCLA**.** When I was in community college his work and the work of his students gave me hope and inspired me to defy the statistics. I, like the students in my research shared, feel that sometimes success is when you "prove them wrong". Before reading Professor Solórzano's work towards the end of my community college journey though, I recall two people and moments that changed my life.

I sit here writing from my hometown. I see my parents often now after being out of their home since I was 18 years old and away from my hometown the past ten years after I transferred out of Riverside Community College ten years ago. I realize now that a moment at home with them changed my life and also impacted this research in many ways. One day after school, when I was 15, I was looking for typing paper (for a typewriter) in an old desk my parents had in the hallway. I looked around and at the bottom of the desk that had been in our house before I was born. I caught a glimpse of a frame. I lifted up the papers covering it and saw that it was diploma in a broken frame. I read the diploma in disbelief and saw that it read, East Los Angeles Community College. It also had my father's name. Tomas Mario Sanchez has an associate's degree? I was in shock. My father went to college and earned a degree? I wasn't in shock that he went to college, but my question came from why didn't I know this? And more than that, why didn't he tell us? I looked downstairs at him, as he lay sleeping on a recliner as he still

does every afternoon. I know that when he wakes he will get ready to commute 60 miles to South Central Los Angeles to work the graveyard shift at the post office like he has done now for over 35 years. I walked downstairs slowly. I sat down and looked at him and when I asked, "Dad are you sleeping?" I knew I was waking him up, but I could not wait. He said his usual line, "I am just resting my eyes." Because I knew he was awake, I said, "Dad I found a diploma in the desk, you went to college? Why didn't you tell us you went to college?" He looked at me and said, "It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter." He continued to say, that the diploma didn't do anything for him in his current job. He shared with me how he had to work full time to take care of his family. I asked him if he was going to transfer. What did you want to do? He told me about how he planned to teach history at the high school level and be a coach. Then he didn't say much else and went to sleep again. We haven't talked about that moment since I was 15, but when he said that it didn't matter, part of me wanted to tell him it did matter and more than a degree or formal schooling mattering and dictating our value and worth in this society, I wanted to tell my dad that he mattered. He mattered and he matters for more than the fact that he graduated high school out of East LA or got an associate's degree. He matters even if he thinks he is just a laborer. Since that moment I realized I have been working to also make him proud although there have been challenges and differences. I matter too and not just because I went to college.

The second person that changed my life and impacted this trajectory in a major way was my former husband, who I have known since I was in middle school. Now after 20 years now he remains a part of my life. He was my best friend for many years and apart of much of this journey. Where I am now wouldn't have happened without his care

and support and that of his parents who took me into their home and accepted me as their daughter at age 18. Coming home recently reminded me of them because I drove by every place I lived before I moved away from Southern California and the last places I lived were with my former husband and his parents.

While I was in high school and prior to moving in with him and his family, my former husband/best friend had been sent to continuation school while we were in high school. From continuation school he was sent to an adult school located in portable classrooms on my high school campus. I remember him coming to meet me often standing outside of my high school's student government office where I had my last class of the day or could often be found doing work. He would wait standing next to campus security for the bell to ring so that he could meet me after school. I remember the times I would see him and he would see me before the bell rang to dismiss us for the day. There were moments when the timing was right and from the window I would see him and he would see me, I would pause, smile, and we would wave to each other. As I stood behind a window waving to him, he seemed so far away. I would think why am I here in school still and why is he not anymore. He later began RCC the same time I did because one day, a month before my high school graduation on the way back from him driving me to a scholarship banquet I told him I wouldn't be in a serious relationship with him unless he was going to school. As a 17-year old, I told him if people are going to be together they have to be going a similar direction and I want to go to college. He went to RCC the day after I told him that and took the placement test and enrolled and we were together after that for many years. He had been concerned when he said they wouldn't let him in college because he didn't have a high school diploma, but I had learned enough to know

that you just needed to be 18 to enroll.

Later, he earned his GED before I transferred to UCSC and we moved to Santa Cruz. I remember when I told him I was transferring that he should go take his GED test before we left because it was preventing him from getting jobs even though he was in community college too. He was nervous because of all his previous negative experiences with school, but I kept telling him he could do it. I knew he could pass the test. I reassured him of his abilities and knowledge. I learned from him how someone could have potential, could be extremely intelligent and motivated, but be in need of support and a good environment to thrive and contribute their ideas and talent. I remember the moment we stood outside in the driveway opening the envelope to his test results. He cried. He passed. I cried too. His mom cried later that day when he showed her. She put up his results on display close to where our photo from my high school prom was. Ever since that moment, I have thought ever since that moment, if that isn't an achievement or success I don't know what should be because I felt it is and it was. It would be more than 10 years before he transferred, but he has had stories of achievement and success long before that while he was in community college, just like I did. We both did.

We also both found care and support in one another and our relationship for a good part of my higher education journey and if there is one thing I learned from this dissertation and from the fourteen students is that having a caring and supportive community is necessary to staying in school My former husband and I found community. There were many times when we couldn't find the support we wanted or needed from our families who often didn't always understand what we were doing, we found it between us as a family, we found community and caring relationships with our peers and a few key

professors, but mostly from our community involvement in M.E.Ch.A at Riverside Community College and later as members of the Watsonville Brown Berets when we had moved after I was accepted to UC Santa Cruz.

As students and as humans, our achievements and success need to be seen in order for us to keep moving, more than that, we as people need to be seen, heard, cared for, supported and loved. We need to remind each other of our own humanity in a system that constantly has dehumanized us and we need to remember to celebrate every single achievement and success along our journeys.

In pursuing this Ph.D., I reaffirmed my responsibility and commitment to work for social justice particularly through education and to continue to help open the doors for those who will come next. My goal in pursuing a Ph.D. was to understand more about the students' experiences, but in this process, I humanized my own experiences, validating my purpose and life and perhaps now the experiences of my own immediate family, my father, my mother and siblings as we are all former students of California Community Colleges. From the students in this study, I felt I could understand more about the conditions that impacted my own trajectory and that of my parents, family, friends and classmates who often grew up with limited opportunities. Many of those around me, if we even went to college, attended a community college and often we didn't make it to transfer, to a certificate or even to complete a semester. The desire to learn more about community college students' experiences was the driving force that led me to pursue a Ph.D.

Like I and the students of this study shared in our *testimonio*, initially there were many people I wished to prove wrong, but then there came a point where I knew I had to

do this not because people said I couldn't but because of what I stand for and want to do with my own life. In order to realize what I stood for, I had to talk about more than what I was fighting against. I learned I stand for social justice, solidarity, and love. I think then it is essential in my own journey as a researcher to remember where I come from and knowing where I stand is essential to knowing myself as an academic, researcher, but mainly as a human.

Behar (1996) speaks of the journey of her becoming an anthropologist by beginning with remembering where she comes from.

> Loss, mourning, the longing for memory, the desire to enter into the world around you and having no idea how to do it, the fear of observing too coldly or too distractedly or too raggedly, the rage of cowardice, the insight that is always arriving late, as defiant hindsight, a sense of the utter uselessness of writing anything, yet the burning desire to write something, are the stopping places along the way. At the end of the voyage, if you are lucky, you catch a glimpse of a lighthouse, and you are grateful. Life, after all, is bountiful (Behar, 1996, p. 6)

After entering a Ph.D. program I felt I lost myself in the maze of academia and was confused about who I was supposed to be or how to become a good academic or Ph.D. student. This tension mixed with my background led me to question, which identities do I want to lay claim to and what does that imply? On a difficult day of writing, as there were many, a friend reminded me "Irene before you're a doctor, you are human." Behar (1996) continues on her previous comment, "But surely this is not the anthropology being taught in our colleges and universities? It doesn't sound like the stuff of which Ph.D.'s are made". For me this is not the education that is being taught in colleges and

universities and in some ways it is, but perhaps we have to scratch what is beneath the surface and go beyond what is in a book, or what a professor says and we must really interrogate the meaning and purpose of education. I know that my work to some may not look like the stuff in which Ph.D.'s are made of and I don't look like the type of person who makes it here, but I am here. I want to ensure that more people who were made to believe that they didn't deserve opportunities make it here as well. I also want to help push researchers to think about how they may reinforce meritocracy in their work and think about when they write about who deserves opportunities. When a researcher defines who is high achieving and who is successful, they are also defining who does not fit that definition and by default then who does not deserve opportunities.

I learned that I don't need to leave parts of myself outside the gates of the ivory tower in order to exist in it. I also learned how difficult it was for me to be a part of certain spaces given my background. Cruz (2001) states that there are multiple layers to the work Chicanas engage in while doing educational research,

> The project of reclamation for the Chicana education researcher is twofold: first, reclamation must be asserted through a politics of difference that emphasizes the local and multiple subjectivities of communities that are recognized as participating in a larger movement of participatory democracies. Second, a project of reclaiming histories and narratives must be committed to exposing how systems of power have privileged certain kinds of narratives that serve to undermine and invalidate others (Cruz, 2001, p. 662).

This journey to the Ph.D. and this dissertation was always a project of reclamation for myself and for our collective humanity. Through this experience, I have exposed how

in higher education, certain narratives, stories and definitions dominate and reinforce meritocracy and oppressive ideology that seeks to erase the experiences and lives of those who do not fit.

During many moments, this goal of a Ph.D. felt impossible, but it is my continued work and engagement with students, particularly community college students, that reminds me why I had to finish this degree. We need more people who not only look like us, but more people willing to commit to a lifetime of working for equity and access in higher education and social justice in society. I know there is more work to do and I will continue it from wherever I find myself. Education is transformation. In pursuing this Ph.D., I have transformed my own life, my son's, family's, and will make an impact on my community. I know I will continue to transform the world around me. I know my success has been the journey and will continue to be. In pursuing a Ph.D., I did what I set out to do and that was to use formal schooling and these degrees as tools to hopefully make a bigger impact as I work for social justice and continue to serve others for the rest of my life. Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa said, "I change myself, I change the world". One of my greatest successes now is leaving the University of Washington and this 15-year journey in higher education, completing this degree and most importantly knowing I have done exactly that and will continue to. Transformation is never ending. That is success.

Appendix A: *Testimonio* Protocol-Sample Questions

Background/Personal
What is your name?
How old are you?
Where were you born?
Where did you grow up?
Where is your family from?
What is your parent's level of education?
What do you/your parents do for work currently?
What are some other jobs your parents have held?
What do you identify as and why?
What languages do you speak?
Was English your first language?
How would you describe your family's (your) income level?
Are you the first in your family to attend college?
Do you have any siblings? If so how many?
Do you have children?
Did you qualify for free or reduced lunch while in school?
Are you the first in your family to attend college?

Educational Experiences (K-12)
Does anything stand out about your experiences in elementary or middle school? Can you tell me about anything in particular?
Do you remember learning English in school, can you tell me about it?
Describe your high school experience (What classes did you take? What are the subjects you enjoyed?)
What is the last Math course you took in high school?
What is the last English course you took in high school?
Can you recall your interactions with teachers or counselors in high school? Describe these experiences.
Did anyone encourage you to go to college? If so, who?
What types of activities were you involved with outside of school?
Sports?
Extra curricular
Community?
Did you work outside of school or are responsible for work in the home? (Taking care of siblings?)
Anything else you wish to add about high school?

Higher Education-Community College
When did you start college?
Did you always feel you would attend college?
Why did you decided to attend the particular school you are at? (Cost, proximity to home, family?)

Can you tell me about the COMPASS placement test? Where did you place? How did you feel after taking it?
How do you feel about your courses in community college? Are there any courses that are challenging? If so which ones and why?
Which courses do you enjoy in community college?
What is your goal or goals in attending community college?
How did you decide to pursue the goal(s) you are currently pursuing?
Who has been most helpful in influencing your career/academic goals (family, teachers, counselors, yourself, etc.) Why?
Did you face any challenges with pursuing higher education? How did you or how are you overcoming them?
How do you feel society views community colleges?
How do you feel society views students who attend community colleges?
How do you feel Latina/os are viewed or treated on your college campus?
Have you ever experienced discrimination or racism(inside or outside of school)?
Describe these experiences, why do you think these things happened?
How do you define your community? Do you see yourself as being in several communities? (If so which ones and why)?
Who is your support network? What do they help you with?
What are your plans for the future? Education? Work? Career?

Achievement/Success
In your own words, can you describe what achievement is to you?
In your own words, Can you describe what success is to you?
What kind of messages do you see at school around achievement and success? Where do you see these messages?
How do you define achievement in your own life?
How do you define success in your own life?
Can you describe the times you have felt successful in your life?
Can you name three achievements you have made in your life? Can you name three achievements you'd like to make in the future?
Anything else you would like to add/share?

Appendix B: Written *Testimonio* Achievement and Success Prompt

Written *Testimonio* Prompt
Please define what achievement and success means to you (academic/personal) and based on your own definition of achievement and success, please share a story about achievement and success as it relates to your life.

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