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A Qualitative Study of the Factors Impacting the College Transfer Experience of High Achieving Hispanic Graduates

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Achieving Hispanic Graduates

by
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Jennifer Bravo Candelaria

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"That which we persist in doing becomes easier to do, not that the nature of the thing has changed but that our power to do has increased" H.J. Grant. This is a quote that I saw in my keyboard class in high school. It is the quote that I contemplated many times during my doctoral process. It has taken a village to assist me in completing my coursework and finally my dissertation. I would like to thank first and foremost my Dad, my Mom, and my brother who have been my rocks and soulmates during my entire lifetime. Their support, encouragement, and prayers have assisted me in accomplishing my goals and dreams. I love you more than words can express.

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Abstract

A Qualitative Study of the Factors Impacting the College Transfer Experience of High Achieving Hispanic Graduates. Jennifer Bravo Candelaria, 2019: Applied Dissertation, Nova Southeastern University, Abraham S. Fischler College of Education and School of Criminal Justice. Keywords: High achieving, Hispanic, Latino, transfer, community colleges, successful, 2+2 articulation agreements, performance-based funding

The purpose of this qualitative investigation was to understand the factors impacting the college transfer experiences of high achieving Hispanic transfer graduates along their path to earning a bachelor's degree in less than six years in the Florida Public Post-Secondary System. Existing higher education literature places emphasis on Mexican born and Mexican American students since they make up the largest Hispanic group represented in the United States. The Hispanic community will be the largest minority group in the United States by the year 2060. It is vital for the social mobility and economic progress of Hispanics to earn a post-secondary education and have the necessary skills to be successful contributors to the national and global economies. The high achieving Hispanic transfer graduates who were interviewed in this study narrated their transfer experience, described barriers and challenges they faced during their undergraduate journey, and identified factors which contributed to their academic success. Hispanic students born in Cuba, Colombia, El Salvador, Peru, and Venezuela were interviewed. The study participants provided valuable suggestions for administrators and faculty in higher education to assist Hispanic students be successful. Having the psychological, social, and cultural needs of Hispanic students at the forefront when designing student success and retention programs will increase the degree completion rates of Hispanic students. Some of the suggestions made by the study participants included creating a university culture that promotes listening to student's needs, a welcome center for transfer students, and a mentoring program that would pair transfer students with current students to create a smoother transfer experience. Ultimately, this study hopes to expand and provide insight into the complexities of Hispanic students in the higher education system in the United States.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Hispanics are the fastest growing minority group in the United States (Pew Hispanic Center, 2009). By the year 2060, it is predicted that the percentage of Hispanics living in the U.S. will be approximately 119 million (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015), comprising 28.6% of the population. There are mixed races amongst the population of the Hispanic diaspora. Hispanics come from countries in Latin America, the Caribbean, and Spain, bringing with them different cultures, values, and socio-economic and professional backgrounds, as well as educational levels and aspirations. The majority of this migrating population will assimilate to American society in search of opportunities and to pursue their education.

Geertz Gonzalez (2010) discussed the importance of Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) understanding the different layers of complexities of their Hispanic students and how they identify based on their ethnicity. HSIs are higher education institutions which 25% of full-time students enrolled in their undergraduate programs identify themselves as Hispanics students (U.S. Department of Education, 2018a). Geertz Gonzalez (2010) maintained that, HSIs should assess their students and graduates' needs on an annual basis. Evaluating and asking current students' and recent graduates for input will assist HSIs to build programs that will take into consideration the diversity of their student population (Geertz Gonzalez, 2010). Flores and Park (2013) stated "demographics indicate that the nation's colleges and universities must prepare themselves, if they have not already done so, to serve a population that is more racially and ethnically diverse than at any other time in the nation's history" (p. 115). Moreover, Garcia and Dwyer (2018) discussed how HSIs are important in assisting students in connecting to the "organization

identity" of the institutions necessary for students to be happy and fit into the college environment at the institution they are attending (p. 192).

Hispanic students are still lagging in college degree attainment in the United States (Santiago, Calderon Galdeano & Taylor, 2015). The number of Hispanic students earning associates of arts degrees (AA) or higher is less than that of other student groups such as Asian, White, and African American (Santiago et al., 2015). As an underrepresented minority group, Hispanic students tend to start their college careers at their local community colleges or private two-year institutions (Santiago et al., 2015). In this study, the investigator interviewed high-achieving Hispanic transfer graduates who chose to start their post-secondary education at a state college in Florida, and then transferred to a Florida public four-year institution to complete their bachelor's degrees in less than the national average of six years. The participants in this study were born in a Spanish speaking country; were bilingual in at least English and Spanish; graduated from Miami Dade College (MDC) with an AA degree; graduated with a 3.5 grade point average or higher; and transferred to and graduated from a Florida public four-year institution with a bachelor's degree in less than six years.

The findings from this study will benefit administrators and faculty nationally in higher education institutions, but especially those located in the state of Florida. Higher education institutions have been under pressure from the government, local business entities, and lawmakers to make themselves more accountable for students graduating in a timely manner with bachelor's degrees and with the credentials needed to find employment in the business world (Bogue & Hall, 2012; Brown, 2018; Mehta, 2014). Similarly, these are some of the reasons why many states have decided to establish

funding models to ensure accountability in higher education institutions to guarantee graduates are able to find employment after obtaining their bachelor's degrees (Dougherty, Natow, Hare, Jones, & Vega, 2011).

In 1994, the state of Florida instituted a Performance-Based Funding (PBF) model for their community colleges (Dougherty, et al., 2011). In 2014, the University System of Florida Board of Governors (FLBOG) approved a PBF model for all Florida public universities. PBF model requires the State University System (SUS) to annually comply with a series of metrics, which if met, would allocate millions of dollars in state funding back into the SUS (FLBOG, 2018a). The SUS restructured its strategic plan to ensure alignment with the PBF model metrics to receive funding and continue operating higher education institutions successfully (FLBOG, 2018a)**.** One of the PBF model metrics is the rate at which freshman complete their bachelor's degrees within a four-year period (FLBOG, 2016).

Florida has a combined population of 46% of 18 to 24-year-old Hispanic and African American students (FLBOG, 2016). Therefore, ensuring that post-secondary institutions can manage Hispanic students is important. Knowing the needs of Hispanic transfer graduates and the factors which increase their bachelor's degree attainment is of extreme importance for the SUS administrators to understand. Martinez (2018) discussed the lack of research on "the persistence of transfer students at the receiving institution" (p. 135). Martinez (2018) referred to the fact that students are transferring to institutions that are not ready to receive them, or do not offer any type of campus resources that address their needs, which are different from those of first time-in-college students. Martinez (2018) research findings added information to equip institutions of higher

education to create a transfer infrastructure that will address the unique needs of Hispanic students. For instance, Martinez (2018) showed that Hispanic transfer students are financially valuable to the SUS. If Hispanics receive campus resources that are designed with the Hispanic student's needs in mind, SUSs can expect their completion rates to increase, therefore contributing to the annual state metrics, also, earning additional state funding for the institution.

Statement of the Problem

Although in the past few years there has been an increase in college enrollment and degree attainment by Hispanic students, the completion rate is still below that of other college graduates (Field, 2018; National Student Clearinghouse, 2018). At the national and state level, there remains an equity gap in degree attainment between Hispanic college students and White-Non-Hispanic college students (Excelencia in Education, 2018; Field 2018; Nichols, 2017). For the U.S. to remain competitive with the global economy and labor force, the number of Hispanics with college degrees must increase (Field, 2018; Marcus, 2016). As reported by Excelencia in Education (2018) "For the U.S. to regain the top ranking in the world for college degree attainment, Latinos will need to earn 6.1 million more degrees by 2020" (p. 1). The majority of Hispanic students begin their college education at a community college (Martinez, 2018; Von Kaenel & Havice, 2018). Therefore, it is crucial to learn from former high-achieving Hispanic transfer graduates, what factors in their transfer experience, both positive and negative, influenced successful degree completion in less than six years. The results will be useful for future Hispanic transfer students to achieve degree completion and therefore decreasing the current equity gap.

Two Florida public higher education institutions are listed among the top in the country which graduate the largest number of Hispanic students (Excelencia in Education, 2018). During the 2014-2015 academic year, MDC awarded 6,978 associate degrees and Florida International University (FIU) awarded 5,754 bachelor's degrees to Hispanic students. Both institutions have an enrollment rate of 68% Hispanic students (Excelencia in Education, 2018). Also, FIU's largest transfer population are students transferring from MDC to pursue a bachelor's degree (FLBOG, 2018b).

Transfer students encounter many challenges on their path to obtaining their bachelor's degree (Jenkins & Fink, 2016). In fact, Hispanic students face even tougher challenges than their counterparts of other ethnicities in higher education (Santiago et al., 2015). In the state of Florida, both Hispanic students and transfer students are highly represented in all the public community colleges and universities (FLBOG, 2018b). To prepare for a future PBF model transfer metric in Florida, it is vital for SUSs to learn what factors high-achieving Hispanic transfer graduates attributed to their successful completion of their bachelor's degrees in less time than the national average while attending the Florida Public Post-Secondary System.

It is vital for the Florida SUSs respective leaders to learn what successes and challenges high-achieving Hispanic transfer graduates reported encountering during their transfer experience and their paths to earning their bachelor's degrees. It is important to increase the number of Hispanic transfer students who graduate with a post-secondary degree in less than six years from the Florida Public Post-Secondary System. The data collected from this study will assist the SUSs in preparing for a future PBF model transfer metric that could potentially measure the retention and graduate rates of transfer

students in Florida. Lastly, it will assist the state of Florida in increasing the degree attainment for Hispanic students enrolled in the public college and university systems.

In Florida, public higher education institutions, whether they are two-year or four-year institutions, must adhere to a strict funding model. This funding model forces the institutions to comply with a set of goals each year which if are not met, translates into funding being withheld from the institution, therefore directly affecting the daily operations of the college or university. Currently, in Florida, the PBF model only evaluates first time-in-college students. However, as the freshmen class decreases in size, the transfer population has increased. Although the thought is that funding model will, in the future, include goals directly tied to the completion rates of transfer students entering the public four-year system in Florida. At the national level, Florida is considered a transfer-friendly state, which will be a positive factor for universities that work well with their transfer populations and have created programming and support systems designed to make them successful. The Florida PBF model will be addressed in more detail later in this study.

Hispanic students tend to be extremely influenced by their families in the educational decisions they make (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015). There have been many investigators who have contributed their research results to the literature on higher education related to the topic of familial connections. As a result, familial connections have a strong influence in the Hispanic student's decision-making process. Gloria and Rodriguez (2000) created a theory that describes the Hispanic student from a different viewpoint. They introduced the psychosociocultural (PSC) framework, which provided insights on the complexities of Hispanic students that directly affects their higher

education experience. The PSC framework provided tools to university staff members working with this population of students to better understand their backgrounds and how-to best work with them.

The PSC approach (Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000) has three main components. The components are the psychological, social, and cultural factors that need to be taken into consideration when providing university counseling and advising to Hispanic students. In Florida, due to its large number of Hispanic students, having this information on the PSC framework added to the training of higher education academic advisors and success coaches will increase the achievement rates of Hispanic students in the state university system.

Phenomenon of interest. The U.S. Census Bureau (2015) is predicted that by the year 2060, Hispanics will compose 28.6% of the population. Therefore, the nation is currently experiencing a rapid growth of Hispanics among its population (Pew Hispanic Center, 2009). The Hispanic Association of Colleges & Universities (HACU) concluded that "17.2% of Hispanics have at least a bachelor's degree and 5.0% an advanced degree, as of 2017, compared to 38.1% and 14.3% for non-Hispanic whites" (2018, p. 1). Increasing the degree attainment for this fast-growing minority group is essential to the social mobility and economic role they will play in the future of the country.

Background and justification. Florida has a high number of Hispanic students currently enrolled in the public higher education system (FLBOG, 2018b). The Florida Board of Governors records indicate that the largest Hispanic new enrollment in the SUS as of fall 2017 was made up of students from the following three countries: Venezuela (2,270), Cuba (1,837), and Colombia (1,685). Peru (821) and Mexico (683) round out the

top five Hispanic countries of origin for transfer students (FLBOG, 2018c). In this qualitative case study, the investigator, did not consider Brazil, which has 1,264 students enrolled in the SUS, a Hispanic country (FLBOG, 2018c). Brazil's national language is Portuguese, not Spanish; therefore, its enrollment statistics were excluded from this study. The current higher education literature lacks enough data on Hispanic students from the Caribbean, Central America, South America and Spain. Existing literature focuses on data obtained from Mexican American students (Geertz Gonzalez, 2010). Mexican Americans are the largest Hispanic group in the United States, composing 63.9% of the Hispanic population in the country (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014).

Currently, the PBF model criteria does not include a specific metric that measures the performance of transfer students in the state (FLBOG, 2016). Based on years of professional experience, the administrators in the transfer departments at FIU, University of Central Florida (UCF) and University of South Florida (USF) have predicted that in the near future, the FLBOG will add a new metric geared toward transfer students (FCMRU, 2018a). The group predicted that the new transfer metrics would measure a retention strategy related to transfer students in the Florida SUS (FCMRU, 2018a). To prepare for the future, it was valuable for this study to provide additional research findings on the factors that make high achieving Hispanic transfer graduates successful since Florida enrolls a high number of Hispanic students. According to O'Neil (2014), communicating with enrolled students and learning about the challenges that prevent them from graduating on time are the keys to making the necessary adjustments to address the issues at hand.

Deficiencies in the evidence. There is very little data on high achieving Hispanic transfer students in relation to students who are foreign born. The vast majority of the literature in regard to Hispanic students relates to students born either in Mexico or who are of Mexican descent (Geertz Gonzalez, 2010). In Florida, there are large representations of Hispanic students from Spanish speaking countries in the Caribbean, Central America, South America and Spain (Vogel, 2013b). The investigator's findings in this study contributed to the current research available nationwide and added new findings from Hispanic transfer graduates of other nationalities beyond Mexican American. Moreover, it generated suggestions for higher education institutions which receive transfer students for how to best assist minority students during the transfer process and what needs they have that the institution can meet, therefore assisting the students in graduating with their bachelor's degrees in less than six years. Further research is always needed to reach a broader group of students and analyze their responses to obtain valuable data that will continue to enrich higher education literature.

Audience. The audience that will benefit from this study are administrators and faculty of HSI's from both public and private institutions across the United States. California, Florida, and Texas are currently on the list of the top ten states with colleges and universities that accept transfer students in the nation (Kowarski, 2019). Consequently, those same three states have large numbers of HSI's in their higher education systems (HACU, 2017). An understanding of the impact of the concepts of the PSC framework will assist the higher education personnel in providing strategies, suggestions or advisement that is geared to the college success of Hispanic students. The PSC framework will be addressed in more detail in Chapter 2. This study will assist

stakeholders across the nation in making decisions that will directly influence the future of Hispanic transfer student populations, which in turn will yield favorable financial results in the long term.

As stated by Jenkins and Fink (2015):

> Addressing inefficiencies and barriers in the transfer process requires considerable institutional commitment to enact changes in institutional practice to curricular alignment, support services, information management, and collaboration across two and four-year institutions. These efforts, though significant, are worth the costs, given the strong returns to successful transfer. (p. 6)

As the state of Florida enrolls higher numbers of Hispanic transfer students, this study will provide both administrators and faculty of higher education institutions with additional insights. Barshay (2018) stated, "Latinos have higher graduation rates than black students; that is, they are less likely to drop out and more likely to earn a four-year degree within six years" (p. 1). Subsequently, the National Student Clearinghouse reported that Hispanic students when they stop attending college, they do not enroll anywhere else (2018). The information obtained through this study will be an instrumental tool in the development of Hispanic transfer student programs and student success initiatives. Also, this study provides valuable insight into retention strategies for Hispanic college students. The goal is to retain Hispanic students in college until degree completion, because research shows if they drop out, the tendency is to discontinue the pursuit of a higher education. The results of this study will prepare Hispanic community

college students with the knowledge and skills needed to successfully transfer and graduate with a bachelor's degree in less than six years.

Definition of Terms

For the purposes of this research study, below are a series of definitions that will facilitate the understanding of the terminology that was used throughout this study.

Community colleges ". . . are sometimes called junior colleges, are two-year schools that provide affordable postsecondary education as a pathway to a four-year degree" (Department of Homeland Security, 2012, p. 1). In this study, the term community college was used to refer to two-year schools inside and outside of the state of Florida. Florida has 24 former community colleges that changed their names to 'state colleges' less than 20 years ago when they started offering bachelor's degrees. To avoid confusion for readers not familiar with the Florida College System (FCS), this study referred to all the institutions in the FCS as *community colleges* to be more consistent with the terminology used in the higher education systems across the United States.

High-achieving Hispanic graduates are defined in this study as Hispanic students who have earned their associate's in arts or their bachelor's degrees with a 3.5 or higher-grade point average (Jeremy & Fisher, 2012).

Hispanic in this study was used instead of the word Latino to describe students who were born in a Spanish speaking country located in Central America, South America, Spanish speaking Caribbean Islands, and Spain. Subsequently, it was used to describe students who were born in the United States but descend from parents who were born in a Spanish-speaking country ("Hispanic", 2018).

Hispanic-serving institution (HSI) describes a higher education institution at which 25% of full-time students enrolled in undergraduate programs identify as Hispanics (U.S. Department of Education, 2018a).

Investigator in this study will refer to the author of this dissertation and the research being conducted by the author (Nova Southeastern University, 2017).

Interviewer in this study will refer to the investigator of the study in the role of interviewer. The investigator interviewed all the participants of this research study.

*Performance-based f*unding *(PBF)* refers to a strategy that ". . . ties funding directly to institutional performance on specific indicators such as rates of retention, graduation, and job placement" (Dougherty et al., 2011, p. 1). In Florida, the higher education system is evaluated each year according to a performance-based funding model, which allocates funding to institutions that have met the indicators set forth by the Florida Board of Governors (FLBOG, 2018a).

State colleges are referred to in this study when naming the former community colleges from the FCS by their full name. The community colleges began to offer bachelor's degree in the early 2000's. There are 24 of these institutions in Florida. They have officially changed their names, removed the word "community", and added "state" to their titles. The remaining four community colleges in the state have kept the word "community" in their official institutional names. The three institutions that offer both two-year programs and one bachelor's degree are Florida Keys Community College, North Florida Community College & Tallahassee Community College. The only two-year community college in Florida that does not offer bachelor's degrees is Hillsborough Community College. All FCS institutions offer an open-door admissions policy and make

education not only accessible, but affordable to students in the communities they serve (FCS, 2018a).

This study is the phrase that is used throughout the document that referrers to the actual research study conducted by the investigator (author) of this dissertation.

Transfer graduate The Florida Board of Governors defines a transfer student as a student who has taken 12 credits of college credit coursework after graduating from high school (FLBOG, 2018d). In this study, the term was used to reference students who have attended one of the 28 higher education institutions that make up the FCS, earned a two-year degree, and then transferred to an upper division four-year public university in Florida.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative investigation was to understand the factors impacting the college transfer experience of high achieving Hispanic transfer graduates along their path to earning a bachelor's degree in less than six years in the Florida Public Post-Secondary System. Hispanics will be one of the largest ethnic groups living in the United States by the year 2060 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). It is important to learn how to address the needs of future Hispanic transfer students and the factors that influenced the success of former Hispanic transfer graduates, to increase degree attainment percentages within this ethic group (Garza, Bain, & Kupczynski, 2014). Higher education institutions in the state of Florida need to continue enhancing their knowledge of the needs and motivating factors of Hispanic transfer graduates. In doing so, the expectation is that the degree completion rate of current Hispanic students enrolled in the SUS will increase, thereby meeting the PBF metrics required by the FLBOG.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU) reports that in 2015 the Hispanic population in the United States was approximately 59.1 million, in addition to the over three million habitants of the island of Puerto Rico (HACU, 2018). In summary, these figures tell us that "18.2% of the U.S. population" is Hispanic (HACU, 2018, p. 1). A large portion of the population's growth in the last 18 years has occurred in the central and southern states in the United States (HACU, 2018). Hispanics pursuing a post-secondary education are more likely to enroll in a community college than a four-year institution (Santiago et al., 2015), therefore resulting in a large number of Hispanic transfer students.

As stated by Handel and Strempel (2016), currently, half of undergraduate students in the United States begin their education at a community college. Unfortunately, not all students who begin studying at a community college transfer to a four-year institution. Handel and Strempel (2016) discussed the disconnect between two-year and four-year institutions, which ultimately impairs students from transferring successfully and earning their bachelor's degree. Shapiro et al. (2017) found that "Overall, out of all degree-seeking students who began at a community college, 13.3 percent earned a bachelor's degree within six years" (p. 24). In addition, the rate of students transferring from a community college to a four-year public university is 41.3%. Shapiro et al. (2017) concluded that the enrollment percentage is higher for public institutions than for private, due to the articulation agreements community colleges have with their public counterparts. Gloria and Rodriguez (2000) stated "the undereducation of

Latinos in higher education is a pressing and persistent issue that exits despite a plethora

of research calling for institutional programming and systemwide change" (p. 145). In

2018, The National Student Clearinghouse published research indicating that 33% of

Hispanic students that started their post-secondary education in 2012 were currently not

enrolled; 17.4% were still enrolled but had not graduated in six years; 53.6% completed

at the institution they had started their education and 13.5% completed at a different

institution than the one they had started their education. The National Student

Clearinghouse (2018) also noted that Hispanic students that started their education at a

community college showed a lower growth in completion rates versus African American

students. In this chapter, the investigator discusses in detail Hispanic and transfer students

in the United States and some of the issues they currently face while pursuing an

undergraduate education.

Theoretical Framework

The psychosocialcultural (PSC) framework is the most appropriate theory for this

study. Hispanic students tend to have an extremely strong connection to their families and

cultural identify. The PSC framework would best describe the persistence of Hispanics in

higher education and the most effective approaches for their overall success (Castellanos

& Gloria, 2007; Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000). This study used the PSC framework since it

has been used to conduct studies related to Hispanic and other underrepresented ethnic

groups in higher education and their path towards degree attainment (Castellanos &

Gloria, 2007).

The PSC approach was used in the study conducted by Guadarrama (2015)**,** which

concluded that students from Hispanic communities' value the opinion of their families

strongly when making decisions regarding higher education. Castellanos and Gloria (2007) stated "Latina/o student success can be improved by applying values central to the Latina/o experience within the academic environment and shifting it to one that respects familiar and essential values" (p. 379). The PSC framework is composed of three important components in the persistence of education by Hispanic students. The first is the psychological aspect of Hispanic students and the environment in which they were raised. It is important for students to not only be mentally stable but have the confidence and self-efficacy to know that they are able accomplish their goals. The second aspect the PSC framework is the social component. Hispanics thrive with a strong social support system to assist and guide them through the academic hurdles higher education may bring to their lives, in addition to the many unknowns. This is especially so when the students are first generation college students (Carrasquillo, 2013).

In 2013, Carrasquillo conducted a study and discussed how first-generation Hispanic students are persistent due to the support systems they find in their college environment. Carrasquillo (2013) noted that students who are part of an honors cohort and are required to meet with an advisor three times per term tend to have high persistence rates. The third aspect of the PSC framework is the cultural component. Hispanics that are first and second-generation immigrants tend to have a stronger connection to their family roots and customs (Vega, 2016). It is important for higher education administrators, staff, and faculty to understand the values placed by students on their culture and how critical their community is for them (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007).

As stated by Castellanos and Gloria (2007), the areas of the PSC framework are broken down into the following: psychological components ("self-efficacy" and "self-

esteem"); social components (the presence of "family" and "mentors"), and cultural components ("congruity" and "ethnic identity"). All three components are important to take into consideration when working with the PSC framework and Hispanic students (p. 384). The PSC framework has been used by some counselors and higher education personnel who work with Hispanic students (Castellanos & Gloria, 2017). It gives higher education professionals context as to why Hispanic students think and act a certain way and the strong influence their families have on their decision-making process.

Rivera (2014) also conducted a research study in which that compared the individual persistence of Hispanic students and what role their surroundings played in their resilience and success in the college application process. Rivera (2014) found that students who are underrepresented tend to know that they need to work harder to achieve what they want; however, they need the support of their environment to complete their goals. Success for Hispanic students is composed of many variables, as reflected in Rivera's (2014) research study and the PSC framework.

Psychological. In the PSC theoretical framework, the first component is the psychological perspective that counselors need to take into consideration when working with Hispanic students. It is vital for Hispanic students to have the opportunity to understand how to connect with their inner strengths to become resilient and develop self-efficacy (Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000). Bandura (2001) discussed "the capacity to exercise control over the nature and the quality of one's life is the essence of humanness" (p. 1). Therefore, explaining the role that the individual has in it his/her own power to self-regulate and achieve the goals set forth. Garza et al. (2014) found that one of the things that assists Hispanic college students in being resilient and developing self-

efficacy is beginning work with these students at the high school level via their guidance

counselors and continuing that support onto the college campus.

Hence, having a healthy self-esteem is also crucial in the Hispanic college

student's academic success. Castellanos and Gloria (2007) asserted that, the mere act of a

faculty member taking interest in the academic and personal life of a Hispanic student

can assist that student in maintaining positive self-esteem and a sense of belonging in

higher education. Tinto (2016) discussed how vital it is for institutions of higher learning

to make Hispanic students feel that they are part of the institution and that they are an

esteemed part of the academic community on campus. Finally, emphasized that students

need to feel a connection to their higher education institutions so that they are able to

motivate themselves and be successful during their undergraduate education to complete

their bachelor's degrees (Tinto, 2016).

Social. As described in the PSC framework, Hispanic students have been raised

with a strong connection to their families, which influences their decision-making

regarding many important aspects of their lives. The choice to continue a post-secondary

education is one that causes tremendous stress for Hispanic students and it is highly

influenced by their close-knit group of family and friends. Covarrubias and Fryberg

(2015) discussed the way in which the level of guilt Hispanic students feel because of

selecting to pursue a college education is real and quite significant in their decision-

making process. For Hispanic students, "achievement guilt" is experienced and they

suffer an inner battle between staying home to work full-time and assist their families

financially or to continue their education to then assist their families after they obtain a

college degree (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015, p. 424). Baker and Robnett (2012) found

that African American and Hispanic students have extracurricular responsibilities that

have an adverse consequence on their academic achievements in college. Baker and

Robnett (2012) also discussed the similarities between both groups that have a negative

impact on their preparation and performance while attending college. Hence, the

importance of the first year in college for these underprivileged student groups. Lastly,

Baker and Robnett (2012) study discussed the ways in which resources need to be in

place to assist underprivileged students in the adjustment to the college environment and

connect them to the appropriate campus resources.

Another component of the social success of Hispanic students in higher education

is the positive roles family and mentors play in their lives (Cejda, 2010). Gloria and

Rodriguez (2000) explored in detail the influence family members and mentors have on

the academic success of Hispanic students. Mentors may be individuals that serve as role

models and also family members, friends of the family, or a professional in the school

setting (Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000). Hu and Ma (2010) also emphasized that having

mentors is an important factor in the success Hispanic students have in their

undergraduate education. Hispanic and minority students in general tended to seek ". . .

support and encouragement and had a higher level of perceived importance of their

overall experience with mentors" (Hu & Ma, 2010, p. 329). Craft DeFreitas and Bravo

(2012) also found that African American and Hispanic students benefited greatly from

having a mentor and a strong relationship with faculty while attending a higher education

institution. These are factors that are significant to orientation personnel at higher

education institutions to pair Hispanic students with mentors and faculty in the students

discipline early on in their undergraduate careers; this will add an additional layer to existing support systems and social circles.

Cultural. The last component of the PSC framework is the cultural aspect. Cerezo and Chang, (2013) described cultural congruity as the notion that each student must synchronize personal beliefs with those of the higher institution the student is attending. Cultural congruity plays a vital role in the student retention on campus. Students who feel comfortable on a college campus have more of a tendency to persevere and complete their degree than students who do not feel connected to their college environment (Cerezo & Chang, 2013). Hispanic students struggle with acculturation when entering post-secondary education. Students are expected to behave a certain way they are unaccustomed to in a college classroom. In other words, at home, they are criticized by their families for spending too much time at school and not enough at home (Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000). Students facing this cultural conflict are often filled with mixed emotions and anxiety (Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000). Cejda (2010) found that Hispanic students with a strong cultural foundation and social support systems performed better in college and possessed stronger self-efficacy traits. Having "social and cultural capital" was the conclusion of the study conducted by Cejda (2010), in which the author tied academic success directly to those components in the lives of the Hispanic students in the study.

Hispanic students also encounter the challenge of dealing with their ethnic identity. Case and Hernandez (2013) conducted a study of Hispanic students who were enrolled in a higher education institution in which the Hispanic students were able to explore their ethnic identities and develop a strong connection to their origins. The

Hispanic students used their ethnic differences with their non-Hispanic peers in their academic and professional lives for their inner growth and success. "As students become confident in their ethnic identity, they are better equipped to progress toward their goal of a college education" (Case & Hernandez, 2013, p. 74). Hipolito-Delgado (2016) conducted a study that explored the connection between ethnic identities and perceived racism as it relates to college success. Hidalgo-Delgado (2016) concluded that ". . . ethnic identity is an important construct linked to self-esteem and educational attainment" (p. 98). As it pertains to the academic success of Hispanic students, it is vital to consider the cultural congruity and ethnic identification as factors that can influence Hispanic students either positively or negatively in the college environment. College personnel need to keep these influences in mind when advising and/or working with Hispanic students enrolled in their institutions.

Historical Context of the Study

In the United States, the Hispanic population is rapidly growing to become one of the largest minority groups (Pew Hispanic Center, 2009). The educational attainment of any group is important to the socio-economic development of the United States. In addition, "17.2% of Hispanics have at least a bachelor's degree and 5.5% an advanced degree, as of 2017 compared to 38.1% and 14.3% for non-Hispanic whites" (HACU, 2018, p. 1). Lastly, "72.0% of Hispanic recent high school graduates ages 16-24 were enrolled in college in 2016, compared to 69.75% for whites" (HACU, 2018, p. 1). The importance of educating Hispanic students starts at the U.S. Federal Government level. As stated in the U.S. Department of Education (2018b): White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics website, "The strength of America's education

system is undoubtedly connected to the academic success of Latinos" (para. 1). Also

included the transformation the nation is undergoing with the influx of immigrants to our

nation. ". . . Latinos should be a priority not just for the federal government, but for every

person in this country" (USDOE, 2018b, para. 1). Former U.S. President George H.W.

Bush created The White House Initiative on Education Excellence for Hispanics (U.S.

Department of Education, 2018b). This initiative was created in 1990 to advocate for

educational differences encountered by Hispanics and it has been supported by every

president that has served in office thereafter (U.S. Department of Education, 2018b).

"This commitment demonstrates the strong support for the critical role Hispanics play in

the overall prosperity of the nation and highlights the federal government's commitment

to expanding educational opportunities and improving educational outcomes for all

students" (U.S. Department of Education, 2018b, para. 2).

Transfer Students

Transfer students in the United States. On a national level, transfer students

encounter challenges that non-transfer students do not face while working towards their

college degrees (Jenkins & Fink, 2016). Keierleber (2014), claimed that all states have

different rules regarding transfer students. Some states have strong policies that assist

students in transferring smoothly within the state, but other states let each institution

create their own transfer policies (Keierleber, 2014). Guaranteeing transfer students, a

smooth pathway from the community college system to a four-year university is essential

to meet the United States' aim to increase the number of students who earn a college

degree and better their place in society (Jenkins & Fink, 2016). Higher education

institutions benefit from the enrollment of transfer students since "students who transfer

from a two-to a four-year institution tend to perform very well academically" (Fortin, 2016, p. 53).

As stated by Von Kaenel and Havice (2018), three areas are prevalent for transfer students to encounter as challenges. The areas are ". . .transfer student's age in their ability to make a successful transition; dealing with academic rigor of the new institution; and finding ways of making new social connections at the receiving institution" (Von Kaenel & Havice, 2018, p. 39). These issues are more prevalent among ethnically underrepresented students since they are the ones attending community colleges in large numbers across the nation (Von Kaenel & Havice, 2018). Martinez (2018) also discussed the fact that many universities do not record their transfer student mobility. Subsequently, to make matters more worrisome, many higher education institutions do not provide any services to transfer students once they enroll for courses (Martinez, 2018).

Fauria & Fuller (2015) discussed the increase of transfer students in higher education and those numbers have increased since former President Obama encouraged young adults to finish a minimum of one year of post-secondary education. Fauria and Fuller (2015) also noted that even though there are more transfer students, their overall success rate in completing a bachelor's degree is less than those students who do not transfer. These issues are important to convey to the administrators and faculty of higher education institutions that receive large numbers of transfer students annually.

Attending a higher education institution that is welcoming to transfer students is important. The top states that ranked as transfer-friendly are California, Florida, and Texas. U.S. News and World Report (Kowarski, 2019) reported the following were the top 10 transfer universities in the nation: (a) University of Central, (b) Florida, (c)

University of Texas-Arlington, (d) Liberty University, (e) University of Houston, (f)

Florida International University, (g) California State University-Northridge, (h) San Jose

State University (CA), (i) University of North Texas, (j) University of South Florida and

(k) California State University-Long Beach. These institutions enrolled large numbers of

transfer students during 2017 fall term and are recognized nationally for this fact. It is

therefore no coincidence that California, Florida, and Texas have the largest number of

Hispanics residing in their states (Stepler & Lopez, 2016).

The National Institute for the Study of Transfer Students (NISTS) is an

organization composed transfer professionals across the nation who shares best practices

that will benefit the transfer experiences for students nationally (NISTS, 2018). "NISTS

was founded in 2002 by Dr. Bonita C. Jacobs in response to a lack of professional

development opportunities and research literature focused specifically on transfer

students" (Handel & Strempel, 2016, p. vii). NISTS believes in advocating for transfer

students to create awareness of their needs and promote higher completion rates among

the transfer student community (NISTS, 2018). Organizations like NISTS are important

to increasing the potential of this large number of students who annually transfer from

one institution to another with the sole purpose of earning a degree (Handel & Strempel,

2016).

Transfer receiving institutions of higher education need to increase collaboration

across units to create an infrastructure that supports a smooth transfer process for students

(Archambrault, 2016). Shapiro et al. (2018) conducted a study of a cohort of Hispanic

students that began their undergraduate education in the United States. This was a

signature report conducted by a group of researchers sponsored by the National Student

Clearinghouse Research Center. Shapiro et al. (2018) reported that out of "2.8 million first-time students, within their first six years, over one million of them continued their studies at a different institution" (p. 4). Shapiro et al. (2018) also determined that out of that initial 2.8 million, 38% became transfer students. Next, the study indicated that while Asian and White students tended to transfer in higher numbers from a two-year to a four-year higher education institution, "49.8% and 50.4%, respectively" their Black and Hispanic counterparts transferred in fewer numbers "33.2% and 39.5%, respectively" (Shapiro et al., 2018, p.4).

The research conducted by Shapiro et al. (2018) showed the increase in student mobility across institutions of higher education and the work that needs to be done to increase the transfer rates of Black and Hispanic students. In 2018, Shapiro et al.'s research demonstrated the increased importance of transfer students when institutions make admissions and programming decisions, especially taking into consideration minority groups like Blacks and Hispanics.

Transfer Students in the State of Florida

In Florida, transfer students are fortunate to work with one of the more transfer-student-friendly states in the nation (Jenkins & Fink, 2016). Florida is nationally recognized for creating policies and pathways for students to transfer seamlessly within public and private institutions in the state. In addition, Florida ranked within the top 10 states for community college transfers with high rates of bachelor's degree completion (Jenkins & Fink, 2016). Wyner, Deance, Jenkins and Fink (2016) conducted a study including several Florida higher education institutions. The institutions were BC, Florida

Atlantic University (FAU) and FIU among other institutions in Colorado, Connecticut, Louisiana, Massachusetts, and Washington.

Transfer-friendly institutions should have the needs of their transfer students at the same level of institutional priority as the first time-in-college students. Transfer-friendly institutions need to have four specific concepts at the forefront of their transfer process: (a) holding the transfer population and their achievements with high regard (b) designing a clear transfer path in conjunction with current curriculum (c) designing advisement tools that meet the needs of transfer students and (d) establishing and maintaining robust working relationships between stakeholders (Wyner et al., 2016). In this case, the stakeholders would be the two-year institutions with which the four-year institutions have partnerships. Furthermore, ultimately will benefit the four-year institution receiving the successful transfer of students and the community college will have a student graduating on time from their institution as well (Wyner et al., 2016).

In the state of Florida, institutions of higher education work closely together due to many provisions that facilitate transfers among all the state's public colleges and universities.

As stated on the Florida College System website (2018b):

> Florida's higher education system is designed to allow students to successfully pursue a bachelor's degree by first earning an AA degree approach to earning a four-year degree is commonly referred to as the "2+2 system". The state of Florida guarantees that students who complete an AA degree at a Florida college can earn a bachelor's degree at a state university or Florida college offering four-year degrees. (para. 1)

In addition, private institutions are also involved in the transfer process by ensuring that general education courses are aligned with those offered by the state public system. In theory, because Florida is a transfer friendly state, college students are more likely to have higher transfer rates than students in other states in the country.

Transfer Process in the State of Florida

The state of Florida has a large population of Hispanic immigrants (Vogel, 2013a). Florida's SUS enrolls large numbers of transfer students (FLBOG, 2018b). In the 2019 U.S. News and World Report (Kowarski, 2019), the state of Florida had three SUSs institutions that were included in the top 10 list of universities at the national level, where large numbers of transfer students were enrolled in degree-seeking programs in the fall of 2017. UCF was ranked number one, with a total enrollment of new transfer students at 6,810; FIU was ranked fifth, with a total enrollment of new transfer students at 5,145; USF was ranked ninth with a total enrollment of new transfer students at 3,805 (Kowarski, 2019). At the state level, the fall 2017 enrollment rates of college transfer students to the SUS indicated that UCF and FIU were also the top transfer universities in the state of Florida. USF was ranked third and FAU was the institution with the fourth largest enrollment of transfer students in the state (FLBOG, 2018b). There is a high number of Hispanic and transfer students choosing to pursue a bachelor's degree in the sunshine state.

Articulation agreements. The state of Florida has a strong 2+2 Articulation Agreement policy among its public institutions. Hodara, Martinez-Wenzl, Stevens, and Mazzeo (2016) defined state systems that have a 2+2 policy as states wherein "policies guarantee the transfer and application of general education and pre-major or prerequisite

course credits across institutions in a system and ensure transfer students can seamlessly enter university ready for upper-division major coursework" (p. iii). In addition, Hodara et al. (2016) discussed that Florida has a common core curriculum which is transferrable between public institutions, a two-year degree (associates of arts) that is a transferrable degree, and a course numbering system that is shared among institutions in the state.

Florida also has a shared Common Pre-Requisite Manual (Hodara et al., 2016). This manual is updated each academic year and it serves as a guide for the public to understand which pre-requisites are required, by major, by an upper division public four-year institution in Florida, and informs students of whether or not programs are considered limited access (Florida Shines, 2018). Graduates from the FCS with an associate of arts degree have guaranteed admission to a SUS institution in Florida (FCS, 2018b). Via the 2+ 2 state articulation agreements, students are secured a seat; however, this only pertains to general academic programs since limited access programs require a specific grade point average and/or pre-requisite coursework for admission.

At FIU, the Nursing and College of Business majors are examples of some of the limited access programs the university currently offers undergraduate students (FIU, 2018a). Limited access programs at FIU included but are not limited to: (a) majors which have a competitive admissions criterion, (b) require students to submit additional credentials (portfolios), and (c) have limited seating in cohort courses (FIU, 2018a). The Transfer & Transition Services Office at FIU designed a series of Transfer Guides. The Transfer guides provides information to students, parents, and community college advisors to learn the general requirements for each major prior to transferring, whether a major is considered limited access by the institution, and the set of pre-requisite courses

needed for the students 'major of choice (FIU, 2018b). It is similar to the Common Pre-Requisites Manual provided by the state, but includes detailed information tailored to students specifically transferring to FIU.

Statewide course numbering system (SCNS). In the 1960's, the Florida Department of Education (FDE) created a Statewide Course Numbering System (SCNS), an important aspect of the K-20 educational system of Florida (FDE, 2018a). The SCNS created a smooth pathway for Florida students to complete their education in an efficient manner, while students are enrolled in K-12, community college, and the public university system. In addition, private and vocational schools can join SCNS and purchase the usage of similar course names for Florida students to take similar courses with outcomes that are accepted across the board. The SCNS catalogue allocates numbers to course names to expand academic programs and assist students during the transfer process within Florida institutions (FDE, 2018a). English Composition I, for example, is coded ENC 1101 at MDC and at FIU. A student can take ENC 1101 at MDC and meet the same English Composition I requirement in place at FIU. The learning outcomes of the course align to ensure that students are learning the same concepts regardless of the institution.

Non-public institutions in the state of Florida have the option to participate in SCNS and align their courses with the Florida academic curriculums, making their institutions more marketable to potential transfer students (FDE, 2018a). Doral College recently began participating in the SCNS. They have transitioned to have general education courses approved by SCNS as of fall 2018 (FDE, 2018a). This practice will

increase the transferability of dual enrollment and current students at Doral College on their path to completing an associate degree.

Performance Based Funding in Florida

During the past decade, institutions of higher education have been under the microscope at the national level regarding the issue of accountability and transparency of operations (Bice & Coates, 2016). Lawmakers have questioned institutions of higher learning regarding the affordably of their degree programs, the amount of debt with which students are graduating college and the low paying jobs students are finding post-graduation which makes it difficult to pay student loans while affording a decent living (Bice & Coates, 2016). Due to these concerns, many states legislatures have developed models of performance-based funding for their public colleges and universities. These models tie graduation rates and employability of college graduates to the funding received by the public institutions on an annual basis (Dougherty et al., 2011).

Florida is one of the states that uses a PBF model to fund public higher education institutions. The PBF model for the FCS was initially instituted in 1996 (Holcombe, 1997). Consequently, the PBF model for the SUS in Florida was voted on by the FLBOG in January 2014 (FLBOG, 2018a). In 2015, the FDE restructured the FCS PBF model into four metrics and to a system similar to the one being used by the SUS since 2014 (FCS, 2018c). The FCS and SUS systems have different criteria regarding what is mandated for their respective PBF model metrics. Each system has a set of metrics that are evaluated by their governing bodies each year (FCS, 2018c; FLBOG, 2018a). Funding for each institution is tied to the outcomes achieved on a yearly basis and if the institution does not meet the set metric, then they can remediate the issues. If they can

improve upon the failed metrics, then partial funding is awarded (FCS, 2018c; FLBOG, 2018a).

Partnerships Within the Florida College System and State University System

Jenkins and Fink (2016) discussed the importance of community colleges and upper division institutions working together to create effective pathways for transfer students. In Florida, the three largest public institutions that attract the most transfer students are FIU, UCF, and USF (FCMRU, 2018b; FLBOG, 2018b). The Florida Consortium of Metropolitan Research Universities is composed of FIU, UCF and USF. The creation of the consortium validates the importance of having strong partnerships that work in conjunction for a higher cause. Meanwhile, "member institutions of the Florida Consortium enroll more than 50% of students transferring from Florida's 28 state and community colleges" (FCMRU, 2018a, p. 1).

All three Consortium institutions understand the importance of transfer students and created bridge programs in partnership with their local community colleges. At FIU, the bridge program is called Connect4Success and their top partners are: a) Broward College, (b) Florida Keys Community College, (c) Miami Dade College, and (d) Palm Beach State College (FIU, 2018c). UCF's DirectConnect to UCF program partners are: (a) the College of Central Florida, Daytona State College, (b) Eastern Florida State College, (c) Lake-Sumter State College, (d) Seminole State College, and (e) Valencia College (UCF, 2018). USF's bridge program is called FUSE. USF collaborates with: (a) Hillsborough Community College, (b) Polk State College, (c) St. Petersburg College, (d) Pasco Hernando State College, (e) State College of Florida, (f) College of Central Florida, (g) South Florida State College, and (h) Santa Fe College (USF, 2018). In total,

17 of the 28 FCS are in strong partnerships with the three largest recipients of transfer students in the state.

Connect4Success, DirectConncet to UCF and FUSE are 2+2 pathway programs that foster a smooth transition from a community college to an upper division institution. All the programs provide participating community college students with a guaranteed seat at FIU, UCF, or USF once they graduate with their associates in arts degree (excluding limited access programs) (FIU, 2018c; UCF, 2018; USF, 2018). All 2+2 pathway programs provide university personnel, who are located on the state college's campuses in Florida for the purpose of offering workshops, individualized and group advising sessions, and transfer assistance for all the students participating in the pathway programs. Each pathway program has minor variations and offer different amenities for students based on university resources.

Connect4Success provides community college participants with a FIU OneCard, which is the official form of student identification at FIU. The FIU OneCard allows Connect4Success students to use the FIU library and attend all sporting events free of charge. The intention is to have the students begin a connecting with FIU while attending a community college, ensuring they will feel more comfortable once they transfer (FIU, 2018c). An example of 2+2 pathway difference between the SUSs is that UCF is such a large institution that offering a student identification to the Direct Connect to UCF students is financially prohibitive. UCF would have to employ larger amounts of staff in their ID office on campus and manage the logistics of a much larger demographic of students than FIU's Connect4Success program. Keim, McDermott & Gerard (2010)

research findings showed that students in a pathway program transfer in higher numbers than their counterparts who decide to transfer and do not have this additional support.

The Florida Transfer Success Network

The Florida Transfer Success Network was created as an extension of the strong partnership and work ethic of the three members of the Florida Consortium of Metropolitan and Research Universities. The Florida Transfer Success Network is comprised of leaders from FIU, UCF, and USF (FCMRU, 2018b). The investigator is one of the founding transfer professionals of The Florida Transfer Success Network. The network began meeting in 2017 to discuss ways to eliminate performance gaps, reduce time to degree attainment, and increase the transfer student academic preparedness when transferring from a community college to the SUSs of Florida (FCMRU, 2018b). The network connects remotely several times during each semester of the academic year and meets annually in person to discuss transfer trends occurring at the consortium institutions and at the state and national level. In the spring 2019 annual meeting, the network expanded to include transfer professionals from FAU, Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University (FAMU), and Florida State University (FSU) in addition to the founding members from FIU, UCF, and USF. The transfer professionals in the state are looking forward to continuing building a strong partnership among the SUS institutions in Florida.

University of Central Florida

UCF is the public university that has the highest enrollment of transfer students in the state of Florida (FLBOG, 2018b). The UCF administration has made a commitment to transfer students by collaborating with the John N. Gardner Institute for

Excellence in Undergraduate Education to establish the Foundation of Excellence

Transfer Initiative (UCF, 2014). This transfer initiative has provided UCF administrators

and faculty with valuable information and data with which to redesign their transfer

process and continue building a strong infrastructure for transfer students (UCF, 2015).

Meanwhile, in the 2017-2018 HSI report, UCF became a Hispanic Service Institution

serving 12,091 Hispanic students; 25.8% of their annual enrollment (HACU, 2019).

The nationally recognized DirectConnect to UCF program is located at the main

campus of UCF Orlando with satellite offices on the partner's community college

campuses (UCF, 2018). DirectConnect to UCF is a bridge program for community

college students to have a direct pathway to UCF. The program has now expanded to

provide international students attending one of their partner community colleges with a

direct pathway to a four-year university education in the United States (UCF, 2018). UCF

and Valencia College are collaborating on recruitment opportunities in South America to

admit students to the International DirectConnect to UCF program (UCF, 2018). This is

an innovative idea that will expand the concept of pathway programs even further. UCF

is an institution of higher education at the cutting edge of transfer work in the state of

Florida and an inspiration to other institutions to follow suit.

Hispanic Students in Higher Education

The largest group of Hispanics in the nation are either born in Mexico or of

Mexican descent (Geertz Gonzalez, 2010). Higher education journals currently publish

research that reflects data gathered from the largest Hispanic group in the United States.

Since Hispanic college students from other countries make up less than 50% of this

population in the U.S., research on those groups is more limited. Higher education

research focuses on Hispanic students who are born in Mexico or who are of Mexican descendent. Research conducted by Mooring and Mooring (2016), showed that Hispanic students were more successful in completing a bachelor's degree if they had a successful experience at a community college. Hispanic college students' bachelor's completion rate was predicted by observing students who started their college education at a community college, obtained a degree, and then transferred to a four-year institution (Mooring & Mooring, 2016). The path for these students tended to be curvier than a straight line compared to their counterparts from other ethnic groups (Mooring & Mooring, 2016). Hispanic students' paths can be more challenging that their non-Hispanic counterparts (Crisp & Nuñez, 2014). In other words, emphasis should be placed on the completion of the degree regardless of the type of path these students followed during their undergraduate education.

One of the reasons Hispanic students' paths may be more challenging than non-Hispanic college students is due to the extreme importance of the family connection in the Hispanic communities (Ventura Gonzalez, 2013). Garza et al. (2014) discussed how Hispanic students ". . . were found to experience internal conflicts related to traditional roles which included assisting their families with household responsibilities, resource provisions, and culturally influenced roles" (p. 3). Ventura Gonzalez (2013) reported how a sense of responsibility and attachment to family adds an extra layer to the complexity of a Hispanic student's decision to attend college and the geography location of the institution they will attend. Ventura Gonzalez (2013) discussed the intricate part the Hispanic family plays in the decision-making process of all family members. This family involvement often determines if a student decides to attend a local community college

and continue to live at home, versus to take a risk and leave the comfort of their known community and attend a more prestigious institution farther from home. (Ventura Gonzalez, 2013). When working with Hispanic students, regardless of the country, family plays a big role, and this should be taken into consideration by higher education administrators, counselors, and faculty when designing recruitment, advisement, and retention efforts for this population (Garza et al., 2014).

Community Colleges

Xu, Ran, Fink, Jenkins, and Dundar (2018) explained the role of community colleges as institutions that prepare students for the first two-years of post-secondary education and assist in the transfer process to the four-year upper division college or university. Budd and Stowers (2015) discussed the fact that community colleges have multiple roles to fulfill, for example, open access, and diverse curricula to meet the needs of all students, among other responsibilities. Community Colleges in the process of wanting to juggle multiple roles and responsibilities, it is challenging to focus only on assisting students to transfer successfully (Budd & Stowers, 2015). Therefore, it is important to note that community colleges enroll large percentages of students of color and underrepresented ethnic groups in addition to Hispanic students who need assistance during their transfer process (Harris, 2017).

Martinez (2018) also discussed the important role community colleges play in providing an open-door policy for underrepresented students. Underrepresented students have faced multiple challenges prior to applying to community colleges and they are excited to be on the road to obtaining a bachelor's degree in the future (Martinez, 2018). Jenkins & Cho's (2012) study revealed that a large percentage of students who enroll at a

community college do not graduate, which is quite an unfortunate trend. Students who

enter a community college and do not chose a plan of study with their first year of

college, have a lower chance of graduating with a degree (Jenkins & Cho, 2012). "While

an estimated 80% of entering community college students intend to graduate with a

bachelor's degree or higher, within six years, only one third transfer to a four-year

institution and less than 15% earn a bachelor's degree" (Fink & Jenkins, 2017, p. 294).

This tendency is worrisome as the number of Hispanic students who start their college

education do so by enrolling in a community college (Santiago et al., 2015). Harris

(2017) said that Hispanic students may believe will not fit in a four-year institution once

they have completed their community college education. Changing this misconception is

crucial as higher education administrators and faculty prepare students for the transfer

process to an upper division institution.

Degree completion is a priority for higher education institutions in Florida to meet

the guidelines for PBF (FLBOG, 2018a). Community college advisors are key in guiding

students in taking the appropriate coursework for their majors and assisting them in their

path to graduation (Bradley, 2016). However, college advisors have been accustomed to

advice students to register for a lower credit count to acclimate students to the new

college environment and meet the minimum 12 credit requirements for financial aid

awards. Bradley (2016) established that advisors should recommend students take 15

credits instead of 12 to accelerate their graduation rates, therefore improving the degree

completion for community college students. As reported by Waiwaiole (2018) the Alamo

College District created a system to encourage students to increase their semester loads to

18 credits. If the students are successful, they will receive tuition to pay for one summer

course. If the students take 24 credits during their fall and spring terms, then the College

will pay their tuition for two summer courses (Waiwaiole, 2018). The Alamo College

District in Texas is thinking outside of the box and putting all resources into motivating

students to take more credits, therefore completing their college degrees sooner.

High Achieving Underrepresented Students

Fries-Britt, Younger, and Hall (2010) discussed the fact that while the United

States is growing to be a more diverse country, "students of color" are still very

underrepresented in the sciences (p. 73). Underrepresented students like "African

Americans, Native Americans and Latino make up over 30 percent of the undergraduate

student population in this country, less than 12 percent of baccalaureate degrees in the

STEM fields are awarded to persons from these racial groups" (Fries-Britt et al., 2010, p.

73; National Action Council for Minorities in Engineering; 2008). Hernandez (2015)

discussed the fact that there are more opportunities in higher education for

"underrepresented populations" (p. 202).

There is a lack of research in the literature regarding high achieving students. The

literature does not "document these students" or their success stories (Vega, 2016, p.

307). On the other hand, Fries-Britt (2017) discussed the improvement there has been in

the past two decades in finding literature regarding high achieving African American

students. Fries-Britt's (2017) findings showed that there are themes that are prevalent in

the success of this population, such as "self-confidence, developing meaningful

relationships and navigating stereotypes, bias and racism" (p. 6). Even though there has

been improvement in documenting the success of African American students in the fields

of science, technology, engineering and math (STEM), they still encounter situations

where due to the color of their skin, their knowledge of their respective field is questioned (Fries-Britt, 2017).

Attending college is a possibility for Hispanic students, however, they continue to be underrepresented in comparison to their African American and White American peers (Gurantz, Hurwitz & Smith, 2017; Hernandez, 2015). Furthermore, high achieving Hispanics are "disproportionately enrolling in less selective institutions" (Hernandez, 2015, p. 204). It is vital for Hispanic students to attend prestigious institutions and earn higher-level degrees so that they can be in positions of leadership in their communities and professional fields (Avery & Hornby, 2004). Carrasquillo (2013) stated that even though there is little research on high achieving Hispanic population, there is some, and it is most important to ask these students about their experiences. Carrasquillo (2013) called for "further investigation of the low-income, high-achieving community college student phenomenon" (p. 10).

As stated by Gurantz, Hurwitz, and Smith (2016) "bachelor's degree completion rates are approximately five to twenty percentage points lower for high-performing and low-performing Hispanic students, respectively" (p. 2). Subsequently, Hispanic students prefer to attend an educational institution closer to home at a lower cost than leave their families (Gurantz et al., 2016). Rivera (2014) discussed the fact that Hispanic students are not aware of the college opportunities available to them or the possibility of attending a four-year institution instead of a vocational or community college. This study hopes to add more data to Carrasquillo's cause and determine the factors that, against all odds, make these students succeed and fuel their social mobility.

Hispanic Students in Florida

As stated by Stepler and Lopez (2016) Florida has approximately 4.8 million Hispanics, which is equivalent to 9% of the Hispanics in the U.S. The Hispanic population that resides in Florida is mostly non-Mexican, which is the largest group of Hispanics that has been researched in higher education (Geertz Gonzalez, 2010). In South Florida in particular, the student population is largely Cuban or descended from Cuban parents (Geertz Gonzalez, 2010). Moreover, the Hispanic population in Florida is comprised of other Hispanic ethnic groups in addition to Cubans. South Florida has also seen an influx of Colombian and Venezuelan immigrants, among others (Vogel, 2013a).

In this study, the research focused on Hispanic students who were born in Spanish speaking Caribbean Islands, Central America, and South America. There are differences in the immigration patterns of natives of all the different Spanish-speaking countries in Central America, South America, and the Caribbean arriving in South Florida. Many immigrants from these countries are of similar socio-economic status, and in turn share many points of view, as opposed to other immigrants from the same country who are of a lower socio-economic level (Vogel, 2013a). In the same way, Hispanics can identify themselves as Asian, Black, and White and have been born in a Spanish-speaking country. Equally important, the socio-economic background of Cubans and South Americans is higher than that of many of their Mexican counterparts (Martinez & Castillo, 2013). In South Florida, the Hispanic population tends to be of a higher socio-economic level, therefore their enrollment is higher in post-secondary education. Being aware of these differences and nuances among Hispanic ethnic groups is beneficial when trying to predict their behaviors as consumers and citizens (Vogel, 2013a).

Mwangi and Fries-Britt (2015) concluded that immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean Islands often find themselves struggling with their American counterparts, since they are perceived as less knowledgeable because they were born in a different country. Quite the opposite is true; immigrant students from these countries often score higher in math and science exams than their American classmates and bring invaluable life experiences to the classroom (Mwangi & Fries-Britt, 2015). The findings from this study will add research to the existing literature on foreign-born high achieving Hispanic students' academic performance in the higher education system. Therefore, it is important to emphasize that high-achieving Hispanic students are paving the way for other students in their communities to follow suit. This study participants offered a snapshot of their transfer process and academic experiences, providing insight, which higher education professionals can use to implement changes in the transfer pathways at their institutions.

Gaps and Limitations of the Literature

There are gaps in the existing literature when researching high-achieving Hispanic students that are also college transfer students. The transfer literature does not provide much insight into Hispanic minorities. Furthermore, Hispanic subgroups that are represented in Florida, for example, Cubans, Colombians, and Venezuelans are seldom mentioned in the existing literature which speaks of Hispanic students. Much of the existing literature at the national level focuses on Mexican students, which are the largest group of Hispanic students in the United States. It is important for higher education institutions to have additional information and insight into Hispanic backgrounds, subgroups, and as mentioned earlier, the psychological, social, and cultural traits of the Hispanics as a community.

Finally, this study interviewed participants from several Spanish speaking countries and provided a broader perspective of their educational experience in the United States. The results of this study added to the body of knowledge regarding other Hispanic groups which also reside in the United States; Hispanics other than those born in Mexico or of Mexican descent who engage in higher education. In addition, participants provided a narrative of their experiences as state college students who transferred to a four-year public state university in Florida. The study focused on students who attended the higher education public system in Florida and excluded private and out of state institutions. Lastly, this study had the limitation of only interviewing a sample of 14 high-achieving Hispanic transfer graduates. Further research should include a larger number of participants and combine qualitative and quantitative methods to obtain valuable data from the participants in various modalities.

Research Question

The central question for this study was:

1) How do high-achieving Hispanic graduates describe the factors impacting their transfer experience from a two-year community college to a public four-year university in the state of Florida?

Chapter 3: Methodology

Aim of the Study

The aim of this study was to gain insight into the transfer experiences described by high achieving Hispanic transfer graduates in Florida who were born outside of the United States. This study described in detail what the participants defined as challenges and/or barriers they faced, and what they reported as successes while pursuing their bachelor's degrees. The participants added insights into how their physiological, social, and cultural environment influenced their undergraduate experience. Lastly, the information collected will assist administrators and faculty in higher education to make fiscal and programming decisions in the future relating to underrepresented transfer students. These insights could help to better serve the growing population of Hispanic transfer students pursing a post-secondary degree in Florida.

Qualitative Research Approach

A qualitative study research design assisted the investigator in obtaining information that was effective in answering the central research question. A quantitative study would have provided the investigator with vast amounts of data; however, the study would not have been able to reflect the narrative of the participants and any additional responses due to, or that resulted from interview protocol and participant responses. According to Creswell and Poth (2018) "qualitative research begins with assumptions and the use of interpretative or theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (p. 8). Hammarberg, Kirkman and De Lacey (2016) discussed in detail the basis in which it is appropriate for a researcher to utilize a qualitative or quantitative

method when conducting a research study. Quantitative research is used when the study needs to have "factual data . . . required to answer the research question; when general or probability information is sought on opinions, attitudes, views, beliefs or preference" (Hammarberg et al., 2016, p. 498). In a qualitative study, the researcher ". . . uses an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns or themes" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 42). Qualitative studies provide the researcher with a rare opportunity to ask participants open-ended questions that add richness to the data collected. In addition, when the data is analyzed, the researcher can draw themes from the information collected and make conclusions.

The investigator of this study used interviews which allowed for the collection of meaningful data and formulation of themes based on the information shared by the participants. Cavazos, Johnson, Fielding, Cavazos, Castro and Vela (2010) conducted a similar study with Hispanic students and the method used for the research was also qualitative. The flexibility that qualitative research offers served to be extremely beneficial when working with a cohort of students. Garza et al. (2014) also conducted a research study with a group of eight Hispanic students, which stated that the qualitative portion "would generate rich data for the study" (p. 9).

In this study, the type of qualitative research conducted will be a case study. As stated by Cronin (2014) a case study ". . . focuses on specific situations, providing a description of individual or multiple cases" (p. 20). Cronin (2014) discussed that by selecting a case study research method "the researcher can investigate 'everything' in that situation, be it individuals, groups, activities or a specific phenomenon" (p. 20). Case

studies provide answers to "How" and "Why" questions for a specific phenomenon (Yin, 2014, p. 10). How and why questions during the interviews provided the opportunity for to obtain meaning and in-depth information from the study participants. Thereby making a qualitative case study an appropriate research design for this study.

Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted to determine the questions that were going to be asked to the participants of this study. The questions were created and were reviewed by two tenured higher education faculty members with doctoral degrees from NSU. After revising the changes suggested by the faculty, two participants were selected to participate in the pilot study. The participants were selected from the recruitment that took place via Facebook and LinkedIn; they did not participate in the study but met all the criteria required for the study. The two pilot participants were interviewed following the interview protocol that was designed for the study. At the end of the interview protocol, the pilot participants shared their comments and provided feedback that enhanced the effectiveness of the protocol. The suggestions made by the two participants was extremely valuable to the study. They provided suggestions to improve the effectiveness of the prescreening questions and the interview protocol. Their suggestions were used to revise the interview protocol. The final draft of the interview protocol received final approval by two faculty members from NSU assisting with the pilot process.

Participants

Participants were recruited via a professional social media campaign. The social media campaign encompassed the use of Facebook and LinkedIn platforms. A

recruitment narrative was posted on both platforms. The posts briefly described the study, the criteria for participating, and requested the participation of those reading the posts. Additionally, the message included a brief statement that asked readers to share the posting with others who met the criteria and were interested in participating; this process is referred to as snowball sampling (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2005). The snowball sampling was used as a recruitment tool. Once there was a group of interested participants, the investigator used a purposeful sampling procedure, to select the individuals met the study criteria.

All the participants interviewed attended MDC, graduated with their associates of arts degree with a 3.5 grade point average or higher, and then transferred to a pubic state university in Florida to complete their bachelor's degree. All the participants graduated with their bachelor's degree in less than six years which is the national average of graduation rates for transfer students. The study participants transferred to the following public state universities after graduating from MDC: one transferred to FAU, three transferred to University of Florida (UF) and 10 transferred to FIU.

The study participants represented Hispanics from Colombia, Cuba, El Salvador, Peru, and Venezuela. In the SUSs in Florida, the highest Hispanic enrollment numbers are from the following three countries: Venezuela (2,270) Cuba (1,837), and Colombia (1,685) respectively (FLBOG, 2018c). The participants' gender breakdown was as follows: 10 females and four males. In this case, the participants represented various Hispanic countries. The breakdown of their countries of birth were as follows: one from Colombia (South America), 10 from Cuba (Caribbean), one from El Salvador (Central America), one from Peru (South America), and one from

Venezuela (South America). Lastly, all the students reported being fully bilingual in English and Spanish.

Study participants were pre-screened to ensure they met the study criteria. Fourteen participants were interviewed over the phone with a semi-structured interview script that contained open-ended questions. According to Cavazos et al. (2010) using an "interview script" is extremely helpful when interviewing participants (p. 176). The interview questions used in this study were created and piloted with the assistance of higher education faculty members with doctoral degrees. Cavazos et al. (2010) also stated that using an interview script is a type of interview process that creates uniformity. Seidman (2013) stated that interviewing . . . is a basic mode of inquiry (p. 8). "Interviews with open ended questions provided the opportunity for participants to openly discuss their experiences with the interviewer. "Recounting narrative of experience has been the major way throughout recorded history that humans have made sense of their experience" (Seidman, 2013, p. 8). Lastly, all the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim to facilitate the identification of themes and to conduct an analysis of the information obtained. The company NoNotes.com was used to provide these professional recording services.

Data Collection Tools

An interview protocol was created based on the research questions designed for this study. As stated by Lodico, Spaulding and Voegtle (2010), it is of vital importance to create and follow the proper steps for an interview protocol. A sample of the interview protocol is shown in Appendix A. The instrument used in this study was created by the investigator. The protocol that was used during the study was as follows: (a) prescreening

questions were developed to select participants, (b) participants were selected for the study, (c) participants signed a consent form, (d) fourteen phone interviews were scheduled, (e) participants were briefed on the purpose of the study, (f) participants completed a brief form with prescreening questions (sent to participants via email prior to the day of the scheduled interviews) and the participants wrote the pseudonym they chose on the form, (g) they were briefed on how the interviews would be conducted, (h) the participants were informed of how the data collected was going to be stored, (i) the main topic of the study and the theoretical framework was shared, (j) the same interview questions were asked to each participant, (k) participants were informed that they could ask for the recording and/or interview to be stopped at any time if they so desired, (l) interviewer concluded the interview and asked the participants if they had any additional questions, and (m) participants were thanked for participating in the study.

Procedures

The application for the NSU IRB approval was completed and submitted. Once the approval letter was received from the IRB team at NSU, a participant recruitment post was written with a brief narrative describing the criteria for the study. The recruitment post provided the NSU email address of the individual conducting the research to which participants were to send an email demonstrating their interest in participating in the study. The recruitment message was posted on Facebook and LinkedIn professional accounts, encouraging interested Hispanic undergraduate graduates to send an email to receive further information and instructions if they met the study criteria.

The next step was to recruit two individuals who met the study criteria to take part of the pilot study. Once selected, they gave effective feedback to enhance the interview

protocol. Once the pilot study was completed, the investigator received emails from approximately 30 interested individuals. Out of those 30 interested individuals, only 14 students made the commitment to participate and be interviewed for the study via phone. The interested participants were sent an email with a brief description of the study and two attachments. One of the attachments was a document with the prescreening questions and the second document was the consent form. A sample of the prescreening questions is shown in Appendix B. Once the list of participants who met the study criteria were identified, the scheduling of the interviews took place. The investigator and the participants decided on the interview dates and times.

The participants received a brief explanation on the mechanics of the interview, the day of the interview, as the interview was to begin. They were told what to expect and it was reiterated that the interview sessions were going to be recorded and ultimately a transcription of the session was going to be developed. The participants were asked if they had any questions regarding the study or the interview process before the start of the interview. Once the interview began, the purpose of the study, the format, and the usage of the NoNotes.com recording services was discussed once again with the participants.

Following the initial introduction of the study, the interviews began, and the participants were asked the study interview questions. The participants knew that they had the option to stop the interview and/or ask any relevant questions they deemed appropriate. Once the interview ended, each participant was thanked for their candor and willingness to share their story for the study. Lastly, the participants were once again informed of the confidentiality of their responses, the way in which and for the amount of time their information will be stored. The NoNotes program was used to record the

interview session and the same company provided the transcription of the recording

several days or up to a week after the interviews took place. The transcription of the

interviews and any notes taken during the process will be stored electronically in an

OneDrive cloud account in an encrypted folder.

Data Analysis

This study used a qualitative case study approach to conduct the data collection

and data analysis. In a case study, there is a central question that is the focus of the

research study (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and in this study, interviews were conducted

from the selected participants that met the criteria. The interviews were conducted over

the phone and were recorded using the NoNotes.com services. This company offers

transcription services that facilitated the accurate recording of the information that was

exchanged during the interview process. Additionally, the information recorded was

saved in an electronic format that was encrypted for safe keeping.

As stated by Creswell and Poth (2018) in case studies, the following steps need to

be followed: "create and organize data files; read through text, make margin notes, and

form initial codes; describe the case and its context; use categorical aggregation to

establish themes or patterns; use direct interpretations; and develop naturalistic

generalizations of what was learned" (p. 199). Cronin (2014) discussed the fact that in a

case study research approach, a large portion of the analysis process can be considered to

have strong subjectivity on the part of the person conducting the study. The analysis and

interpretation need to be as clear as possible. In a qualitative study, especially one on the

social sciences, Cronin (2014) said "it is particularly important to demonstrate that the

research approach taken is credible and rigorous (p. 26).

Ethical Considerations

Conducing a research study is an important and serious endeavor with potential ethical considerations. Therefore, it is imperative to be well versed in the rules and regulations that ensure the study is conducted in an ethical manner. One such consideration is the confidentiality of the participant's personal information and data collected during the study. In this study, all the prescreening information, pilot study feedback, and transcriptions of the participants' interviews are kept in a locked file cabinet in a secure location. The electronic exchanges and interview recordings were stored in an OneDrive cloud account in an encrypted folder. Furthermore, the participants' real names were not used in the reporting of the data. All the participants selected their own pseudonym to further protect their identity during and after the end of the study. Participants in the final report are referred to by a participant number. Lastly, participants were informed that they had the option to stop their participation at any time during the study. It was important to the investigator that participants understood that the study conducted had provisions to meet high standards of ethical procedures.

Trustworthiness

Amankwaa (2016) discussed the value trustworthiness brings to a research endeavor and the importance of creating a protocol to ensure the qualitative research is considered valuable. Lincoln and Guba (1985) determined four components of trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Each area has a set of steps that ensures the process is accurate and the study is thorough. This study followed the criteria set forth by Lincoln and Guba in their classic 1985 findings. Amankwaa (2016) breaks down the criteria in lay terms by describing each area once the

findings of the research have been collected. Amankwaa (2016) described the areas as the following: (a) credibility- information is accurate (b) transferability – the information can be applied to other fields; (c) dependability – the information can be replicated in the future, and (d) confirmability- the results are not influenced by the investigator in any way.

The investigator of this study used the criteria mentioned earlier to conduct a qualitative case study that met trustworthiness requirements for the research process. This criteria recommended by Amankwaa (2016) was followed by the investigator in the following way (a) collected information that was accurate, (b) the data collected could be applied to other fields of study, (for example, private industry researchers wanting to learn more about Hispanics in the United States could benefit from reading this study), (c) ensured that the study procedures were written in a manner that the study can be replicated in the future, and lastly (d) safeguarded the study from possible research bias.

Potential Research Bias

The investigator of this study was also the interviewer of the study participants. The investigator is a foreign-born female Hispanic transfer graduate; therefore, the belief was that the participants were going to feel more at ease discussing their college journeys with someone who belonged to a similar ethnic group. In addition, the investigator graduated from MDC, meaning there might have been bias towards students who graduated from the same institution. Furthermore, the investigator was also a transfer student from a community college to a four-year public state university in Florida. The investigator graduated with a bachelor's degree in four and a half years; however, the investigator's grade point average both the associate's and bachelor's degrees were below

a 3.0. In conclusion, the investigator is extremely interested in this research topic, however remaining open-minded throughout the study was critical in order to obtain unbiased results.

Limitations

One of the limitations of the study was that all the participants attended and graduated from the same community college, MDC. Conducting interviews of Hispanic transfer graduates from other community colleges the state of Florida would have expanded the perspective of the data that was collected during this study, especially from counties in the state where the population of Hispanics is lower than that of South Florida.

A second limitation was to only conduct interviews of high achieving Hispanic transfer graduates who transferred to a public state university. Comparing high achieving Hispanic graduates who transferred from a community college to a private four-year institution to high achieving Hispanic graduates who transferred to a public state four-year institution would be an interesting comparison. Subsequently, reporting the level of satisfaction among these high achieving Hispanic transfer graduates, while also collecting data on their grade point averages and the time it took for them to earn their bachelor's degrees would be noteworthy. Collecting all this additional data would increase the qualitative and quantitative research currently available on Hispanic students are foreign born.

Chapter 4: Results

The central question guiding this study was: How do high-achieving Hispanic graduates describe the factors impacting their transfer experience from a two-year community college to a public four-year university in the state of Florida? This study involved qualitative questions that were created to obtain insights from high achieving Hispanic transfer graduates. The information gathered was an avenue to understand what factors the participants reported as being part of their successes and which challenges were during their road towards achieving a bachelor's degree in less than the national average of six years. The participants in this study spoke freely and candidly about their individual journeys while pursuing their undergraduate education in the Florida public post-secondary system.

This study followed a qualitative research case study design to collect data. The data was collected via one-on-one interviews with the study participants. During the interviews, the participants discussed the factors, which in their opinion, were influential during their undergraduate education. The participants answered questions that pertained to the positive factors and difficulties they encountered during their transfer experience and overall undergraduate education. Additionally, they answered questions on the role played by family, friends, classmates, faculty, counselors, and administrators whom were influential at both MDC and in their respective transfer institutions. Then, the participants shared comments regarding the significance of their family's economic status and how that impacted their transfer decisions. Also, participants discussed their employment status and the impact this had on their success, as some worked on campus and others off campus while pursuing their degree. Participants added statements on how they overcame

difficulties encountered their path to degree completion. In summation, questions were formulated to include the PSC framework on which this study was based. Three questions were included in the interview protocol that were directly related to PSC theoretical framework. Participants discussed the three parts of the PSC framework. They answered questions related to the psychological, social and cultural aspects of themselves and their environments as related to their post-secondary education. All the participant responses were recorded and later transcribed using the NoNotes.com recording and transcription system. After reading and analyzing the 14 interview transcripts, the following themes emerged:

Theme 1: Academic Transitions and Experiences

The participants in this study graduated from a community college and then transferred to an upper division four-year institution. Participants in this study experienced positive and challenging transitions to college. The participants discussed their transition from high school to a community college, and then the transfer from a community college to a four-year university. Participants discussed their preference of smaller classroom setting of the community college, honors program, attending college for free, and meeting faculty and staff that took an interest in assisting them in their path. Participant #10 shared her experience regarding her transition from high school to post-secondary education:

> To be honest, starting at the community college level was really very helpful to transition from high school. I came from a very small private high school, so instead of going directly to a big university, I think it was really helpful to transition to Miami Dade, which was where I attended. The classes you know had

30 or 40 students. The teachers were very kind and knowledgeable and helpful to

the students.

Participant #2 reported having to enroll in remedial English courses during the

beginning of their undergraduate journey. Participant #2 shared:

I started Miami Dade College and one thing I think that helped me a lot at Miami

Dade was that when you start at a community college versus a university, I feel

like you are more prepared when you go into the university because in a

community college, it kind of gives you the opportunity to remediate any learning

that you have to do.

The remedial courses provided a strong foundation for the rest of the academic journey of

participant #2.

There were several participants that reported having difficulty during their first

semester as a transfer student when they started at the four-year university. Some of the

challenges they encountered were larger classes, the level of difficulty of the courses,

finding it harder to make new friends, and not knowing the new culture at the university.

Participant #10 shared the following:

In reality, in my first semester when I transferred to FIU, for example, my first

accounting class had like 140 people in an auditorium. That was overwhelming in

a sense. I think going the first couple of years to a community college makes it a

really great transition.

Several participants reported earning a high-grade point average at the community

college and when they transferred, their first semester at the post-secondary university,

their grades suffered. Others reported leaving home to another city and encountering a

new environment. Participant #1 reported challenges when transitioning from MDC to the Honors College at FAU, stating "I did not like it. It was too small." The honors campus of FAU is located in Jupiter, Florida, and students are required to live at the dorms on campus. "I had to live on campus with other students, typically, who were freshmen which I didn't understand, if I was a junior, why I couldn't live off campus." Participant #1 made the decision to leave the honors program at FAU and attended the main FAU campus located in Boca Raton. He stated that at the Boca Raton campus, "I was allowed to be off campus; I didn't make any friends, [but] I continued to rely on my network of friends in Miami." The academic experience he had was positive, as he recounted "I got good professors, I was lucky." The participants provided enriching examples of their transfer experiences during their undergraduate education throughout the interview process.

Theme 2: Family Support

All the participants reported the influence their respective families had on their success while pursuing their undergraduate education. The family support received was not limited to encouragement but extended to cover methods of care such as emotional, financial and psychological support; transportation to campus; paying for tutors; and finally, a home to live in while attending college. Most participants reported that not going to college was not an option but expected. Hispanics have close-knit family units that extend from the nuclear family of parents and siblings to include extended family members, for example, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Often, family members are active participants in each other's lives and share their thoughts on what each other

should pursue. Several participants reported the importance of their parents, grandmothers, and aunts during their college journeys.

Participant #6 was born in Venezuela and shared that when it came to the decision of pursing a post-secondary education, "I come from a very large family and pretty much everyone - I would say 70% to 80% of my family members - are professionals. So, it was something that was non-negotiable." Participant #2 stated:

> I come from a Cuban family, so they expected me to go to school. Ever since I was little, I was told 'you need to do something for yourself' and 'you need to become better than us.' That's actually something that I promised my grandmother before she died. She always told me 'you need to go to school and you have to promise that you are going to school.' My family was big, and they pushed me to go to school.

Participant #13 shared that her Mom kept repeating the same phrase to her: "Education is an investment." She started laughing and noted that her Mom's phrase ". . . should be like a slogan." In addition, Participant #13 shared the following moving thoughts regarding the influence her Mom's example had on her decision to purse a post-secondary education:

> I always knew that I wanted to go to school. I think part of me being an immigrant [meant that education is] a value that's always pushed forward. My mom works in housekeeping, so I knew that was not going to be my future. She was always very supportive of me pursuing an education.

Furthermore, Participant #13 shared the following:

Honestly, I think the most important thing was family support for me. I think I

had the skills – I thought I had gained the skills throughout my educational career

and for my bachelors . . . [but] having support from my family, financial support

and encouragement [was most important] - because it can get hard…I was

working and going to school and had a lot of things going on when I was pursuing

my bachelors.

Participant #3 shared:

I always recall, particularly my mother, who said, 'You have to go to school. You

have to go to school,' as my father did as well. But they certainly emphasized the

fact that I had to get a degree in something, whatever it was - I had to succeed. I

had to go to college.

Subsequently, Participant #3 also shared having the parental pressure to go to college and

felt "a lot of guilt if I didn't go to college, but then I wanted to because I enjoyed it." All

the participants were candid when sharing their family stories of support, commonly

noting the expectation that pursuing a college education was the next step after high

school, the constant reinforcement that staying in college was the correct path, and in

some instances, even cooking and washing clothes for the participants so that they could

concentrate on studying. The anecdotes were too many to include in this section,

however, they were all very powerful stories of perseverance and of working hard to

achieve the "American Dream."

The following themes were the result of the questions related to the PSC

framework. Participants answered the question: What were the psychological, social, and

cultural aspects that influenced you to be successful during your undergraduate

education? The next three themes reflect the participants' responses in relation to the PSC theoretical framework of the research study.

Theme 3: Failure Was Not an Option

Participants shared many examples of what drove them to succeed. There was a recurring theme of participants stating that they felt they had no choice but to attend college and be successful. It was a theme that was present in each interview, regardless of the country of birth, parents' educational background, or gender. All the participants had that feeling in common. Several participants reported an inner drive to be successful, to achieve, and being very self-motivated. A few reported being in control of their academic advisement choices through self-advising. Other participants had a counselor who guided them in general, and others had guidance as part of The Honors College. These staff members had a strong impact on the participants and motivated them to succeed and to think outside of the box.

Participant #12 reported what made up the inner narrative that kept her going during her journey at MDC and afterwards at FIU. She shared the following personal memory:

My dad didn't really finish – he didn't get to do a bachelor's in Colombia. My mom did, but it was very difficult for her. I think that was in the back of my head: 'I have this opportunity now in the United States and let me make the most out of it.' So, I think deep inside that was something that pushed me all along, that there were times that I didn't question whether the thought of dropping out - not going to school was not an option in my brain and not because my parents were constantly telling me, 'Hey, you must stay in school.' It was something that

naturally, deep inside [I thought] 'this is an opportunity I have, and I'm going to

take advantage of it.'

Dedication and strong study habits were part of the behaviors that assisted Participant#1

in being successful in college.

Participant #1 shared the following:

. . . dedication, putting [in] time. Making sure that every time I would open a

book, whether in the classroom or outside, I was going to be effective. Not only

just [sic]spending time reading a book, but actually learning and studying and

gathering the information.

Participant #13 shared:

 I was always very motivated to go to school, even before moving to the U.S. I

was always a good student and part of that, I think, is [due to] personality and

motivation. My mom and her being always supportive and encouraging me to

reach for more – yes, I think motivation, persistence. Participants described how

they remained disciplined, had an inner drive to achieve, and wanted to make

their parents and extended family members proud.

Theme 4: Peer Support

During the interview process, it was surprising to observe the importance of peers,

close friends, and classmates to the participants. Family support had a different meaning,

however, friendships certainly stood out of all the themes in the study. The participants

made friends in community college, and some transferred together to the same upper

division institution. Other participants made strong friendships at the Honors College

through their involvement in student organizations on campus. Lastly, most of the

participants reported keeping in touch with college peers, faculty, and staff with whom they developed friendships with while pursuing their undergraduate education. Participant #7 shared "the friends that I had [were a factor of my success]. I think we all had similar goals, we all wanted to go to college, and we all wanted to pursue careers. So, I think the social circles that I was with at the time [influenced me a lot], we had similar goals." Participant #11 stated "I was able to make, like [sic] really good friends with, not only with [sic] students but, you know, [sic] with faculty… they were instrumental in my success then and even, [sic]and even now."

Participant #14 stated:

> The girls I transferred with; they were all Hispanics. They were all driven, and I think that had a great influence [on me]. Most of my friends in college at UF were mixed, but the girls that I roomed with were Hispanic. Actually, we would support each other, and we were there for each other and we would help each other out a lot. I think that helped me to see that they too were striving to be better.

Participant # 3 shared:

> Of course, we were the first generation to come over from Cuba. So that group, I feel is a little different, or was a little different. And we had each other for support, so I had friends and we were all sort of in the same position trying to navigate the waters . . . we would communicate with each other [about] what was working for them, [and] what wasn't working for them.

Many of the participants reported having a strong network of friends during their undergraduate education and the ways in which they assisted each other. College friends

supported each other, assisted each other academically and emotionally, had similar

values, and had similar academic and social interests.

Theme 5: Student Organizations

There was one question in the interview protocol that asked participants if they

were part of a student organization while pursuing their undergraduate education, and if

participating had an impact on their journey. It was surprising to learn that all participants

had been part of a student organization, or created an organization, and in many instances

were involved in student government. Most of the participants were part of Phi Theta

Kappa (PTK), the National Honors Society for community colleges. All the participants

in the study discussed how they were actively involved in either one or more student

organizations at MDC and at their transfer institution. Several participants were part of

The Honors College at MDC and others of the Honors College at FIU. A few participants

were part of both honors colleges at MDC and FIU. Participants reported meeting peers

that had their same interests, and those friendships have been long lasting.

Additionally, participants mentioned having participated in student organizations

while at MDC and FAU, FIU, and UF. Some of the student organizations mentioned

were (at MDC) Psi Beta (Community College National Honor Society in Psychology),

FBLA (Future Business Leaders of America-Phi Beta Lambda), Chemistry Club, and (at

FIU) American Marketing Association, Computer Science Club, and Tau Sigma Honor

Society (the honor society for transfer students attending universities), among many

others. Participant #5 described:

It allowed me to network with other people. It allowed me to figure out if I was on

the right track towards what I wanted to do, which was medicine. It also allowed

me to meet faculty from different universities and kind of know what I needed to

prepare for. It also helped [me] earn volunteer hours, so that was also very

beneficial. I think that those organizations are really helpful in getting you to the

next step.

Also, Participant #4 commented that at FIU, they "joined the sorority Sigma, Sigma and

Sigma that's where [they] met like [sic] really close friends of mine who [they] still talk

to today." Participant #12 joined a religious organization at FIU, and she reported "the

Christian ministry on campus … was a huge support. It was a group of people that came

from very different backgrounds and being able to have this one thing that was the same

[faith]…was so helpful." In addition to meeting new friends, participants shared that

being part of student organizations assisted them in being involved in activities that

promoted public speaking, traveling to competitions, conducting research and most of all,

finding others who shared their same interests and long-term goals.

Theme 6: Cultural and Ethnic Identity

As reflected in the PSC framework, participants shared the relationship between their

culture and their success in college. Participant #14 shared the following:

I wanted my family to be proud, but I wanted to stand out - I wanted that more

than anything. I wanted to know that as a Hispanic woman I could stand on my

own two feet, that I could do it. To me, that was very important: that I was Cuban;

I came when I was 11 years old; I started college when I was 18 - I wanted the

world to know that, 'hey, here's a Hispanic woman who can make it and will

make it - and she'll do good,' and I did.

In regard to the importance of their family culture impacting their attitude towards education and their reaction to those cultural factors, Participant # 10 stated:

> A lot of the Cubans that came (to the U.S.), they were hard working. My family was hardworking, and they were always used to working. Although my mom was a housewife, she would always cook and do stuff for my dad and everybody. We were always brought up to work hard to achieve success. It doesn't come by sitting around and not doing anything. You have to pursue it and you have to work hard towards it, in order to get to where you want to be.

Participant # 9 was born in Peru; however, one grandparent was Japanese. He grew up between two family cultures before moving to the U.S., and he shared the following:

> I think everything traces it back to my father's mother - my grandmother - because she would tell him, 'you have to study, you have to study,' and then after that, my mother also realized the same thing and she would support me while I was studying, and … it was our culture. My grandma was selling vegetables because that was that's what farmers will do . . . she told me I had to study, 'so that you are not like me.' Everybody wanted to get out of that circle; they wanted to be something better.

One of the prescreening questions, asked the participants to answer: What group do you culturally identify with? It was interesting to read the results. Out of 14 participants of foreign-born Hispanics, there were an array of answers. Seven of the participants identified as Hispanic, one as Latina, one as American, one as American/Cuban, one as Cuban, one as Cuban/Hispanic, one as Hispanic/Asian, and one

as Hispanic/Latino. It was very fascinating to learn how all the participants identified as different groups, not only Hispanic or Latino (a) categories.

Theme 7: Financial Challenges

Participants in the study had different levels of economic need while pursuing their undergraduate education. All the participants discussed the financial aspect of obtaining a post-secondary degree to some level during the interview process. Some participants reported that their families were in dire financial distress and this affected the choices they made to attend universities close to home. Subsequently, some of the participants reported having to work to support themselves, since their parents were immigrants and did not have the additional funds to provide them for incidentals and the cost of a college education. A group of the participants were part of The Honors College at MDC and they had their tuition paid for via their honors scholarship. However, when it came time to transfer, they choose a university closer to home since they could not afford to attend a university outside the state, or in some instance's participants, could not afford to leave Miami-Dade County.

One of the participants was able to have her studies paid for, however, she had to transfer to FIU to have that option. Participant #12 was fortunate that she was part of The Honors College at MDC, which provided her with a full scholarship. In addition, one of her parents worked at FIU and her tuition was therefore subsided for the rest of her bachelor's degree. She stated, "The fact that I didn't have to rely so much on my parents for my financial needs to pay for school . . . was also a motivator to keep on going."

Participant #2 expressed the following regarding finances and his college education: "My mom lived in Cuba and my dad was the only one working. I did have to

take financial aid, which came from the government. I didn't have to pay for any of my schooling. Unfortunately, I do have student loans because I had to live on my own." In addition, he had to work while pursuing his education in order to pay for his expenses. Participant #14 shared "My mother and father, they couldn't support me financially like other American kids, but most of the financial support came from loans that I took out." As Participant #14 reported, "moral help came from my family and from my friends, but I had to get a couple loans to get through UF. Even though I worked, it wasn't enough."

Participants reported that working, while being enrolled as a full-time student, provided an extra source of income to supplement any assistance received from parents, extended family members, federal financial aid and merit scholarships. Consequently, study participants also shared some of the benefits they experienced while working on campus. Participants #8 and #11 discussed how working on campus kept them grounded and helped them more easily be mentored by their supervisors. Their flexible schedules assisted them in staying in school and focusing on their studies, avoiding the extra commute of traveling to a job off campus.

Participant #13 shared the following:

> I was working at a different place and eventually I got a job on campus, so that made things easier for me because I was already on campus. When I started to work on campus, I had more time to do other things and join the clubs and all of that.

In addition, working on campus provided Participant #13 the opportunity to connect with other employees, who as recounted, later became "my mentors there, who wrote my recommendation letters when I was applying to Grad school programs." The investigator

was extremely impressed to learn the sacrifices and mature decisions several of the

participants had to make at such a young age to finance their undergraduate education.

Conversely, other participants were fortunate to receive full scholarships that subsidized

their entire bachelor's degree, which resulted in having a less stressful educational

experience since they did not worry about how to pay for tuition and books.

Suggestions for Administrators and Faculty

In order to gain insight as to how the participants felt their experiences might

help decision makers, the participants were asked was the following question: What

suggestions do have for administrators and faculty from the community college and state

university you attended that would assist them in increasing the completion rates of high-

achieving transfer students like you currently attending their institutions? This question

gave the participants an opportunity to give their personal opinions, based on their own

experience in the Florida post-secondary state system, to provide feedback to the

decision-makers at those higher education institutions.

Participants gave an array of suggestions for the higher education administrators

and faculty to improve the overall undergraduate experience of not only Hispanic

students, but all students attending their institutions. Two participants suggested that it is

important to have hands-on experiences while in college to then be more prepared for the

job market after graduation. As stated by Participant #6, "the more the university can do

to help the students get better job opportunities that are really providing them with real

work experience that can help them advance, the better." Three participants emphasized

that administrators and faculty should listen to their student body. It was a little

astonishing that something as simple as listening to students was a suggestion that was

brought up several times by different participants during the interviews, as explained by Participant #2 who suggested, "Listen to the students and avoid classifying people based on what they are or where they come from." In addition, he said ". . . just because someone is Hispanic … that [doesn't mean] they don't know what they are doing, or they don't understand what's going on."

Participants suggested that it is important for staff at four-year institutions to make their incoming transfer students feel welcomed and included at the university. A way of creating this environment is to develop a Welcome Center for transfer students and especially be inclusive of those who are living away from their homes and/or countries. Also, staffing the academic units with academic advisors who care about transfer students and underrepresented groups would be beneficial. Subsequently, it would help to increase the student engagement of transfer and Hispanic students through campus activities, student organizations and research opportunities on campus. Participant #6 suggested that it is important for colleges and universities to assist students "to find paid internships." Additionally, she suggested having funding available to provide students who are low income the opportunity to study abroad. These suggestions were some of the areas the study participants felt were important for administrators and faculty to be aware of and take into consideration when making programming and fiscal decisions at higher education institutions in Florida.

Participant perceptions of higher education from past to present. The study investigator intended only to interview participants from different Hispanic countries and different genders. However, after realizing the participant's graduation dates from their bachelor's degree ranged from 1972 to 2017, the investigator became intrigued by the

similarities and differences that emerged, even given the important difference in generations.

All participants discussed their decision to attend post-secondary education in Florida and the importance of earning a college education for them and their families. The participants had similar transfer experiences, whether to FIU, FAU or UF, which included experiencing transfer shock, adjusting to a new environment, and learning the new rules and locations of buildings at the university. A large portion of the participants also reported that their grades suffered during their first semester at the transfer university, since the academic rigor was different than the one at MDC. In summary, most of the study participants successes and challenges were similar, however, there were some differences that were clearly due to the time lapse between graduating from college in 1972 versus 2017.

One of the main differences among the study participants who graduated prior to the year 2000, was the use of technology in higher education. One of the participants discussed not having all the technological advances which are available in 2019 in the areas of registration and advisement. An example, was the use of a phone system at MDC which was used by students to register for courses, drop courses and check for end of semester grades, since at that time there was no internet. Furthermore, at FIU, open courses were printed and posted outside of Primera Casa (building where the registrar's office was located), and if a student wanted to change course, the student had to make a line and ask a staff member to manually change the course in the system. Two participants discussed the high number of academic advisors which are now hired by state colleges and universities to serve the student population. The participants

commented on the availability of advisors in the old days, but not at the scale advisement teams are currently available. At MDC, all the students who graduated after 2010 reported having an assigned advisor assist with academic advisement. Also, the study participants who transferred to FIU, FAU and UF reported having assigned advisors according to their academic major. It was an interesting observation for the investigator to note that for the most part, the participant's experiences, regardless of graduation year, were mostly similar with a few differences.

Summary

Participants in this study were extremely accommodating and generous with their time. The participants shared their stories, which at times, brought sensitive memories back to their present day. The themes that emerged from this study were seven: (a) academic transition and experiences, (b) family support, (c) failure was not an option, (d) peer support, (e) student organizations, (f) cultural and ethnic identity and (g) financial challenges. The investigator was amazed to observe the recurrence of the same topics imbedded in the participants' answers. The study participants discussed the importance of their families and friends while in pursuit of an undergraduate degree. The social aspect of the participant's college experience was one of the main keys that assisted this group of high achieving Hispanic transfer graduates to achieve their goals in a timely manner. Keeping the participants socially engaged on campus and having stable home lives assisted this group of participants to become high-achieving Hispanic transfer graduates. In Chapter 5, the investigator summarizes all the main findings of the study, compares findings with existing higher education literature, makes recommendations for further research, and provides an update on the 2019 Florida legislature decisions.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Overview of Findings

The purpose of this qualitative investigation was to understand the factors impacting the college transfer experience of high achieving Hispanic transfer graduates along their path to earning a bachelor's degree in less than six years in the Florida Public Post-Secondary System. This chapter includes a discussion of major findings as related to the themes that emerged from this study. The themes that emerged from this study were seven: (a) academic transition and experiences, (b) family support, (c) failure was not an option, (d) peer support, (e) student organizations, (f) cultural and ethnic identity and (g) financial challenges.

All the participants interviewed were Hispanics were born outside of the United States. The study results provided insight into the post-secondary educational experiences of high-achieving Hispanic transfer students. The research participants discussed factors that assisted them in being successful during their journey to complete an undergraduate education. All the study participants began their academic careers at a state college and then transferred to an upper division institution. In addition, participants discussed the challenges encountered on their path and in some instances, the participants provided perceptions into how they overcame barriers encountered on their path to earning both an associate in arts and a bachelor's degree in less than six years, which is the national average.

This chapter contains discussion and future research possibilities to help answer the central research question: How do high-achieving Hispanic transfer graduates describe the factors impacting their transfer experience from a two-year community

college to a public four-year university in the state of Florida? In this study, foreign born Hispanic students were interviewed. All the participants briefly shared personal stories and had many similar themes in common. The national literature on Hispanic students tends to concentrate on conducting research studies solely or mostly with Mexican students or students of Mexican descent. This tendency in the research focus in higher education is understandable, since Mexicans are the largest Hispanic subgroup in the U.S. (Geertz Gonzalez, 2010). On the contrary, South Florida is a melting pot of cultures and a Hispanic population made up of many different subgroups. In South Florida, there are Hispanics born in Central, South America, and the Caribbean (Vogel, 2013a). Hispanic countries are characterized by having Spanish as their official language, therefore all the participants learned English as a second language once they moved to the U.S. This study had participants that were born in Colombia, Cuba, El Salvador, Peru, and Venezuela, and moved to the U.S. before starting their college education.

The questions used in this study were based on the psychosociocultural (PSC) framework created by Gloria and Rodriguez in 2000. The participants discussed what psychological, social, and cultural factors they experienced while earning their associates and bachelor's degrees. In addition, the participants conversed about the influence their families and peers had on their path to achieving a bachelor's degree. The participants felt that as immigrants, they had no choice but to pursue a post-secondary education. Some participants reported on their personal, inner drives to move forward, work hard, and achieve what others around them were achieving as well. Many of them stated that their Hispanic origin and cultural views were strong factors in the decisions they made and ultimately their success. A combination of factors assisted this group of high

achieving Hispanic transfer graduates navigate the American higher education system and ultimately make themselves and their families proud.

Meanings and Understandings

The central research question in this study was: How do high-achieving Hispanic graduates describe the factors impacting their transfer experience from a two-year community college to a public four-year university in the state of Florida? Participants in this study shared numerous anecdotes of their experiences and perceptions of their journey, from beginning their post-secondary education at a community college, to then transferring to an upper division institution to complete their four-year degree. It was interesting to note that regardless of the country of birth and gender, all the participants reported similar stories. This study was based on the PSC framework, which is composed of three aspects: psychological, social and cultural.

Psychological. Stepler (2016) shared the results of a survey that indicated the value African American and Hispanic parents place on their children obtaining a post-secondary education. A post-secondary degree is interpreted by the assurance of the economic mobility that will result from receiving a college degree (Stepler, 2016). These results parallel the information shared by the participants to the investigator of this study. The participants shared the importance, and in many cases pressure, their parents and extended family members exerted on them earning a post-secondary degree. Many the participants reported not having a choice in earning a college education. In a way, it was their duty as an immigrant to earn a degree, justifying the family's sacrifice of moving to the United States for a better life. Rivera's (2014) findings are consistent with the findings of this study, therefore, supporting the findings that students who are minorities

at their universities know intrinsically that they need to work harder than their counterparts to achieve their goal of earning a college education.

The resilience, strong work ethic and focus displayed by all the high-achieving participants truly came alive during the interview process. Even though as they transferred to an upper division institution after completing their associate degree, there was an adjustment period, the participants knew that they needed to find solutions to their challenges and ask for help. This level of assertiveness and strong drive was truly impressive to record as part of this study. Rivera (2014) discussed similar findings in the study of Hispanic students that were successful in their college degree attainment.

Social. In addition, participants reported how family, friends, academic advisors, faculty, and honors directors were crucial to their success. Specifically, important was having a network of peers with similar interests and who were striving for the same goals. The importance of mentorship for underrepresented minority students was discussed by Biswas (2019) who shared concrete examples of how faculty can provide an environment of "care work" at institutions where students of underrepresented groups are a minority (p. 2). Biswas (2019) believes that, it is of great significance for students to have faculty and/or mentors who look like the students for the students to feel comfortable enough to share the needs and issues they are having at the higher education institution they are attending. Some of the High-achieving Hispanic transfer students that participated in this study reported having meaningful relationships with faculty members, club advisors, honors college administrators, academic advisors, and most of all their classmates.

Cultural. Participants in the study reported the importance of family and the support they received from parents or extended family members. Perrakis and Hagedorn

(2010) discussed how students in their study reported not having the same flexibility as their American peers in having the means to go away for college and stay living in a dorm. Study participants reported having to choose a university closer to home and work rather than one in a different city far away from family and friends (Perrakis & Hagedorn, 2010). Hayes (2012) discussed the importance of having a coach for underrepresented students while attending college so that they can have a more individualized support system and adjust to the new environment and culture around them more easily.

In this study, participants discussed how they stayed at the community college close to home for a variety of reasons. One of the reasons was the strong connection to their families and friends; and another factor was the financial impact which influenced their choice to work, take out student loans, and their final transfer university choice. Many reported being accepted to other universities in northern Florida or outside of the state, however, decided to transfer to a university closer to home due to family and financial circumstances.

Findings Linked to Existing Literature

In this study, the participants discussed the importance of interacting with an academic advisor during their undergraduate education. The academic advisors provided academic guidance, transfer information and most of all support to the participants during moments of academic distress and homesickness. Tovar (2015) discussed how community colleges need to ensure that their academic advisement teams not only give students' academic guidance, but also assess the needs of the students they are serving. Additionally, Tovar (2015) stated that academic counselors in institutions of higher education can improve their student interactions with Hispanic students by knowing their

"psychosocial and academic needs" in order to guide them through their college journey (p. 64). In this study, several of the participants mentioned how the academic advisor at UF understood how difficult it was for the participants to be away from family members residing in Miami. The academic advisor's guidance and understanding of the participants feelings was crucial to successfully finishing their bachelor's degree. Tovar's (2015) study alludes to empowering the academic counselors to have a more in-depth knowledge of the Hispanic students beyond their academic profiles, which is in line with Gloria and Rodriguez' (2000) PSC theoretical framework.

The PSC theoretical approach also provides advisement professionals with the psychological, social and cultural aspects that influence Hispanic students' performance and attitudes in the college environment (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007; Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000). In this study, participants discussed in length the importance of perseverance, inner drive, family influence, college friends and their cultural identity as factors in their degree attainment and ultimately college success. Introducing training in the PSC framework to the professional academic advisors' trainings at all the community colleges and universities in the state of Florida will make a strong positive impact in the services they provide the students in their caseloads. Jackson, Starobin and Laanan (2013) stated the vital role community colleges play in the transfer accomplishments of minority students. Despite the technological advances in higher education, academic advisors and faculty interactions with students are significant when assisting students to navigate and succeed throughout their undergraduate journey.

Wood and Palmer (2016) discussed the similarities between underrepresented groups and white students when it comes to the importance of having a strong social

connection to others while in college. Regardless of their ethnicity, college students perform better and complete their degrees at faster rates if during their undergraduate education they have friends on campus with whom they share similar ideals or have common goals. This "social integration" is an important piece in the complex set of factors that assist college students in staying persistent and obtaining their college degree (Wood & Palmer, 2016, p. 20). In this study, all the participants shared how important their college friends and their overall peer support were to their successfully completing their bachelor's degree in less than six years. Likewise, Tovar (2015) stated "having supportive family and friends, receiving transition assistance from the institution, spending adequate time studying, and committing to the pursuit of a major or a degree exercised a powerful influence on intention to persist to degree completion" (p. 63). Study participants discussed in detail how their parents, grandparents and extended family members in general had a strong influence on their decision to pursue an undergraduate education. For this reason, family support and their financial assistance were extremely vital for study participants during their college education.

According to Lopez and Jones (2017), engagement in student organizations and other activities is a factor that promoted student success at the baccalaureate level for this group of former transfer students. The 14 participants interviewed for this research study discussed how they were part of at least one student organization, whether on campus or off, during their undergraduate education. The majority were engaged on campus at both institutions they attended. Some of the participants were part of an honors program at the community college level, which had a cohort model. They also were part of honor societies, student government associations, academic, and service organizations on

campus. Two of the participants reported having worked as student assistants at the community college and how that experience assisted them in staying more connected to campus and finding mentors in their employers who assisted them during their journey.

Research Significance

The central question in this study was how high-achieving Hispanic transfer graduates described the factors impacting their transfer experience from a two-year community college to a public four-year university in the state of Florida. Barshay (2018) established that, there are gaps in the degree attainment of Hispanic students in the nation. Additionally, Barshay (2018) stated:

> Fewer than a quarter, or 22.6 percent, of Latino Americans ages 25 to 64 held a two-year college degree or higher in 2016, the report said. By comparison, more than 30 percent of black American adults had a college degree, and nearly half, or 47.1 percent of white adults did. That's nearly a 25-percentage point gap in college attainment between Latinos and whites. (para. 3)

However, in Florida, Hispanic students have a larger percentage of degree attainment that in other states (Barshay, 2018). Florida has a higher percentage of Cubans and Puerto Ricans living in the state and those groups tend to have a higher level of socio-economic status than other groups that reside outside of Florida (Martinez & Castillo, 2013). Lastly, it is inferred that socio-economic status is a more important factor than the level of support Hispanic students are receiving in the post-secondary system in Florida.

In this study, all the participants interviewed were not only Hispanic, but were also transfer students. Wang (2016) shared the "importance of and need for engaging both students' motivations and their actual behaviors in order to best prepare them for

transfer" (p. 27). Staff who work in community colleges play a crucial role in assisting students in preparing them for the transfer process to an upper division institution. Moreover, community college advisors can guide their students to transfer to highly selective schools that will assist them in transferring to an institution they thought was out of reach for them. Hispanic students and other underrepresented groups would benefit tremendously from these opportunities.

In addition, the study participants faced some of the same issues transfer students experience at the national level. Transfer students in general, endure a process of adjustment and some of them struggle academically since the rigor of the courses at the university is tougher than at the community college (Lopez & Jones, 2017). Also, study participants reported being exposed to the possibility of transferring to highly selective universities. Many of the study participants were accepted into some of the most prestigious universities in the U.S., however, they choose to stay in Florida due to either financial or family reasons.

Implications of the Study

The participants in this study provided their suggestions to community college and/or university administrators and faculty on ways in which to improve the retention of Hispanic students at their institutions. Most of the participants noted that their suggestions were not only for Hispanic students, but all college students in general.

In the state of Florida, PBF is used to assign the annual monetary allocation to the public universities, state colleges and community colleges. During the spring 2019 legislature session, a bill was introduced that would have added a transfer metric to the current PBF the Florida SUS's adhere to. As the session transpired, the bill was modified

and the final decision was to: "Delay the metric regarding 2-year graduation rates for Florida College System (FCS) transfers to fiscal year 2020-2021" (Florida Senate, 2019, p.15). The original Bill CS/SB 839 Organization and Operation of State Universities was introduced to the legislature and was modified and rewritten to fall under SB 190: Higher Education during the legislative session and the transfer metric, as mentioned earlier, was delayed to the future. The bill modification resulted in the passing of Bill SB 190. The bill has a mandate for the SUSs in Florida under the title of 2+2 targeted pathways. Below is the section of the bill pertaining to transfer students:

Florida boasts one of the strongest 2+2 articulation systems in the nation. Students who complete their associate of arts degree at a Florida College System institution are guaranteed admission into one of the twelve state universities. To improve the transfer experience and minimize excess credits, SB 190 requires colleges and universities to partner and develop guaranteed admission pathways from the associate of arts (AA) into a student's university and bachelor's degree program of choice at a specific university. Many colleges and universities already have such 2+2 targeted pathways, such as Fuse. (FCAN, 2019, p. 3)

Luckily, the transfer metric bill did not pass during the 2019 legislative session, however, it is an indication that lawmakers in Tallahassee, Florida are already discussing the fate of transfer students. The modification of the bill from a transfer metric to the implementation of a 2+2 targeted pathway program is an indication that Florida legislators want all the SUSs to have the framework in place before introducing a formal transfer metric. The delay in the transfer metric will give the SUS's an opportunity to prepare for the 2020-2021 legislative sessions, where the transfer metric will be revisited

once again. At the present time, FAU, FIU, UCF, and USF, among other SUSs, already have 2+2 pathways programs in place. The 2019-2020 academic year will provide those institutions with 2+2 pathway programs to review the current business practices and improve any processes that need revisions. The higher education literature also supports these types of programs.

Harmon (2012) stated that HSIs community colleges are actively guiding their students to transfer to an upper division university. Moreover, Harmon (2012) shared the importance of Minority Serving Institutions "working with state-systems and across campuses to create clearer pathways that benefit both the institutions and the students as they move through their college careers often at several different institutions" (p. 8). In Florida, this is in direct alignment with the new legislative mandate that all the public SUSs create a two-year transfer pathway to all their institutions. This mandate will increase the established collaborations between the Florida College System and the Florida State University system institutions. The institutions will need to ensure that students and staff members are aware of all the pathways available for community college students, pre-requisite requirements to transfer smoothly into the state university system in a two-year timeframe.

Additional limitations. Another study limitation, in addition to the ones listed in Chapter 3, is the fact that it would have been thought-provoking to compare the challenges and successes reported by both the Hispanic transfer graduates who attended a public four-year institution and those who attended a private four-year institution in Florida. Also, during the recruitment of participants, the investigator was not able to recruit any students born in Mexico, the Dominican Republic or Puerto Rico. Adding

students from other Spanish speaking countries in the Caribbean would have enriched the perspectives shared by the Cuban students who were interviewed. For this reason, interviewing Mexican born students would have enriched the data currently available on United States born Mexican descendant Hispanic students. Comparing their educational achievement and progress would be extremely interesting to this type of higher education research. All this additional research would have largely enriched the current literature available regarding high achieving Hispanic transfer students.

Directions for Future Research

Researching Hispanic students is important for higher education administrators and local community leaders. At the national level, as the Hispanic population grows in the United States, it is of extreme importance that young generations of Hispanics pursue a post-secondary education. A higher educational level will assist them in obtaining higher paying jobs, therefore increasing their social mobility. Hispanics need to enter the workforce and contribute their talents to the future national economy in larger numbers.

Quintana (2018) discussed an American Council of Education study that found that Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) are providing their student body with the opportunity to succeed in their institutions, which leads them to increase their social mobility. HSIs are achieving this task by using the approach of accepting the students at their current education level when they enter the institution. HSIs provide developmental education, if needed, and support for students who are of low socio-economic status and/or first-generation students (Quintana, 2018). This study supports the view that post-secondary education institutions which take into consideration Hispanics and their needs,

are successful in improving the social mobility of not only Hispanic students, but underrepresented students in general.

Future research needs to include ways of promoting high school completion, college preparation, and the importance of having a post-secondary education to Hispanic students enrolled in the K-12 systems across the nation. In addition, research can be conducted on education modules provided to new Hispanic children and young adults moving to the United States in search of a better life, via the immigration system. These educational modules or training sessions could acclimate new immigrants to the value of an education and the correlation between having a post-secondary degree and a higher paying job.

At the state level, future research could include the replication of this study and expand it to include Hispanic students who attended other community colleges in the state of Florida and not be exclusive to MDC. Additionally, further research could interview high achieving students who attended a community college in Florida and then transferred to an institution outside of the state and compare their experiences with those of students who decided to attend a public state university in Florida. Besides that, it would be beneficial to include Hispanic students who choose to attend a private college or university and compare the experiences reported by the alumni. The data collection of all these possible studies will continue to increase and expand the scope of the existing literature regarding Hispanic in post-secondary education. Lastly, more research will show the complexities and layers of the Hispanic communities spread across the United States. The Hispanic ethic group cannot be placed in one box; it is vibrant multilingual and multiethnic, with different socio-economic levels and cultures. Conducting research

to include Hispanic students representing all the countries in Central and South America, Spanish speaking countries in the Caribbean, and Spain will expand the existing national literature on Hispanic college students.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In conclusion, this study reinforced the existing research conducted by Gloria and Rodriguez (2000) in regard to the specific needs of Hispanic college students, which created the PSC theoretical framework. As a result, training student affairs and academic support services staff to understand the PSC framework will add to the staff's knowledge base of the development of Hispanic students. This training would include the three parts of the PSC framework, which are the psychological, social and cultural components that need to be taken into consideration while working with Hispanics student.

O'Neil (2014) emphasized the importance of a university's reaction to a student in academic distress, as it is the key for that student to succeed. This was one of the reasons for this study. On a professional level, the investigator currently heads a transfer office at a large public four-year institution in Florida. The research conducted will greatly supplement the necessary planning of the infrastructure for the university to accommodate a greater number of prospective transfer students at the universities in Florida, while providing better services to the transfer students currently being served regardless of their country of origin. The results of this study provided qualitative data that will be useful when creating a transfer task force in the future. For instance, this study will assist in the strategic planning of increasing the recruitment and retention of domestic and international transfer students to the institution.

This study asked high achieving Hispanic transfer graduates to share suggestions for administrators and faculty working in the Florida Public Post-Secondary system to implement in their institutions to assist other Hispanic transfer students to complete their undergraduate education within the national average timeframe. Some of the suggestions made by the study participants included: creating a university culture that promotes listening to student's needs, creating a welcome center for transfer students, creating mentoring programs that would pair transfer students with current students to ease the transfer experience, and providing students with internships during their undergraduate education that would provide actual work experience for students prior to their graduation from their bachelor's degree. The suggestion that impacted the investigator the most was the statement several participants shared: the importance of being heard by the institution's staff and administrators. Lastly, college students are college students; regardless of their ethnicity, they are young people trying to adjust to post-secondary education and looking forward to graduating and entering the workforce.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol:
A Qualitative Study of the Factors Impacting the College Transfer Experience of High Achieving Hispanic Graduates
February 2019

Date and time of the interview: _____

A) Introduction:

- Greet the participant and thank him/her for agreeing to participate in this study

- Verify that the participant can hear the interviewer well

B) Describe the research study:

- Explain the purpose of the study

- Describe the recording and transcription process of the interview

- Discuss with the interviewee the approximate length of the interview

- Describe any risks and benefits associated with participating in this study

C) Informed Consent:

- Remind the participant that their agreement to participate in the study is voluntary and they can change their mind at any time or stop the recording

- If the participant needs to stop or take a break during the duration of the interview, they are able to do so

- Advise the participant that they can choose to not answer a question if they do not feel comfortable

D) Confidentiality of the interview and the data collected:

- Participants will be asked to choose a pseudonym in order to protect their personal information

- Inform the participant that there will not be any information that could be identifiable during the interview process or when the information collected is analyzed and reported

- Inform the participant of how all the information collected will be secured, password protected, and stored in a secure location for 36 months to then completely discarded

E) Ask the participant for permission to begin the interview and the audio recording

F) Begin the interview session

I am going to start the interview session by reading you the central question this study is focusing in: **Central Question:** How do high-achieving Hispanic graduates describe the factors impacting their transfer experience from a two-year Florida College System institution to a public Florida State University system institution? *I am very interested in learning your perspective as a former high-achieving Hispanic student who started his/her post-secondary education at a community college, graduated with an associate degree and then transferred to a public state university to complete a bachelor's degree in less than the national average of six years.*

Interview Questions:

1) What factors do you describe as successes you encountered during your path to earning a bachelor's degree in less than six-years in the Florida public post-secondary system?

2) What factors do you describe as challenges you encountered during your path to earning a bachelor's degree in less than six-years in the Florida public post-secondary system?

3) How did your family influence your decision in pursuing a post-secondary education?

Investigator briefly explain the concept of psychosociocultural (PSC) framework to the participants.

4) What were the psychological aspects that influenced you to be successful during your undergraduate education?

5) What were the social aspects that influenced you to be successful during your undergraduate education?

6) What were the cultural aspects that influenced you to be successful during your undergraduate education?

Investigator lets the participants know that the following set of questions are in relation how you adjusted to college environment.

7) How did you adjust to the new culture you encountered at the community college you attended as an undergraduate student?

8) How did you adjust to the new culture you encountered at the state university you attended as an undergraduate student?

9) Did you belong to any student organizations or social group(s) while pursuing your undergraduate education?

    a. If you answered yes to question 9, what impact do you think being part of those organizations had on your success while pursing your undergraduate education?

10) What support network did you have inside the community college and/or
   university you attended?

11) What support network did you have outside the community college and/or
   university you attended?

12) When you needed academic assistance, who was there to support you and
   provided you guidance?

13) When you needed personal assistance, who was there to support you and provided
   you guidance?

14) What type of family support did you receive while pursing your undergraduate
   education?

15) What suggestions do have for administrators and faculty from the community
   college and state university you attended that would assist them in increasing the
   completion rates of high-achieving transfer students like you currently attending
   their institutions?

G) Conclude

- Thank the participant for his/her participation in the interview process and for
  agreeing to participate in this research study

- Answer any questions that the participant may have

- Review the confidentiality of the information gathered during the study and the
  guidelines for safe keeping of the data collected

H) In preparation for data analysis:

- Organize all the notes taken during the interview process

- Download the transcription of all the interviews

- Listen to all the recordings and compared them to the transcriptions to ensure that all the information was transcribed accurately

- Use the information gathered to begin the analysis process

Appendix B

Pre-Screening Questionnaire

Pre-Screening Questionnaire:
A Qualitative Study of the Factors Impacting the College Transfer Experience of High Achieving Hispanic Graduates
February 2019

Pseudonym selected by study participant: _____

1) Where were you born? _____

   a) When did you move to the United States? _____

2) Are you bilingual?

   a) Yes or No _____

   b) What languages are you fluent in (reading/writing)?

   _____

3) What ethnic group do you culturally identify with? _____

4) Did you complete elementary, middle, high school in the U.S.?

   _____

5) What year did you graduate from high school? _____

6) At what community college did you begin your undergraduate education?

   a) Name of community college _____

   b) What year did you start at the community college? _____

   c) How many community college(s) did you attend before transferring to the public state university?

7) Did you earn an associate degree prior to transferring to the university where you completed your bachelor's degree?

   a) Yes or No _____

   b) Specify type of associate degree you earned?

(AA, AS or AAS) _____

    c) How long did it take you to complete your associate degree? _____

8) What was your grade point average when you graduated with your associate

   degree? _____

9) How many transfer universities did you apply to? _____Was accepted to? _____

    a) Which Florida Public State University did you transfer to after completing

       you associates degree? _____

    b) Why did you choose that one? _____

10) What year did you graduate from with your bachelor's degree? _____