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Amor y Apoyo: Lecciones de Latinx Families in Nourishing Resilience to First and Second-Generation College Students

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ABSTRACT

The present qualitative study aims to understand how Latino/Hispanic hereafter referred to as Latinx, parent involvement is different or similar among first- and second-generation college students in how they experience higher education and how parental education impacts the use of student support services. Hence, supporting Latinx student retention by developing university and parental relationships. Second-generation college students and Latinx parents were unable to be included in the study because of their scarcity or hesitation of participating. Therefore, participants included a convenience sample of six first-generation undergraduate students from a 4-year institution. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to obtain their stories of parental involvement and student involvement. Results suggest that (1) first-generation college students experience a hands-off involvement

from parents, however, they enjoyed the freedom this brought, (2) Latinx parents might have a misunderstanding of college student identity, and (3) students expressed a desire to have their parents learn about and understand mental health. Implications of findings include universities creating more resources to support Latinx students' mental health, as well as earlier school outreach for Latinx parent involvement to better inform them about the college lifestyle.

Keywords: Latinx, parental involvement, first-generation

Introduction

Latinx individuals continue to be the largest ethnic group in the United States, and it is estimated that in 2060 there will be 111 million Latinx individuals (U.S Census Bureau, 2018). With such a growing Latinx population, they will inevitably become more involved with the

U.S education system and workforce, thus it is vital to assist them since they will be engaging in more professional jobs, altogether affecting the country's overall economic stability. Latinx students struggle to obtain a four-year degree more so than other groups, this is known as the "Latinx education crisis" and it is a result of a cumulative failure of educational policies and societal barriers, such as language, race, class, and migration status (Gandara & Contreras, 2009). Possible solutions to address this crisis include educating Latinx parents about higher education, and addressing the lack of support for Latinx students in educational institutions.

Past literature on Latinx parents in the P-12 education system highlights the deficits of Latinx parent involvement, emphasizing the linguistic barriers of Latinx parents and the lack of time they have to support their children's education (Tinkler, 2002; Valencia, 2002). However, this deficit approach only acknowledges a formal approach to parental involvement (Orozco, 2008; Smith et al., 2008; Tinkler, 2002; Quiocho & Daoud, 2006; Zarate, 2007). Formal parent involvement is based on the visibility of parents to educators, such as attending school events or teacher meetings. In contrast, informal parent involvement is categorized as the support parents provide that is invisible to educators, such as providing a place to study or discussing and motivating educational plans for the future. The distinction of formal and informal parent involvement accentuates the strengths Latinx parents provide to their children, overall having a strength-based approach to Latinx parent involvement. In higher education, families play an essential role in the cultivation of ethnic culture and identity in Latinx college students. Latinx parents provide their students with moral support by using their home language and providing *consejos* ("advice") and *apoyo* ("support") (Alfaro et al., 2014; Auerbach, 2006). Additionally, educational institutions provide support to Latinx students by hosting spaces where students can build community,

be mentored, and network (Chrispeels & Rivero, 2001; Demetriou et al., 2017; Tovar, 2015).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Theories that inform this study include Latino/a Critical Race Theory (LatCrit), Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory, and Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth. LatCrit provides a framework of how racism reproduces and maintains inequality in society by looking at issues pertaining to Latinx individuals and their intersectionality of race, class, gender, language, and immigration status (Bernal, 2002; Solórzano & Bernal, 2001; Yosso et al., 2001). LatCrit also offers the methodology used in the present study which include counter-storytelling, narratives, and testimonials. These methods provide a space for marginalized individuals to share their experiences or stories that are oppositional to narrative of the privileged group on race, sex, gender, class, sexuality and other social constructs that are deemed as a point of normality (Beverly, 1989; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). The Bioecological Systems Theory provides a model for how environments, organized in systems, interact with each other and the individual throughout time to shape the individual's development (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). This theory allows the study to illustrate how Latinx parents and educational institutions affect each other and individually affect the student's development. Lastly, Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth Model recognizes the multiple strengths students of color possess that assist them in navigating racism and other forms of oppression in education systems. The present study will focus on three of the six capitals presented in the Community Cultural Wealth Model: (1) familiar capital, the cultural knowledge developed by family and kinship that emphasize the importance of community; (2) aspirational capital, the ability to be resilient

and maintain goals, dreams, and hopes when facing challenges; and (3) resistance capital, the knowledge and skills that fosters opposition to inequality (Yosso, 2005).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on Latinx parental involvement in higher education documents the use of the home language in different forms of providing support, namely *apoyo* and *consejos* (Alfaro et al., 2014; Auerbach, 2006; Espino, 2016; González et al., 2006; Yosso, 2005). These different forms are noted to contain themes of resiliency, courage, and inculcate values of family and hard work. Thus, the literature exposes the cultural wealth that Latinx parents share with their children, exemplifying family, aspirational, and resistance capital (García, 2018; Stephens et al., 2014; Yosso, 2005). These themes highlight Latinx students' understanding that their educational goals are not only for themselves but also for their families, as well as maintain their hopes and dreams when facing barriers, and build resiliency when facing obstacles at higher educational institutions. However, the literature on Latinx parent involvement in universities overlooks how Latinx families can be a conflicting factor for Latinx students in higher education by only highlighting *apoyo* and *consejos* and not discussing potential clashing values between Latinx parents and higher education institutions (Alfarro et al. 2014; González et al., 2006; LeFevre & Shaw, 2012).

In addition to family supporting Latinx student success, past literature also highlights other forms of support for Latinx students at the institutional. Such factors of support include: building community, mentoring, and academic support (Brazil-Cruz & Martinez, 2016; Contreras, 2018; Demetrious et al., 2017; Gloria & Castellanos, 2012; Tovar, 2015; Yosso et al., 2009; Zalaquett & Alana, 2006). These studies deemed Latinx students to be successful by

their completion or enrollment in a doctoral program or a professional degree (Brazil-Cruz & Martinez, 2016; Contreras, 2018, Demetrious et al., 2017; Tovar, 2015; Zalaquett & Alana, 2006). The overarching theme reveals the importance of educational agents and mentors. Mentors could be peers, faculty and university staff. Nonetheless, this literature overlooks how Latinx families can be a source of support that also helps students be retained at the university.

To further investigate the ways to improve Latinx parental involvement and Latinx student retention, the present study aims to examine how Latinx parent involvement is different or similar among first- and second-generation college students in how they experience higher education. Second-generation college students have parents who went to college and therefore can potentially speak on how this impacted their own involvement on-campus or how their parents were involved in their education. This can help with assessing how Latinx parent involvement impacts the use of student support services in higher educational institutions to develop family-university relationships to support Latinx students.

METHODS

Participants

Participants consisted of a convenience sample of six Latinx students, either undergraduate students or undergraduate alumni from the same institution (2 males, 4 females; $M_{age} = 19-24$ years old, $M_{age} = 20.83$ years, $SD_{age} = 1.82$ years). Two students had recently graduated, while four students were continuing students. All participants are first-generation college students, students who are the first in their families to attend college and first-generation immigrants, who are children of immigrants. Three students reported their parent's marital status as

TABLE 1: Participants Characteristics

Participants	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Hometown	Immigration Status	Languages Spoken	Number of Siblings	Birth Order	Housing Status	Hours Worked	Graduating Year
Garcia	22	Male	Mexican	San Diego, CA	US Citizen	English/Spanish	2	Youngest Child	At Home	Unemployed	2019
Ramon	24	Male	Mexican	Tijuana, MX	Permanent Resident	English/Spanish	2	Eldest Child	At Home	30 hrs/wuk	2019
Adela	19	Female	Mexican	San Diego, CA	US Citizen	English/Spanish	1	Eldest Child	At Home	6 hrs/wuk	2020
Belinda	20	Female	Salvadorian	Los Angeles, CA	US Citizen	English/Spanish	1	Eldest Child	Off-Campus	40 hrs/wuk	2021
Ana	20	Female	Mexican	Los Angeles, CA	US Citizen	English/Spanish	4	Middle Child	Off-Campus	Unemployed	2020
Juana	20	Female	Mexican	Los Angeles, CA	US Citizen	English/Spanish	2	Middle Child	Off-Campus	Unemployed	2020

married and two students reported their parents as divorced, while one student reported their parent as single (Figure 1A). Regarding each parent’s education, 58% of the participant's parents had less than a high school education, 17% of parents had a high school diploma, 17 % of parent’s education was unknown, and 8% of parents had completed vocational school (Figure 2). For additional details on specific participants, reference Table 1.

Procedure

Student participants completed an online questionnaire posted on Latinx student organizations and social media platforms to be screened for specific criteria before being contacted to schedule an interview. Student participants had to meet the criteria of identifying as Latinx, attending or recently graduating from a four-year institution, be at least 18 years old, and be either a first- or second-generation college student. Latinx students also noted if their parents would be willing to participate. Participants were scheduled for an interview if they met the criteria. All participants were provided with a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality.

Originally, the study would also include perspective from the parents by means of

interviews, however, due to the lack of willingness to participate parental perspectives were not included. Instead, the semi-structured interview questions were modified to ask students regarding their parents’ involvement and their own involvement at their university. Student interviews lasted about an hour and were audio-recorded, then later transcribed for thematic analysis. For this form of analysis an inductive approach was taken, where the data determined codes. Patterns found among codes were then developed into themes, which revolved around the participants’ shared experiences regarding parental involvement and student activities.

Materials

A short online questionnaire was used to ensure participants and their families were eligible to participate in the study (Appendix A). Based on the screening questionnaire, participants were all first-generation students and their parents were unable to participate due to scheduling, transportation, or hesitation for participating in research. Therefore, interview questions were modified to accommodate only the student’s perspective on their parents’ involvement and their experience in higher education (Appendix B). Interviews took the form of

testimonios, which is a textual narrative coming from a real person who took part in --or was-- a witness of the event they are recounting (Beverley, 2005). It involves recording, transcribing, and finally editing by a writer based on what content the participants want to convey. Testimonios are a way to tell the stories of people who are marginalized or oppressed by allowing them to be the protagonist of their story and to express a social problem from their perspective, both personal and honest. This method was used to highlight the experiences of first-generation and first-immigrant Latinx students and their families as they navigate U.S higher education. Semi-structured guided questions were developed and consisted of demographic questions concerning Latinx students and their parents (Appendix B).

POSITIONALITY

The primary reason for this project was to voice the thoughts and opinions of Latinx parents and Latinx students in order to develop better resources for parents and students and compare students' experiences in higher education. The researcher, Monica Gonzalez, is a first-generation Latinx graduate from a single-parent household who attended the same school as the participants, so she knows some of the participants personally. Her experiences and perspectives may affect the way these qualitative results are interpreted; however, Ms. Gonzalez's background allows her to build rapport and navigate spaces that other researchers may not.

FIGURE 1: Participant's Report of Relational Status of Parents

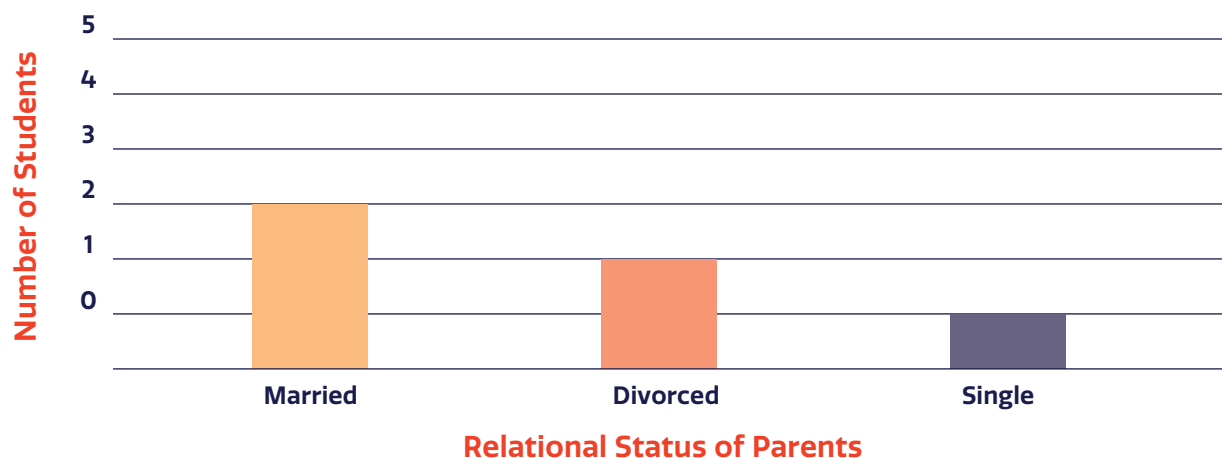


Figure 1. Parental Relationship Status. This bar graph shows the number of students that reported their parental relationship status.

RESULTS

Data reveals three main themes in describing Latinx parental involvement and student retention among first-generation college students: (1) all students reported that while their parental involvement had a hands-off approach, students enjoy the freedom to build their own pathways, (2) all students express how parents have a misunderstanding of the

college identity, (3) and students desire for their parents to understand mental health issues, such as stress and anxiety.

Hands-off involvement and Freedom

The first theme shows that Latinx parental involvement can be hands-off for first-generation students, which allows Latinx students to have the freedom of creating their

own experience in college. When asked how their parents are involved in their college education, students reported that their parents had a hands-off approach and trusted them with knowing what is best for their education. One student, pseudonym Garcia, describes how his parents would be involved by motivating him. He comes from a traditional household, where both parents are providers. Garcia is the youngest of three siblings, all of them who attended college. He stated the following,

"[My parents] really motivate me and kinda of allowed me to pursue whatever I wanted to pursue with my degree or wanted in my major. I feel like they have a lot of trust in me to get things done...like 'we don't really know about sciences or like applying for things in college, so we just trust that you're doing your best."

This student stated that, as a marine biology major, he did not know what careers he could pursue, so he became involved in an aquarium and a research lab. These two experiences allowed him to explore his potential careers since his parents were not familiar with careers in his field. Similarly, Belinda shared that she does not mind her parents not being active in her college education. Her parents escaped the Civil War of El Salvador in which they endured hardships such as poverty and paused their education. She said,

"I don't really care if they're involved or not because honestly, I like being in charge of my own life. I mean, sometimes it's frustrating in the sense of when [I] want support. But I like making my own decisions. I feel like I'm so free, you know. I don't have my parents telling me what major to pick, and what to do in college. I'm so free and they support me... [my parents] don't have that pressure to choose my destiny or career path."

Belinda is double majoring in political science and public health. She also mentioned how hard it is for her to describe to her parents the work she does in a political science student organization, such as lobbying and advocacy, because there is not a direct translation to it. While there is a language barrier to understanding, Belinda is not concerned that her parents had a hands-off involvement in her education.

Misunderstanding of college student identity

The next pattern is parent misunderstanding of the college student identity, which was highlighted when asking students to describe any challenges they had as a college student that was conflicting with family. Many students described staying up late at night to complete work, but their parents not being understanding of this. Ramon, a commuter for most of his college attendance, explains how his mom would disapprove of staying up late. Ramon says,

"Staying up late [my parents] had a huge issue with. Like my mom would wake up in the middle of the night to tell me to go to sleep. But I had papers to finish, so I couldn't do that."

Additionally, Adela mentions how her busy schedule would prevent her from completing homework during the daytime and needed to stay up late, but her parents would not understand. Adela is an upcoming 4th-year student, who works in the residential dining halls. She works about 20 hours a week during the academic year. Adela says,

"College is different. You have so much free time, but you don't. You go to class, work, or go to [general body meetings]. By the time I would get to the dorms, it was already late. I started homework late and finished late... my mom would ask me why I was working so late... she assumed that I could finish everything during the day, but I can't. It's not like high school."

Here, Adela is describing the busy schedule of a Latinx first-generation college student. She goes on to explain how she needed to stay up late to complete assignments but also needed the day for classes and work. Moreover, she illustrates how her mother is comparing the high school student experience to a college student and assuming the workload is the same.

Mental Health

Another theme highlighted in student responses to challenges faced as a college student with family was mental health. For many Latinx first-generation, they felt that their parents did not understand mental health, especially topics of stress and how to relieve it. Juana, a middle child of three siblings and the only sibling who studies psychology, recalls a time when she had a phone conversation with her parents about how they were feeling about upcoming exams and papers. Juana mentions,

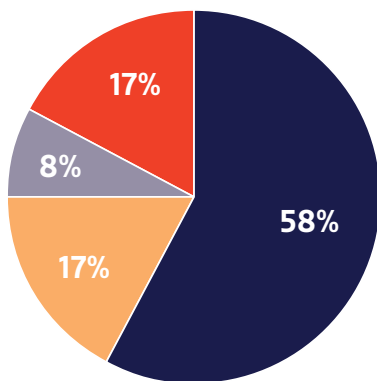
"Being stressed out all the time. I feel it's a big thing. I would talk to my parents and they [would say] 'oh calmate, para de estresarte (oh calm down, stop stressing)' like stop stressing out and calm down. I feel that they couldn't relate to that...mental health, I consider it a topic [related to college student identity]. I know that a lot of people, including myself, discovered what mental health was, and seeing forms of treatment for [mental health]."

Another student Ana, a Sociology major and first in her family to complete high school, describes anxiety throughout the academic year. Ana states,

"Anxiety is always throughout the quarter. You just feel so anxious. Deadlines, deadlines, deadlines, and things. The first week is the only time where there is no anxiety. But then the second week you're thinking about midterms, then midterms come, and you start thinking about finals, and it just never ends."

Moreover, Ana also mentioned how she always felt discouraged to join a dancing club because of her family's mentality of "[not doing] what you love if it doesn't benefit your career". However, she acknowledges that it's important to join students' organizations just to "keep your sanity" or alleviate stress.

FIGURE 2: Educational Attainment of Each Participant's Parents



Educational Level

- Less than high school
- High school diploma
- Vocational school
- Unknown

Figure 2. Parental Education Levels. This pie graph illustrates the education level completed by each student's parents.

DISCUSSION

Three trends emerged from the collected data, (1) all students reported that while their parents have a hands-off approach to involvement, they enjoyed the freedom to build their pathways, (2) all students express how parents have a misunderstanding of the college identity, and (3) students desired their parents to understand mental health.

Regarding the first theme, students recall their parent's involvement in college to being hands-off but enjoyed the freedom this brought. Moreover, the parents provided unconditional faith and trust in their children to navigate and to be successful in their education. These results are inconsistent with the literature regarding Latinx parental involvement, they only note the informal involvement of using language to convey advice and support. However, it does not

acknowledge the liberty and trust that immigrant Latinx parents provide to their first-generation college students. Additionally, the freedom that most students were reporting was surrounding the choice of their major and the different organizations they joined.

The second theme is the Latinx parental misunderstanding of the college student identity, which is consistent with previous studies. Many studies have cited that low Latinx parental education impacts parents' understanding of the U.S. P-20 education system (Auerbach, 2006; Chrispeels & Rivero, 2001; LeFevre & Shaw 2012). Therefore, they are unaware of the multiple components of college student life. Similarly, most of the parents of the participants had less than a high school education and students reported the misunderstanding their parents had with the need of having to stay up late and why their days were busy. They highlighted that while their job was just to study or being a student, many participants were involved in labs, student organizations, work, which were linked to their responsibilities of being a student. They participated in these activities to feel connected at the university or explore career opportunities. In other words, Latinx parents were unaware of additional responsibilities beyond academics that college students have, hence they misunderstood the role of a college student and how these involvements serve as a coping strategy for stress and loneliness.

In the last theme, participants expressed a desire that their parents would understand mental health. Many participants expressed that, in their college experience, they learned about mental health. Further, they reported a high level of stress and anxiety in college, and their parents were unable to relate to the level of stress they were going through. This is inconsistent with the literature, given that it does not mention mental health as support or challenge for Latinx parents. Instead, it has

been noted that Latinx parents provided moral support. Similarly, the literature on first-generation college students support acknowledges the importance of mentoring and spaces to share similar lived experience, but it does not mention mental health. Some studies noted that Latinx first-generation college students are less likely to use mental health resources on campus (Stebbleton et al., 2014; Stephens et al., 2014). Furthermore, it has been cited that Latinx students in higher education have some assumptions and stigma around mental health and receiving treatment (DeFreitas et al., 2018; Mendoza et al., 2015). Altogether, it is possible these results highlight a bigger issue of mental health among the Latinx community in general.

A potential action by universities that can help the issue presented above from the findings is to create and promote the use of mental health services for Latinx first-generation college students, since the discussion of mental health may be absent among the students' families. Universities can assist by hiring more mental health professionals who are Latinx and develop mental health trainings for mentors, student board members, and employers which are closer to Latinx students. Globally, Latinx parent involvement should start earlier, such as in high school, to expose parents to the college lifestyle that their student will be experiencing as an undergraduate. Additionally, college information should be accessible both in terms of availability and language will help develop bonds with Latinx parents.

A limitation of this study is that it did not allow for parent's participation, which could have provided a better insight in the understanding of Latinx parent involvement and student resources. Additionally, the participant pool did not consist of any second-generation college students, resulting in all of the students in this study being first-generation. Therefore, no analysis was done comparing

first- and second-generation college students as initially intended. However, the results did suggest a way that universities can help Latinx first-generation students, which was also part of the aims of this study.

Future studies should continue to investigate how Latinx parents influence their student's education, as well as how other family members also contribute to this influence. Moreover, observing for conflicts that arise from family values and universities and can lead to the incorporation of Latinx values in universities to further support and retain Latinx first-generation college students. These questions will become relevant to emerging Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI's), as they will be serving more Latinx students as this community continues to join the educational system.

In conclusion, to better support Latinx students there needs to be a recognition that higher education is a colonized system that has marginalized, not only the students, but their families as well. The colonized education system has wounded Latinx students' mental state, and excluded Latinx parents. Some recommendations include developing culturally sensitive mental health support for first-generation Latinx students by cooperating with already established connections, and informing parents about the college student lifestyle. For these students, family continues to be a source of strength and it is important to find how both education institutions can work in conjunction to support Latinx students to reach their fullest potential.

DISCLOSURES

Monica Gonzalez is now an undergraduate alumna from the University of California, San Diego.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Monica Gonzalez, Department of Education, University of California, San Diego, La Jolla, CA, 92093-0115 or email: magonzal@ucsd.edu.

Appendix A: Contact Information Questionnaire

* Required

1. Name:* _____

2. Preferred Gender Pronouns:* _____

3. Age:* *Mark only one square*

- Over 18 years old Under 18 years old

4. Do you consider yourself and your family Latinx?* *Mark only one square.*

- Yes No

5. Are you a first-generation college student?* *Mark only one square.*

- Yes No

6. Are you a second-generation college student?
NOTE: If your parents DID NOT attend college and you and your sibling are BOTH attending college. You are BOTH still considered first generation* *Mark only one square.*

- Yes No

7. What is your mother's education?* *Mark only one square.*

- Unknown or not applicable
 Less than high school
 Some college
 Associate degree or certification (equivalent)
 Bachelor's degree (equivalent)
 Master's degree (equivalent)
 Doctorate or professional degree (equivalent)
 Other: _____

8. What is your father's education?* *Mark only one square.*

- Unknown or not applicable
 Less than high school
 Some college
 Associate degree or certification (equivalent)
 Bachelor's degree (equivalent)
 Master's degree (equivalent)
 Doctorate or professional degree (equivalent)
 Other: _____

9. Will your family be willing to participate in this study with you? (at least one parent)* *Mark only one square.*

- Yes No Maybe

10. What is the best way to contact you?* *Check all that apply.*

- Email Phone
 Mail Other: _____

11. Is it okay to leave a voicemail? *Mark only one square.*

- Yes No Maybe

12. Please Include contact information (phone/email)*

13. Comments/ Questions/ Concerns:

Appendix B: Student Guiding Interview Questions

1. Relationship status of your parents: _____

2. Hometown of your parents (if known): _____

3. Hometown – region: _____

4. Race: _____

5. Immigration status: _____

6. Gender: _____

7. Age: _____

8. Hours worked on average per week. _____

9. First generation college student? _____

10. Generation in this country: _____

11. Language spoken: _____

12. Housing status- apartment, live at home: _____

13. Major _____

14. Year graduating _____

15. Describe your family/ home environment.

16. How has your family impacted your educational career?

a. How have your parents been involved in your college education?

17. How are you involved on campus? How has your involvement in school contributed to your retention at the university? And has your family contributed to your involvement on campus or retention?

a. How informed are your parents about student resources on campus?

18. Are there any challenges you faced as a college student that were related to your family?

19. Are there any challenges your parents faced when supporting your journey in college?

20. Do you feel that UCSD acknowledges your family's values and beliefs and if so how?

21. What do you wish the university did differently to support your family's involvement?

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Biography:

I am a first-generation Latina college graduate from UCSD. I studied human developmental sciences with a minor in education studies. At UCSD, I have been involved with Summer Bridge from the Office of Academic Support & Instructional Services and my sorority, Sigma Pi Alpha sorority Inc. These experiences lead me to be interested in student retention/ success and Latinx students' concerns. In the future, I aim to obtain my PhD and to become a professor so I can become a mentor for other underserved students and have an impact in educational policies to make education equitable for all students.

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