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# "We've Got Something More to Prove Here": Racial-Ethnic and Social Class Identities and the Challenges Facing Latina/o College Students

Gretchen Marin

*University of Connecticut - Storrs*, [gretchenmarin@yahoo.com](mailto:gretchenmarin@yahoo.com)

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“We’ve Got Something More to Prove Here”:  
Racial-Ethnic and Social Class Identities  
and the Challenges Facing Latina/o College Students

Gretchen Marín

B.A., Hunter College- City University of New York, 2003

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“We’ve Got Something More to Prove Here”:  
Racial-Ethnic and Social Class Identities and the  
Challenges Facing Latina/o College Students

Presented by

Gretchen Marín, B.A.

Major Advisor

---

Davita Silfen-Glasberg

Associate Advisor

---

Bandana Purkayastha

Associate Advisor

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Marysol Asencio

University of Connecticut

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## Abstract

Latinas/os are one of the fastest growing minority groups in the United States. In fact, the United States Census Bureau projects that by the year 2050, the numbers of Hispanics will more than double, increasing from the current figure of 50.5 million to 102.6 million. Despite such rapid population growth, the numbers of Latinas/os with at least a Bachelor's degree remain low. In this study, I explore the intersection of racial-ethnic and social class identities in relation to academic identities. Specifically, I examine the challenges facing Latina/o college students of various socioeconomic backgrounds as they negotiate a predominantly White, middle-class university setting. Using qualitative data consisting of semi-structured interviews, as well as ethnographic observations, my study found seven key themes influencing the experiences of students. These themes include: 1) examples of differences in habitus and cultural capital, 2) feeling different on campus, 3) a sense of guilt associated with being in college, 4) being accused of "Acting White," 5) feeling a sense of responsibility of giving back to the family and/or the Latino community, 6) resistance within these different categories and 7) examples of racial microaggressions. The existing literature often focuses on the challenges facing African-American students. This thesis seeks to expand on the existing literature by incorporating the experiences of various types of Latina/o college students.

# **Chapter 1**

## **Introduction**

Latinas/os<sup>1</sup> are one of the fastest growing minority groups in the United States. In fact, the United States Census Bureau projects that by the year 2050, the numbers of Hispanics will more than double, increasing from the current figure of 50.5 million to 102.6 million. Currently, Hispanics represent roughly 16.3 percent of the population. By 2050, this figure is projected to stand at 24.4 percent (US Census Bureau 2004). Thus, nearly one quarter of all United States residents would be Latinas/os.

Despite such rapid population growth, the numbers of Latinas/os with at least a Bachelor's degree remain low. According to a 2012 US Census Bureau population report on educational attainment, "Hispanics reported the lowest percentages overall of those with a high school diploma or equivalent and above—61 percent had completed high school or higher and 13 percent had completed at least a bachelor's degree"(5). This stands in sharp contrast with the numbers for other groups. For example, 31.1% of non-Hispanic Whites and 49.7% of Asians/ Pacific Islanders have a Bachelor's degree or more while only 17.5% of Blacks and 12.7% of Hispanics can boast similar rates of educational attainment (US Census Bureau 2012).

Why is it that despite their increasing numbers, Latinas/os are least likely to earn a degree from an institution of higher education? In this thesis, I seek to examine how racial-ethnic identities as well as various social class identities interact within an

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<sup>1</sup> Most activists and scholars use the terms "Latino," "Latina," "Latin@" and/ or "Latina/o" (to eliminate gender biases) as it is deemed to be more politically conscious than the term "Hispanic," which is utilized mostly by the US government and its agencies. My preference is to use the term "Latina/o." However, I occasionally use the term "Hispanic" in an effort to maintain the terminology utilized by those agencies that collected and reported the data that I use throughout this paper. At all other times, I use the term "Latina/o."

institutional culture in higher education that is predominantly White and middle-class.

What are the challenges facing Latina/o college students as they negotiate a predominantly White, middle-class university setting?

Answering questions such as these can help address the issues that can lead to increasing the numbers of Latinas/os obtaining degrees in higher education which also positively impact poverty rates. For example, according to a special report on “Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2010” (2011), the poverty rates between non-Hispanic Whites and Latinas/os for 2009 are 12.3 and 25.3 percent respectively; the figures for 2010 are 13.0 and 26.6 percent. As the Latina/o population grows, poverty rates grow and will continue to escalate if we do not make an effort to understand why Latinas/os, as a group, are not earning Bachelor’s degrees and beyond. This leads to a cyclical relationship whereby low educational attainment leads to poverty, which limits access to quality education, which then leads to more poverty.

Understanding the cyclical relationship between poverty and educational attainment is important as it leads to research that tries to identify and address the factors that influence low educational attainment. Anthropologist John Ogbu (1998), posited a theory that sought to address the school [under]performance of students of color. While paying particular attention to broad societal factors, he argued that the different cultural dynamics<sup>2</sup> of people of color negatively affect the academic performance of students of color. Although some scholars reject Ogbu’s arguments (Lundy 2003), his work points to the potential importance of cultural identities in relation to academic performance.

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<sup>2</sup> Ogbu (1998) states that “‘cultural,’ broadly, refers to the way people (in this case minorities), see their world and behave in it” (158). He argues that the negative experiences of people of color in the dominant larger society have given rise to an oppositional culture in education. Since students of color see the institution of education as an extension of the dominant larger society, they choose not to partake in the institution as a way of opposing both the institution and the larger, dominant society.



Culture(s), according to Sewell (1999) refer(s) to the beliefs and practices that are concrete and bound to a particular society or a societal subgroup. Cultures, along with individuals' social realities, lead to the development of identities (Flores 2000). Such cultures and identities can relate to individual racial backgrounds (Hitlin, Brown, & Elder 2007; Robinson & Biran 2006; Smedley 1998), ethnic backgrounds (Hitlin et al 2007; Phinney 1996; Torres 2003), pan-ethnic backgrounds (Calderon 1992, Diaz McConnell & Delgado-Romero 2004), as well as social class backgrounds (Sennett & Cobb 1972; Tinto 1993; Willis 1977), among others. These identities can affect various aspects of life; educational experiences, and ultimately, educational attainment, can be influenced by various cultural backgrounds and identities (Carter 2006; Robinson & Biran 2006; Torres 2003).

Studies have shown that ethnic identities<sup>3</sup> affect the academic well-being of Latina/o students as they attempt to navigate an institutional setting such as college (Carter 2006; Castillo, Conoley, & Brossart 2004; Hsiao 1992; Hurtado & Ponjuan 2005; London 1989; Solorzano, Villalpando, & Seguera 2005). These studies suggest that an ethnic identity<sup>4</sup> often stands in contrast to the academic institutional culture that the university propagates. According to these scholars, for Latina/o college students, conflicting ethnic and academic identities negatively affect academic performance. In addition, other scholars have examined the effect of social class on academic performance (Tinto 1993; Walpole 2003). They have found that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds have lower academic performance. According to Tinto

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<sup>3</sup> Described by Carter (2006) as embracing the language, food, music, way of dress and way of talking of one's ethnic group (317).

<sup>4</sup> Defined by Torres (2003) as being "based on national or cultural characteristics. These differences are multidimensional and include language, food, behavior, and other customs" (533).

(1993), students of color from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to attend lower quality public schools which leave them ill-prepared for college. As a result, they are “more likely to experience academic difficulty in college... and more likely, therefore, to leave because of academic failure”(49). Thus, attrition, or dropping out, is more common among poor students of color.

Issues of college attrition among people of color have been discussed among a variety of scholars from a variety of disciplines (Carter 2006; Ogbu & Simmons 1998; Solorzano, Villalpando & Seguera 2005; Strayhorn 2008; Tappan 2006; Tinto 1993; Villenas & Deyhle 1999). Much of the literature has focused on external factors pertaining to educational inequities, especially as they relate to the lack of resources available to students of color. Tinto (1993) explored these external constraints while also looking at the ways in which finding a social and intellectual niche can affect educational experiences. He argues that students of color from disadvantaged backgrounds:

Tend to face greater problems in meeting the academic demands of college work, in finding a suitable niche in the social and intellectual life of the college, and perhaps in obtaining sufficient financial resources. Academic difficulties, incongruence, isolation, and perhaps finances seem to be more severe for them than for students generally.  
(75)

Utilizing survey data (National Longitudinal Survey, High School and Beyond, American College Testing Program, and the Survey of Retention at Higher Education Institutions), Tinto explores the various factors that contribute to attrition among college students. He explores the external and structural constraints that influence attrition rates for students of different racial-ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. Like Tinto, my work will examine the experiences of college students. However, I will build on Tinto’s work by utilizing qualitative data to examine the experiences of Latina/o students in particular.

Specifically, I will be exploring the internal issues and/or conflicts facing Latina/o college students as they negotiate their various identities in a predominantly White, middle-class institutional setting.

Much of the existing research focuses on racial identities (Smedley 1998; Torres 2003), ethnic identities (Phinney 1996), or social class identities (Sennett & Cobb 1972; Willis 1977). With the exception of Robinson & Biran (2006) and Torres (2009) who examined ethnic and social class identities in educational settings, very few studies have addressed the interplay of multiple identities. My work will explore the intersection of racial-ethnic and class identities in relation to an academic identity and how these identities affect academic performance. Specifically, my work seeks to understand the challenges facing Latina/o college students of various socioeconomic backgrounds on a predominantly White, middle-class campus.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review & Theoretical Framework**

Since this thesis is exploring the challenges facing Latina/o college students, it would be helpful to discuss the groups of people that are categorized as Latinas/os. Contrary to popular belief, Latinas/os are not a homogeneous group. They vary greatly based on factors, which include, but are not limited to ethnicity, nationality, race, and immigration experience to name a few. According to a special report of the US Census Bureau (2004) “the federal government defines a Hispanic or Latin[a/o] as a person of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race” (1).

A special report published by the US Census Bureau (2004)<sup>5</sup>, found that Latinas/os represented only 10.4% of individuals with at least a bachelor’s degree. Although the numbers of Latinas/os with a bachelor’s degree have increased slightly in under a decade, I cite this report because it provides a breakdown of the particular groups of Latinas/os that are earning bachelor’s degrees. Thus, this report shows that there are particular groups of Latinas/os that fare better than others. The US Census Bureau (2004) found that Spaniards (29.9%), South Americans<sup>6</sup> (25.2%), and Cubans (21.2%) accounted for the majority of Latinas/os with at least a bachelor’s degree. These data show that there are differences in educational attainment not just between Latinas/os and other racial-ethnic groups but also that differences exist *within* the broad category of Latinas/os.

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<sup>5</sup> I use this report because more recent data detailing the specific groups of Latinas/os earning bachelor’s degrees is not available as of yet.

<sup>6</sup> “People who responded Argentineans, Bolivian, Colombian, Ecuadorian, Paraguayan, Peruvian, Uruguayan, Venezuelan, and Other South American were categorized under South American” (US Census Bureau 2004, 2).

Spaniards have the highest rate of educational attainment among Latinas/os. However, Spain's inclusion in the US Census Bureau's definition of Latinas/os is problematic given its history of conquest within the very countries it has been categorized with. Feagin (2001) and Bonilla-Silva (1999) posit ideas that demonstrate why Spain's inclusion in the Latina/o category is problematic. Feagin (2001) argues that colonialism has helped to create a "global racist order" that forms the foundation for which our legal, political, and moral foundations are based (16). Similarly, Bonilla-Silva (1999) argues that "the race ascribed with the superior position enjoys social, political, economic, and psychological advantages over the group or groups ascribed with inferior positions"(899). The "global racist order" posited by Feagin and the argument put forward by Bonilla-Silva highlight the ways in which racism is embedded in our institutions. Education is one of the institutions where racism, vis-à-vis historical colonialism, has disadvantaged people of color. Therefore, given Spain's history of conquest, the Spanish are privileged within the institution of education, which leads to an inflation of the overall numbers of Latinas/os with Bachelor's degrees.

The example of the Spanish, as well as other lighter-skinned Latinas/os, helps to highlight how the terms "Hispanic" and/or "Latina/o," complicate the lines between race and ethnicity<sup>7</sup> (Hitlin et al 2007; Vidal-Ortiz 2004). Popular press and many scholarly works treat race as a binary concept defined by skin color of black and white. Other scholars call for the expansion of the concept "race" to include Asians and Native Americans (Alcoff 2003; Omi & Winant 1994). Sociologists increasingly recognize that race is a social construction (Omi & Winant 1994; Smedley 1998). The terms "non-

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<sup>7</sup> The same is true of darker-skinned Latinas/os who are often mistaken for African-American (Bailey 2000).

Hispanic White” and “non-Hispanic Black” demonstrate the complexities of White and Black as they identify race in ethnic terms. If race were a biologically factual category, why should ethnicity be relevant? Therefore, in an effort to highlight the reification of race and ethnicity, throughout this paper, I have decided to hyphenate the two and thus use the terms “race-ethnicity” and “racial-ethnic.”

Finally, many Latinas/os do not think of their race as distinct from their ethnicity (Bailey 2000; Hitlin et al 2007). In fact, research has shown that many Latinas/os often select the category “other” when it comes to indicating their racial background (Hitlin et al 2007). Hitlin et al (2007) argue that “‘Hispanic’ is as real a group as ‘black’ or ‘white,’” (592) and therefore, the US Census should incorporate “Hispanic” as a racial category, instead of imposing categories that Latinas/os do not identify as.

The US Census, in addition to other governmental agencies as well as the media, have propagated the use of panethnic labels, such as Hispanic and Latina/o. The concept of panethnicity utilizes a term to categorize and consolidate several different groups (such as Cubans, Dominicans, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, etc.) into one larger, umbrella category (such as Hispanic and/or Latina/o) (Calderon 1992; McConnel & Delgado-Romero 2004). Studies have shown that only a small minority of Latinas/os self-identify using panethnic labels but these same studies show that the percentages of individuals doing so are increasing.

Using panethnic labels has its advantages and disadvantages. The biggest advantage, and the reason why I utilize panethnic labels in this paper, has to do with the ways in which data is collected. As I mentioned earlier, the US Census Bureau, as well as other governmental agencies, utilize panethnic labels in their data collection and

presentation. Panethnic labels allow us to see general patterns of behavior specific to Latinas/os. However, panethnic labels can be problematic as they prevent researchers from observing the nuances that may be specific to particular groups. An example of this is exemplified in my discussion of the rates of Latinas/os obtaining bachelor's degrees and beyond and how there are certain groups (Spaniards, South Americans, and Cubans) that fare better than others. Using panethnic labels exclusively would prevent us from seeing the pattern of low educational attainment among particular groups such as Mexicans and Puerto Ricans. Thus, using panethnic labels can be helpful but researchers should be aware of their limitations.

Many scholars have utilized panethnic labels as they have explored issues relevant to Latinas/os in education (Carter 2006; Ogbu & Simmons 1998; Solorzano, Villalpando & Seguera 2005; Strayhorn 2008; Tappan 2006; Villenas & Deyhle 1999). These scholars have found that attrition rates among Latinas/os are higher than for other groups and argue that several factors contribute to this phenomenon. Some scholars attribute the higher attrition rates to racism (Solorzano et al 2005; Tappan 2006; Villenas & Deyhle 1999, Yosso 2006). Others have argued that cultural capital<sup>8</sup> contributes to attrition (Bourdieu 1984 & 1998). Still others have examined more individual psychological and behavioral perspectives such as cultural straddling<sup>9</sup> (Carter 2006),

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<sup>8</sup> Cultural capital refers to the knowledge and socialization that one acquires as a result of family background and upbringing. Cultural capital contributes to attrition by disadvantaging those who come from underprivileged backgrounds who may not be familiar with the norms of White, middle-class culture and institutions.

<sup>9</sup> Cultural straddling refers to the process whereby students are aware of and capable of navigating the discontinuities that exist between two, often conflicting, cultures.

microaggressions<sup>10</sup> (Solorzano, Ceja & Yosso 2000; Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal & Esquilin 2007), and sense of belonging<sup>11</sup> (Strayhorn 2008) as influencing attrition among underrepresented groups. Taken together along with student attrition theory, critical race theory, and capital deficiency theories, these perspectives contribute to the theoretical framework of this thesis.

### ***2.1 Tinto's Theory of Student Attrition***

In Tinto's Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition (1993), Tinto explored the many causes that lead to student attrition. Using data from several sources (National Longitudinal Survey, High School and Beyond, American College Testing Program, and the Survey of Retention at Higher Education Institutions) to explore student departure, Tinto found that student departure is more prevalent among Blacks and Hispanics, as well as those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

To explain student departure among different groups, Tinto creates a theory of individual departure from institutions of higher education. He draws from Van Gennep's Rites of Passage (1960) as well as Durkheim's Suicide (1951) to explore the process that leads individuals to withdraw from a particular community (in the case of student departure, the college community). Van Gennep argued that there are three stages that are characteristic of a rite of passage: separation, transition, and incorporation. Tinto argued that these stages are analogous to the stages that students go through prior to departing from a university. He argues that suicide and school departure are analogous in

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<sup>10</sup> Sue et al. (2007) report that "Microaggressions are brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color (271).

<sup>11</sup> Sense of belonging refers to "a feeling of connectedness, that one is important to others, that one matters" (305). When students feel disconnected this may lead to leaving college (Strayhorn 2008).



that they both reflect a voluntary withdrawal from a particular community. In addition, Durkheim argued that rates of egotistical suicide (suicide which occurs when individuals are unable to become integrated members of a community) can be reduced by offering better means for integration of individuals into society. Similarly, Tinto argues that student departure can be reduced if institutions can provide students with provisions to help them better integrate into the university. Building on the perspectives of Van Genep and Durkheim, Tinto's theory suggests that students who are able to successfully transition and become integrated into college life would be more likely, not only to remain in college, but also to excel academically.

Fischer (2007) explored this hypothesis in an article where she examined the experiences of people of color in higher education. Focusing on the adjustment process, Fischer explored the factors that may impact how students adjust to college. Specifically, she examined the relationships between connections on campus and grades and college satisfaction. She found that having formal *academic* ties (i.e. professors) were positively related to GPA. She also found that having formal (i.e. extracurricular) and informal (i.e. friends) *social* ties contributed to greater levels of college satisfaction. In her study, students who failed to establish informal connections were more likely to leave college. In addition, Fischer found that for all groups, with the exception of Whites, lack of formal ties was significantly related to leaving college. Lastly, for Blacks and Hispanics, being involved in formal activities leads to both greater levels of college satisfaction and academic success. Her findings appear to validate Tinto's theory which stressed the importance of integration into the college environment. However, unlike Tinto, she fails

to examine the relationship between social class and race-ethnicity and their effect on the establishment of campus connections.

## ***2.2 Critical Race Theories***

The work of Tinto (1993) and Fischer (2007) focused on more individual characteristics and agency, such as the choices students made to become better integrated into college life, as well as the interpersonal relationships they developed on college campuses. Critical Race Theories bypass the individual and take on a much more macro perspective by focusing on the structure of institutions. Critical Race theorists (Solorzano et al 2005; Tappan 2006; Villenas & Deyhle 1999, Yosso 2006) argue that racism plays a significant role in the life chances of groups in US society. They argue that social structures exist to either facilitate or make it more difficult for particular groups in society to get ahead. Critical Race scholars seek to, “explore the ways in which ‘race-neutral’ laws and institutional structures, practices, and policies [in education] perpetuate racial/ethnic inequality” (Solorzano, D.G., Villalpando, O., Oseguera, L., 274). Institutional racism leads to increased levels of poverty and lower levels of educational achievement and attainment.

The most important aspect of Critical Race Theories relates to the acknowledgement of race and racism as a central characteristic of American society. Scholars have argued that this racism is manifested in a variety of ways (Bonilla-Silva 1999; Feagin 2000; Solorzano et al 2005; Tappan 2006; Villenas & Deyhle 1999, Yosso 2006). One way in which racism is manifested in higher education is the way in which colleges and universities reflect the culture of White middle-class America thus

privileging members of that culture while disadvantaging poor people of color (Yosso 2006; see also Bourdieu 1984, 1998). In essence, institutions are encouraging the rejection of ethnic cultures, languages, and identities by rendering them inferior (Salazar & Bagley, 2010).

However, exclusively focusing on racism is problematic because it ignores the classism that is perpetuated within the institution of education. Social class is in part responsible for those norms and behaviors that are valued by particular groups (i.e., powerful groups) in society (Bourdieu 1984, 1998; Castillo, Conoley & Brossart 2004; Carter 2006; Hurtado & Ponjuan 2005; London 1989; Yosso 2006). Thus, individuals who share the social class valued and reinforced by the university are privileged in that respect, regardless of race (Torres 2009). This is not to discount any existing racism but rather suggests that we need to examine the notion of cultural capital in addition to racism when studying the educational experiences of people of color, and Latinas/os in particular. An intersectional approach is absolutely necessary when examining issues facing Latina/o college students.

### ***2.3 Capital Deficiency Theories***

The notion that the university privileges the culture of the White middle-class builds on Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984, 1998; Yosso 2006). Cultural capital refers to the knowledge and socialization that one acquires as a result of family background and upbringing (Bourdieu 1984, 1998). Many have argued that cultural capital helps to ensure social reproduction by privileging those individuals that possess the required capital and by disadvantaging those who lack it

(Bourdieu 1984, 1998; Castillo, Conoley & Brossart 2004; Carter 2006; Hurtado & Ponjuan 2005; Lareau 1987; London 1989; Yosso 2006).

Habitus refers to those practices and behaviors that characterize a particular group and serves to distinguish groups from one another (Bourdieu 1984, 1998). We often see differences in the ways in which one group may perceive the habitus of another.

Bourdieu (1998) illustrates this point by noting that, “the same behavior... can appear distinguished to one person, pretentious to someone else, and cheap or showy to yet another” (Bourdieu, 8). Many scholars have argued that the habitus that students of color bring with them into the university is often in conflict with the habitus of the university culture, and the larger mainstream society (Castillo, Conoley & Brossart 2004; Hurtado & Ponjuan 2005; London 1989). Bourdieu argues that such conflicts represent what he calls, “symbolic violence” and is exercised by those groups who have and wish to maintain power. Thus, the habitus and cultural capital that students of different socioeconomic backgrounds bring with them can be an asset or a liability as they attempt to navigate a university setting.

To illustrate this, Collier & Morgan (2004), in their study of the differences between first-generation and “traditional” college students, found large differences in terms of students’ understandings of their role as a college student. They found that because traditional students had some familiarity with the college culture resulting from the experiences of relatives (a form of cultural capital), these students benefited by having clear understandings of what professor’s expectations were as well as their role as college students in general. However, first-generation college students lacked the college student expertise and were not able to consult their parents and/or other relatives for

guidance. Thus, Collier & Morgan (2004) conclude that understanding university expectations has an impact on the academic outcomes of students.

Some scholars have argued that the perspective of students lacking the proper habitus and cultural capital is a form of deficit thinking in that it focuses too much on that which is *lacking* in a particular culture as opposed to valuing those positives that have served the culture well (Yosso 2006). In addition, some have rejected the deficit perspective, arguing that because of the racist nature of societal institutions, the cultural capital of students of color is devalued (Yosso 2006). However, regardless of whether the cultural capital argument is perceived as a form of deficit thinking or not, the question remains: how do students of color adapt to the different cultural landscapes?

In her study of the culture shock experienced by Black students attending a predominantly white elite college, Torres (2009) examines the effect of social class and cultural capital for Black students. She applies cultural capital theory in analyzing the experiences of Black students on campus. She finds that non-affluent Black students have an especially difficult time given their marginal status resulting from the racism and classism that is perpetuated on campus. Echoing an argument I made earlier in this paper, Torres (2009) argues that much of the existing research focuses too much on race without exploring other factors, such as class, that may affect the adjustment process for students of color. She finds that Black students who had grown up in relatively affluent homes and were familiar with upper-class culture did not encounter the culture shock that non-affluent students faced. Among the most salient differences were ways of speaking and socializing. Affluent students with the necessary cultural capital had an easier time

transitioning into the college environment, as well as the ability to engage in cultural straddling whenever necessary.

Are there differences between the types of students that decide to accept, reject, or straddle various cultures? Particularly among Latinas/os, does race-ethnicity and/ or social class<sup>12</sup> influence the decisions that students make when deciding on accepting, rejecting, or straddling cultures?

## ***2.4 Cultural Straddling***

Scholars have examined the effect of various levels of Latina/o ethnic identity on student perceptions of the university environment (Carter 2006; Castillo et al 2006; Hsiao 1992; Michie 1999; Strayhorn 2008). They found that those students who have a strong ethnic identity have a tendency to reject the university environment and its culture. Conversely, those students that identify as having a weaker ethnic identity will tend to embrace the university environment and its culture. However, these scholars fail to examine whether or not a class identity exists, in addition to an ethnic identity. How do class and ethnic identities interact when students find themselves in an academic setting?

Some researchers have argued that when students become aware of cultural discontinuities, they can either reject the university culture or accept it by finding tactics to straddle both cultures (Carter 2006; Castillo et al 2004; Michie 1999). Cultural straddling refers to the ability to “strike the best academic and social balance... and traverse the boundaries across groups and environments more successfully” (Carter 2006: 306). Students of color become aware of the differential speech and behavioral patterns

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<sup>12</sup> In order to limit the scope of this research project, I have decided to focus primarily on race-ethnicity and social class. Gender, despite its relevance to the topic, will be minimized so as to allow for a deeper analysis of the dynamics and intersection of race-ethnicity and class.

that are characteristic of particular racial-ethnic and socioeconomic groups. Thus, cultural straddlers often use different vocabulary and mannerisms when interacting with peoples of various socioeconomic and racial-ethnic backgrounds.

Cultural straddlers are able to decipher what is appropriate behavior and language within different social contexts. Scholars have argued that negotiating a home and academic setting represents a second curriculum that students of color must master in order to succeed (Carter 2006; Collier & Morgan 2004). While they attempt to meet the expectations of their course work, they must simultaneously acquire the social and cultural capital necessary to be a successful college student. This becomes yet another obstacle that students of color are required to overcome in order to succeed. Other scholars (Michie 1999) have argued that students of color often exist in a state of limbo as they attempt to navigate the university culture while retaining their original culture(s).

In addition, Hsiao (1992) identifies a related conflict which manifests itself specifically among first-generation college students: “particularly as they begin to take on the symbols of the college culture—be it style of dress, taste in music, or range of vocabulary—first-generation students often sense displeasure on the part of acquaintances, and feel an uncomfortable separation from the culture in which they grew up” (2). This leads to feelings of marginalization either within the original or the new culture, and sometimes, within both (Castillo et al 2006). Marginalization, has an impact on a student’s sense of belonging which involves the particular emotions experienced as a result of marginalization (Castillo et al 2006; Hsiao 1992; Strayhorn 2008).

## ***2.5 Sense of Belonging***

The sense of belonging that is experienced by college students influences their academic performance (Hsaio 1992; Strayhorn 2008). Strayhorn's (2008) study of sense of belonging among Latina/o college students found that "Latin[a/o] students who excel academically... feel more connected to campus than those who perform less well"<sup>13</sup>. Consequently, some attention to the experiences of lower-achieving Latin[a/o] students is warranted as they are less likely to feel a sense of belonging, which in turn, may lead to leaving college" (313). Like Tinto, Strayhorn concludes that students who excel academically have a greater sense of belonging than students who do not. Thus, sense of belonging is something that is crucial to academic success and should therefore be nurtured, especially among poor students of color.

Taken together, the literature suggests that discrepancies exist between the White middle-class university culture and the varieties of classed and ethnic Latina/o cultures. Several scholars (Carter 2006; Castillo et al 2006; Collier & Morgan 2004; Hsiao 1992; Michie 1999; Strayhorn 2008) have argued that students are often caught in a bind where they must choose between being loyal to their family/culture and school success. Often, being successful in school is labeled as "acting White" which itself is a class-loaded term. To many poor students of color, academic success can imply turning your back on who you are and where you come from (Castillo et al 2006; Hsiao 1992; Michie 1999; Ogbu & Simmons 1998).

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<sup>13</sup> Strayhorn (2008) found that "lower-achieving Latin[a/o] students... [were] less likely to feel a sense of belonging, which in turn, may lead to leaving college"(313).



What the existing literature does not explore is how a class identity interacts with a racial-ethnic identity within a university setting that is predominantly White and middle-class. How do the interactions of class and racial-ethnic identities affect the ways in which Latina/o college students view the university as well as the ways in which they view their own identities? Assuming that previous scholars are correct in their assertions of conflicting racial-ethnic and academic identities, how do students react to such conflicts? Specifically, how do students negotiate their various identities and resolve the tension between their academic identity, which is situated in a White, middle-class world, while preserving their classed racial-ethnic identities?

## **Chapter 3**

### **Research Design**

“New England 2020” (2006), a report sponsored by the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, found that the numbers of Whites leaving Connecticut has greatly increased while more minorities have migrated into the state, greatly changing the demographics of Connecticut. The report also showed that Hispanics<sup>14</sup> have the greatest fertility, with larger numbers of children at earlier ages and continued growth throughout all age categories compared to other groups. Despite their increasing numbers, the report also showed that the “Hispanic population has experienced outright declines in the rates of college participation and college completion” (16). Given the changing demographics and the continued underrepresentation of Latinas/os- Hispanics within higher education, I find that situating my study at the University of Connecticut would be ideal.

According to the US Census Bureau (2000), the population of Connecticut is comprised of 12% of persons of Latina/o-Hispanic origin. However, the Latina/o-Hispanic student population at the University of Connecticut (UConn) stands at only 4.5%<sup>15</sup>. These figures demonstrate, as suggested by the New England 2020 (2006) report, that the numbers of Hispanics pursuing bachelor’s degrees are far below the numbers of Hispanics in the general population.

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<sup>14</sup> The New England 2020 report uses the term “Hispanic” exclusively. Recall from the very first footnote that the terms “Latino,” “Latina,” “Latin@” and/ or “Latina/o” (to eliminate gender biases) are used mostly by scholars and activists as they are deemed to be more politically conscious than the term “Hispanic.”

<sup>15</sup> [http://education-portal.com/directory/school/University\\_of\\_Connecticut.html](http://education-portal.com/directory/school/University_of_Connecticut.html)

To further illustrate and emphasize the discrepancies that exist between the racial-ethnic compositions of the populations of the state of Connecticut and UConn, let us examine the figures for Whites. According to the US Census Bureau, Whites comprise 73.8% of the population in Connecticut. This figure is very similar to the White student population at UConn, which stands at 72.1%<sup>16</sup>. Clearly, there is a discrepancy in the percentages of Latina/o students that go on to pursue a college degree, particularly at the University of Connecticut. Given that the University of Connecticut is not only a public institution, but also the state's flagship school, one would expect that the student population would reflect the demographics of the state. However, as these figures illustrate, there is a gross underrepresentation of Latina/o students at UConn, especially in relation to their White counterparts.

| <b>Connecticut State Population<sup>1</sup> &amp; University of Connecticut (UConn) Student Enrollment Population<sup>2</sup></b> |                               |                                 |
|---|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|
|   | <i>Connecticut Population</i> | <i>UConn Student Population</i> |
| Whites:   | 73.8%                         | 72.1%                           |
| Latin@/Hispanic:  | 12.0%                         | 4.5%                            |
| All Others:   | 14.2%                         | 23.4%                           |
| Totals:   | 100.0%                        | 100.0%                          |

Source:

<sup>1</sup> US Census Data

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.education-portal.com>

As the figures above illustrate, the numbers of Latinas/os enrolled are far below the numbers in the state population. A more competitive admissions process, in addition to the fact that UConn is a Research I University, might explain this underrepresentation.

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<sup>16</sup> [http://education-portal.com/directory/school/University\\_of\\_Connecticut.html](http://education-portal.com/directory/school/University_of_Connecticut.html)

Regardless of the reasons, the fact remains that Latinas/os are underrepresented at the University of Connecticut. Given my interests in obstacles facing Latina/o college students as well as issues relating to their identities, studying Latinas/os in an environment where they are clearly the minority will likely make these issues more salient, thus making the University of Connecticut an ideal setting for this study.

### **Project Origins**

This thesis began as a project for a qualitative research course. For the course, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork observations of a mentoring course at the Puerto Rican and Latin American Cultural Center (PRLACC). Throughout this manuscript, I refer to the mentoring course as “the METAS course.” The course lasted an entire semester and each session was just under two hours. METAS, an acronym that stands for “*Mentoring, Educating, and Training for Academic Success*,” is a program designed to help freshmen and transfer students get acclimated to the university by pairing them with a peer mentor who provides all sorts of guidance and support. The type of guidance and support provided is not limited to academics but also includes access to social networks and assistance in navigating the university bureaucracy. The official name of the METAS course is “Latinos, Mentoring, and Leadership” and it is open only to the peer mentors involved in the program.

The goals of METAS include the enhancement of Latina/o student retention, the creation of a strong sense of community, and providing a support system for Latina/o freshman and transfer students as they transition into college life. The goals of the program highlight the problems facing Latinas/os in higher education. These problems

include poor student retention, weak sense of community and a support system that is lacking both within the university and at home.

My interest in this research site stemmed from several reasons. To begin with, this course is offered at the University of Connecticut, a predominantly White university. Thus, I was operating under the assumption that students of color, and Latinas/os in particular, would be cognizant of the fact that they were racially-ethnically different from the rest of the student body.

In addition, in order to become a peer mentor in the program, a student must demonstrate that they have been relatively successful in navigating the university environment by maintaining a minimum grade point average of 2.5. Because I was trying to examine sense of belonging and its correlation with academic success, this site appeared ideal as it would lend credence to my belief, and Strayhorn's theory, that if one feels connected to the university then this connection would be reflected in having good grades and other markers of academic success.

In analyzing field notes that I collected during that time, I discovered five salient themes: Image vis-à-vis Language, Cultural Differences, Sense of Belonging, Sense of Guilt, and Sense of Responsibility.

I decided to probe further into these themes by using interview data. Thus, for this thesis, I utilize qualitative data consisting of semi-structured interviews with 20 Latina/o students (in addition to one who considers himself Latino by association) at the University of Connecticut. My sample was derived from a variety of sources including the Puerto Rican and Latin American Cultural Center (PRLACC) and other organizations

including Student Support Services (SSS), the Society for Hispanic Professional Engineers (SHPE), as well as a Latina sorority<sup>17</sup>.

Due to the many factors that may influence the experiences of college students, I have decided to use a purposive sample. The sample includes students of different socioeconomic and racial-ethnic backgrounds. I interviewed students who were born both within and outside the United States. The students that I interviewed were limited to those with two Latina/o parents, as students with one non-Latina/o parent may have had different experiences.

Because the Latina/o student population at the University of Connecticut is less than five percent, occasionally, I resorted to snowball sampling in order to obtain a large enough and diverse enough sample for this study. Although it may be possible to draw my sample entirely from Latina/o based organizations, doing so may have some limitations. For example, students who have made a conscious decision to affiliate themselves with an organization may be different from those who do not get involved in campus life. Furthermore, students involved in ethnic organizations may be different from those who have decided against such affiliations. These factors are worthy of consideration as I consider explanations that may be relevant to embracing or rejecting particular aspects of various Latina/o student identities.

Throughout the interviews, students were asked a range of questions ranging from how the transition was from high school to college, to how often they visit home, how their relationships are here at the University of Connecticut, what they like and dislike about the university, who their friends are (not by name but by characteristics related to class and race-ethnicity), and how relationships with family and friends are back home.

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<sup>17</sup> Lambda Theta Alpha, Mu Sigma Upsilon

Students were asked to describe their cultural backgrounds as well as discuss their educational motivations and experiences<sup>18</sup>. In asking these questions, I expected to learn about the challenges facing Latina/o college students.

Due to the nature of this research, I find it important to discuss my background and position as a researcher. Scholars such as LeCompte (1987) have discussed issues of native/insider research, detailing both the pros and cons of engaging in such research. I believe that the pros of insider research greatly outweigh the cons, particularly when one is engaged in the research of marginalized groups. Like the students I interviewed, I am Latina. I am part of what has been dubbed the 1.5 generation (Ellis & Goodwin-White 2006)) in that, although I was born in Puerto Rico, I was raised in New York City. Like several of my informants, my first language is Spanish. I was raised in a Puerto Rican household where I not only spoke the language, but I also ate the food, listened to the music, and benefited from the extended family that is characteristic of many Puerto Rican families. I believe that this familiarity with my own ethnic culture proved beneficial when conducting interviews with students. They often switched between languages and referenced our common food and music.

Some of my respondents were the first in their families to attend college. I believe that having been a first-generation college student myself, allowed students to openly discuss the challenges they have encountered without fear of being judged. For those students who may not have been the first to go to college, I believe that my background still provided a level of comfort as they likely perceived me as a peer (many thought I was in their age group even though I was about ten years older than many of

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<sup>18</sup> See Appendix for interview guide

them). I believe that such “peer status” implies that I was not someone who needed to be impressed. Thus, my background allowed students to candidly discuss the dilemmas and stigma facing Latina/o college students as they relate to both their racial-ethnic and class backgrounds. Furthermore, my status on campus as a graduate student meant that I, too, understood the obstacles they faced as students on a predominantly White campus.

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed to allow for future analysis. In addition, HyperResearch, a qualitative data analysis software, was utilized for coding in order to facilitate data analysis. Although this research is in the exploratory stages, careful analysis of interview data has been useful in gaining an understanding of the processes that affect Latina/o students’ identities and their academic trajectories.

There are several limitations to this study. One limitation is the sample size. The sample is small and cannot be generalized. However, despite the sample size, conducting interviews has provided some insight into the matters that Latina/o college students are most concerned with. In addition, the way in which students were recruited (via Latina/o organizations and/ or snowball sample) is another limitation. Despite the limitations of this study, this research can aid in understanding issues facing Latina/o college students at predominantly White, four-year institutions.

A more complete study should incorporate a survey to a list of all Latina/o students at the University of Connecticut, in addition to gathering more interview data. Doing so will enable the researcher to get more diversity and larger numbers of students, allowing for the data to be more generalizable. Lastly, a comparative study examining Latina/o and White students of various social class backgrounds would be helpful in



ascertaining which factors (race-ethnicity or class) have a greater impact on the challenges facing Latina/o students.

### **Implications and Significance of Research**

Although issues of attrition among people of color have been discussed among a variety of scholars from a variety of disciplines (Carter 2006; Ogbu & Simmons 1998; Solorzano, Villalpando & Seguera 2005; Strayhorn 2008; Tappan 2006; Villenas & Deyhle 1999), much of this literature has focused on external factors pertaining to educational inequities. However, my research examines the internal issues and/or conflicts facing Latina/o college students as they negotiate various identities within a White, middle class institution.

Much of the existing research has focused on racial identities, ethnic identities, or class identities (Carter 2006; Ogbu & Simmons 1998; Solorzano, Villalpando & Seguera 2005; Strayhorn 2008; Tappan 2006; Villenas & Deyhle 1999). Very few studies have addressed the interplay of these three identities simultaneously. My work attempts to fill this void as I explore the intersection of racial-ethnic and class identities in relation to an academic identity. Given my focus, I am confident that I will be able to contribute to both the identity literature as well as to the education literature. My work will contribute to the identity literature by exploring the interplay of multiple identities and to the educational literature by exploring the ways in which negotiating identities affects academic achievement.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Analysis**

Although I began with themes that appeared during the METAS course observations, there were particular themes that reappeared as I conducted and analyzed my interviews. There were a total of seven recurring themes which are:

1. Examples of differences in habitus and cultural capital discussed by Bourdieu
2. Feeling different on campus (i.e. Sense of Belonging)
3. Sense of Guilt associated with being in college (Losing touch with friends from home... No longer having things to talk with them about)
4. “Acting White”
5. Sense of Responsibility of giving back to the family and/ or the Latino community
6. Resistance within these different categories
7. Examples of Racial Microaggressions

Student identities, which these themes originate from, are highly complex. These themes are influenced by factors such as race-ethnicity, “phenotype,” social class, generation in the United States, family dynamics, neighborhood effects and a host of others. This will become apparent as I discuss the stories of my informants. Each student brings a different set of life circumstances and experiences that in ways differs from that of the next student. Yet, despite *different* circumstances, students appear to

share *similar* experiences. However, there are also times when despite *similar* circumstances, students have *different* experiences.

According to most of the sociological literature, and especially according to quantitative research methods, people and/or groups with similar characteristics have similar outcomes. Those who deviate from this belief are placed into the outlier category, making their experiences appear to be unimportant. However, I would argue that it is possible that by exploring the outlier, one can discern more complexity of the processes that differentially affect people within the larger categories of social class and/or race-ethnicity. Thus, although there exist generalized patterns of behavior for particular groups (i.e. Latinas/os, poor/working class, etc) the existence of outliers might be important as they may be symptoms of systematic differences.

I begin the next section with a discussion of the ways in which habitus and cultural capital are transmitted and cultivated. It has long been believed that belonging to the same social class leads to shared notions of habitus and cultural capital. Though this is often true, it need not always be true, particularly when we discuss groups in the lower socioeconomic strata who are struggling to become upwardly mobile.

#### ***4.1 Habitus & Cultural Capital***

The role of habitus and cultural capital was a theme that quickly emerged from my interviews. The students I interviewed came from a variety of backgrounds. For most students, their social class informed the amount of cultural capital that they had at their disposal in navigating their college environment. Generally, students who came from a middle-class background possessed this cultural capital whereas students who

came from poor to working-class families often lacked it, or rather, possessed lesser amounts of it. Thus, cultural capital operates on a continuum.

The starting point for students on this continuum is influenced by a variety of factors. Thus, if one considers an intersectional approach in examining where students begin on the cultural capital continuum, it becomes apparent that there are numerous factors ranging from race-ethnicity to class to immigrant status to generation in the United States, among a long list of others, that influence this starting point.

Derek was born and raised in Stamford, CT. He describes the neighborhood in which he grew up as “a nice, suburban neighborhood.” Both of his parents graduated high school but only his mother went on to take courses at a community college, although she never graduated. He attended Stamford public schools which he described as being “very diverse.” When asked about his high school experiences and networks, he stated:

I was an artistic kid, and I was in the fine arts. I was in the orchestra, and I did the school musicals and the plays and all that stuff. And all the kids in there were just diverse. And we clicked on that level.

Given his involvement in the arts, Derek developed the habitus and obtained the cultural capital that many middle-class students benefit from having in predominantly White institutions of higher education. His involvement in structured extracurricular activities such as orchestra and theatre in high school have taught him how to delegate time to particular activities. These skills have translated into his ability to manage time while in college, whether it be time to study or time to participate in extracurricular activities. In addition, being exposed to diversity early on has taught him how to interact with people who are different from himself.

Derek's experience in high school helps to illustrate the ways in which "differences in habitus give individuals varying cultural skills, social connections, educational practices, and other cultural resources, which then can be translated into different forms of value (capital) as individuals move out into the real world" (Lareau 276-277). Despite the fact that his Puerto Rican parents are not college educated, because of *where* he grew up, Derek was able to develop the habitus and cultural capital associated with the White middle-class, which has proven beneficial in navigating the predominantly White university that he attends. Derek also mentions that he "can pass" giving him yet another advantage on campus.

Natalia, like Derek, possess the habitus and cultural capital valued by the university. After being asked to describe her previous educational experiences, she immediately mentions having grown up "somewhat" privileged in a suburb of New Jersey. She attended a predominantly White, all girls, Catholic high school which she says helped her with her transition to UConn. She says:

"I've been open to everything, so I know how to interact with the White kids just because of school. And I grew up right next to Washington Heights, so I have the best of both worlds. I can interact with everything, and I know how to, not necessarily change myself and be fake, but I know how to enhance certain characteristics in certain settings and kind of downplay others."

"Everything that I did like my ballet and my swim team, my swim team was in Washington Heights. I swam for Riverside...I'd literally go there right after school in, still my uniform on... I was able to have that transition back right off the bat, so it kind of forced me... you have to really adapt to your surroundings very quickly."

Similar to Derek, her structured activities and exposure to different groups in high school has helped to cultivate the habitus and cultural capital privileged at predominantly White

institutions. Furthermore, she had already learned how to negotiate being a “minority” in high school therefore allowing for a smoother transition in college. In addition, Natalia discussed campus involvement as something she learned in high school. Natalia’s social class has informed a sense of entitlement and importance of being assertive. In regards to opportunities, Natalia argues that,

Freshmen need to have it drilled in their heads. That it’s not just gonna come to you. You have to look for the opportunities. Same thing like, I applied to be an RA (Resident Assistant). I had to go for it. It’s not like they came to me and said ‘you know, you should apply.’ I had to send it out there. I got on the waiting list. I had to be like ‘I’m still interested, I’m still interested’ cause people can’t read your mind.

Natalia’s privilege stands in sharp contrast with that of Marlene, who grew up in a single parent household (with her father) in Hartford. Unlike the sense of entitlement and assertiveness displayed by Natalia, Marlene tells me about a time where she had to skip class for a week to help translate for her sick grandmother at the hospital. Instead of feeling entitled to and requesting an extension on assignments, she approaches the professor and says:

I just wanted to let you know that I’m not expecting you to give me extensions on anything. I just wanted to let you know why I didn’t come to class because out of respect to you, I want you to know I wasn’t skipping on purpose.

The professor told her that she admired that and Marlene said:

“It was such a weight lifted off of my shoulders.

Marlene concerns herself with the idea of giving her professor the “respect” she deserves as a person in authority. The notion of “respeto” is very important among Latina/o cultures. However, “respeto” is not something that is part of the habitus of the university culture. Therefore, Marlene is not gaining anything by providing her professor with this

“respeto.” On the contrary, a White, middle-class student would have probably approached the professor expecting an agreement to make up missed work; explaining the situation out of respect would not have been the motivating factor in speaking with the professor.

In addition, there may be more than just “respeto” at play in the above referenced encounter. It is also likely that Marlene approached the professor in hopes that the professor would offer the extension without her having to ask for it. It is likely that this is an attempt to compensate for her lack of sense of entitlement.

Marlene and I talked about family expectations concerning attending college. In contrast to Derek and Natalia whose parents expected them to attend college, Marlene’s father was not as supportive about college. When I asked if she goes home often, she says:

Uh uh. My father is VERY over protective. Like when I was applying to colleges, he was like, ‘you don’t have my permission to go to college. Why don’t you get a job and help us out in the house?’ I was like, ‘ok, no!’ So that’s when we started clashing. And then, it’s hard to go from like being used to one environment to then go back home... Oh can you make dinner? Oh can you go pick your brother up at school? And it’s like, ‘I’m on vacation!’

Marlene’s father never attended college. His life has consisted of hard work and providing for his family. His expectation that she enter the labor market and help the family is indicative of the differences in the habitus of groups from different socioeconomic backgrounds.

Julio is half Puerto Rican and half Dominican. He was raised by, both, his mother and grandmother. He obtained an athletic scholarship that sent him away for boarding

school. I asked him whether his experiences at boarding school helped prepare him for life at UConn. He replies:

The two different cultures, yeah. Well, the two different foundations... I lived on a campus. I had a roommate. I had professors that would give us a syllabus to say, "this is what it is, this is what you have to do." I actually had research papers. I had the bibliography and all that stuff, but just learning how to deal with people in general, people from different backgrounds. Whereas Hartford High everybody was basically from a similar area. Everybody was from Hartford, so we all knew what it was like. At (the boarding school) we had people from California, people from China, we had people from Idaho, from Texas, all over and it just came up to the point where it was like, let me try to put a bug in people's ear to let them understand, like us being out there. It's competitive no matter who you are. Whether you're White, Black, it's competitive all over. But there's, I guess, the White privilege and the fact that people are born with these privileges because of their skin color and their families. Many of us (people of color) unfortunately don't have that. There's no such thing as Black privilege or Latino privilege. We have to work for what we get and sometimes everybody believes that, "oh minorities are a charity case." It's still a lot harder sometimes being a minority student. Not because you're competing with other students, but just because of the stereotype that are put amongst us.

Julio understands the challenges facing students of color. He has also been fortunate to attend a private boarding school where he was able to cultivate a greater degree of cultural capital. Unfortunately, a sports injury led to the loss of his athletic scholarship, which resulted in his return to Hartford High. However, his time at the boarding school was instrumental to his future successes both at Hartford High and at UConn. The knowledge he gained at the boarding school made him a stronger student, which ultimately resulted in his gaining an *academic* scholarship to attend UConn.

Although Julio comes from an underprivileged background, attending a boarding school granted him the opportunity to cultivate the cultural capital that is valued at predominantly White, middle-class institutions of higher education. In addition to being



prepared for the logistics of college, he also learned how to interact with students of different racial-ethnic and social class backgrounds. These opportunities cannot be underestimated.

### **Transition to College**

Students had various levels of habitus and cultural capital at their disposal upon arrival at the UConn campus. Several students were able to benefit from programs such as Student Support Services (SSS) and METAS. Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, in particular, did not possess basic knowledge such as how many credits to register for.

The case of Eunice is an interesting one. Eunice is part Ecuadorian and part Puerto Rican. She is from Bridgeport, CT but describes where she is from as being “the nicer part of Bridgeport.” She attended Catholic schools her entire life. Although her parents attended college (her father attended a community college and her mother attended Sacred Heart in Fairfield), neither of them graduated. Despite having parents who are at least somewhat familiar with institutions of higher education, there were still things that Eunice was unfamiliar with. For example, during our interview, she states:

- Eunice: I'm behind in credits because my first semester I only took 12 credits. Second semester I think I only took 14 and then last semester I took 14.
- GM: Is 14 credits a normal course load?
- Eunice: I think like 17 is a normal ... 15 or 17 is normal...So, I'm like ... I think I'm like 12 credits behind. And, that's like an entire semester.
- GM: Why did you take only 12 credits? Like, did you know that 17 credits or whatever was the norm?
- Eunice: No.

Janette is equally unfamiliar with the university culture. During the interview,

Janette says:

Janette: When I came here, first semester, people were talking about cumulative. I'm like what in the world is cumulative? What are you talking about? I'm lost, like I was just so, but I never showed anyone that I was lost, cause I was like too strong. And I didn't want, cause I didn't want to be labeled as just another minority... So I was like, I'm not going to be labeled as that. So I always try to find out for myself what it really was.

GM: How did you find out by yourself though?

Janette: I guess, well SSS was a very big, big part of helping me.

Janette is from Waterbury. Her parents are from the Dominican Republic.

Although her mother went to college in the Dominican Republic, she still considers herself to be “first-generation college,” because her mother’s degree did not transfer over to the United States. Apparently, whatever cultural capital her mom had accrued in the Dominican Republic did not transfer over to the United States. Fortunately, Janette was able to benefit from programs like SSS, which she credits with helping her learn to navigate the university culture.

Many of the students I interviewed felt that they were fortunate to have had someone at their high school help them apply to college. Oftentimes, even though parents wanted them to go on to college, they lacked the knowledge to help them through the process of applying to schools and financial aid. Stephanie articulates this perfectly when she says:

Applying to colleges I did that all on my own and like reaching out to my guidance counselors, because my parents didn't know what to do. I thank God that I had like some really good counselors that told me about FASFA, told me you have questions you come in and talk with us.

Stephanie's parents did not complete high school. Her father has a tenth grade education and her mother eventually earned her high school equivalency diploma. Stephanie's parents separated when she was younger. Her father, like Marlene's father, has never been very supportive of her pursuing a college education. According to Stephanie, her father's view on college has been that "college is extra. You want to do that, you have to navigate it on your own," which stands in sharp contrast with her mother who has always stressed the importance of a college education.

Stephanie's mother is the one who pushed for her to attend a magnet school when she was entering the schooling system. This has helped her tremendously at this stage in her academic career. Stephanie describes magnet schools as being "very advanced." Her high school, also a magnet school, prepared her for the rigors of college by offering Advanced Placement (AP) classes, which helped her develop study habits that have been effective at UConn.

Magnet schools are known for attracting the brightest students; in addition, they also strive for diversity. Stephanie believes that the diversity she was exposed to during her schooling years helped prepare her for her experiences at the University of Connecticut. A predominantly White campus was not as big a hurdle for her, as it was for some other students. The same was true for Lourdes, a student who comes from Bloomfield but attended magnet schools. It seems that the diversity offered by magnet schools, not only helps students to interact with the different groups, but also helps them to not feel inferior given their "minority" status.

## ***4.2 Feeling (and Being) Different/ Sense of Belonging***

- Marlene: On this campus, there's a lot of White people. A lot of White people... When I got here, I thought, 'Ok.. I don't think I could do this.'
- GM: You felt out of place?
- Marlene: Yeah, yeah, definitely.

Nearly all of the students I interviewed mentioned feeling different on campus. Feeling different operated on a continuum thus some students felt more different than others. Students' educational experiences prior to attending college seemed to influence how comfortable they felt on a predominantly White campus. In the case of Marlene who only attended public schools in Hartford, coming to UConn lead to some culture shock. However, Eunice describes a different experience.

- Eunice: But also like coming to this university especially, coming from predominantly Black and Hispanic demographics and coming to predominantly White....
- GM: How was that?
- Eunice: It was good because like, I like White people. So, it was... like, it was fine for me.

Eunice and Marlene come from two of Connecticut's largest cities, Bridgeport and Hartford, respectively. However, Eunice is more privileged than Marlene in that she describes her neighborhood in positive ways. Eunice is also privileged in that she comes from a two-parent household, where both parents attended college, even if they did not complete the requirements for a degree. She also attended private Catholic schools her entire life. Up until she entered high school, the schools she attended were predominantly White. Thus, unlike Marlene who has had very little to no peer interaction with Whites, Eunice does not seem to struggle with the predominantly White nature of the UConn campus.

Students mentioned feeling different for a variety of reasons. Besides not being White, students generally felt different due to their habitus, which included speaking Spanish, listening to different music, and/or eating different foods. Sandy discussed these three issues at great lengths.

Sandy is from Guatemala. She came to the United States at the age of fourteen. She is yet another very interesting case. In Guatemala, she lived a very middle-class lifestyle. Both of her parents attended college there. Her mother attended college for two years and had an extensive social network that helped her obtain a job at Guatemala's Supreme Court. Her father who attended college for four years was a mechanical engineer. Sandy attended a well-known, private Catholic school in Guatemala. However, when her family moved to the US, their social capital (their social networks) and educational training did not follow them. They settled in New Haven, CT and Sandy went from attending private schools, to attending New Haven public schools where several of her classmates either did not graduate high school or if they did graduate, did not pursue a college education. However, given the cultural capital available to her, she says:

So, school was like, it was never an option. And it wasn't like you know, you're gonna finish high school and that's it. No, college was not an option... Even for my brother, he did manufacturing engineering at BU. He graduated like two years ago.

She found it difficult to transition to college academically because her high school, "it wasn't like a private high school where they prepare you for college." However, given the cultural capital that was available to her, she was able to turn to her parents and

brother when she encountered difficulties with her courses. Often, the help they provided was in the form of emotional support as illustrated below:

So I remember calling my brother crying and just thinking, you know, why don't I, should I just change my major.... And he's like, "It's your first exam, you know, and it's college. It's different." So, it was very difficult, like academics wise, I think was the hardest thing.”

This type of support is something that was not available to students such as Marlene and to a lesser extent, Stephanie whose parents did not have any degrees in higher education. Sandy also discussed feeling different on campus due to her race-ethnicity.

With, one of my best friends, Melinda. She's half Ecuadorian, and half Honduran. And her family and my family are very similar... Her, Honduran values and her Latin American values are like very... So like her family and my family, we're a lot alike and so, we talk about things like this. About, you know, being like, the few Hispanics here at UConn and you know, how, sometimes it's like we wanna find people that relate to us but it's difficult because there's not so many of us here.

Janette discussed being racial-ethnically different. Janette is also an RA for SSS. SSS students are required to attend a summer program on campus where students stay in dorms together and take courses together. The summer program provides them with a bit of extra time to get adjusted to college life. However, because it is summer, the campus is relatively quiet and empty. As an RA, Janette prepares SSS students for the change that will occur when the fall semester begins. She shares some words with incoming cohorts that were shared with her.

So I told my kids the same thing. I was like, you see now, okay, you guys are all brown...In the fall think of a popcorn bag and throw a raisin in there, and that's going to be you, the raisin... They told us that... and then I told my students that. It was like we pass it along.

This comment demonstrates that the color of one's skin plays a role in the comfort level of students on campus. And given the fact that this bit of information has been passed along from different RA's to different incoming cohorts, students feel that this information is valuable, otherwise, it would not be shared.

Having lighter skin may mean that a student will feel a greater sense of belonging.

Derek, the middle-class student from Stamford, discusses the notion of "passing."

"Most of the time I can pass and people won't think I'm Latino or Spanish."

"Most people don't even know I'm Spanish. They think I'm either some form of White or Italian."

As the quote above demonstrates, having lighter skin certainly has its advantages and it is certainly an invisible privilege. The privileges he enjoys as a result of his light skin (categorized by many as his race) go unnoticed but the disadvantages that he incurs as a result of his ethnicity are very noticeable to him. Derek discusses these disadvantages in contradictory ways when he says:

Derek: But I think sometimes a minority or someone who isn't White will think about it way too much 'cause I don't...to be honest, I don't think the other White kids in your class are really thinking about it at all. They don't really care. You're just another person they can get to know if they're a nice person.

GM: Yeah, yeah...

Derek: Cause I really don't think most people, they do have misconceptions of others, but they don't necessarily believe them wholeheartedly. As far as belonging, I just feel like sometimes you feel isolated because you could be discriminated against or could be thought of...or someone could assume things about you, there's not that many other people who can understand that... There's only certain people I can talk about certain things with as a Latino. Not just the race stuff but, oh yeah, I felt like this today or felt

like that because of my race or whatever or ethnicity. Latino is not a race.

First of all, this quote highlights an argument that I made early in this paper regarding the issue of “race” among Latinas/os; particularly how Latinas/os do not identify racially. More importantly, Derek feels different, or in his words “isolated,” due to his ethnicity despite his ability to “pass.” Having grown up in Stamford, Derek gained a significant amount of cultural capital from the schools he attended and the neighborhood in which he grew up. His exposure to middle-class Whites as peers throughout his childhood has helped him establish a significant comfort level on this predominantly White campus. However, despite his level of cultural capital, there is still something that prevents him from feeling as if he completely fits in. Perhaps, the fact that his parents are not college educated has had an indirect effect on his sense of belonging on campus.

Derek’s contradictory thinking is reminiscent of an argument made in Sennett & Cobb’s book, *The Hidden Injuries of Social Class* (1972). In this text, the authors discuss social class as something that is built in to institutional structures but also something that is built into individual notions of self-worth. The self-worth of individuals is based on a socioeconomic comparative assessment where those at the top of the socioeconomic ladder are believed to be superior to those at the lower end. Sennett & Cobb discuss the blue-collar worker and state that, “there is a split between conscious belief and inner conviction—in secret he feels ashamed of who he is” (97).

It appears that a similar process may be occurring within Derek. Perhaps having parents whose educational attainment is below that of the adults in his community serves as a reminder of being different and perhaps, Derek attributed the lower educational attainment as being related to his ethnicity, since there do not appear to be any other



possible explanations. Another reason why it seems plausible that the educational attainment of Derek's parents may be a factor in feeling different is in relation to Natalia who shares many of the same characteristics as Derek. She is middle-class and has a great amount of cultural capital at her disposal. Unlike Derek, she cannot "pass." She is a darker skinned<sup>19</sup> Latina. She is extremely confident and has not let her being different hinder her at all. She is very much involved in campus life and tells me:

- Natalia: I'm an RA, something that I wanna get more Latinos involved in because as a minority, there's very few of us when you look at all the other RA's. I'm the co-president of [a science organization for students of color]. Just getting myself out there so that more professors know, so that I can get better letters of recommendation, build a better package for myself.
- GM: How do you think you learned to do all of that?
- Natalia: It had to do with high school and basically drilling...it all has to do with how you were educated before coming to college 'cause that just becomes very routine. It became very smooth. I didn't even have to think about it.
- GM: Okay.
- Natalia: I was taught how to talk and how to market myself in high school."

She credits her high school with instilling these leadership skills (i.e. cultural capital) in her. School certainly plays a huge role. Natalia was fortunate to receive private schooling. However, having college-educated parents that reinforced these ideas and values certainly helps. As engineers, they likely have more autonomy and have benefited from factors such as networking and possessing leadership skills. Thus, having college-educated parents likely prevents her from dealing with contradictions such as those discussed by Sennett & Cobbs, since there is continuity in the middle-class values at school *and* at home.

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<sup>19</sup> Notions of "dark," "darker," "light," and "lighter" skinned are all very subjective measures. As a lighter skinned Latina, I will tend to describe others as darker only because of my own personal orientation. Later in this thesis, I will quote Natalia as saying she is "light skinned" which she uses because she is light compared to everyone else in her family.

Being Latina on a predominantly white campus is a non-factor for her. Her cultural capital has translated well into leadership skills that have proven useful to her integration in campus life. We talked about how she felt about whether she had any concerns stemming from her being Latina and she said:

Going back to what you were saying about being perceived a certain way 'cause I am a Latina, I was... thinking about doing a sorority 'cause I want to branch out and do everything. I love being at PRLACC, doing everything that it entails. I don't want to do a cultural sorority. I want to do a social just because it's bigger. Even though they're known as the White ones, it's bigger. It's got more network and it could benefit me more.

She is clearly not intimidated by being involved in large groups where she is a minority. Of more importance to her is developing a social network that could prove beneficial in the future.

Elvin, like Natalia, comes from a New Jersey suburb. He describes moving from a “predominantly Hispanic neighborhood” at the age of eight to a predominantly White neighborhood where they lived for a little over a decade, until they returned to their former neighborhood to buy a condo. Unlike Natalia, he did not attend private schools. For high school, he attended a county technical school. His parents are not college educated but his older sister is. She is significantly older than him and went away for college when he was about five years old. He calls her his “role model” and says that he always wanted to go to college because he wanted to be like her.

Elvin did not experience any culture shock when he came to UConn. He and I discussed his coming to such a predominantly white campus.

GM: Was it ok for you or was it a bit of a culture shock?

Elvin: Uh uh... Not at all. All the schools I went to were either pretty mixed between Hispanics and White, or even my high school, the technical school was VERY MUCH

White, it was VERY. So I was, it didn't phase me. Actually I felt it was pretty normal. It felt ok. But I do notice that! Of course, I notice that. It's very noticeable here.

GM: But as long as your comfortable with it. It's fine.

Elvin: And I am. I'm very comfortable here. I never feel like that's really, like something against me here. I've never felt that way.

Elvin is interesting because although he although his parents are not college educated, unlike Derek, he feels completely comfortable on this campus. He did not attend privileged schools like Derek and Natalia but was accustomed to having White peers. I wonder whether his nationality (his parents are from El Salvador, but he was born and raised in the US) has anything to do with his feeling comfortable at UConn. The fact that Derek, who is Puerto Rican, can feel "isolated" at times despite the fact that he possesses more cultural capital and has the ability to "pass" is strange considering that these are privileges that Elvin does not have. Perhaps these differences can be explained by Segmented Assimilation Theory.

Segmented Assimilation Theory (Zhou 1997) argues that there exist three patterns to becoming integrated into US society. These patterns are described as,

"the time-honored upward mobility pattern dictating the acculturation and economic integration into the normative structures of middle-class America; the downward-mobility, in the opposite direction, dictates the acculturation and parallel integration into the underclass; and economic integration into middle-class America, with lagged acculturation and deliberate preservation of the immigrant community's values and solidarity" (984).

Elvin's comfort level on campus could be a result of his belonging to the first category of assimilation described by Zhou (1997). Derek, on the other hand, seems to belong to the third category of assimilation which could explain his feeling different. Given their

status as college students, none of the participants in this study can be considered to be part of the second pattern, which describes integration into the underclass.

Zhou's description of an immigrant group with "lagged acculturation and deliberate preservation of [the group's] values and solidarity" (984) despite being economically integrated into the middle class is certainly fitting for the group of students that I interviewed. Although the students that I interviewed are clearly not all middle class, the fact remains they are all aspiring toward moving up the socioeconomic ladder. For these students, becoming upwardly mobile does not mean giving up their ethnic culture(s) which includes listening to Spanish music.

Some of the girls resisted the White, middle-class culture at UConn by asserting their Latina identity. They did so by playing their Spanish music in their dorm rooms, regardless of the reactions of other students. Marlene described how she would often clean her room while listening to Spanish music (something that for the most part, many Latinas/os have grown up doing) and she had students complain to the RA's about her despite the fact that the music "wasn't loud." She also mentioned that when these same students would listen to their music (and she used N'Sync as an example) they would not get reprimanded despite the fact that they played their music louder than hers. Sandy, like Marlene, also asserts her Latina identity. According to Sandy:

"I'm very proud of it (being Latina)... my friends the ones that are not Latino, they know me. They know that I'm gonna speak Spanish whenever I get the chance, that I'm gonna listen to this music whether you like it or not"

Interestingly, despite feeling different because of who they are, many students resisted the White, middle-class university culture and asserted their Latina identities.

Thus, despite the negative repercussions associated with blasting their music in their rooms (such as getting into trouble with an RA), students continued to play music loudly as a means of resistance to the dominant university culture. These students speak of being proud of their identities despite the fact that the university culture does not necessarily embrace that which they are proud of

### **College Parties: Centrality of Music and Alcohol**

Music is very important in Latina/o cultures. As a result, Latina/o students at UConn continue to embrace music as a means of asserting their identities but also as a way of letting loose. When I asked students what they did for fun, many of them mentioned music. Music is often played at parties and several of my informants contrasted “Latina/o parties” with “White parties.” When I ask Janette what she and her friends do for fun, she says:

Janette: I don't know I guess party. But not in the sense that you would think...  
GM: In what sense?  
Janette: Like going to Carriage, or... like hang outside and all you do is play beer pong. We don't, I don't do that.  
GM: Okay.  
Janette: Like I mean party like, actual dancing, like that's a party to me. My friends like dancing, so we just all go and dance.  
GM: Like where? At someone's house?  
Janette: Yeah.  
GM: Okay.  
Janette: On campus. We just all dance and hang out.  
GM: Okay. Do you guys drink too or no?  
Janette: Sometimes.

Music and dancing are at the forefront of “Latina/o parties.” The relevance of drinking alcohol is minimal in relation to the importance of music and dancing. Sandy provides

more detail about the differences in parties and the ways in which parties are viewed by some of her peers.

So, with my group of White friends, you know, we go to like, the bars or we go to fraternity parties or we go to whatever. While, like, with my group of four Latino friends, it's more of, how can I say it... Ok, so, my three friends, that I'm really close to... their group of friends is also mostly only Latinos. So, you know, when I'm like, "Jessica, vamos a, hay una fiesta aqui"<sup>20</sup> bla bla bla, she's like, "Is it a White party?" and I'm like, "Yeah" and she's like, "Ugh. Sandy, you know I don't like those!" And so usually with those people, I go to like PRLACC parties, lets say...  
It's just like, it's like, just waaaay two different worlds...

Natalia makes similar distinctions between parties even though the groups of friends and parties she is referring to in this case are her friends from back home. Despite the fact that she is not talking about UConn, the same distinction appears between the parties of the different racial-ethnic groups.

In terms of like parties and stuff when I'm home with my White friends, it's probably like a drinking party. I won't partake in it. I'll try to like dance. I'll still make the best out of the situation, but like, that's that type of party. And then when I'm with my minority friends, like my Latinos and my like Blacks, we dance. Like drinking can play such a minimal part. But just to see a huge difference between the two. As a Latino, as somebody's who's Black, you could just be so social and dancing is just such a vital part that you don't need the alcohol.

In her article, "‘Culture Shock’: Black Students Account for Their Distinctiveness at an Elite College," Torres (2009) found the same pattern in respect to the centrality of alcohol at the parties of different racial-ethnic groups. She found that "White parties" were unappealing to Black students given the centrality of alcohol and the lack of dancing. Although I began this section with discussing the importance of music in

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<sup>20</sup> Translation: "Jessica, lets go to, there's a party here"

Latina/o cultures, music, which includes dancing, is extremely important to other “minority” groups. Thus, it seems as if students of color have to carve out that niche for themselves within the greater “party culture” on campus.

Up until now, all the informants who discussed parties have been female. Although I do not intend to examine issues of gender in this thesis, I do want to show that the sentiment regarding the importance of music and dance in parties was not limited to female students. Derek, who admitted to having become involved in the party scene for a short time, also struggled with the idea of drinking and not dancing at parties. In our interview, he said:

And I wasn't even like a partier necessarily... I did at the very beginning, but it wasn't my cup of tea. I'm not a person who goes out and gets drunk. And even at that, I was like if you're not going to go dance or whatever, it's not as fun.

### **PRLACC, METAS, BAILE, & SSS**

Many of the Latina/o student organizations are closely linked. PRLACC (the Puerto Rican and Latin American Cultural Club) is a physical space where most students tend to congregate. METAS is a mentoring program that falls under the jurisdiction of PRLACC. After the mentoring period ends (either as mentor or mentee), students either continue or terminate their affiliation with PRLACC. Oftentimes, students who are affiliated with PRLACC are also students who are affiliated with BAILE (Bringing Awareness into Latino Ethnicities), a student organization that seeks to raise awareness of Latina/o cultures through the use of music and dance. SSS is an academic support program that seeks to assist first-generation and low-income college students.

As mentioned above, Sandy and other students preferred attending “PRLACC parties” over “White parties.” However, PRLACC as well as programs and organizations

such as METAS, BAILE, and SSS have served an incredibly important function by helping to foster a sense of community and belonging among Latina/o students on campus. Stephanie is currently a student at the Neag School of Education, one of the more highly ranked teacher education programs on the East Coast. Stephanie tells me about her affiliation with PRLACC.

Stephanie: I've always been connected with the center.  
GM: Okay. What about the center is so appealing to you?  
Stephanie: Just the fact that it's a reminder, like I'm not the only one... You know. Right now, the school that I'm at, I'm probably the only full Hispanic girl. Everyone else is like half and half. And I'm probably the only, in my cohort, I'm probably the only one that's noticeable (noticeably Latina)

Although being part of PRLACC is comforting for many students, many of them also realize that there is a drawback to places like PRLACC and that is that one can remain confined there. For example, Jennifer, a student who is originally from Waterbury and came into UConn through SSS, describes one of the disadvantages of PRLACC. She says:

I also went to PRLACC and I got to meet everybody from over there, but the thing is, like I feel you have to be involved on campus to actually like enjoy it in a sense, because like for me I would feel really awkward just going to a college. I'm not really dark skinned but I am colored so I have the curlier... like I'm the typical Hispanic. So it would be awkward. So it's always like a little difficult opening up to people, but then I feel like that's a downfall that I had towards myself that I mostly surround myself with Hispanics on campus. So it's like all the Hispanics I know them but then like everybody else is kind of like I don't know them.



For Jennifer, she is aware of the importance of stepping out of the comfort zone that is provided by PRLACC. However, she also has a difficult time doing so. When we talk of where she is from (Waterbury), she says, “it was a little different. It was like... everybody's kind of minority. That was kind of how it goes and so if somebody was White they were like a minority too.” Jennifer’s statement about other Whites in her neighborhood is indicative of one of two things. Perhaps she is categorizing them as a minority since there are fewer numbers of them in the community relative to the number of people of color; or perhaps, the fact that they live in her community is indicative of their social class, which for Jennifer may be a sort of racializing agent. Therefore, Jennifer’s interactions with Whites have been limited to those in her social class, which differs from the Whites at UConn who occupy the middle to upper rungs of the socioeconomic ladder.

This stands in contrast with Natalia whose middle class status has made it natural for her to interact with the middle class nature of the institution. Even though, like Jessica, Natalia is Latina, that does not prevent her from branching out of the comforts provided by PRLACC. According to Natalia, “ getting acclimated to this campus, as a Latina, it’s so easy for me to feel ostracized... but the more you get involved, the less it is.” The cultural capital that Natalia had cultivated at home and at school is in large part responsible for her ability to get more involved on campus. She discusses those students that limit their interactions to PRLACC.

- Natalia: There are a lot of people in PRLACC that want to stay confined to just PRLACC. They might not even want to venture out to a different club or a different culture just because they want to stay within”
- GM: And you don’t think that’s a good thing?
- Natalia: For me it’s not.

Despite the fact that she frowns upon students of color limiting their interactions with the larger university, she is aware of why people choose to do so and the privileges that she has that have allowed her to move beyond PRLACC. She says:

I don't blame some people for wanting to stick to their culture. Out of 16,000 undergrads, you're being told that you have this percentage of this. And you don't see that! You're going to want to stick to your own. I understand that. But from my high school and from growing up, I've always been told to reach out. That's why it was easy for me. That's why I can't say it's not right for people to stick to their own and what they know just because had I not have had my upbringing, I would have done the same thing.

Natalia clearly understands the advantages of the cultural capital that she possesses.

Derek shares similar beliefs about exploring different groups and because of his background, is able to explore more of what the university has to offer. When I ask him about his views on students who stay confined to PRLACC he says, “that’s kind of sad.”

I then ask him to explain why he believe that behavior is “sad,” to which he responds:

I think that part of it is like when you totally seclude yourself to one group of people, you have only one viewpoint of everything... Cause usually when you meet people from different groups, cultures, or ideas, or anything, they usually end up being very nice, and you can get along with them very well. And so, I find it sad because it’s like, well, you’re just missing out on a possible good friendship or having a more broader view of the world.

Certainly, having attended such a diverse high school equipped Derek with the tools to move fluidly between different groups. Besides his affiliation with PRLACC, Derek is also part of the Polish Cultural Society. According to Derek,

In the Stamford public school system, a big thing was always diversity, diversity, diversity. And not only was it all being tolerant, but embracing other cultures and actually being interested in learning about other people. And I think that’s part

of why I always was in like the Asian Culture Society or I'd do a lot of stuff here with the Polish Cultural Society.

However, not all Latina/o students feel at home at PRLACC. Eunice became affiliated with PRLACC through the METAS program. She describes a different experience with the people at PRLACC. She says, "something like didn't click with everyone. It's like they all clicked away from me." She describes continued efforts to engage with PRLACC students through BAILE, efforts that were unsuccessful. Although she is a mentor for the METAS program, she has very limited contact with the cultural center.

Why is it that some feel at home at PRLACC and some, like Eunice, do not? Some of my informants mentioned that PRLACC is cliquy and pushes away students who are not part of the PRLACC clique. Given my observations of the center, I can agree that this is certainly one reason for why some avoid the center. However, there also seems to be a pattern with students who frequent the center. They are often, though not always, more Caribbean Latinas/os (i.e. Puerto Rican and Dominican) than students from Central and South America. In addition, students who spend the most time at PRLACC tend to be students who are of a lower socioeconomic background. Thus, it seems likely that the interaction of ethnicity, socioeconomic status, as well as other factors such as cultural capital, play a role in how comfortable students can feel at PRLACC.

This becomes even more apparent when Natalia says that she has been approached by people, including students from PRLACC, who accused her of thinking she was better than them. Apparently, her social class and level of cultural capital helped create this tension, which had perhaps been mediated somewhat by the fact that she is Dominican. During our interview, she says:

Natalia: Yeah. I've actually been approached by some people from PRLACC, from the [METAS] class too.

GM: You've been told by people?

Natalia: Yeah, like “before I got to know you, I thought that you were stuck up in a certain way.” I'm like that's what I don't like. I don't want to give off a certain uptight impression of me. I want people to want to get to know me because if you aren't forced to, in a situation like such a small class such as the METAS class, you'd never talk to that person ever. So that's why I don't want to come off a certain way like that. But I want to expand. I want to do things that are just non-Latino sometimes, you know?

Kathy is a student who has very minimal contact with PRLACC. Kathy's parents are from Guatemala. Her father works as a painter and earned his GED later in life while her mother is a teacher and holds a masters degree. Kathy grew up in the predominantly White rural town of Montville, CT. She describes being the only Latina growing up and so, for her, coming to UConn was what she was already accustomed to. In fact, UConn was more diverse than her hometown and she shared that it was on campus where she made her first Latina friend as well as her first Black friend. Thus, for Kathy, PRLACC is not a place where she feels at home. During our interview, she whispers, “It's kind of weird cause sometimes I feel like I'm more like a White Spanish,... I don't know why. Even sometimes I'll go into PRLACC and sometimes I'll feel uncomfortable there.” As a result, Kathy and other students like her keep their involvement with PRLACC to a bare minimum, going there only to print papers since the center offers free printing to students.

Kathy also described a disconnect between what she and her Latina friend on campus and her friends back home do for fun. She says, “my best friend here is Jahaira who's like Puerto Rican and I can talk to her, like in Spanish, and we'll like listen to Spanish music, or watch Spanish stuff which I can't do with my friends [from back

home] cause they just wouldn't understand." Because of her background, Kathy's disconnect between her friend on campus and her friends back home is quite the opposite of what it is like for most Latina/o students at UConn.

#### ***4.3 Different Paths Lead to a Sense of Guilt***

Several of the students mentioned feeling as if the paths they were currently on were different from the paths being taken by many of their friends back home. Most of the students that brought up this issue came from underprivileged backgrounds. They often struggled with wanting to remain loyal to their friends in their pursuit of becoming upwardly mobile.

Sandy said:

It was more like we had nothing to talk about after a while... You know what I mean? It just became so different. Like our lives went in completely waaay two different paths. I was in school and I was busy and I remember my friend once telling me, 'Sandy, all you talk about is school' and so there was like nothing we could relate to each other at that point.

Marlene said:

I feel like, most of my friends I had in high school they're pregnant, or have kids, or are married already. And I still try to keep in touch because people go on their different paths but it's hard too.

Despite feeling as if they are on different paths, students often continue to make an effort to maintain their friendships from back home. However, despite their efforts, it may become increasingly difficult. Marlene goes on to say:

I feel like I'm the only one who's in college with a job so we try not to do something to spend too much time cause it gets awkward. Like you run outta things to talk about.

She tells me about her reaction when her friends talk about issues at work or finding a babysitter. Marlene says, “and I’m like, Oh damn, that sucks. But I can’t say anything else cause I can’t relate to you.” Sandy echoes the same sentiment. When I ask her if she has every felt guilty because of the differences in trajectory, she says:

Sandy: Yes! Yes, yes cause I, I felt like I was sort of being a bad friend, not keeping in touch with them. And, because, they felt that I felt that I was better than them because I was in school and they weren't. And, so, I felt like, there was that guilty sense of it because, like, I was really good friends with these people during high school and just how our lives went completely separate ways and... my mom is like, "Sandy, you know, you know, friends, come and go. Like, the only people that are gonna be there for you are, is gonna be your family." So... because I, I talk to my mom about, I was like, "I don't want them to think that I'm better than them because I'm in school and because, you know, they're doing different, because we just like, our lives completely went different ways. You know? But I did feel guilty because like,, they thought, that I felt like I was better than them...

GM: And you didn't?

Sandy: No! Not at all! So, that made me feel like I was a bad friend, you know, cause they said that I had changed, that I was not the same person. That all I talked about was school. And you know, like, we had nothing to talk about after a while, you know what I mean?

Although I asked Sandy if she every felt guilty, most of the time students described feeling guilty without my having to ask. Students who come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds have this tension when they return home whereas students from more middle-class backgrounds do not deal with this tension. Students from more privileged backgrounds have high school friends that are also in college and are having similar experiences. However, for Marlene, it was even more difficult since the tension involved her very own father. She describes going home and the tension that ensues. She says:

He thought that I was trying to be better than him. Like sometimes I go home and I say something and he's goes, 'oh don't think cause you've taken a couple classes that you're better than me.'

This sort of tension is something that would seem unimaginable to many, particularly for those in the middle class. However, this is a very real and difficult reality for students who occupy the lower rungs of the socioeconomic ladder. Students often felt conflicted between trying to become upwardly mobile and having to remind people that they do not think of themselves as better than them because they are in college. This puts a strain on relationships while also creating a mental burden that students must deal with all while having to deal with the issues facing the “typical” college student.

#### ***4.4 “Acting White”***

“Acting White” or rather being accused of “acting White” is another issue that many students dealt with, particularly when returning home. Marlene illustrates this point when she discusses going back home; she says: “when I go back home... and I hang with friends that aren't in college, it's like, ‘why are you talking so White?’ and I'm not!”

“Talking White” is a form of “acting White” and it is something that nearly all of my interviewees brought up. Although, “acting white” is a class-loaded term, it seems as if even students from middle-class backgrounds are confronted with this accusation. Eunice shares that one of her closest friends, a Black male who is originally from the same area as she, says she is “the Whitest Puerto Rican he knows.” Natalia also deals with this issue and states that ““some people do say that I'm White-washed and that I talk like a White girl cause I don't necessarily bring out the Spanish.”

Derek exemplifies my argument about the problematic nature of lumping groups together based on factors such as race-ethnicity and/or social class. Because Derek grew up in Stamford, he possesses levels of cultural capital that may not be available to students from more underprivileged backgrounds. However, because his parents come from more underprivileged backgrounds and are breaking new ground in their quest for upward mobility for themselves and their children, Derek occupies an interesting space. He admits to feeling “isolated” at times on campus but also does not feel entirely connected to his “roots” (whatever that may be). He tells me about the disconnect between him and his family and relates it to the notion of “acting White.”

Now growing up, what affected me was the fact that my sister and I were considered, because of our mannerisms, the way we expressed ourselves, the way we dressed and carried ourselves, we were considered the White Latino or the White people. Because we were good at school and we spoke a certain way and we went to college or whatever while my cousins, for lack of better terms, were like ghetto or whatever and they dressed differently or they spoke differently or whatever. And so we were the White kids of our family.

#### ***4.5 Racial Microaggressions***

Perhaps the notion of “acting White” is simply one of many forms of racial microaggressions. Racial microaggressions are “subtle insults (verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual) directed toward people of color, often automatically or unconsciously” (60: Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso 2001). The notion of racial microaggressions builds off of Steele and Aronson’s theory of stereotype threat, which notes that the existence of stereotypes have a negative impact on test performance which has a larger impact on academic success (Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso 2000). However, racial microaggression



theory expands the notion of stereotype threat by focusing on the internalization, and impact, of the constant forms of racism that people of color endure.

Over and over again, students discussed experiences that can be classified as racial microaggressions. Regardless of social class, it seems as if Latina/o students face these subtle insults as these microaggressions are a result of the racist nature of the society in which we live which continues to portray people of color in negative ways. However, I found that social class became important when it came to the ways in which students handled these microaggressions.

Allen (2010) investigated the experiences that Black middle class male students had with racial microaggressions. Allen (2010) found that families were able to utilize their social and cultural capital to minimize the impact that racial microaggressions could have on their sons. He argues that:

The social and cultural capital of the parents directly impacted the ability for their sons to traverse the microaggressions of race in the school and manipulate the structural processes of schooling that often stratify Black men out of the opportunity structure. In response to the racial microaggressions in school, these parents were able to draw from and enact particular situations to create moments of social inclusions, resisting the effects of school racism” (137).

Allen’s (2010) study was limited to Black male high school students. However, his findings could easily be expanded to other marginalized groups as well as to other educational levels and even to other institutions. In the case of the present study, it seems as if Natalia would exemplify the argument set forth by Allen.

Natalia mentions that she often has to contend with stereotypes of Latinas: “I think it’s terrible. A lot of people are like oh, you’re not pregnant yet?” Fortunately,

having college-educated parents likely have helped her to discount these assumptions, at least to the degree that she understands that these beliefs do not pertain to her. This becomes apparent in the following dialogue where she and I discuss Latinas and stereotypes.

Natalia: I know that I'm not the typical Latina, but like all right, whatever.  
GM: No. But is there a typical Latina?  
Natalia: The stereotype.  
GM: Exactly. And maybe the stereotype is not necessarily typical.  
Natalia: That's true actually, yeah.

Although Natalia does not accept the stereotypes for herself, she seems to have accepted them for other Latinas. While it is unfortunate that she has accepted certain stereotypes for other Latinas, the benefit of having college-educated parents who can instill a different belief system than that which is perpetuated in our society cannot be underestimated.

Natalia also describes subtle forms of racism expressed in the form of jokes. She says:

Socially, with my friends, because the majority of them are White and to a lot of White students, it's just Black and White, there's no in between. So as a Latina, and I'm...even though I'm light skinned, I'm still not White. I'm seen as Black. So there are some times when my friends think that it's cool to cross the line and joke, like "you're my Black friend." I'll be like, "hold on, I'm not Black." I'm your Latina friend, but I'm your friend like that shouldn't have to be an issue. I get how it could be funny sometimes, but it's sad when I have to be considered that.

Eunice has encountered racism, albeit outside of the UConn campus. She describes going to a diner at a nearby town with family and receiving “looks” from other diners.

GM: What are the looks like? Like, curious, nasty....?

Eunice: Kind of nasty sometimes; like I went to a diner off campus this weekend. And, I went with my family; a bunch of crazy Puerto Rican people. So, they're ... we walk in and like people glance up and look away. And, we'd hold the door open and they'd act like we weren't there. And, we'd sit there and nobody would come sit at the tables around us. So, it was like our table, a circle of tables and then everybody else was over [t]here.

Facing stereotypes and acts of racism are difficult to deal with when you are the group being stereotyped or the victim of racism. However, when that is coupled with racial microaggressions experienced on campus, students of color can be left feeling isolated (as was the case with Derek) or even worse, they may internalize these microaggressions to the degree that they may feel pushed out of the university, leading to what Tinto described as “student departure.” Sandy shares her thoughts on this topic.

Sandy: In the Hispanic culture, there's not a lot of us that did pursue higher education but the ones that do, you know, need that support from their faculty members, and I've had so many stories from friends that are Latinos that have gone to their advisors and they have told them the most awful things you can think of. Like one of my good friends, he's from Mexico. And he's, I think, communication and, I think business. He went to his advisor... so he goes in to the appointment and, he sits, and she's like, "Are you Puerto Rican?" That's the first thing that she asked him!...

And he, my friend was like, "no, I'm, I'm from Mexico." She's like, "Oh, you know, I, you look like, I thought you were Puerto Rican." Whatever, it had nothing to do with whatever... This is the first thing that this woman asked my friend.

So, then, he starts talking to her about, what classes he's planning on taking next semester and you know, she was like, "you sure you wanna do business?" and he's at the same year as me [a Junior]...

And just like that story, I have at least, another five that I can think of, of other of my friends who are Latinos that have, you know, with professors, or advisors, or things like that. That they always put you down. I feel like it's harder to find people that tell you, "Yes, you can do it.

Yeah, you can, keep working hard, you will make it." Than it's easier for them to say, "Oh, you know, just like, find an easier way around it."

GM: How do you think that people handle that? When they're told that they can't do it or that they shouldn't be here?

Sandy: First off, you know, it makes you feel like maybe it's true, maybe I'm just gonna be one of those percentages of Latinos that don't graduate from college maybe. Because like, even for me, when, that bio class my freshman year, I was like, "Maybe I should change my major. Maybe biology is not for me." With my roomies, looking back into freshman year, we were like the transition was so hard that we would be like, "Maybe, you know, we can do something else like, maybe college is not for us." We talked about these things so I feel like, it kinda makes you stronger in a way, that if you handle it correctly. If you know how to handle it. Because there are people out there that, you know, as soon as a professor tells them, "Just don't do it," he or she will be like "ok." You know, if you're the professional so you should know so I'm just gonna, not keep trying. And like, to my friends, when they call me and they're telling me, both of them, well, my guy friend, he wasn't crying, he was upset. But my, my girl friend that had a similar situation with a professor, she was crying. And she's like, "I cannot believe that he would tell me to drop his class, with one exam, and it was the first exam."

Sandy was not the only student to describe situations such as these. Other students, particularly those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, either had similar experiences or knew of someone who did. The quote above illustrates the impact that such racial microaggressions can have, not just on the student who experiences it first hand, but also for those who experience it vicariously through friends. Particularly disturbing is that these microaggressions are not being delivered by fellow students who are young and ignorant, but rather by faculty, who should be more aware of the challenges facing students of color and as a result, should be helping them get through college, as opposed to encouraging them to leave.

Latina/o students face racial microaggressions from their peers as well. Lourdes, a student that has successfully navigated various social networks on campus denies feeling different because of her racial-ethnic background. When I ask her if she gets involved in study groups with people who are unlike her (i.e. White, middle-class), she answers with a matter of fact, “Yes.” I probe by asking her if there is anything awkward about being involved with these study groups to which she responds:

Lourdes: I don't see that there should be a reason for it to be awkward unless they feel awkward about it themselves because if they come up to me...not that they feel awkward but they stereotype. If they stereotype me in a specific way and I know they're stereotyping me I'll just get mad.

GM: Okay.

Lourdes: And it's not awkward.

GM: Do you say anything?

Lourdes: Yeah.

GM: You do?

Lourdes: Yeah I just like when we start talking and they kind of like try to jump over me...like it's happened to me before where they're like, oh well they're... disrespecting and “I don't know what you think but this is what we think” and I'm like “well I think something similar.” But I don't get angry in that like I get mad and start cussing them out. I get angry in that I would do my damnest to show my point and show that my point is better than theirs because it's my point.

GM: Yeah.

Lourdes: Not for any other reason but because I have the intellectual capacity to think of a point in myself and defend it in the end. And usually that gets my point across and...

GM: Okay.

Lourdes: But that only happened to me like twice.”

I found it interesting that although she denies that inter-group study groups can be awkward, she has actually been the recipient of racial microaggressions. Interestingly,

the fact that she concludes by stating that something like this has “only” happened to her twice is indicative of the expectation of having to deal with discriminatory behavior.

#### ***4.6 Sense of Responsibility***

The last issue I want to discuss is the sense of responsibility that students feel towards their families and community. Derek said to me that he definitely wanted to give back to the community. In saying this, he emphasized that he wanted to give back to the Latina/o community in particular. Even though he had grown up middle class, he felt that as a Latino, he had a responsibility to the community. He said that even though he had many doors opened for him because of his privilege, he had a responsibility to hold doors open for future generations of Latinas/os.

On a different level, Marlene had a sense of responsibility to her younger siblings. She told me about helping her younger brother, who is in high school, with a biology project. Her face lit up when she told me that he was able to get an “A” on the assignment. She also told me about her younger sister who had recently started college. Her sister also attends the University of Connecticut and has a high grade point average. Marlene is especially proud because since she was a first generation college student, she faced a lot of obstacles during her first two years of college. As a result, she had been dismissed from the university, although she was able to appeal the decision and get re-admitted. Given her struggles, she is very proud of her siblings and almost seems to live vicariously through them. Because she was a first generation college student, she felt a responsibility to help her younger siblings learn to navigate the university bureaucracy as well as teaching them proper study habits and other things necessary for academic

success. She also told me that when I emailed her requesting an interview, she was excited about speaking with me because she felt like “anything I can do to help” which is yet another reflection of her sense of responsibility toward other Latinas/os.

Sandy also displayed this sense of responsibility toward her community. She discussed volunteering in Willimantic with children in middle school. She feels like that is her way of giving back to the community. She also mentioned that she felt it was important for children in Willimantic to interact with mentors that looked like them (in reference to being a person of color). She said to me that she would like these students to think, “Hey, if she can do it, then I can do it.”

Natalia articulates a very similar sentiment. During our conversation, she calls attention to the underrepresentation of Latinas/os in the sciences. She discusses her involvement with mentoring programs and states that she hopes her involvement in these programs will help bring about more diversity (i.e. Latinas/os) into the sciences.

That's why whenever we talk about mentoring, I'm always there trying to push for more Latinos in the sciences 'cause it's kind of depressing. I look around...I'm a mentor for science kids.

As can be seen in the examples above, Latinas/os often feel as if they are engaged in a battle greater than themselves and one in which they represent their entire racial-ethnic group. Nowhere are these feelings more apparent than in the following quotations. Like many of the students I spoke with, Derek’s perception of his role as a Latino college student is one that appeals to his sense of responsibility to his racial-ethnic group. He tells me about his role as a Latino college student:

We're here to represent Latinos in higher education. We're here to do better for all of us. And it's going to be a struggle because people assume stuff about us, but we can relate and have a community because we come from the same ideas even though we come from...we come from similar backgrounds, even though we

may have grown up in different places. We have the same feelings because we want...we've got something more to prove here. And that's kind of what I've gone through. I may not have felt like I didn't belong here, but I always felt that pressure like I have something to prove for Latinos in general and say well, I did it. I learned. I can do it. I can achieve just as much as any other student. And it's funny 'cause a White person can do really bad in college, they don't do bad for their whole race. I do bad in college, I do bad for my entire ethnicity.

Because of his social class and racial-ethnic backgrounds, Derek's words are sometimes contradictory and difficult to decipher. For example, when he says "we come from similar backgrounds, even though we come from different places," it is difficult to know if he means "we" as in Latinas/os, Puerto Ricans, or just the general White, middle-class student population. Does he mean that as a Puerto Rican/ Latino that he is the same as other Puerto Ricans/ Latinas/os despite his different social class background? Or does he mean that as a Puerto Rican/Latino, he is the same as the White, middle-class population despite his racial-ethnic background? Regardless of the true meaning of that particular statement, one thing is irrefutable: that his success in college (on an individual level) will serve as a reflection on the Latina/o community. Thus, in this case, his sense of responsibility lies in his ability to successfully obtain a college education.

Natalia also describes experiences where she is representative of her racial-ethnic group. She tells me about a conversation she was having with a peer who was half White, half Dominican where they were discussing her candidness. Her peer shares his concern with her being so frank with people. Natalia describes the conversation to me as follows:

"He goes, 'No because sometimes you aren't afraid to tell people the way it is and how you feel. And when you're with your White friends, they could see that as the attitude that can make it seem like the stereotype.' And I [Natalia] was like, 'No because I know how to conduct myself.' I'm not going to get outright loud... Cause that's not only going to make me look bad, all like Latinas and Latinos, and I don't want that. That's the last thing that I want."



She continues:

“When it comes to being a Latina, there's so many stereotypes already, I just want to better that image first. And by bettering that image, I'm also bettering myself too.”

Like Derek, she is concerned with the images of Latinas/os as a group. Her actions are not simply a reflection of herself but rather a reflection of her entire racial-ethnic group. She also hopes that by doing her part to improve the image, she will benefit while also helping others.

Lastly, her assertion that she knows “how to conduct [her]self” is demonstrative of the cultural straddling that is characteristic of underrepresented students in higher education (Carter 2006). Natalia is confident in her ability to straddle different cultures whether that be White versus Latina/o or Middle-class versus Poor/Working-class (i.e. Washington Heights). Her ability to straddle has likely contributed to both her academic success and personal growth.

The sense of responsibility exhibited by many of the Latina/o students likely stem from the belief that has been instilled in them that they not forget where they come from.

As Sandy described:

The culture thing is a big, big issue and she's [her mom] always reminding me, “you know where you come from, you know your values, you know this, you know that but you also have to become someone in life...” She also wanted me to get the college experience but also to know and remember where you come from because that's like, you know, the most important thing.

These examples help to illustrate the sense of responsibility that is prevalent among Latinas/os towards both their communities and their families. This sense of responsibility and the notion of remaining true to one's roots can be viewed as a double-edged sword. On one hand, these beliefs can serve as a way to motivate and give back to the community. On the other hand, these beliefs can serve as added pressure to what is

already a high-pressure situation. Given that the students that I had the privilege of speaking with were students at UConn, they were likely the one's who have mastered the skills (i.e. cultural straddling) that many students often cannot (or will not) master. If these issues are challenging to successful college students, then it may be safe to assume that these are issues that may be contributing to the very low educational attainment for Latinas/os.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Latinas/os are one of the fastest growing groups in the United States. They are also one of the most undereducated groups in the United States. Getting to and keeping Latina/o students in college has proven to be an arduous task. Issues of college attrition among people of color have been discussed among a variety of scholars from various disciplines (Carter 2006; Ogbu & Simmons 1998; Solorzano, Villalpando & Seguera 2005; Strayhorn 2008; Tappan 2006; Villenas & Deyhle 1999). Much of the literature has focused on external factors pertaining to educational inequities, especially as they relate to the lack of resources available to students of color. However, instead of focusing entirely on external and structural factors, my research has attempted to

incorporate the internal issues and/or conflicts facing Latina/o college students as they negotiate their various identities in a predominantly White, middle-class institutional setting.

Much of the existing research has focused on racial identities (Smedley 1998; Torres 2003), ethnic identities (Phinney 1996), or class identities (Sennet & Cobb 1972, Willis 1977). My work has attempted to address the interplay of multiple identities simultaneously. Specifically, I have tried to focus on the intersection of racial-ethnic and class identities in relation to an academic identity. Given this focus, I hope that I have been able to contribute to both the identity literature as well as to the education literature. The contribution of my work to the identity literature lies in my exploration of the interplay of multiple identities, and to the educational literature, in my exploration of the ways in which negotiating identities affects academic achievement. Specifically, I sought to understand the challenges facing Latina/o college students of various socioeconomic backgrounds on a predominantly White, middle class college campus.

Throughout this research, I was able to familiarize myself with issues that are of importance to Latina/o college students, especially as they try to navigate a predominantly White, middle-class college environment. I found that the habitus and cultural capital discussed by Bourdieu were extremely relevant to the Latina/o college student experience. In addition, there were the dilemmas of feeling different and “acting White” as well as a sense of guilt and sense of responsibility that students were often conflicted by. Finally, I also found that students showed signs of resistance within these categories.

More importantly, this study helped highlight how different the experiences of Latina/o college students are, not only from those of their White counterparts, but also, among each other. Factors such as race-ethnicity, “phenotype,” social class, family dynamics including whether students come from one parent or two parent households, neighborhood effects, and others, influence the experiences of different groups of Latinas/os. This study showed how despite *different* circumstances, students often shared *similar* experiences. The study also showed how despite *similar* circumstances, students have *different* experiences.

Most social science literature, especially that focusing on education, is heavily quantitative. This study helps to demonstrate the importance of qualitative research in understanding the nuances that may otherwise not be visible with quantitative research. Most of the sociological literature focuses on patterns, and sociologists often focus on people and/or groups with similar characteristics having similar outcomes. Those whose experiences differ from the larger patterns are placed into the outlier category, making their experiences appear to be unimportant.

Throughout this paper, it was my hope that by exploring the outlier<sup>21</sup>, I could demonstrate the complexity of the processes that differentially affect people within the larger categories of social class and/or race-ethnicity. Thus, although there exist generalized patterns of behavior for particular groups (i.e. Latinas/os, poor/working class, etc) the existence of outliers might be important as they may be symptoms of systematic differences. Thus the interaction of different identities whether it be race-ethnicity, social

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<sup>21</sup> Given the numerous studies demonstrating that Latina/o students generally do not graduate high school or attend four-year colleges, I find it fitting to describe my participants as “outliers.” They have defied the odds by being in attendance at one of the top public universities in the North East. In many ways, the students in this study are “the cream of the crop.”

class, gender, sexuality, and many others, all play an important role in determining the experiences of groups and individuals. Therefore, researchers are cautioned against making broad generalizations and are reminded of the importance of micro-level research.

The students in this study demonstrated these complexities. Most importantly, they demonstrate the importance of having the habitus and cultural capital valued by institutions of higher education. Although race-ethnicity can be barriers to navigating a predominantly White institution, having the “appropriate” cultural capital can help minimize the negative effects associated with the racist nature of the institution. My study also helped to show that habitus and cultural capital can be cultivated outside the home, in schools. Therefore, if students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds could have access to this cultural capital at regular public schools, instead of sites of alternative schooling such as magnet and private schools, then their chances of successfully navigating predominantly White institutions in the future, are greatly increased.

### **Further Research**

Throughout my research, I found that the challenges discussed during my interviews often made me wonder whether that particular issue was something peculiar to Latina/o college students or college students in general. For example, when students mentioned feeling different on campus and/or lacking a sense of belonging, would White students from poor and working class background have similar struggles? Would the centrality of music versus alcohol at parties for White students of various social class backgrounds differ from that of Latina/o and Black students? How would students of

different racial-ethnic and social class backgrounds describe relationships with their friends from back home and would they differ from the descriptions provided by students in this study? In order to understand whether the issues raised in this study are specific to students of particular racial-ethnic backgrounds or social class backgrounds, future studies will have to incorporate White students from various social class backgrounds. By enlarging and diversifying the sample, future researchers will be able gain a better understanding of what issues are more salient among certain groups.

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## **Appendix A. Interview Guide**

1. Tell me about yourself and your experiences with schooling in general.
2. How did you end up at UConn?
3. How was your first year?
4. Was your second year better?
5. What do you like and dislike most about UConn?
6. How often do you go home? How is that?
  - a) Do you hang out with old friends? How is that?

