

Exploring Latino male graduates' awareness of degree value and its influence on community
college enrollment decisions

by

Cynthia Ramos

B.A., New Mexico State University, 2001
M.E., Northern Arizona University, 2008

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

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Department of Educational Leadership
College of Education

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
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Abstract

Recent U.S. Census data indicate that the Hispanic/Latino population continues to grow, comprising approximately 19.5% of the U.S. population in 2023, with projections estimating this group will make up nearly 28% of the population by 2060. Given the significant growth of the Hispanic and Latino population, and the ongoing influence and impact they stand to have on the communities they live in, it is critical to continue exploring and examining the factors influencing Latino male higher education attainment. Currently, Latino males have drastically lower levels of educational attainment than other males. If Latino males continue to maintain low educational attainment rates and are underrepresented in high-wage jobs, the ability of the community to advance socioeconomically is severely limited. This study explored how perceptions of degree value are formed and how they influence students' choices to enroll and persist. An explanatory sequential mixed-methods design was used to discover participants' awareness of degree value. Results revealed insights from data collection, surveys, and focus groups and interviews on the factors influencing Latino males' perceived value of community college education.

Keywords: Latino male, Hispanic, Mexican, community college, degree value, degree utility, enrollment, and motivation.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the people who carried me through this journey. To my husband, Josh, and my son, Rocco, thank you for your love, your patience, and for hanging in there with me through the long days, late nights, and all the moments in between. Your support grounded me, kept me going, and reminded me why this work mattered. I love you both more than words can express. Mom and Dad, thank you for loving me so deeply and for always making me believe that I could be and do anything I wanted in this world. The confidence, determination, and values that have guided me through life were shaped by your example. I am who I am because of you, and I will always be grateful. My dear friends, thank you for your steady presence and your unwavering support. You showed up in the ways that mattered most, and I am deeply grateful.

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

As open-access institutions, community colleges play a critical role in helping individuals to pursue educational opportunities, achieve social and economic upward mobility, and break the cycle of poverty. The literature has also found higher education to have important positive outcomes for individuals, such as positive health outcomes and family stability (Carnevale et al., 2024; Haveman & Smeeding, 2006; Hout, 2012). Furthermore, research finds that when more individuals in a community are educated, people “receive a social return on the education of others” noting lower usage of public assistance, lower crime rates, and increased tax revenues (Hout, 2012, p. 392). However, when members of a community experience low rates of higher education attainment, the community’s overall ability to thrive and advance economically is hampered.

According to Vasquez Urias (2012), the Latino population was growing and was expected to constitute 30% of the total U.S. population by 2040. New estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau (2024) reflect this trend, showing the Hispanic population accounted for just under 71% of the overall growth of the United States population between 2022 and 2023. This means Hispanics represented approximately 19.5% of the U.S. population in 2023. The Latino Policy & Politics Institute shares that the Latino population is projected to increase to 28% of the U.S. population by 2060 (Zong, 2022). While this population growth indicates a great potential for Hispanic and Latino populations and the communities they contribute to, educational attainment among Latino males has not kept pace. According to Santiago et al. (2024), “Latino males are underrepresented in higher education despite completing high school at similar rates as their female counterparts” (p. 4).

A significant amount of research has been conducted to understand the challenges and identify effective strategies to support Latino male students' academic journey (Crisp & Nora, 2010; Crisp et al., 2015; Luis et al., 2023; Sáenz et al., 2013; Wood & Harris, 2013; Urias, 2012; Urias & Wood, 2015). However, Latino males also grapple with several complex decisions when initially considering community college enrollment, including financial factors, *machismo* or pride, and a degree's practical value and usefulness (Sáenz et al., 2013). Given the significant growth of the Hispanic and Latino population and the ongoing influence and impact they stand to have on the communities they live in, it is critical to continue exploring and examining the factors influencing Latino male higher education attainment.

Statement of the Problem

Closing higher education attainment gaps ensures more people contribute to a community's social and economic advancement. Latino males enroll in college at lower rates than Latinas and other peers; and for those who do enroll, the completion rates remain disproportionately low (Sáenz & Ponjuan, 2009). Statistics from the U.S. Census American Community Survey (2021) revealed that 28% of Latino adults had earned an Associate degree or higher compared to 48% of white adults. More recently, Santiago et al. (2024) reported that Latino males had lower levels of educational attainment than other males. “As of 2022, 25% of Latino males had earned an associate degree or higher, compared to Asian (64%), White (47%), and African American (30%) males” (p. 4).

According to Sáenz and Ponjuán (2009, 2012), the educational attainment of Latino males is a critical issue to examine, especially when they continue to fall behind their peers. Scholars have declared that community colleges have a responsibility to address this gap, asserting it as a pressing moral imperative (Gándara, 2017; Garza et al., 2014; Sáenz & Ponjuán,

2012; Sáenz et al., 2018). When Latinos continue to be overrepresented in high-skilled, low-wage occupations and maintain low educational attainment rates, this contributes to stratification in the workforce and limits the advancement of communities and their people. In 2021, 34% of employed Latinos were in production, transportation, and material moving occupations, or in farming, construction, and maintenance occupations, compared to 12% of Asians, 22% of Whites, and 24% of African Americans (Santiago et al., 2024 & Santiago et al., 2024b).

Background of the Problem

As the U.S. labor market grows, the demand for higher educational attainment continues to rise. Carnevale et al. (2023) reported that in 2021, out of 155 million jobs nationwide, 68 percent required some level of postsecondary education. By 2031, the total number of jobs is projected to reach nearly 171 million, with employers expecting 72 percent of new and replacement hires to have a college degree or other forms of postsecondary training (Carnevale et al., 2023). The most recent labor force increase can be largely attributed to the growth in Latino workforce, as according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (n.d.), "Hispanics make up the nation's fastest growing worker group, and accounted for about two-thirds of the net labor force increase between 2003 and 2023." As this new workforce grows, so does the need for increased Latino higher education attainment. According to Santiago et al. (2023), the United States must ensure that 6.2 million Latinos earn degrees by 2030 to "regain the top global ranking in the world for college degree attainment" (p.8) and meet future workforce demands.

Higher education is necessary for economic mobility, yet minoritized individuals are less likely to enroll (Haskins & Sawhill, 2010). The advantages of a post-secondary education are far reaching. According to Carnevale et al. (2024), "having a college degree is associated with monetary benefits like higher median wages and higher likelihood of employment, along with

nonmonetary benefits like better health and greater reported happiness” (p.10). However, a 2023 survey of 25,000 high school seniors across 21 states revealed that fewer Latino and Black male high schoolers want to attend college (Flores, 2023). This trend of declining Latino male higher education degree aspiration warrants further inquiry to understand what type of opportunities and expectations they seek.

Community colleges uniquely offer credentials that can be "stacked" in a flexible sequence, allowing individuals to progressively advance their knowledge and qualifications in a way that aligns with their career goals or the evolving demands of the workforce. This stackable credential movement has the potential to help Latino males make a connection to their practical value. If credentials lead to improved skills, employment, or career advancement, then a student is able to understand its practical value – i.e., higher earning potential and other tangible benefits of the credential. U.S. Department of Labor (2010) defines stackable credentials as a “sequence of credentials that can be accumulated over time to build up an individual's qualifications and help that individual move along a career pathway to further education and different responsibilities, and potentially higher paying jobs.”

This connection between practical value and career advancement is closely tied to the broader concept of degree utility – the belief that earning a degree will lead to greater job opportunities and financial security (Palacios, 2016). Participants in Palacios’ study revealed that they had a strong motivation to obtain their degree, particularly to secure employment and become financially stable. In their study, Perez and Taylor (2016) stated that for many Hispanic males, the decision to attend college provides them the opportunity to become the first in their family to attend college and advance their economic mobility.

The cost of higher education is a barrier that first-generation Latino males must learn to navigate, particularly given that they are more likely to come from lower-income households and receive financial aid at a higher rate than non-first-generation students (Latino et al., 2020; Sáenz & Ponjuán, 2009). In a study focused on four-year college enrollment decisions, Perna (2000) found that Hispanic student participants lacked sufficient financial resources when making college enrollment decisions and without alternative financial resources, some students delay or forgo college. However, a more recent focus group study by Sáenz, et al. (2018) revealed that their family provided motivation, or *ganas*, to help them overcome those challenges.

Latino student enrollment has increased substantially at institutions of higher education, in particular, Latino male enrollment at community colleges increased by 63.4% from 2005 to 2013 (Hatch-Tocaimaza, 2017). However, Latino males are not completing at the same rates as their peers (Hatch-Tocaimaza, 2017; Luis et al., 2023; Sáenz et al., 2018, Santiago et al., 2024). Despite institutions' implementation of research-backed programming and practices, the attainment gap for Latino males remains a challenge (Sáenz & Ponjuán, 2012, Sáenz et al., 2013, & Palacios, 2016). While research on Latino male higher education attainment has examined institutional success factors such as access, onboarding, and engagement, more exploration of factors influencing their decision to pursue and complete higher education is needed (Corona et al., 2017). Fewer studies have focused on how Latino males perceive the value of a college degree and how those perceptions influence their decision to enroll and persist to completion.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine how Latino male graduating community college students perceive the practical value of their degrees and certificates and to understand how this perception influenced their decisions to enroll and persist in college. Additionally, the study

seeks to identify the factors that shape Latino male students' awareness of degree value and their decisions to attend community college.

Research Questions

The research questions guiding this study are:

RQ1: What factors influence Latino male graduating students' awareness of the value of their community college education?

RQ2: In what ways do Latino males perceive the value of community college degrees and certificates?

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

Grant and Osanloo (2014) describe a theoretical framework as a *blueprint* that guides a researcher's plan to researching a topic. The theoretical framework "provides structure to the entire dissertation" inquiry and clarifies the approach to the study (p. 15). Distinct from the theoretical framework, a conceptual framework offers researchers a way to get more granular and explain the study more specifically, "narratively or graphically" (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017, p. 31).

Theoretical Framework

Yosso's cultural wealth model (2005), which emphasizes the recognition of strengths in Communities of Color, was selected as the theoretical framework for this study as it examines traditional notions of social capital and focuses on strengths and resources in communities of color. Often, deficit-based perspectives dominate discussions in educational theory. Since this study seeks to examine Latino male perceptions, influences, and level of awareness, this model will offer a research lens that illuminates the "accumulated assets and resources in the histories and lives of Communities of Color" (Yosso, 2015, p. 77). For example, linguistic capital

recognizes the value of being multilingual and the intellectual and social skills accompanying cultural communication experiences (Yosso, 2015). Yosso's alternative forms of social capital "challenge educators and policymakers to recognize and capitalize on cultural wealth Latinos possess and use to succeed in higher education" (Pérez & Taylor, 2016, p. 5).

Conceptual Frameworks

Two conceptual frameworks will be used for this study. The Situated Expectancy-Value Theory (SEVT) (Wigfield et al., 2020) is an updated theory that expands on the Expectancy-Value Theory (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000) by including the influence of social and contextual factors on motivation. The Socio-Ecological Outcomes (SEO) model is a conceptual framework developed by Harris and Wood that explores the salient influences of societal and environmental factors on outcomes for men of color in community colleges (Harris & Wood, 2016).

The Expectancy-Value Theory (EVT) is a foundational theory for understanding motivation through *expectancy* and *value*. Eccles et al. (1983) initially developed the expectancy-value model of achievement performance and choice to study student achievements in mathematics. The Situated Expectancy-Value Theory (SEVT) (Eccles & Wigfield, 2020) expands on EVT by incorporating the influence of social and contextual factors on motivation. EVT and SEVT acknowledge that "individuals' performance on and choices of different achievement activities are strongly influenced by their expectancies for success, self-concepts of ability, and valuing of tasks and activities" (Wigfield et al., 2020.) However, the additional contextual influences incorporated in SEVT offer a guide for this study to consider not only the students' internal motivations but also how their environment (e.g., cultural, economic, familial) influences their degree utility perceptions and enrollment decisions. When contemplating Latino males' motivation to pursue higher education, SEVT provides a focused model for examining

motivation in academic contexts. Therefore, SEVT will be used as the conceptual framework to explore how expectations of success and the perceived value of a degree influence Latino males' motivation to attend community college and obtain a degree.

The Socio-Ecological Outcomes (SEO) model is a conceptual framework used to inform education research for men of color in community colleges (Harris & Wood, 2016). This model is comprised of seven key constructs that include additional factors “affecting the success of men of color in community colleges, highlighting interactions between societal, environmental, intrapersonal, and campus-based factors that influence student success outcomes for these men” (pp. 35-36). The first two constructs embody the “inputs” that define men of color or represent societal factors that impact men of color. These inputs include age, primary language, stereotypes, and economic conditions. The following four constructs make up the socio-ecological domains: the noncognitive domain, the academic domain, the environmental domain, and the campus ethos domain. According to Harris and Wood (2016), the *noncognitive domain* includes attitudes, beliefs, and identities that influence their educational success. The *academic domain* refers to faculty-student interactions and educational commitment. The *environmental domain* includes factors such as finances, family responsibilities, and life stressors that have the potential to impact persistence negatively. Finally, the *campus ethos domain* encompasses institutional factors contributing to a student's overall experience, including campus policies and programs and an institution's ability to foster success.

The last construct, the outcomes variable, reflects the type of student success outcomes resulting from the abovementioned constructs and their interactions. Harris and Wood (2016) explain that the interactions and experiences within each domain “interact and shape student success outcomes for men of color in community colleges” (p. 38). The Socio-Ecological

Outcomes (SEO) model provides a framework for community college practitioners researching Latino males, informing them about perceived practical value of degrees and certificates among this population. As such, the SEO model was selected as another conceptual framework due to its focus on the socio-ecological domains and how such factors influence men of color perceptions and decisions. By considering key constructs and interactions presented in the model, researchers can examine findings that will inform institutional decisions and interventions (Harris & Wood, 2016).

Methodology

According to Lochmiller and Lester (2017), a mixed methods research approach allows scholars to survey a wide range of participants about their experiences and also learn more about individual experiences. Mixing the qualitative and quantitative data can provide a robust understanding of a problem (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The study will use an explanatory sequential mixed methods research design. Through explanatory research, researchers can explore causal relationships “to generate theoretical understandings of current practices, programs, processes, and policies” (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017, p. 9). An explanatory sequential mixed methods research methodology involves two phases of data collection, allowing qualitative data to expand upon and explain the quantitative findings from the initial phase of data collection (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). As such, the research starts with collecting quantitative data through a survey and subsequently conducting focus group interviews to learn about experiences and gather perspectives. Using the outcomes of the quantitative data analysis, a researcher can explain the results by connecting them to the specific contextual factors that influenced those findings (Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017). The

researcher interprets the quantitative data to “inform how and to what extent qualitative data are used” (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017, p. 218).

Alignment Table

A table (Appendix A) was developed to demonstrate alignment between the problem based on literature findings, research questions, theoretical and conceptual framework, methodology, and survey/focus group questions.

Delimitations and Assumptions

The research study was restricted to Latino male students who were near completion during the Fall 2025 or Spring 2026 semesters at one of nine community colleges in the southwest region of the United States. It excludes students of other demographic groups and males from other ethnic backgrounds. The study assumes that the participants will respond truthfully to questions about their awareness of degree utility and enrollment decisions. Furthermore, the study assumes participants will have a basic understanding of terms such as "degree utility" and "value of education," or these concepts will be adequately explained during the participant recruitment process.

Significance of the Study

The persistent gap in higher education attainment rates among Latino male students, who represent a rapidly growing demographic within the U.S. population, is a critical issue in the U.S. as the labor market increasingly demands postsecondary education or training. This study may contribute to the literature and broad knowledge of higher education practical degree value awareness and its motivation on Latino males to attain a community college credential or degree. The identified gap in the literature that this study is designed to address is the perceived practical value of community college degrees and certificates among Latino males, as well as the factors

that shape their awareness of degree value.

Definition of Terms

First-Generation College Student: An individual both of whose parents did not complete a baccalaureate degree (U.S. Department of Education, 1980).

Community Colleges: Public two-year colleges that primarily offer associate degrees but also offer some bachelor's degrees.

Degree Utility: Refers to students' perceived usefulness of pursuing higher education endeavors (Harris and Wood, 2014).

Hispanic: Americans of Spanish origin or descent; Americans who identify themselves as being of Spanish-speaking background and trace their origin from Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Central and South America (Passel & Taylor, 2009).

Latinos: A heterogeneous population of Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, Cuban Americans, and South Americans who inhabit regional communities (Hurtado, 2002). Latino is the masculine form, whereas Latina is the feminine form of the word. Latino/a is the preferred identity, reference, and usage by researchers of this origin in higher education.

Hispanic / Latina/o: A generic term used to refer to Hispanic or Latino as a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race (U.S. Census, 2024).

Chapter Summary

The chapter introduced the statement of the problem and provided the background of the problem, and the purpose of the study and research questions were introduced. Theoretical and conceptual frameworks were also introduced, including relevance to the study and explanation of how they are suitable for exploring the problem and research questions. An overview of the

methodology to be used in this study was provided, including an alignment table, delimitations and assumptions, study significance, and definition terms.

Organization of the Study

Chapter One presented an introduction and background of the problem, setting the stage for the rest of the dissertation. Chapter Two will provide a review of relevant literature. Chapter Three will explain the research methodology used for the study. In Chapter Four, an analysis of the data collected and findings will be provided. Chapter Five will offer an overview, conclusion, and implications, as well as recommendations for future research.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review is to summarize and synthesize existing research on the factors influencing Latino males' decisions to pursue higher education, with particular emphasis on their awareness of their certificate or degree value. Understanding how Latino males perceive the value of a degree is essential to identifying factors that influence their enrollment and persistence in community colleges. The structure of the literature review includes a comprehensive review of extant and foundational research using peer-reviewed and scholarly journal articles obtained through various academic databases such as ProQuest, ERIC, EBSCOhost, Google Scholar, and research and policy organizations. Preliminary key search terms align with the focus of my study, such as "Latino male," "Hispanic," "community college," "degree value," "enrollment," and "motivation."

The design of the literature review includes an explanation of how the theoretical and conceptual frameworks inform the research approaches and guide the study, including how the frameworks inform the quantitative and qualitative components of the study. Several themes emerged after examining the literature on Latino male practical degree value awareness and educational attainment at community colleges. The following themes have been identified, analyzed, and synthesized as they relate to factors contributing to Latino males' decision to attend community college. The literature review begins with a discussion on theoretical and conceptual frameworks, followed by research organized into the following themes: (a) familial influences and cultural values, (b) Latino first generation, (c) financial factors, (d) masculinity, (e) degree utility, and (f) academic and institutional factors.

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

According to Lochmiller and Lester (2017), the theoretical framework provides a broad lens and rationale for the overall approach to the study. As the theoretical framework for this study, Yosso's cultural wealth model (2005) will guide how the literature and research is examined and interpreted. Serving as "an anchor... to the larger literature base" (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017, pg. 31), the theoretical framework will provide a lens through which to analyze past studies and identify trends in findings.

On the other hand, the conceptual framework supports the literature review by synthesizing key concepts and identifying gaps existing research. According to Leshma & Trafford (2007), the conceptual framework helps a researcher determine what studies are relevant to the research and creates "theoretical links between extant research, current theories, research design, interpretations of findings" (p. 101). Similarly, Lochmiller and Lester (2017) explain that the conceptual framework serves to explain relationships and connections between key concepts in the literature.

Yosso's Cultural Wealth Model

As an asset-based approach to understanding these unique contributions, Yosso's framework highlights six forms of capital representing the accumulated knowledge, assets, and resources within communities of color: aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant capital (Yosso, 2005). The model is a framework that allows researchers to examine how students of color examine college by adjusting the lens from a deficit to a strengths-based perspective (Yosso, 2005). By focusing on their cultural assets, the cultural wealth model highlights the strengths Latino male students bring to community colleges and how these assets

shape their awareness of the practical value of their degree or certificate and impact their decisions to attend college.

Situated Expectancy-Value Theory (SEVT)

In the 1960's, Victor Vroom developed the expectancy theory of motivation. This theory suggests that individuals are motivated to act if they believe doing so will bring positive results (Parijat & Bagga, 2014). The expectancy theory states that an individual's decision to act is influenced by a belief that outcomes of their effort will lead to high performance (expectancy), which will lead to positive outcomes (instrumentality) that are desirable, attractive, and important to them (valence) (Bandhu et al., 2024; Parijat & Bagga, 2014).

Similarly, the expectancy-value theory (EVT) of motivation developed by Eccles, Wigfield, and colleagues (1983) suggests that individuals are motivated by their expectation of doing well and the value of the outcome (Bandhu et al., 2024). Eccles et al. (1983) advanced the EVT to examine the expectations that influence motivation and behavior. This model contains two primary elements, expectancies and values. Expectancy measures how well one believes one will do on a specific task while accounting for the value placed on it (Eccles et al., 1983). The value individuals place on the task consists of 1) the importance of doing well, 2) interest in the task, 3) the utility value or usefulness of the task on the individual's future, and 4) the perceived cost (time, effort, emotional) of engaging in the task (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000).

Both theoretical models, the expectancy theory of motivation and the expectancy-value theory of achievement motivation, propose that motivation is fostered by an individual's expectation to do well and receive a positive outcome. If an individual believes their "chances of success are high and that the outcome is valuable, they will be highly motivated to engage in the behavior or activity" (Bandhu et al., 2024, p.6).

The Situated Expectancy-Value Theory (SEVT) (Wigfield et al., 2020) is an updated theory that expands on the Expectancy-Value Theory (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000) by including the influence of social and contextual factors on motivation. The SEVT framework will assist with mapping out relationships between key concepts in the review of literature and extant research.

The Socio-Ecological Outcomes (SEO) Model

The SEO model serves as a conceptual framework for studying Latino males' educational motivations due to its ability to capture the noncognitive influences on students' behaviors and outcomes. SEO contains four socio-ecological domains: non-cognitive, academic, environmental, and campus ethos, which provide a nuanced view of the factors shaping Latino males' experiences and decisions (Harris & Wood, 2016). As such, this conceptual framework will inform the qualitative portion of the study and collect the diversity of factors influencing Latino males' educational choices. Additionally, the SEO model complements the Situated Expectancy-Value Theory (SEVT) and its focus on expectations of success and the perceived value of the educational goal. Latino males' motivation to attend community college may hinge on how valuable they perceive a degree to be for their future and how likely they are to succeed. The SEO model can frame these motivational elements within a broader socio-ecological context, allowing the study to explore how they affect Latino males' awareness, expectations, and valuation of a degree or certificate.

Familial Influences and Cultural Values

Family is central to Latino males' motivation to pursue higher education. This support extends beyond emotional encouragement; family members encourage academic persistence. The impact of culture and family support has been studied extensively, offering significant findings about key factors and familial dynamics that contribute to Latino male academic

achievement. In their study, Huerta and Fishman (2014) found family to be a primary motivating factor for participants to attend college and persist. Parents play a critical role in students' success, and researchers found their involvement was connected to higher Latino male student success and resiliency (Garza et al., 2014; Trevino & DeFreitas, 2014; Sáenz et al., 2020; Santos, 2004). Family experiences have also been found to influence the degree or certificate that Latino males choose. When describing their experiences with selecting a college major, African American and Latino males shared that their educational pathway decisions were “rooted in their desire to choose a major that would provide stability and practicality” (Solano, 2024, p. 11). Latino student families emphasize college as a way to secure a better life with “less physically taxing work” (Nunez & Sansone, 2016, p. 101).

Familismo, a cultural pride and loyalty to family, is a critical source of support for Latino male students attending community colleges (Hines et al., 2019; Sáenz & Ponjuán, 2012; Sáenz et al., 2016, Sáenz et al., 2018). The impact of *familismo* is further seen in college choices, with many Latino students opting for institutions close to home to remain connected to family. When deciding where to enroll, Zerquera et al. (2018) found Latina/o/x students more likely to select a college close to home, reflecting the cultural importance of remaining near family. Alternatively, Sáenz et al. (2016) recognized that family can represent a stressor for Latino students. For many Latino men who value dignity, the encouragement to do well academically can feel like an obligation or pressure (Sáenz et al., 2016).

In a study that examined successful African American and Latina(s) community college students, the focus group interviews revealed the family was a critical contributor to their success, which “enhanced their overall family legacy in higher education” (Sandoval-Lucero et al., 2014, p. 530). A Latino male participant shared that his parents supported and believed in

him and suggested campus resources when appropriate (Sandoval-Lucero et al., 2014). These qualitative findings further support the understanding that when faced with familial, academic, and financial pressures, *familismo* provides the motivation to persist and succeed (Sáenz et al., 2018).

For Latino males, female family members, especially mothers, were critical contributors to their educational success (Crisp et al., 2015; Hines et al., 2019; Perez & Taylor, 2016; Ramirez et al., 2020; Sáenz et al., 2020; Vasquez et al., 2022). “Mothers emerged as primary sources of support and motivation. In contrast to dominant forms of college support (e.g., tutoring, financial assistance), our participants cited emotional and moral encouragement that their *madres* afforded them during difficult times” (Vasquez et al., 2022, p. 495). The presence of male role models is another factor found to impact Latino male academic success positively. Role models, particularly male educators, can motivate Latino male college students to decide to attend college (Luis et al., 2023; Sáenz & Ponjuán, 2008). Sáenz and Ponjuán (2009) found that Latino male leaders in education can motivate young Latino males, reinforcing the desire for higher education.

Peer influence can be complex. Some peers are not always a positive influence on Latino men. In their study, Sáenz and Ponjuán (2012) revealed that “peers play a complex role for Latino males... encouraging them to join the workforce as opposed to studying or channeling their energy into education endeavors” (p. 6). However, the Rodriguez et al. (2019) study found that peers played an important role in influencing Latino male student success and sense of belonging. Latino men “articulated the importance of connecting with peers who shared similar goals and provided encouragement for them to be successful in college” (Rodriguez et al., 2019, p. 11).

Parental Education

Parental education is another unique predictor of student success (Crisp & Nora, 2010). Crisp and Nora found the level of parental education to be significant for developmental students but not for non-developmental students. The assumption is that if students were required to take developmental coursework and their parents had acquired higher education levels, they received the “support and encouragement to succeed” in the face of those challenges (p. 191). Parental education also determines whether or not a student is considered a first-generation college student.

Latino First Generation

In a study of first generation Latino male college students, Huerta and Fishman (2014) found that participants lacked the appropriate capital, or non-tangible resources, to navigate the various institutional processes and procedures for academic success. Understanding the circumstances that first-generation students face, Hines et al. (2019) found that participants in their study had limited social and navigational capital. Being the first in their family to attend college, the students lacked knowledge of the application process and did not know how to navigate college enrollment. Participants in Airhart’s (2022) study reported struggles in navigating the financial aid application and other college processes, noting that their parents lacked the knowledge to support them. Without inadequate navigational capital, first-generation Latino males experience confusion and frustration (Sáenz et al., 2018). Sáenz et al. also found that despite having abundant familial capital, “the synthesis of first-generation status coupled with lack of academic preparation resulted in academic barriers for Latino men” (p. 50).

Despite the lack of capital necessary to navigate higher education, Sandoval-Lucero et al. (2014) study findings revealed that many of their study participants ultimately developed a sense

of navigational capital and “now have the skills to maneuver themselves through the sometimes intimidating college system” (p. 531). Nunez and Sansone (2016) studied first-generation Latino students who worked, a majority of whom held federal work-study positions, and found that those who worked on campus began to cultivate navigational and cultural capital. “Through working, many students were also able to build social relationships on campus and an overall sense of belonging, or, in the words of one student, the chance to “integrate” themselves into the community” (Nunez & Sansone, 2016, p. 107).

Financial Factors

Students of lower socioeconomic status regularly manage significant financial decisions and face financial difficulties. For Latino males, financial challenges often motivate them to work instead of attending college (Carales, 2020; Sáenz & Ponjuán, 2012; Trevino & DeFreitas, 2014). While Latino families support higher education attainment, students’ work obligations and family commitments can rise above educational endeavors. “Parents generally value the pursuit of higher education, yet Latino males often face pressures to contribute to family finances” (Sáenz & Ponjuán, 2012, p. 6). For young Latino males, there are cultural “expectations to work, contribute to the family, and assume traditional gender roles” (Sáenz & Ponjuán, 2009, p. 16).

Using a Beginning Postsecondary Students (BPS) longitudinal study, Carales (2020) examined educational attainment outcomes of 800 Latina/o community college students, 41% of which were male. According to Carales (2020), financial factors often serve to pull Latino males away from attending college. In Sáenz et al. (2013) qualitative study of 130 Latino male students, focus group participants cited earning money as a “culture marker of manhood” (p. 91). They often considered entering the workforce to advance financially and prove their self-worth

(Sáenz et al., 2013). Conversely, other literature has also presented findings wherein aspirational capital has helped African American and Latino students persist in the face of financial barriers. Many students in the Sandoval-Lucero et al. (2014) study had “high aspirations to not only be employed, but also be in an upper management position, or in occupations with high levels of responsibility” (p. 530).

Masculinity

Masculinity, as a social construct, can profoundly influence the lives of Latino men, offering both positive and negative dimensions. From a negative standpoint, masculinity can cause men to restrict their emotions and express vulnerability (Sáenz et al., 2013). For male community college students, masculinity can conflict with behaviors found to drive academic success (Harris & Harper, 2008; Huerta & Fishman, 2014). This struggle often contributes to male students’ reluctance to engage on campus, seeking help from faculty and staff, and tapping into academic and non-academic resources. Additionally, masculinity can cause men to restrict their emotions and express vulnerability (Sáenz et al., 2013). The extant research points to Latino male student perceptions of masculinity and tendencies to avoid seeking academic support, avoiding “expressions of fear” that keep them from “reaching out for help and taking full advantage of programs and services designed to promote academic success” (Sáenz & Ponjuán, 2012, p.6). Student participants in the Rodriguez et al. (2019) study found that Latino males hesitated to seek campus resources out of a sense of pride, expressing that it “was like admitting failure” (p. 8) to access campus resources. This fear of failure can lead to the decision to quit. Decisions to opt out and seek pride in meeting other family obligations “demonstrate a fight or flight response; by choosing to drop out, males could run away from the source of their

fear of failure – education – but simultaneously run towards a source of confidence and strength – a job” (Sáenz et al., 2013, p. 90).

Masculine ideals often associate academic pursuits with traits traditionally viewed as feminine. The behaviors that lead to academic success come in conflict with the activities that males engage in to demonstrate their masculine identity (Harris & Harper, 2008). Vasquez Urias and Wood (2015) suggest that Latino men who “are comfortable with their masculinity” (p. 30) can overcome perceptions that college is a “space only for women” (p. 30).

Masculinity can also be a source of motivation for success when Latino men channel it into perseverance and determination to achieve their goals. According to Luis et al. (2023) and Sáenz et al. (2013), masculinity can prove productive and indicate success if Latino men tap into it to work hard at accomplishing their goals. Latino males who utilize academic supports, such as tutoring, reported increased self-confidence, contributing to their positive outlook (Luis et al., 2023). Sáenz et al. (2013) found that the *machismo* or pride Latino male students possess, can be a “source of strength, propelling them to work harder for their goals” (p. 89). Palacios (2016) also found that machismo contributed to *Mexicano* students' confidence that their degree would offer them secure employment and financial stability, a “better life,” and heightened respect. Additionally, Sáenz et al. (2013) revealed “quasi-positive manifestations of masculinity,” which involve “competition and pride as driving forces in Latino men’s lives” (p. 92). Sáenz et al. (2016) revealed Mexican American male students possessed “attitudinal factors’ that aid them with persisting, including “hope, determination, and desire” (p. 120).

Degree Utility

Degree utility refers to a degree's practical value and usefulness, encompassing non-cognitive domains, including economic, personal, and societal benefits (Bean & Metzner, 1985;

Wood & Harris, 2013). These factors help individuals assess a degree and make informed educational decisions. Researchers have found degree utility to be a significant factor for Latino male success and positively impacts perceptions of school (Palacios, 2016; Vasquez Urias & Wood, 2015). Palacios (2016) found degree utility to be “a significant determinant of success” among the participants in her study (p. 135). Latino men who understand how their degree would provide employment and financial stability believe in their degree's utility and are more motivated to succeed (Palacios, 2016; Vasquez Urias & Wood, 2015). “When Mexicanos had notions relative to their faculty caring about their perspective in class, valuing interacting with them in class, valuing their presence in class, and caring about their success, Mexicanos are more likely to develop higher degree utility” (Palacios, 2016). For these reasons, degree utility positively correlates to higher education retention and completion (Vasquez Urias & Wood, 2015).

The results of a study of Hispanic two-year college students' motivation for attending college revealed that they see college as a way to change their lives (Santos, 2004). For them, a choice to pursue an education was highly connected to an expectation for economic advancement. In researching how the experiences of African American and Latino males influence retention and persistence, Solano (2024) discovered stability and practicality of their major to be important factors. Participants often stated financial stability as a primary factor in choosing a major that would allow them to *afford bills and pay the rent* (Solano, 2024).

Intersecting with degree utility are the socioeconomic status and the barriers low-income students face in attaining higher education. The practical and economic value associated with earning a degree or credential varies significantly for low-income, often minority students, who face structural and financial obstacles that make long-term career stability and personal

development more challenging to attain (Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2018). According to the national report issued by the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce (2018):

The fastest-growing occupation and industry sectors are those that have workers with the most postsecondary education and training. The economy will continue to create jobs for workers with a high school diploma or less, but these jobs, in many cases, do not offer high enough earnings for the workers who hold them to achieve upward economic mobility. The labor force will be increasingly divided between those who have postsecondary education and those who don't. It is becoming ever clearer that postsecondary education or training is the only path to a middle-class lifestyle for most workers (Carnevale et al., 2023, p. 37).

Academic and Institutional Factors

The Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE) conducted an extensive study of Black men, Latinos, and White men at community colleges and outlined four themes as keys to success: 1) personal connections matter, 2) high expectations matter, 3) instructor qualities matter, and 4) engagement matters (CCCSE, 2014). Participants in CCCSE's Men of Color study consistently mentioned the benefits of having a strong network on campus, especially the "value of someone who believes in me" and makes time to help (CCCSE, 2014, p. 8). Participants also agreed that faculty who express belief in their ability to reach high expectations and demonstrate a commitment to helping them learn are integral to their progress and success (CCCSE, 2014). Similarly, when faculty are accessible, they are seen as helpful and invested in their students' success (Sandoval-Lucero et al., 2014).

According to Rodriguez et al. (2019), the smaller size of classes at community colleges promoted more interaction with professors and “made them (Latino men) feel as though they were a part of the campus community” (p. 4). The relationships built with faculty and college staff also introduce opportunities for validating experiences, contributing to Latino males feeling seen and capable (Rendón, 1994; Rodriguez et al., 2019). College practitioners who encourage, relate, and recognize student potential help Latino male students see their “place within the community college environment and influenced the ways in which Latino men felt connected to their environments” (Rodriguez et al., 2019, p. 7). Consistent with this literature, Hines et al. (2019) found that Latino male study participants benefited from instructors who expressed interest and confidence in their ability to succeed.

Rendón and Muñoz (2011) studied minority and nontraditional college students to learn how new approaches may improve their academic achievement. A key finding was that when college practitioners took the initiative to validate students, it transformed how students began to see themselves as succeeding (Rendón & Muñoz, 2011). Within her framework, Rendón (1994) stated that the “role of the institution in fostering validation is active - it involves faculty, counselors, coaches, and administrators actively reaching out to students or designing activities that promote active learning and interpersonal growth among students, faculty, and staff” (p. 16).

Self-efficacy and Belonging

Self-efficacy refers to the belief in one's ability to execute a specific goal and succeed (Bandura, 1997). Often, a student's self-efficacy can be developed through classroom and campus interactions. Participants in various studies attributed their persistence and success to feeling connected and supported by faculty and staff (CCCSE, 2014; Harris & Wood, 2016; Sáenz et al., 2013; Solano, 2024). Strayhorn (2012) describes a sense of belonging as "students'

perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus" (p. 3).

Campus engagement and support are other institutional factors that have consistently been reported to contribute to Latino student success. Sandoval-Lucero et al. (2014) found that their study participants acknowledged that establishing connections on campus contributed to their college success. Participants discussed various ways to feel connected, including “obtaining work study jobs, to feeling connected in class, to having helpful staff members assist in their academic processes, and joining clubs and organizations” (Sandoval-Lucero et al., 2014). Similarly, Solano (2024) found that participants in her study found that “Being involved in campus activities through work or volunteer experiences helped the participants establish a sense of belonging and motivated them to do well, impacting their self-efficacy beliefs” (p. 13).

In other studies, Latino male students reported that positive experiences with peers, faculty, and staff on campus contributed to their academic success (Luis et al., 2023; Rodriguez et al., 2019; Solano, 2024; Vasquez Urias & Wood, 2015). A study of Latino men in community colleges found that a sense of belonging was more easily achieved due to “the intimate nature of CC environments” (p. 4) and consistent opportunities for direct communication with faculty (Rodriguez et al., 2019). A look at Latino male motivation and perceptions indicated that they were more likely to “place a greater value on educational pursuits” (p. 29) if they feel college is suited for both men and women (Vasquez Urias & Wood, 2015).

In his study, Pena (2017) found that Latino male student participants attributed a sense of belonging when Spanish was spoken by faculty and staff during their first-year experience. He also found testimonials to be a strong connector with Latino male students, noting that when

college staff shares their own stories and experiences, they can help “bridge any divide students may feel with program staff, thereby creating a greater sense of belonging and trust among Latino male students in the program” (Pena, 2017, p. 92). These are examples of how validating experiences influence Latino males' connectedness to institutions.

Men of Color initiatives (MCIs) in higher education support self-efficacy and a sense of belonging by creating environments and resources that specifically address the challenges these students face. “Programming with 'men in mind' can provide meaningful opportunities for Latino males to socialize with other Latino peers and develop purposeful relationships with male faculty and staff” (Sáenz et al., 2013, p. 93). Community college MCIs have proven effective in achieving positive outcomes, including a sense of belonging (Briscoe et al., 2020).

Pre-college Student Characteristics

As students enter and progress through higher education, they bring a variety of backgrounds and societal factors, including diverse experiences. These factors include academic preparedness, college generation, socioeconomic background, and cultural and family influences. Unfortunately, some pre-college experiences impact Latino males' enrollment in primary school and high school graduation rates, further creating achievement gaps (Sáenz & Ponjuán, 2012). Additionally, men of color are more likely to experience prejudice and oppression compared to their White counterparts, which influences their interactions with faculty (Harris et al., 2015; Hines et al., 2019; and Vasquez Urias & Wood, 2015).

Summary

The literature reviewed in this chapter highlights key factors influencing Latino males' decision to attend community college, including familial, financial, and institutional dynamics, as well as individual characteristics such as masculinity and self-efficacy. The research indicated

that these are primary factors for Latino males' enrollment, persistence, and success. A significant amount of research on Latino student college enrollment has been focused on cultural values and *familismo*. There remains a need to explore factors influencing Latino males' decision to pursue and complete higher education. Therefore, this study intends to examine Latino male graduating students' awareness of the practical value of their degree and certificate, and how this awareness influenced their decision to attend community college. In Chapter Three, the methodology for this study will be presented.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

Chapter Three provides an overview of the methodology used to conduct this study, demonstrating alignment with the research questions and the overall purpose of the study. The chapter begins with a review of the purpose of the study and research questions and explains how the theoretical and conceptual paradigms inform and guide the study. Next, the research design, site selection, study participants, and instrumentation used for gathering data are reviewed. Then, the details of the data collection and sources and procedures for analyzing the data are presented. The chapter concludes by explaining limitations, ethical considerations, and steps taken to provide a quality study.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine how Latino male graduating community college students perceive the practical value of their degrees and certificates and to understand how this perception influenced their decisions to enroll and persist in college. Additionally, the study seeks to identify the factors that shape Latino male students' awareness of degree value and their decisions to attend community college.

Research Questions

The research questions guiding this study are:

RQ1 (Quantitative): What factors influence Latino male graduating students' awareness of the value of their community college education?

RQ2 (Qualitative): In what ways do Latino males perceive the value of community college degrees and certificates?

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

The theoretical and conceptual frameworks selected for this study inform the methodological approach taken, providing structure and coherence. The theoretical framework provides the researcher a broader lens and path to develop an understanding of how to craft the study (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). In this way, Yosso's (2005) cultural wealth model allows researchers to examine Latino male behaviors through a strengths-based lens. Applying a theoretical framework that utilizes a lens focused on the assets students of color bring to their educational experience helps shift away from a deficit-based model toward a strength-based model (Yosso, 2005). By emphasizing their cultural assets, the cultural wealth model can guide research in showcasing the strengths Latino male students bring to community colleges. This approach sheds light on how these assets influence their understanding of the practical value of a degree or certificate and shape their decisions to pursue higher education.

The conceptual frameworks selected for this study shaped the instrumentation and data collection approach used in the study. Survey and focus group interview questions were developed to contextualize educational decisions within participants' lived realities, incorporating their motivations and perceptions. Using Situated Expectancy-Value Theory (SEVT), the study will quantitatively explore factors that contribute to expectations of success and the perceived value of a degree that may motivate Latino males to attend community college and obtain a degree while considering sociocultural factors. This conceptual framework informed survey questions, designing them to assess participants' beliefs about the utility of their credential and their expectations for achieving their goal. The Socio-Ecological Outcomes (SEO) model is a conceptual framework developed by Harris and Wood that explores the salient influences of societal and environmental factors on outcomes for men of color in community

colleges (Harris & Wood, 2016). The Socio-Ecological Outcomes (SEO) model guides the qualitative portion of the study, seeking to understand the non-cognitive factors that influence Latino males' educational motivations and decisions. This conceptual framework helped design focus group interview questions that aimed to capture the intersectionality of Latino male participant experiences and external factors.

Research Design

The study utilized an explanatory sequential mixed methods design, allowing for quantitative and qualitative data collection to understand the stated problem more deeply (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This design is a two-phase approach wherein the researcher first collected and analyzed quantitative data, then collected qualitative data to help explain the quantitative results (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). In the first phase, quantitative data collected from a survey of Latino male graduating students informed the development of focus group interview questions for the second (qualitative) phase of data collection.

The rationale for selecting an explanatory sequential mixed-methods approach is to understand Latino males' perceived value of their community college degrees and certificates and to learn about factors influencing individual decisions and motivations.

Site Selection

The study was conducted at nine large and small, urban and suburban, Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) community colleges within a large community college system in the southwest. HSI community colleges were chosen because this designation means that the institution "has an enrollment of undergraduate full-time equivalent students that is at least 25 percent Hispanic students" (U.S. Department of Education (USDE), n.d.). These institutions were intentionally chosen to support greater participation among Latino male students.

Study Participants

According to Lochmiller and Lester (2017), purposeful sampling is used to select participants based on particular criteria. Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) explain that purposeful sampling is used by researchers to recruit participants who may have experienced the key concepts of the study. The first quantitative phase of the research study utilized purposeful sampling to identify a large population of Latino males graduating or preparing to graduate from the chosen study sites. In November 2025, the Institutional Research department for the study sites provided a list of enrolled students for fall 2025 and spring 2026 across all study sites. Utilizing purposeful sampling, the list was narrowed to 1,583 Latino males who had completed 45 or more credits if an associate degree was declared, or 12 or more credits if a certificate was declared, from the chosen study sites. The inclusion criterion requiring participants to be Latino male community college students who were graduating or near graduation was intended to ensure they had developed an awareness of the value of their degree.

The initial invitation email was sent on November 12, 2025, and the survey remained open for 6 weeks. The first reminder email was sent on November 18, and a second reminder email was sent on November 30. At the end of the survey, participants were asked whether they were interested in participating in a focus group interview.

The second, qualitative phase involved inviting this subset of the larger sample to participate in focus group interviews. It was estimated that 10-20% of the survey respondents would agree to join a focus group. Recruitment for the focus group proved difficult, so the researcher utilized snowball sampling to recruit more participants. Snowball sampling helps researchers recruit participants by allowing participants to recommend additional individuals

(Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). Faculty and academic advisors are additional individuals who may be used to recruit more participants.

According to Onwuegbuzie and Collins (2007), determining the sample size is equally critical to the study as the selection of the samples, because it helps the researcher “make statistical and/or analytic generalizations” (p. 287). Hennink et al. (2019) assert that estimating sample size for qualitative research is challenging since *saturation* is commonly used to determine the sample size. *Saturation* is the point in data collection at which no new information is obtained (Morse, 1995). Through their study, Hennink et al. (2019) found “Four focus groups were sufficient to identify a range of new issues (code saturation), but more groups were needed to fully understand these issues (meaning saturation)” (p. 1483). Informed by the research, the purpose of the study, and the research questions, the target sample size for the focus group was 18-40 participants, spread across three to five well-populated groups.

Instrumentation

The research design guided the use of instrumentation in this study, which begins with a “broad survey in order to generalize results to a population and then focuses, in a second phase, on detailed qualitative, open-ended interviews to collect detailed views from participants” (Creswell, 2003, p. 21). The instrument used to collect quantitative data in this research study was a mobile-friendly Google survey. The survey included unidentifiable demographic questions, followed by Likert-scale questions to quantify perceptions and ranking questions to assess relative importance. Survey questions were informed by the Community College Survey of Men (CCSM©), an instrument that measures noncognitive factors influencing success for men of color (Wood & Harris, 2013). The survey was open for 6 weeks, and one reminder email was sent to participants (see Appendix D).

The quantitative data collected from the survey informed the development of subsequent focus group interview questions. The non-cognitive domains of the SEO model further informed the focus group interview questions. The researcher, in addition to the focus groups and interviews, served as the qualitative instrument, using semi-structured questions that allowed participants to share openly (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). The questions were phrased respectfully, with a focus on cultural strengths and understanding of motivation. After consent was obtained, in-person and Zoom sessions were audio- and video-recorded, and participants were allowed to turn off their cameras if they preferred. Transcripts were coded to protect participants' identities.

Data Collection and Data Sources

Before initiating data collection, approval was secured from the Kansas State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) as well as from the community college district and individual institutions, as required. The researcher introduced themselves and their study to the chancellor and/or presidents of each site and requested to survey and interview participants (see Appendix B).

Quantitative Data

A list of Latino male students enrolled in Fall 2025 and Spring 2026 semesters, including their college email addresses, was obtained through the institutional student information system. (n=1,583) An email was sent to the list, inviting them to participate in the survey (see Appendix D). To encourage participation, the communication informed recipients of the opportunity to enter a drawing for a \$100 gift card if they completed the survey. Additionally, the researcher engaged academic advisors, faculty, and staff to promote and share the survey with students who met eligibility criteria.

Drawing on constructs from the CCSM (Wood & Harris, 2013), a well-established instrument, the researcher developed a new survey tailored to this study. The instrument was further refined through pilot testing to improve clarity, coherence, and overall quality. Survey piloting allows the researcher to present the survey instrument to prospective participants before administering to the larger participant sample (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). The researcher identified four Latino male students, such as peer leaders, student workers, and ambassadors, and asked them to provide feedback on the survey's flow and clarity. A Zoom meeting was hosted to discuss and gather feedback from pilot participants. The feedback confirmed that the questions were relevant and straightforward, and that the survey itself was easy to follow and flowed well. Pilot participants further confirmed that the time required to complete the survey was reasonable and did not lead to a loss of interest. The pilot also revealed areas for improvement, such as narrowing down options for a single question and separating a single question into two. Overall, the feedback from pilot participants informed revisions to item wording and structure, enhancing the instrument's effectiveness in capturing participants' perspectives.

Qualitative Data

At the end of the Google survey, respondents were invited to indicate their interest in a follow-up focus group and 64 respondents provided contact information. The researcher used this list for initial recruitment. To incentivize willingness, a coffee bar gift card was offered to all focus group participants. However, due to limited response, additional outreach was conducted through college advisors, faculty, and colleagues. This expanded effort resulted in participation from additional Latino male students who were not among the original 64 respondents.

While focus groups were originally planned as the method of data collection, several scheduled sessions had only a single participant, resulting in interviews rather than focus groups.

In such cases, the researcher proceeded using the same semi-structured protocol, ensuring consistency across the sessions despite the lack of peer interaction. The researcher hosted 17 student participants over five focus group sessions and five interviews (see Table 1).

Table 1
Participants

Participant ID	Pseudonym	Session ID
P01	Sammy	FG1
P02	Mateo	FG1
P03	Ernie	INV2
P04	Adam	INV3
P05	Bobby	FG4
P06	Victor	FG4
P07	Will	FG4
P08	David	FG4
P09	Tomas	FG5
P10	Joseph	FG5
P11	Joaquin	INV6
P12	Isaac	INV7
P13	Jeremy	FG8
P14	Ariel	FG8
P15	Xavier	FG9
P16	Gabe	FG9
P17	Joe	INV10

Note: FG = Focus Group and INV= Interview

The researcher sought informed consent from participants (see Appendix E.) and shared a variety of interview procedures to be followed during the focus group interviews (Hyatt & Roberts, 2024). The focus group sessions were scheduled on dates and times convenient for participants. The session began with a refresher on consent and an opportunity to answer any questions. Semi-structured, 30-45-minute interviews or focus group sessions were conducted in person and via Zoom, and participants were asked for permission to video- and audio-record and to have their recordings transcribed via the Zoom platform.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data collected through the online Google survey was inspected for completeness. The responses were exported to a secure, password-protected file to prepare the data for analysis in *jamovi*. *Jamovi* is a free and open statistical platform software tool created for data analysis and statistical testing (jamovi.com). Using this software, the data analysis identified trends, such as average levels of awareness of degree value or utility.

Transcripts and notes from focus group and interview sessions were reviewed and organized, allowing the data to be coded. Codes were developed directly from the data, using participants' words and sentiments. Saldaña (2013) explains a code as “a word or short phrase” (p. 3) used to represent and capture the essence or key ideas from texts or visual data, such as interview transcripts. “In qualitative data analysis, a code is a researcher-generated construct that symbolizes and thus attributes interpreted meaning to each individual datum for later purposes of pattern detection, categorization, theory building, and other analytic processes” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 4). In this analysis, the researcher employed In Vivo coding during First Cycle coding, using the participants' own words and phrases. Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) assert that coding is a “core feature of qualitative data analysis” and is the “process of grouping evidence and labeling ideas” (p. 214), capturing broad themes that emerge. Linneberg and Korsgaard (2019) explain that an inductive coding approach helps the researcher to remain open-minded, “which is good for capturing the complexity and diversity of the data” (p. 263).

Codes were then applied to the data, helping the researcher to cluster the coded data into categories for deeper analysis (Saldaña, 2013). The researcher clustered related codes by reviewing organized participant transcripts, looking for quotes that looked and felt alike. With the codes categorized, a Second Cycle of coding was conducted to narrow the list of categories

and assertions. Finally, themes were identified to organize the overall ideas, and the data was further analyzed to identify direct quotes that support common themes and emphasize the findings. A table (Appendix I) was developed to illustrate how the researcher organized codes into categories, which were then grouped together, constructing a theme.

In the final phase of analysis, the researcher synthesized the data collected through quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews. Mixed-methods research provides a valuable opportunity to integrate results and findings from each phase of the study. Comparing quantitative trends with qualitative themes enables the researcher to use interview findings to explain survey data, illuminating areas of alignment and discrepancy. When qualitative research converges with quantitative research, “a more complete understanding is developed” (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018, p. 220).

Alignment Table

A table (Appendix A) was developed to demonstrate alignment among the problem, based on literature findings, research questions, theoretical and conceptual frameworks, methodology, and interview/survey questions.

Limitations

This study is limited to HSI community colleges in the Southwest, and results may not generalize to community colleges in other geographic areas of the country. Another limitation is that the sample is limited to graduating Latino male community college students, minimizing the transferability to a 4-year university setting. Data collection with study participants is occurring near the end of their academic journey, so there is the potential that the timeframe might miss changes in perceptions or the degree utility awareness over time. Limitations may be updated as the study is conducted.

Ethical Considerations

Various ethical issues must be considered when human subjects participate in a research study (Hyatt & Roberts, 2024). After KSU Institutional Review Board (IRB) approvals are received, the researcher will adhere to IRB guidelines and conduct the study by first securing informed consent and confidentiality. Survey participants were informed of their right to confidentiality. Pseudonyms were used to protect the privacy of participants. Signed informed consent forms will be obtained from focus group participants, notifying them that their participation is voluntary and that they may choose to participate or withdraw at any time. The researcher conducted interviews in a neutral and supportive manner. Additionally, the data will be securely stored in an external hard drive in an organized manner to maintain integrity and security of the data for five years.

Reflexivity Statement

According to Lochmiller and Lester (2017), “Reflexivity is the process of intentionally accounting for your assumptions, biases, experiences, and identities that may impact any aspect of your research study” (p. 95). I acknowledge my identity as a Latina and the assumptions and potential biases I may hold. I further acknowledge that my female gender may pose a challenge in gaining trust and rapport with study participants during interviews.

Study Quality

This study will answer the research questions through a quality approach. To ensure the validity and reliability of the quantitative results, the CCSM© was used to develop the student survey used in phase one of the study. Developed by the Minority Male Community College Collaborative, “The CCSM is the only instrument designed specifically for measuring factors that influence success for minority male community college students” (Wood & Harris, 2013, p.

334). The CCSM© has undergone rigorous validation testing and analysis of reliability, and the instrument demonstrated strong internal consistency and reliable cross-racial/ethnic comparisons (Wood & Harris, 2013). Several strategies were used to increase the trustworthiness of the qualitative findings. The researcher employed member-checking to summarize initial findings and interpretations with participants and ask them to confirm accurate interpretations (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017).

Summary

The study explored Latino male graduating students' awareness of the value of their degrees and certificates and examines the factors contributing to this value, focusing on how this awareness influenced their decision to attend community college. This chapter reviewed the theoretical and conceptual frameworks underpinning the study, including Yosso's cultural wealth Model, Situated Expectancy-Value Theory (SEVT), and Socio-Ecological Outcomes (SEO) Model. Together, these frameworks guide both the quantitative and qualitative elements of the study, shaping data collection instruments to capture the nuanced intersection of cultural strengths and educational motivations. The chapter also reviewed the research design, site selection and participants, instrumentation, and data collection and analysis. The chapter concluded with a discussion of study limitations, ethical considerations, and efforts taken to ensure a high-quality study. Chapter Four will review and present the findings of this research.

Chapter 4 - Research Results and Analysis

Chapter 4 presents the study's findings. The chapter begins with a description of the data collection process and participant characteristics, followed by an overview of the quantitative and qualitative results. Chapter 4 concludes with an integrated presentation of the quantitative and qualitative results, along with a summary of the findings.

The research questions guiding this study were:

RQ1 (Quantitative): What factors influence Latino male graduating students' awareness of the value of their community college education?

RQ2 (Qualitative): In what ways do Latino males perceive the value of community college degrees and certificates?

Quantitative Phase

The participants in this study included Latino male students enrolled in Fall 2025 and/or Spring 2026 who had completed 45 or more credits if an associate degree was declared, or 12 or more credits if a certificate was declared. The Qualtrics secure survey was sent to 1583 students, inviting them to participate. Additionally, the researcher engaged with academic advisors, faculty, and other colleagues at several study sites, sharing information and asking them to disseminate the survey and encourage the Latino male students they work with to complete it. It is unknown how many additional students may have received the survey link and completed it as a result of this outreach. To encourage participation, communications informed students of the opportunity to be entered into a drawing for a \$100 gift card if they completed the survey. These efforts resulted in 123 survey responses.

The researcher reviewed survey responses to assess completeness and confirm that participants met the study criteria. Participants who did not meet the study criteria of being a

Latino male were eliminated. One survey response in which 'Other' was selected was found to contain a self-entered answer categorizing the ethnicity as Latino, so the participant was included. Six participants selected an ethnicity other than Latino and were eliminated. Three additional responses were eliminated for lack of completion. A total of 114 usable survey responses were collected and included in the analysis.

Once the finite number of students (1,583) who qualified for the research study was established, a minimum sample size of 100 participants was determined to be sufficient to achieve a 90% confidence level with an 8% margin of error. The 114 usable survey responses exceeded the minimum required sample size and achieved a 7.45% margin of error. Therefore, the quantitative sample was deemed adequate to address the research questions and conduct the planned analyses.

Descriptive Demographics

The study sample was restricted to Latino male students enrolled in the Fall 2025 and/or Spring 2026 semesters. Because gender was an inclusion criterion, the survey collected additional basic demographic information. These descriptive demographic results are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2

Descriptive Demographics of Participants

Characteristic	N=113	%
Age		
18-24	55	48.7
25-34	33	29.2
35-44	18	15.9
45-54	6	5.3

Characteristic	N=113	%
Age		
55+	1	0.9
Ethnicity		
Latino/Hispanic only	88	77.9
Latino/Hispanic and White	17	15.0
Latino/Hispanic and Black	3	2.7
Latino/Hispanic and Native American	4	3.5
Latino/Hispanic and Other	1	0.9
First-Generation		
	N=114	%
First Generation College Student	77	67.5
Non First-Generation College Student	37	32.5

Note. One participant did not answer the Age and Ethnicity demographic question. $N=113$ on those characteristics, whereas $N=114$ for the First-Generation question.

The survey garnered an age-diverse sample and are displayed in Table 3. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 60 years, with a mean age of 28 ($SD = 8.75$). Based on this, about two-thirds of survey respondents (68%) are between 19.25 and 36.75 years old. However, when using two standard deviations (SD) above and below the mean age of 28, it is determined that 95% of survey respondents were between 10.5 years and 45.5 years of age. Given that the minimum age for participation was 18, it can be determined that 95% of the total survey population was between 18 and 45.5. Nearly half of the survey respondents were under the age of 25, and about a third were between the age of 25-34. Less than a quarter were over the age of 35, with 7 of them being 45 years of age or older.

Table 3*Age Range of Participants*

	<i>N</i> =113	%
18-24	55	48.7
25-34	33	29.2
35-44	18	15.9
45-54	6	5.3
55+	1	0.9

Regarding race and ethnicity, participants were permitted to select multiple categories; however, 77.9% selected Latino/Hispanic only, and 22.1% selected Latino/Hispanic in combination with one or two other races or ethnicities. Within this latter group, the most common combination was Latino/Hispanic and White. This distribution is reflective of the geographic makeup of the study sites in the southwestern region of the United States. These distinctions provide insight into the diversity within the Latino male population, an important context for interpreting participants' perspectives. Table 4 displays reported ethnicities and combinations.

Table 4*Diversity of Latino/Hispanic Participants*

	<i>N</i> =113	%
Latino/Hispanic only	88	77.9
Latino/Hispanic and White	17	15.0
Latino/Hispanic and Native American	4	3.5
Latino/Hispanic and Black	3	2.7
Latino/Hispanic and Other	1	0.9

First-generation college status is reflected in Table 5. Approximately two-thirds of Latino male respondents identified as first-generation college students, while one-third did not. This proportion is notably higher than the study sites' overall average, where approximately 48% of

students are first-generation. This proportion also exceeds national estimates, which indicate that about one-third of community college students identify as first-generation (American Association of Community Colleges, n.d.).

Table 5

First-Generation Status of Latino Male Participants

Status	N=114	%
First Generation College Student	77	67.5
Non First-Generation College Student	37	32.5

Participants (n=114) were asked to identify their educational goals, with the option to select multiple responses: (1) Earn a certificate, (2) Earn an associate degree, (3) Earn a bachelor's degree, (4) Transfer to a 4-year university, (5) Other. Table 6 reflects the frequency with which participants indicated each educational goal.

Table 6

Educational Goals of Participants

Educational Goal Code	Counts	% Of Total	Cumulative %
1	6	5.3	5.3
1,2	2	1.8	7.0
1,2,3	4	3.5	10.5
1,2,3,4	4	3.5	14.0
1,2,3,4,5	1	0.9	14.9
1,3	1	0.9	15.8
1,5	1	0.9	16.7
2	22	19.3	36.0
2,3	12	10.5	46.5
2,3,4	10	8.8	55.3
2,3,4,5	3	2.6	57.9
2,3,5	3	2.6	60.5
2,4	2	1.8	62.3
3	21	18.4	80.7
3,4	4	3.5	84.2

Educational Goal Code	Counts	% Of Total	Cumulative %
3,4,5	2	1.8	86.0
4	13	11.4	97.4
5	3	2.6	100.0

Note. Educational Goal Code: (1) Earn a certificate, (2) Earn an associate degree, (3) Earn a bachelor's degree, (4) Transfer to a 4-year university, (5) Other. Participants were permitted to select more than one educational goal.

A slight majority of respondents (57%) identified a single, primary goal. Of those with a single goal in mind, some identified earning a certificate (5.3%), yet most articulated aspirations that extended beyond short-term credentials, including pursuing an associate degree (19.3%), a bachelor's degree (18.4%), and/or transferring to a four-year institution (11.4%). Fewer participants reported 'other educational goal' as their aspiration (2.6%). A summary of participants' primary educational goals is presented in Table 7.

Table 7
Single, Primary Educational Goals of Participants

Educational Goal	Counts	% Of Total
Associate (2)	22	19.3
Bachelor (3)	21	18.4
Transfer to a four-year institution (4)	13	11.4
Certificate (1)	6	5.3
Other educational goal (5)	3	2.6

Note: This table displays the single, primary educational goals identified by 57% of respondents.

The remaining participants (43%) selected more than one educational goal, indicating multifaceted educational aspirations. The most frequently reported combinations centered on completing an associate degree alongside longer-term goals, particularly earning a bachelor's

degree and transferring to a four-year institution (e.g., codes 2,3 and 2,3,4). These patterns suggest that many participants view the associate degree not as an endpoint, but as part of a continuous educational trajectory. In contrast, combinations that did not include transfer or bachelor's degree attainment were less common. A summary of these selections is presented in Table 8.

Table 8
Multiple Educational Goals of Participants

Educational Goal Code	Counts	% Of Total
2,3	12	10.5
2,3,4	10	8.8
1,2,3	4	3.5
1,2,3,4	4	3.5
3,4	4	3.5
2,3,4,5	3	2.6
2,3,5	3	2.6
2,4	2	1.8
1,2	2	1.8
3,4,5	2	1.8
1,2,3,4,5	1	0.9
1,3	1	0.9
1,5	1	0.9

Note: This table displays the multiple educational goals identified by 43% of respondents.

Educational Goal Code: (1) Earn a certificate, (2) Earn an associate degree, (3) Earn a bachelor's degree, (4) Transfer to a 4-year university, (5) Other.

Quantitative Research Findings

The first research question for the study was: What factors influence Latino male graduating students' awareness of the value of their community college education? The

quantitative findings presented below provide data for analyzing the factors contributing to the value Latino male students place on community college education and their expectations for success. The survey included two complementary sets of items. The first set used Likert-scale responses to assess participants' confidence and beliefs about the value of a college credential. The second set asked the participants to check boxes and identify factors that influenced their decision to enroll in college.

Survey – Likert Items Section

The survey prompted participants to rate their confidence and/or agreement with 24 non-cognitive items designed to assess their educational experiences and perceptions. Responses were recorded on a six-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*), with higher scores indicating greater confidence/agreement. The absence of a neutral midpoint was intentional to force a more favorable or unfavorable response. A summary of students' ratings for each item is presented in Table 9.

Table 9
Means and Standard Deviations for Non-Cognitive Survey Items

Item	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
My college degree is important for achieving my goals	5.62	0.754
Earning a college credential or degree will help me achieve my career goals	5.57	0.747
My college degree will improve my job opportunities	5.52	0.790
I enjoy learning new things in college	5.52	0.788
I have what it takes to earn a college degree	5.50	0.822
I believe students like me can be academically successful here	5.49	0.812
Earning my credential or degree is something I take pride in	5.44	0.898
Earning a college credential or degree will help me support my family	5.43	0.911
I can overcome academic challenges if I put in the effort	5.42	0.832
My instructors believe I can succeed	5.38	0.892
It's important to me to prove that I can succeed in college	5.28	1.06
I can successfully transfer to a four-year institution if I choose to	5.24	0.966
I can complete all of my courses with good grades	5.22	0.961

Item	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
The support services at this college make it easier for me to succeed	5.20	0.870
The time I spend in school is worthwhile	5.17	0.985
What I learn here is directly relevant to my life outside of school	5.12	1.07
I find my coursework interesting and meaningful	5.12	0.969
I look forward to attending my classes	5.11	0.985
I choose classes that interest me, even if they are challenging	5.10	0.960
I know how to find help when I need it	5.09	1.10
I feel confident completing my coursework despite personal challenges	5.01	1.19
Completing my credential or degree is part of how I define success for myself	4.89	1.27
I worry about paying for college	4.59	1.49
I've thought about stopping college because of personal or family responsibilities	4.01	1.76

Note: Survey items are listed highest to lowest based on mean scores.

Students reported the highest levels of confidence on two items reflecting the value of community college education. The strongest rated items were “my college degree is important for achieving my goals” ($M = 5.62$) and “earning a college credential or degree will help me achieve my career goals” ($M = 5.57$). These were followed closely by “my college degree will improve my job opportunities” ($M = 5.52$) and “I enjoy learning new things in college” ($M = 5.52$). Overall, 21 of 24 items received a mean score above 5.00, indicating most students selected either “Agree” or “Strongly Agree”. Additionally, these scores were relatively tight, showing low variability among participants. These consistently high scores may indicate a ceiling effect, in which participants' scores cluster near the highest possible ratings. A ceiling effect occurs when a measure has an upper limit on possible responses, and many participants score at or near that limit (Lewis-Beck et al., 2004).

Participants also showed considerable levels of confidence in self-efficacy items. Students are self-assured they have what it takes to earn a college degree ($M = 5.50$), believe

students like them can be academically successful ($M = 5.49$), can overcome academic challenges, if they put in the effort ($M = 5.42$), can successfully transfer to a four-year institution ($M = 5.24$), and are confident they can complete all courses with good grades ($M = 5.22$).

On the lower end of the confidence ratings, students reported moderate agreement that completing a credential or degree was central to their definition of success ($M = 4.89$, $SD = 1.27$). Financial concerns were prominent ($M = 4.59$, $SD = 1.49$), and a subset of students reported considering stopping out due to personal or family responsibilities ($M = 4.01$, $SD = 1.76$). The higher standard deviations present with these items reflect less consensus and greater variability. While all survey items were rated relatively positively, Table 10 presents items with the highest and lowest rated non-cognitive items based on mean scores.

Table 10
Highest and Lowest Rated Non-Cognitive Survey Items

Item	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Highest Rated		
My college degree is important for achieving my goals	5.62	0.754
Earning a college credential or degree will help me achieve my career goals	5.57	0.747
My college degree will improve my job opportunities	5.52	0.790
I enjoy learning new things in college	5.52	0.788
Lowest Rated		
I feel confident completing my coursework despite personal challenges	5.01	1.19
Completing my credential or degree is part of how I define success for myself	4.89	1.27
I worry about paying for college	4.59	1.49
I've thought about stopping college because of personal or family responsibilities	4.01	1.76

Note: This table presents the highest and lowest rated non-cognitive items based on mean scores.

Survey – Checkbox Items Section

While the Likert-scale items captured the students' beliefs and perceptions, in the next set of items, the participants were asked to indicate what influence(s) were present in their decision

to enroll in college; they could select multiple influences (check multiple boxes). The data indicate that these students were most influenced to enroll by a desire to secure a better job or earn more income (82.5%), followed by personal interest in a subject or field (60.5%). Students' decisions to enroll were also notably influenced by a desire to set an example for my family (58.8%) and through encouragement from family/friends (43.9%). Transferring to a four-year university (37.7%) is important, but not a primary influence. Influences that were less frequently selected included financial aid and scholarships (28.9%), seeing people like me succeed (22.8%), support from a mentor or teacher (18.4%), I didn't have other options (6.1%), and Other (5.3%). The frequency that each influence was selected is presented in Table 11.

Table 11
Enrollment Influences

Influence	count	%
To get a better job / earn more income	94	82.5
Personal interest in a subject or field	69	60.5
To set an example for my family	67	58.8
Encouragement from family/friends	50	43.9
To transfer to a four-year university	43	37.7
Financial aid or scholarships	33	28.9
I see people like me succeeding in college	26	22.8
Support from a mentor or teacher	21	18.4
I didn't have other options	7	6.1
Other	6	5.3

Note: Participants were allowed to select multiple influences.

Bringing together data from both sets of survey items reveals alignment between students' perceptions of the value of their education and their motivations for enrolling in college. The Latino male participants in this study most frequently reported enrolling to secure better job opportunities or increase earning potential (82.5%), which closely corresponds with

the highest-rated Likert-scale items emphasizing degree utility, including beliefs that a college credential will improve job opportunities ($M = 5.52$) and help achieve career goals ($M = 5.57$).

Similarly, personal interest in a subject or field (60.5%) was the second highest reported enrollment influence and can be linked to students' strong agreement with survey Likert items such as enjoying learning new things in college ($M = 5.52$) and finding coursework interesting and meaningful ($M = 5.12$). These patterns suggest that both extrinsic (economic) and intrinsic (interest-driven) motivations continue to play an important role in shaping students' educational experiences.

At the same time, some areas of misalignment were revealed. Despite encouragement from family and friends (43.9%) being a strong enrollment influence, some students indicated they had considered stopping out due to personal or family responsibilities ($M = 4.01$). This suggests that while students enter college with clear and purposeful motivations, financial and life circumstances continue to influence their ability to persist.

Qualitative Research Findings

The second research question was: In what ways do Latino males perceive the value of community college degrees and certificates? After coding and analysis were completed, four primary themes were constructed, capturing the ways Latino males perceive the value of their community college education: (a) College as a Path to Economic and Life Advancement, (b) Encouragement and Social Capital, (c) Negotiating Support and Belonging, and (d) Becoming the One Who Changes the Story. Each primary theme is further elaborated through sub-themes, which represent more specific patterns observed across participant narratives. These sub-themes highlight key facets of participants' lived experiences and help to contextualize the broader themes.

College as a Path to Economic and Life Advancement

When Latino males were asked what earning their degree means to them and how it has changed how they see their future, they regularly expressed the belief that their community college education will lead to economic improvement and employment opportunities.

Throughout interviews and focus groups, participants acknowledged that their degrees would help them obtain better jobs or advance in their current positions.

Improvement Through Education

Sammy felt motivated to attend community college, stating, “I don't really like the job I have right now. I have had different jobs... warehouses, construction, and painting. I don't like my life being in someone's hands. My expenses are dependent on that check. I don't really like my life being like that.” Similarly, Isaac said, “I wasn't making a lot of money. I had worked as a cook. And then at the time that I signed up for community college, I was working at a gas station, and I just, like, I don't want to do this for the rest of my life. I was like, the only way I see out of this is through getting a degree.” In addition, Joaquin sought purposeful work and said, “I wasn't satisfied with my work at the time. At the time, my job wasn't very satisfying, so it was paying the bills, but I didn't feel anything meaningful.”

Degree Utility and Goals

Participants regularly shared their perceptions of the usefulness of their degree. Several participants found an immediate connection between their certificate or degree and their career goals. While already in a stable position, Adam realized he needed to take the necessary steps to be prepared for the changes affecting his work. This led him to his community college, where he was working on a certificate in cybersecurity. Joaquin stated, “Once I get my license, specifically in nursing, there's a high demand, so the doors are gonna open.” Victor expressed, in broad

terms, his perception of the utility of his degree, stating, “The way I see my degree, it's definitely gonna help me get further in my career.”

Some participants discussed the value of their community college education in a less direct way, yet their positive perceptions were apparent. Reflecting on where his degree would take him, Ernie stated, “I'm gonna be in a good spot. I don't know what employer is gonna hire me, but I know that having those credentials is just gonna open up major doors post-graduation.” Jeremy acknowledged that his community college degree might be his first stepping stone, stating, “I've done a little bit of research into what doors an Associate's in Psychology can open for me, but I know it would benefit me more to go for the Bachelor's. An associate's is just the beginning.” After his initial, unsuccessful attempt at a university, Xavier expressed his growing confidence in his second attempt at his community college.

I'm more able to get hired by companies than before I had it. It definitely means a better resume [...]. If it leaves me better than how I was before, without the degree, it's an investment, for sure. It's changed [me] in better ways, knowing that I'm gonna finally complete some schooling. Although an associate, I don't know how far that's gonna get me, but it's a path in the right direction.

Financial Pressure and Provider

While exploring how financial concerns and external pressures shape educational decision-making, several Latino male participants expressed or acknowledged awareness of societal and cultural expectations for males to financially provide for others. Joe discussed this as one of his primary hurdles, saying,

As a Hispanic or Latino male, you don't really think about college or even take it that seriously because we are brought up thinking that we gotta work with our bodies, you

know, physical work, we gotta do labor work. We kind of think that's the only route we really have, because we don't really get encouraged to think we're smart enough to actually go to college.

In their responses, participants reflected on their purpose and goals, revealing a motivation that helps them mitigate the burdening expectations.

I think what it is, maybe culturally, men are supposed to work and provide. But you're going to be able to better provide if you do go to college and get your education in a good field. And if you really want to provide, you can provide best by going to college (Joaquin).

Similarly, Isaac shared a series of thoughts related to these pressures.

I stress about it because it's not happening fast enough, cause it's like, I need to be the provider for my family. Especially, I have a wife now, and I wanna be the provider for her and take care of her and everything like that, you know? I think my wife put it best, in that she's like, you know, you're doing this for our future. The amount that you're gonna be doing in the future outweighs, however much you feel like you're not doing right now.

However, Isaac further acknowledged that the stereotype of males as breadwinners is a message he struggles with.

I grew up with a single mom, but even she was like, 'a man provides type of thing,' so it's like, I've always had that mentality. It's tough. It's kind of like a realignment in my brain of thinking. Not only should I get a degree because it's something that I want, but also because [my wife and I are] a team. Just because I suddenly have a "good job," it doesn't mean that anything really changes, other than the bills are less stressful, you know?

Joe shared how such pressure has served as an inspiration or motivation for him, declaring,

I do believe that a man should be the breadwinner. Not to say that a woman can't, but I believe that the primary breadwinner should be the man, or take on the majority of the financial responsibility in the household. So, those things do motivate me, especially now. I don't have a family, and I'm not even in a relationship, but I want to at least be ready for when that day does come.

Gabe shared that those financial concerns and external pressures contributed greatly to his thoughts of quitting or taking a break. He explained,

When I went back to school, I still didn't have legal status; I was still undocumented. I was challenged with having to pay out-of-state tuition. Fortunately, it was just one semester. After that, I was able to acquire legal status. It was very difficult, but at the same time, it felt more rewarding. Obviously, I'm a provider in my household, and a lot of people in my position quit school. It's definitely been the biggest challenge for me.

During a focus group on this topic, Xavier recognized that his brother-in-law was experiencing similar challenges when he was in college. The discussion from other participants appeared to help him realize a double-standard he had held.

When my sister's husband was going to school, she was the provider; she was the only one working, and he was the one going to school. I found it a little weird, but I wonder if I would have thought differently if it were the other way around. Like, if he was the one who was working and providing, and my sister was going to school, would I have found that less weird?

For other participants, other types of pressures were more prevalent. Ariel said time was a stronger constraint on him, sharing, “I work 40 hours plus sometimes, and then I have to come back and do homework, and I still have to take care of the house stuff. I mean, it's hard juggling all of it at one time.” This work-school-life balance challenge was mentioned by most of the working participants in the study.

Encouragement and Social Capital

Participants discussed the impact that family encouragement, moral support, and other validating factors had on their persistence. Overwhelmingly, they revealed that family, peers, and mentors offer encouragement and validation by reminding them of the value of persisting to completion. Additionally, the Latino male participants discussed the benefits of forming various types of connections on campus and how developing a network helped them negotiate additional layers of support.

Family encouragement and Support

Isaac said, “I did think of stopping out at one point, and then my wife had to calm me down.” He went on to explain how his wife said, “It [stopping out] doesn't make any sense for our future. Like, why would you put in this much effort so far, and then just ditch it?” According to Ariel, his boss encouraged him to complete his certificate to progress with the company. “So, yeah, she had a direct influence on me going back [to school].”

Given his undocumented status, Sammy admitted he has wondered whether it is all worth it. Sammy shared that his father reminds him that education is “a key that can open the door.” According to Sammy, his mother “basically said, ‘Just keep going, you don't know what could happen. Maybe you can get blessed one day.’ So, that's why I continue. If my mom didn't tell me that. I probably wouldn't be here.”

Faculty Support and Validation

Speaking about instructors and student life staff, Sammy said they “have helped me a lot... written a lot of letters of recommendation, evaluated a lot of my applications for scholarships, and gave me the opportunity to manage projects.”

Ernie credits an instructor with not letting him give up in his first semester. “It was my FYE teacher, like, ‘No, come talk to me every week. We’ll get through this.’ So yeah, I got through that first month, and then something just clicked.” Similarly, Will spoke of the support he received from an instructor, sharing, “They make me feel wanted. I’m struggling with a class, and they help me. They see me. I’m not just a student who has a C, an F, or anything; they see someone with value.” Isaac shared that when he lost a family member, some faculty were “really kind and helpful.” “He [an instructor] was like, hey, we’re gonna figure something out... take all the time you need. That was monumental to me, emotionally and mentally, but [also] to my academic success at that time, you know?” For Xavier, receiving affirmations from faculty has been validating.

One of my instructors, after submitting my portfolio last semester, said, ‘You’re gonna get a job right after college, I already know it.’ And I’m like, really? She was just very positive... and that made me feel a lot better about continuing my education and sticking to it.

Negotiating Support and Belonging

Social capital exists in the “relations among persons” and facilitates “productive activity” (Coleman, 1988, pp. 100-101). Coleman asserts that the value of social capital lies in the extent to which individuals can access “resources that they can use to achieve their interests” (1988, p.

101). As a result, colleges aim to help students develop a sense of belonging and a connection to academic and non-academic supports.

Having connections to others on campus, such as peers, helped some Latino male participants perceive greater value in their community college education. Will spoke with admiration of some fellow Latino male students, saying, “I looked at them because [of their] determination, just everything about them, and them attending class made me want to continue my career here at [the community college].” Jeremy also conveyed an appreciation for his Latino friends in college, stating, “We all sort of lean on each other and support each other.” The social capital built through these peer relationships provides students with emotional support, which is important to student persistence and success.

Academic and non-academic resources, particularly the staffing in these areas, have been key to many participants’ persistence. For example, engagement in student life activities or acceptance of on-campus job opportunities helped participants benefit from social contacts. Will, a student employee, expressed appreciation for the staff he works with, saying, “Like a flower, they made me bloom. I was so stuck in my shell, and they just made me come out of it, and they just helped me with resources.” Victor, also a student employee, recalls, “All these people would want to strike a conversation with you, would want to talk about what your goals are and what you really could be doing about them, or, like, how you could be applying yourself and being proactive to get what you want.” Several other participants agreed, describing the benefits of building social capital as providing “extra support,” and helping them to “navigate.”

While discussing resources or services most helpful to their success, participants frequently credited the library and tutoring services with having a significant positive impact on their success. Joaquin recalls the library helping him identify articles and other sources. Isaac

fondly remembers, ‘I wouldn’t have passed my chemistry course over the summer had I not had the tutoring center.’ Ariel also noted that online tutoring was helpful, and said, ‘I’ve also worked with a couple of librarians for sourcing documents. Librarians have helped me locate sources for a couple of references that I needed to use.’

A few non-academic departments were mentioned several times as key resources for Latino male participants. Isaac said, ‘I would be completely lost if it wasn’t for advising.’ During focus group #4, all participants confirmed their reliance on federal student aid. Bobby stated, ‘Without FAFSA, I wouldn’t be able to be in college, and I don’t think I would be pursuing a degree if it wasn’t for FAFSA.’ Victor agreed, ‘Financial aid was a huge part of my coming to college,’ and discussed how vital it was to have enough to pay for classes and textbooks. Will also expressed doubt that he would be attending college if not for financial aid, ‘I don’t know if I would have been able to come to community college if it wasn’t for FAFSA, because money was an issue.’

Several other participants discussed the benefits of on-campus involvement. Ernie described student clubs and organizations as ways to meet ‘groups of individuals that can relate... to all these different stories... it has made a huge difference.’ Gabe found community in his community college’s Computer Science Club, especially in the ways it helped them ‘reach out to professionals in the industry.’

Despite recognizing the value of community college resources, some participants admitted to avoiding help-seeking behaviors. When asked about resources utilized, Joe stated, ‘I don’t tend to ask for help a lot of the time. Not to say that I don’t, but I like to fix my problems before I make them other people’s problems.’ Matching this sentiment, Jeremy said, ‘I really haven’t used any resources, I guess. I’ve just been trying to do it all on my own.’ He further

acknowledged that he tends to work to figure it out on his own, but recognized, “Sometimes, you know, thinking about tutoring feels kind of scary, because maybe there's a feeling of defeat if you ask for help.”

Apparent in most interviews and focus group discussions with participants was the positive impact that forming connections and a sense of belonging provided. Latino male students shared that these feelings contributed to their persistence. Comparing his community college experience with his first year at a university, Xavier said, “I feel like I belong, for sure. There are a lot of Latinos in my community college. It's very diverse. At [university], I didn't feel like I belonged that much, but here, I feel like I belong.” Gabe concurred, saying, “It definitely feels like I belong, and even for people who are a minority, there is a sense of community. It [campus] is very welcoming, and I definitely think that makes a difference.’

In a few rare instances, participants indicated that they persisted despite failing to establish a sense of belonging. Joaquin said, "I don't think I've experienced, like, a sense of belonging. I don't know, that might be because I'm a male in nursing? So, there's not that many of us. And I think I'm the only other Latino male in my class, so I haven't experienced any sense of belonging."

Becoming the One Who Changes the Story

A constant sentiment among nearly every participant reflected an intrinsic motivation for individual achievement and/or a desire to change the family story. Some participants did not or rarely experienced doubt or hesitation in their decision to enroll in community college. At the same time, many participants described their college enrollment as a means of improving their family's economic circumstances and role modeling for younger relatives.

A few participants described the decision to enroll as necessary and explained the work to be successful as nothing too difficult. Joaquin, a military veteran, said, “I haven't really struggled. ... I just kind of have that in me, maybe from the military, I'm not sure, but yeah. It's an intrinsic thing.” While some Latino male participants began their educational journey with a healthy level of confidence in their ability to succeed academically, most discussed developing self-efficacy through their community college experience. Gabe acknowledged, “At the very beginning, it was very overwhelming; everything was new. ... but I think my position in the journey makes it easier to just keep going. It's easier to stay motivated now.” Jeremy recalled,

I wasn't really confident in myself that I could do this. I wasn't really ever great at school, and I didn't really have that pressure to make something of myself. So being in your 30s and going back to school, it's a different ballgame. I'm more mature, and I realized that school is important to get to where I need to be to make my dreams come true.

As self-efficacy increased, participants reported that their commitment to completing their educational goals was strengthened. “[College] has shown me that I can handle the academic side of things. ... So now, a future as a nurse practitioner looks more doable, so I guess it's showing me that I can handle something that I didn't think I could before” (Joaquin). For Isaac, personal growth and self-acceptance were added benefits,

Yeah, no, it's definitely filled me with more confidence and taught me to like myself more. For a long time, I always thought, like, I'm a burnout, I'm a loser, whatever. But now it's like, I feel proud of myself, and I really feel optimistic about my future. I'm like, oh, I can do things, I'm capable of this stuff.

Role Modeling

Participants frequently described their motivation in relational terms, connecting their educational pursuits to the well-being and betterment of their families. Focus group responses suggest that Latino male participants view the degree or credential as a tool to transform their family trajectory, improving their own and the next generation's futures. Adam was mindful that by returning to community college to earn a certificate, he was also striving to be a good role model for his daughters. Several first-generation participants expressed pride in their determination to complete their educational goals, especially to show their children, siblings, and other younger relatives that college is attainable. "I'm the first boy in my family to graduate from high school, so being able to come to community college and just get my associate's [degree] in this field means absolutely everything, because it is me breaking a cycle" (Will). Bobby agreed, "I come to succeed and just kind of break that chain of sorts, like [the other participant] was saying, for my family, being the first one here in college and the closest to graduate soon. I will kind of break that cycle, and [be] a role model for my younger siblings."

Ariel, speaking on being a first-generation student, said, "I feel proud about that, because a lot of times we [Latino males] just go to work. We just work hard and don't really go to school, so it'll be nice to finish that." Similarly, Ernie noted, "And with all my younger nephews and nieces, showing them that Hispanics and Native Americans do have a place on campus. They do belong. They can succeed. It's a lot of work, it's a lot of dedication, but we have it in us."

Integrated Findings

As the final step in this explanatory sequential mixed-methods study, the researcher used qualitative data analysis outcomes to explain the quantitative findings. Table 12 presents integrated quantitative and qualitative findings to identify areas of agreement and contradiction

in the factors contributing to the value that Latino male students place on community college education.

Table 12
Mixed Methods Merged/Integrated Results

Quantitative Results	Qualitative Theme	Participant Quote	Integrated Interpretation
High agreement: <i>My college degree is important for achieving my goals</i> (M = 5.62) Students were most influenced to enroll by a desire to secure a better job or earn more income (82.5%)	College as a Path to Economic and Life Advancement,	“The way I see my degree, it's definitely gonna help me get further in my career.” (Victor)	Agreement: Quantitative and qualitative results converged, reflecting participants' strong belief in the value of their degree.
High agreement: <i>I have what it takes to earn a college degree</i> (M = 5.50) Students are highly influenced to enroll by personal interest in a subject or field (60.5%)	Encouragement and Social Capital	“I've never thought of it as too hard and something I couldn't do. I've always thought of it as something that I need to do.” (Ariel)	Agreement: Quantitative and qualitative data reflect participants' high sense of capability.
Moderate agreement: <i>I worry about paying for college</i> (M = 4.59) Financial aid or scholarships minimally influenced enrollment among participants (28.9%)	Negotiating Support and Belonging	“Without FAFSA, I wouldn't be able to be in college, and I don't think I would be pursuing a degree if it wasn't for FAFSA.” (Bobby)	Contradiction: Quantitative data did not show considerable financial concern over paying for college, yet qualitative data revealed underlying financial uncertainties
High agreement: <i>I've thought about stopping college because of personal or family responsibilities</i> (M = 4.01) Encouragement from family/friends (43.9%)	Encouragement and Social Capital Becoming the One Who Changes the Story	“I did think of stopping out at one point, and then my wife had to calm me down and be like, no, it doesn't make any sense for our future. Like, why would you put in this much effort so far, and then just ditch it?” (Isaac)	Agreement: Quantitative results reflect some acknowledgment of having considered stopping out, while participant narratives (qualitative data) revealed family support and encouragement to persist.

Note. Quantitative results are presented as mean (M) scores based on Likert-scale survey responses. Qualitative themes were derived from focus group and interview data. Illustrative quotes represent participants' perspectives aligned with each theme. Integration highlights areas of convergence (agreement) and divergence (contradiction).

Summary

Chapter 4 began with a review of the research questions and the data collection method, followed by descriptive demographics and the findings. The quantitative analysis identified contributing factors to Latino male degree utility, confidence ratings on self-efficacy items, and top influences on enrollment decisions. The qualitative findings were arranged into the following themes: (a) College as a Path to Economic and Life Advancement, (b) Encouragement and Social Capital, (c) Negotiating Support and Belonging, and (d) Becoming the One Who Changes the Story. The themes were supported by quotes from participants, which exemplified their experiences and perspectives. Chapter 5 reflects on the findings and offers recommendations for future research.

Chapter 5 - Conclusion and Recommendations

This chapter briefly reviews the purpose of the study, research questions, and theoretical and conceptual frameworks, followed by a review of the methodology, data collection, and the resulting findings as they relate to the research questions, frameworks, and literature previously reviewed. The chapter also presents implications for practice and recommendations for future research. The chapter then concludes with a summary.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine how Latino male graduating community college students perceive the practical value of their degrees and certificates and to understand how this perception influenced their decisions to enroll and persist in college. Additionally, the study seeks to identify the factors that shape Latino male students' awareness of degree value and their decisions to attend community college.

Research Questions

RQ1: What factors influence Latino male graduating students' awareness of the value of their community college education?

RQ2: In what ways do Latino males perceive the value of community college degrees and certificates?

Discussion of Findings Related to the Research Questions

Research Question 1: What factors influence Latino male graduating students' awareness of the value of their community college education?

The quantitative findings from this study indicate that Latino male students are acutely aware of the value of their community college education, particularly its importance for achieving long-term career and life goals. One of the most salient factors influencing participants' awareness of degree value was the perceived connection between education and economic mobility. Quantitative findings found participants consistently identified their college degree as important for securing stable employment, increasing earning potential, and creating

opportunities for upward mobility. These findings reinforce the idea that, for Latino males, degree utility is a primary factor in determining the worth of their community college education.

Educational goal findings further suggest that participants may view their community college certificates and degrees as strategic steps towards broader educational goals, including transfer to a four-year institution. Just under half of all survey participants (43%) selected more than one educational goal, suggesting either an initial plan to pursue stackable credentials and/or transfer, or reflecting a gained confidence in their ability to pursue additional degrees as they neared completion of their planned program.

Beyond the economic impacts, the findings indicate that the value of community college education for Latino males extends beyond financial stability. Many participants attach meaningful, intangible value to earning a college degree. It represented a way to explore a personal interest, set an example for their families, validate their academic capabilities, and experience deep personal pride.

Research Question 2: In what ways do Latino males perceive the value of community college degrees and certificates?

In this explanatory sequential research design, the qualitative findings are intended to help explain the quantitative results (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). As such, the qualitative findings aligned with many of the quantitative results and provided additional context to several assertions. One primary assertion was that community college degrees were highly valued, particularly for the economic advancement they enabled. Participant quotes provide the voices to move beyond survey mean scores and percentages, highlighting the key perspectives that underpin them.

Consistent with the quantitative findings, Latino male students reported that the value of their community college education was multidimensional. Similar to the highest mean-scored survey items and enrollment influence items, focus group and interview participants shared that they believed earning a certificate or degree would pave the way to a future with more opportunities. Participants expressed clarity and confidence in the utility of their degrees, drawing connections to pay raises, job promotions, and the ability to soon apply for jobs they had lacked the educational qualifications for.

However, a few qualitative findings diverged from the quantitative. Despite strong endorsement of the value of education, participants expressed significant concern over the affordability of college and noted the costs of attending as a persistent barrier, even among highly motivated students. Financial considerations were moderate during the quantitative data collection phase. However, during the qualitative phase, these considerations emerged as influential in shaping students' awareness of value. A notable proportion expressed concerns about financial challenges and indicated they had considered stopping out because of financial pressures. This tension highlights the important dynamic that, even as students recognize the long-term economic benefits of their education, the immediate costs of attendance can complicate their ability to persist. In this way, students' awareness of value is not static, but continuously negotiated in relation to both present constraints and future goals.

Discussion of Findings Related to Conceptual Frameworks

The Situated Expectancy-Value Theory (SEVT) (Wigfield et al., 2020) is an evolution of the original expectancy-value theory of achievement motivation (Eccles et al., 1983). Eccles and Wigfield updated the theory to SEVT, highlighting the *situated* nature of motivation (Wigfield et al., 2020).

The Situated Expectancy-Value Theory

The quantitative findings in this study connect to this *situated* emphasis, providing a more nuanced understanding of how that context operates for Latino male students. In particular, the findings highlight the importance of family and culture in shaping students' perceptions of value. The authors, Eccles and Wigfield, noted that SEVT emphasizes non-static individual behaviors and choices, often influenced by social and environmental factors (Eccles & Wigfield, 2020). SEVT is the conceptual framework for RQ1 and the survey instrument. As such, the quantitative results in this study align with the SEVT constructs but also reveal contrasts among Latino male community college students.

The top enrollment influence survey findings on degree value and personal interest align with subjective task values (STV), a key component of the SEVT model. Figure 1 presents the Eccles expectancy value model, where the subjective task values consist of four areas: 1) interest-enjoyment value, 2) attainment value, 3) utility value, and 4) relative cost.

Figure 1
Eccles expectancy value model of achievement choices

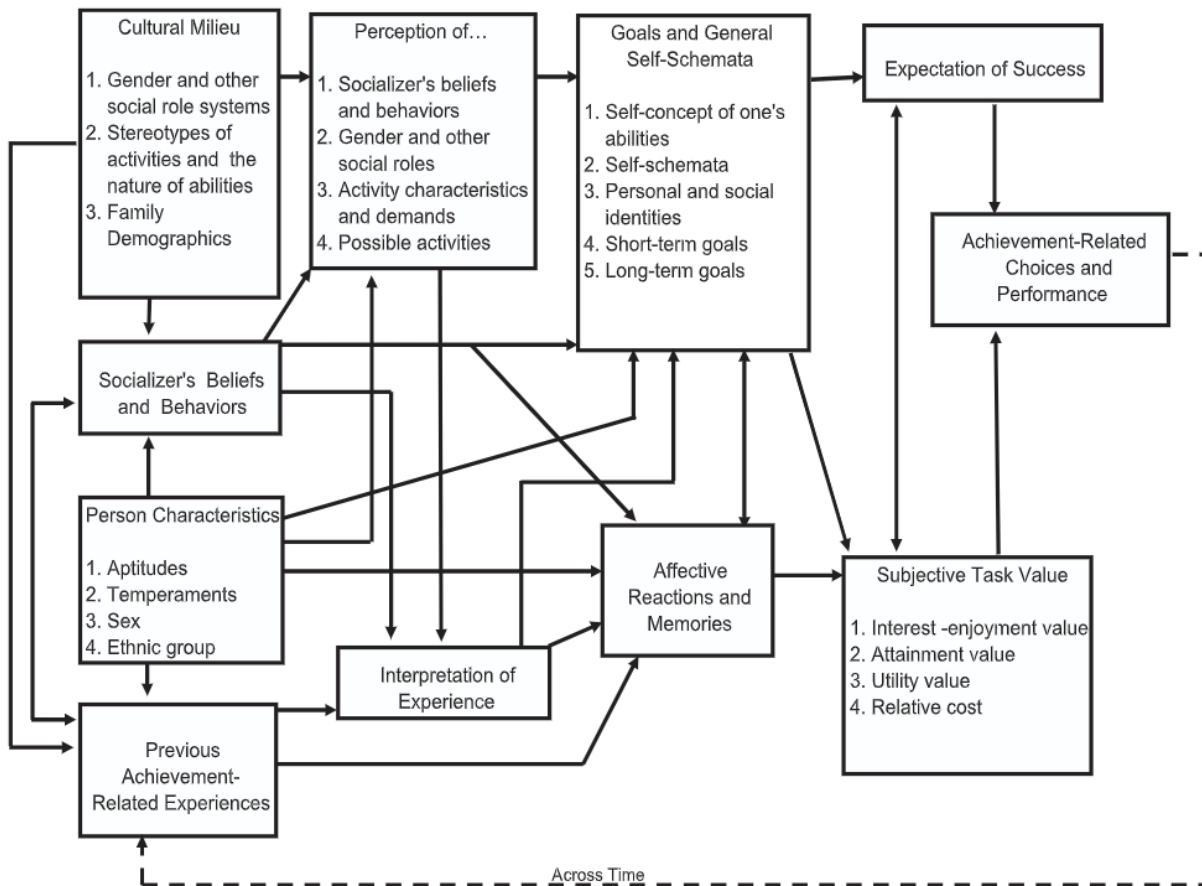


Fig. 1. Eccles Expectancy value model of achievement choices.

Note. The Subjective Task Value (STV) components provide an assessment of a task’s worth.

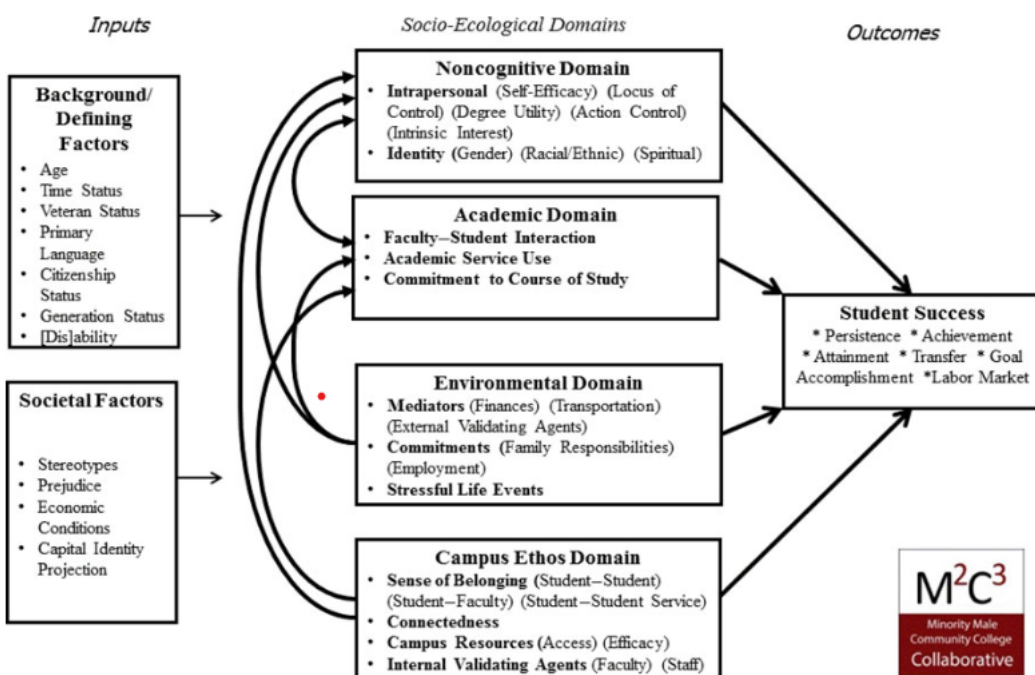
“Because each of these four components of STV can, in principle, vary... in any one moment, they can either increase or decrease an individual’s motivation to engage in any particular achievement-related task or activity...” (Eccles & Wigfield, 2020). Respondents rated their college degree as important for career goals, increasing job opportunities, and long-term stability. These results align closely with SEVT’s assertion that individuals are more likely to engage in tasks they perceive as useful for achieving future goals.

The second conceptual framework, the Socio-Ecological Outcomes (SEO) Model, examines the success of men of color in community colleges while accounting for social, environmental, intrapersonal, and campus-based factors (Harris & Wood, 2016).

Socio-Ecological Outcomes

The Socio-Ecological Outcomes (SEO) Model contains four domains: noncognitive, academic, environmental, and campus ethos. These domains (seen in Figure 2) account for the experiences and interactions that influence the journeys of men of color after they enroll in community college, which offer a nuanced view of the factors shaping Latino males' experiences and perceptions (Harris & Wood, 2016).

Figure 2
Socio-Ecological Outcomes (SEO) Model



The qualitative themes derived from the second phase of the study strongly align with the SEO model constructs. Of the four qualitative themes, two align firmly with the variables found in the SEO noncognitive domain: *College as a Path to Economic and Life Advancement* and *Becoming the One Who Changes the Story*. In the noncognitive domain, variables reflect how students feel and respond to their environment, including their interactions with people and experiences with the institution. This domain captures the “emotional and affective responses to social contexts” (Harris & Wood, 2016, p. 38). Participants consistently expressed confidence that their degrees would open doors to better jobs and/or futures. Furthermore, students regularly described their education as a means of personal and professional development. Additionally, participants discussed their confidence and self-efficacy, and how these factors contributed to their success. Jeremy, a participant in FG8, stated, “I'm proving it to myself that I can go out there and succeed in whatever I set my mind to.”

Participant voices also revealed a strong internal drive to achieve their goals, along with an awareness that earning a college education could shift the trajectory of their family’s future. They expressed great pride in their ability to achieve both personal aspirations and meaningful goals for their families. Qualitative findings revealed that family and community were central to how students perceived the value of their education. During focus groups and interviews, participants frequently mentioned their educational attainment as a way to support their families, serve as role models, and change the story for future generations. These perspectives reflect a collective understanding of educational success that extends beyond individual value, tied to their familial responsibilities and cultural expectations. These collective findings connect directly to the degree utility, self-efficacy, and locus of control variables found in the noncognitive domain.

The next qualitative theme, *Encouragement and Social Capital*, complements the environmental domain well. In this domain, external commitments and stressful life events are considered alongside validating agents that mitigate negative effects and provide the encouragement students need to persist (Harris & Wood, 2016). Through focus group and interview sessions, the study found this to be a common narrative among Latino male participants. For example, one participant's wife kept assuring him that the time he was investing in his education now would pay off later, and another participant's company accommodated a 20-hour workweek so he could attend classes full-time for a semester. These positive social networks and external validating agents helped them persist despite challenges, which is the crux of the SEO environmental domain.

Encouragement and Social Capital also align with the SEO academic domain, evidenced in the narratives coded under the faculty support and validation category. While a handful of students reported caring, meaningful interactions with faculty that contributed to their success, most indicated that their internal drive was the primary factor. Similar to Harris and Wood's (2016) description of men of color as "reluctant to pursue faculty interaction" (p. 39), Latino males in this study described their connection with faculty as appreciated but inessential. When discussing library and tutoring services, many participants mentioned them as key contributors to their success. However, many participants openly acknowledged their avoidance of help-seeking, sharing a desire to figure things out on their own.

Negotiating Support and Belonging, the last of the qualitative themes, aligns with the variables situated in the SEO campus ethos domain. In this domain, variables such as college programs, campus resources, and the day-to-day practices that shape campus culture are found to influence the success of men of color. Participants discussed the role student services played in

their success, highlighting how areas like financial aid helped them overcome financial barriers to higher education and how advising helped them navigate their educational pathways. Students also shared that library and tutoring services were frequently used and found to be worthwhile for their academic success. Moreover, participants spoke candidly about the campus practitioners who had a positive impact on them, sharing how these individuals eased their concerns, offered encouragement, and engaged in meaningful conversations that helped them feel seen and valued.

Discussion of Findings Related to the Literature

Both quantitative and qualitative results confirmed, extended, and, in some cases, challenged prior research. The literature review highlights the themes of *familial influences and cultural values*, emphasizing the importance of family and culture in Latino males' valuation of college education. Parents, particularly mothers or *madres*, have served as primary supporting and validating agents (Crisp et al., 2015; Garza et al., 2014; Hines et al., 2019; Perez & Taylor, 2016; Trevino & DeFreitas, 2014; Ramirez et al., 2020; Sáenz et al., 2020; Santos, 2004; and Vasquez et al., 2022). Survey participants ranked setting an example for family (58.8%) and encouragement from family/friends (43.9%) among the most influential factors in their enrollment. Participant narratives conveyed a tender tone of appreciation when discussing encouragement from their parents; in particular, they discussed the reassuring ways their fathers, mothers, and wives offered support and encouraged them to keep going.

Financial factors carry significant weight when individuals decide whether to engage in a task, such as pursuing a college degree. The qualitative results of this study revealed that, while Latino males understood that their college degrees would provide better-paying job opportunities and improve their socioeconomic futures, they still faced cultural expectations to work and provide for their families. This directly aligns with the literature indicating that Latino males

often consider leaving college to work and prove themselves (Carales, 2020; Sáenz & Ponjuán, 2009; Sáenz & Ponjuán, 2012; Sáenz et al., 2013; and Trevino & DeFreitas, 2014).

Additionally, Latino males discussed financial aid as critical to their ability to attend college and understood that community colleges offered them a way to achieve goals in an effective, quality, yet low-cost manner. For many, earning an associate degree or certificate at a community college was a conscious decision to minimize debt while pursuing additional education goals. This finding contrasts with the literature in that Latino male participants did not view finances solely as a stressful constraint; they also discussed financial decision-making at the individual and family levels in strategic ways.

Masculinity often shapes the educational experiences of Latino males. The robust literature on masculinity reveals that it can have both positive and negative impacts. Masculinity can cause men to withhold emotions and avoid engaging in a variety of help-seeking behaviors or campus resources out of a sense of pride (Harris & Harper, 2008; Huerta & Fishman, 2014; Rodriguez et al., 2019; Sáenz et al., 2013; and Sáenz & Ponjuán, 2012). Participants in the qualitative portion of the study demonstrated the negative impacts of masculinity, expressing a preference for avoiding asking for assistance or using academic resources. Conversely, that same source of pride is often the driving force behind Latino men's efforts to accomplish their goals (Luis et al., 2023; Palacios, 2016; and Sáenz et al., 2013). In several instances, participants presumably channeled masculinity, pushing themselves to prove to themselves that they could complete their educational goals and take pride in earning their degrees.

Degree utility is a significant theme in the literature and in the study's findings alike. Palacios (2016) and Vasquez Urias and Wood (2015) both found that when Latino men understand how their degree can improve their job opportunities, their belief in its utility is

strengthened. Similarly, Latino male study participants most frequently reported enrolling to secure better job opportunities or increase earning potential (82.5%), which closely corresponds with the highest-rated Likert-scale items emphasizing degree utility, including beliefs that a college credential will improve job opportunities ($M = 5.52$) and help achieve career goals ($M = 5.57$). The qualitative findings of this study complement the literature on degree utility by expanding the definition for Latino male participants to include intergenerational impact, personal validation, and role modeling.

Unexpected Findings

At the conclusion of each focus group and interview, participants were asked what advice they would offer colleges to better support Latino male students. While a couple of participants suggested expanding existing academic and non-academic resources, most emphasized the importance of utilizing available support systems. As Ariel noted, “The school does give you a lot of resources,” highlighting a shared perception that institutional supports are present and accessible. However, participants highlighted that Latino males benefit when they can actively connect with and use these resources.

This perspective was further contextualized by participants’ recognition of structural and cultural barriers. Ariel pointed out that parents of first-generation students may not have the knowledge to guide their children through the college enrollment process, while Jeremy added, “Navigating the academic system is sometimes really complicated for people in our community.” Together, these insights suggest that the challenge is not only about resources, but also about awareness, navigation, and utilization.

This finding may be considered unexpected, given that much of the literature and conversations about underserved populations in colleges often call for expanded services. In

contrast, participants in this study did not focus their recommendations on the college's deficits; instead, they described support as a shared understanding, emphasizing both the availability of resources and their own responsibility to engage with them.

Implications for Practice

The persistence gap in higher education among Latino male students was at the heart of this study, seeking to better understand how perceptions of degree value and utility shaped their college behaviors. The implications for this study suggest improving attainment outcomes for Latino males through frameworks that go beyond access and cultivate degree value awareness. There is an opportunity for community colleges to address the persistence disparity by making the practical value of a college credential clearer, more relevant, and continuously reinforced throughout the student experience. Participants demonstrated a strong orientation toward purpose, often connecting their educational pursuits to economic stability, family support, and long-term mobility. However, awareness of how specific programs of study translate into these outcomes was not always fully developed. Community colleges can address this by developing academic pathways and career outcomes across multiple touchpoints, including onboarding, advising, and classroom instruction. This includes not only highlighting labor market data but also acknowledging the broader meanings students assign to their education, such as personal pride, role modeling, and contributing to intergenerational advancement. Making these connections visible may strengthen Latino male students' commitment to completion by reinforcing the full meaning of their educational efforts.

Achieving the Dream (ATD), founded in 2004, is a national nonprofit that partners with community colleges to strengthen institutional capacity and improve student success. ATD's Community Vibrancy Framework (Achieving the Dream, 2025) is a fairly new approach that

explores ways for institutions to begin focusing on social and economic mobility. ATD (2025) urges, “leaders must connect this broader understanding of completion to the overall return on student investment in education, as well as how the return on education translates into measures that lead to community vibrancy” (p. 3). A framework such as this, or others like Guided Pathways or *Excelencia* in Education, could provide community colleges with the foundations and coaching needed to begin implementing these practices for improving attainment outcomes.

For governing boards, these recommendations require policies, strategies, and funding that explicitly support the institution(s)' efforts to strengthen degree value awareness early and often. Institutional leaders must expand their access agendas to intentionally connect degree pathways, workforce needs, and learning with whom to partner to serve students. Faculty contribute by reinforcing the relevance of coursework and connecting academic content to students' broader goals. It's imperative that student affairs practitioners create welcoming environments that help students navigate complex systems and conversations around transfer and/or career pathways. Together, these efforts reflect a coordinated approach that moves beyond access to support students in translating degree value into attainment.

Recommendations for Further Research

Examine development of degree value awareness over time.

Latino male participants rank high and confidently describe the practical value of their community college degrees. This study captured these reflections at or near completion; however, future research could explore how degree utility develops over a student's journey. A longitudinal study would help clarify whether a high degree value awareness was present among study participants at the onset of their educational journey or if it had developed and strengthened over several semesters.

Examine the role of masculinity in educational decision-making

Grounded in Yosso's cultural wealth model (2005), this study considered literature suggesting that masculinity can function as a source of motivation. Several participants described navigating and, at times, resisting negative internal messaging associated with masculinity, ultimately reframing it in ways that emphasized strength, responsibility, and care for themselves and their families. This sense of self-assurance reflected an internalized understanding of masculinity that supported, rather than hindered, their commitment to degree attainment. Further research on masculinity in educational decision-making may deepen understanding of this dynamic and identify ways institutions can more intentionally build on these strengths in practice.

Conclusion

As the labor market's demand for a skilled and credentialed workforce continues to rise, the attainment gap among Latino males remains a critical issue to be addressed. This study's findings revealed that Latino male participants were confident in the value of the community college education. While participants consistently acknowledged the economic and career benefits of a college degree, they also discussed the personal and familial significance. Their responses reflected a strong sense of pride and excitement at the prospect of proving to themselves that they could succeed. This suggests that for Latino males, the value of their community college education is not only defined by what they believe it will do for them, but also by what it will help them accomplish for their family.

Institutions of higher education are dedicated to improving student success outcomes, and community colleges are especially driven by a mission to uplift their communities. However, for colleges serving populations similar to those in this study, that commitment must translate into

action. This requires taking a hard look at institutional data, asking critical questions about who is and is not being served, and making transformational decisions that move beyond incremental change. If community colleges are serious about improving outcomes for Latino male students, then this work must be intentional, measurable, and sustained.

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Appendix A - Alignment Table

Problem Based on Literature Findings	Research Questions	Conceptual Frameworks	Methodology	Interview/Survey Questions
Latino male enrollment at community colleges, in particular, increased by 63.4% between 2005 and 2013 (Hatch-Tocaimaza, 2017). However, Latino males continue to complete college at significantly lower rates than their peers (Hatch-Tocaimaza, 2017; Luis et al., 2023; Sáenz et al., 2018). Despite the implementation of research-backed programming and practices by institutions, the attainment gap for Latino males remains a pressing issue (Sáenz & Ponjuán, 2012; Sáenz et al., 2013; Palacios, 2016).	RQ1 (Quantitative): What factors contribute to Latino male graduating students' awareness of the value of community college education and their decision to enroll and persist? RQ2 (Qualitative): In what ways do Latino males perceive the value of community college degrees and certificates in their decisions to enroll and persist?	Situated Expectancy-Value Theory (SEVT) (Eccles & Wigfield, 2020) Socio-Ecological Outcomes (SEO) model (Harris & Wood, 2016)	Explanatory Sequential Mixed Methods using survey data to inform focus group interviews of Latino male graduating students	Survey informed by the Community College Survey of Men (CCSM©) survey (See survey questions in Appendix F) Focus group interview questions – Survey responses and SEO model will inform the development of semi-structured focus group interview questions.

Appendix B - Request for Research Participation (CEO Email)

Subject: Request for Research Participation – Study on Latino Male Students’ Awareness of Degree Value

Dear [Chancellor/President's Name],

I hope this email finds you well. My name is Cynthia Ramos, and I serve as Dean of Student Affairs. I am also a doctoral candidate at Kansas State University, conducting research on Latino male students’ awareness of degree value and its impact on their community college enrollment decisions.

As part of my research, I am seeking to survey and interview Latino male students at all ten colleges in the Community College District, which are also HSI-designated colleges. A mixed methods approach will be used to survey and then conduct a follow up focus group of currently enrolled Latino male students who are graduating in Fall 2025 or Spring 2026, or who have completed at least 75% of a certificate program. I believe this study will provide valuable insights that may inform institutional efforts to support student success.

If needed, I am happy to discuss this request further at your convenience. Please let me know if we could schedule a brief meeting to explore how best to proceed. Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to your response.

Best regards,

Cynthia Ramos
Doctoral Candidate, Kansas State University
clramos@ksu.edu

Appendix C - KSU IRB Approval



Office of Research Integrity,
Compliance and Security

TO: Sandy Robinson
Educational Leadership

Proposal Number: IRB-13189

FROM: Lisa Rubin, Chair
Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects

DATE: 09/19/2025

RE: Proposal Entitled, "Exploring Latino male graduates' awareness of degree value and its influence on community college enrollment decisions.."

The Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects / Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Kansas State University has reviewed the proposal identified above and has determined that it is EXEMPT from further IRB review. This exemption applies only to the proposal - as written - and currently on file with the IRB. Any change potentially affecting human subjects must be approved by the IRB prior to implementation and may disqualify the proposal from exemption.

Based upon information provided to the IRB, this activity is exempt under the criteria set forth in the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects, **45 CFR §104(d), category: Exempt Category 2 Subsection ii.**

Certain research is exempt from the requirements of HHS/OHRP regulations. A determination that research is exempt does not imply that investigators have no ethical responsibilities to subjects in such research; it means only that the regulatory requirements related to IRB review, informed consent, and assurance of compliance do not apply to the research.

Any unanticipated problems involving risk to subjects or to others must be reported immediately to the Chair of the Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, the University Research Compliance Office, and if the subjects are KSU students, to the Director of the Student Health Center.

Electronically signed by Lisa Rubin on 09/19/2025 12:18 PM ET

Appendix D - Online Survey Email Invitation

Subject: Share Your Experience - Brief Survey for Latino Male Students

Dear [Student's Name],

I hope you are doing well. My name is Cynthia Ramos, and I am a doctoral candidate at Kansas State University, conducting a study on Latino male students' awareness of degree value and how it impacts their decisions to enroll in community college.

As a soon-to-be graduate, your insights are invaluable. I invite you to participate in a brief survey to share your experiences and perspectives. Your feedback will help inform efforts to better support Latino male students in higher education.

As a thank you for your time, you will have the opportunity to enter a drawing for a \$100 gift card upon completing the survey.

[Click here to take the survey](#)

This research study has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the protection of research participants of the [community college] and Kansas State University. Your participation is completely voluntary, and your responses will remain confidential. If you have any questions, please feel free to reach out to me at clramos@ksu.edu.

Thank you for considering this opportunity. I truly appreciate your time and insight!

Best regards,
Cynthia Ramos
Doctoral Candidate, Kansas State University
clramos@ksu.edu

Appendix E - Informed Consent Form

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Dr. Sandy Robinson, slrobins@ksu.edu

IRB CHAIR CONTACT INFORMATION: (*If you have questions or wish to discuss on any aspect of the research with an official of the university or the IRB.*) Lisa Rubin, rubin@ksu.edu, Chair, Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, Kansas State University.

You are invited to participate in a research study examining the perceptions and experiences of Latino male students in community college. This study is being conducted by Cynthia Ramos, a graduate student as part of a dissertation project at Kansas State University.

Participation is voluntary. Your responses will be anonymous and confidential. Your information collected as part of the research, even if identifiers are removed, will not be used or distributed for future research studies.

The survey should take approximately 10–15 minutes to complete. There are no known risks to participating. If you agree to participate, please continue. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer or stop at any time.

Do you consent to participate in this study?

- Yes
- No

Appendix F - Survey Questions

Are you currently enrolled at a community college? (Yes/No)

What is your race/ethnicity? (Check all that apply)

- ☐ Latino/Hispanic
- ☐ Black/African American
- ☐ White
- ☐ Asian/Pacific Islander
- ☐ Native American
- ☐ Other: _____

Are you a first-generation college student? (Yes/No)

What is your age? _____

What is your educational goal?

- ☐ Earn a certificate
- ☐ Earn an associate degree
- ☐ Earn a bachelor's degree
- ☐ Transfer to a 4-year university
- ☐ Other: _____

How confident are you in the following areas?

Use a **6-point Likert scale** *Strongly Disagree (1) → Strongly Agree (6)* unless otherwise noted.

- I can complete all of my courses with good grades.
- I can overcome academic challenges if I put in the effort.
- I can successfully transfer to a four-year institution if I choose to.
- I have what it takes to earn a college degree.
- My instructors believe I can succeed.
- The support services at this college make it easier for me to succeed.
- I feel confident completing my coursework despite personal challenges.
- I know how to find help when I need it.
- I believe students like me can be academically successful here.
- Earning a college credential or degree will help me support my family.
- I worry about paying for college.
- My college degree will improve my job opportunities.
- My college degree is important for achieving my goals.

- What I learn here is directly relevant to my life outside of school.
- I enjoy learning new things in college.
- I look forward to attending my classes.
- Earning a college credential or degree will help me achieve my career goals
- I find my coursework interesting and meaningful.
- I choose classes that interest me, even if they are challenging.
- I've thought about stopping college because of personal or family responsibilities.
- Completing my credential or degree is part of how I define success for myself.
- It's important to me to prove that I can succeed in college.
- The time I spend in school is worthwhile.
- Earning my credential or degree is something I take pride in.

What influenced your decision to enroll in college? (Select all that apply)

- ☐ To get a better job / earn more income
- ☐ To set an example for my family
- ☐ To transfer to a four-year university
- ☐ Encouragement from family/friends
- ☐ Support from a mentor or teacher
- ☐ Financial aid or scholarships
- ☐ Personal interest in a subject or field
- ☐ I didn't have other options
- ☐ I see people like me succeeding in college.
- ☐ Other _____.

Thank you for completing the survey! Your responses will help improve our understanding of the factors that impact Latino male enrollment and success in community college.

Invitation to Participate in a Focus Group Interview (Optional)

Would you be interested in participating in a **focus group interview** to share more about your experiences as a Latino male student? Participants will receive a **gift card to the campus coffee bar** as a thank you for their time. Your survey responses will remain anonymous and separate from your focus group participation. If you are interested, please provide your name and email address below. Leave blank if you are not interested.

[First and Last Name]

[Preferred Email Address]

[Preferred Phone Number]

Appendix G - Focus Group Interview Email Invitation

Study Participant,

Thank you for completing the survey about the experiences of Latino male students in community college. I'm reaching out because you indicated interest in participating in a focus group interview to share more about your experiences.

Participants will receive a gift card to the campus coffee bar as a thank you.

Details:

- Format: Small-group conversation (6–8 students)
- Duration: 30-45 minutes
- Dates and Times: *Week of January 12, 2026*. Complete the [Focus Group Sign-Up form](#) to select your preferred date/time option.

(Note: Space is limited for each session. You will receive a confirmation email once your spot is secured.)

Your voice is important. The focus group will help us better understand:

- What motivates Latino males to enroll and stay in college
- How you perceive the value of your degree or certificate
- What support systems help, and what barriers get in the way

Thank you again for contributing to this important study.

Warmly,
Cynthia Ramos
Doctoral Candidate, Kansas State University
clramos@ksu.edu

Appendix H - Focus Group Interview Protocol and Questions

Welcome & Purpose

1. Review and collect focus group consent forms. For Zoom group sessions, obtain verbal consent after review of the consent form.
2. Confidentiality. Explain that participation is voluntary. “Nothing you share will be linked to your name. You may skip any question or stop at any time.”
3. “Do I have your consent to audio and video record for transcription and analysis purposes?”
4. “Are there any questions before we begin?”

Warm-Up Question

To get started, please share your first name, your program, and how far you are into your studies.

- Course credits completed
- Employment status (FT/PT/not working)
- Program of study
- Enrollment level (FT/PT)

What initially brought you to attend community college?

Semi-structured questions – (not all questions were asked, nor necessarily asked in this order)

1. When you think about earning your degree or certificate, what does it mean to you personally?
2. How do you decide whether college is “worth” the time, effort, and cost?
3. In what ways has being in college changed how you see your future or yourself?
4. How has your family encouraged or influenced your decision to attend or continue in college?
5. Have peers, mentors, faculty, or staff played a role in your persistence? Please describe those experiences.
6. How would you describe your sense of belonging on this campus as a Latino male?
7. What resources or services have been most helpful to your success (advising, tutoring, financial aid, cultural centers, etc.)?
8. Tell me about a time when an instructor or staff member made you feel supported or unsupported. What impact did that have?
9. How do financial concerns shape the way you move through college—class load, working, stopping out, etc.?
10. How confident are you that your program will lead to better job opportunities or career growth? Why or why not?

11. How does the value you place on your degree influence whether you stay enrolled or think about stopping out?

Optional Questions That Directly Connect to Survey Results:

- The survey found that many Latino males rated “financial worry” as a major concern. Does this match your experience?
- The survey results showed high motivation to earn a credential to support the family. What does that meaning look like for you?

Closing Questions:

- What advice would you give to other Latino males considering community college?
- What advice would you give the college to better support Latino male students?
- Is there anything we didn’t ask about your experience that you think is important to share?

THANK YOU.

Remind participants they'll receive the gift card for their time.

Appendix I - Development of Code to Theme

