The role of religion and spirituality in the Latina/o student university experience

by

Mirta Rodriguez-Chavez

B.S., Fort Hays State University, 1996
M.S., Fort Hays State University, 1998

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of Special Education, Counseling and Student Affairs
College of Education

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

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Abstract

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of you so that in your difficult times, you could see that a daughter of immigrant teenage parents earned her spot in PhD degrees of the world. ¡Sí se puede!

Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my parents, Marta and Oscar Rodriguez, who have been there for me every step of the way. Their advice, love, and commitment to supporting me throughout the many challenges and triumphs in life are the reason I am here today.

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

According to a report by the 2020 Pew Hispanic Center, the Latina/o population in the U.S. is the fastest-growing minority population. Hispanics accounted for over 54% of the total growth for the United States between 2010 and 2019. Demographers estimate that in the year 2026, 4.1 million of the students enrolled within American colleges and universities will be of Hispanic descent, representing a projected increase of 26% since 2015 (Colby & Ortman, 2015).

While Latina/os have high population rates for people 18-24 years of age, they also have the lowest percentages for earning four-year degrees (Murphy & Murphy, 2018). The Latina/o educational attainment gap still exists and continues to be a major concern. In 2020, 21.8% of U.S. undergraduate college students were Latina/o, the second largest ethnic group enrolled at the undergraduate level (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021a). While the number of Latina/o college students is increasing overall, these students have continued to be underrepresented in four-year institutions.

Background of Problem

The educational achievement gap persists as Latina/o students comprised 16% of all bachelor's degrees conferred in 2019 compared to 61% earned by white students in the U.S. (Noe-Bustamante & Flores, 2019). The lack of knowledge about college processes by some Latina/o students and their families creates barriers to meeting priority deadlines to be adequately prepared for college. Many experience uncertainty around how to navigate university processes and structures, and a lack of resources also presents challenges for Latina/o student enrollment and retention (Murphy & Murphy, 2018). Variables related to family background and pre-college academic preparation (i.e.) time management, major selection, course-taking patterns, academic identification, psychosocial well-being, student engagement, experiences of

discrimination, and perceptions of campus climate) may also influence their academic success (Barnes & Slate, 2013).

Literature reveals that universities tend to place sole ownership of challenges on students rather than considering the role their institutions play as sources of stress and difficulties (Harper et al., 2013). The challenges in higher education for the Latina/o student population have often been framed around a trend of lower levels of college readiness and higher rates of attrition. However, these investigations have not explored the institutional barriers students face (Martin et al., 2017) that create challenges for Latina/o students in the form of discrimination and acculturation (French & Chavez, 2010; Huynh et al., 2012). To assist in closing the equity gap, educational leaders may benefit from understanding how students can be adequately prepared with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to be admitted and succeed in college (Barnes & Slate, 2013).

Problem Statement

Despite the growing population of Latina/o students in the United States, those who are entering college are not graduating at the same rate as their white counterparts. In 2020, the six-year Hispanic student graduation rate was 8% lower than that of white students (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). The U.S. population grew by 22.7 million from 2010 to 2020, and Hispanics have played a significant role in driving U.S. population growth over the past decade. Hispanics accounted for 51% of this increase, a greater share than any other racial or ethnic group (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). The 23% increase in the Hispanic population was faster than the nation's growth rate (+7%) and represented the second fastest growth among ethnic groups (Pew Research Center, 2020). In 2020, 24% of Latina/o adults in the U.S. held a college degree, up from 19% a decade ago. Despite this increase, the equity gaps remained in degree attainment for

Latina/o students. For example, 46% of white students in the U.S. attained-year degrees, reflecting an equity gap of 22 percentage points for Latina/os (EdExcelencia, 2019).

In Hispanic culture, spirituality is a legacy and an essential component in the process of motivation, decision-making, priority setting, and value formation, which in turn influences the behaviors of Hispanics (Ramirez, 1985). Furthermore, Latina/os are more likely than non-Hispanics to say that religion holds importance in their daily lives (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021a). More than 90% of Hispanics identify with a specific religion. Regardless of their religious tradition, for Latina/o population, monotheism is an active presence in daily life, which may include attending religious service at least once a month (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021a). With the growing population of Latina/o students and the importance that religion and spirituality play within this community, it would be beneficial to understand the influence that religion has on students' higher education experience.

As previously mentioned, Latina/o higher education graduation rates are increasing, yet there is still an educational attainment equity gap. To assist in closing this gap, colleges and universities may benefit from shifting their current practices to assist Latina/o students' transition into higher education and on their path to completion. Those interested in Latina/o student success should focus on the profile of the Latina/o students to adjust and meet their needs (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). Sources of strength for Latina/o students include students' values and in-group norms, beliefs, and traditions (Flora et al., 2016). Religion and spirituality are key in the values of some Latina/o cultures, families, and traditions and should be explored in relation to Latina/o students' college and university experience. Religion and spirituality can be interrelated but are not the same. The distinction is made as religion is a personal set or institutionalized system of religious attitudes, beliefs, and practices (Victor & Treschuk, 2020), while spirituality

is an abstract reality that serves as a moral compass, giving direction and meaning to people (Fuertes & Dugan, 2021). This study included an examination of the role that religion and spirituality play in the college experience of Latina/o students.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to examine the role that religion and spirituality played in the Latina/o college student experience. The findings of this study provide university administrators with a new pillar of knowledge in addressing the specific needs of Latina/o students. It is important to consider various aspects of these students' university experiences, and religion and spirituality are important dimensions of identity in the lives of Latina/os (Cuellar, 2021). As such, religion and spirituality should be examined within the university context to understand their role or influence regarding Latina/o students' educational experiences.

In this study, I investigated the role that religion and spiritualty play in the Latina/o student experience. As important and insightful as educational research is, less attention has been given to cultural factors that influence Latina/o students' college experience. The goal of this study was to gather information regarding religion and spirituality as possible community cultural factors during the Latina/o student experience. This study included 10 Latina/o students in their sophomore through senior years who were at least 18 years of age and seeking an undergraduate degree from a predominantly white land grant land grant university. Students who self-identified as Latina/o, Hispanic, Mexican, Puerto Rican, or other origins of a Latin American country were recruited. In addition to ethnicity, the students included in this study would have exposure to religion and spirituality.

Significance of Study

Overall, deficit thinking continues to pervade in higher education literature and practice for Latina/o students (Carales & Lopez, 2020). Deficit models focus on remediating problems for the group as opposed to focusing on the group's strengths (Harper et al., 2013). These non-holistic models are not the solution for addressing the Latina/o students' needs. Deficit models show little success and sustainable long-term outcomes for Latina/o students (Piña-Watson et al., 2016). Higher education institutions would benefit from gaining additional knowledge regarding Latina/o university students' experiences; a holistic review of the various facets that Latina/o students encounter during the university years is beneficial in redefining strategies needed for institutions to implement success.

In a national study of over 14,000 college students, 75% of respondents reported that they identify with a higher power or God through religious or spiritual practices during college (Astin et al., 2011). A core cultural value shared among Latina/o subgroups is the importance of spirituality, though the expression of spiritual and faith experiences may vary (Cervantes & Parham, 2005). Although a complex phenomenon, spirituality is directly intertwined with the Latina/o cultural value structure (Cervantes, 2010). Approximately 19.6 million Latina/os identify as Catholic, another 22% are Protestant, and 18% are religiously unaffiliated (Pew Research Center, 2014). Bowman and Small (2010) stated that acknowledgment of religion by college institutions, in addition to attention to activities that recognized, engaged, and supported their religious identities and which were supported by a faculty advisor, contributed to their spiritual growth. An absence of those conditions could exacerbate feelings of marginalization and could undercut spiritual development during college (Bowman & Small, 2010).

There are several studies that have shown positive outcomes of the integration of religion and spirituality into college students' experiences. These findings may suggest that religion could be associated with greater satisfaction at college (Gehrke, 2008). In one study, religious students reported higher levels of overall satisfaction with college, specifically with the non-academic environment on their campuses (Kuh & Gonyea, 2006). As the fundamental need to belong is shared by all people (Maslow, 1962), universities would benefit from looking at the whole student when searching for strategies to help Latina/o students feel that they belong. Strayhorn (2012) described sense of belonging as a basic human need and, in the higher education context, as a student's perception of affiliation and identification with the university community. This involves feeling valued by and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty, peers). Attention needs to be given to those factors which promote a sense of belonging. This study illuminates how religion and spirituality influence the sense of belonging of some Latina/o students during their college experience.

Cultural Values Significance to Education

As Latina/o students continue to experience obstacles and fall behind their white, Black, and Asian peers in graduating with a bachelor's degree (Krogstad, 2016), they are faced with several challenges throughout their college experiences, such as acculturative stress, discriminatory experiences, and a hostile campus climate. These obstacles can adversely affect academics, self-esteem, and college completion (Nuñez, 2009; Rodriguez et al., 2000). Despite the challenges, Latina/o college students have been found to show resilience (Pérez, 2009). As Latina/o students enter college, they bring with them their own set of core values and social norms that should be explored for their significance through their educational experience. In Latina/o students' lived experiences, religious beliefs and spirituality are values often held in

high regard (Campesino & Schwartz, 2006). Hispanics with a greater sense of pride in their cultural view of themselves as a part of a collective—and who find strength in that knowledge—seem to be better off (Consoli et al., 2015). According to Campesino and Schwartz (2006), cultural value structure is a foundation of strength used for coping with the daily life struggles many Latina/os face. Spirituality is also a core element of a Latina/o sense of cultural self, which stems from Latina/o values of integration (Cervantes, 2010).

A couple of core Latina/o cultural values are believed to maintain a sense of connectedness with one's family (Carranza, 2007; Cauce et al., 2002; Knight et al., 2010). These values are *familismo*, defined as responsibility and loyalty to the family, and *communidad*, an emphasis on the collective community. Familismo and communidad serve as a support system for dealing with adversity during the college years (Germán et al., 2009). Together, familismo and *religiosidad* (religiosity) have been linked to positive outcomes, such as academic engagement (Germán et al., 2009). As several studies have indicated, for Latina/o students to overcome adversity and achieve academic success, particular attention needs to be paid to factors that promote well-being in the interest of finding variables that offset adversity. The findings of this study may have a positive effect on education by highlighting the role of religion and spirituality among some Latina/o students.

Significance to Higher Education Administrators

By better understanding the lived experiences of Latina/o students, higher education administrators can build stronger relationships with their Latina/o community. This assists in building trust between students and administrators, resulting in a stronger community. The creation of a new group on a college campus is paramount to student success, as it is important for Latina/o students to feel like they belong within the university structure. Additionally,

instructors and higher educational institutions must adapt to the variety of identities that increased student diversity brings. This may assist members of the university community in understanding the importance of building relationships that ensure deepened learning and encourage persistence, particularly among student populations traditionally underserved by higher education (Dueñas & Gloria, 2020). The development of trust between administrators and students is paramount to student success. It is the infusion of cultural values for Latina/os where person-focused relationships that establish *confianza* (trust) and the reciprocity of *respeto* (respect) are engendered (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007).

Knowledge of the university system provides students with greater access to necessary resources to navigate their college experience. Engagement with administrators and the use of university resources (e.g., financial aid, academic support, recreational services, student health services) also support student retention. The degree of access that students have to knowledge of college admissions procedures and financial aid availability—as well as the means through which students obtain that information—stems from inequitable opportunities rooted in socioeconomic class, citizenship status, and race and ethnicity (Bell et al., 2009; Lareau, 2015; Mwangi et al., 2018; O'Connor et al., 2010; Stanton-Salazar, 2011). The findings of this narrative inquiry recognize the importance of religion and spirituality as factors that might influence student success.

Students identifying as spiritual or religiously committed have been found to be more likely to experience growth in positive social development along the dimensions of ethics of care, charitable involvement, and a compassionate self-concept (Brandenberger & Bowman, 2013). University faculty, staff, and administrators benefit from the knowledge of developing the whole student identity, specifically regarding spirituality and religion and how these relate to

students' experiences on their campus. By identifying these factors, the university may benefit from an emphasis on developing these aspects of students' lives. The focus of this study may benefit university administrators and promote institutional growth and community through their understanding of how religion and spirituality motivate students.

Research Question

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to explore the role that religion and spirituality play in Latina/o students' higher education journeys. In this study, I focused on the following research question: What role do religion and spirituality play in the Latina/o higher education experience?

Overview of Research Methodology

When choosing a research method and design, a researcher is selecting the framework for how the study will be conducted (Hays & Wood, 2011; Leavy, 2017; Yin, 2011). A qualitative methodology was appropriate for this study because it is an inductive design that generates meaning and descriptive data to answer the research question (Leavy, 2017). Unlike quantitative methods, this methodology is not intended to produce findings that are generalizable to the public. This study examined Latina/o students' experiences using a qualitative methodology. The qualitative methodology allowed for a more in-depth approach. For this study, data was collected through a set of interview questions. I approached this study with an acknowledgment that, as the researcher, a Latina, a first-generation student, and an English language learner, I hold biases in my own university experience. I needed to recognize these to adequately analyze and present the qualitative data and describe the Latina/o student experience through the voices of the students as reflected in their storytelling. I accomplished this through semi-structured interviews that involved asking participants the same set of questions while allowing for follow-up questions.

Overview of Design Appropriateness

To understand the role that spirituality and religiosity play in the Latina/o college student experience, a narrative inquiry design was selected. Narrative inquiry in education is increasing in popularity as a pedagogical strategy that lends itself to the practical application of research (Kim, 2015). Considerable practical and professional benefits of narrative research stem from the unique insights available by exploring the lived experiences of educators, education administrators, students, and parents or guardians (Dunne, 2003). Narrative inquiry studies are a collection of stories that reflect individuals' lives and are, therefore, particularly appropriate in studies that explore individual experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Using narrative inquiry as a methodology assisted in capturing a more personal understanding of the participants' experiences through their own voices. In this study, a qualitative design was appropriate given my aim to explore the role that religion and spirituality play for Latina/o students during their college experience.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework selected for this study was community cultural wealth (CCW) (Yosso, 2005). According to Yosso (2005), CCW is essential to the survival and thriving of people of color in education. This theoretical framework was selected as most research with Latina/o youth has used a problem-centered approach, which focuses on the barriers they face or perceptions of challenges (Alvarado & Ricard, 2013). Through CCW framing, this study focused on the assets that Latina/o students already possessed to make meaning of their university experience (Roe, 2019; Yosso, 2005.)

There are six forms of CCW, and these build upon each other to strengthen marginalized communities (Yosso, 2005): (a) aspirational capital, (b) familial capital, (c) linguistic capital, (d) social capital, (e) navigational capital, and (f) resistant capital (Table 1.1).

Table 1.1. Forms of Community Cultural Wealth

Form of Community Cultural Wealth	Description
Aspirational Capital	Centers on people of color's attitudes and behaviors that exhibit optimism and hope in the context of perceived or real challenges (Yosso, 2005, 2013).
Familial Capital	Includes the cultural knowledge taught and generationally passed down through the home, such as skills, values, community history, and family memory (Yosso, 2005, 2013). According to Delgado Bernal (2005), these are referred to as pedagogies of the home.
Linguistic Capital	Refers to the intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences, which can be in more than one style or language (Yosso, 2005, 2013).
Social Capital	Refers to the networks of relationships that provide the exchange of essential information and resources (Yosso, 2005, 2013).
Navigational Capital	Describes the necessary skills and strategy to navigate social institutions to survive and resist oppression (Yosso, 2005, 2013).
Resistant Capital	Refers to the experiences of communities of color in their struggle for equality (Yosso, 2013).

The accumulation of these various forms of capital can provide the fundamentals for Latina/o to navigate the university system. This framework was the basis for how religion and spirituality can serve as key sources for CCW, and I explored religion and spirituality through the CCW framework to understand Latina/o college students' experiences.

Definition of Terms

Culture: Refers to behaviors and values learned, shared, and exhibited by a group of people (Yosso, 2005).

Cultural Capital: Cultural values that extend to academic achievement and are nurtured through family teachings (Pérez & Taylor, 2016).

Cultural Congruity: A match of cultural or personal values to the university; this congruence (or lack thereof) has been shown to determine whether the student feels welcome (Gloria & Kurpius, 1996).

Equanimity: A prototypic defining quality of a spiritual person. It measures the extent to which an individual feels at peace or is centered, can see the silver lining, sees each day as a gift, and feels good about the direction of life (Astin & Keen, 2006).

Familismo: This is one of the most salient cultural values for Latina/os and refers to the vital importance of the nuclear and extended family to the individual (Campesino & Schwartz, 2006).

Latina/o: This term represents both female and male individuals of Hispanic descent.

Making Meaning: A construct related to both spirituality and religiosity. The ability to integrate an ambiguous situation into a framework of personal meaning using value-based reflection (van den Heuvel et al., 2009).

Positive Psychology: A branch of psychology focused on the character strengths and behaviors that allow individuals to build a life of meaning and purpose. It is a scientific approach to studying human thoughts, feelings, and behavior, with a focus on strengths instead of weaknesses and on building the good in life instead of repairing the bad (Peterson, 2008).

Religion: Religion consists of many beliefs and practices held by a collective group of people over a period, such as rituals, myths, symbols, and doctrines (Nuñez & Foubert, 2015). Religion is guided by tradition, rules, and culture. Religion is defined as a personal set or institutionalized system of religious attitudes, beliefs, and practices (Victor & Treschuk, 2020).

Spirituality: Refers to a broader umbrella of beliefs, practices, and worldviews that links an individual and/or a community to a bigger sense of the divine, supernatural, and/or transcendence (Astin et al., 2010; Rockenbach & Mayhew, 2013). Spirituality can be a connection to God, nature, others, and surroundings. Spirituality is associated with quality and meaning in life (Victor & Treschuk, 2020).

Spiritual Capital: Describes capital, assets, and resources linked to spirituality and/or religion (Pérez, 2009).

Spiritual Identification Quest: An individual's interest in seeking meaning in life. The propensity to see oneself spiritually (Astin et al., 2011).

Spiritual Quest: A measure that "reflects an engagement in the search for meaning and purpose in life" (Lindholm, 2014, p. 69).

Assumptions

In conducting research, certain assumptions within a narrative inquiry study help establish a relationship between the researcher and participants of the study. The following assumptions were identified for this study. First, I assumed students would be able to answer questions candidly and honestly so I could gain the intricate details of their experiences. Second, the students self-identified as Latina/o living in the United States while attending a four-year, land-grant university. Lastly, students were assumed to have had exposure to religion and/or spirituality in their upbringing.

Limitations

Limitations exist in research that may restrict the reported results. Each participant's level of comfort likely affected how openly they shared the role that religion or spirituality had on their educational experience. Additionally, the use of scripted questions may have limited my

ability to gain enough depth and understanding of students' experiences. I used follow-up questions sparingly as needed to gain a better understanding of the participants' stories. Follow-up questions differed among participants based on their initial responses.

Chapter Summary

The recent attention around Latina/o educational attainment brings to the forefront questions about equal opportunity and educational attainment gaps and the impact these gaps have on our national economy (Castaneda-Flores, 2013). Latina/o students' struggle for academic success within the university is often overlooked due to institutional tendencies to shift ownership of the challenges to the student rather than addressing institutional barriers as sources of difficulties. Despite the growing population of Latina/o students in the United States, those entering college are not graduating at the same rate as their white counterparts. Although Latina/os higher education graduation rates are increasing, there is still an educational attainment equity gap. However, focusing solely on problems does not always translate to meaningful change for students of color. To more holistically examine the experiences of Latina/o college students, the theoretical framework selected for this study was CCW, which is an asset-based approach (Yosso, 2005). In this narrative inquiry, I sought to explore the role that religion and spirituality play in Latina/o students' higher education journey. Using a narrative inquiry design allowed me to capture the voices of students through rich descriptions. In this chapter, I identified assumptions and limitations of this study, as well as the significance of the findings. In the next chapter, I provide a review of relevant literature. In Chapter 3, I describe the research methods and procedures used in this study. Findings are presented in Chapter 4 and discussed along with implications in Chapter 5.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

This chapter begins with an overview of common challenges faced by students in higher education, followed by a discussion around the historical perspective of the importance of spirituality and religion within the Latina/o community and current research on the role that it plays in higher education. Also included is a review of existing literature on barriers that Latina/o students experience in education, as well as scholarship on spirituality and religion in higher education. The chapter ends with Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth framework (CCW), which provided the theoretical foundation for this study, underpinning how I investigated the role of religion and spirituality in the Latina/o student experience.

General Student Body Challenges in the University Experience

College is typically referenced as some of the best years in a person's life. Students create their college expectations based on what they hear regarding "college myth" tales. After students graduate from high school, they leave behind their childhood to begin a new chapter in life. This new phase includes freedom from parental regulation, the opportunity to engage in a wide range of social activities, and a desire to experience the best years of their lives. The transition from high school to college can be overwhelming because of expectations placed on them for which they had no preparation. Often, this leads to disillusionment with the university experience (Bland et al., 2012). Far from the idealistic myth, the university years are also often described as the most stressful time in a person's life. Many students struggle during the transition from secondary school to university, experiencing profound cognitive, psychosocial, and spiritual changes.

Keup (2007) examined reasons behind students' dissatisfaction with their first year of college by following the transition from high school to college for one cohort of students at a

private, coeducational, Catholic high school in Los Angeles, California. A diverse sample of 100 students participated, with 30% identifying as Latina/o. The goal of Keup's research was to provide a thorough, accurate, and rich description of the precollege expectations and first-year experiences. Many in this high school group mentioned having expectations about interpersonal interactions and relationships. Other expectations included spending time with peers in residence halls and participating in a variety of college student organizations that generally mirrored the types of activities in which they engaged in high school. There were fewer discussions about academic rigor and college majors. As college freshmen, the participants reported unmet expectations academically and socially. Keup's (2007) study provided information on students' precollege expectations and actual college experiences, and the findings offered insights into how first-year college services could be programmed and delivered on campus to ease the transition process for new students.

In another study, Smith and Wertlieb (2005) reported that first-year college students' expectations about "what college is like" did not always measure up with their actual experiences. In their study, they examined 31 first-year students at a four-year public university for their social and academic expectations. They then compared those expectations with students' experiences at the middle and end of their first year of college. Their results indicated that, in general, students' expectations were not aligned with their academic and social experiences. Those students who transitioned to a realistic view of college life maintained their college status. Those who were dissatisfied and were not connected with the necessary resources left the university. To prevent students from dropping out, those who work in higher education should identify and operationalize the tools, or supports, necessary for students to have an academically and socially successful experience in college.

Students are constantly challenged by psychosocial crises (Newman & Newman, 2017). This reality runs contrary to a widely held belief that the college experience mirrors the fun aspects of high school, such as hanging out with friends, participating in student organizations, and attending social events with the freedom of not having parental supervision. The stress students encounter can make university experiences less satisfying and fulfilling than one may anticipate (Robotham, 2008). The stresses and challenges of university life are difficult to navigate, and these frequently cause college student stress levels to increase, at times leading to illness. Students should find positive ways to cope. Castellanos and Gloria (2008) studied the relationship between spirituality and quality of life among university students and found that some students turned to spirituality as a coping strategy. There has been an interest in general religion and spirituality among college students to mitigate stress and adversity, particularly in institutions of higher education (Kuh & Gonyea, 2006).

Higher education institutions can assist students by encouraging participation in a wide range of interests, which may include religion and spirituality. Religion and spirituality are tools to foster well-being (Villani et al., 2019). Colleges and universities are already offering mindfulness workshops that give students tools to cope with stress, evaluate their needs, and develop practices that will help them to be successful in college (Flett et al., 2020). As students search for resources to find balance, clarity, and a sense of purpose, their spiritual and religious tradition is one aspect that should not be overlooked. Colleges offer diversity and multicultural programming as resources to help with student success but often lack other support structures to meet spiritual and religious needs (Waggoner, 2016).

Public institutions of higher learning differ in their philosophy regarding support for religion and spirituality for assorted reasons, resulting in the quest for meaning and purpose for

young adults standing as an unmet need. For students who are religious, there is a danger in not addressing or avoiding religion or spirituality on campus, as this has led students to feel hesitant about their beliefs and disengage from their academics (Bowman & Small, 2010). According to Waggoner (2016), there is more of a current interest among university students in spirituality than religion. For this study, I distinguished between spirituality and religion by scope of the activity (Victor & Treschuk, 2020). Spirituality refers to a connection to God, nature, and others, and can be associated with quality and meaning in life. Religion is attributed to traditional values and practices related to a certain group of people or faith, guided by institutionalized systems of tradition, rules, and culture.

According to Waggoner (2016), the trend of students moving toward spirituality is likely caused by (a) a growing dissatisfaction by many with religious systems that tend to be exclusionary and are seen as less relevant in explanations of and guidance for modern life, and (b) a perceived alternative means to achieve personal fulfillment grounded in the authority of and care for oneself. Waggoner (2016) also stated that developing an institution's position on religion and spirituality is typically based on legal matters. There are two noteworthy strategies many institutions will adopt: some invoke total abstinence, while others attempt neutrality. The abstinence perspective employs a strict application of separation of church and state and argues that no religion or spirituality should be allowed within public institutions. On the other hand, neutrality attempts to be fair, focusing on free exercise and speech protections. This component relates to an even hand in accommodating religion and spirituality in public institutions (Waggoner, 2016). These stances on religion and spirituality have detoured the progress of religious and spiritual practice in institutions of higher education.

Historical Perspective of Religion and Spirituality in Higher Education

Over the years as student development professionals explored phenomena that supported the university student experience, the theoretical connections between spirituality and religion became a turning point for growth in research. Higher education scholars Alexander and Helen Astin (2010) decided that the emerging field of religion and spirituality required more research to understand how college students thought about these issues. To gather more data, Astin et al. (2010) developed and led a multi-year project (2003-2009) through the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) entitled *Spirituality in Higher Education: A National Study of College Students' Search for Meaning and Purpose* (Astin et al., 2010). The study utilized an extensive national sample of more than 14,000 students. The project focused on the patterns and principles of spirituality and religiousness among college students and how the college experience influences spiritual development.

The results of the UCLA study of college students' search for meaning and purpose suggested that spirituality is essential to university students' lives and highlighted the crucial role of spirituality in higher education. The results illustrated that 80% of respondents were interested in spirituality and believed in the sacredness of life. More than 75% believed in God, 66% believed that their spirituality was a source of joy, and 66% agreed that their religious/spiritual beliefs provided guidance and support. A total of 75% felt a sense of connection with a higher power or God that transcended their personal self (Astin et al., 2011).

According to Waggoner (2016), the UCLA research project provided valuable insight into students' level of interest and involvement in spirituality and expectations for spiritual development in colleges and universities. The UCLA study was a clear indicator that religion and spirituality matter for many college students. The study also found that students who engage

in religious or spiritual practices have greater satisfaction in their campus social life, a more positive overall rating of interactions with others, a higher overall rating of their college experience, and higher grade point averages. This information supports the need for comprehensive religion and spirituality plans.

The National Survey of Student Engagement included data from 150,000 college students from 461 U.S. colleges and universities and focused on how spirituality and religion affect their college experience (Mooney, 2010). The results aligned with the UCLA study in that college students who engaged in religious activities and had higher levels of interest in spirituality reported higher levels of campus life engagement. These studies and initial writings on spirituality and religion in higher education created a turning point and opportunity for scholars to research. The findings suggested that spirituality is essential to university student lives. Astin et al. (2011) highlighted that spirituality plays a critical role in higher education. The researchers discussed these findings in their book *Cultivating the Spirit: How College Can Enhance Students' Inner Lives* (Astin et al., 2011).

In the past 20 years, research about religion and spirituality in higher education has begun to flourish. The UCLA study set the stage for other researchers to create further studies with the extensive data collected. In 2008, the UCLA Spirituality in Higher Education project conducted a competition for researchers to propose original work. Most of those studies went into an edited volume by Rockenbach and Mayhew (2013). Bowman and Small (2010) found that among those of racial and ethnic minorities and religious minorities, females exhibited higher levels of ecumenism than males in the same group.

Many studies on religion and spirituality have centered on minoritized students in general. Gehrke (2013) conducted a study that examined the spiritual differences between

different racial/ethnic backgrounds while looking at a set of experiences that may influence this development. The sample of the study included 3,698 college students attending 135 U.S. institutions, of which 19% identified as African American/Black, 31% Asian American/Pacific Islander, 23% Hispanic/Latino, and 28% White/Caucasian. Gehrke (2013) sought to determine if students from different racial/ethnic backgrounds exhibited different spiritual growth in college and concluded that there were differences in the ecumenical worldview development along lines of gender, race/ethnicity, and worldview experience.

Importantly, Gehrke (2013) noted that students from diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds had varying levels of expectations for spiritual development entering college and three years later. Gehrke (2013) also noted that during college, Black students grew in their spiritual identification interest, in seeking meaning in life, and equanimity, reflecting higher levels than other students. Latina/o students reported higher levels than Asian and White students. White students scored either at or below all the other students when they entered college and three years later. Prior research (e.g., Tisdell, 2003) showed that students from ethnic minority backgrounds utilized their oppression identity through spiritual fulfillment, and white individuals strengthened their spiritual fulfillment through cross-cultural interaction. The Gehrke (2013) results may point to white students having fewer cross-cultural interactions.

Conceptualizing Barriers for Latina/o Students in their University Experience

The current literature contains a plethora of information highlighting the challenges faced by Latina/o students. The following literature review acknowledges institutional barriers that create low recruitment, persistence, and graduation of Latina/o students. Additionally, it explores the role of religion and spirituality as forms of cultural capital on the Latina/o higher experience

and success in higher education. The barriers include first-generation status, lack of instrumental knowledge, language, climate, isolation, discrimination, and economic capital.

First-Generation College Students

Among all undergraduate first-generation students in the United States, close to 50% identify as Latina/o (Campesino et al., 2009). According to an amendment to the Higher Education Act of 1965, "first generation" describes college students for whom neither parent has completed a four-year degree. Collier and Morgan (2008) asserted that first-generation college students need to be included in the at-risk student populations, as their parents have less instrumental knowledge regarding the university system and are unlikely to be able to assist in academic processes. That assertion is supported by additional research on first-generation college students being a risk indicator because students have less access to information (Buenechea-Elberdin et al., 2018; Murphy & Murphy, 2018; Pike & Kuh, 2006). Latina/o parents consider being the first to go to college a "vehicle to escape poverty" (Vega, 2016), which is a badge of honor and a source of great pride in their families. However, being the first to attend college can be an additional challenge in higher education for Latina/o students. This major life accomplishment can be short-lived, as being the first to attend the university can turn into a stressor as the landscape of university life is foreign for Latina/o students (Rodriguez, 1996; Wawrzynski & Sedlacek, 2003).

Torres et al. (2006) conducted a longitudinal study with 60 students at seven institutions across the United States; three were public institutions, two were Hispanic serving institutions (HSIs), and the other two were predominately white institutions. Their results showed that first-generation Latina/a college students navigated the college environment uniquely and did not see their advisors as expert authorities. Instead, they relied on pamphlets and peers. These choices

put them at risk and could lead to an academic crisis. This became an added stressor, as it was attributed to their lack of knowledge of the dominant culture's capital. These academic stressors can be avoided if institutional stakeholders are proactive and understand the process used by these students. According to Yosso (2005), Latina/o students use navigational capital to find their way through the systems that cater to the majority population.

Instrumental Knowledge in Navigating the University

A key component of cultural capital for college student success is instrumental knowledge regarding the admission process and resources at the institution. According to O'Shea (2016), Latina/o students lack instrumental knowledge related to financial aid, support, resources, college life, and culture. This translates into a barrier affecting student success. Latina/o parents who have not attended college lack this type of instrumental knowledge to pass down to their children to assist them in navigating the higher education system. This lack of cultural capital from previous generations, along with their lack of experience at a university, puts Latina/o students at risk.

Murphy and Murphy (2018) stated that the lack of college information available to students and their families profoundly affects getting ready, getting in, and getting through. Latina/o parents and students do not know what they do not know. Simply put, they are unaware of their lack of knowledge. This makes it difficult for Latina/o parents to help their children navigate an unfamiliar experience, which leaves students in a new and challenging environment to navigate alone (O'Shea, 2016). Yosso (2205) claimed that communities of color utilize navigational capital to find their way through structures and systems built for the majority populations. In systems of inequality and where the rules of the game are unstated, people of color draw on their networks to navigate through the systems. In the context of education, this

form of capital has been used to frame support to first-generation college-bound students (Auerbach, 2007), the experiences of Black male students (Allen, 2013), and the experiences of students of color in doctoral programs (Espino 2014). These were a few of the studies that led Park et al. (2020) to assert that navigational capital may emerge from a student's spiritual identity or their faith-based social networks to guide and sustain Latina/os and other students of color as they navigate educational institutions.

Language

A third barrier for Latina/o students is language, which affects several forms of cultural capital, as speaking English is valued by the dominant culture (Espino, 2014). Although not all Latina/o students are English as a Second Language (ESL) learners, there is a need to further study ESL students' challenges in accessing a four-year college education (Deil-Amen & Turley, 2007; Kao & Thompson, 2003). In studies regarding underrepresented students' access to higher education, the focus has typically centered on categories like race/ethnicity (e.g., Deil-Amen & Turley, 2007; Kao & Thompson, 2003), socioeconomic status (e.g., Bowen et al., 2005; McDonough, 1997), and first-generation college students (e.g., Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Pascarella et al., 2004). However, language has largely been overlooked.

As of 2020, 10% of the K-12 students in the U.S. population were ESL learners, many of whom were Latina/o (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021b). Latina/o parents may have little to no fluency in English. This results in diminished levels of the dominant culture's linguistic capital. Although low-income communities and first-generation college students and their families have cultural capital, the field of education and the context of educational research have ignored, devalued, and excluded their ways of knowing (Winkle-Wagner, 2010), resulting in a linguistic barrier.

In the United States, language is critical for communication, expressing oneself, fostering relationships, and navigating daily life. The lack of ability to communicate effectively adversely affects social capital (e.g., networks and connections). It is important to recognize that many ESL students face challenges and barriers unique to linguistic capital that other underrepresented students do not. A lack of proficiency in English language skills can also affect access to schools, opportunities for job advancement, and even proper health care, which diminishes economic capital (Flores, 2006; Partida, 2007). ESL students begin their education at a disadvantage since linguistic capital is central to educational success. Furthermore, Latina/o students with low-level resources in social, economic, and linguistic capital start their education at a considerable disadvantage (Kanno & Varghese, 2010). Yosso (2005) connected language skills to students' racialized cultural history. She also described how young people of color use cultural expression for survival through language. Park et al. (2020) ascertained that bilingualism in Latina/o students may be developed through spiritual or religious practices. Religious and spiritual institutions could therefore foster linguistic capital by providing opportunities for young people of color to develop bi/multilingual skills through spiritual and religious practices.

Spiritual and religious spaces have influenced the formation and use of linguistic capital in communities of color (Park et al., 2020). Kanno and Varghese (2010) found that bilingual students who served as translators for their family and religious organizations built their negotiation skills, which fostered success in the classroom and social environments. While this is a strength attribute, the application of linguistic capital to education was neglected. Building skills through a communication experience of translating is an example of linguistic capital for Latina/o students (Yosso, 2005, 2013).

Campus Climate

Hurtado and Ponjuan (2005) conducted a longitudinal study on Latina/o students' perceptions of the university environment. They found that campus climate created additional stressors for Latina/o students. Experiences with discrimination and prejudice created a climate that did not promote a "sense of belonging" for Latina/o students (Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005). Their longitudinal study examined students' perceptions of climate, as well as their sense of belonging, their analytical skills, and their abilities. The study was conducted at 10 public universities varying in size from 5,000 to 20,000 student enrollments located in the Midwest, Northeast, Southwest, and Northwest of the United States. The researchers found that the university climate was more likely to be perceived as unwelcoming by Latina/o students who spoke Spanish at home versus those who did not speak Spanish because Latina/o students who spoke Spanish at home had a stronger ethnic identity (Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005). Furthermore, students who spent more time with diverse peers also perceived the climate as hostile (Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005).

Hostile climates encountered at the university by Latina/o students can cause high stress which negatively impacts college students' academic performance. McBride & Greeson (2023) conducted a cross-sectional online survey study on the association of mindfulness and academic achievement in college students. There were 534 undergraduate students surveyed, and the results of the study found that mindfulness buffered stress. This holds true for Latina/o students who use mindfulness and mediation as part of their spiritual and religious practice.

Dueñas and Gloria (2020) examined the roles of belonging and motivation in relation to a sense of mattering among 236 Latina/o undergraduates at a Midwest research university. At predominantly white institutions like the one in their study, Latina/o students aligned themselves

with others like them to create a sense of belonging and connection to home and family to manage racial microaggressions. Latina/o college students who lived with family or peers reported a greater sense of belonging (Dueñas & Gloria, 2020; Strayhorn, 2012). The sense of belonging played a critical role in their university experience as Latina/o students, as it was the strongest positive predictor of their university mattering. There was a clear relationship between belonging and mattering (Strayhorn, 2012, 2015). This finding is congruent with current Latina/o higher education literature in that familismo and peer support are key factors in university success (Gonzales et al., 2009; Kiyama et al., 2015; Turcios-Cotto & Milan, 2013). The results found by Hurtado and Ponjuan (2005) aligned with Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth (CCW) theory for Latina/o students, identifying students' resiliency as a form of aspirational capital, their feeling of strength from speaking Spanish as a form of linguistic capital, and their sustained connections to family as a form of familial capital.

Isolation

The lack of a sense of belonging is a stressor for many Latina/o students and has led to decreased or diminished interest and engagement on campus and in ordinary life activities (Strayhorn, 2012). In recent literature, sense of belonging is highly valued in Latina/o culture, as is the culture of familismo. Close ties to immediate and extended family are central to the value system. Latina/os raised in these close-knit families have a strong orientation and commitment toward the family unit structure. The concept of belonging becomes key to a person's sense of self and the feeling that their efforts are valued, both of which impact student persistence and success in college (Strayhorn, 2012). Strayhorn (2012) stated that college students' social acceptance, support, community connections, respect for their own identity, well-being, and academic success were all critical to their academic success. Sense of belonging is a key

component of university success (Pedler et al., 2022), and the lack of belonging Latina/o students experience is a barrier that may be better addressed through their assets in social and familial capital.

Discrimination Effects

According to Gloria and Castellanos (2003), young adult Latina/o students' unique experiences with discrimination, cultural isolation, lack of access to same-ethnicity role models, and low educational expectations result in their psychological well-being and academic success are at risk. Literature regarding Latina/o college students was established through several studies focused on stressors (e.g., acculturative stress and discrimination) related to an increase in depression and anxiety (French & Chavez, 2010; Huynh et al., 2012; Hwang & Goto, 2008). Acculturative stress is quite prominent in Latina/o populations. It is usually brought about by factors including legal status, language barriers, difficulties assimilating to beliefs, values, and norms of the dominant culture, perceived feelings of inferiority, and discrimination (Bekteshi & Kang, 2020).

In a healthcare study of Latina/o patients, Ornelas et al. (2011) found that the experiences of acculturation, discrimination, and language barriers result in mental health challenges among Latina/o students, particularly an increase in anxiety and depression. In a study by DeRoma et al. (2009) that included 164 participants from undergraduate and graduate psychology classes at a PWI military college in the southeast, findings suggested that Latina/o students experienced discrimination that caused mental health concerns, which then negatively affected their academic performance. Negative effects on academic performance hinder the likelihood of degree completion. Existing literature has documented a variety of challenges that become stressors and adversely affect Latina/o higher education attainment, which ultimately perpetuates educational

challenges. To offset racism and social inequities, some religious organizations have offered culturally relevant resources and faith-based programs to counter the impact of racism on achievement to meet the needs of their communities (Jordan et al., 2010).

Economic Capital

Language barriers, along with discrimination, lower the levels of economic capital and place Latina/o students at a higher risk of becoming low-income or living in poverty. In 2016, the poverty rate for Hispanic children was 24.9% compared to 13% for white children, according to the Federal Interagency Forum on Child & Family Studies (2017). Many Latina/o parents have several jobs, working long hours to minimally sustain their households. The investment of time and energy in several workplaces leads to minimal time to help their children with college preparation.

Research suggests that Latina/o students with low-level resources regarding social, economic, and linguistic capital begin their education with a significant drawback (Kanno & Varghese, 2010). Families beginning college with low levels of economic capital find financing college education burdensome. In the 2015-16 academic year, 76% of full-time Latina/o students received some type of federal aid, compared to 67% of white students, 50% of Asian students, and 88% of Black students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021b). Sixty percent of Latina/o college students received a Pell Grant, comprising 22% of all full-time Pell Grant recipients.

Latina/os also received the lowest amount of aid compared to white students. According to a Latina/o profile report by EdExcelencia (2019), the typical characteristics of Latina/o students impact the chances of receiving aid and the amount received. First-generation Latina/o college students were more likely to receive financial aid because their parents did not have a

college degree; however, these students received lower aid amounts on average due to lack of knowledge of how to adequately fill out the paperwork. The higher a parent's educational attainment, the higher the average financial aid amount awarded from any source. Latina/o students were more likely to be enrolled part-time than other undergraduates, which compounds this issue as there is scarce financial aid for part-time students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021b).

The Pew Hispanic Center Survey, according to Lopez (2009), found that 40% of Latina/o students attributed their reason for leaving the institution to the inability to pay for college. The financial commitment of higher education compels many Latina/o students to work while in school, which often affects their academic performance and ability to adapt and adjust to the college environment and culture (Contreras, 2011; Crisp & Nora, 2010). A focus on building social capital may be used as a tool to assist students in finding monetary sources for their higher education resources.

Latina/o Students Navigating Barriers in Higher Education

Bourdieu et al.'s (1977) theory of cultural capital argued that the knowledge, dispositions, and educational qualifications of the upper and middle classes comprise what are considered capital valuable to a hierarchical society. If a person is not born into a family in the middle and upper stages of the hierarchy, they could get social mobility through the educational system. Bourdieu et al.'s (1977) theory is often used to explain the equity gap for people of color.

The community cultural wealth (CCW) model challenges this traditional form of cultural capital (Yosso, 2005). Latina/o students are at a disadvantage at predominately white institutions, as there is a lack of "Latina/o-centric" or *Latinidad* (meaning being Latina/o) perspective

(Castellanos et al., 2016). CCW moves from focusing on a deficit form of thinking about people of color to instead emphasizing their capital through their cultural wealth. This form of resistance capital comes from their families and communities and consists of aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant capital. Latina/o students negotiate their identities and work toward becoming culturally grounded (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012). Yosso's (2005) CCW is an asset-based framework of resistance capital through optimism and strength, and it provides context for understanding Latina/o students' university experiences.

Castellanos and Gloria (2007) described various cultural aspects, including ethnic identity, cultural congruity, and acculturation, commonly included in the cultural dimension of support. These cultural dimensions include the values of family (familismo) and community (comunidad). Values and validation of meaningfulness are also part of the cultural dimension. This combined approach of the variables across psychological, social, and cultural dimensions provides a holistic perspective of Latina/o students' cultural values. Cultural values serve as buffers when the university remains dominated by values such as competition (vs. collaboration), indepenence (vs. interdependence), self-importance (vs. group-importance), or even worldliness (vs. spirituality). Latina/o students often experience incongruence between their cultural values and those of the educational setting (Gloria & Kurpius, 1996; Gloria & Pope-Davis, 1997).

Latina/o college students experience cultural stressors that negatively impact their mental health, which places them at risk for academic problems (DeRoma et al., 2009). A few of these unique stressors and challenges include discrimination, cultural isolation, acculturative stress, and lack of ethnic role models, all of which increase the risk of dropping out, as well as the development of mental health issues (Gloria & Castellanos, 2003). Despite these challenges,

some students persist. To explore how institutions can better serve Latina/o college students, more understanding of their values and experiences is needed.

Neblett et al. (2012) suggested that ethnic identity and cultural values counteract college stressors. Latina/o college students often remain connected with their family, reflective of the value of familismo. Cauce et al. (2002) and Knight et al. (2010) stated that students who received positive cultural messages from their families were aided in coping with these stressors and in their academic achievement.

A study by Corona et al. (2017) examined the association between cultural stressors, cultural values, and mental health in a sample of 198 Latina/o college students from two public and one private universities in the Southeast. They found that cultural values are central to Latina/o culture. In prior research regarding Latina/o culture values, familismo and religiosity were the two main values explored. However, Corona et al. (2017) included respeto as a cultural value as well. Corona et al.'s (2017) study supported familismo's ability to serve as a buffer, with the findings demonstrating that low parental support and cultural stressors led to increased anxiety and depression in Latina/o college students. Scholarship has demonstrated that a high level of presence in Latina/o cultural values is associated with fewer mental health issues in Latina/o college students (e.g., Lawton & Gerdes, 2014).

The research by Corona et al. (2017) also supported prior research, revealing a significant positive association between cultural stressors and mental health symptoms manifested in anxiety and depression. Their findings showed that cultural values, such as familial capital, familismo, and religiosidad served as buffers, and moderated psychological distress. Their study demonstrated the importance of Latina/o college students maintaining their connection to cultural values of religion as a way of promoting their well-being and academic success (Corona

et al., 2017). Colleges and universities can provide support to Latina/o college students by maintaining a connection to the values of family and respeto and engaging students in faith-based programs. Corona et al. (2017) promoted the critical importance of Latina/o students' remaining connected to family and cultural values—including religion or spirituality for some—for better mental health while in college. This study supported the familial capital outlined in Yosso's (2005, 2013) CCW framework.

Castellanos et al. (2016) suggested that Latina/os' cultural history is a cultural and spiritual blueprint from which they can draw strength and meaning from those beliefs, processes, and values practiced across time for growth and meaning. Through cultural values, spirituality has been practiced across generations and has been used for survival through life's adversities. As recently as the 1980's, Latina/os behaviors were described as deviant and pathological. Research in Latina/o psychology has brought to light the strengths and deep structural meanings of different Latina/o values (McNeill et al., 2001). Latina/o norms have been repositioned as positive and strength-based (Santiago-Rivera & Altarriba, 2002). The repositioning of Latino values must put an end to individual or cultural blaming and seek to understand the meaning of Latina/o processes that value strength for their communities. To understand the various processes that Latina/os use for a positive state of mind, one may look at inner strength and will (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012). According to Cervantes (2010), Latina/os use the mind, body, spirit paradigm to navigate adversity and maintain well-being.

Spirituality and Religion

Since this study focused on spirituality and religion, it was prudent to determine the distinction, if any, between these two concepts (Nuñez & Foubert, 2015). Regarding definitions of spirituality and religiosity, much of the literature keeps the concepts separate (Astin et al.,

2011). Spirituality is a broader concept, which includes the personal quest for understanding answers to ultimate questions about life, life meaning, and relationship with the sacred or transcendent (Koenig, 2012). Nuñez and Foubert (2015) referenced spirituality as the practice of making sense of self to the external world. There is a consensus that spirituality refers to a universal human phenomenon that may involve finding purpose, transcendence of self-boundaries, and connection with a higher being, nature, and others; spirituality is not necessarily experienced within a religious context (Delgado, 2005; Hill & Pargament, 2003).

Alternatively, religion is a multidimensional construct that involves beliefs, practices, and rituals related to the transcendent, which is God, Allah, Buddha, or a Higher Power that often involves the supernatural (Lucchetti et al., 2021). Religions usually have specific beliefs about life after death, as well as rules about conduct within a social group (Koenig, 2012). Religion also relies on an organized community of faith that has written codes of regulatory behavior (Miner et al., 2015). There is a conceptual distinction made by scholars when defining spirituality and religion. This distinction recognizes that some individuals are spiritual but not religious, and others are both, and one does not lead to another (Hill & Pargament, 2003). Exploring the role of spirituality and religion within universities will expand the dimensions of CCW (Yosso, 2005) for growth and understanding. These two definitions guided further discussions for this study.

Spirituality

Scholarship suggests that *meaning in life* and spirituality have the potential to influence Latina/o college students' subjective happiness. Although meaning of life may be found without spirituality, previous researchers identified that meaning in life is related to spirituality (Purdy & Dupey, 2005; Seligman, 2011). Understanding the importance of spirituality and meaning in life

will assist university staff and administrators in identifying ways to increase Latina/o students' happiness. This in turn may affect academic performance and resilience in postsecondary education (Cavazos et al., 2015). Cavazos et al. (2015) conducted a quantitative study to obtain more data on how the perceptions of meaning of life and spiritual experiences were predictors of subjective happiness in Latina/o students. Their study suggested a positive correlation between spiritual experiences and the level of subjective happiness. This was an extension of Lermans' (2010) study, which found that spirituality and making meaning in life were helpful ways to increase Latina/o students' happiness. Such information can bring benefits to colleges and universities by examining the role religion and spirituality play in college experience.

Spirituality and religiosity play a key role in the everyday lives of Latina/os (Campesino & Schwartz, 2006). Spirituality has been linked to thriving Latina/o college students. Consoli et al. (2018) conducted a quantitative study of 84 self-identified Latina/os at a West Coast institution to further explore how to assist Latina/o students for them to be successful. They examined the relationship between cultural variables—such as spirituality, religiosity, and making meaning (e.g., personal meaning using value-based reflections)—and discovered that these variables caused Latina/o students to thrive in the university experience. Spirituality, defined as the relationship with a higher power, was identified as playing a vital role in the Latina/o students' ability to thrive. The study also showed that "making meaning" assisted in their thriving.

Nuñez and Foubert (2015) conducted a study at a midwestern university of 10 Hispanic student on making meaning of the Latina/o college student experience and their spiritual and religious development from childhood through college. They chose to focus on Latina/o students as they are the fastest growing population in the United States, and there is a need to investigate

the effect of religion and spirituality on Latina/o students. Their findings were congruent with the literature in that most of the research conducted on this student population operates from a deficit model to explore what prevents them from graduation.. Nuñez and Foubert (2015) found that as spirituality increases, religiosity decreases during certain times in college. According to Nuñez and Foubert (2015), this occurred as students were spiritually minded but less engaged in church attendance behavior. The study also suggested that students' being away from home for the first time, or religion not being a familial obligation, may have also been contributing factors. In addition, their study found that students were becoming more ecumenical in their views, believing that non-religious people can be just as good as religious people. The study also concluded that there were more who believed that they did not need to attend or belong to a church to not be punished by God or a higher power.

Consoli et al. (2015) conducted a quantitative study with 121 undergraduate Latina/o students to determine if spirituality, hope, social support, and cultural values served as predictors for resilience and thriving. This study's purpose was also to move away from a deficit model and to add more information to the foundational dimensions that assist in Latina/o university success. The Latina/o students self-identified as having overcome adversity during their college experience. Over half of the participants (64%) were second-generation Mexican from the United States. The study found hope to be a predictor of resilience and thriving. Hope was conceptualized as a cognitive-motivational strength-based construct and has been proposed as an important model for college students' motivation for goal commitment and attainment (Snyder et al., 2002). Spirituality was a predictor of thriving, indicating there is "value added" to spiritual beliefs for Latina/o students dealing with adversity.

Previous studies have revealed that Latina/o students come to campus with individual, interpersonal, and institutional challenges along with unequal access to college information (Kimura-Walsh et al., 2009). Despite the challenges, Latina/os continue to pursue higher education. It is important to look at gaps in the research to assist Latina/os in the university. For example, Cavazos et al. (2015) conducted a quantitative study of 119 Latina/o students in a Hispanic serving institution in the Southwest, 90% of whom identified as Mexican. They acknowledged the challenges and obstacles that Latina/o students face in postsecondary education. Cavazos et al.'s (2015) study focused on three interrelated constructs—spirituality, meaning in life, and subjective happiness—that can contribute to academic success. This study's findings resonated with those of previous researchers who identified that meaning in life is related to spirituality (Purdy & Dupey, 2005; Seligman, 2011), and that academic motivation is related to Latina/o students' subjective happiness (Gabriele, 2008).

Cavazos et al's (2015) findings found a positive correlation between daily spiritual experiences and the level of subjective happiness, suggesting spirituality was a strong predictor of subjective happiness. Additionally, meaning in life was also a positive predictor of subjective happiness. Their findings were of value to this study since, among Latina/o college students, there is an important relationship between meaning, academic motivation, and self-esteem (Steger & Shin, 2010). CCW was the underlying framework of this study because it focuses on the strengths and virtues that enable individuals to not only survive, but also to thrive (Lopez et al., 2018; Yosso, 2005). This study sought to add to the literature of CCW by examining the role of spirituality and religion of Latina/o students.

Campesino et al. (2009) conducted a quantitative study to examine the spiritual perspectives and practices of 223 Latina/o versus non-Latina/o students from a public university

in the Southwestern United States. The Latina/o versus non-Latina/o students were almost proportionate by half of each category, with Latina/os reflecting a slightly higher percentage (54%) of the participants. Latina/os scored significantly higher than non-Latina/os in the spiritual perspective scale (SPS) and the Latino spiritual perspective scale (LSPS). Latina/os who spoke Spanish at home believed in collectivism versus individualism and identified strongly with their cultural values, which confirmed the statistically significant difference between Latinos and non-Latinos. Students who strongly identified with Latino cultural values scored higher than those with a weaker cultural identification. The Latina/o students reported higher religious activity, like attending church services daily, engaging in personal prayer outside of the church, and discussing religious or spiritual beliefs weekly than non-Latinos. Latina/o cultural identification was the only significant predictor, which indicated that spirituality among Latina/os has meaning to the cultural group context. These findings indicated that spirituality is important to Latina/o college students, and it also showed the importance of spirituality as a cultural core value (Campesino et al., 2009).

Religion

A central portion of the literature base supports the idea that religion has great meaning and is a major part of Latina/o culture (Baez & Hernandez, 2001). There are a range of religious denominations from Evangelical to Catholic to Espiritismo to Santeria. There are also a range of religious practices, such as building altars, prayers, attending mass, or other activities, based on the doctrine. All practices are to attain tranquility and understanding of life processes (Caplan et al., 2011). Gloria et al. (2016) claimed that Latina/o students bring their ancestral, cultural, and spiritual selves into higher education settings as they use their cultural spirituality to cope with educational challenges. Since there is a body of literature supporting the notion that religious

practices are a core component that provides mind, body, and spirit wellness to overcome life's challenges, it is necessary to examine how religion or spirituality may affect the Latina/o student experience.

According to Mooney (2010), religiosity has also been found to increase study hours and extracurricular activities and decrease time partying. Mooney's (2010) study was conducted at a midwestern university in a state with a high religious presence. The study included 10 Hispanic students ages 18-26. The findings supported the importance of connection between family, religion, and spirituality, in addition to the specific themes of family and language within the Hispanic culture. Students with stronger family ties had stronger spiritual beliefs and/or were more engaged with religious practice (Mooney, 2010).

Despite all the challenges and barriers, there are Latina/o students who successfully complete their educational goals. Cultural stressors like acculturative stress and discrimination, are increased by mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety. This can be further exacerbated by negative associations between cultural values of religiosity, familismo, and respeto (Corona et al., 2017; Huynh et al., 2012). On the other hand, there are some Latina/o students who do not experience as many harmful effects of these stressors.

There is research that suggests that Latina/o students with higher levels of cultural values, such as religiosity and familismo, are associated with fewer adverse mental health symptoms (Lawton & Gerdes, 2014). Additionally, cultural factors, including ethnic identity, cultural orientation, and values, protect Latina/o college students from adverse mental health effects (Llamas & Consoli, 2012). This is where an asset-based model is useful, changing the focus to positive attributes of Latina/os. Despite the negative experiences and barriers, Latina/o students continue to navigate higher education (Gloria et al., 2005, 2016). Research shows that Latina/o

culture, religiosity, and spirituality are often critical in their coping with challenges (Campesino et al., 2009).

For Latina/o students to succeed in college, Castellanos and Gloria (2016) shared the importance of knowing the cultural values/constructs significant to these students. Their research indicated that Latina/o students valued comunidad (emphasis on the collective community), familismo (role of responsibility to the family), Latinidad (cultural identity), and espiritualidad (spirituality) (Triana et al., 2020). Latina/o student values come in direct opposition to the white values of individualism and competition that they experience in their higher education spaces and settings (Castellanos & Gloria, 2008; Ojeda et al., 2014). Castellanos and Gloria (2016) found spirituality as a core element of Latina/o sense of cultural self, which stems from Latina/o values integration. Spirituality is embedded within cultural group norms (Campesino et al., 2009) and within relationships as sources of meaning (Cervantes & Parham, 2005). It is through the integration of such values that Latina/os practice cultural spirituality. The question then becomes: What role does spirituality play in educational experiences and wellness processes (Castellanos & Gloria, 2008; Castellanos et al., 2016; Gloria & Castellanos, 2012)?

Conceptual Framework

The community cultural wealth (CCW) model was selected as the conceptual framework to examine Latina/o students' experiences with religion and spirituality during higher education (Yosso, 2005, 2013). Park et al. (2020) described religion and spirituality as community and cultural capital. Nuñez and Foubert (2015) stated that the study of religion and spirituality is critical to Latina/o student development as higher levels of spirituality created greater life satisfaction. A challenge for the Latina/o populations in the U.S. is that they are often the subject of deficit-based studies rather than strength-based studies (Collatos et al., 2004; Villalba, 2007).

A deficit-based framework was considered for this study, as the framework focuses on barriers and deficiencies. While it is good to provide fundamental knowledge of the barriers, I ultimately determined that it would be more beneficial to conduct research using a strength-based approach by exploring what Latina/o college students already have in linguistic, cognitive, education, and cultural assets that can benefit their experience in educational settings (Garcia & Öztürk, 2017). Yosso (2005) challenged the deficit framework through CCW to acknowledge the resources that allow Latina/o students to succeed despite the odds.

A community cultural framework was selected as it is a strength-based approach, which focuses on the study of the conditions and processes that contribute to helping affirm the values inherent within Latina/o communities and developing better strategies for accessing and completing college (Espino, 2014). Sources of strength for Latina/o students—such as their values, in-group norms, beliefs, and traditions in which they are socialized in their families and immediate influences—must be considered as sources of strength (Flora et al., 2016). This strength becomes an additional resource capable of producing additional resources.

Pierre Bourdieu, a French theorist, introduced the notion of cultural capital that later became the foundation of the CCW model (Yosso, 2005). Cultural capital is privileged knowledge and symbolic wealth transmitted through hierarchical systems from one generation to the next to sustain class status (Bourdieu et al., 1977). In the case of higher education, cultural capital currency exists in the form of knowledge cultural capital, or the knowledge, skills, education, and advantages that further one's success in a particular field (Bourdieu et al., 1977). Through cultural capital theory, members of the dominant culture are rewarded, such as in education, with privileged knowledge that interprets institutional symbols and language, positive

reflections of their communities in educational curricula, and membership into the political and cultural elite (Espino, 2014).

Gloria et al. (2005) explained that Latina/o cultural capital must be considered in higher education as a source of academic support for students. A Latina/o student's cultural capital (e.g., the expression of spiritual or religious beliefs) may assist with navigating the unfamiliar territory of higher education. Additionally, Latina/o students' social capital—which describes their connections within and across families, friends, and other associations—acts as a network of support systems helping students meet academic goals.

It is imperative to highlight the importance of incorporating factors associated with optimism and strengths with those traditional factors (e.g., social support) to enhance the effect on well-being (Caballero et al., 2001). The social dimension is consistently included for Latina/o students given the importance of these relationships (Rosales, 2006). This social dimension is comprised of support from faculty, mentors, peers, and family. The social dimension also includes, but is not limited to, social support from the influence of student organizations (e.g., Latina/o sorority or fraternity, ethnic-specific student organization), faculty, advisors, mentors and family encouragement for postsecondary education. The social dimension surrounds itself through meaningful relationships of life satisfaction with others through networks, connections, role models, and mentors, which individually and collectively inform persistence. This study explored the role of religion and spirituality, in the context of social capital, as sources for CCW in the experiences of Latina/o students (Espino, 2014).

Chapter Summary

In Chapter 2 the background for this study was discussed, which included the historical perspective of the importance of spirituality and religion within the Latina/o community. Overall,

students' challenges of the university experience are difficult to navigate and frequently cause college student stress levels to increase. There are several barriers for Latina/o students in higher education, including being first generation, language, campus climate, isolation, discrimination, and economic capital. Recognizing these challenges, scholarship is needed to understand how higher education institutions can assist students by encouraging participation in a wide range of interests, which may include religion and spirituality. One way Latina/o students navigate these barriers in higher education is through Latin-centric cultural wealth, which includes religion and spirituality. The CCW framework was selected for this study, since it is a strengths-based approach. This focus on identifying the sources of strength for Latina/o students, such as their values, in-group norms, beliefs, and family traditions, was useful in understanding religion and spirituality as skills and tools to assist them in their university experience. In the next chapter, I discuss the rationale for a qualitative narrative inquiry method. Chapter 3 also includes information related to the research questions, population, sampling method, data collection and analysis methods, and the creditability and trustworthiness of this study.

Chapter 3 - Methods

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to examine the role that religion and spirituality play in the Latina/o college student experience. Unlike prior research previously discussed, this study explored the role that religion or spirituality play in their university journey. This chapter includes information on the chosen research methodology and design, participants and purposeful sampling, credibility and trustworthiness, data collection, and data analysis.

Research Question

This study sought to provide university administrators with a new pillar of knowledge in addressing the specific needs of Latina/o students. The following research question guided this study: What role do religion and spirituality play in the Latina/o higher education experience?

Methodology and Design

A goal of this study was to extend the current literature by examining the role of religion and spirituality in Latina/o college students' experiences. I used narrative inquiry to accomplish this goal. The methodology and research design are discussed in the following sections.

Methodology

The purpose of qualitative research is to gain an in-depth understanding of human behavior, experience, attitudes, intentions, and motivations to make sense of the way people think and feel (Ahmad et al., 2019). Qualitative researchers are concerned with the beliefs, motivations, and actions of people, organizations, or institutions. Qualitative research includes classic examples of culture, sociological studies of an institution, and psychological studies of behavior (Lakshman et al., 2000). Qualitative research studies typically focus on a small subset of a population (Bhattacharya, 2017). Qualitative methods take a holistic perspective, which preserves the complexities of human behavior (Strong, 1992).

Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meanings that people have constructed, how people make sense of their world, and the experiences they have in the world (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). A qualitative methodology was selected for this study to gain insight into Latina/o students' university experiences, specifically through the collection of narrative data. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the topic in-depth, not to generalize to a particular population (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The inductive approach of narrative inquiry allowed for a comprehensive approach to understanding the Latina/o student experience.

Research Design

A research design is a blueprint for how a study should be developed, which includes: the timeline of the research, the role of participants, the means of data collection, and the data analysis process (Bhattacharya, 2017. Narrative inquiry is a form of qualitative research in which the stories themselves become the raw data (Lieblich et al., 1998). Narrative inquiry, a more specific form of inquiring about people's experiences, was ultimately selected for this study, because it is a design that generates meaning in the form of descriptive data to answer the research question (Leavy, 2017). In a narrative inquiry design, the researcher engages in storytelling, through telling the stories of individual experiences (Butina, 2015).

Narrative inquiry focuses "not only on individuals' experiences but also on the social, cultural, and institutional narratives within which individuals' experiences are constituted, shaped, expressed, and enacted" (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, pp. 42–43). Narrative research is a wide concept that can mean collecting anything related to narratives, based on the premise that people understand and give meaning to their lives through the stories they tell (Andrews et al., 2013; McMullen & Braithwaite, 2013). This design also allows a researcher to provide a particular source of knowledge regarding the meaning individuals assign to their daily social

contexts (Clandinin, 2016; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin et al., 2009; Riessman, 2008). Researchers write narratives about the experiences of individuals, describe a life experience, and discuss the meaning with the individual (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

The process of retelling stories involves gathering stories, reviewing them for key elements and phrases, and then analyzing them for themes across participants (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). Narrative inquiry was chosen to provide the flexibility for participants to tell stories about the Latina/o student university experiences with minimal direction from the researcher. The narrative inquiry approach is a common design used to learn more about identity, culture, historical experiences, and lifestyles (Lieblich et al., 1998).

Interview Protocol

The interview protocol included 15 semi-structured interview questions (see Appendix C). These questions allowed participants to share how religion and/or spirituality may have influenced their college experiences. The interview protocol also assisted in gaining greater insight into the resources, activities, and relationships attributed to religion and spirituality that have shaped participants' college experiences. The interviews were recorded and transcribed to be analyzed in NVivo.

Participants

Participants were undergraduate students in either their sophomore, junior, or senior years at a land-grant university. This inclusion criterion was necessary because it ensured participants would have been at the university long enough to have experiences to share. Freshmen would have just begun their journey and may not have had experiences to discuss. The participants recruited were of Latina/o descent. This allowed for representation of several Latin American origins. The participants also had to have some exposure to religion and spirituality.

The purpose of this criterion was to ensure the participants could discuss religion and spirituality. The participants could be of any religious or spiritual identity; this allowed me to explore any religious or spiritual backgrounds of the participants. Demographic data were collected to have background descriptions of the participants.

The participants' gender was not limited; they could be of any gender identity to ensure a diverse group of participants. This design allowed me to focus my collection and analysis of data regarding their university experience in relation to religion and spirituality. All participants recruited were of Latina/o descent. The land grant university selected for this study has a population of almost 20,000 students. It is a predominately white university in a Republican state. It is a public land grant research university. The purpose of studying this group of students was to add to the knowledge of the experiences of the students regarding any role that religion or spirituality may have played in their success.

Purposeful sampling was employed for participant recruitment. Purposeful sampling allowed me to "select individuals ... for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study" (Creswell et al., 2007, p. 125). In this study, I recruited 10 participants who self-identified as Latina/o, were undergraduate students in their sophomore, junior, or senior years, reflected diversity in gender and major, and were enrolled at the land grant university. The participants were recruited from Latina/o student organizations, which included Latina/o fraternities and sororities. The students were selected based on their Latina/o ethnic identity and fulfillment of all inclusion criteria. This was important as the study pertained to Latina/o students' experiences. A sample size of 10 students is the average number for a narrative inquiry as identified by leading researchers (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Marshall et al., 2013; Yin, 2011). The students were selected by the

above criteria, and sampling continued until the 10 participants had been selected (Table 3.1). The 10 participants were interviewed, and once no more new themes were found, data saturation was achieved. Data saturation is met when patterns emerge in at least three consecutive participant responses (Guest et al., 2006).

Table 3.1. Overall Demographics of Participants

Name	Gender	Speak Spanish	Year in College	1st Gen	Affiliation Before College
Flor	Female	Yes	4	Yes	Catholic
Cruz	Male	Yes	4	Yes	Christian
Junior	Male	Yes	3	Yes	Catholic
Nora	Female	Yes	3	Yes	Catholic
Olivia	Female	Yes	3	Yes	Catholic
Isabel	Female	Yes	2	Yes	Catholic
Marta	Female	Yes	4	Yes	Christian
Marilynnn	Female	Yes	4	Yes	Catholic
James	Male	Yes	2	Yes	Catholic
Pati	Female	Yes	4	Yes	Christian

Data Collection

The method of data collection for this study was semi-structured interviews. This type of interview includes a mix of structured interview questions, which are used flexibly, with the largest part of the questions guided toward the issues to be explored (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). A follow-up interview was also included in the data collection process as a part of member checking to allow for elaboration on anything related to the questions not expressed in the initial interview. I maintained consistency with the interview process in questioning for all participants. Participant interviews were the pivotal point of data collection for this study. This assisted in

gaining purposeful sampling of in-depth knowledge of Latina/o students' college experiences (Patton, 2002; Suri, 2011).

In qualitative data collection, the focus on consciousness, perception, self-awareness, and communication of participants allowed me to gain a sophisticated understanding of the collective lived experiences of participants (Noble & Smith, 2014). This approach recognizes that vital information lies within the data collected. Reyes and Ríos (2005) concluded that narratives are useful for researching Latinas in higher education because they give a voice to Latinas who may not discuss issues that need to be examined for fear of being unscholarly. The following sequential process took place during data collection:

1. I provided the informed consent form.
2. I scheduled interviews.
3. I conducted interviews with participants and recorded them on Zoom.
4. I transcribed the recordings of the participant interviews.
5. I reviewed the interview transcripts with participants for member checking to increase the trustworthiness and the accuracy of the transcriptions.

In the qualitative study, I conducted 10 semi-structured interviews in a Zoom setting that was comfortable for the participants. Each interview had an audio recording and field notes. Field notes were not part of the data analyzed; however, they allowed me to make notations of body language and expressions and to make notes of possible follow-up questions. The interviews were transcribed by Zoom, and the recordings were compared with the transcriptions to promote accuracy and comprehensiveness when identifying themes and patterns. The participants were provided with transcript copies for review to ensure accuracy.

Informed Consent

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the informed consent form that was read and signed by the participants. The informed consent form was obtained from the participants

involved in the study. The participants were 18 or older and received an email informing them about the study. This process included an invitation for them to participate (Appendix A). This letter also included an informed consent agreement (Appendix B), which indicated: (1) a description of the narrative study, (2) an explanation of the purpose of the research, (3) the time commitment required for participation in the study, (4) a statement describing the process, (5) a description of any foreseeable discomforts to the participants, (6) the foreseeable benefits to the participants or others as a result of the research, (7) an awareness that the result may be published, (8) a statement of voluntary participation with the ability to withdraw from the study at any given point without any penalty, and 9) a statement of the participant's right to communicate in their preferred mode of communication or to express if they no longer wanted to participate in the study. The informed consent was signed at the time of each participant's interview.

Data Collection

The participants' interviews were transcribed, after which member checking took place. Member checking allowed participants an opportunity to review the data they provided through their transcribed interviews. This process establishes credibility of the study (Carlson, 2010; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). During this process, ambiguities and discrepancies were addressed and stories revised, adding a layer of validation prior to analysis (Creswell & Miller, 2000). After the member checking process was completed, I began reviewing the transcripts to ensure that no personal identifiers were present. The data was further scrubbed to remove duplicates and fix errors in the transcription or member checking and to be in a format acceptable for uploading into NVivo for analysis.

Researchers are encouraged to use software to analyze larger quantities of data. This allows the researcher to investigate the data at a deeper level and to identify themes in the data collected, as well as re-story the data based on the narratives of the participants (Saldaña, 2021; Skjott Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). For this qualitative study, I used NVivo software program to code and analyze the data collected. According to Bhattacharya (2017), no type of analysis, including inductive analysis, takes on a defined linear format. NVivo can add accuracy to the analysis process by allowing the researcher to carry out quick and accurate searches of a particular type. It can also add to the validity of the results by ensuring that all instances of a particular usage are found (Welsh, 2002). Through interpretation, interactions, and discussions with participants, the researcher can identify themes for more in-depth consultation and generate a better understanding of people's environments (Creswell et al., 2007).

In the first round of coding, I searched for the following predetermined words/phrases: (a) religion, (b) spirituality, (c) well-being, (d) college experience, and (e) culture. These specific words and phrases were selected as a priori codes related to the research question and goal for the study. Additional key words and phrases aligning with Yosso's (2005) CCW model were coded: (a) aspirational capital, (b) linguistic capital, (c) familial capital, (d) navigational capital, and (e) resistance capital. The participants' transcripts were reviewed individually. Any words or phrases explicitly related to the above predetermined items were selected and coded accordingly using NVivo nodes. The identified statements were selected and coded using NVivo codes. Once all participants' transcripts were coded, I completed a second round of coding to review all transcripts for words and phrases that indirectly referenced the original five statements.

The second round of coding was done to develop a deeper level of themes. To that end, I identified and coded references that indirectly related to religion, spirituality, well-being, college

experience, and culture. Lastly, a frequency query was run to identify additional themes that were common among participants that may not have been captured with the a priori approach, and additional coding was completed. Once data were identified, coded by theoretical framework components, and additional themes were identified and coded by frequency of occurrence, the participants' stories were retold and organized by these identified themes. These coded words and phrases, the identification of theoretical framework categories, and the frequency search were used to identify the themes of this study. This process for analyzing data for a narrative inquiry study guided my process of identifying themes for this study.

Confidentiality

To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were given to each participant. It was important for the participants to know that their identities would remain confidential throughout the study. I explained to each participant how their information would remain confidential. The interview data were stored on an external drive to which only I had access. The participants received an informed consent form (Appendix B), which indicated that the data were collected through semi-structured interviews and that their identity would remain confidential. The recorded interviews were transcribed, at which time the video recordings were destroyed. The participants' pseudonyms and transcribed interviews were stored electronically in an encrypted password-protected file. The files will be kept for up to seven years after data collection, after which time I will properly destroy them. I will be the only individual with access to the data files, the analyzed data, and pseudonyms for each participant. Any communication or information collected during the study from the participants was kept confidential.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

There are different approaches to narrative inquiry research, and it is imperative that any narrative research approach is seen to be rigorous and stand up to scrutiny (Loh, 2013). In this study, the method aligned with the purpose of the study to maintain trustworthiness, narrative truth, accuracy, and utility to ensure its quality (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Altheide and Schneider (2013) found two main commonalities that cut across narrative research, ethnography, and case study methodological approaches: the "ethical obligation to make public their claims, to show the reader, audience, or consumer why they should be trusted as faithful accounts of some phenomenon" and the "pragmatic utility of validity as 'good for our present intents and purposes'" (p. 389). To that end, I removed ambiguities and made sense of the participants' stories to represent the narrative accurately through member checking.

Researcher Positionality

For this study, I used qualitative, narrative inquiry to explore how religion and spirituality play a role in Latina/o students' university experiences. Through the examination of the research questions, my desire was to contribute to the larger body of knowledge in educational research. The development of this research study was inspired by my experiences working with Latina/o university students and being part of the Latino community. I selected the topic of religion and spirituality experiences for Latina/os, because of my Latin roots. I used religion and spirituality when facing challenges in my own university experience. A bias for me was the preconceived notion of Latina/o students' lacking financial resources because of traditionally being low-income students. Another preconceived notion was that Latina/o students do not receive adequate mentoring or support in college. This was, in part, due to my generation or age gap in having attended college.

A challenge for me was realizing that I may already know what students may say because I am part of the Latina/o community. Recognizing this, I made concerted efforts to allow the data to lead me to the final conclusions based on the identified themes during data analysis. This commonality of culture aided me in providing an environment where participants would be more comfortable speaking frankly and honestly. My goal as the researcher was to add value to the lack of current literature regarding the experiences of Latina/o students' experiences and to determine how religion and spirituality play a role in Latina/o students' college experiences.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I provided an overview of the methodology and design of this research study. The qualitative narrative method allowed for an in-depth understanding of the participants, as it is an inductive design that generates meaning and descriptive data to answer the research question (Leavy, 2017). The narrative inquiry method assisted in capturing the students' experiences through their own voices. The narrative inquiry design allowed for focus on the individual's experience through the social, cultural, and institutional narratives within their university engagement (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). The purpose of this study was to gain an in-depth understanding of whether Latina/o students religious or spiritual behavior, attitudes, intentions, and motivations influenced their university experience. The research question that guided this study was: "What role do religion and spirituality play in the Latina/o higher education experience?" The participants were recruited based on their identification as Latina/os at a land grant university. Purposeful sampling was employed for participant recruitment. For reliability purposes, I collected narrative data through 10 semi-structured, Zoom-recorded interviews with the participants. The interviews were transcribed and reviewed with participants

for member checking to determine the accuracy of the transcriptions. In Chapter 4, I present the findings of the study.

Chapter 4 - Findings

In this narrative inquiry, I explored Latina/o students in their university experience who were in their sophomore to senior year at a land grant university in the United States. Their lived religious and spiritual experiences from childhood to college were discussed, along with their thoughts on the role these two concepts played in their college experiences. My study aimed to provide faculty, staff, and administrators with information on how to support Latina/o students through college. All 10 participants participated in an initial interview and a follow-up interview to confirm the accuracy of my notes and transcriptions. The following themes were identified: (a) organized and individual religious practices, (b) impact on mental and emotional health, (c) sense of belonging/support, and (d) incorporation of native language. All participants were part of religious groups in their childhood, and many mentioned not having thought much about their religious or spiritual journey. They were all excited to share their experiences, and when they felt stuck, I would say, "Just remember this is 100% about you and your experiences, there is no right or wrong answer." This would motivate them to share their experiences and inner thoughts.

Participants

Interviews were completed with 10 students at a land grant university in the United States. All 10 participants were first-generation college students. Three participants identified as male and seven as female. No participant identified with a gender identity other than male or female. Demographic information also included year in college, with first-year students being part of the exclusion criteria for this study.

Below is a brief description of each of the 10 participants. All participants mentioned being excited about participating in a study for Latina/o students. When asked the demographic questions, they all shared various aspects of their life and who they were. As such, each

description will vary in detail and length. The participants typically paused for a few moments to think before responding and commented similarly to Isabel: “Can I think about that? I just never thought about this.”

Flor

Flor is a first-generation student and was a senior at the time of the study. She described herself as being born into Catholicism. When Flor was asked what spirituality meant to her, she distinguished between religion and spiritualty, sharing, “Spirituality means that you are connected to a higher power, and religion to me is a practice of spirituality but in a more organized form.” Flor attended two other out-of-state colleges, initially wanting to be a marine biologist. However, she explained that, due to a lack of funding and personal issues, she decided to regain her in-state status and pursue a degree in geology to make a positive impact on those around her by addressing climate change. Flor was the youngest of her siblings and discussed learning from her siblings’ college experiences that it was okay to ask professors for resources. Flor described practicing her spirituality in college through meditation, prayer, and the occasional attendance of church when she goes back home to visit family.

Cruz

Cruz is a first-generation student and was in his senior year at the time of this study. He described his religious affiliation as Christian growing up. To him, spirituality was:

> Being in tune with yourself, being in tune with your thoughts, your emotions. Religion means to me you’re following a set of ideas based on your pastor. For example, my mom’s a Christian so she follows the ideas of the Bible.

Cruz shared that, up until around 18, he engaged in spiritual practices with his mother.

> I would practice while my mom would practice reading the Bible every night every Sunday. Especially on Saturday night, we would practice what the pastor would preach, we would read about it and then we would talk about it. So, I remember I would read the words, and I would say what it means to me. Then, my mom would give her interpretation, and we would talk about it. And then, we would go to church and just listen to the pastor's interpretation of it. We [would] kind of compare it and talk about it.

Cruz had continued his spiritual practice in college through prayer, meditation, and church attendance and felt that his university experience had been eye-opening. He said that it was a fresh start for him.

Cruz mentioned a sense of being more open by participating in student organizations and wanting to put himself out there to learn more about different people. He shared that since he was the first to go to college, he was unaware of the resources available to him. Cruz spent his early years in college navigating college on his own. He often felt alone and as if it were more difficult for him than his peers with campus connections. His parents experienced financial difficulties and were unaware that the financial aid office had assistance specifically for students experiencing economic hardship. He explained that it was months later that he found out there was an accommodation that could be made due to a parent's loss of a job, and he only learned this after just deciding to show up in the office. He expressed wishing there were more resources for students and greater efforts to inform students of the resources available to them.

Junior

Junior is a first-generation student and was a junior in college at the time of this study. He was born into Catholicism. To him, spirituality was "something we really can't see, but we just kinda know it's there without actually seeing it." He described religion as an organized faith such

as being Catholic and belief in one God. Junior practiced his religious beliefs through church attendance, prayer, and discussions with his family and friends.

He described his college experience as consisting of ups and downs. He had a brother who was a senior and occasionally provided him with advice about making certain necessary purchases such as where to buy the cheapest books and making sure to buy a parking pass. He described a summer bridge program that helped him learn about resources, get to know people, and put himself out there by attending different meetings. He also described his experiences as a lot of trial and error from finding places to study to the appropriate time to go to the gym to adjusting to the constant change when things did not go as planned. He felt there were a lot of unknowns in college.

Nora

Nora is also a first-generation student and was in her junior year. She was born into the Catholic faith as a child and had a similar definition of spirituality. She stated, "It's a spiritual connection between you and a God, and religion means who you associate with if you are Catholic or Christian…. How you choose to identify." Before coming to college, Nora practiced devotionals and discussions with her mother and with her pastor. She went on to detail that after entering college, while still praying and practicing, she identified as Christian and no longer Catholic. She said,

> I was first baptized Catholic. And as a child, I didn't really have a say. So, I was just baptized Catholic. I was taught to pray in Spanish at a young age, and I was taught to pray in English. And, then as I got older. I changed religions to Christianity, because as a Catholic, sometimes you don't really know the whole Bible.

Nora mentioned that her college experience, especially having been the first to attend college, helped her practice her religious beliefs more. She still made a concerted effort to attend church every weekend while in college, write in her devotional, and pray.

Nora began her college experience at a community college and transferred right after graduation to a four-year university. She had to work part-time on campus to help pay for college expenses. Her first major was education, and she switched to speech-language pathology. The switch in majors added another year to her college completion, and she said it had been quite an adjustment going from education to health care. She described her experience as "interesting" and a lot more work navigating all the levels of change in this decision. She sought out a community to be a part of, and after much prayer, she decided to join a multicultural student organization focusing on Latinas. She felt this was a resource that had helped her, but her college experience had been difficult, which added stress. Therefore, she continued to practice her religious beliefs in college.

Olivia

Another first-generation student, Olivia was raised Catholic and was in her junior year pursuing a major in business. Olivia described religion and spirituality in the following way: "Spirituality is believing in something even if you haven't seen it as it is a form of connection." Religion to her was checking a faith box, like Buddhist or Catholic. "It's just where your faith is, and I just went with being Catholic because it was what my parents taught me." Olivia practiced her religious beliefs in college through prayer, worship music, and church attendance.

Olivia described her college experience as way more positive than she thought. Although Olivia had challenges in college, she felt she had a good support system for being a Latina on a predominately white campus. Olivia mentioned that, as a first-generation student, she felt that

many of her questions went unanswered. Through a summer bridge experience, she connected with a faculty advisor who became her go-to person for questions. She was grateful for the information provided since her parents didn't go to college and, therefore, could not support her in this manner. She also felt grateful for the staff connections she made to help her during all the unknowns.

Isabel

Isabel is a first-generation college student and was a sophomore at the time of the study. She was baptized in the Catholic faith as an infant. Isabel described spirituality as "having that feeling of fulfillment." She described religion as "getting to interact with the spiritual self in me and with others that think the same about religion, and for me, that is Catholic." Before college, Isabel described her religious practices as mainly attending youth groups and being a server during mass. Once Isabel left the youth group, she would still attend church on Sundays. She shared, "I would just have those youth group Bible studies. God is the way to everything. We should always ask for help." Isabel practiced her religious beliefs during college through prayer, rosary, reading the Bible, church attendance, and the occasional church conference.

Isabel was from a small, predominantly Hispanic, rural town, and the transition of going to a college with little Latina/o representation had been difficult for her. Isabel described having to spend most of her freshman year studying since her classes were difficult. She described her sophomore year as a better experience because her first year was extremely hard. She found it challenging to make her class schedule because she had to move her classes around so many times. Isabel described herself as shy and not liking to ask for help. The stress of adding and dropping courses brought her to tears at one point, and she got assistance from a multicultural department to drop a class that was not going well. Isabel referred to the lack of knowing what

she was doing and the lack of family to whom to ask questions, which led to her feeling a bit lost at times at the university.

Marta

At the time of the study, Marta was a senior in college who described herself as growing up in a strong Chistian faith, similar to Baptist. She described her college experience as nontraditional. When asked about religion and spirituality, Marta distinguished between the two. She stated that, to her, spirituality "is kind of more in tune with your connection to what you may believe, and religion is a bit more focused on a higher being rather than spirituality." She described her religious experiences before college:

> I grew up Christian. My mom always took me to church when I was young. I don't ever really remember not going to church. So, I grew up really kind of enclosed and almost forced into religion and what I should believe. It was always ... those very traditional roles, my family didn't drink, and my family didn't party.

Marta mentioned that her university experience did not follow the traditional four-year path of most students. During the COVID-19 pandemic, she was having a challenging time and ended up taking some time off from college to assist her family with some health-related needs that required her support. Marta went directly from high school to college without knowing what she was doing or how she would navigate the experience. She mentioned being first-generation, which meant she had no guidance from home or family. She had to look up resources on her own and got connected to a multicultural department, which helped her return after her break.

Upon her return to college, she changed majors from pre-medicine to engineering. Since her education had already become a financial burden, she needed a major where she would be finished quicker with a full-time paying job. This change made her realize that what was

important to her were her values and what she ultimately wanted out of life. Majoring in engineering worked much better for her.

Marilynn

Marilynn was a senior majoring in animal science on a pre-veterinary science track. She was born into the Catholic faith. Marilynn spoke about her understanding of spirituality by sharing that she had previously thought it was religion. At the time of the interview, she believed that "spirituality is more my inner thoughts, and religion is being raised Catholic and having to go to church." Family was a key influencing factor for Marilynn before college, but it also affected her ability to continue practicing the way she used to.

> It was me and my cousin, and ever since we were young, we have had to go to each other's house, pray the rosary, and then do prayers at the end. I would always go to church every Sunday or they had talks like I had with my mom.

Marilynn transferred from another university because the first university she attended did not have a major in animal science. She was the first in her family to go to college and described having to find time to assist her parents by translating for them in various aspects of their lives. Marilynn mentioned being the oldest daughter and only living a few hours from her parents. She spent as much time as possible going home and assisting her parents with their needs. Marilynn transferred to this university without knowing anyone and was able to make friends in the residence halls. She described her living space as her source of connection on campus, and her resident assistant guided her in connecting with the resources she needed.

James

James was a sophomore in business with an emphasis in accounting. He considered himself a cradle Catholic, which meant being born into Catholicism due to his family's religious

affiliation. James described spirituality as a form of his religious practice, stating, “Spirituality means kind of having a relationship with yourself at the same time of having it with a spiritual being...such as God, since I am Catholic.”

Before college, James was very engaged in various ministries in the church. He remembered attending church around five years of age:

> Pretty often, like every Sunday, we were there. And then, in between, when there were special services or any other sort of commitment, we were there. So, I grew up there being taught, you know, the word [Bible] is law.

He sang in the church choir for two years. Then, he helped in the children’s ministry: “I took care of children from ages one to five during the services to watch over them and teach them Catholicism classes. We go Mondays for prayer, Fridays for a service, and then Sunday for service as well.” He continued his religious practice in college through prayer, discussions with friends, and occasional church attendance.

James mentioned being the first to attend college and having some apprehension since he did not know what to expect. He described his transition to college as way better than most, which he attributed to participating in a four-week summer bridge program that assists first-generation students. He said he fell in love with the experience as it helped him build a family structure at college. He also mentioned getting a lot of advice from the connections with the staff from the program. These individuals became his resources for all his questions, and he was so happy to see that the university had staff who were like him and could relate to his issues and questions. He mentioned spending a lot of his time studying in the multicultural center. In this space, he had access to the staff and many other students and student organizations to help him feel as though he had an extended family on campus. He also mentioned that through this

connection, he joined a Latino fraternity, which helped him build a brotherhood on campus with others like him. He stated that there were so many things to get involved in and that he always reminded himself that academics come first.

Pati

Pati was a senior majoring in business marketing and described being raised as a devout Christian. When asked how she thinks about religion and spirituality, she described these as "the connection with self, what you value, and your relationship with God." She also described religion as being "in a way separate from spirituality as it is a predetermined set of rules of what is expected of you, such as expectation since I am Christian." Pati practices her religious beliefs through prayer and church attendance.

Though Pati's mom graduated from college; her institution was in Mexico. For this study, she was still considered a first-generation student as neither of her parents had a bachelor's degree from a U.S. college. Pati attended two years of community college and lived at home during this time. The first time she had been away from home and her parents for an extended period was when she transferred to the university. Pati described feeling independent due to being away from home and making her own choices, and she shared how good that freedom felt to her. This was the first time she felt as though she was doing things for herself rather than for her family. She described having good high school mentors who helped her get to community college and then making the right connections with instructors who helped her connect to further resources. She also shared about getting to know so many of her friends who were not as fortunate to make connections or create networks, and she was grateful that she had done so.

Themes

Several common themes arose from the student interviews regarding the role of religion and spirituality for these Latina/o students. The first illustrated that most of the students attended campus organized religion groups when they first arrived on the campus. Although the students did not continue to attend these university religious groups, all the students eventually took part in individual religious and spiritual practices. Religion and spirituality were described as mechanisms to counteract the anxiety and stress of the college experience and ultimately had a positive influence on these students' mental health. Several students used their religious and spiritual practices to overcome academic struggles. A unique finding was that although they were bilingual, many students preferred to practice their religion or spirituality in their native language since it enhanced their experiences.

Organized Religion and Individual Religious Practices

Many of the stories highlighted in this section reflect how participants sought an organized religious group on campus. The students described a need to be around others who shared common values and who could provide a religious community during their college experience. Marta offered a prime example of how moving away from family and going to college increased her desire and need to find belonging in a religious community:

> It's just all about community. So, I think it's helped me and if anything, that's being a Latina … I knew I wanted to look for some kind of community. So, I did reach out to a lot of religion-based groups to try and find some kind of community.

She wanted to make meaningful connections with others who shared similar cultural values.

Organized Religious Practices

Several participants tried university-organized religious/ spiritual or organizational practices in college. Nora explained that she attended a university-sponsored organized group called *Call to Greatness*. She was excited about finding a religious group so quickly, and since she didn't have a car, she would get rides to all the events. Her newfound excitement came to a quick halt as her religious views did not match up with most of the group.

Nora felt that the questions she posed regarding the teachings and beliefs of the other members of the group were not viewed in a positive light. One example she shared was "they would say something and then if you try to explain yourself or explain how that didn't sound right, they would take offense." Nora began to feel unwelcome as she continued to question their views. She mentioned, "I noticed they slowly started pulling away and started getting less and less invited to meetings." She eventually quit attending as she felt as though they did not want her there. Nora did not allow the feeling of no longer being welcomed in the university religious group to affect her personal religious practice. Nora stated, "Not belonging in the group only strengthened my need to pray, in the morning and at night."

Pati was equally excited to find an organized group through which to practice her religion. She quickly found a religious student group called *Christian Purpose*, which was quite popular on the campus, and mentioned that she attended a few times. She also shared feelings of indifference about attending, explaining, "It wasn't bad but nothing great about it either." She also mentioned that her indifference could have been due to a lack of connection with others in the group. Pati stated, "I went to Christian Purpose at the university but did not feel a strong connection, and it is too late in my schedule, so I just stopped going." Pati continued describing

her religious practice and elaborated, “I still always have the need for God, especially in college, so I do my prayers.”

Marta also sought out organized religious groups at the university. She mentioned reaching out to several religion-based groups to find community. After attending various groups, she mentioned feeling disappointed. She did not continue to participate in these as “it wasn’t necessarily what I wanted, so I didn’t really stick with them or really felt connected to them just because of my culture and being at a PWI, it wasn’t relatable for me.” Marta added, “So, I don’t practice with a university, but I still practice my religion as being in college isn’t easy, and I need the connection to God.”

Marilynn’s experience began with an invitation from a member of the university religious group, *God is Everything*. She described being sought out by Amy and how they began having religious discussions. However, Marilynn mentioned that she soon found that she and Amy were not in the same place regarding religion. She stated, “Attending all the time didn’t feel like the right thing, and her priority was religious activity, and mine was finishing my education.” She described needing to prioritize her academics versus spending so much on attending religious practice with the group. Marilynn stated, “I have a deep belief in God, and I still pray, talk to God, read the Gospel, and pray the rosary on my own time and in my own way.”

Olivia looked into an organized group for university Bible study. The late hours of the bible study group never seemed to align with her schedule, as she had a packed class schedule and student organization involvement. She shared, “I actually don’t have a campus-based religious group or group spiritual practices, as it never fits into my schedule, and I’m ok with that.” Olivia explained that “not practicing with a university group lets me practice as an individual and in a more modernized way, as I watch and read Bible verses on TikTok.” In

addition, she described wearing a cross as another form of practice for protection, stating, “The cross gives me a sense of safety and being loved.”

Of all the students who started with a university religious group, none stayed in that group. Some students felt they were no longer welcome. Others could not identify with the practices within the group. Additionally, some mentioned that their views were being questioned or that it was a cultural difference, with many of the students in the organization being white. However, these students continued their religious practices. Some practiced their religion individually while others turned to university-organized cultural groups such as Latina/o fraternities and sororities, cultural identity student organizations, and within their own social/family circles. The commonality here is that these students continued to practice religion during their university experience despite disconnecting from specific organized campus groups.

Individual Religious Practice

A few participants did not seek out organized university religion/spiritual practice while in college yet still practiced religion and spirituality. Isabel described that when she first began college, she started practicing by reading the Bible in her residence hall “just with random girls that were into religion who lived on my dorm floor.” Isabel shared,

> We would have liked Bible studies. I would be there every Wednesday, every Thursday, and so it was just me and our group of girls on our floor, and we would meet each other once a week and then we would do Bible studies and stuff.

She stated that there were too many different religions and interpretations of the Bible, and it began to feel confusing and uncomfortable. Eventually, she stopped attending. Isabel continued to practice with occasional church attendance and prayer, and she shared, “I don’t go to church as often, but I still pray. Being in college makes me need to pray.”

Junior shared that he would have liked to have participated in a university religious group, but his time commitment to classes, homework, and his job did not allow him to do so. He mentioned, “Being in college and having so many things out of my control make me seek God.” He referenced his religious practice involved attending church with his brother and meeting other friends there on Sundays:

> I don’t practice with an organized group. I do talk to my brother. I go most weekends to church, waking up in time to go very important. Religion just comes up in conversation of when feeling stressed, prayed and how much it helps and sharing experiences.

Junior mentioned finding comfort in conversations with his brother and friends about praying about the challenges of college and life in general.

James likewise did not seek out university religious groups when he first attended college. He described participating in a summer bridge program where he got connected with multicultural student organizations, which kept him so busy that he did not seek out any religious groups on campus. James felt that practicing his religion in college was more difficult as he couldn’t just tag along with his family like he did when he lived at home. He stated, “Yeah, I have some friends that I do go to church with and some of my fraternity brothers too. But they go also on a solo basis as well with little time. It’s harder to do that.” He mentioned having to be more intentional about practicing while in college, explaining, “I don’t have time to go to church, but I need to pray more because being in college is hard.”

Flor did not mention any desire to seek out organized religion. She felt that organized religion had too many rules and constraints, which sometimes suppressed the natural flow of growth. Flor described her practice while in college as moving away from the organized form of Catholicism to a spiritual practice: “I would say that I am currently into spiritual practices more

than religious practices." She mainly discussed the need for individualistic spiritual practice or to simplify her practices for what was helpful while navigating college nuances. Flor stated, "I feel for me and the place that I'm at in my university experience, it's just healthier to practice spirituality. "Individual religious practices brought the students peace of mind and comfort.

Positive Influence on Mental and Emotional Health

Practicing religion and spirituality had a positive influence on the students' mental and emotional health. Students used their religious and spiritual practices to get assistance with the obstacles and challenges of college. The stories in this section explore the sometimes stressful and overwhelming nature of college. Several participants used prayer to ask God to help them manage their stress and anxieties, and many felt that religion was a safe place that brought them comfort.

For example, Cruz struggled in the university experience because of his Latino identity on campus, which affected his mental and emotional health. He shared, "I meditated before I became more spiritual with myself. I was struggling with mental health with it, especially with imposter syndrome, especially in the first two years," He found that his spiritual practices helped with the thoughts in his mind. Cruz stated, "Practicing spiritual activities, it does influence my mental health in a good way. When I feel incredible anxiety or depression." Cruz further described how his strict Latino cultural values increased his anxiety in college as he was meeting students of diverse backgrounds, which included members of the LGBTQ community. As he was forming friendships with people, he recognized that his community may not accept his friends' identities. He mentioned worrying that his new friendship could make him vulnerable to being talked about and judged by others. He then went on to describe how spirituality helped him through this: "So, practicing for actually [allowed for my] mental health to get better, become

more self-aware and to seek help when I get so… like, I'm in a really bad state." Cruz found that practicing spirituality during his college experience helped him to be in a better mental state.

Olivia described an internal struggle with her thoughts about her college experiences and using her relationship with God as a tool to help her get through those thoughts. She mentioned,

> There were some things that I felt I couldn't talk to anyone about because it was just insecurities within me. So just saying it to God made me feel he was listening and eventually the pain just went away and I got comfort.

Olivia described her lack of knowledge about mental health before attending college. Culturally, "we're told that there's no such thing as mental health or emotional [wellbeing]." She mentioned that when she struggled in college, especially when others were not, she turned to her religious upbringing: "It's that God made you that way, and it doesn't mean you are less than other people. It is just that your path is different than others, and that's okay." Practicing religion gave Olivia a sense of strength in her college journey.

Nora stated, "Mental and emotional health go together, since if I worry about it, it is going to affect how I feel. For example, if I worry about money, then I'm stressed and sad." She mentioned always being worried about how she was going to pay for everyday expenses and how her mom did not have the funds to assist her: "I pray a lot about being able to get scholarships so I can continue in college." She also described using prayer to overcome her racing thoughts with so many other challenges she faced while in college. She stated, "I have a tendency to sometimes overwhelm myself just with different things, and sometimes I have to take a step back, take a deep breath, pray, and then it's the same just like with life in general or homework." Nora prayed for the doors of opportunity to open and connect with her needs for support, which brought her peace of mind.

Marilynn reflected on her high level of fear during her college experience, which resulted in her struggling at times with her mental health. She related some of these feelings of being afraid to a state of loss and sadness being away from her family. She stated, “It is very hard for me to be away from family… it makes me sad when I think about it.” While in college, she continued all her various religious practices as they were helping her cope. She stated, “Even though I’m by myself, believing in God, that He’s hearing me, and I find comfort in that.” Marilynn found comfort in her prayers, which released her from her fears and offered the spirit of a sound mind to help her cope with her emotional challenges while in college.

James used prayer during college to help him deal with grief. He went into detail about his family’s religious practices that they used to deal with the loss of an aunt: “We prayed the rosary to help her soul get to heaven.” He added that his family still had a picture of her in their home, as she was still considered part of their family. In addition, they also prayed for her during the Day of the Dead celebration. In this practice, they made an altar with her favorite food, drink, and hobbies to show who she was in life. James reflected, “This helps us remember her and also still feel connected to her.” He felt that their cultural celebrations and religious practices helped heal their pain from the loss as sometimes the pain diminished, and sometimes it felt like she was with them.

Marta explained that during her college experience, there were physical health challenges with her brother, which affected her mental state and caused her to be depressed and want to isolate herself. However, she used her religion to help her out of this state of mind by attending church. Being able to talk to others became a source of happiness and joy for Marta, bringing her well-being and stability. Marta stated,

> [At first] I wouldn't really go to church and stuff. I'd say I was sadder. Since I started going, it brings me more happiness and more joy [and] ... being able to talk to other people. I just think it brings more peace to us and then it helps us focus more on what we're, what's good for our well-being, and the good path of life. It brings stability.

For Marta, religion and spirituality assisted her inner struggle during college, helping her persevere and make sense of what was going on in her world.

Pati described emotions of distress caused by feeling conflicted between her Latino religious upbringing and making good decisions in college. She stated, "Sometimes it's kind of [a] mental battle what I've learned, how I feel, and what I should do." Pati also mentioned learning about many other cultures and meeting students who practiced different values. One example she gave was cohabitation. Pati felt stressed because her religious teachings stated these practices were wrong, but she also believed that her friends were not bad people. Pati turned to prayer for protection so she would not be negatively influenced by peer pressure or the ways of the world. She also prayed for the fortitude to recognize what is right in the eyes of God. Pati stated, "[In prayer] it was kind of comforting in a sense [that] everything will be ok." Additionally, Pati found peace in praying for those whose actions did not align with her religious values. This practice became another way to release herself from any undue influence during her college experience.

Use of Religion to Overcome Academic Struggles

In response to the challenges that came their way during college, many of these students used their religious practices as a source of guidance in their academic journey. Several participants prayed for discernment in their choices and decisions in their academic and personal lives. These students mentioned they were looking for God to help them approach difficult

situations with the strength to continue in their college journey. For example, Junior referenced practicing his religious beliefs more in college than ever before because of his academic coursework. Junior explained, “Because I need help with different college classes, so it was kind of encouraging of practice more, more, more.” He gave the example of exams, sharing, “Whenever I had a test, the schools bring me closer to God because I need guidance and wisdom to see what I need to see [so] I pray before the exam.” He felt that praying helped his academics, “You know, to stop the brain getting more frustrated with classes.” Junior described that being in an academically rigorous major led him closer to God, as his prayers often consisted of asking for the wisdom to do well in his coursework.

Marta discussed the difficulties of taking high-level courses when she was a pre-medicine major. She used her religious beliefs to help her get through rigorous classes, stating, “Yeah, I do. I would say even when I go into exams, I’m like, God, please give me the strength, so just having that hope is also helpful.” Marta found that praying for academic wisdom and the strength to persevere through adversity was one of the best tools to navigate the academic challenges in her college experience.

Similarly, Marilynn shared a story where she prayed about a situation in her chemistry class:

> I took a really, really bad hit with it because I was doing good, and then it just went downhill. It’s all like, “oh, maybe I’m not cut out to be a vet,” or “maybe I’m not cut out for this major,” or “I’m away from my parents.” I have no one there besides my parents. I have no one there besides my friends, but it’s different. So, when I was going through that rough patch, I was like, okay. Let me go to let me have quite a time, talk through these thoughts.

Marilynn added, “I feel like it actually opened my eyes to the true value of my religion. I need religion [at] some point in my life because ... [it] helps me get through these tough times like studies and exams.” Marilynn found that prayer gave her the strength to continue enduring her major’s difficulty.

Flor described the need for prayer given the many environmental science courses she had to take, sharing, “So even these ... really hard classes I don’t take [them]. Oh, like, it’s a punishment or [something] like that.” She went on to share:

> I take it like it’s helping me grow, and that’s how I see and take obstacles in my life, and that’s how I kind of take school. It’s helping me grow. ... the professors aren’t, no one’s against you here.

Flor described her God as a good God, not one that punishes. She found that her spirituality helped her make meaning of and find purpose in her academic challenges at the university.

Isabel described how difficult her college experience had been since her courses were very demanding. These challenges sometimes left her wondering if she fit in when she had to drop a course. She mentioned that when she starts to feel hopeless with all the challenges in her coursework, she turns to her religious beliefs. Isabel stated, “I know I have someone or something to help me, like if I’m frustrated about something...It gives me the strength to stick with my classes even when they are so hard.” Isabel described her religion as helping, providing her support when she needed it in her coursework.

James mentioned feeling overwhelmed and nervous with all the tasks of college life. James found a sense of support and connection to God through prayer. He shared, “I know I am not alone at times when I am physically alone or what I know for a fact that I can go pray, and someone is listening.” He described feelings that he could manage all his tasks, and it was

through his connection with God that he felt he belonged in college. James also described prioritizing prayer and his academics to ensure he was successful in his classes. James stated, "And I keep practicing these beliefs even more than I did in high school just because I am more stressed with college classes, and I need that to kind of ease my mind sometimes." James mentioned that praying helps take the edge off the pressures of his academic coursework, which, in turn, he felt helped him get better grades.

Junior described feeling anxious and stressed out about his classes. These feelings increased his religious practice in college. Junior stated, "I would say I didn't practice as such as I do now in college." He detailed, "I believe that just kind of scientific, you know. It's more like anxious. I want to tap [into] something [and] I've kind of seen that...Prayer helps with emotional health." He mentioned that engineering classes are challenging, and he feels a lot of stress to succeed in his major. Junior shared, "I feel religion helped me seek refuge, especially now in college. It is difficult, and I need something to help me get through being resilient." Junior's religious practices provided him the strength to be resilient and continue in his college journey.

Cruz experienced a lot of self-doubt about his academic abilities at the university. He stated, "Sometimes I get in my head so bad that I can't focus on the work I need to do for class." Cruz mentioned praying to God for the ability to concentrate and for guidance in retaining the information that he reads for classes. He expressed, "It is through prayer and meditation that connects my mind to a better space." Cruz felt that his prayers helped him do better academically.

Enhanced Religious or Spiritual Experience in Native Language

The participants in this study were all first-generation Latina/o students, and they all spoke Spanish. The students mentioned practicing their spiritual and religious practices in both

Spanish and English, depending on the situation. However, several preferred their practice in Spanish. They noted that not only did prayer help them, but praying in Spanish also helped them feel more connected to their Latina/o heritage.

Junior described living in a home where everyone spoke Spanish. He added that communicating with his parents was easier for him and his siblings when done in Spanish. He mentioned that speaking English was necessary for school and work but that his language of comfort was Spanish. When asked if he practiced his religion in English and Spanish, Junior stated, "I mostly practice in Spanish because I learned my prayers in Spanish with my mom." Junior mainly expressed his religion in Spanish, sharing that practicing in Spanish had more meaning for him. Junior said, "Even now in college, my brother and I go to mass in Spanish… it just feels right." Junior found that praying in Spanish gave him a feeling of certainty.

Isabel also described growing up in a Spanish-speaking home. Though her mom spoke English, her dad did not, so everyday life was easier to navigate in a language everyone spoke. When she talked about attending church, she mentioned that in her hometown, there was an English Mass and a Spanish Mass. She also shared that she preferred to attend the Spanish Mass. Isabel explained that practicing her religion in Spanish had much more meaning than practicing in English. Isabel stated, "Attending mass in Spanish makes it spiritual for me, most of my close friends are Hispanic, and we all [speak] Spanish." She added, "Even my religious youth group was in Spanish, and when I pray, I pray in Spanish to feel connected to God." Isabel mentioned that practicing her religion in her first language makes the spiritual connection more meaningful for her.

Marilynn stated that her parents' language of preference was Spanish; therefore, she and her siblings spoke Spanish with their parents at home. She mentioned continuing to speak

Spanish while in college, as she still translates for her parents over the phone and when she returns home. They save paperwork for her to read and translate for them. Marilynn stated that praying was easier in Spanish, "I'm used to speaking Spanish with my parents, and well, praying with them is only Spanish, so I feel more at home." She feels more at home practicing her religion in Spanish.

Flor described practicing spirituality in both languages, depending on what she is praying for. Flor stated, "I do practice in Spanish. It just depends on kind of how I'm feeling, but I do practice in Spanish too." She mentioned that when her needs were deep, she would pray in Spanish, giving her a sense of being truly connected to the higher power.

Nora talked about needing consistency with her prayers in the mornings and evenings. Nora described feeling reassured that praying would fulfill her needs and challenges. The need for consistency also translated to her praying in Spanish. Nora stated, "I learned to pray in Spanish with my mom, and that is why I still pray in Spanish because it just makes more sense to me, and that is what has always helped." Praying in Spanish for Nora was a staple in her religious practice. Marta also mentioned having grown up practicing her religion with her family and with her mom, so attending church in Spanish and praying in Spanish made her feel connected. Marta stated, "Being at a university [with] not many Latina/os is hard for me, and I try to stay connected with my culture as much as I can, [and] that's why when I pray, I pray in Spanish."

One struggle that Cruz faced in college was self-doubt regarding whether he belonged at the university and feeling unprepared to navigate all the nuances of college life. Cruz stated, "There are times when my mind [kept] spinning on all the things that I do not know just about being in college, you know." He described the need for prayer to calm his intense, reoccurring

thoughts of his deficits. He stated, “When I’m praying for things that feel so intense, I pray in Spanish, since that is how I grew up praying, and it worked.” He also mentioned praying in English, which were often more simple prayers of gratitude. When there was a need, the prayer was in Spanish.

Pati mentioned that being a transfer student was difficult for her, and although she was older when she moved away from home, she lacked experience in the world. She stated, “Having more independence and freedom away from home, making my choices. Doing things daily that I would do for myself.” She mentioned that while growing up Christian, her teachings were that there was good and bad. Pati stated, “The way you approach things matters, but I think as long as you know you have that connection and relationship with God...his forgiveness is overpowering all of that.” She stated that although she is bilingual, her prayers were in Spanish. Pati said, “I grew up speaking Spanish, so that is what I’m most comfortable with. “The students turned to praying in Spanish when they either had a serious concern or wanted a deeper connection with a higher power. Prayer is Spanish provided meaning for the students.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to examine the role that religion and spirituality play in the Latina/o college student experience. The themes discussed in this chapter were: (a) organized religion and individual practice, (b) positive impact on mental and emotional health, (c) use of religion to overcome academic struggles, and (d) an enhanced experience in the native language. These themes showed how religion and spirituality significantly impacted these Latina/o students. Several students initially sought organized religion and later turned to individual practice, whether due to lack of connection, indifference, or lack of belonging. As a whole, the students in this study practiced their religion and spirituality individually.

Many of the participants used their religious practices to help them cope with mental and emotional challenges during their university experience. They described using their religious and spiritual practices when they experienced feelings of imposter syndrome, challenges of academic rigor, lack of cultural identity, coping with insecurities, and searching for comfort. They all felt that their religious and spiritual practices positively supported their mental and emotional health. These Latina/o students also used their religious and spiritual practices to navigate the academic challenges they faced due to the rigor of their coursework. They prayed for guidance, confidence, support, and strength to make it through their academic coursework. Participants also described using their religion and practice to persevere through their academic apprehensions and how these practices helped them feel heard and find comfort and support.

In the various reasons and methods these Latina/o students used to implement their religious and spiritual practice, a unique theme came to light: prayer in their native language. Many described having learned their prayers and attending church in Spanish. They found a sense of nostalgia and connection to family as they continued to practice their religion in Spanish when most of their current world is to speak in English. Several described a deeper connection to God and their cultural heritage when praying in Spanish, which brought a sense of support and comfort they did not feel was realized when praying in English. All 10 students mentioned the benefits of making religion and spirituality a part of their university experience.

Chapter 5 - Discussion

This discussion chapter highlights how religion and spirituality played a role in assisting Latina/o students in their university experiences. In the findings of this study, the participants shared stories of how they used religion and spirituality to navigate their college experiences. The themes that surfaced in this study were (a) organized and individual religious practices, (b) the positive influence of religion on mental and emotional health, (c) the use of religion to overcome academic struggles, and (d) an enhanced religious and spiritual experience in the native language.

In this chapter, I will discuss the students' use of their religious and spiritual values and practices to help them navigate their various university experiences. This section will also go into more depth to explain the meaning and relevance of practicing religion and spirituality for these Latina/o students. In addition, this chapter will also show the connection between the findings of my study and existing theory and literature. Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth (CCW) model provided the framework underpinning the findings of this study. The association between the findings of these Latina/o students' use of religious and spiritual practices aligns with the six forms of cultural capital: aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistance (Yosso, 2005).

Organized and Individual Religion

This study found that many of these Latina/o students looked for organized religious groups when they first arrived on campus. Campesino and Schwartz (2006) previously found that religion and spirituality were essential and played a vital role in the everyday lives of Latina/os. Participants in this study had a variety of experiences with organized university religious groups. They described being unable to connect with or feel welcome in the university religious groups.

Despite this lack of connection, the students continued practicing their religion and spirituality as individuals. Upon arriving at the university, Marta, Nora, Pati, and Olivia all sought out organized religion to practice their faith. However, they encountered several challenges with the existing university organizations. These students continued to practice their spirituality as individuals when the organized groups did not work for them. Not giving up and finding what worked for them to continue their spiritual practice showed resilience, which supports the research conducted by Park et al. (2020). Park et al.'s (2020) study found that when institutional systems in place do not work for Latina/o students, they can assert their navigational capital through the emergence of students' spiritual identity that may serve to guide and sustain Latina/os as they navigate educational institutions.

Nora's experience with the All About Good university group is an example of the impact of non-alliance with the group's belief system, which negatively affected her sense of belonging. Nora felt her questions regarding the teachings of the group were not welcome, and this eventually led to her being excluded from the group. Nora's commitment to her religious values remained despite feeling unwelcome in the group. She continued her individual religious practices to help her work through the many challenges in her university experience. This finding supports Yosso (2005), who stated that communities of color utilize navigational capital to find their way through systems built for majority populations.

Marta attended several organized religious groups at the university in search of a faith community. She felt that none of the organizations she attended showed any connection to her Latina/o heritage. Her experience showed a need for more culturally relevant religious groups. Marta's experiences align with Gloria et al.'s (2020) findings that suggest a lack of cultural

congruence leads to disengagement with university groups. A clear example of what led to Marta's disengagement from the religious groups was the cultural incongruence.

Pati also attended a university religious organization when she first arrived on campus. There, she found a lack of connection, which resulted in her turning to an individual religious practice. This ability to continue her religious practice as an individual is an example of resistant capital. Olivia experienced many scheduling conflicts as most groups met later in the evenings, which did not work with her schedule. She mentioned how this added another layer of difficulty in trying to prioritize her time, which resulted in her no longer being able to attend organized campus religious groups. Despite her disengagement from the university group, Olivia continued her individual spiritual practices. Olivia found that modern technology could help her continue her religious practices in response to her time constraints. She turned to social media to continue some of her practices. Olivia's experience is supported by van den Heuvel et al. (2009), as Olivia was able to put a challenging situation into a framework of personal meaning using values based on reflection to adapt. Olivia found meaning in her religious beliefs and found ways to continue to practice these.

Marilynn similarly faced time constraints due to the rigor of her major and, therefore, did not attend regular religious group activities. However, she made time to pray. This is another example of how, even with limited time, these Latina/o students employed resistance capital as they still chose to practice religion and spirituality to help them navigate their university experiences. Marilynn's continued individual religious practice despite stepping back from organized group activities reflects the importance and values of her religion. This experience is supported by the study of Consoli et al. (2018), where cultural variables like spirituality, religiosity, and making meaning allowed Latina/o students to thrive in the university experience.

Individual Spiritual and Religious Practices

There were several challenges with participation in the organized university religious groups, yet all the students continued their religious practices. These Latina/o students' findings show resilience in their religious practices even when the university groups failed them. The student's commitment to their faith and religious practices was not hindered; instead, their individual practices remained strong and, in some cases, even increased. Their commitment to their faith was an example of the use of their spiritual capital, as they used their assets and resources linked to religion and spirituality to assist them in their college experience. Consoli et al. (2015) found that spirituality was a predictor of thriving, indicating that there is a "value-added" to spiritual beliefs for Latina/o students dealing with adversity. Some examples were shown through Nora's increasing prayer, and Marilynn's individual spiritual practices remained strong. Olivia's use of TikTok for Bible verses and her symbolic use of the cross represent how students adapt religious practices to fit their modern, busy lives. This adaptability indicates a shift towards personalized and technologically integrated forms of religious practice. For some students in my study, such as James and Nora, finding community through cultural or social groups, such as Latina/o fraternities and sororities, helped them build their social capital as they provided an alternative route to integrating their religious and cultural identities. This finding is supported by the study of Dueñas and Gloria, 2020, where they examined the role of belonging and motivation at PWI institutions, and Latina/o students aligned themselves with others like them to create a sense of belonging to home and family.

This finding suggests that while formal religious groups at the university may not always meet students' needs, alternative social structures can offer support and a sense of belonging. This study's findings of Latina/o student experiences are supported by social capital, which

refers to understanding and finding people's networks and the available community resources (Yosso, 2013).

The students' experiences with organized religious groups at the university highlight a range of challenges and adaptations. Marilynn, Pati, Olivia, and Nora felt that the disconnect between themselves and the formal religious groups often stemmed from cultural differences, beliefs, priorities, and time constraints. The experiences of students in my study who sought out organized religious groups were supported by Hurtado and Ponjuan (2005) in that Latina/o students' perceptions of climate affects their sense of belonging, or in this instance, the lack of sense of belonging in the organized religious university groups. These researchers also found that the university climate was more likely to be perceived as unwelcoming to Latina/o students, particularly for those who spoke Spanish, and all the participants in my study spoke Spanish. Despite these challenges, the students demonstrated a strong commitment to their personal religious practices, finding alternative ways to integrate their faith into their college lives. The students continued to practice their religious and spiritual practices individually. The continuation of their religious practices regardless of the challenges relates to research by Tisdell (2003) which showed that people with ethnic minority backgrounds utilize their oppression identity through spiritual fulfillment. The CCW model (Yosso, 2005) supports their ability to adapt through aspirational capital by showing their resiliency. This resilience and adaptability underscore the importance of supporting diverse forms of religious expression and providing a range of options to meet the varied needs of students in higher education.

Positive Influence on Mental and Emotional Health

Corona et al. (2017) concluded that there was a significant positive association between cultural stressors and mental health symptoms, which manifested in anxiety and depression. The

shared experiences of the students in my study showed that stressors, along with several other challenges related to their college experiences, led to some mental and emotional distress, which the students referred to as anxiety, feelings of loneliness, and sadness. Bekteshi and Kang's (2020) work on acculturative stress supported the students' experiences in my study. Their results indicated that acculturative stress is quite prominent in the Latina/o populations and that these types of stresses occur due to (a) difficulties assimilating to beliefs, values, and norms of the dominant culture; (b) perceived feelings of inferiority; and (c) discrimination (Bekteshi & Kang, 2020).

Gloria et al. (2016) claimed that Latina/o students use their cultural spirituality to cope with educational challenges like those discussed in this study by bringing their ancestral, cultural, and spiritual selves into higher education settings. Cruz described how many times he felt anxiety as well as impostor syndrome being a Latino at the university. Marilynn described feeling fear and sadness being away from her family. Both Cruz and Marilynn both used their spiritual practices to offset their emotional and mental insecurities. They were able to find comfort through prayer to cope with the newfound apprehensions of being in college. Similarly, Olivia's experiences with her internal insecurities led her to place emphasis on the role of religion in coping with her internal self-doubt. Her religious practices provided her with comfort, as mental health support was absent due to cultural beliefs. These experiences that Cruz, Marilynn, and Olivia shared are in line with Roghayeh et al.'s (2011) findings that religious beliefs like prayer have a desirable effect on students' mental health. Roghayeh et al. (2011) also found that relying on beliefs and religious activities helped students process stressful situations.

James's various religious practices (e.g., building an altar for Día de los Muertos and praying rosaries) provided him solace as he dealt with the loss of his aunt. His multiple forms of

religious practices are reflective of Caplan et al.'s (2011) findings, which highlighted how a range of religious practices (e.g., building altars, praying, attending mass, or other activities based on the doctrine) assisted in attaining tranquility and understanding of life processes. James's use of religious practices provided support during his grief.

Nora used prayer to cope with her feelings of financial distress. The Pew Hispanic Center Survey documented the economic insecurities of Latina/o students. According to Lopez (2009), 40% of Latina/o students attributed their reason for leaving the institution to their inability to pay for college. Nora used prayer to find comfort through the practice of her faith. In Sharp's (2012) research, asking God for something concrete—like good health or economic aid—could help ease some of the anxiety associated with these problems. Nora's use of prayer is an example of how her religious practices offered relief from the challenges of financial distress.

Marta's story illustrates how religious practices provided comfort and enhanced her social connections. She explained that attending church diminished feelings of isolation as it provided a community where she felt peace and connection. The experience Marta described aligns with the work of Ekwony (2020), who stated that students who connect with a community of faith find emotional assistance in coping with stress and challenges at the university. For Marta, attending church service fostered a sense of community, which improved her well-being.

In summary, the students shared experiences illustrating how their religious and spiritual practices positively influenced their mental and emotional health during college. Similar to how Corona et al. (2017) found that religion served as a buffer for psychological distress, many participants found comfort in their faith. The students in my study detailed how their religious practices provided comfort and lowered their levels of anxiety. Many mentioned how their

religious practices offered a source of relief from the anxiety and stress they were feeling during their college experiences.

Campesino et al.'s (2009) research supported my findings that Latina/o culture, religiosity, and spirituality are often critical in Latina/o students coping with challenges. The narratives of these students' experiences show how religion and spirituality assisted by bringing comfort and a mechanism for managing stress in their various challenges (e.g., navigating cultural and identity challenges). Overall, their religious practices served as valuable tools for resilience and well-being. The variety of ways the students in my study engaged in their faith reflected its impact on their ability to cope with the demands of college life. Their religious and spiritual practices assisted these students in navigating mental and emotional stressors, which aligned with findings from prior research on spirituality and stress among college students (e.g., Roming & Howard, 2019). Spirituality can serve as an intervention to combat stress and, along with social support, plays an essential role in fostering a better quality of life for college students (Roming & Howard, 2019).

Use of Religion to Overcome Academic Struggles

According to Ekwonye et al. (2020), academic stress causes anxiety, distress, and fear, which are detrimental to students' psychological well-being. Their research found spirituality to be one resource for dealing with academic stress. My study similarly surfaced many accounts from students reporting intensively turning to their religious and spiritual practices in response to academic pressures. Religion, spirituality, and psychological well-being are often linked, particularly for Latina/o students who identify as Catholic (Park & Millora, 2010).

Junior's experience of academic pressures leading to a higher frequency of prayer to seek spiritual support and cope with the rigor of academic coursework is an example of using religion

for aspirational capital. His experiences mirrored the results of Campesino et al. (2009), where Latina/o students reported attending church services, engaging in personal prayer outside of church, and discussing religious or spiritual beliefs as ways to offset challenges during college. In Junior's case, praying before exams helped him manage anxiety and maintain focus, showing a connection between his religious practices and improved academic performance. Junior's experiences suggested faith was a buffer in coping with academic stressors. Yun et al. (2019) similarly found that spirituality significantly buffered students' ability to handle stress by using prayer to assist with mental health support.

Cruz's experience illustrates how spiritual practices like meditation can help with concentration and academic performance, which aligns with McBride and Greeson (2023) assertion that meditation helps improve concentration. For college students, meditative practices can help them achieve a state of mental calm needed to deal with the stress of academic work. By praying for focus and content retention, Cruz felt that his religious practices created a mental space conducive to better academic performance. His testimony supports the idea that spiritual practices can enhance cognitive functions related to learning. As described McBride and Greeson (2023) students like Cruz who engage in mindful spiritual practices tend to employ these assets to cope with academic difficulties.

As mentioned in the research by Consoli et al. (2015) spirituality has consistently been a means of coping. Furthermore, Consoli et al. (2015) found that not only did spirituality assist with coping, but it was also a predictor of thriving for undergraduate students. Several students, including Marta and Marilynn, described praying for wisdom and strength to endure challenging courses. Marta noted that praying for academic wisdom and perseverance was a critical tool in her coping strategy. Similarly, Marilynn's experience with her chemistry class led her to rely on

prayer to regain her confidence and sense of purpose, reinforcing the role of religious practices in managing academic stress.

Flor and Isabel highlighted how their religious beliefs provided them with a sense of meaning when facing academic obstacles. The Cavazos, et. al (2015) study supported daily spiritual experiences and meaning of life as it served as a positive predictor of subjective happiness among Latina/o college students. Flor viewed her challenging courses as opportunities to make meaning for personal growth. Isabel felt that her religion offered her strength and reassurance, along with happiness helping her persist in college.

Nuñez and Foubert (2016) found that spirituality serves as a means of support, coping, and resistance. For students like James, prayer served as a vital source of emotional support. James described how connecting with God through prayer alleviated his feelings of overwhelm and helped him manage the pressures of college life. This connection gave him a sense of belonging and reduced his stress levels, positively influencing his academic performance. These experiences also align with research by Consoli, et. al. (2015) who found that spirituality assisted Latina/o students in the face of stress.

Enhanced Religious or Spiritual Experience in Native Language

In this study, all the participants were bilingual—they spoke Spanish and English. Additionally, Spanish was the first language for all 10 participants. The findings highlighted that, particularly for Latina/o students who learned to speak Spanish before English, there is an affinity for practicing their religious and spiritual activities in their native language. These findings in this study support the pillars outlined by Yosso (2005), which describe how young people of color use cultural expression and language to survive.

Many of the students in my study stated that they felt a stronger connection to their Latina/o culture and a closer connection to their spirituality when practicing their religion in Spanish. Since Spanish was their first language, the students learned prayers and religious rituals in Spanish. The preference for religious and spiritual practice in their native tongue can be linked to Gloria and Castellanos' (2012) work, as their research found that Latina/o students negotiated their identities in college and worked toward being culturally grounded. For students in this study, religion and language were both anchors that helped maintain a connection to Latina/o cultural values.

Junior and Isabel mentioned having learned their prayers and sacraments in Spanish, as Spanish was the language spoken at home. Mooney (2010) supported the importance of connection between family, religion, and spirituality, in addition to the specific themes of family and language within the Hispanic culture. Junior and Isabel described a deep-rooted desire to practice their religion in Spanish, as doing so provided a deeper level of meaning and nostalgic comfort. Junior's practice in Spanish helped him find connection when he was living at home with his family, and it felt more reassuring for religious practices. Junior and Isabel also mentioned that their preference for their religious practices in Spanish stemmed from a greater sense of spiritual meaning and cultural values. Additionally, they found that practicing their religion in Spanish provided a stronger connection to their families.

For Marilynn and Flor, Spanish was also the language spoken in their homes, and praying in Spanish brought them a cultural family connection. This connection was supported through *familismo* and *comunidad,* couple of core Latina/o cultural values are believed to maintain a sense of connectedness with one's family (Carranza, 2007; Cauce et al., 2002; Knight et al., 2010).

Flor prayed in both English and Spanish and turned to practicing in Spanish when she had deeper spiritual needs, underscoring her emotional connection to her cultural values. For Marilynn, Spanish remained the language of choice for prayer due to its emotional and cultural familiarity, as she associated Spanish with home and comfort.

Nora emphasized that consistency in her religious practices—along with prayer in her first language—helped her feel more connected to her spiritual practices. Having learned to pray in Spanish with her mother, she found it the most meaningful. Nora's experience can be described through familial capital, highlighting the importance of familial ties and the cultural knowledge the family nurtures (Yosso, 2005, 2013). Marta felt connected to her culture and community through Spanish prayer, which helped her cope with the challenges of being one of the few Latina/os at her university. Marta's use of prayer as a mechanism for strengthening her connection with her community is an example of social capital (Yosso, 2013). Cruz and Pati alternated between Spanish and English in their prayers. Despite both being bilingual, Cruz used Spanish primarily for intense or significant prayers, while Pati preferred to pray in Spanish for comfort and familiarity. Cruz and Pati's experiences relate to Park et al.'s (2020) assertion that bilingualism in Latina/o students is practiced through spiritual or religious practices

In summary, the findings of this study highlight that Spanish was not just a language for these first-generation Latina/o students but also a crucial element of their spiritual and cultural identity. Practicing their religion in Spanish helped the students maintain a connection to their heritage, providing emotional comfort and ensuring consistency in their spiritual practices.

Implications for Research

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to examine the role that religion and spirituality play in the Latina/o college student experience. The findings, as presented in Chapter Four,

indicated that religion and spirituality played a role in the Latina/o college student experience. There are important implications for higher education institutions and for the support systems of Latina/o college students. While this study showed that many Latina/o students reported feeling disconnected from the university's religious organized groups already on campus, further research is needed to understand the possibilities that culturally relevant organized religious groups at universities could create. Furthermore, the findings indicated that these Latina/o students maintained individual spiritual practices, which helped them to feel supported and resilient. Therefore, there is a need for research that explores institutional support of individual faith-based practices. The findings also suggested that religious and spiritual practices positively impacted the students' mental and emotional health. Despite the historical practice of higher education institutions separating church and state, this study shows a need for further scholarship that explores how institutions might incorporate spiritual practices as a part of their well-being programs.

Additionally, students faced challenges in their academic coursework, and the spiritual and religious practices of these Latina/o students reflected the concept of navigational capital as their faith was used to persevere in their academics. Further research could delve deeper into the use of religious and spiritual practice as a motivator for academic persistence. Finally, many of the students preferred to practice their faith in Spanish. This points to a need for scholarship to examine the need for higher education institutions to create more support of linguistic capital throughout the Latina/o student experience. In addressing these implications, universities can create a more inclusive and supportive student experience.

Implications for Practice

Universities should create organized religious groups that are culturally relevant. Organized religious groups can simultaneously provide an opportunity for a sense of belonging and an on-campus faith engagement initiative. As a practitioner, I am now more aware of how we neglect such an important value of Latino college students. I will be much more intentional in my interactions with students to talk about any spiritual or religious beliefs that they may use for their well-being during their college journey. Additionally, institutions should provide spaces on campus that support individual practices of religion and spirituality. For example, they could create small spaces in several buildings across the campus to practice prayer and meditation. The findings of this study also pointed to a need to integrate religion and spirituality into mental health services. The incorporation of such practices would provide an opportunity for students to leverage religion and spirituality for mental and emotional support. Furthermore, given that spiritual practices were found to be positive factors in students' academic resilience, universities should develop programs incorporating mindfulness or meditation. These initiatives would support students using their spiritual practices to cope with academic stress. Colleges would benefit from creating a major or minor in religious studies, as the literature as well as my study support the desire of students to be religiously connected and what an opportunity to be able to do that through college course credit. Universities would also benefit from creating religious services in English and Spanish to serve students' language preferences. In addressing these implications, universities can provide better support for Latina/o students navigating their college experiences, providing a student experience that enhances their overall well-being.

Personal Reflection

Padre Nuestro que me has traido a mir propria reflection de me relacion con Dios y mi carera. Te doy las gracias en este dia por aver me dado la oportunidad de enforcer me con mi espiritualidad. Thank you, Lord, for having brought me to my own reflection of my relationship with you within my career. I give my thanks on this day for having given me the opportunity to reconnect with my spirituality. As I reflected on the student findings for my research, I found several commonalities with their experiences. I realized that when I find myself with challenges, not just during this dissertation process but also in life, I turn to my religious practices to pray for help with the things which are beyond my control. I also learned my prayers and practices as a young child. The most profound connection that I had with my findings was that I find a deeper connection when I pray or attend Spanish Mass. It has a nostalgic meaning to a time when I was at home living with my parents and family.

Chapter Summary

The need for this study arose as there was a 23% increase in the Hispanic population (Pew Research Center, 2020), while the equity gaps remained in degree attainment for Latina/o students. While 46% of white students in the U.S. attained-year degrees, only 24% of Latina/o students hold a degree, meaning an equity gap of 22% for Latina/os (EdExcelencia, 2019). To assist in closing the educational equity gap, colleges and universities would benefit from shifting their current practices to better meet the needs of Latina/o students (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). The literature on the profile of the Latina/o students discusses the connection to culture. This is significant because prior research has illustrated that Hispanics with a stronger sense of pride in their cultural connections tend to have greater success (Consoli et al., 2015). The Latina/o student profile includes students' values, as well as in-group norms, beliefs, and traditions (Flora

et al., 2016). Spirituality is one example of in-group norms, beliefs, and traditions, and is a core element of a Latina/o sense of cultural self, which stems from Latina/o values integration (Cervantes, 2010). Familismo (family) and religiosidad (religiosity) together have been linked to positive outcomes, such as academic engagement (Germán et al., 2009).

The literature review provided a historical overview of Latina/os students' college experiences. The Latina/o university experience can be challenging as they navigate cultural, linguistic, and other lines of difference. For example, among all undergraduate first-generation students enrolled in the United States, close to 50% of them identify as Latina/o (Campesino et al., 2009). Barriers for first-generation Latina/o students include the lack of instrumental knowledge in navigating the university, language, campus climate, isolation, discrimination effects, and economic capital.

Narrative inquiry was selected for this study to attain the students' individual university experiences and to provide flexibility for the participants to tell their stories with minimal direction from the researcher. The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to understand the role that religion and spirituality play in the Latina/o student experience. Additionally, a goal of this study was to consider how religion and spirituality might be possible community cultural factors during Latina/o students' college experiences. Religion and spirituality are key in the values of many Latina/o cultures, families, and traditions. However, they have largely not been explored in relation to Latina/o students' college and university experience. According to the literature, more than 90% of Hispanics identify with a specific religion. Regardless of their religious tradition, Latina/os, are active in their practice and may attend religious services at least once a month (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021a).

In the findings of this study, students shared stories of the role that religion and spirituality played in navigating their college experience. The themes that surfaced from their interviews were: (a) organized and individual religious practices, (b) the positive influence of religion on mental and emotional health, (c) the use of religion to overcome academic struggles, and (d) an enhanced religious and spiritual experience in the native language. In the first theme, I discussed how many students reported feeling disconnected from the university's religious groups, which provides an opportunity for higher educational institutions to develop culturally relevant religious groups at universities. This theme also indicated that these Latina/o students maintained individual spiritual practices, which lends itself to an opportunity for institutional support of space for individual faith-based practices. The second theme illustrated how religious and spiritual practices positively affected students' mental and emotional health, which suggests that institutions should incorporate spiritual practices as a part of their well-being programs.

The third theme recognized that Latina/o students faced challenges in their academic coursework and leveraged their spiritual and religious practices as navigational capital to persevere in their academic endeavors. Finally, many of the students preferred to practice their faith in Spanish, which points to the need for universities to create greater support of linguistic capital throughout the Latina/o student experience. In closing, by addressing the needs of the Latina/o student profile, universities can create a more inclusive and supportive Latina/o student experience.

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Appendix A - Recruitment Letter

Dear _____,

I am a doctoral student here at Kansas State University in the College of Education. As Latina/os are the fastest growing minority in the United States, I am conducting research on the role that religion and spirituality play in Latina/o student experience. I am writing to inquire if you would like to join as a participant in my dissertation study. In this study, your participation is completely voluntary and would only require one, one-hour, virtual interview. There will also be a 45-minute to one hour follow-up interview. The follow-up interview serves the purpose of the participants checking the summary of their interview with the opportunity to correct or to disclose any additional information that was not previously given in the first interview pertaining to the topics discussed. It will be recorded, and notes will be taken.

I am recruiting individuals who: (1) are sophomore, junior, or seniors; (2) are part of the Latina/os community here on campus; and (3) have had some experience with religion or spirituality.

If you are interested in participating or if you have any questions, please respond to this e-mail: Mirta@ksu.edu or 620-655-2056.

Mirta Chavez

Appendix B - Informed Consent

Informed Consent

Dissertation Study: Mirta Rodriguez-Chavez

Project Title: The Role of Religion and Spirituality in the Latina/o Student Experience.

Project Approval Date: _____

Project Expiration Date: _____

University: Kansas State University

Principal Investigator: Dr. Christy Craft, ccraft@ksu.edu

As a participant, if you have questions or wish to discuss any aspect of the research with an official of the university or the IRB, you may do so. These are: Dr. Lisa Rubin, Chair, Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224; Brad Woods, Associate Vice President for Research Compliance, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224.

This consent form is for the dissertation research project aimed at understanding the role of religion and spirituality in the Latina/o student experience.

The researcher seeks to focus on the role, if any, does religion or spirituality play in the Latina/o student experience.

Procedure and Length of Study: The participant will participate in up to an hour interview, with an additional 45-minute follow-up interview three weeks after the initial interview. The researcher will record the interviews on Zoom and will take notes.

Risk Factors: This study holds no foreseeable risks or discomforts to the subjects.

Benefits: There is a $20 visa gift card for the participants. However, it will not be given, if the participant decides to withdraw from the study.

Purpose: Through narrative research, this study is looking to add to the current literature regarding the Latina/o student experience. This study will also add to the religion and spirituality literature. This study will expand the knowledge of lived experiences and provide faculty, staff, and administrators with a better understanding of the fastest growing minority group.

Subject Identity: Only the researcher will know the identity of the 10 participants. All the participants will be assigned a pseudonym for the study.

Terms of participation:

I understand this project is research, and that my participation is voluntary. I also understand that if I decide to participate in this study, I may withdraw my consent at any time, and stop participating at any time without explanation, penalty, or loss of academic standing to which I may otherwise be entitled.

Participant understands that:

- I understand that my confidentiality as a participant in this study will remain secure and anonymous. Only the researcher knows my identity. The interview data is stored on an external drive with the researcher. Only the researcher has access to the interviews.
- My participation in this interview process is strictly voluntary.
- None of this information will be shared with my administrators and will remain confidential.
- I may opt out of this study at any time.
- I will be given one copy of the signed form.
- The interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes. The interview will be recorded, and notes will be written during the interview. There will be a 45–60-minute follow-up interview. The follow-up interview serves the purpose of the participants checking the

summary of their interview with the opportunity to correct or disclose any additional information that was not previously given in the first interview pertaining to the topics discussed. It will be recorded, and notes will be taken.

- There is no penalty or loss of benefits for withdrawal from participation and I may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits.
- The information that will be collected as part of this research could be used for future research studies or distributed to other investigators for future research studies without additional informed consent. in this study. I have been given a copy of this consent form.

There is no compensation or medical treatment available if an injury occurs. I have read and understand the explanation provided to me, and my signature indicates, I willingly agree to participate in this study under the terms described and that I have received a signed copy of this consent form.

PARTICIPANT NAME: Date:

SIGNATURE: Date:

WITTNESS TO SIGNATURE: Date:

Appendix C - Interview Protocol

The interview questions were developed to allow students to share their experiences without the researcher leading them in any particular direction. Probing questions were provided following some initial questions to gain more in-depth understanding.

The questions are as following:

Demographic Questions

1. What is your gender identity?
2. Do you speak Spanish?
3. What year in college are you?
4. Are you the first in your immediate family to attend college?

Core Interview Questions

1. Tell me about your college experience thus far.
2. Do you feel as if you have received enough information regarding university resources to navigate your experience? If yes, explain.

Interview Questions

1. What does spirituality mean to you?
2. What does religiosity mean to you?
3. What do you currently practice, if any, spiritual or religious? If so, do you practice in language do you practice in? How often?
4. How, if at all, does being part of the Latina/o culture influence in your spirituality?
5. How, if at all, does being part of the Latina/o culture influence in your religiosity?
6. Tell me about your religious or spiritual beliefs, values, and practices before college?
7. What are your current religious beliefs, values, and practices?
8. How, if at all, do religious or spiritual activities influence your mental health? Emotional health?
9. Please share any campus-based spiritual or religious activities that are beneficial to you as a student.
10. Please share any off-campus spiritual or religious activities that are beneficial to you as a student.

11. What role has your college experience played in shaping your religious or spiritual beliefs?
12. What roles have your religious or spiritual beliefs played in your college experience?
13. Please share an example or two of how religion or spirituality has influenced your college journey so far.
14. What religious or spiritual tools, if any, do you use when facing challenges in college?
15. Please describe any relationships that you have for which religion or spiritualty are a key component that have assisted you through your college experience.