

**“Los Caminos de la Vida”- Mapping Emerging Adulthood and Acculturation
Theory onto Ecological Systems to Understand Latine College Students and Their
Parents Perspectives**

by

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Abstract

This dissertation examined the experiences of Latine college students and their families through ecological, cultural, and developmental perspectives. Despite the growing population of Latine college students in higher education, limited research has explored how students or their parents perceive that developmental transitions, acculturation processes, and/or family systems interact to shape their college experiences. This dissertation addressed this gap through two complementary manuscripts. Chapter 2 presented a conceptual framework that mapped constructs from Emerging Adulthood and Acculturation Theory onto Ecological Systems Theory to better understand the experiences of Latine college students beyond the individual level. Implications for clinical, research, and intervention were discussed. Chapter 3 expanded on this framework with an empirical transcendental phenomenological qualitative study examining the perspectives of parents of Latine first-generation college students. Thirteen parents of Latine college students participated in semi-structured interviews exploring their parental roles as their students transition into college, perceptions of how being Latine shaped their student's college experience, and changes in relationships. Six themes, two themes having one subtheme, were found. Findings highlighted the complexity of parental support such as emotional support, cultural values, parental sacrifice, and changing dynamics as students integrate into college and emerging adulthood. This dissertation contributed to counseling psychology and higher education literature by centering culturally grounded and family-oriented understanding of Latine college students and their families.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) Use Disclosure Statement

In the preparation of this dissertation, no Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools were used.

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In the preparation of this dissertation, no accessibility tools were used. The author acknowledges full responsibility for the intellectual content of this work and has made a good faith effort to comply with digital accessibility requirements in publishing, wherein the nature of the content does not significantly change in order to do so. Furthermore, all content has been reviewed and revised to meet these requirements prior to final publication.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Latines make up 19% of the U.S. population, making them the largest ethnic minority group in the United States (U.S. Census, 2023a). As a note on terminology in this dissertation, the proposed term *Latine* will be used with the recognition that people have valid reasons to use or prefer different terms. The term *Latine* has recently been adopted by people in Latin America and the U.S. to be more gender-inclusive, that is, the ending vowel *e* does not necessarily have to be masculine (*Latino*) or feminine (*Latina*) in Spanish. *Latine* is used instead of the non-gendered *Latinx* because it is often easier to pronounce for Spanish speakers and has a relatively easier plural form (*Latines*).

Over the past two decades, college enrollment for Latine students has increased from 1.2 million in 2005 to 2.4 million in 2021 (U.S. Census, 2024a), and Latines are more likely to be first-generation college students than their non-Latine counterparts (*Excelencia* in Education, 2019). While the number of Latine college students is increasing, there is still room for improvement across a range of outcomes, including retention, graduation rates, and mental or physical health. College institutions must move beyond access and move toward understanding the unique experiences and needs of Latine college students to continue increasing enrollment, retention, and graduation rates, as well as overall health.

Despite the growing number of Latine college students, there is limited empirical research that can be used to inform the development or adaptation of programs and interventions to help these students. Current literature has identified challenges on the individual level such as financial challenges, academic adjustment challenges, and barriers in navigating higher education. However, literature has not delved into

understanding systems beyond the individual level, such as higher-level systems, cultural, or developmental factors that shape Latine college students' experiences.

For many Latine college students, the transition into college can be seen as a collective experience, including familial relationships. These relationships often remain present or close as students navigate higher education, particularly for Latine college students who are first-generation (i.e., being the first one in the family to attend a four-year university). First-generation students tend to rely on their family for emotional and financial support. While students integrate into college, the parent-child relationships also change and undergo transition. Students begin to take on new roles and responsibilities while also navigating expectations from family and academics. These dynamics can lead to opportunities of growth or challenge, especially when caregivers and students differ in cultural aspects (i.e., values, practices, identities) and understandings of developmental and college experiences and expectations. The following two chapters of this dissertation will add to knowledge about parents of Latine first-generation college students by (a) presenting a conceptual map to understand these students and (b) examining perspectives of parents of Latine first-generation college students in an empirical qualitative study.

Chapter 2 mapped concepts from emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000) and acculturation (Berry, 1997; Schwartz et al., 2010) onto ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977), examining their overlapping domains to understand Latine college students. Ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) examines how a person's development is influenced over five interconnected environmental systems: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. Emerging

adulthood (Arnett, 2000) is a developmental stage that focuses on the transitional period between adolescence and young adulthood and is characterized by five distinct features: identity exploration, instability, self-focus, feeling in between, and possibilities. Acculturation is described with a multidimensional acculturation framework that examines how a person changes among three dimensions: practices, values, and identity, and acculturative stress. Rather than treating these theories as independent or parallel explanations, this chapter positions ecological systems theory as the main foundation and maps constructs from emerging adulthood and acculturation to see how these constructs influence Latine college students. This conceptualization allows the reader to see how developmental and cultural processes unfold within relational and systemic contexts. These three theories have never been examined together, offering a new perspective to conceptualize Latine college students. Secondly, this dissertation took a collectivistic approach rather than an individualistic approach, emphasizing the role of family within Latine college students. This is important for Latine college students, for whom familial relationships play a role in their integration into college campus. The chapter concludes by highlighting ways the framework can be valuable for counseling psychologists, such as utilizing it for clinical work with the population or conducting research studies to inform interventions.

Chapter 3 built on this conceptual map with an empirical phenomenological qualitative study that examined perspectives of parents of Latine first-generation college students. Existing literature has largely focused on perspectives of Latine college students (e.g., Frederick et al., 2023; Marrun, 2020; Michel & Durdella, 2019), but only two studies have explored perspectives of parents of Latine first-generation college

students (Cuevas, 2019b; Auerbach, 2006). It is crucial to investigate the experiences of parents, given the importance of the student-parent relationship in college. This empirical study contributed new empirical knowledge by centering the voices of parents of Latine first-generation college students, a group largely underrepresented in research. Hearing the voices of parents of Latine first-generation college students is needed to inform intervention adaptation or development, clinical practice, and research. The present study used a transcendental phenomenological approach to examine the perspectives of parents of Latine first-generation college students. Using a phenomenological approach, the study captured the depth and complexity of these experiences. This study used three frameworks, emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000), acculturation (Berry, 1997; Schwartz et al., 2010), and ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977), to build the interview protocol and guide the coding process. Specifically, the research questions were (1) What do parents of Latine first-generation college students see as their role during the transition period? (2) How do parents think being Latine shapes the college experience of first-generation college students? (3) What are the ways that familial relationships transition/change when Latine first-generation college students go to college? The sample size consisted of 13 parents. Eligibility criteria required parents to (1) identify as Latine (or a similar term, such as Hispanic, Latino, Latina, or Latinx); (2) speak and understand Spanish and/or English, and (3) be a parent (or primary caregiver with a parental role) to a Latine, first-generation college student attending a four-year university for at least one semester as a full-time college student. Data was analyzed following recommendations for phenomenological research (Moustakas, 1994), including bracketing, horizontalization,

inductive coding, reduction and elimination, consensus coding, cluster and thematizing invariant constituents, and auditing. There were six themes, with two having one subtheme. Results highlighted the complexity of the parental roles while their students were in college. One key aspect was how parents grounded themselves in their cultural values, emotional support, and parental sacrifice. The chapter concludes by discussing the implications of the findings for clinical practice, research, and intervention development.

This dissertation has implications for the field of counseling psychology and other fields that are related to work with college students and their families. From a clinical perspective, the integrated conceptual framework may be used to inform case conceptualization by encouraging clinicians to consider how systems, developmental, and cultural aspects can interact and impact Latine college students. For example, tensions between student's self-focus and familial values may not be understood as an individual conflict, but rather cultural differences between parents and students. Similarly, the qualitative findings can inform the development and adaptation of culturally responsive programs that examine individual and family-level dynamics. In terms of informing future qualitative research, this work highlights the importance of multilevel and culturally grounded approaches to understanding Latine college students and their families. Specifically, it examined how familial and social relationships are included as students from a minoritized/marginalized population navigate college and emerging adulthood. This aligns with counseling psychology's commitment to promote culturally responsive services and outcomes for diverse populations.

Abstract

Latines are the largest ethnic minority group in the United States and continue to represent a growing population within higher education (U.S. Census, 2023a; U.S. Census, 2024a). Compared to other racial and ethnic groups, Latines are most likely to be first-generation college students and are enrolling in college at increasing rates. Despite the growth, Latine students have unique needs that higher education institutions should address to increase retention and graduation rates. Existing literature has examined Emerging Adulthood, Acculturation, and Ecological Systems Theory separately. This conceptual manuscript addressed this research gap by mapping constructs from Emerging Adulthood and Acculturation Theory onto Ecological Systems Theory to better understand the experiences of Latine college students. This framework illustrates how developmental and cultural processes may interact across ecological systems and offers a culturally grounded and relational perspective for understanding Latine college students. Implications for clinical, research, and intervention adaptation for Latine college students are discussed.

Keywords: Latine College Students, First-Generation, College/Universities, Ecological Systems Theory, Emerging Adulthood, Acculturation

Chapter 2

Latines are the largest ethnic minority group in the United States. They currently make up 19% of the U.S. population and are expected to grow even faster, projected to be 27% of the population by 2060 (U.S. Census, 2023a; Pew Research Center, 2022). Compared to other racial or ethnic groups (*Excelencia* in Education, 2019; Krogstad et al., 2023; Wick et al., 2019; U.S. Census, 2023a), Latines are relatively younger (median age 30 years) and more likely to be first-generation college students, i.e., their parents and/or guardians did not complete a four-year college or university degree than other ethnic groups (44% vs. White 22%, Black or African American 34%, Asian American-29%). College enrollment for Latine students between the ages of 18-24 years doubled from 1.2 million in 2005 to 2.4 million in 2021 (US Census, 2024). In 2021, about a quarter (23%) of Latines between the ages of 25-29 had earned a bachelor's degree, an increase from 2010, but still lower than non-Latine white people (37%) in the same age group (Pew Research Center, 2022).

Colleges and universities are facing declining enrollments overall, but there are growing numbers of Latine college students. Latine students, and particularly Latine college students, have unique needs that colleges should address to increase matriculation, retention, and graduation rates. However, there is relatively little empirical research with this group, which hinders the development of programs to meet their needs. One way to increase research and program development or adaptation with Latine college students is to have an overarching conceptual framework to guide this research as well as program development.

This manuscript will delineate constructs from three theories that are believed to be useful to understand the experiences of Latine college students. This manuscript

follows recommendations (MacInnis, 2011, p.138) for conceptual mapping to “detail, chart, describe, or depict an entity and its relationship to other entities.” This conceptual manuscript seeks to chart what kind of constructs are contained within each domain, and how constructs from one domain might fit onto another domain, but not to completely describe all possible contents of each domain. Specifically, the manuscript aims to be a metaphorical map of showing how Acculturation Theory (Berry, 1988; Schwartz et al., 2010) and Emerging Adulthood Theory (Arnett, 2000) map onto Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) for Latine college students. The next sections will provide an overview of each of these theories.

Ecological Systems Theory

Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) conceptualizes a person’s development as influenced by five interconnected environmental systems: Microsystem, Mesosystem, Exosystem, Macrosystem, and Chronosystem. Starting from the closest system, the *Microsystem* is the complex of relations between the person—in this case a college student—and environment in an immediate social setting (e.g., home, school, workplace) where the person may have different roles (e.g., daughter, parent, student, employee). The *Mesosystem* is where the different microsystems interconnect, such as parents interacting with their student’s college or their college student’s peers. The *Exosystem* is an extension of the mesosystem, considering both formal and informal social structures that may not directly interact with the person but influence their mesosystems. For example, a parent’s work system could influence a student through financial constraints. The *Macrosystem* refers to the overarching culture or subculture, forms of social organization, and/or associated belief systems or lifestyles. The

Chronosystem refers to how events or experiences can influence a person's development and includes both personal experiences, such as the birth of a sibling, transitions in schools, or the divorce of parents, as well as larger societal events, such as a war or a change in marriage laws. The microsystem changes and expands with transitions in the chronosystem, such as marriages, births, graduations, divorces, and death. A transition may influence more than just the microsystem and can interact with higher-order systems. Bronfenbrenner (1977) provides examples, such as when a child enters a day care, the child's parents are also changed around the transition, or a divorce occurs and changes a student's behavior in a class. The transition from adolescence to adulthood is one major life transition; the characteristics of this transition have been described in various ways, relatively recently as an extension or update of Erikson's (1968) stages of development called emerging adulthood.

Emerging Adulthood Theory

Emerging Adulthood theory expands on Erikson's (1968) Stages of Psychosocial Development. Erikson, influenced by Sigmund Freud, developed a developmental theory that focused on eight psychosocial stages, where humans need to resolve the crisis in that specific stage or continue to be fixated on the stage. *Trust vs. Mistrust* is the first stage, from 0 to 12 months, when infants develop a sense of trust with their caregivers. If caregivers do not provide stability or care, these individuals develop mistrust. The second stage is *Autonomy vs. Shame/Doubt*, from ages 1 to 3 years, when children develop a sense of personal control and independence. When these children's interactions with the social and physical environment are successful, they develop feelings of autonomy. However, when children do not develop a sense of

control and autonomy, they develop feelings of shame and doubt. *Initiative vs. Guilt* is the third stage, from 3 to 6 years old, when children begin taking control of their own lives and interactions with others. Children can develop a sense of purpose by exploring, making decisions, or taking charge in activities; if not, they develop a sense of guilt when their initiation is met with criticism. *Industry vs. Inferiority* is the fourth stage between ages 6 to 11 years when children meet new demands, such as social and academic. When students are successful, they develop a sense of competence regarding new demands they encounter. However, when they do not develop the competence, they start to feel inferior around not being able to complete demands. *Identity vs. Role Confusion* is the fifth stage from 12 to 18 years, when adolescents develop a sense of self and identity. When successful, they develop the ability to stay true to themselves. However, failure leads to role confusion. *Intimacy vs. Isolation* is the sixth stage, from 18 to 40 years, sometimes called young adulthood when people start to form intimate relationships. When they succeed, they can build strong relationships. However, when they fail, it results in loneliness and isolation. The seventh stage is *Generativity vs. Stagnation*, or middle adulthood, from 41-65 years, when adults create or nurture, such as having children or making positive changes for others. When they are successful, they feel valuable and accomplished, unlike when they fail, they feel unproductive or uninvolved. In the eighth stage, *Integrity vs. Despair*, or older adulthood, refers to ages 65 to death, when elders look back at life and reflect. Elders who were successful feel a sense of wisdom, unlike those who fail to feel regret, bitterness, and despair.

Arnett (2000) proposed a new developmental stage, emerging adulthood, that he described as a vital and distinctive stage, given that societal times have changed. Emerging adulthood theory expanded on the transition between Erikson's (1968) adolescence and young adult stages and has similarities to both Levinson's (1978) *Early adult transition*, which occurs at the ages of 17 to 22 years when young people are leaving their parent's home to make choices about career and education, and Keniston's (1971) work on the late teens and twenties. The new Emerging Adult stage was characterized by three transition criteria that signified independence from parents: accepting responsibility for oneself, making independent decisions, and becoming financially independent. *Accepting responsibility for oneself* refers to taking over responsibilities that were once presumed by your parents and no longer expecting your parents to take responsibility for your consequences or mistakes. *Making independent decisions* relates to no longer having important decisions regarding life made by your parents. Rather, you are the one making the decisions. *Becoming financially independent* is about no longer needing your parents to pay for your responsibilities, such as bills.

The emerging adulthood stage is also characterized by five distinct developmental features: identity exploration, instability, self-focus, feeling in between, and possibilities. *Identity exploration* refers to the process or search for answers to the question, "Who am I?" by exploring the various life options, such as love and work. During this stage, emerging adults don't hold the responsibilities and commitments to adult roles and have the opportunities to explore and try out different things, such as living or choices of love and work. *Instability* focuses on various changes in their life,

such as college education, work, love, and how their original plan changes with time. However, the constant change comes with a learned lesson about themselves. *Self-focus* is where the obligations or commitments to others are low, i.e., the emerging adult is making their own decisions from what to have to dinner to going to college or working full-time while attending college, more independently than in either adolescence or in traditional young adulthood. *Feeling in between* is the transition between being an adolescent and an adult. For example, emerging adults are financially responsible for their money, however, they may feel uncertain about how to be responsible, making them feel like a child. *Possibilities* is the idea of hoping and dreams flourishing and feeling possible, such as exploring different aspects of life or making drastic life decisions, especially when they have no commitment to others, such as family, partners/spouses, or children.

Acculturation

Acculturation refers to the process of adapting to a new cultural context. Acculturation was originally seen as the process of relinquishing the heritage culture and adopting the receiving culture over time (Gordon, 1964). However, one critique was that immigrants often hold on to their heritage culture while they adopt the receiving culture. Berry (1997) introduced a bidimensional model of acculturation to explain changes along two largely independent dimensions, corresponding to native and host cultures. That is, the first dimension concerns the retention or rejection of the person's native culture, and the second dimension concerns the adoption or rejection of the host culture (Berry, 1992). These two dimensions intersected to create four different acculturation strategies: assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalization (Berry,

1997). *Assimilation* is where the person adopts the receiving culture and discards the heritage culture. *Separation* is where the person discards the receiving culture and retains the heritage culture. *Integration*, sometimes called biculturalism, is when the person adopts the receiving culture *and* retains the heritage culture. *Marginalization* rejects both the heritage and receiving culture, although there has been some criticism about whether this strategy exists widely in the “real world.”

More recently, there has been some criticism facing Berry's (1992) bidimensional model. One major criticism was the assumption that a migrant's experiences would fit into one of the four categories, sometimes called the "one size fits all" approach (Schwartz et al., 2010). Arguing against the one size fits all approach, it was believed that to understand someone's acculturation, one must take into account a wide variety of contexts, characteristics of migrants, groups or countries they are coming from, socioeconomic status and resources, country and communities they are settling in, and fluency of language. Schwartz and colleagues (2010) proposed a *multidimensional* model of acculturation that integrated several generally separate theories and empirical literatures, with dimensions including cultural practices (e.g., Berry et al., 2006), cultural values (e.g., Triandis, 1995), and cultural/ethnic identities (e.g., Phinney, 1990). *Cultural practices* are related to behavioral aspects of culture (e.g., language use, media preferences, food preferences). Cultural practices of the heritage or host culture are commonly used to assess enculturation or acculturation from the bidimensional acculturation perspective. *Cultural values* refer to the belief systems that are embedded within a particular culture (e.g., collectivism vs. individualism, familism, interdependence vs. independence). *Cultural identities* refer to the extent that people feel connected to

their ethnic or cultural group. For Latine college students, this could be an overarching Latine identity and/or a specific nationality identity, such as Mexican or Cuban.

Acculturative Stress

Most major life transitions are stressful; the acculturation process is a major life transition that is often stressful. This stress is usually called *acculturative stress* but has also been described with terms like transnational stress or transcultural stress.

Acculturative stress is conceptualized as the by-product of conflict or dissonance between the host and heritage cultures (e.g., Cervantes et al., 2012; Salas-Wright & Schwartz, 2019). Acculturative stress has three distinct but overlapping dimensions: discrimination, negative context of reception, and bicultural stress. *Discrimination* refers to acts of exclusion, taunting, attacks, or viewed suspiciously based on race or identity. *Negative context of reception* is how an immigrant is treated (i.e., unwelcoming, adverse opportunity structure) in social or community systems in the receiving nation. *Bicultural stress* means the feeling of being caught between two cultures, such as conflicting expectations and demands from each culture, which may be experienced as internal tension or external conflicts with family members about values or behaviors.

Conceptual Map

This conceptual map provides examples of how emerging adulthood or acculturation concepts may reveal themselves in each system but is not a comprehensive description of all possible experiences. It is expected that this map can be used to inform investigations that fill out the details, or to help researchers or other professionals who work with Latine college students organize potential areas of inquiry with respect to experiences of Latine college students. Further, some of the areas, such

as emerging adulthood in the exosystem, can be viewed as “uncharted territory” for further exploration because concepts from emerging adulthood that might fit into the exosystem have not been clearly defined in the literature. The next sections will show how these theories can be used to understand Latine college student experiences in each ecological system from proximal starting with the microsystem to the distal with the chronosystem

Microsystem

The microsystem is the closest social environment to the person, in this case a Latine college student, with relationships to immediate social settings. Four aspects of emerging adulthood intersect, identity exploration, instability, self-focus, and feeling in between, can all be seen in the microsystem. Identity exploration can be found in several microsystems. One example is the student-love system, in which emerging adults often try on different roles and kinds of relationships, such as committed partnerships, casual dating, friends with benefits, or long-distance relationships. Another example is the student-work system, where emerging adults typically spend time finding a fit with work, often trying several different careers or majors. Similarly, instability can be seen in the student-classroom system, with changes in instructors and classmates as often as each semester. Self-focus also fits in the microsystems of the student-work system, when emerging adults decide what job they want, where they want to live, and what salary they need to maintain their lifestyle in a way that is not necessarily selfish. Decisions are being made primarily for themselves because they typically have few responsibilities or obligations, like providing care for a child or spouse. Feeling in between can be seen in the student-parent microsystem, as emerging adulthood is

characterized by taking on a more independent role with much of the freedom of an adult, while also having extended financial dependence on parents, who may be paying for a range of expenses during college, such as tuition, car payments, health insurance, rent, or telephone bills. In simple terms, the student is independent and dependent on their parents.

Four aspects of acculturation—practices, values, identifications, and acculturative stress—can be mapped onto the microsystem. Practices at this level can be defined as changes in practices such as language use, clothing preferences, media preferences, and food preferences. An example of a relationship could be the student-family or student-school. Within the student-family system, practices like speaking Spanish language, cooking traditional foods, or listening to Latin American music are role-modeled or taught to children by parents. Similarly, many members of microsystems, such as the school system or religious group system, model or teach cultural-based values such as forgiveness, kindness, or honesty. Similar, in the student-parent relationship, values can be seen as parents modeling *familismo*, like making decisions around everyone's well-being or putting family above everyone else. Ethnic identity can also be transmitted within the student-parent system, when parents directly tell their students their identity or students observe how parents identify themselves, or by parents modeling their own affiliations and connections to a particular ethnic group. However, there is more to identity than a word or term, but it can include the student exploring what the ethnic group means to them, including the values attached to them. Acculturative stress can be seen in several microsystems, including in the student-peer

system with obvious racist statements or less obvious microaggressions, such as a peer assuming that the student's role on campus is a worker and not a student.

Constructs from emerging adulthood and acculturation theory can also be mapped together onto the microsystem, similarly to an interaction. Within the microsystem, and indeed each of the five ecological systems, there are multiple possible intersections. Specifically, there are 20 (5 emerging adulthood, 4 acculturation constructs) potential overlaps. This conceptual map will describe a small number that seem relevant, but we acknowledge that more are possible in each system. One may see how identity exploration can overlap with ethnic identity in the microsystem when a Latine student explores their individual identity in the context of their ethnic identity. For example, in the student-love system, an emerging adult may be trying on different roles or types of relationships while also attempting to integrate how their ethnic identity has meaning in relationships with people who have similar or different ethnic backgrounds or identities. Instability and acculturative stress may also interact within the microsystem. One example of this interaction can be seen in the student-instructor system, such as when a Latine student has new instructors each semester, while also addressing the possibility or experience of discrimination or microaggressions, like new instructors mispronouncing their names. There could also be an intersection between acculturative stress and self-focus in the microsystem. For example, in the student-parent system, may have to balance their choice about attending college for personal reasons with conflicting values about closeness and obligations to family (*familismo*).

Mesosystem

The mesosystem refers to the interaction of two or more microsystems, such as the link between the parent system to the peer systems. Instability can be seen in a mesosystem, such as when frequent changes in the student's peer/classmate systems make it difficult for parents to maintain relationships with the peers. Acculturative Stress can also be seen in the mesosystem, such as when a student has to not only balance connections between their parents and peers, but often Latine students experience the bicultural stress moving between two different cultures and languages. The intersection of identity exploration and acculturative stress may also be seen in mesosystems. For example, many emerging adults are trying on different social roles, which can also cause conflicts with parents who may believe the students are losing their traditional values.

Exosystem

Exosystem effects are often difficult to observe because it involves systems in which a college student (in this case) does not belong that still have an influence on a student, and so an individual student may not be aware of these influences. Observers might be able to recognize exosystemic effects through reports of those, such as parents, who are in the systems. However, for theoreticians, researchers, clinicians, or others working with Latine students, it is still meaningful to consider how the acculturation process in the exosystem might impact a student. One example is acculturative stress in the parent-work system, such as discrimination in pay for parents, that has an indirect but adverse effect on a Latine student, even if the parent does not tell the student about discrimination. It is also often difficult to intervene to change the

exosystems directly, although there are sometimes ways to indirectly change exosystems by those in the exosystem, e.g., a parent successfully confronting workplace discrimination, or through the macrosystem by changing laws or through advocacy.

Macrosystem

The macrosystem comprises larger social and philosophical ideals or beliefs that define a particular culture. Some examples include social norms, political systems, economic systems, or legal systems. The intersection of the macrosystem and emerging adulthood can be mapped into two aspects of emerging adulthood, identity exploration and self-focus, which can be seen in the macrosystem. Identity exploration can refer to a student's attempt to find a fit for the self within larger cultural and societal contexts, deciding whether to adopt social norms. Self-focus of emerging adulthood can be viewed as influenced by the contextual norms around the age of marriage and child-rearing in the macrosystem.

The acculturation process has four features, cultural practices, values, identity, and acculturative stress, that can be seen in or influenced by the macrosystem. In terms of cultural practices, mass media often provides role models for behavior and is one way that youth adopt linguistic characteristics of the receiving culture. Cultural values can also be absorbed from the larger societal contexts, for example for Latine students the value of individualism is often more valued by the receiving culture than the heritage culture. Cultural or ethnic identities are also defined by social forces in the macrosystem, as can be seen in the different ways that U.S and Latin American societies define ethnic/racial groups. Acculturative stress is also influenced by the

macrosystem, for example, through laws and policies around immigration that may encourage disparities in treatment, or social norms about who can be a “real American.” There are also potential intersections between emerging adulthood and the acculturation process as influenced by the macrosystem. For example, Latine students may experience the common self-focus of emerging adulthood with additional levels of acculturative stress. That is, self-focus may be primarily a facet of an individually-based culture, which can pose difficulties for Latine students who often are from collectivist cultures.

Chronosystem

The chronosystem can refer to experiences that an individual has during their lifetime, so the transitions around emerging adulthood could be conceptualized as a chronosystemic phenomenon. However, the chronosystem could also refer to large historical events that happen over time. From the later frame, there are aspects of emerging adulthood, e.g., feeling in between, that are affected by the chronosystem. Changes in the economic system, such as the increase in housing prices as a share of income, have made it more difficult for young people to own homes than for older generations. This difficulty in meeting a life milestone associated with adulthood may lead to people feeling between adolescence and adulthood.

The acculturation process can also be influenced by the chronosystem. For example, cultural practices such as the Spanish language have evolved over time with changes in slang or the introduction of new words (like Latine or Latinx in the last 20 years). Cultural identity can also be influenced by social changes, such as the Chicano Movement. Prior to the movement, Mexicans were often treated as inferior to their

White counterparts, but the Chicano Movement empowered people of Mexican descent to see themselves as part of a new ethnic group called Chicanos, and to be empowered to be proud of their heritage. Although the movement did not eliminate injustice and inequity, Latines have seen increasing representation in a range of careers and college enrollment.

Acculturative stress can also be influenced by the chronosystem. For instance, before Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA; U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2021), children whose parents brought them to the U.S. did not have protections from deportation and had limited opportunities. After the Obama administration introduced the program, these children had greater opportunities in the U.S., such as attending college. However, the program's potential to be changed or stopped by a future administration can increase acculturative stress. Changes in laws and policies around immigration may lead to changes in opportunity structures and the context of reception, such as whether immigrants can obtain or renew their driver's license.

Conclusion

This manuscript mapped major constructs from emerging adulthood and acculturation onto ecological systems theory following the recommendations provided by MacInnis (2011). This map may be useful to understand or describe the experiences of Latine college students. Although this mapping exercise was not designed to explain every possible social relationship system with respect to acculturation or emerging adulthood, we hope this map can be used as a guide or starting point for a broader understanding of the Latine college student experiences. This map can be applied to

various areas, including clinical practice and research, serving as an additional resource for helping Latine students.

In clinical practice, clinicians can use this map to expand conceptualizations about how their symptoms and intervention processes. That is, this map may help clinicians develop a deeper understanding of Latine students' issues with a guide for asking questions about experiences in several areas of social relationships. For instance, if a Latine college student may seek counseling regarding difficulties around the experience of college transition, this can be validated as a common experience for emerging adults. If students have conflicts around balancing their family with school responsibilities or experience discrimination on campus, a counselor could work to improve communication with parents or peers, or develop advocacy for policy changes on campus. These examples align with multicultural competencies and orientations that highlight clinicians' abilities to understand and interact with a student's cultural worldviews, values, and beliefs during treatment.

This conceptual framework may also be utilized to inform future research. With respect to qualitative inquiry, this map of concepts might be used to build a framework to ask questions about Latine college students' perceptions and lived experiences. For one, this map could be used to guide inquiry about the experiences of members of social systems, such as parents, that are influential for Latine college students. That is, a qualitative researcher could create an interview guide for work with parents of Latine college students that is informed by this map, that will ask about their perceptions or experiences with changes in various relationship systems, the acculturation process or acculturative stress, and/or the transitions associated with emerging adulthood. With

respect to quantitative research, an investigator could have a study that is designed to understand nuances of a single theory, such as evaluating the effects of acculturative stress on Latine college students, and what facets of cultural identity or practices can mitigate these effects. Or, an investigator could use the map to suggest constructs, such as adding factors related to relationship systems as mitigating factors, or transitions related to emerging adulthood as compounded acculturative stress. There are several measures of constructs from each theory for Latines or college students, e.g., acculturation stress on the Hispanic Stress Inventory-II (Cervantes et al., 2012), acculturation practices (BAS; Marin & Gamba, 1996), or Transitions Stress for emerging adults (Lee et al., 2018), but measures that tap the intersections between these theories is a potential avenue for psychometric research.

With respect to intervention science, this conceptual map can be utilized to adapt or develop interventions for Latine students following existing models of cultural adaptations for evidence-based practices (e.g., Lau et al., 2016). One example of changing the design of an existing intervention created for White, non-Latine students would be expanding on the potential academic and social challenges of college to include discrimination, unwelcoming contexts, or internal struggles with values. Following the same model, the map could also be used to inform the creation of culturally sensitive therapies (Lau et al., 2016) by identifying culturally important areas that an intervention, such as making changes in a higher-level academic system (i.e., macrosystem), or by strengthening a positive ethnic identity and building connections with students with similar ethnic backgrounds on campus to counter effects of acculturative stress.

This conceptual framework did not encompass all systems or larger societal systems such as student-social media systems, extended family systems, or physical and mental health treatment systems. Future research and theoretical work broaden the framework's scope and fill in specifics about how emerging adulthood and/or acculturation constructs map onto different social systems. This manuscript was necessarily limited in scope by examples that could be drawn from previous literature and experiences, which is not well-developed for Latine college students. We see this manuscript as a conversation-starter, not a comprehensive answer to understand Latine college student experiences. To enhance the utility of this framework, we recommend that scholars continue to fill in this map by incorporating examples from on-going research or case studies, and even to add other theories that may be relevant to Latine college students. This will ensure that the framework reflects the latest developments and trends in the field.

Abstract

Parents of Latine first-generation college students play an important role throughout the college transition, yet limited research has centered on their perspectives and lived experiences. Existing literature has primarily focused on students' experiences, with little attention given to how parents understand their role, navigate changes in family relationships, and make meaning of their student's transition into higher education. This transcendental phenomenological qualitative study explored the experiences of parents of Latine first-generation college students using Ecological Systems Theory, Emerging Adulthood Theory, and Acculturation Theory. Research questions were: (1) What do parents of Latine first-generation college students see as their role during the transition period? (2) How do parents think being Latine shapes the college experience of first-generation college students? (3) What are the ways that familial relationships transition/change when Latine first-generation college students go to college? Analysis resulted in six overarching themes, two with subthemes, organized across three broader domains: Family Dynamics and Changes, Acculturation, and Parent-Student-School Relationships. Themes included Parent Perspective on Role, Parents Feeling in Between, Change Within Acculturation Continuum, Parent Values vs. Student Emerging Adult Development, Systemic Worries and Latine Identity, and Disconnection Between Parent-School. Findings have implications for clinical, research, and culturally responsive family-centered interventions, and future research examining parent-student relationships during the college transition.

Keywords: Hispanic/Latine, First-Generation College Students, Parents, Ecological Systems, Acculturation, Emerging Adulthood

Chapter 3:

Latines are the largest U.S. ethnic minority group (19%; U.S. Census, 2023b). Projections suggest that by 2060, this figure will rise to 27%, with just over 1 in 4 people being Latine (U.S. Census, 2023b; Pew Research Center, 2022). The median age for Latines is approximately 30 years, younger than the overall U.S. population (37 years; U.S. Census, 2023b). Latines are more likely (44%) than their counterparts (White 22%, Black or African American 34%, Asian American 29%), to be first-generation college students, where a parent or caregiver did not complete a four-year college or university degree (*Excelencia* in Education, 2019; Krogstad et al., 2023; Wick et al., 2019). The enrollment of Latine students aged 18-24 years has doubled from 2005 to 2021, from 1.2 million to 2.4 million (U.S. Census, 2024b). However, a graduation rate gap persists, with 59% of Latine students at four-year institutions graduating within six years, compared to two-thirds (67%) of their white counterparts (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). Latine students also account for 16% of all conferred bachelor's degrees, compared to their peers (White 61%, Black 10%, Asian/Pacific Islander 8%, Native <1%) (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2023).

Latines are a quickly growing group of students entering college, so it is paramount to understand their experiences—which are likely to be different from members of other ethnic/racial groups. There are many reasons why Latine first-generation college students struggle to complete a four-year degree, including financial barriers, academic challenges, and discriminatory experiences (Gonzalez-Galvan et al., 2026; Hernandez, 2002; Witkow et al., 2015; Malaney & Shively, 1995). Latine students have expressed adverse emotions surrounding financial barriers, such as feeling stressed over filling out financial aid forms or making cognitive decisions around

finances (e.g., loans) for their education (Gonzalez-Galvan et al., 2026). Students also face challenges during their direct college experiences, such as academic challenges and discriminatory experiences. Latine students report difficulty adjusting academically due to a lack of preparation in high school and an inability to turn to their families for support (Hernandez, 2002; Gonzalez-Galvan et al., 2026). Latine students are more likely to experience higher levels of discrimination (e.g., peer discrimination, adult discrimination) than Asian and White Peers and can contribute to students dropping out (74% to 44%) during their first year of college (Witkow et al., 2015; Malaney & Shively, 1995).

While students face direct challenges between school and themselves, they also face difficulties with the student-parent relationship. Students express dealing with hardships, such as filling out financial aid forms or academic struggles, such as studying tips, time management, or applying to internships. However, students also found it difficult to talk to their parents about their experiences and challenges. For example, students expressed difficulty elaborating on their academic responsibilities or challenges, and the translation between both languages added more pressure to the challenge. Students also discussed how asking parents for assistance was a challenge, given their limited knowledge about higher education. These experiences keep students from asking for specific help, feeling adverse emotions, and can ultimately dealing with the challenges independently (Gonzalez-Galvan et al., 2026; Tornatzky et al., 2002). As students turn 18 years of age and start leaving for college, they are legally adults in most U.S. states. Students also experience internal stress between their family and school values and expectations, such as having to keep up with family and academic

requirements (Duncheon, 2017; Frederick et al., 2023; Gonzalez-Galvan et al., 2026). These expectations and differences in values can lead to a strain in the student-family relationship.

Although families may have conflicts, parents of college students are also an important source of connection, support, and continue to have influence in college and beyond (e.g., Turrisi & Ray, 2010). Latine first-generation college students often rely on their familial relationships for support (e.g., financial, emotional) to achieve their aspirations (Michel & Durdella, 2019; Cuevas, 2019b; Cuevas, 2021). Students also want their parents to be part of the process as they embark on their college journey, especially when many are pursuing college to give back to their parents and their sacrifices. Students have also described how leaving for college strengthened their relationships with their parents (Gonzalez-Galvan et al., 2026). The next sections will describe three conceptual frameworks, Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; 1988), Emerging Adulthood Theory Arnett (2000; 2024), Acculturation Theory Berry (1997), will be used to guide this proposed investigation into the experiences of parents of Latine first-generation college students.

Ecological Systems Theory

Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; 1988) proposes that a person's development is shaped by five interconnected and hierarchical environmental systems: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. The *microsystem* looks at the relationship between the person and immediate settings (e.g., home, school) and the different roles they play (i.e., child, student, employee). The *mesosystem* is a system of microsystems where two or more systems interact. The

exosystem is seen as an extension of the mesosystem, which accounts for formal and informal socials that indirectly influence the mesosystem. The *macrosystem* is the patterns of stability in forms of social organization and beliefs of lifestyles. The *chronosystem* focuses on how events or experiences can impact a person's development, for example, the addition of a family member or the divorce of parents. Ecological transitions are crucial to this theory, with influence across all five systems over the lifespan. Transitions can range from a mother meeting their newborn, obtaining a job, or the death of a loved one. However, transitions are not always clear and can feel rather ambiguous when they occur. One prime example is the transition from adolescence into adulthood.

Emerging Adult Theory

Arnett (2000; 2024) proposed a novel developmental stage called Emerging Adulthood to understand the experiences of adults, usually ages 18-25 years old (now sometimes to 29 years old), that fits between and shares some features of adolescence and young adulthood (Erikson, 1968). This stage has three transition criteria that gradually lead to adulthood. The first criteria is *accepting responsibility for oneself*, which focuses on emerging adults taking responsibility, unlike in adolescence, where the parents take on the responsibility and consequences of mistakes made by the person, but not the same as young adulthood. During this time, emerging adults want to be treated like adults but may not want, or be able, to take on other responsibilities, such as paying bills. This stage also differs from Erikson's (1986) young adulthood (intimacy vs. isolation) stage, which focuses on building strong, intimate relationships, such as a marriage. *Making independent decisions* is the second criteria that focuses

on emerging adults making their own decisions in their lives, unlike in adolescence, where the person did not have full autonomy to make choices without their parents. The third criteria is *becoming financially independent*, meaning reducing or entirely paying their bills without much or any support from their parents. This differs from adolescence, when it was common for parents to take care of their adolescents financially.

Emerging adulthood also has five unique features to separate this stage from Erikson's (1968) adolescence and young adulthood stages: identity exploration, instability, self-focus, feeling in between, and possibilities. *Identity exploration* revolves around the question of "Who am I?" and exploring the variety of options in life, such as love and work. *Instability* refers to the high number of changes, such as college courses, workplaces, love relationships, and often changes in overall life plans. *Self-focus* discusses how emerging adults make their own decisions and have relatively low commitments or obligations to others. *Feeling in between* revolves around the position of being between adolescence and adulthood, but not identifying completely in either. Lastly, *possibilities* refer to the idea of young people perceiving a wide range of hopes and dreams that feel attainable.

Acculturation Theory

Acculturation was originally viewed as a single dimension, with immigrants losing their heritage (or home) culture as they adopted the receiving (or destination) culture over time. Recognizing that this concept did not fit with many immigrants' actual experiences, Berry (1997) introduced a *bidimensional* model of acculturation between two dimensions, native and host cultures. The first dimension encapsulates the retention or rejection of the native culture, while the second dimension is about the

adoption or rejection of the host culture. For Latine immigrants, these dimensions have been described with various terms, including *Hispanicism* (heritage culture) and *Americanism* (receiving culture). Within this bidimensional conceptualization, people can range from low to high on either dimension over time, which fits with observations about the complexity of the immigrant experience, about how immigrants often retain many aspects of their heritage culture, even as they adopt aspects of the receiving culture.

When these dimensions intersect, people could be grouped into four general acculturation strategies: assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalization. *Assimilation* is when the person is high on the receiving cultural dimension and low on the heritage cultural dimension. *Separation* is when the person is low on the receiving culture and high on the heritage culture. *Integration* is when both the receiving and heritage cultures are high, and is sometimes called *biculturalism*. *Marginalization* is where the person is low on both the heritage and the receiving culture. Berry's (1997) model has faced some criticism for simplifying immigrant experience; one criticism was that two dimensions were not sufficient to characterize the multifaceted, heterogeneous experiences of immigrants.

In response to this type of criticism, Schwartz and colleagues (2010) expanded on Berry's model that attempted to integrate several separate theoretical traditions around immigration and culture. This multidimensional model has three dimensions: cultural practices, cultural values, and cultural identity. The first dimension is *cultural practices*, most closely related to Berry's (1997) constructs, and consists of features such as language use, media preferences, and food preferences. *Cultural values* refer to the

belief systems associated with a specific context or group, some examples being collectivism, *personalismo*, *familismo*, or *respeto*. *Cultural (or ethnic) identity* is the extent to which a person feels a sense of solidarity and attachment to their ethnic or cultural group.

The acculturation process, as with other life transitions, can be a stressful process for many immigrants. This kind of culturally-based stress is often called *acculturative stress*, a construct that refers to stressors including discrimination, context of reception, and bicultural stress (Salas-Wright & Schwartz, 2019; Cervantes et al., 2012).

Discrimination includes acts of exclusion, taunting, attacks, or views of suspicion based on race or identity. *Context of reception* is how immigrants are treated when they are present, such as being welcomed or opportunity structure. *Bicultural stress* is feeling between two cultures (i.e., conflicting expectations, cultural demands), which could include internal conflicts or actual conflicts with parents or others.

These three theoretical frameworks will be used to understand themes from studies of the experiences of Latine first-generation college students and/or their parents. Qualitative research with Latine college students' experiences is usually from the student perspective. As would be expected with samples of emerging adults, qualitative research often highlights the feeling of being in-between adolescence and adulthood, such as the need for receiving financial support from their parents (Michel & Durdella, 2019; Gonzalez-Galvan et al., 2026). Latine students receive culturally meaningful emotional support within the student-parent microsystem in different forms, e.g., *historias familiares* (family stories), *dichos* (words of wisdom), *consejos* (advice). This type of support from parents helped with the student-school relationship, aiding in

problem-solving and fostering internal motivation to achieve hopes and dreams (Frederick et al., 2023; Marrun, 2016; Michel & Durdella, 2019).

Bicultural stress, such as conflicts over values, occurs in student-family and student-school microsystems and the mesosystem, i.e., interactions between microsystems. For instance, some Latinas questioned the conflict between their apparent self-focused decision to pursue a college education vs. parents feeling their daughter abandoned the family. This conflict can be exacerbated by the choice of college, if out-of-state or far away from home. Some students discussed that instability in students' relationships with their college, such as schedule changes, internships, or co-ops, also led to conflicts with parents (Gonzalez-Galvan et al., 2026; Frederick et al., 2023). However, students reassuring parents about changes could lead to more positive views of the student-college relationship (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012). There are a small number of qualitative studies from the perspective of Latine parents, but most of these are of K-12 students (Goldsmith & Kurpius, 2018; Langenkamp, 2019; Cuevas, 2019a; Castellanos et al., 2013). To our knowledge, only two studies have examined the perspectives of parents of Latine college students who were attending college (Cuevas, 2019b; Auerbach, 2006).

Cuevas (2019b) interviewed fifteen parents of Latine first-generation students using a phenomenological approach and aspects of Chicana feminist epistemology to understand the experiences of parents and how they engage in their student's higher education goals and aspirations. The findings regarding the college transition had themes related to emerging adulthood, acculturation, and ecosystems. For example, parents felt a sense of *orgullo* (pride) as their children worked toward achieving their

hopes and dreams consistent with the possibilities of emerging adulthood because the students appeared to have so many more opportunities. With respect to acculturation, parents felt a sense of fear that their student's cultural values or practices would change to match the receiving culture's values and/or norms, and lead to conflicts within the family. Parents worked to preserve positive relationships in the family system in several ways, such as keeping communication with regular calls. Parents also worried about the possibility of discrimination on campus, exacerbated by the political climate in the macrosystem during interviews. Parents also found providing support to students during the in-between stage was rewarding, and that their support indirectly influenced the student-school system (i.e., a mesosystemic effect) by improving the student's ability to succeed academically.

Auerbach (2006) used an ethnography case study design to examine the roles of seven parents of Latine college students. These findings reflected some aspects of emerging adulthood and acculturation process, but little about family systems other than the general focus on the parent-child relationship. As in Cuevas (2019b), parents talked about their duty to help their students reach their hopes and dreams, reflecting the theme of possibilities, because students seemed to have more opportunities. Parents wanted to increase help beyond moral and emotional support, but found the environment unwelcoming due to socioeconomic status and limited proficiency in English.

Purpose of Present Study

There is a large and growing population of Latine first-generation college students who are at risk for academic failure and other adverse consequences due to

financial and academic challenges, including discriminatory experiences in college. It is imperative that colleges understand how to help these promising young people succeed in college and reach their full potential. Emerging adult college students are by definition adults, but parents still play an important role in students' lives. Understanding the experiences of their parents is one important way to inform program development and adaptation for Latine first-generation college students. There is limited research that presents the voices of parents of Latine college students—and none with first-generation college students even though Latines are overrepresented in this group. This qualitative study expanded on knowledge about their experiences related to college. Specifically, the qualitative phenomenological study used three frameworks, ecological systems, emerging adulthood, and acculturation, to understand the experiences of parents of Latine first-generation college students. The study had three research questions: (1) What do parents of Latine first-generation college students see as their role during the transition period? (2) How do parents think being Latine shapes the college experience of first-generation college students? (3) What are the ways that familial relationships transition/change when Latine first-generation college students go to college?

Methods

Study Design

This qualitative study used a transcendental phenomenological qualitative research approach (Hays & Singh, 2012) to explore the perspectives of parents of Latine first-generation college students. The transcendental phenomenological approach was chosen to explore and understand the experiences of parents of Latine

first-generation college students and find the essence (i.e., share common experiences) within those experiences. A transcendental phenomenological qualitative study design uses the participants' stories to make meaning of their descriptions of their experiences. Other types of qualitative research studies were not appropriate to use given that we were interested in the common experiences within these parents rather than establishing meaning of a phenomenon (ethnography) or examining an issue and retelling a story (narrative).

Participant Selection and Recruitment

Following recommendations for phenomenological studies (Hays & Singh, 2012), the sample size could range from 12-20 participants to capture the depth of the lived experiences of the participants, and used a purposeful homogeneous sampling, which involves participants who share similarities to gain more comprehensive information about one specific subgroup. Participants were recruited using online platforms (i.e., Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, and university or community-based organization websites) that may be used by parents of college students or by college students who could then pass it on to their parents. To be eligible participants must have: (1) identify as Latine (or a similar term, such as Hispanic, Latino, Latina, Latinx); (2) speak and understand Spanish and/or English; and (3) be a parent or primary caregiver to a first-generation Latine college student attending a four-year university for at least one semester as a full-time student and living outside their parent's home. The present study focused on students who were attending four-year universities, as these settings often involved transition experiences related to independence, campus integration, and navigating university systems that differ from two-year colleges or community college

pathways (e.g., Grim et al., 2024; Redford & Hoyer, 2017; Inkelas et al., 2007). Initially, parents were required to have students living away from home, but due to challenges with recruitment because living at home is common with Latine university students, eligibility was expanded to include parents of students living at home and commuting to college. Participant recruitment ended when data saturation was reached. Data saturation is when no new data or meaningful insights emerge from the data, and responses become consistent and well-established (Tracey, 2020). Data saturation occurred in the final interviews ($N = 13$), as no new themes emerged and participant responses reflected consistent patterns across parents' experiences of supporting their students during the college transition.

Procedures

All procedures and modifications were reviewed and approved by the Auburn University IRB before recruiting. Two additional research members (i.e., undergraduate research member, faculty advisor/auditor) employed by an outside institution were added to the research team. The primary investigator worked with both members to get approval from their institution's IRB and the Auburn IRB to work with de-identified data. All study materials viewed by participants were available in English and/or Spanish. Parents met the interviewer over a secure online conferencing system (Auburn zoom) and completed a brief demographic questionnaire (see Appendix A) to establish eligibility, and then discussed informed consent. Parents consented to participate in a 60–90-minute interview in English and/or Spanish with the primary investigator. Each interview was video/audio recorded. The interviewer used a semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix) designed to understand parent experiences with three conceptual

frameworks: ecological systems, acculturation, and emerging adulthood. Participants were compensated with a \$20 e-gift card to their preferred email address. Recordings were transcribed in the language(s) in which they were conducted and then coded by the PI and other members of the research team.

Participants

As seen in Table 1, 13 parents of Latine first-generation college students were interviewed. Parents, between 36 to 52 years old, had at least one child who identified as a Latine first-generation college student who was attending a four-year university, either lived at home, on-campus, or near campus, and had attended more than one semester in college. All parents were assigned pseudonyms to protect confidentiality. One participant had their partner join at the beginning of the interview. The primary investigator provided verbal information on informed consent, to which the partner verbally agreed and signed consent. Given this information, these two participants were still counted as one participant as they alternated between answering questions. Inclusion was agreed upon by the primary investigator and three research assistants.

Data Collection

A **demographic questionnaire** with 16 questions about the participant and their child/student, that was adapted for this study from items used in previous studies with Latines was used to collect additional data such as student's college, distance from home, participant age, gender, country of origin, generational status, highest level of degree or school, and employment status. This questionnaire was also used to specify if participants had more than one child in college and to rule out participants who did not meet eligibility.

Semi-structured Interviews was the second form of data collection used. These interviews were video and audio recorded using an online secured video platform (Zoom). Interviews were ~55 minutes. To guide the interviews, the primary investigator created and used an interview protocol, composed of two overarching questions and 16 probing prompts, informed by Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977), Emerging Adulthood (Arnett, 2000), and Acculturation Theories (Berry, 1997; Schwartz et al., 2010). These questions were used to ask parents of Latine first-generation college students about their role(s) while their students were in college, how their student's Latine identity shaped their college experience, and how familial relationships changed when their students went to college.

Data Analysis

The research team was the primary investigator, a bilingual/bicultural (Spanish/English) Latina, and her advisor, three bilingual/bicultural undergraduate research assistants, and a bilingual/bicultural auditor who was a psychologist with expertise working with college students. The team was composed of college-educated people either in the process of getting their bachelor's or doctoral degrees, or holding a PhD in psychology. This allowed for different perspectives throughout the data analysis process. Two research members, one undergraduate and an auditor, were from outside institutions. The PI and other team members work together to transcribe the interviews, create a codebook, code the transcriptions, and find themes.

Data analysis used Moustakas' (1994) approach to phenomenological data, which is composed of several different steps: bracketing, horizontalization, inductive coding, reduction and elimination, consensus coding, cluster and thematizing invariant

constituents, and auditing. *Bracketing* is a critical pre-data analysis step to maintain the integrity of the research study and reduce researcher bias and assumptions. The research team discussed ways their identities, beliefs, experiences, and other factors appeared throughout the study by engaging in self-reflection at the start of every team meeting. The second step was *Horizontalization*, which is the process of identifying non-repetitive, non-overlapping statements in interviewee's transcripts (Hays & Singh, 2012). Part of these steps included *Inductive Coding*, which is where the research team will review each line and develop codes from it. The next step was *Reduction and Elimination*, where research members will code to determine invariant constituents/horizons (Hays & Singh, 2012). Researchers also participated in *Consensus Coding* by discussing and defining each code in team meetings. Researchers worked on identifying inconsistencies in codes and working together to come to a consensus. The following step was *Cluster and Thematizing Invariant Constituents*, where researchers grouped codes into thematic labels and worked together to reach a consensus or worked through inconsistencies in themes. The last step was *Auditing*, which is where an auditor who had not been involved with the data analysis reviewed the work (i.e., transcripts, codes, themes) for accuracy and consistency.

Trustworthiness

This study employed rigorous qualitative methods to maintain the authenticity, credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. Consistent with phenomenological approaches, credibility, was supported using Bracketing, Reflexivity and Consensus Coding (Hays & Singh, 2012). Bracketing was an ongoing, reflexive process in which

each member of the research team actively identified and reflected on assumptions (i.e., personal, professional) that could influence the data. Reflexivity involved the continual examination of how researcher's identities, experiences, and perspectives may shape the research process and interpretation of findings. The research team, primarily composed of Latinas in higher education, acknowledged how their identities as Latine college students and their personal experiences with parents and their experiences in college could influence data interpretation. To address these potential biases, research members checked in at the beginning of team meetings to discuss any assumptions or biases and engaged in ongoing self-reflection throughout data collection and analysis. Additionally, research members engaged in consensus coding to collaboratively develop and refine the codebook. Codes were defined through discussion, and team members worked together to ensure codes and definitions were grounded in participants' narratives. When discrepancies arose, research members revisited the data, engaged with relevant literature, and reflected on potential bias to reach consensus agreement. This process supported a more nuanced and collectively validated interpretation of the data. To strengthen trustworthiness, triangulation and discussion with the external auditor were used (Hays & Singh, 2012). Triangulation is defined as the use of multiple researchers in the study (Hays & Singh, 2012). An external auditor reviewed all the data and final themes to ensure consistency and rigor in the analytical process. The auditor also met with the primary investigator to discuss interpretations, raise questions, and provide feedback, enhancing the overall credibility and dependability of the findings.

Findings

Findings with parents of Latine first-generation college students revealed perspectives on their student's college experiences and the ways parents navigated their role throughout the process. As shown in Table 2, analysis of the interviews resulted in six themes, two having one subtheme. Below, we describe themes related to the microsystem (family dynamics and changes), then related to acculturation (cultural practices, values, and identity), and finally those related to the mesosystem (parent-student microsystem connection to the student-college microsystem). Together, these themes highlighted how parents understood and supported their student's transition to college while navigating changes within the family, cultural factors, and broader systemic factors.

Parent Perspective on Role

Parents captured their roles through the values and support they instilled and maintained in their students from a young age. Cecilia, a 52-year-old mother, discussed how values started at home. She said:

“Los valores están en la casa hija. Te digo que yo siempre he estado hablando con ellos. O sea, yo siempre les pongo los pies en la tierra, O sea, pisan la tierra, porque aquí siempre van a estar.”

Some of these values instilled looked like *palabras de ánimo*, meaning words of encouragement, and *consejos*, words of wisdom. A common phrase used by the majority of parents was *échale ganas* meaning for someone to give it their all. Other phrases, such as *encomiéndate a Dios*, were phrases of encouragement used, highlighting the usage of religion as both a value and support. Parents provided *consejos* in a general approach to overall well-being rather than academic focused. For

example, Luna, a 36-year-old mother, discussed how she would tell her daughter to take deep breaths or breaks throughout her study sessions, and even offered to purchase a gym membership to release the adverse emotions she felt as a result of her academics. Ultimately, the values expressed by parents centered on a central theme of resilience and perseverance, qualities they wanted their students to draw upon throughout their college journey.

While parents instilled values of resilience and perseverance in their students, they also demonstrated these values through sacrifices they made in their roles as parents. This form of support may be less visible than *palabras de ánimo* or *consejos*, yet it reflects an important dimension of *familismo*. Participants described this as an unspoken responsibility to support their students despite their own challenges. For example, Luna and Cecilia, both single, divorced mothers, explained that they increased their work hours to cover their students' tuition and books. Notably, no parent identified loans as an option, underlining the intentional and personal nature of the support they provided through their own sacrifice.

Direct Changes in Parent Life due to Student-School Relationship

A common theme across all parents was the never-ending support for their students, an action that emphasized their values, such as *familismo*. Parents were directly asked how their student being in college changed anything for them, such as their workplace. Many parents were quick to say no or had difficulty answering the question. However, throughout their interviews, the changes they endured were highlighted. Though parents did not see this as a hardship, but rather, an unspoken value and responsibility as a parent. Valentina and Fernanda discussed how they

changed their work schedules (i.e., going from morning shifts to night shifts) to allow their students to borrow the family car to commute to school. Cecilia discussed how, before going to college, her son would help her clean offices to reduce the workload on Cecilia, but while in college, he was no longer able to help due to class schedule changes and academic responsibilities. Cecilia, Valetina, and Tomas shared a common story of being the main providers and having to increase their work hours to help pay for their students' education (e.g., tuition, books). For example, Valentina said she increased her work hours to help purchase a car for her daughter to commute to school. Tomas consistently discussed how his responsibility was to “*apoyarlo al 100% económicamente*,” meaning to fully support him financially. He further elaborated when asked about his support and said:

“Pues cambió para mí porque si yo era responsable cuando él entró a la universidad o antes de que entrara tenía que ser más responsable...extra responsable porque ese era mi trabajo que económicamente no le faltara nada a él para que pudiera acabar sus estudios. Entonces de ese lado, cambió mi parte... en no relajarme y echarle ganas en el trabajo para que él estuviera bien y acabe sus estudios.”

Tomas was highlighting how he continuously supports his children, if that means not relaxing and working hard to help his student graduate from college.

Parents Feeling in Between

As parents explored the changes in familial relationships, many discussed “feeling- in-between” their parental role. For example, parents such as Luna, Natalia/Noah, and Estelle noticed the direct changes in responsibilities when it came to

their students' academics. For example, they discussed how they would receive direct notifications from their student's K-12 education regarding attendance and grades, but noticed how this form of communication stopped when they entered college. One parent even described how they were not allowed to ask for student information, indirectly citing Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA, 1974). Additionally, parents felt a shift on how their students leaned on them. For example, Carmen said:

“Y ahorita, ya está así, pero todavía por recibir ella para tomar decisiones, todavía me habla y me dice, “Me invitaron a una fiesta. Como ves ma. ¿Me puedo ir o no me puedo ir? Y yo le digo, “Mira yo queriendo, te digo que no. Pero tú tienes que tomar la decisión tuya, hija, lo bueno y lo malo eres tú. Tú eres la que toma la decisión de lo bueno y lo malo.” Puedes ir a la fiesta, puedes ver, pero no es obligatorio que tomes que fumes o hagas cosas que no quieras hacer.”

In the above, Carmen is discussing how her daughter is coming to her for advice on whether she should attend a college party. Carmen acknowledged her hesitations but ultimately encouraged her daughter to make her own decision.

Changes within Acculturation Continuum

Questions in the interview protocol focused on gathering information on a student's acculturation, specifically around their practices, values, and identities. Parents seemed divided between acknowledging how their students either did or did not change. For example, Paola and Angelica, ages 44 and 49 years, did not see any changes in their daughters' acculturation as they attended college.

Though, parents seemed to be welcoming of their students exploring their host culture regardless of the push back it may receive from the heritage culture and values.

For example, Lucia, a 43-year-old mom, said:

“He does like nail black polish on his fingers and on his toes. And you know, guys don’t do that in our culture. It was a really radical change, but I’m proud of him for it. He’s really embracing who he is and what he discovered when he left home.”

Tomas also spoke about his student’s choice of going on vacation rather than coming home during academic breaks (e.g., spring break) despite the heritage’s cultural value of *familismo*.

Regardless, parents vocalized how they wanted their students to remain true to their heritage roots. Cecilia and Tomas spoke throughout their interviews on how they allowed their students to evolve, however, always wanting their students to stick to the values they were taught, such as *respetto* (respect), *ser honesto* (be honest), and *cuidarse a uno mismo* (take care of oneself).

Despite most parents allowing their students to move through their acculturation continuum, some parents expressed concern over social influences and the impact on their student’s values. For example, Alejandra, Jimena, and Luna all worried about how their student’s friends would negatively influence their students like introducing them to drugs and alcohol. Additionally, Alejandra and Jimena felt *abandonadas* (abandoned) by their students when they would choose to go out with friends rather than come home on the weekends or communicate with them. Alejandra even discussed how she asked her son to introduce his friends to her to help lower her anxiety. She admitted that knowing

her son's friends helped and provided an additional method of checking in on her son and his well-being.

Parent Values vs. Student Emerging Adult Development

Aside from the sacrifice parents exhibited as they supported their students, parents' personal values were challenged as their students developed, specifically in their self-focus, identity exploration and possibilities. Some parents expressed concern when their students informed them that they wanted to work while attending college. Luna and Natalia/Noah shared how they were opposed to their students working in fear that it would interfere with their academics. However, Luna started to accept the idea of her daughter working after she explained to Luna how her work opportunities could help in a variety of ways, such as increasing work experience and helping narrow down her career choice.

Parents expressed a level of *orgullo* (pride) when their students decided to go to college rather than entering the workforce after graduating high school. Many discussed adverse emotions, specifically disappointment or judgment toward Latine emerging adults who decided to work instead of attending college. Some parents expressed that these students were motivated by money and would regret their decision in their future.

For example, Natalia/Noah said:

“Y entonces aqui los muchachos se van a lo fácil y piensan que todo es fácil porque están jóvenes, pero no, no están viendo así a su futuro. Y entonces todos esos muchachos que no estudiaron ahorita y cuando estén viejitos y que ya no lo puedan hacer, se van arrepentir, van a van a decir ‘hubiera estudiado.’”

Parents also expressed disappointment when students dropped out of college, regardless of their reasoning. Tomas, a 44-year-old father, reported the following:

“Después a los chicos meses, pues me enteré de que los muchachos desgraciadamente no siguieron, se salieron. Entonces, de ese lado sí me da tristeza porque uno quisiera ver que todos acaben sus estudios. Pero sí, es bien difícil. También la verdad es bien difícil para los papás. Y como papá, pues, nos toca más que apoyarlos porque nadie lo sabe más que los papás que tienen los chicos en la universidad. Porque sí, es bien difícil.”

He expressed feeling sad that his student's friends did not finish college and hoped that they would. He also discussed the hardships parents faced supporting their own students in college, acknowledging that only parents who were supporting their students would understand these hardships.

This aligns with parent's value of *familismo*, a value embedded throughout their responses. This value, among others, was highlighted when each parent spoke about wanting their children to have *una vida mejor* (a better life). Parents voiced wanting their students to have a better life than them, citing it as a reason they migrated to the United States. Many parents like Tomas, Cecilia, Natalia/Noah, Carmen, Estelle, and Luna discussed how they wanted their students to work in careers different from their own. Many parents expressed the hardships they encountered in their jobs, such as cruel work conditions (i.e., hot or cold weather). For example, Estelle noted:

“Sí, pues yo creo que sí, es...A veces uno, ellos quieren uno lo mejor para ustedes, ¿verdad? Entonces, viendo cómo uno sufre, ¿por qué no decirles a

ellos? Ustedes tienen las oportunidades que uno no tiene y que si las saben aprovechar, les va a ir bien en la vida.”

Estelle used her experiences to express to her daughter the hardships and to take advantage of her possibilities. Other parents, such as Jimena, expanded on her daughter’s possibilities and said:

“Bueno, me parece muy bien. O sea, buenísimo que ahora haya oportunidades de estudio. Porque para nuestros tiempos no había tantas oportunidades. No estaba la tecnología tan avanzada, y entonces tocó trabajar. Era más difícil. Entonces, gracias a Dios, que ella sí puede tener la oportunidad.”

Systemic Worries and Latine Identity

Values were even used as a force of support as parents discussed their systemic worries. Parents were directly asked about social or cultural factors that would affect their students. Many parents needed additional probing to help answer the questions. However, the majority of parents spoke of their worry regarding the immigration system in the United States. They highlighted worries, no matter who was being impacted, such as direct or extended family or friends. Regardless of documentation status, parents expressed being worried and their plans on navigating the system. For example, one parent said:

“Ahorita Sí, me preocupa como, pues...Cómo están las cosas Ahorita de la economía. Las leyes del este gobierno. Tanta migración por todos lados. Pues le digo: cárgate, tu pasaporte cárgate, lo que sea, porque, pues es latino y uno no sabe. Pues si da miedo.”

Additionally, parents discussed ways they navigated their systemic worries on an individual level. Forms of coping included reminding their students of their *consejos* such as *obedecer las leyes* (obey the laws) or *echarle ganas* (give it your all). Parents spoke about instilling and maintaining hope and that circumstances would hopefully get better, especially through challenges. A note to mention was that some parents discussed the increased *peligro* (danger) within the United States and the current administration's mission to decrease and control immigration. Some even said that they had never experienced this level of fear. Parents also discussed how they leaned into religion as a form of coping, asking God to protect and bless them through their daily lives. One parent discussed how she would tell her daughter to pray to God. She also said, "...*siempre tiene que poner a Dios por delante para que te vayan bien las cosas.*" In other words, she would tell her daughter to put God first for things to go well. It's noteworthy to mention that parents only spoke from an individual standpoint on how to combat systemic worries.

Disconnection between Parent-School

Parents were directly asked about their relationship with their student's school. The disconnection seemed to be prominent when they were asked about challenges their students may have faced in college. Some expressed that they did not know about the challenges, and how they defaulted to *consejos* as their support. Some briefly discussed the academic challenges their students faced, such as difficulty with academic material or professors. Additionally, parents felt like it was not their parental role to have a relationship with their student's school, as discussed above (feeling in between). The difference between parents feeling-in-between and the disconnection

between parent-student relationships is the acculturative stress, macrosystems, and systemic challenges parents feared.

Parents who predominately spoke Spanish discussed the hardships and fears behind the language barrier when communicating with their student's university, increasing the disconnection. Others had internalized fear of being discriminated by the university. These points also led to some parents intentionally being disconnected for their safety. A few parents discussed how their immigration status led to the disconnection for the safety of themselves and their students. This fear was also exacerbated due to the political climate (i.e., increase in Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) with the support of the current administration) when these interviews were conducted. Many raised concerns and even discussed how they have had challenging conversations with their students about their future plans if family members were to be impacted by ICE. Additionally, other parents voiced that their disconnection was out of their control. For example, Tomas discussed how he wished he could be involved with his son's journey as a collegiate athlete, but felt like the start times of games were not aligned with his work schedule.

Indirectly Managing Disconnections

Despite the challenges with disconnections in the mesosystem (parent-student <=> student-school), parents found ways to mitigate potential adverse effects by indirectly supporting their students while they were in college. Many parents supported their students by simply being present. Valentina discussed how she would go to her daughter's college orientations to *acompañarla* or in other words, accompany her. Luna discussed doing the same with her daughter and using the opportunity to ask her

daughter questions regarding her college journey. Carmen and other parents discussed helping their students move into their dorms or apartments, seeing this as a form of support. Lucia explained how her son would call her for emotional support or to be present with him. For example, Lucia said:

“I feel like I was like that support system for him because there were days where it was really hard. He would have to stay up late studying or doing those models...he had to do a lot of little models where he had to like glue stuff together and this and that, and he would have a deadline. So, you know, sometimes he was behind on that deadline and I would have to stay up with him. ‘He’d be like, hey mom will you stay up with me on the phone? You know, so I don’t fall asleep.’ So, you know, like I would be there on the phone with him. And there were many times where he called me crying, like very frustrated. And, you know, I would have to tell him ‘Calm down. You know you can do this right now. You’re just very frustrated, but you know, this is going to pass.’ So I feel like I was a good support system for him. And I feel like he did come to me when he got to the point where he needed that, like that little breather, you know like yeah.”

Other parents discussed how they would support their students by providing any documents they needed, such as their tax forms so their students could fill out their FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Federal Student Aid, n.d.).

Discussion

The present study used a transcendental phenomenological approach to examine the lived experiences of 13 parents of Latine first-generation college students

during their transitions into college. To my knowledge, this study was the first to be grounded in three theories, Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977), Emerging Adulthood (Arnett, 2000), and Acculturation Theory (Berry, 1997; Schwartz et al., 2010), to understand how these parents understood their roles, how they perceived their student's Latine identity shaping their college experience, and how familial relationships changed. As seen in Table 2, we found six themes, two themes having one subtheme, in the parents' narratives. Although there were some intersections, themes were generally focused on the microsystem (family dynamics and changes), acculturation (cultural practices, values, and identity), and/or the mesosystem (parent-student microsystem connection to the student-college microsystem). These findings extend existing literature centering on parents of Latine first-generation college students and their experiences while their students transitioned into college. Results may be used to inform intervention or program developments or adaptations to support parents and students.

Findings from this study suggest that parents conceptualize their role as fundamentally rooted in the transmission of culturally grounded values and the provision of consistent emotional and instrumental support. Parents did not describe their role through active institution engagement or academic monitoring, but through the cultivation of internal resources within their students like resilience, perseverance, and moral grounding (Falicov, 2014). Practices such as *consejos* and *palabras de ánimo* functioned as culturally embedded forms of guidance that promote resilience and perseverance (Sanchez et al, 2005; Marrun, 2020).

Consistent with *familismo*, parents enacted their role through significant personal sacrifice in their life to strengthen and support the student-school relationship. These sacrifices can be seen through increased work hours, schedule changes, and taking on the full financial responsibility for educational expenses. *Familismo* emphasizes strong identification and attachment to family, often prioritizing collective needs over individual desires (Sabagoal et al., 1987). In this study, parents did not frame these direct changes as burdensome sacrifices, but rather as an expected extension of their parental role and responsibilities. This reflects prior findings that Latine parents often express support through emotional, moral, and practical support (Frederick et al., 2023; Langenkamp, 2019; Auerbach, 2006; Gonzalez-Galvan et al., 2026).

Research has also highlighted *familismo* as a central organizing value in Latine families, shaping parenting behaviors and reinforcing the reasons of migration to ensure their students have different life opportunities than themselves (Falicov, 2014; Sabogal et al., 1987). Additionally, research has shown that family support, a component of *familismo*, can increase academic motivation among Latine, first-generation college students (Azpeitia & Bacio, 2022). However, while parents may perceive these acts as practical and expected forms of support, Latine, first-generation college students may experience them differently, at times interpreting them as a form of disconnection when deeper support is desired (Gonzalez-Galvan et al., 2026). Psychologically, parents may also normalize these adjustments due to longstanding experiences navigating hardships and survival-oriented circumstances.

As students transitioned into college, parents noticed relational changes (i.e., communication, physical presence), regardless of the students' living conditions, and

found ways to restructure and adapt. Parents described feeling an *in-between* role due to the limited contact they had with the university and policies that separated them from children, e.g., FERPA. Other parents discussed their worries and hesitations about their student's being in college, but encouraging them to find their voice and make their own decisions, aligning with self-focus (Arnett, 2000). Parents navigated this transition by trying different forms of communication, such as texting or calling, or location sharing, while also considering their student's instability in class schedules and responsibilities. This aligns with past research where students have discussed how their forms of communication shifted when they went to college (Gonzalez-Galvan et al., 2026).

These relational changes also appeared to intersect with parents' awareness of their student's evolving acculturation and development. As students navigated college, parents reflected on both continuity and change in their student's values, identities, behaviors, and development, and how it interacted with parental values and perspectives. Parents' responses reflected a complex engagement with their student's acculturation process, sometimes not being explicitly articulated. Acculturation can be understood as a multidimensional model with three dimensions (i.e., practices, values, identities) used to navigate cultural contexts (Schwartz et al., 2010). In this study, parents acknowledged both continuity and change in their students along each of these dimensions.

Parents often expressed openness to their student's movement through their acculturation process, even when it diverged from traditional cultural norms. A note to mention is that parents did express pride in their students continuing to identify with their Latine backgrounds. Parents were open to students' practices changing, such as

their food preferences, however, when it came to values, this did align with previous research of fear that their students would change (Cuevas, 2019b). The changes in values may also be an indicator for parents that something may have failed in their parenting. Research has shown that values are instilled by the age of 13 years or middle childhood and influenced by family relationships (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Rokeach, 1973).

At the same time, parents continued to emphasize the importance of maintaining their Latine roots, such as values (i.e., respect, honesty). This was specifically highlighted over social influences and relationships, shining light on the mesosystem gaps between family and friends. Limited understanding and knowledge regarding social influences and friends may constrain parents' awareness and lead to an increase in protection. One parent tried to combat this by narrowing the gap between her and her son's friends. This slightly differed from research that indicated parents being worried about their student's levels of acculturation changing in college and leading to potential conflict within the parent-student system (Cuevas, 2019b).

An increase in tensions between students and parents occurred when their students engaged in behaviors that did not align with parental values. Parents discussed how their students engaged in self-focus and identity exploration in college, two features in emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000). For example, parents did not approve of their students working as they believed it would adversely impact their academic performance. This aligns with past research where parents prioritize academic success as it leads to upward mobility (Fulgini, 1998). Although when students communicated the meaning behind obtaining a job, parents were able to

understand the importance and benefits, and adjust their perspectives. This suggests that parental perspectives can be changed with an increase in communication and understanding, especially since parents may have limited knowledge of the benefits given their own educational attainment.

Despite these tensions, parents consistently expressed strong beliefs regarding the value of education and the possibilities it could create for their students. Many parents criticized students who may have chosen alternative pathways (i.e., entering workforce instead of college or other post-secondary training/education), regardless of the student's reasons (i.e., personal choice, provider of family). This aligns with research suggesting that educational attainment is often viewed within Latine families as a pathway toward intergenerational mobility and fulfilment of familial aspirations (Langkamp, 2019). Across interviews, parents framed higher education as an opportunity for *una vida mejor* (a better life), often using *historia familiares* (family stories) and *consejos* (advice-giving narratives) to encourage students and highlight the hardships they themselves have endured (Marrun, 2020). This is consistent with literature suggesting migration is often motivated not only by economic survival, but also by the desire for children to access opportunities unavailable to previous generations (Falicov, 2014). Similarly, Latine, first-generation college students have expressed wanting to give back to their parents and honor the sacrifices their parents faced when migrating to the United States (Gonzalez-Galvan et al., 2026).

Beyond educational aspirations, parents also described concerns related to broader systemic and sociopolitical factors that shaped their student's experiences, such as the U.S. immigration system and sociopolitical climate, aligning with the

macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Concerns varied between documentation status and overall vulnerability associated with the Latine identity, aligning with previous research that discussed how these factors influenced their level of support due to fear and acculturative stress (i.e., Cuevas, 2019a; Cervantes et al., 2012). Parents relied heavily on their practices and values, such as *consejos* and religious practices, to manage their fear and uncertainty, demonstrating the universal usage in different systems of levels or aspects of life. However, parents' forms of coping revolved around the individual level. In other words, parents did not emphasize ways they could push for change or reformation of systems. It shows that parents may prioritize safety and immediate well-being. Additionally, parents were able to note how systems impacted them directly, but were unable to discuss how they impacted their students. A curiosity would be if this aligns with their practical way of thinking and may see their students in a sense of privilege given their legal documentation status. Some parents spoke about the injustices that Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA; U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2021) recipients faced when navigating college (i.e., increased tuition), but had a hard time retelling challenges their own students faced.

These experiences also extended into the ways parents interacted with their student's university and navigated involvement throughout their student's college journey. A significant finding was the disconnection between parents and their student's universities. Parents listed a variety of barriers such as language, work, and concerns related to discrimination and immigration status as reasons for their disconnection, aligning with previous research documenting structural and cultural barriers that restrict family involvement (Cuevas, 2019a; Cuevas, 2019b; Auerbach, 2006). Regardless,

parents showed forms of perseverance and resilience and found ways to be involved in the student-school relationship. Their support often was expressed through their presence, emotional support, and logistical support (i.e., moving) rather than a direct parent-school relationship. Students also found ways to help bridge the disconnection between their parents and school by helping translate or breaking down their academic classes, regardless of parent understanding and comments of not understanding. This aligns with research where Latine, first-generation college students have highlighted the disconnection between parents and universities, and the hope for that relationship to exist (Gonzalez-Galvan et al., 2026).

Another thing to consider could be that their disconnection could be based on their ways of thinking. For example, a reason as to why parents immigrate to the United States is for a better life and provide opportunities for the children (Falicov, 2014). With this goal, a person may fall into a sense of survival, especially in a country that may not accept their identities or may deal with other systemic barriers (i.e., immigration, language, discrimination). When conceptualizing Latine parents using Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943), they fall within the first two levels of basic needs. Parents have set this foundation in order for their students move up in the hierarchy, allowing them to meet psychological needs and self-fulfillment needs. This aligns with the observations the primary investigator saw when parents had a hard time discussing changes in their students' identities. They simply may not have this lens due to the consistent and never-ending feeling of being in survival mode.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study provided a look into the experiences of parents of Latine first-generation college students, however, there are several limitations that should be considered for interpretations. First, this study's eligibility criteria initially required that students live on-campus or near their university to really highlight the changes in familial relationships and parental roles. However, eligibility was expanded to include students who commuted to their university, as it reflects the common practice of students living with parents in Latine families. A second limitation revolved around recruitment. When the research team first started recruiting through online platforms, the informed consent Qualtrics link was infiltrated by bots. The primary investigator had to sort through 400 submissions by analyzing the location, names, and emails provided. This may have led to real participants being removed inadvertently. A third limitation was a result of the political climate. Recruitment began in 2025 and continued into early 2026 during a change in presidential administration. During this period, immigration enforcement actions by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement increased. Recruitment and enrollment were particularly challenging because some eligible parents feared that sharing their experiences could result in unintended consequences, i.e., deportation or data being hacked. Although the research team tried providing reassurance by naming all the steps being taken to protect their data, three participants who had originally provided consent declined to be interviewed. It is important to acknowledge that most participants identified as women of Mexican heritage. This is the largest cultural group of Latines in the U.S. (U.S. Census, 2023c), but future research should attempt to have more participants from a broader range of national origins and gender. Students attended four-year universities, all classified as Predominately White Universities (PWI)

in the Southeast and Northeast, which is not representative of all U.S. college experiences. Future research should extend sampling to students in different types of colleges (i.e., community, technical), colleges such as Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSI), and colleges in different regions across the U.S. Interview protocols were created in English and then professionally translated into Spanish. Even with professional translation, meaning may have been lost, so future research studies could improve the interview guide by using a translation-back-translation process with bilingual/bicultural translators, and trial testing the translated protocol to ensure clarity and preserved meaning, or by creating an interview guide simultaneously in Spanish and English. Additionally, sexuality and relationships were not organically discussed by participants. Given that these are important topics for emerging adults, it would be beneficial to add a prompt regarding these topics to directly ask participants.

Future qualitative research to understand parent and student perspectives could help to build a more comprehensive understanding of how support, expectations, and relational changes are experienced and negotiated within the family system. Although previous qualitative research has included interviews with students or parents as the participants, studying the student-parent dyad may provide a more comprehensive understanding of their shared experiences, communication patterns, and perspectives. Exploring these dynamics with both parent and student together could help inform interventions aimed at reducing disconnection and strengthening the parent-student relationship by identifying gaps between parents' intentions and students' interpretations of these supports. Additionally, it may provide insight into how parents' survival-oriented perspectives contribute to relational differences with students who may not share the

same lived experiences. These results also emphasize the importance of community in Latine families navigating the transition to college. Creating spaces where parents can connect with other families, share experiences, and access culturally responsive resources may help reduce feelings of isolation and provide additional support as they navigate changes in their relationship with their students. These findings can serve as a starting point for conversations among parents, students, and community members to increase awareness of the challenges and strengths within the parent-student relationship and promote stronger family connections. Findings could be used to inform or create an intervention for both parents and children who are incoming college students. For example, a series of workshops could provide psychoeducation on academic structures, ways to support through transition, such as communication, and changes within emerging adulthood that are culturally meaningful for Latine families. Workshops should have materials available in both Spanish and English. This would allow parents and children to come together and discuss college structures and support to help student's overall college experience. Institutions may also consider expanding linguistically accessible resources for families, such as offering campus tours in Spanish or chatbots available in multiple languages, as happens at some institutions, e.g., Auburn University Graduate School. These efforts may reduce barriers to accessing information and promote greater parent engagement throughout the college transition.

Findings from this study may help inform interventions aimed at strengthening the parent-student relationship among Latine families. Specifically, interventions could help students recognize the different ways parents express support, such as through financial support, cultural values, emotional encouragement, and physical presence,

even when these forms of support may differ from traditional Western conceptualizations of parental involvement.

Counseling Psychologists working with Latine first-generation college students and their families can also play an important role by providing culturally responsive psychoeducation about emerging adulthood, facilitating conversation around changing family roles, and validating parents' strengths and sacrifices. There are existing interventions that could be used as examples of how to adapt existing family engagement models within established college access and retention programs. Two examples would be TRIO Programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2026) and Puente Project (The Puente Project, 2023), which have an emphasis on supporting first-generation college students and other marginalized identities. Some of the support includes family-oriented components such as parent orientations and informational workshops to increase knowledge on universities processes (i.e., financial aid, academic expectations). These programs would benefit from addressing relational and cultural aspects in the college transition. While programs like TRIO are effective in providing access to information, they may benefit from integrating structured opportunities for families to engage in conversations around shifting roles, communication patterns, and the emotional aspects of supporting a student in college. This is particularly important given that parents in the present study described feeling “in between” roles, navigating reduced oversight while maintaining a strong desire to remain involved. In contrast, the Puente Project offers a more culturally grounded approach that incorporates elements of *familismo* and community connection despite the emphasis on community college. However, even within culturally responsive

models, there remains an opportunity to more directly address systemic concerns and family-level coping strategies, particularly related to discrimination, safety, and sociopolitical stressors identified in this study. Integrating these discussions into existing workshops may better align programming with the lived realities of Latine families. This study highlighted the complex experiences of parents of Latine first-generation college students as they navigated their student's transition into higher education. Although parents consistently described feelings of *orgullo* (pride) and hope for their student's future, their narratives also revealed the emotional, cultural, financial, and systemic complexities embedded within this transition. One meaningful finding was that parents often expressed support through culturally grounded practices such as *consejos*, *palabras de ánimos*, *familismo*, and ultimately, sacrifice. Another important finding was that parents appeared open to many aspects of their student's growth and acculturation, yet still experienced tension when changes challenged deeply rooted cultural values or family expectations. Parents described feeling *in-between* roles as their students developed into their emerging adult stage, while simultaneously feeling disconnected from their student's university due to language barriers, work demands, immigration-related fears, and limited institution inclusion. Collectively, these findings suggest that support for Latine first-generation college students should extend beyond the individual student and include greater recognition of parent's lived experiences, cultural strengths, and systemic barriers. Future research should continue examining the immediate parent-student relationship to better understand how support, communication, and relational changes are experienced within the family system, while also helping higher

education institutions develop more culturally responsive ways to support students and their families.

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Table. 1

Anonymized Description of Parents of Latine First-Generation College Students

Participant	Gender	Parent Age, yrs	Country of Origin	Parent Education	Student Age, yrs	Student Residence
Alejandra	Woman	47	Columbia	HS	21	On/Near Campus
Jimena	Woman	47	Columbia	HS	21	On/Near Campus
Natalia/Noa	Woman/					
h	Man	42, 45	Mexíco	≤5th	21	On/Near Campus
Paola	Woman	44	Mexíco	HS	19	Living with parents
Fernanda	Woman	51	Mexíco	6th to 12th	19	Living with parents
Angelica	Woman	49	Mexíco	6th to 12th	26	On/Near Campus
Carmen	Woman	46	Mexíco	6th to 12th	19	On/Near Campus
Cecilia	Woman	52	Mexíco	6th to 12th	28	On/Near Campus

Estelle	Woman	44	Mexíco	6th to 12th	22	Living with parents
Tomas	Man	44	Mexíco	≤5th	23	On/Near Campus
Luna	Woman	36	Mexíco	≤5th	19	Living with parents
Valentina	Woman	43	El Salvador	HS	19	Living with parents
Lucia	Woman	43	Mexíco	6th to 12th	29	On/Near Campus

Note. HS = High school graduate or equivalent; all others show grade equivalent range.

Table 2.

Summary of Themes/Sub-themes.

Parent Perspective on Role
• Direct Changes in Parent Life due to Student-School Relationship
Parents Feeling in Between
Change within Acculturation Continuum
Parent Values vs. Student Emerging Adult Development
Systemic Worries and Latine Identity
Disconnection between Parent-School
• Managing Disconnections

Appendix A: Interview Protocols

English

- 1) Tell me your feelings about *student's name* [* = use specifics from survey] going to college.
 - i. *Identity Exploration*: Students are getting to know who they are and what they like as a person, how is that for you as a parent?
 - ii. *Instability*: There are many changes going on when they are in college, what is that like for you as a parent?
 - iii. *Self-Focus*: Some people say that students are selfish, especially when making decisions, during this time, what do you think?
 - iv. *Feeling in Between*: Tell me about the your experience as *student name* changes between being a teenager to an adult.
 - v. *Possibilities*: Now students have so many options, what is it like being a parent to a *student* who has so many options?
- B) Some people may think college is different when you are Latine, how do you think that makes a difference?
 - i) *Practices*: *Student* is going into new environments where there are changes to food, clothing, and language, what are your thoughts?
 - ii) *Values*: Some parents are worried about changing values and some are not worried, what do you think?
 - iii) *Identifications*: You said you consider yourself *Latine*, what do you think about *your student* saying the same about themselves?
 - iv) *Acculturative Stress*: Being *Latine* is a positive thing, but sometimes there are challenges at *college.* What do you think?
- C) Tell me how relationships have changed or stayed the same with *student name* at *college*?
 - v) *Microsystem*
 - (1) What about your relationship with *student's name*?
 - (2) What about other relationships, if any, that are changing?
 - vi) *Mesosystem*
 - (1) How would you describe your relationship with *college*?
 - (2) How does your relationship with *your student* influence their relationship with *college*?
 - vii) *Exosystem*
 - (1) What do you think about *student* being in college changing anything else for you, for example, in your workplace or somewhere else?
 - viii) *Macrosystem*
 - (1) *So we talked a little bit about being *Latine,* what do you think about other social or cultural factors, for example laws or immigration systems, affecting *your student*.*
 - ix) *Chronosystem*:
 - (1) *What about major events that you are concerned about with *student* at *college*?*
- 2) Is there anything else about *student* being in college you would like to add to help me understand your experiences?

Español (Spanish)

- 1) Hábleme acerca de cómo se siente que *nombre del estudiante* [* = use los datos específicos de la encuesta] vaya a la universidad.
 - i) *Exploración de la identidad*: Los estudiantes están descubriendo quiénes son y qué les gusta como personas, ¿cómo es eso para usted como padre/madre?
 - ii) *Inestabilidad*: Hay muchos cambios que ocurren cuando van a la universidad, ¿cómo es eso para usted como padre/madre?
 - iii) *Enfoque en sí mismo/a*: Algunas personas dicen que los estudiantes son egoístas, en especial cuando toman decisiones, durante esta etapa, ¿qué opina usted?
 - iv) *Sentirse en un punto intermedio*: Hábleme sobre su experiencia con el cambio de *nombre del estudiante* de adolescente a adulto.
 - v) *Posibilidades*: Ahora que los estudiantes tienen tantas opciones, ¿cómo es ser un padre/una madre de un *estudiante* que tiene tantas opciones?
- B) Algunas personas piensan que la universidad es diferente cuando eres latine, ¿cómo cree que esto marca una diferencia?
 - i. *Prácticas*: El *estudiante* entra en un nuevo ambiente donde hay cambios en la comida, la ropa y el idioma, ¿qué piensa al respecto?
 - ii. *Valores*: Algunos padres/madres se preocupan por los cambios en los valores y otros no se preocupan, ¿qué opina usted?
 - iii. *Identidades*: Usted dijo que se considera *latine*, ¿qué opina de que *su estudiante* se identifique de esa manera?
 - iv. *Estrés de aculturación*: Ser *latine* es algo positivo, pero a veces existen retos en la *universidad*. ¿Qué opina?
- C) ¿Cuénteme sobre cómo las relaciones con *nombre del estudiante* han cambiado o permanecido igual desde que está en la universidad?
 - i) *Microsistema*
 - (1) ¿Cómo es su relación con *nombre del estudiante*?
 - (2) ¿Hay alguna otra relación que esté cambiando?
 - ii) *Mesosistema*
 - (1) ¿Cómo describiría su relación con la *universidad*?
 - (2) ¿Cómo su relación con *su estudiante* influye en la relación del estudiante con la *universidad*?
 - iii) *Exosistema*
 - (1) ¿Qué opina de que el hecho de que el *estudiante* esté en la universidad pueda cambiar otra cosa para usted, por ejemplo, en su lugar de trabajo o en otro lugar?
 - iv) *Macrosistema*
 - (1) *Hablamos un poco sobre ser *latine*, ¿qué opina sobre otros factores sociales o culturales, por ejemplo, leyes o sistemas de inmigración que afectan a *su estudiante*?*
 - v) *Cronosistema*:
 - (1) ¿Le preocupa algún evento importante relacionado con que su estudiante esté en la universidad?
- 2) ¿Hay algo más relacionado con que su estudiante esté en la universidad que le gustaría añadir para ayudarme a comprender mejor sus experiencias?

Appendix B: Participant Quotes

Theme	Original Spanish	English Translation
Parent Perspective on Role	“Los valores están en la casa hija. Te digo que yo siempre he estado hablando con ellos. O sea, yo siempre les pongo los pies en la tierra, O sea, pisan la tierra, porque aquí siempre van a estar.”	“Values are in the home, daughter. I tell you that I have always been talking to them. I mean, I always keep them grounded. I mean, they have their feet on the ground, because this is where they will always be.”
Direct changes in parent life due to student-school relationship	“Pues cambió para mí porque si yo era responsable cuando él entró a la universidad o antes de que entrara tenía que ser más responsable...extra responsable porque ese era mi trabajo que económicamente no le faltara nada a él para que pudiera acabar sus estudios. Entonces de ese lado, cambió mi parte... en no relajarme y echarle ganas en el trabajo para que él estuviera bien y acabe sus estudios.”	“Well, things changed for me because if I was responsible when he started university, or even before he started, I had to be even more responsible... extra responsible because that was my job, to make sure he didn't lack anything financially so he could finish his studies. So, on that side, my part changed... in not relaxing and putting in extra effort at work so that he would be okay and finish his studies.”
Parents Feeling in Between	“Y ahorita, ya está así, pero todavía por recibir ella para tomar decisiones, todavía me habla y me dice, “Me invitaron a una fiesta. Como ves ma. ¿Me puedo ir o no me puedo ir? Y yo le digo, “Mira yo queriendo, te digo que no. Pero tú tienes que tomar la decisión tuya, hija, lo bueno y lo malo eres tú. Tú eres la que toma la decisión de lo bueno y lo malo.” Puedes ir a la fiesta, puedes ver, pero no es obligatorio que tomes que fumes o hagas cosas que no quieras hacer.”	“And right now, that's how things are, but she still turns to me when she needs to make decisions; she'll still call and say, 'I've been invited to a party. What do you think, Mom? Can I go or not?' And I tell her, 'Look, if it were up to me, I'd say no. But you have to make your own decision, daughter, you're the one who has to weigh the good and the bad. You're the one who decides what's right and what's wrong.' You can go to the party, you can look around, but you aren't obligated to drink or smoke or do things you don't want to do.”

Parent Values vs. Student Emerging Adult Development	“Después a los chicos meses, pues me enteré de que los muchachos desgraciadamente no siguieron, se salieron. Entonces, de ese lado sí me da tristeza porque uno quisiera ver que todos acaben sus estudios. Pero sí, es bien difícil. También la verdad es bien difícil para los papás. Y como papá, pues, nos toca más que apoyarlos porque nadie lo sabe más que los papás que tienen los chicos en la universidad. Porque sí, es bien difícil.”	"After a few months, I found out that the boys unfortunately did not continue, they dropped out. So, on that side it does make me sad because one would like to see everyone finish their studies. But yes, it is very difficult. The truth is also very difficult for the parents. And as a father, well, it is more of our responsibility to support them because no one knows it more than the parents who have the children in the university. Because yes, it is very difficult."
Emerging Adult Development	“Sí, pues yo creo que sí, es...A veces uno, ellos quieren uno lo mejor para ustedes, ¿verdad? Entonces, viendo cómo uno sufre, ¿por qué no decirles a ellos? Ustedes tienen las oportunidades que uno no tiene y que si las saben aprovechar, les va a ir bien en la vida.”	“Yes, well I think so, it’s... Sometimes you want the best for yourself, right? So, seeing how you suffer, why not tell them? You have opportunities that I don’t have, and if you know how to take advantage of them, you’ll do well in life.”
Systemic Worries and Latine Identity	“Ahorita sí, me preocupa como, pues...Cómo están las cosas ahorita de la economía. Las leyes de este gobierno. Tanta migración por todos lados. Pues le digo: cárgate, tu pasaporte cárgate, lo que sea, porque, pues es latino y uno no sabe. Pues si da miedo.”	“Right now, yes, I’m worried about how, well... How things are right now with the economy. The laws of this government. So much migration everywhere. So I tell him: take your passport, take whatever you need, because, well, he’s Latino and you never know. It’s scary.”
Systemic Worries and Latine Identity	“...siempre tiene que poner a Dios por delante para que te vayan bien las cosas.”	“...you always have to put God first so that things go well for you.”

Disconnection between Parent-School	Pues yo nada más fui cuando fue el open house. Pues lo poquito que yo entendía y lo poquito que me interpretaba *student's name*. Entonces, pues no he estado muy, muy, muy...Cómo se dice... informada.	Well, I only went during the open house. So, it was just the little bit I understood and the little bit *student's name* interpreted for me. So, I haven't been very... how should I put it... well-informed.
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