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Latina/o Students' Perceptions of Academic Self-Confidence in Community College Experiences

Sara Lenore Pierce
Walden University

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Sara Lenore Pierce

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Walden University

2020

Abstract

Latina/o Students' Perceptions of Academic Self-Confidence in Community College

Experiences

by

Sara Lenore Pierce

MA, Sacramento State, 2005

BA, Westmont College, 2001

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

May 2020

Abstract

The low completion rates of Latina/o community college (CC) students continue to be a problem in the landscape of higher education both in California and across the United States. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological research was to describe and better understand the lived experiences of Latina/o CC students and their perceptions of the role that academic self-confidence plays in their degree completion. Delgado and Stefancic's critical race theory provided the conceptual framework that guided this study. The research questions were aimed at probing the experiences of CC Latina/o students to describe their perceptions of the potential role academic self-confidence may play in degree completion. The study included interviews of 6 Latina/o students who succeeded and graduated at the local college and a focus group with 4 current students at the same institution. Data were analyzed using the Colaizzi method of phenomenological interpretation that depends on rich, in-depth first-person interviews. Findings from this study included five overall themes that were found to positively influence the students' perceptions of academic self-confidence and served to create a description of the phenomenon as it is defined by Latina/o CC students. The five themes that resulted from this study are (a) support, (b) failure, (c) familial and cultural alliance, (d) motivation to disempower stereotypes, and (e) intrinsic motivation and growth mindset. The anticipated positive change implications of this study are that a better understanding of the lived experiences of Latina/o students may contribute to planning for policies and procedures that could improve equity in the CC experience.

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Dedication

This capstone is dedicated to my mother, Susan Baker. From the very beginning of my journey on this Earth, I know that my zest for life has been intense. I am constantly in a state of pushing forward, doing more, reaching up, and achieving more. This study is dedicated to you, Mom, who never told me no, never told me that it was enough, never told me that I needed to slow down. You have always encouraged me to reach for my dreams and goals and push hard, even if you may not have understood why I wanted to do so.

Thank you for watching my kids while I worked through this program, asking me incessantly how it was going, helping me monetarily, and not taking offense when I was short and abrupt with you. Thank you for your constant support, your unwavering love, and for allowing me to discover who I am without reserve. Thank you for showing me the importance and for giving me the courage to speak up for those that need my voice because their voice cannot be heard. I hope I have made you proud. You are my hero, and this is for you.

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Lastly, I would like to thank my grandmother, Mimi, who is no longer on this Earth. She instilled in me at a very young age, the importance of how education and justice work harmoniously with one another to create a more balanced world. I hope she is smiling down and sees that our family's legacy of combating injustices and dismantling systems that perpetuate inequity is still alive and well in our family.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The low completion rates for Latina/o students attending community college (CC) are of concern both at local and national levels in the United States. The disparity of completion rates for Latina/o CC students leads to this study and provides an avenue for social change. Research has illustrated that, of the students who began their educational journey at a CC in 2012, only an average of 39% completed a degree within 6 years (Shapiro et al., 2018). Additionally, the same study indicated that the Latina/o CC student population only completed at a level of 36% in 6 years, whereas 48% of white students completed their CC degree in those same 6 years (Shapiro et al., 2018).

The timeliness of this study originates from the increase in Latina/o students in the CC sector and their failure to demonstrate equitable degree attainment (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). A primary mission of the California CC system (CCC) is to improve economic growth and global competitiveness through education (California Education Code, 1999). The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological research was to describe and better understand the lived experiences of Latina/o CC students and their perceptions of the role that academic self-confidence plays in their degree completion. Chapter 1 includes the following sections: (a) Introduction; (b) Background; (c) Problem Statement; (d) Purpose of this Study; (e) Research Questions; (f) Conceptual Framework; (g) Nature of the study; (h) Definitions of Terms; (i) Assumptions; (j) Scope and Delimitations; (k) Limitations; (l) Significance; and (m) Summary.

Background

The Latino Academic Transfer and Institutional Degree Opportunities (LATIDO) Roundtable highlighted that when compared to other minority groups, Latinas/os are the fastest-growing minority group of college enrollees in the state of California (Cerna & Beal, 2018). In the academic year 2018-19, Latinas/os represented 46.13% of the total population of students in the California Community College (CCC) system (CCC Chancellor's Office, 2019). As this number rapidly approaches majority, Crisp, Taggart, and Nora (2015) also reflected that a steady increase of Latina/o students in CC institutions has a projection to grow to one fourth of the total population by 2050. These statistics demonstrate the importance of continuing to research and improve Latina/o achievement levels in the CC sector. As the steady growth in numbers is substantial for the Latina/o CC population, attention has also been directed to the fact that the equity gap is narrowing slowly. However, researchers have argued that as the completion rates are increasing for Latina/o students of higher education, this gradual increase does not parallel the significant growth in Latina/o demographics in the same sector (Huber, Vélez, & Solórzano, 2014). In sum, colleges must produce outcome percentages of completion at a rate that, at a minimum, mirrors the demographic growth rate. The disproportion of these rates is a challenge to remedy, and the need to find a solution to the problem supports the research of this study.

The most recent data illustrate a widespread gap in educational outcomes for Latina/o students and their non-Hispanic counterparts at the CC level (CCC Chancellor's Office, n.d.). Additionally, although Latina/o students are attending higher institutions at

higher rates, they are dropping out at a higher percentage rate than any other ethnic group in the United States (Kouyoumdjian, Guzmán, Garcia, & Talavera-Bustillos, 2017).

Although scrutiny of this topic is increasing, it is important to recognize that “historically community colleges’ organizational behavior tends to mirror social and economic change rather than leading it” (Levin & Kater, 2013, p. 16). As Felix and Castro (2018) echoed, CCs must address these inequities given their unique and powerful position in the landscape of higher education as open-access institutions. The statistics about Latina/o students in higher education lend urgency to studying the topic of degree completion and students’ perceived self-confidence.

Moreover, although many factors have been correlated with Latina/o degree attainment, recent research recommends additional study of the attribute of academic self-confidence and its effect on CC degree completion (Crisp et al., 2015). This research is an attempt to fill the gap in practice and address the lack of normed institutional practices to understand better the role of self-confidence in Latina/o experiences in the focus CC. The gap in practice for this study is the lack of understanding of what students perceive to be support structures that might enable their self-confidence. The need for this study was both imminent and necessary in order to inform policy and procedures at the local setting. It will also help address the gap in practice at the focus college. Additionally, this study can contribute to the existing body of literature on Latina/o CC achievement and perhaps help improve CC completion rates through a better understanding of Latina/o students’ perceptions of degree attainment and its relation to academic self-confidence.

Problem Statement

The low degree completion rates for CC Latina/o students continue to be a concern in both the CCC and national CC systems. This concern is heightened by the fact that Latina/o students' CC completion rates are not equitable when compared to their non-Hispanic counterparts. The staggering statistics about Latina/o students in higher education lend urgency to studying the topic of degree completion. A 2013 study by NASDAQ indicated that between 2008 and 2019, Latina/o CCC students would increase by 28% due to workforce demands, while White and Black student demand is expected to fall slightly (Chen, 2017). Felix and Castro (2018) described further that in 1992 the Latina/o attendance rate at CCs was 19%; however, it increased to 43% in 2015. There is no debate concerning the overwhelming diverse growth that CCs continue to face.

Nevertheless, González (2015) argued that trends reveal a “de facto segregated system of higher education” and that CCs have the lowest completion rates of all institutions of higher education in that only 38% of students who begin an associate's degree at a CC complete in a 6-year time period (p. 72). This “segregated system” is in direct opposition with the CC mission of open access and illustrates another reason why this study was necessary. The drastic increase of Latina/o students in the CC sector, accompanied by the fact that Latina/o students are failing to complete their degrees on an equitable timeline with non-Latina/o students, illuminates the value and timeliness of this study.

Methods and protocols to address CCC Latina/o students' lower completion rates differ according to the literature in myriad ways, with a system-wide lack of normative

practices. Currently, CCs react to the inequitable educational system by responding to state-led initiatives, funding formulas, and mandated equity planning strategies (Felix & Castro, 2018). However, a systematic review from 2015 documented multiple predictors of success and completion to lessen the disparity of attainment for Latina/o students (Crisp et al., 2015). Crisp et al. (2015) highlighted that different factors affected Latina/o students that would ultimately yield better educational outcomes. The following contributors emerged from Crisp et al.'s study: (a) sociocultural characteristics; (b) academic self-confidence; (c) beliefs; (d) pre-college academic experiences; (e) college experiences; (f) internal motivation and commitment; (g) interactions with supportive individuals; (h) perceptions of the campus climate/environment and college experiences; and (j) institutional characteristics. Nevertheless, Crisp et al. suggested that although academic self-confidence led toward better grades, persistence, and even degree completion "it remains unclear what policies and practices might serve to support/develop students' motivation and confidence" (Crisp et al., 2015, p. 263). This previously mentioned finding leads to the justification of this study and the impetus to address the gap in practice at the local setting.

In this research study, I use the terms *Hispanic* and *Latina/o* interchangeably. Benson (2014) stated that although the U.S. Bureau of the Census used the term *Hispanic*, a survey from the Pew Hispanic Center conducted in 2011 revealed that half of the participants did not care whether they were identified with the term Latino or Hispanic. The U.S. federal government, as well as Hispanic research of the Pew Research Center, a nonpartisan fact think tank, uses the terms interchangeably (Lopez, 2013). The

term *Latina/o* refers specifically in current research to describe those of Latin descent, in comparison with *Hispanic*, that more aptly applies to those from Spanish origin.

Nevertheless, many statistics locally and nationally use the term *Hispanic* to document their research. Some prominent leaders in research for *Latina/o* studies include the Pew Research Center and the National Latino Research Center (NLRC), both of which use the term *Latina/o* instead of *Hispanic*. This study more dominantly used *Latina/o* to remain consistent with the leaders of research in the field. Lastly, I will use the term *Latina/o* rather than *Latino/s* to overtly note that women and men are both included in this study. Izirry (2012) attested to the problematic nature of identifying this group by one homogenous term. Although *Latina/o* is used as one consistent term in this capstone, in order to remain consistent with the research that has preceded it, acknowledgment of the term shows the limitation that it may not adequately represent all those who self-identify as *Hispanic* or *Latina/o* both in terms of gender and race.

Evidence of Problem at the Local Level

The problem addressed in this study is that *Latina/o* students' CC completion rates are not equitable when compared to their non-*Hispanic* counterparts. The school of focus is a small, rural CC in California. The local research at the focus CC for this study evidences lower degree attainment for *Latina/o* students compared to non-*Hispanic* students. Table 1 illustrates the steady growth of the *Latina/o* student demographics when compared to non-*Hispanic/White* students in the prior 5-year period. This steady increase in demographics supports the national projections mentioned previously.

Table 1

Local CC Demographics

Academic year	Hispanic	White
2013-14	23.3%	63.5%
2014-15	23.1%	61.4%
2015-16	24.9%	58.7%
2016-17	25.5%	57.0%
2017-18	25.8%	53.3%

Note. From “Local CC Research and Reports” by Local CC Fact Book, 2017-18 (<http://www.ltcc.edu/about/institutional-effectiveness/reports.php>). In the public domain.

The percentage of Latina/o students at the local CC has increased year over year. However, the course completion rates overall in distance education and face-to-face courses remain lower than the rates for non-Hispanic students. Successful course completion rates reflect courses that students pass with a C or higher. If students are not successful from course to course, their degree completion rates in turn suffer. Table 2 highlights the varying levels of completion by academic year in distance education and face-to-face courses, comparing non-Hispanic/White students and Hispanic students in the past 5-year period.

Table 2

Course Success Rates for Distance Education (DE) and Face-to-Face Courses (F2F)

Academic year	Hispanic DE	Hispanic F2F	White DE	White F2F
2013-14	75%	79%	79%	86%
2014-15	73%	82%	82%	85%
2015-16	76%	79%	84%	87%
2016-17	74%	79%	84%	87%
2017-18	80%	80%	85%	88%

Note. From “Local CC Research and Reports” by Local CC Fact Book, 2017-18 (<http://www.ltcc.edu/about/institutional-effectiveness/reports.php>). In the public domain.

Table 2 shows that both groups improved from year to year, yet the inequitable outcomes of completion rates across both modalities, when comparing Hispanic and White students, persisted.

The large demographic increase of the Latina/o student population and lower individual course completion rates at the focus CC led to the investigation of Latina/o CC student's overall degree completion rates. Completion rates reflect Latina/o students who completed a degree, certificate, or transfer-related outcome from 2011-12 to 2016-17. The cohort data from these 6 years record Hispanic completion rates of 34.1%. On the other hand, non-Hispanic completion rates reached 44.3%. The difference in the percentage of degree attainment of negative 10.2 points illustrates the vastly inequitable trends recorded for Latina/o students at the focus CC in these 6 years (Student Success Scorecard, 2018). The local data of degree attainment at the focus college mirrors the national data presented in the next section.

Evidence of Problem at the National Level

Similarly, the CC Latina/o attainment levels at the national level are disparate when compared to their counterparts. The National Center for Educational Statistics illustrated that although the numbers have been increasing for educational associate degree attainment for Latina/o students, they still lag far behind their White counterparts. Cerna and Beal (2018) argued for a proactive approach to combat the disparity: “As more Latinos pursue postsecondary education, altering the demographic complexion of the student body at many California colleges, these institutions must develop methods that effectively support Latino students academically and culturally” (p. 26). Table 3

illustrates the most recent data that shows the disparity of degrees conferred to Hispanic students of U.S. citizenship and of nonresident status nationally.

Table 3

Associates Degrees Conferred by Postsecondary Institutions in the United States

Academic year	Hispanic AA degrees conferred nationally	Percentage distribution of Hispanic degrees conferred nationally	White AA degrees conferred nationally	Percentage distribution of White degrees conferred nationally
2010-11	126,297	13.6%	604,745	65.2%
2011-12	151,807	15.1%	635,755	63.3%
2012-13	157,989	15.9%	617,308	62.3%
2013-14	168,106	17.0%	601,959	60.9%
2014-15	180,515	18.1%	590,390	59.3%

Note. AA = Associate of Arts. From “Associate’s degrees conferred by postsecondary institutions, by race/ethnicity and sex of student: Selected years, 1976-77 through 2014-15” by National Center for Education Statistics, 2014-15 (https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d16/tables/dt16_321.20.asp?current=yes). In the public domain.

As Table 3 illustrates, Associate of Arts (AA) degree attainment in the United States has been slowly increasing for Hispanics at the national level. Still, these numbers do not mirror the significant demographic growth in Hispanic students attending CCs. The difference in conferred degrees illustrates the importance of this study. Both locally and nationally, researchers recognize this problem as critical.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological research was to describe and better understand the lived experiences of Latina/o CC students and their perceptions of the role that academic self-confidence plays in their degree completion. The problem for

research in this study is that Latina/o students' completion rates are not equitable compared to non-Hispanic counterparts. Among others, one attribute found to increase student's degree attainment is Latina/o students' higher levels of academic self-confidence. Student responses will drive dialogue for how CCs may improve degree completion outcomes. The purpose of this research aligns to address ways to respond to the stated problem: Latina/o students do not share comparable completion rates when compared to their White counterparts. The current landscape of research illustrates that academic self-confidence is a known indicator of persistence, success, and completion; however, research is lacking about how institutions can increase academic self-confidence in students at the undergraduate level (Crisp et al., 2015). Crisp et al. (2015) synthesized 190 empirical publications from a systematic review and purported that academic self-confidence has been successfully linked to positive outcomes for Latina/o students. The authors stated, "Furthermore, a good amount of quantitative evidence was found linking measures of students' academic self-confidence or self-efficacy to course failure, grades, persistence decisions, and degree completion" (p. 256). This finding directly authenticated the need for this study. Also, Felix et al. (2018) stated, "...the planning process could benefit by narrowing the scope of proposed activities to deliberately and strategically address the specific student groups facing gaps in educational outcomes" (p. 26-27). Lastly, Rodríguez and Oseguera (2015) emphasized that institutional culture can have dramatic effects on graduation rates, from curriculum design to educational policy. The results of this study will inform the strategic planning process at the local CC on practices and procedures that positively affect the academic

self-confidence of Latina/o students and ultimately help narrow the disparity Latina/o students are facing. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological research is to describe and better understand the lived experiences of Latina/o CC students and their perceptions of the role that academic self-confidence plays in their degree completion.

Research Questions

The problem under investigation is one of both theoretical and academic nature. Latina/o CC students experience lower completion rates when compared to their non-Hispanic counterparts. In theory, the CC systems state that open access is integral to the mission of the institutions. Still, the unrestricted open accessibility may be providing shortcomings for underrepresented groups (Villicaña, 2017). As CCs react to the disproportionate outcomes differently for Latina/o students in California, I chose to focus this study on the lives of the students and how they respond to their perceptions that academic self-confidence may have played in their educational experiences. The design and nature of the research question for this study is overarching. Its design comes from an intent to describe and better understand Latina/o CC students and their perceptions of the role that academic self-confidence plays in their degree completion. The guiding research question for this study is the following: What are the lived experiences of Latina/o students at the local community college and their perceptions surrounding academic self-confidence?

The sub-questions aim to describe further and understand the guiding research question:

- SQ1: What positive experiences support the CC student's concept of academic self-confidence?
- SQ2: What negative experiences hinder the CC student's concept of academic self-confidence?

Conceptual Framework

The foundational conceptual framework for this study originated from John Horkheimer's critical theory presented in the 1930s. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* defines critical theory as a challenge to the status quo, which originated in sociology and political philosophy, as the ways of using inquiry to decrease human dominance and increase human freedom for all (Bohman, 2005). In practice, this theory adheres to the notion that as researchers, we must be reflective after an inquiry to seek liberation for all humans and create a world that responds to all needs. Gutek (2010) purported that unequal conditions are passed on generationally to satisfy the needs of the dominant class. Critical theory is best understood with the alignment of other approaches. For this particular study, critical race theory (CRT) characterizes the conceptual framework.

CRT uses the basic tenets of critical theory to define society and culture and its relationship to race, power, and law. It is a theory that aims to resolve the struggle of alleviating racial injustices in a system that maintains these injustices as part of the social hierarchies. Delgado and Stefancic (2013) explained further:

Our social world, with its rules, practices, and assignments of prestige and power, is not fixed; rather, we construct with its words, stories, and silence. But we need

not acquiesce in arrangements that are unfair and one-sided. By writing and speaking against them, we may hope to contribute to a better, fairer world. (p. 3)

The authors attest to the value and importance of constructing and re-telling our narratives to alleviate the strata of power. By using CRT as the conceptual framework, the phenomenological research aims to empower the narratives and experiences of the Latina/o CC students and raise awareness of these systems to dismantle them ultimately. Other notable research studies on achievement gaps of marginalized populations have also used CRT as a framework in the research of Latina/o students (Lechuga-Pena, & Lechuga, 2018; Von Robertson, Bravo, & Chaney, 2016). The primary goal of CRT is to build an actual multicultural society and empower the marginalized, thus abolishing the segregated systems we experience in higher education and society at large. This research aims to bring about the social change of more equitable experiences for Latina/o students in CCs. The conceptual framework of this study directly supports the anticipated social change of understanding the lived experiences of our students to influence policy and procedures at the focus CC.

In research, the theories with which we align ourselves are influenced by the worldview or paradigms that resonate with us; the paradigms are then related closely with the approaches to inquiry that we choose (Burkholder & Burbank, 2016). By using CRT, I investigated perceived inequities and planned to contribute to positive social change. CRT will be discussed more thoroughly in Chapter 2.

Nature of the Study

The problem under investigation in this study is the low completion rates of Latina/o students at the CC level. To understand CC students' perceptions of the phenomenon of academic self-confidence and its possible role in degree completion, I conducted a phenomenological research study. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological research was to describe and better understand the lived experiences of Latina/o CC students and their perceptions of the role that academic self-confidence plays in their degree completion. Lester (1999) stated that the purpose of phenomenological research is to study participants' perceptions of a phenomenon and to identify it by those who experience it. Similarly, according to Christensen, Johnson, and Turner (2010), the primary purpose of a phenomenological study is to expound upon the meaning and structure of the lived experiences of a group of people with regard to a specific phenomenon.

Additionally, Christensen, Johnson, and Turner (2010) stated that illuminating the essence of the phenomenon is another key objective. Beginning with a phenomenon instead of a theory, phenomenology's founder, Moustakas (1994), argued that lived experiences and behavior are intertwined, and that research should focus on the wholeness of experiences, searching for its essence. Phenomenology then branches off into multiple approaches for the conduction of research. This study adheres to lifeworld research, an approach that has drawn from aspects of both descriptive and interpretive approaches. Chapter 3 will expand upon this method's approach.

In this study, I used a phenomenological qualitative design and in-depth interviews with Latina/o students to search for wholeness and essential themes of the phenomenon to understand students' perceptions of academic self-confidence in their CC experiences. Furthermore, a basic tenet of phenomenological research is the process of bridling one's judgments. Bridling is a derivative from the initial concept of bracketing, developed by Moustakas (1994). Bracketing or epoché requires the identification of biases, ideas, and prejudgments to be acknowledged before researching the phenomenon so that a more clear consciousness may be achieved (Moustakas, 1994). On the contrary, Dahlberg, a researcher tethered to lifeworld research, rejected the notion of bracketing one's judgments and adheres to a state of bridling them instead. Bridling, in opposition, suggests that it is impossible to remove our biases, ideas, and prejudgments from consciousness. In turn, we must loosen our thoughts and ideas to understand how the phenomenon emerges in concert with the slackened reflections of our perceptions (Dahlberg, 2006). For this research, as a phenomenologist, it was critical for me to bridle my judgments and ideas of the world to reflect upon the phenomenon as a whole and evaluate the overall wholeness of the phenomenon. Without adherence to bridling, the significance and authenticity of the interviews would have been lost, thus devaluing the richness and depth of the study. As a practitioner-researcher and as the instrument of the research, I needed to recognize prejudgments and allow the interview to accrue as much data as possible. This aspect is supported by the conceptual framework of this study, CRT, which states we must be reflective of our world to alleviate the racial injustices that we experience.

Additionally, phenomenology helps to unsilence the nontraditional students to allow the educational systems to be questioned. In line with phenomenological methodology, I interviewed students at the local CC to inform this research with responses to open-ended questions. Consistent with the phenomenological study, the research questions have both social meaning and personal significance, as Moustakas (1994) suggested. As the researcher and interviewer, I bridled (see Vagle, 2016) my preconceived notions and biases and reacted and coded each interview using the Colaizzi (1978) method. Additionally, I kept a reflective research journal throughout my study to reflect upon my ongoing thoughts and insights to ensure that my biases and reflections were explicitly categorized. Phenomenological interviewing supported by CRT allows for the researcher to extract descriptive lived experiences to help alleviate the hierarchies of power and privilege.

I conducted thorough 60- to 90-minute interviews with six students, at two different times at least a week apart. The first interview focused on the life history of the student, and the second investigated the details of the experiences and explored the meaning behind them (see Seidman, 2013). Latina/o students who successfully graduated with an AA degree between 2011-2012 and 2016-2017, the 6-year cohort defined by the data, were the students recruited for the interview process. Secondly, I conducted a focus group that consisted of six current students with good academic standing (3.0 or higher) at the focus CC. Krueger and Casey (2015) suggested that four to eight participants are ideal for a focus group. Snowball or chain sampling was used so that the focus of inquiry would yield rich data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Once I identified two students for the focus

group, they were asked for recommendations to identify other students who could provide rich data of the current student experience. This study followed the Colaizzi-style method of coding, which extracts significant statements, formulates meaning, clusters them into themes, and ultimately creates a description of the phenomenon (Brooks, 2015). Every statement relevant to the topic carried equal value when coding took place (Moustakas, 1994). After I analyzed the data, common themes emerged. Ultimately, these clustered themes were organized into textural descriptions of the experiences seeking to define and describe the phenomenon as explained by the students (Moustakas, 1994). Each interviewee was assigned a pseudonym to give privacy to the participants and maintain their anonymity. Finally, I aggregated the data in my final writing to protect the individuals' identities.

Definitions of Terms

Latina/o: A term used interchangeably with *Hispanic* to refer to a self-identified group of people that pertain to Latino or Spanish descent (Encyclopedia Britannica, n.d.).

Distance education: A modality of instruction that has a physical separation of students and teachers during instruction where courses are delivered via the Internet (National Education Association, n.d.).

Hispanic serving institution: An institution of higher education that reports over 25% Latina/o enrollment (Excelencia in Education, 2017).

Assumptions

The main assumption of this study was that the participants were truthful and honest in their interviews. The choice of phenomenological interviewing suggests that by

evaluating the lived experiences, one shall learn about the phenomena. Only through accurate responses will this research be valuable. Also, there was an assumption that all participants would be able to commit to the entire set of interview processes.

Scope and Delimitations

As a delimitation, only six students were interviewed in depth on two separate occasions, and one focus group of four students was conducted. Secondly, only students self-identified as Latina/o were interviewed for this study; other demographic groups were not interviewed. The scope of this study was limited to the rural local CC. The investigation focused on the lived shared experiences of these CC students about their experiences with academic self-confidence. Other predictive attributes for Latina/o students that have been documented were not researched in this study. In addition, the investigation of other identifying factors related to the students, such as gender, first generational status, ethnicity and race, and income, were neither identified nor evaluated in this study. Nevertheless, the outcomes of this study provide an avenue for the local CC to react to the conclusions/results.

Limitations

The phenomenological research conducted for this study is not generalizable to all CCs due to the limited number of interviewed participants and the fact that only one CC is used for this research. In addition, there was only one rural setting used in this research. Lastly, it is noted that the lived experiences of the participants for the in-depth interviews and focus groups in this study may not be generalizable to the overall Latina/o

CC population. All of my potential biases as the researcher were documented and minimized through the process of bridling.

Significance

The significance of this study has practical, theoretical, and empirical implications. It is feasible due to the relevance it carries in the current demographic makeup of the focus student population. Theoretically, this study is significant because the CC system strives to provide an equitable education to its community, minimizing the achievement disparity. The results of this study may serve to inform other CC institutional policies and practices. CRT can provide a rich foundation for this study, seeking a way to lessen the inequities experienced in the realm of higher education. The uniqueness of this study serves to yield better understanding of the gap in practice, as it provides research to inform policy and procedures at the local CC to address inequity levels of degree attainment for Latina/o students. This study also contains a practical value. The observed lived experiences of the participants will inform how the local CC operates to react to student needs around academic self-confidence.

Additionally, another unique aspect is to present the ideas of the students in the local setting to the Board of Trustees at the focus college. This study's focus in the CC environment continues research on one of the most sensitive and significant subpopulations of students. This original contribution serves to inform CCs to understand the academic self-confidence attributes of Latina/o students and the effective practices that may help to narrow the equity gap.

Paulo Freire (2000) described how the current systems and structures maintain oppression. In line with phenomenology, he suggested that students and educators co-intent on reality to know it thoroughly, but also ultimately re-create the knowledge and become re-creators of it (Freire, 2000). As a key agent in the participation of honest inquiry, I seek to rectify the inequities and systems of oppression that surround us. Bell hooks (2000) echoed the sentiments of Freire, stating, “Everything we do in life is rooted in theory. Whether we consciously explore the reasons we have a particular perspective or take a particular action, there is also an underlying system shaping thought and practice” (p. 19). Both hooks and Freire exemplify the justifications and significance as to why I chose to explore through CRT the lived experiences of Latina/o CC students seeking degree completion.

Summary

In Chapter 1, I presented the problem and purpose of this study. Most notably, the chapter features and documents the inequitable trends for Latina/o completion rates at the local and national CC level, the steady increase of Latina/o enrollees in the higher education sector, and the lack of research related to how the role of academic self-confidence may contribute to completion rates at the CC level. The topic of study, although researched thoroughly, reveals a gap in the body of literature when focusing upon the characteristic of academic self-confidence. The problem of this research thus informs the purpose, which is phenomenological and seeks to describe and understand the perceptions of the students’ lived experiences with academic self-confidence and how it can influence institutional practices and degree completion. Additionally, Chapter 1

included the research question, the methodology, definitions of terms, nature, assumptions, scope, limitations, and significance of the study. Chapter 2 will continue with the literature review and define more clearly the conceptual framework used for this study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The low completion rates of Latina/o CC students continue to be a problem in the landscape of higher education in both California and across the United States. Furthermore, Latina/o students' completion rates are not equitable compared to non-Hispanic counterparts, both locally and nationally. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological research was to describe and better understand the lived experiences of Latina/o CC students and their perceptions of the role that academic self-confidence plays in their degree completion. The body of literature evidences that academic self-confidence, when combined with other characteristics, may be a key indicator of academic achievement. Much recent literature has highlighted the value of academic self-confidence in relation to academic outcomes. Most notably, two systematic reviews of literature (Crisp et al., 2015; Manzano-Sanchez, Outley, Gonzalez, & Matarrita-Cascante, 2018) reflected upon the value of understanding characteristics of academically self-confident Latinas/os and how this can lead toward the understanding of more completed degrees. Chapter 2 includes both the literature research strategy used for this capstone and how the literature unifies with the conceptual framework. Lastly, a comprehensive, relevant, and authoritative inventory of literature is organized for moving forward. This literature review serves to provide the historical perspective of this topic and the foundation for which this research stands.

Literature Search Strategy

I searched a comprehensive and thorough list of databases and search engines for research related to CC, Latina/o student college completion, and student academic self-

confidence. The Walden library website was the primary source for literature retrieval for peer-reviewed articles related to the topic of study. Some primary databases used were the following: Education Source, SAGE Journals, and the Thoreau Multi-Database. Additionally, alerts were set up on Google Scholar, and suggested articles were collected from Mendeley, the website used to store relevant literature. The three dominant journals used for this research were *Community College Review*, the *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, and the *Journal of College Student Development*. Key search terms consisted of *Latino*, *Latinx*, *community college*, *higher education*, *critical race theory*, *equity*, *academic self-confidence*, *self-efficacy*, *achievement gap*, *critical race theory*, *phenomenology*, *persistence*, and *degree completion*. These terms were explored individually and together to create a methodological process that was systematic and comprehensive. Additionally, I scrutinized the reference lists of the key pieces of literature that define the foundation of this research. As the researcher, I feel that an appropriate level of saturation has been met.

Conceptual Framework

In this research, I use CRT as the conceptual framework and the foundation for the problem that Latina/o students' CC completion rates are not equitable when compared to their non-Hispanic counterparts. This framework is prominent in other studies on Latina/o degree attainment and is overtly utilized for its importance in creating equity in the educational landscape. The CRT framework and phenomenological methodology for this study are aligned closely and help to identify the common experiences or essences that could lead to dismantling the racist and oppressive systems in which we reside. This

conceptual framework is aimed not only at defining the past systems that represent the current situation, but also at considering solutions to lessen the disparity in achievement for Latina/o students.

Through the systemization of the body of research, there were two seminal researchers related to the topic of study. Crisp and Nora (2010; 2015) investigated the lived and perceived experiences of Latina/o students in the higher education landscape, and her systematic reviews and articles are notably revered as pivotal in the field. Secondly, Sáenz, García-Louis, Drake, and Guida (2018) are noteworthy in the field for their work in closing the educational gap for Latina/o students. Sáenz, Ponjuan, and Figueroa's 2016 book entitled *Ensuring the Success of Latino Males in Higher Education: A National Imperative* is referenced throughout the literature and referred to as a formative assessment of the landscape of this phenomenon. Although many dissertations and recent publications use CRT as the guiding framework for their research, only the most closely aligned and significant articles are reviewed in this study.

CRT is a commonplace framework in qualitative studies with Latinos and higher education. Garcia, López, and Vélez (2018) articulated how CRT has been vastly accepted as a framework in qualitative advanced research methodologies over the past 15 years. In the body of research on Latina/o higher education, various researchers have used CRT as the framework. Ladson-Billings and Tate's (1995) research validated the value of CRT in the higher education landscape. They stated, "The 'voice' component of critical race theory provides a way to communicate the experience and realities of the oppressed, a first step on the road to justice. As we attempt to make linkages between

critical race theory and education, we contend that the voice of people of color is required for a complete analysis of the educational system” (p. 58). These authors attested to the value and necessity of empowering the voiceless to bring light to their narratives. Patton (2016) elaborated further on the role of CRT in the higher education system by arguing that these institutions are culpable for maintaining racism and systematic oppression, but are also obligated to devise systems to disrupt and dismantle these systems of oppression through CRT. The connections above establish the motivation for choosing CRT to frame this educational study.

Studies in the CRT literature endorse how proponents of equity in higher education are using CRT. Lechuga-Pena and Lechuga (2018) used CRT to frame their study on Xicanisma/o and its intersectionality with education via storytelling and narrative to inform Latina/o success. Similarly, a qualitative study that explored the experiences of Latina/o students at predominantly White institutions adhered to CRT and Latino critical theory to frame its study. The research expounded upon how macroaggressions affect the students’ psychological, cultural, and social adjustment in college (Von Robertson et al., 2016). In line with the other studies that used a foundation of CRT to investigate Latina/o in higher education, Irizarry’s (2012) 3-year ethnographic study used CRT as the framework to understand the factors behind why Latina/o youth choose their paths of higher education. Lastly, Acevedo-Gil, Santos, Alonso, and Solórzano (2015) intensified the value of CRT as a framework by determining that the theoretical lens that CRT provides is not sufficient; they found that by creating a “critical race validating pedagogy,” it could help move students through the CC systems and in

turn have better outcomes (p. 107). This theory has morphed into a pedagogy, thus augmenting its worth and purpose in the landscape of higher education. Acevedo et al. (2015) elaborated on the ways to implement this critical race validating pedagogy.

As the scholars above attested, CRT grounds much of the existing body of research into how higher education and oppression intersect and interact. Gillborn (2015) emphasized the imperative to respond to the mainstream status quo by focusing on how inequity is sustained and created, and understanding and making sense of lived experiences by researching the personal biographies. The author further argued that “we must refuse the growing mainstream assertion that racism is irrelevant or even non-existent” (Gillborn, 2015, p. 284). This assertion values the intersectionality and alignment of CRT and phenomenology. As Leonardo (2005) aptly stated, critical race scholars “privilege the concept of race as the point of departure for critique, not the end of it” (p. xi). This study, like those that have come before it, used CRT as the foundation to unearth the systems that perpetuate the inequities in higher education.

In the body of research that precedes this study, researchers have explored many factors that predict persistence and completion for Latinas/os in higher education. Thus, the synthesizing of the research corroborates the significance of the following concepts in relation to persistence and completion: campus culture, faculty interactions, tutoring and/or mentoring, culturally relevant curriculum, student self-perception, family support, self-efficacy, and lastly, from which this study stems, the academic self-confidence of Latina/o students. The next sections explore the literature found for these combined characteristics and how this study ultimately focused on the educational self-confidence

attribute that may contribute to persistence and degree completion for Latina/o CC students. The literature review is organized into the following topical sections: Historical Background, Campus Culture, Faculty Interactions, Tutoring and Mentoring, Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, Student Self-Perception, Family Support and Cultural Connectedness, Self-efficacy, and Academic Self-Confidence.

Literature Review Related to Key Variables

The exploration and analysis of contributing factors that lead to success for Latina/o students' educational outcomes in higher education have been researched over the past few years. Presented in this study is an examination of current literature concerning Latina/o outcomes about the themes that are most applicable and relevant to the topic of this study. Factors that lead to degree completion for Latina/o CC students are a key topic of research and found in much of the literature. Although only suggestive, these attributes appear to lead to higher levels of degree completion. This literature review will identify key literature from the past 5 years and will summarize the historical background of low degree attainment, literature with similar methods and frameworks, previous studies related to the topic of Latina/o degree completion, and general conclusions revealed.

Throughout the literature, similar methodologies arose in studies that investigated the Latina/o CC student quest toward degree completion. Phenomenological studies included one on how successful CC Latina/o students transferred to Tier 1 universities (Harris, 2017). Unlike studies that have been conducted in a deficit mindset, Harris's study sought to investigate themes that determined successful outcomes through the

exploration of lived experiences to capture the essence of the phenomenon. Additionally, the documentation of the persistence trends of nontraditional undergraduate students who attended Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) was researched through phenomenological methods (Arbelo-Marrero & Milacci, 2016). Likewise, a study on the Latino brotherhood and its relationship to college persistence focused on six students in a phenomenological study (Estrada, Mejia, & Hufana, 2017). Lastly, one study was done on the lived experiences of first-generational Latina/o students and their intent to persist at 4-year HSI institutions (Vega, 2016). Although different in the focus of phenomena, academic journals have published a multitude of research that uses the method of phenomenology to document the perceptions of Latina/s students about how educational outcomes may be improved. Pérez II, a prominent researcher on Latina/o equity in education, has presented various research articles (e.g., Pérez II & Sáenz, 2017; Pérez II & Taylor, 2016) on how phenomenology encourages Latinos to express their voices. The basic ideas of CRT support the method of phenomenological investigation.

The problem and purpose of this study are also in alignment. Critical in nature, this study argues that as scholars, we must attest to the value of the narratives of the Latina/o CC student. One author stated, “if the educational system is a white, male, European creation, and we believe it should continue to be based on that form of culture, it is understandable that most students from other cultures fail within it, and those who succeed do so only at the cost of renouncing their identity” (Castells, 1999, p. 74). In a truly multicultural and diverse world, practitioner-researchers must adhere to the intrinsic value of CRT and break down these systems of inequitable power intersected with race.

Historical Background

The historical perspective of this topic is critically important to its analysis. The enrollment and persistence trends of the Latina/o student higher education population has been an increasingly worthy topic over the past several years. As college enrollment showed a 25% increase in the college sector for Latinas/os from 2010-2016, more attention has shifted toward how success is measured for this population (Excelencia in Education, 2018). The rate in which Latina/o students are enrolling, particularly at the CC level, does not reflect degree attainment and completion rates, especially in California (Huber et al., 2014). Moreover, although student equity plans propose to address the lack of equity in persistence and completion, the plans lack targeted activities that will ultimately help Latino students complete (Feliz & Castro, 2018). Dowd and Bensimon (2015) further argued that without specific attention given to targeted groups where institutions invest themselves to be inquiry scholars toward equity mindedness, the equity gaps would persist even if overall outcomes improve.

Additionally, the early research conducted by Crisp and Nora (2010) revealed significant predictors of Latina/o CC student persistence and completion in terms of developmental education. Through logistic regression, the authors evidenced that much of the research that preceded this study focused on Latina/o students at 4-year institutions. This study concluded that the characteristics and factors that influenced non-developmental students at the CC level were limited to parent educational levels and academic preparation in high school. Since 2010, key studies and research point to the necessity and timeliness of this research and outline multiple uncorrelated approaches

that may serve to strengthen the achievement of the Latina/o CC population. The next paragraphs point to the vast body of research as a foundation for this capstone.

Campus Culture

The themes of campus culture and a sense of belonging for Latina/o students show as a valuable factor of student success and completion at institutions of higher education. A welcoming campus culture environment is one that Latina/o students experience and perceive positively when in attending college. Studies confirmed that institutions need to ensure that a primary focus is held for Latina/o students concerning creating a campus that reflects their values and needs; the studies also validated that institutional culture must be structured in a way that positively supports the student experience (Arellys and Alberta, 2015; Johnson, Wasserman, Yildirim, & Yonai, 2014; Rodríguez, & Oseguera, 2015). Tinto's theory of integration is congruent with this predictor of success in creating campus environments that foster cultural engagement (Museus, Yi, & Saelua, 2017).

Additionally, Cerezo and Chang (2013) attested that college grade point average (GPA) is predicted not only by high school GPA but also with the connection with minority peers and cultural congruity. Similarly, a study that focused on CCs that are also HSIs illustrated the importance of students' perceptions of campus climate and capturing a racially diverse picture overall (Cuellar & Johnson-Ahorlu, 2016). Similarly, Sladek, Doane, Luecken, Gonzales, and Grimm (2020), in a very recent study, researched how the first year Latina/o university students reacted to differing supports for cultural diversity and inclusion. The study investigated through quantitative measures whether

cultural mismatch affected neuroendocrine and affective responses to psychosocial stress. The study concluded that cortisol levels were reduced for Latina/o students when cultural values were authenticated and valued more highly in the institution. Lastly, Castro and Cortez (2017) found through their qualitative study that Mexican CC students thoughtfully consider the equitable environments of the campuses in which they transfer and that predominantly White institutions must proactively take steps to create a positive atmosphere for these transfer students.

Furthermore, other studies in line with these findings demonstrated the importance of peer connections and mentoring in relation to persistence and completion (Pérez & Sáenz, 2017; Rios-Ellis et al., 2015). All the studies mentioned above emphasized the value of campus culture and its relation to how students perform. However, Chun, Romero Marin, Schwartz, Pham, & Castro-Olivo (2016) argued further for the immediate connection between the sense of belonging and self-efficacy as predictors of academic success. The importance of campus culture in connection with other predictive characteristics appeared repeatedly throughout the body of literature.

Faculty Interactions

Similarly, research revealed that positive interactions with faculty at institutions of higher education are positive predictors for Latinas/os' achievement (Baker, 2013; DeFreitas, & Bravo, 2012; Cuellar, 2014; Lundberg, Kim, Andrade, & Bahner, 2018; Trevino & DeFreitas, 2014). A mixed-method study by Baker (2013) that used the National Longitudinal Survey of Freshman and interviews studied the first two years of the college experience and how on-campus support influenced the Latina/o student

success. The study reported that Latina/o students experienced higher GPAs with more interactions with their professors. The researcher elaborated that faculty interactions helped students navigate the college environment and reduced stereotype threat. Lastly, Baker (2013) argued that interactions with faculty of color positively affected the Latina/o students' sense of belonging and their sense of value on the campus culture. This aspect relates directly to the aforementioned attribute of belongingness and campus culture. Both by feedback from faculty that encouraged students to meet expectations and awareness of their availability, connectedness between students and faculty improved students' perceptions of their learning (Baker, 2013; Lundberg et al., 2018). Furthermore, Lundberg et al. (2018) reasoned that feedback by faculty and articulation of expectations were strongly associated with student success at the CC level. Lundberg et al. (2018) argued that the power of the learning improvements lies in the institutions themselves if institutions invest in time, effort, and resources for faculty. The authors elucidated on the value of researching this topic and how the outcomes can result in a positive catalyst for both institutional and social change.

However, Cuellar's (2014) multiple regression analysis argued that faculty interactions either may positively or negatively affect the perception of academic self-concept for students, particularly in the non-HSI context. When students felt intimidated by faculty, there could exist an adverse effect. However, in HSI institutions, emerging HSI institutions, and non-HSI institutions, students' faculty interaction ratio was important in the perceived development of their academic potential (Cuellar, 2014). Furthermore, Fairlie, Hoffmann, and Oreopoulos (2014) conducted an additional study

that attested to the importance of hiring minority faculty of color and its benefit to the students. The results highlighted the positive racial interactions between the students and the minority faculty and, ultimately, how these faculty predicted student retention and completion overall.

Likewise, in combination with self-efficacy, supportive relationships with faculty were found to have correlated positively with better outcomes of academic achievement and were shown to foster intrinsic motivation in Latina/o students (DeFreitas, & Bravo, 2012; Lechuga-Pena & Lechuga, 2018; Trevino & DeFreitas, 2014). One qualitative study researched the predictive nature of involvement with faculty on a students' academic self-efficacy (DeFreitas et al., 2012). The study concluded that when a faculty member interacted with students more often, their sense of academic self-efficacy and academic self-concept improved as well as the student's GPA. An additional grounded-theory study that researched the barriers and facilitators of success for Latina/o students used counter storytelling, a method that utilized interviews to elucidate inflation from participant, siblings, and parents of Latina/o families, found that the authentic caring and mentoring of professors aided Latina/o students to overcome barriers on their educational paths (Lechuga-Pena et al., 2018). The article defined authentic caring as caring from individuals who were "sincerely invested," "provided emotional supports," and connected the students to resources (p.310). Lastly, Trevino & DeFreitas (2014) investigated how intrinsic motivation can be increased in Latina/o students and found that professors could increase this attribute by verbal rewards and positive feedback. The combination of the influence of faculty involvement and academic self-confidence drives

this research in an attempt to describe the lived experiences of Latina/o students and their educational journeys.

Tutoring and Mentoring

Thirdly, tutoring and mentoring opportunities for Latina/o students surfaces throughout the literature as a positive predictor for higher academic outcomes. The literature reflects that more tutoring and mentoring affirms and promotes the self-efficacy of Latina/o students in the higher educational setting (Clark et al., 2013; Pérez II & Taylor, 2016; and Salas et al., 2014). One three-year study validated that student Latina/o mentees viewed mentors as emotional and academic support; the social capital acquiesced by the mentees produced better outcomes for the students (Moschetti, Plunkett, Efrat, & Yomtov, 2017). However, research further concluded that culturally competent peer mentoring and tutoring specified for Latina/o students yields greater success rates (Rios-Ellis et al., 2015). Similarly, Alcocer and Martinez (2018) agreed with this conclusion; they attested that culturally affirming and relevant mentorships are more valuable and led to great self-efficacy in Latina/o students. Overall, the research concurred the vast benefit of peer mentoring and its tie to greater self-efficacy in Latina/o students.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Consistent with the research presented on culturally relevant tutoring and mentoring opportunities for students, culturally relevant pedagogical approaches appeared in the literature as positive predictors for students' persistence and completion (Lechuga-Pena et al., 2018). Culturally relevant curricula are defined by Ladson-Billings

(1995) as “a pedagogy of opposition (1992c) not unlike critical pedagogy but specifically committed to the collective, not merely individual empowerment” (p. 160). A literature review in 2018 on Latinos in higher education concurred with the value of understanding the socio-economic, linguistic and cultural challenges Latina/o students face when making institutional and pedagogical decisions (Flink, 2018). Additionally, Muliaina (2018) argued that conventional models of teaching and learning have disregarded the importance and value that the historical backgrounds of students play. Garcia and Okhidoi (2015) investigated this topic within HSIs and advanced the importance of culturally relevant curricula and programs with connection to serving the Latina/o population. The authors demanded that institutions recognize that they are no longer serving students with old organizational structures. One action research study argued that intentional learning models that support Latina/o students linguistically and culturally could produce more gains for Latina/o students than high school GPA or other standardized test scores (Gonzales, Brammer, & Sawilowsky, 2015). Lastly, a qualitative study on increasing academic validation concluded that the use of culturally relevant curricula reported more satisfied and engaged students in the learning process. The authors presented a variety of ways that curricula may be implemented to ensure adherence to CRT is met (Acevedo-Gil et al., 2015). In conclusion, previous research defends that as scholars we must scaffold our curricula and create pedagogical practices that reflect the narratives of our Latina/o students to move them toward better rates of degree completion.

Student Self-Perception

Additionally, the uniqueness of Latina/o students and their self-perception also plays a role in Latina/o educational, academic outcomes. Manzano-Sanchez et al.'s systematic review (2018) focused upon the fact that the Latina/o group is not homogeneous and that the factors of acculturation, immigration status, familial experiences in the higher educational setting, and ethnic and racial perceptions influence their self-efficacy and academic performance. Gonzalez (2013) echoed the importance of Latina/o student labels concerning Latino versus Hispanic, racial discrimination with other Latinos, African Americans and Whites, political affiliations, and citizenship status. Likewise, Kiyama, Museus, and Vega (2015) noted the different experiences that Latina students documented in college when compared to their male counterparts. Often Latina students felt invisible within the organizations.

Furthermore, Ojeda, Castillo, Rosales Meza, and Piña-Watson (2014) noted the importance that cultural adaptation processes like enculturation and acculturation play in persistence trends of Mexican-Americans in higher education. They defined acculturation as the process where a student integrates behaviorally and culturally into a culture yet does not adopt the culture's norms and beliefs. Similarly, the authors researched the effects of enculturation, where the student rejects part of their heritage's norms and beliefs and adopts aspects of another culture's norms or beliefs instead. The term acculturation differs from assimilation in that assimilation reflects a complete loss of the markers of culture whereas acculturation retains the markers of a culture such as languages, food, and customs. In the process of acculturation, the authors found that the

acculturation to White culture in addition to the enculturation to Mexican American culture both positively predicted persistence (Ojeda et al., 2014). Lastly, one study documented the power of ethnic loyalty and its tendency to improve upon students' integration into campus culture (Arana & Blanchard, 2018). This study uniquely illustrated the interdependence of many of these predictive attributes. In summary, Latinas/os' self-perception is an essential factor to consider when researching Latina/o outcomes.

Family Support and Cultural Connectedness

Family support and cultural connectedness also appear throughout the literature as a positive indicator of success. Scholars agreed that the financial, moral and emotional support provided by the students' families played a vital role in their achievement and even demonstrated a link between finishing college and improvement of family capital by pursuing education (Clark et al., 2013; Matos, 2015; Perez II & Taylor, 2016). Cortez, Martinez, and Sáenz (2014) also highlighted the role of the Latina mothers in their support of students' educational journeys and completion. The focus group study comprised of 30 Latina mothers discovered that Latina mothers believed that success was comprised of students being both academically prepared and possessing specific attributes critical. Cortez et al. (2014) stated that "mothers often said being disciplined, responsible, and having goals were key" (p. 889). Finally, the study revealed that Latina mothers want to be involved in the educational decisions of their children, but are not considered clear stakeholders to educators. Finally, Sáenz, García-Louis, Drake, and Guida (2018) adhered to and addressed the concept of "*familismo*" or family support for

Latino males in the CC setting and how much of their success is dependent upon the family's role in the educational pathway. The authors studied Latino males at a 2-year institution in Texas through qualitative measures. The results showed that the familial capital outweighed other social and academic challenges and motivated individuals to persist and succeed at higher levels (Sáenz et al., 2018). Carolan-Silva and Reyes (2013) moreover found that families and peer groups, although crucial support for many students, were not sufficient. The authors concluded that institutional supports are lacking and that institutions need to take a more active role to meet students' needs. In addition, a very recent study from Solis and Durán (2020) concluded that as Latina/o CC students transferred to four-year institutions, their isolation was combated and success was achieved by the support of family, professors, and involvement in student organizations. This study confirms how the combination of attributes is essential to help alleviate educational gaps. As Crisp et al. explained (2015), the family's role, with a combination of the characteristics mentioned above, helps support success for Latina/o students and provides a more seamless pathway toward degree completion.

Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy repeatedly surfaced throughout the vast body of literature as a positive characteristic of persistence and completion for Latina/o college students. One systematic review verified through extensive database investigation that self-efficacy and academic performance are positively and significantly connected at all educational levels (Manzano-Sanchez et al., 2015). Thirteen institutions of higher education's data revealed that the students' self-efficacy played a vital role in their academic success and cognitive

development (Bandura, 2006). The literature also suggested that this characteristic influences decision-making, future actions, and behaviors, has an impact on studying, and ultimately predicts GPA and persistence in college sophomores (Chun et al., 2015). Similarly, Hann, Farruggia, and Moss (2017) researched first-year college students' mindsets and how self-efficacy, academic motivation and a sense of belonging factored into better educational outcomes. The authors concluded that self-efficacy was most closely aligned with the academic performance of this cohort of students. Lastly, in their systematic review, Manzano-Sanchez et al. (2018) stated, "...more research is needed to inquire about the characteristics of self-efficacious Latina/o students and strategies they use to increase their academic performance and to establish academic goals" (p. 199). The literature is clear that self-efficacy is a positive attribute contributing to success and completion, but there remains a gap in the literature as to how Latina/o CC students can motivate this attribute.

Academic Self-Confidence

Lastly, academic self-confidence emerged throughout the body of literature as a significant positive factor attributed to academic persistence and completion in systems of higher education. Although similarities exist, self-efficacy and academic self-confidence differ. Albert Bandura (2006), the leader in studies on self-efficacy, describes the dissimilarity in the following way:

It should be noted that the construct of self-efficacy differs from the colloquial term "confidence." Confidence is a nondescript term that refers to the strength of belief but does not necessarily specify what the certainty is about. I can be

supremely confident that I will fail at an endeavor. Perceived self-efficacy refers to belief in one's agentic capabilities, that one can produce given levels of attainment. A self-efficacy assessment, therefore, includes both an affirmation of a capability level and the strength of that belief. Confidence is a catchword rather than a construct embedded in a theoretical system. (Bandura, 2006, p.382)

Academic self-confidence, like self-efficacy, materializes in the literature as a characteristic to be noted and worthy of study.

Many studies that precede this research verify the significance that academic self-confidence plays a role in the educational journeys of Latina/o CC students. Acevedo-Gil et al. (2015) confirmed that academic validation or invalidation of Latina/o students by institutional agents affected their overall success. The authors argued for attention to be drawn to positive practices in the classrooms and ultimately made a case for critical race validating pedagogy to create positive environments. Cuellar (2015), however, highlighted the fact that even though most Latinas/os' academic self-confidence levels rose at the end of their college experience, there was evidence that supported that the background characteristics, institutional characteristics, and experiences during college affect Latina/o college students' levels. Nevertheless, the research highlighted that although predictive in nature, a gap occurs in the literature as to how institutions as a whole can influence these levels of academic self-confidence in Latinas/os.

Correspondingly, Crisp et al. (2015), in the most up-to-date systematic review for Latina/o outcomes in higher education, shared that although we know that high levels of motivation and confidence are predictors of success, we lack the knowledge as to what

practices and policies may support students' levels of confidence and motivation in higher education. Lundberg et al. (2018) agreed with this need for further research on how students interact with institutional support. Cuellar (2014) noted, "Higher levels of academic self-concept are posited as an intermediate outcome on the way to degree completion" (p. 522). It is with this knowledge that this study embarks. With previous literature as the foundation, the research question of this study focuses on the gap in research.

Summary and Conclusions

This research in the literature review for this study reveal that a combination of vibrant campus culture, positive faculty interactions, robust tutoring and mentoring, culturally relevant curriculum, family support, a positive student self-perception and greater levels of academic self-confidence and self-efficacy are indicated as aspects of experiences that may support better educational outcomes for Latina/o students. However, with this depth of research, no study surfaces that focus on the CC Latina/o experience with academic self-confidence and how this attribute may influence degree completion. Chapter 3 includes an explanation of the research method that this study adheres to and how this methodology is used to ensure that this research is trustworthy and ethical.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological research was to describe and better understand the lived experiences of Latina/o CC students and their perceptions of the role that academic self-confidence plays in their degree completion. The implications for social change include an understanding of the Latina/o students CC experience and formulating ways to manipulate and drive institutions' policies and procedures to aid in better degree completion. In Chapter 3, I will expound on the phenomenological methodology, the research approach, and design for the participants, data collection, and its analysis. The main guiding question is open-ended, thus allowing students to express themselves openly, full, and honestly. In Chapter 3, I will also clarify the role of the primary instrument, the researcher, and the identified procedures for recruitment and participation. Lastly, Chapter 3 will include a discussion of the trustworthiness and ethics of this research.

Research Design and Rationale

Through this research, I proposed to investigate, through a phenomenological lens, how academic self-confidence perceptions may influence degree completion. Moustakas (1994) remarked that research questions ought to have both personal significance and social meaning for the researcher. As I will explain further in the section on the role of the researcher, these two characteristics are true for me. This phenomenological study used the following overarching guiding research question and subsequent sub-questions in both the interviews and the focus group:

- RQ: What are the lived experiences of Latina/o students at the local community college and their perceptions surrounding academic self-confidence?
- SQ1: What positive experiences support the CC student's concept of academic self-confidence?
- SQ2: What negative experiences hinder the CC student's concept of academic self-confidence?

Within qualitative research, Ravitch and Carl (2016) argued that it is imperative to cautiously consider the ideological and conceptual implications of the qualitative method and how it intersects with the study goals, driving questions, and guiding theories and commitments of the study. Whether the researcher chooses an action, case study, ethnography, evaluation, grounded theory, participatory narrative action, practitioner or phenomenological research, the design must take into consideration the implications (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The conceptual and ideological implications of this study aligned most naturally with the method of phenomenology.

Phenomenological research repeatedly appears as a method used to understand and describe the lived experiences of Latina/o students about their perceptions of academic achievement. This method allows researchers to document and give a voice to students from whom their culture does not represent as a majority. For example, through the use of phenomenology, Kiyama (2018) testified to the meaning of education for Latina women students, traditionally not uniquely represented, and Pérez II and Sáenz (2017) used the same method to investigate the role of Latino males' academic

determination concerning how students interact with administrators, faculty, and peer networks to achieve their goals. As a method that extrapolates and describes life through the lens of the participants, phenomenology is valuable for seeking to understand how to increase educational attainment for Latina/o students in systems of higher education. Throughout my research on phenomenology, it became clear that this method is most aligned with my questions and my quest to understand Latina/o CC students.

Phenomenology is the research method for this study due to the various rationales above in this paper, most notably because this type of research remains as close to the data as possible, and focuses on the lived experiences of the participants. Conversely, ethnography was not selected due to its prolonged nature, studying the phenomenon that includes observations. The length of this study would not have allowed for ethnographic methodology due to the length of time that AA degree-seeking students attend CCs. Additionally, Ravitch and Carl (2016) explained that, in ethnography research, there is an immersive emphasis on the in-field observations of participants to attain cultural meaning. After scrutiny of ethnography with alignment with the purpose and problem of this study, observations were not deemed appropriate as a viable method of collecting data.

Another form of qualitative research, narrative research, focuses on the narrative stories of the participants and focuses on the stories as the primary data. Although personal stories are important to this research, the narrative focus as primary was not the intent of this research as it would be expected to cover much of a participant's life experiences and would last an extended period. In contrast, the focus of this research is

primarily on the student's CC experiences concerning their perceptions of academic self-confidence.

Thirdly, grounded theory, a qualitative research method that attempts to develop theory from data, was not appropriate because the goal of this study is not to develop a theory. The grounded qualitative method seeks to use the comparison method to describe the data as it is related to a theory (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). For this study, grounded theory was not deemed appropriate due to its goal of developing a theory.

Lastly, a case study approach tends to use a variety of data sources, such as interviews, documents, and observations. A case study approach was not the best approach for this study because I focused on the lived experiences of the individuals and highlighting the unique experiences of CC students. Case study research utilizes an iterative process where theory builds and is analyzed over an extended period (Carl & Ravitch, 2016). The proposed research for this study is not theory based.

Through the phenomenological nature of this study, I aimed to examine and capture the direct perceptions and descriptions of the participants' lived experiences through face-to-face interviews (Moustakas, 1994). Secondly, a focus group enabled the capture of perceptions of academic self-confidence of recent practices and experiences from current AA students at the focus CC to ensure that the data from the interviews are being relevant. The design of phenomenological research has traditionally been approached by either a descriptive or an interpretive design. For this study, instead of adhering to either an only descriptive or interpretive design, I chose to abide by the philosophies of Dahlberg and Dahlberg (2008) who are not interested in choosing one or

the other (Vagle, 2016). Dahlberg, Dahlberg, and Nystrom (2008) wrote, “Openness...means to have the patience to wait for the phenomenon to reveal its complexity rather than imposing an external structure on it, such as the dogmatic use of theories or models” (p. 112). By using this phenomenological lens, the researcher describes the emergent themes that the participants may have had in common using analysis. Phenomenology takes an interest in the subjectivity of experience and how these experiences are defined (Englander, 2012). Subsequently, the themes were documented, thus revealing the essence that is extrapolated from the analysis (see Patton, 2002). A qualitative phenomenological design was deemed appropriate for this research because it would allow the participants to express themselves openly via open-ended questions. Phenomenological interviewing extracted descriptive lived experiences to understand and help alleviate hierarchies of power and privilege as addressed in CRT. By exploring the use of open-ended questioning, each interview is treated as a way to discover something valuable about the phenomenon. Most notably, the phenomenological research method proved to be most valid due to the importance of bridling in the process and the focus on the lived experiences of the participants. Although all methods contain merit, I chose phenomenology with the intent that it would allow me to capture the richness of individual experiences at the CC.

Role of the Researcher

For this research, I played the role of the observer of mannerisms and the interviewer. Ravitch and Carl (2016) indicated that the analysis of phenomenological research attempts to remain as close to the data as possible. Following their

recommendation, I ensured that as the researcher I focused primarily on the data.

Burkholder and Burbank's (2016) assessment that our notion of inquiry reflects our world paradigm is truthful for me as a researcher. The unique personal narratives resonated strongly with me and I sought to be open to react to the data. To do so, as recommended by Dahlberg and Dahlberg (as cited in Vagle, 2016), the phenomenological lifeworld researchers, I bridled my assumptions and feelings throughout this study.

Additionally, to mitigate researcher bias and remain intentional in studying the essence of the phenomena, I recorded each of the interviews and ensured that all participants consented to be open and active participants. As suggested by Vagle (2016), I adhered to a phenomenological attitude where I entered into a questioning mindset and became curious about things that may have been originally treated as obvious. There was no conflict of interest or power within this study on my part as the researcher. To ensure this intention remained valid, I categorized my biases and perceptions and maintained a journal throughout my research.

Lastly, although I teach at the focus CC and have a passion for the Spanish language, culture, civilization, peoples, and customs, and possess a BA and MA degree in Spanish, these factors did not influence my position as the researcher and observer. The participants for the focus groups were not my current students, and this research did not affect their grades or overall outcomes. I remained thoughtful of my purpose throughout this study and stayed cognizant of my convictions, beliefs, and preconceived notions.

Methodology

Phenomenological research, considered both philosophy and method, interests itself in understanding a phenomenon that may not be limited by time and space and relating how the actors in the situation perceive it. This methodological approach focuses on describing the lived experiences of participants rather than generating theories about the phenomena (Moustakas, 1994). For this study, I focused on what Creswell (1998) deems an occurrence or phenomenon, and how the phenomenon has changed the way that society operates. I utilized this method to investigate the essence of the phenomenon of academic self-confidence in Latina/o students and its role within degree completion.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

The first population of this study consisted of adult Latina/o CC students who completed their AA degree in the cohort date range of 2011-2012 to 2016-2017. Secondly, in addition to the in-depth interviews, in this phenomenological study, I investigated the responses of a focus group, comprised of four current students at the local CC with good academic standing (i.e., with a GPA of 3.0 or higher). The students of the focus group had finished at least one year at the focus college.

Krueger and Casey (2015) stated that focus groups could provide insight into organizational concerns and issues and offer valuable perspectives on morale and engagement. The focus group data were analyzed and interpreted by the use of basic qualitative analysis. Snowball sampling was used; as I initially recruited via the focus college database with randomization and then recruited relevant contacts from the initial ones. The focus group took place after the process of in-depth interviews. The purpose of

the focus group was to take the data and conclusions of the current student population and question the applicability to current students. Originally called “focussed interviews,” this focus group was used for “exploration and confirmation” of the study’s findings (see Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990, p. 15). By using the focus group as both confirmatory and exploratory, I intended to confirm the current reliability of the data from the in-depth interviews and to explore other potential current themes.

The initial participants were recruited using the local CC database, with the help of the director of institutional effectiveness at the local CC, searching by the dates of the cohort, and students self-identified as Latina/o. After the database was accessed at the local focus CC, I used snowball sampling as the mechanism for recruitment. Through this strategy, I started with “one or a few relevant and information-rich interviewees and then ask for additional relevant contacts” (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p.134). I was the recruiter for the interviews, and both male and female students were interviewed.

Instrumentation

I conducted the phenomenological interviews using open-ended questions I have written (see Appendix A) with six students who graduated between 2011-2012 and 2016-2017. Each interview lasted from 60-90 minutes and took place two different times at least one week apart. Creswell (1998) stated that a qualitative study should contain at a minimum of five participants, yet Morse (1994) argued that at least six participants constituted a better sample. Based on this recommendation, I chose six participants to interview in-depth.

Following a recommendation by Seidman (2013), the first interview focused on the life history of the student and their demographics and the second investigated the details of the experiences and explored the meaning behind the experiences. Additionally, the second session allowed me to pursue experiences the participant may have remembered since the previous session and perhaps note his or her expanded thinking of his previous discussion. I transcribed each interview manually and emailed each participant his or her transcription then ask them to verify what was recorded was true. These interviews were open-ended guided by the structure of the overarching research question (see Appendix A for questions). Keeping in alignment with the problem and purpose of this study, the interview questions reflected a syncretization of literature that preceded this capstone and utilized questions that sought to describe the phenomenon using CRT as its foundation. All interviews and the focus group were held in a private office in the library at the local CC. If the interviews were not able to take place in the face-to-face setting, a phone-recorded interview was used as the replacement.

Rubin and Rubin (2012) revealed that a saturation point had been met when no new information is forthcoming. Although I planned to research using the guidelines stated in this chapter for both the in-depth interviews and the focus groups, interviews could have continued to occur with more participants to refine the perspectives if it were deemed necessary. Recruitment efforts continued until I met a level of saturation where emergent themes were repetitive and rich conclusions can be drawn.

Data Analysis Plan

The analysis of this data adhered to the importance of researcher bridling, coined by Dahlberg and Dahlberg (2008), and moved away from the original concept of bracketing (Vagle, 2016). Gearing (2004) described the importance of bracketing in phenomenological research as one of requiring that researchers set aside their assumptions, biases, theories, and previous experiences when describing the phenomenon of interest. Dahlberg moved away from bracketing toward bridling. With bridling, the researcher supports a notion by stating that rather than “suspending” one’s judgments, “rather the focus remains on becoming much more familiar with one’s judgments so they do not compromise one’s openness to the phenomenon” (Vagle, 2016, p. 14). This reflexive notion encouraged me to be open about my reactions and relation to the data. Common in lifeworld research, adherence to this concept was an essential element to my research. To do so, I maintained a reflective journal throughout the ongoing data collection. These reflexive thoughts and reactions contributed to my final discussion and authenticated the process of bridling.

In the transcriptions of the unstructured interviews, I used a Colaizzi (1978) method to analyze the data. This method focuses on reading the descriptions several times, extrapolating out “significant statements,” creating meaning and organizing the meanings into clustered themes, describing the phenomenon and ultimately validating the description for each respondent. Ultimately, as Vagle (2016) shared, this analysis becomes less a method and more a craft. I manually analyzed the data with no use of

software as a way to immerse myself more fully into the data. As I worked my craft, I stayed as close to the data as possible as suggested by the phenomenological ancestors.

To capture data from the focus group that was held after the interviews, I audio-recorded the discussion and transcribed the recording using basic qualitative analysis (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016). To begin the process, I used open coding; this process is described as one that determines what parts of the data stand out and involves summarizing segments of its data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). From this point, I moved to pattern coding, forming the open codes into “clusters” or “chunks of data” (p. 250). Throughout this process, I adhered to the recommendations from Ravitch and Carl (2016) and I adhered to the following coding concepts: “repetition in and across various data items, strong and emotive language,” “agreement between individuals, concepts that are not discussed or commented on, disagreement between individuals, and mistakes and how/if they are solved” (p. 251). Throughout this work, I eliminated irrelevant elements. Ultimately, once the descriptions and themes emerge, I presented my initial conclusions to the participants via email to validate my findings, also known as member checking or respondent validation (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Member checking is often considered the most important validity measure to ensure credibility. Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated, “if the investigator is to be able to purport that his or her reconstructions are recognizable to audience members as adequate representations of their own (and multiple realities), it is essential that they are allowed to reach to them” (p. 314). Throughout the overall process of a person-centered approach to establish the credibility of interpretations of the data, I critically and systematically reflected upon the process and documented it in my

reflective journal. As explained, in both the interviews and focus group, the data were transcribed and given to each participant for validation. After the transcribing and analysis of the interviews and the focus groups with their separate processes, the findings were synthesized, ideas were aggregated, and themes were presented together to reveal the thematic landscape of the phenomenon holistically for this study.

Trustworthiness

Previous research indicates that there is no single way to authenticate validity in qualitative research. Commonly referred to as validity, trustworthiness, credibility, relevance, or confirmability, one measurement is the researcher's "sustained engagement" with the research openly and sensitively (Vagle, 2016). Trustworthiness is the qualitative version of validity and reliability.

In addition to the bridling of my judgments and precaution that my perceptions do not compromise the integrity of my data, I ensured the credibility of this research by the employment of member checking. This validation strategy ensured that participants were involved with each step of the process. For example, the participants were emailed each transcription after each interview to ensure accuracy is met. Ravitch and Carl (2016) coined the term "participant validation" and suggested that the strategies be employed at varying points of the study (p. 199). As the researcher, I was open to the possible reflections and critique of the codes and remained conscious that this is a critical process of this research (Ravitch and Carl, 2016). Each participant was given one week to respond to his or her transcription, the conclusions, and/or comment and make

corrections. Overall, this process was iterative in nature and one that honestly and truthfully reflects the data.

Trustworthiness supports qualitative research through attention to dependability, transferability, confirmability, and member checking of the data. Dependability was ensured by recording the interviews using both the audio function a laptop computer and a digital device for recording purposes. Transferability was attained when I provided rich and thoughtful descriptions of the data, thus provoking further research and organizational dialogue on institutional effectiveness about Latina/o student perceptions. Lastly, confirmability confirms the authenticity and genuineness of the perceptions and experiences of the participants. Researcher reflexivity was the most specific strategy employed to ensure confirmability (Vagle, 2016). As suggested by Ravitch and Carl (2016), as the researcher I engaged with reflexive data generation questions, which confirmed that as the researcher I am “understanding that people are experts of their own experiences” (p. 114). I shared with the participants how my positionality, perspectives, background, and insights as the researcher could influence the research. I reflected on these notions in my ongoing research journal as well. Additionally, I indicated how I am conscious of my biases. Overall, the integrity of this lifeworld research was held with the highest importance and was not compromised.

Ethical Procedures

Prior to collecting any data, IRB approval for this study was requested and approved by Walden University. The IRB approval number for this study is 10-17-19-0663081. Secondly, permission from the local focus college was requested and granted.

The local CC used Walden's IRB process instead of additional processes. To ensure that each participant was freely able to consent to participate in this study, I adhered to the following six steps: (a) a voluntary consent form was provided to each participant for both the phenomenological interviews and focus groups with the details of the study; (b) all participants were informed of their right to leave; (c) all participants were given a pseudonym to protect their identities; (d) all recordings of the interviews were kept in a password-protected computer and the transcribed interviews will be kept for 5 years and kept in a fireproof, locked safe; (e) all participants were notified that each interview will be transcribed by the researcher and sent back to them for accuracy and authenticity; and (f) each participant received a 1-2 page summary of the aggregated findings. All data were kept secure and confidential at all times.

Summary

The gap in practice on how we can address the problem of low completion for Latina/o CC students was the motivation for this research. In Chapter 3, I explained how the phenomenological methodology was constructed for this study within a framework of critical race theory (CRT). Chapter 3 also includes details about the selection of participants, instrumentation methods, plans for analysis of the data, trustworthiness, and validity of the data, and the ethics behind this research. In Chapter 4, I reflect on the results and findings of this study.

Chapter 4: Findings

The purpose of this qualitative research was to apply phenomenological research strategies to describe and better understand the lived experiences of Latina/o CC students and their perceptions of the role that academic self-confidence plays in degree completion. The overarching research question that guided this research is the following: What are the lived experiences of Latina/o students at the local CC and their perceptions surrounding academic self-confidence? The sub-questions related to this guiding research question are (a) What positive experiences support the CC student's concept of academic self-confidence? and (b) What negative experiences hinder the CC student's concept of academic self-confidence? This chapter includes a definition of academic self-confidence, a description of each of the participants, an account of the setting for this research, and the themes derived from the analysis of the interview data. Lastly, Chapter 4 highlights the data collection methods and data analysis processes that were used for this research and authenticates the trustworthiness of this research.

Setting

The interviewed participants of this study are the foundation from which this research stems. It should be noted that without their openness and willingness to participate, this research would not have been possible. Subsequently, the data analysis was derived unequivocally and wholly from the transcribed interviews of all participants. In alignment with the reflective lifeworld approach, adherence to the goal of phenomenological interviewing was upheld, seeking to understand the lived experiences of Latina/o CC students.

The setting for this research was not adversely affected in any way that could have affected the interpretation of the results. The process of selection of the participants for the phenomenological in-depth interviews and the focus group followed the guidelines outlined in Chapter 3 of this paper. All questions used for the phenomenological interviews and the focus group interview can be found in Appendix A.

The presentation of results for this study followed the processes of reflective lifeworld research. Dahlberg et al. (2008) stated that phenomena and essences are synonymous. As the authors stated, holistically understanding the phenomena or essence is a fundamental and critical step in phenomenological research. To adequately cognize the emergent themes, it is first important to confirm what the phenomenon or essence is. From this previously stated recommendation, what follows is the all-encompassing description of the phenomenon under study derived from the data of the lived experiences of the participants.

Description of Academic Self-Confidence

To conceptualize the themes that result from this study and the participants from whom the ideas have come, I first describe the essence of academic self-confidence. The seminal authors of lifeworld research argued, “It is important to first present the essence, the essentials of the phenomenon, and then constituents, otherwise it is hard to see what the constituents are *of*” (Dahlberg et al., 2008, p. 255). As the researcher, I have created the following description of academic self-confidence. This description is an amalgamation and comprehensive construction, resulting from the six phenomenological interviews and the focus group comprised of four students: Academic self-confidence is a

growth-mindset framework that successfully creates capacity for students to benefit in the world of academia regardless of the perceived obstacles, failures, insecurities, and pressures experienced. The inextricable external factors that affect academic self-confidence are responded to by taking the courage to ask for help, with the power to pursue clear, personal, and individualized goals that ultimately appreciate the value and love of learning for learning's sake. This description will be explained and supported in Chapter 5 of this study.

The six participants selected for the phenomenological interviews and the four from the focus group corroborated the description of academic self-confidence by member checking, ensuring that its accuracy captured their experiences. Using the pseudonyms Evita, Frida, Pancho, Rigoberta, Federica, and Che for confidentiality, I further describe the participants with highlights of their demographics, backgrounds, and characteristics relevant to this study. The demographics of the four participants chosen for the focus group follow those of the interview participants. The six phenomenological interviews were carried out with graduates from the focus college and the focus group consisted of students presently attending.

Participant 1: Evita

Evita is a first-generation Mexican woman who graduated with an AA in psychology in 2014 after 3 years of study at the focus college, attending full-time for the entirety of her time. Evita now possesses a BA in psychology. Evita attended the focus college directly after high school despite the challenges of becoming pregnant at 14 years of age and having parents who never graduated high school. She plans on working

toward becoming an early interventionist for preteen, teenage, or middle school-aged kids. When asked why she wanted to pursue this career, she stated, “Because I had somebody who was that person for me, and had they not been there, my life could have been a lot different and not in a positive life.” She commented on having the aspiration of going to university right out of high school for as long as she could remember; however, after becoming pregnant, she reluctantly chose the pathway of a CC to remain closer to a family who could help with her son.

Participant 2: Frida

Frida is a first-generation Latina woman who graduated from the focus college in 2013 after 4 years of study. Having moved back to the United States from Mexico when she was 12, Frida fell under the umbrella of a *Dreamer* student during her time at the focus college. Starting at 15 years of age, her college journey has resulted in four AA degrees in Spanish, sociology, psychology and liberal arts. When asked what led her to college, she replied,

So, I moved to the States about the age of 12, and from then on, it's been a path of education the whole time. I mean, my first teachers that I had in the States were always like, you know, not only are we gonna get you on a path to learning the language, learning the culture, we're also gonna get you on the path to college.

Frida's parents' highest level of academic attainment was to the elementary level. Her goals for the future include finishing her BA in psychology with a minor in sociology and to continue her current job as the director of human resources for a company that focuses on staffing services for hotels.

Participant 3: Pancho

Pancho is a first-generation Latino male college student who grew up in the United States but moved to Michoacán, Mexico, at the age of 9 and never completed high school; after Grade 10, his family moved back to the United States. He graduated from the focus college with an AA in music in 2016 after 3 years of study. Pancho's parents achieved a second grade and fifth grade level of education, respectively. When asked what steered him toward pursuing a college education, he replied,

When I was around 22; I worked at a hardware store, I played in a band, so things weren't bad, but I didn't feel 100% fulfilled. I knew there was more in me, I knew that there was something else that I needed to do. And even though I was making decent money for a young person. I wasn't too worried, but I knew that as far as fulfillment, I wasn't fulfilled. So, I heard asking myself questions like what can I do? And then the first thing that came to mind is, I should probably go back to school.

Additionally, Pancho possesses a BA in Global Studies with a Peace and Conflict emphasis. In the future, Pancho aims to complete an MBA or a master's degree in the discipline of student affairs.

Participant 4: Rigoberta

Rigoberta is a Chicana first-generation female student who completed her AA in psychology in 2015 after three and a half years of study. After moving back to Mexico at the age of 10, she ultimately graduated with her high school diploma from the United States. She is on the pathway to complete her BA in psychology in the next few months

with the aspiration of becoming a social worker who helps children. Rigoberta stated that a master's degree or doctoral degree are also on her list of aspirations. When asked what her impetus for attending college was, she stated that her brother's influence of attending college steered her in the CC direction.

Participant 5: Federica

Federica is a Latina, first-generation, self-supported, openly gay woman who completed her AA in 2012 in social sciences after 4 years of study. Her parents both have a high school education. When asked to comment on how and where her educational journey began, she said the following:

It started with my mother as she never got to go to college because her mom died of cancer, so she never got to pursue a college degree back in her hometown of Managua, Nicaragua. So, she looked for a better life and came up here. She still struggles with the English language. And so I thought to myself, I wanted to be the first one to graduate from college, from my family. So I did whatever I could to make costs cheap, which included going to the community college first instead of going straight to a four-year degree.

Federica possesses a BA in business management with an emphasis on IT management. Her ultimate career aspiration includes breaking down the barriers of Latina women in the IT field, most notably in the area of cybersecurity.

Participant 6: Che

Che is a Mexican American male college athlete who completed his AA in Spanish in 2016 after 2 years of study at the focus college. Although his parents did not

graduate from college, he spoke of one uncle who did. Following the CC, Che persisted and completed a BA in Spanish while playing soccer for the university. When asked what steered him toward college, he replied,

Well, after high school, I starting working nine to five and I found myself being frustrated at my nine to five just because I was so young and I didn't want to work at a Radio Shack for my whole life. I didn't know what to do, so I talked to a couple of friends that were already enrolled in college and they told me that the instructors were quality and that there was a lot of help. So, I decided to go and get my AA in Spanish, and it just happened to be at the same time [the focus college] was getting a soccer program, and me being an athlete, it just made me want to go back to college 10 times more.

Che ultimately aspires to continue his education to complete his teaching credential to teach Spanish. Additionally, he has an interest in entering the field of interpreting and/or translating for the courts to help Latino/a people in the areas of immigration.

The Focus Group

As stated in Chapter 3, the focus group for this research was used for “exploration and confirmation” of the study’s findings (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990, p. 15). Although the methodology section stated the proposed request for six focus group participants, four participants were ultimately interviewed due to circumstances out of my control. I had recruited and received consent letters from six current students; however, on the slated day of the focus group, two of the participants were not able to attend due to unforeseeable circumstances in their lives. Upon the conclusion of the focus group, I

decided that although six participants were recruited, the four who participated in the focus group yielded ample diversity and provided saturated data for the research to confirm the findings of this study. Krueger and Casey (2015) stressed that “the group must be small enough for everyone to have opportunity to share insights and yet large enough to provide diversity of perceptions” (p. 6). The range of perceptions and openness of the four participants provided diverse and representative opinions leading to the conclusion that the focus group was large enough.

The four participants’ demographics and experiences differed in several characteristics. Of the four participants, two were female and two were male. Although all students fit the criteria of having attended CC for over one year with at least a 3.0 GPA, their attendance ranged from 1 to 3 years. These four participants from the focus group also corroborated the description of academic self-confidence by member checking. Under the pseudonyms Selena, La Malinche, César and Benito, the focus group participants are further described in the following sections with highlights of their demographics, backgrounds, and characteristics relevant to this study.

Participant 1 for Focus Group: Selena

Selena has been at the focus college for 3 years and her proposed area of study is anthropology with a minor in environmental science. She considers herself of light-skinned Mexican descent or Hispanic. She is a first-generation student.

Participant 2 for Focus Group: La Malinche

La Malinche has been at the focus college for 2 years and her proposed area of study in psychology. She was born and raised in the United States but moved to Mexico

when she was 7 years old. She shared that her identity has been difficult to determine, being called both American and Mexican, leaving her to feel that she does not belong anywhere.

Participant 3 for Focus Group: César

César has been at the focus college for 3 years and his proposed area of study is in psychology with a minor in criminal justice. He stated that he aligns most closely with the Hispanic culture and “everything that is behind it.” He also articulated that he aligns as multicultural, having German, Latino, and Native American heritage.

Participant 4 for Focus Group: Benito

Benito has attended the focus college for 1 year and one quarter and his proposed area of study is in electrical engineering. The race and ethnicity from which he aligns are Guatemalan, claiming 99% Latino. He moved to the United States from Antigua, Guatemala, prior to starting his journey at the focus college.

The four participants for the focus group of this study currently seek an AA from the focus college in various disciplines; however, their pathway and journey toward degree completion varies and diverges. The rich and authentic data from this focus group of four participants provided a saturation point that authenticated and confirmed the findings from the in-depth phenomenological interviews.

Data Collection

The participants selected for each data set followed the methodology section with precision with adherence to the criteria for each subset of participants. All participants were initially recruited with aid from the focus CC database, followed by the use of

snowball sampling to increase the richness of the data. As the previous section references, the two phenomenological interviews included six participants who graduated between 2011-12 and 2016-17. Each interview lasted 45-70 minutes with 1 week between the two interviews. All interviews were held in a private office at the focus college or over the phone for long-distance. As stated in the methods section, during the first phenomenological interview, I focused on the life history of the student and their demographics and in the second interview, I investigated the details with attention to any follow-up questions from the first interview creating space for reflective dialogue. The focus group with the four current students lasted for 75 minutes. It took place in the private office and was conducted entirely in person.

Each of the data sets was recorded with a computer and phone audio as a backup. I transcribed the audio files with care, replacing names with pseudonyms. The collected data were secured and privacy was the highest priority in both the phenomenological interviewing process and the focus group process. For both the phenomenological interviews and focus group, the individual interviews were sent to each participant for validation and accuracy check. Lastly, as stated in the previous section, although six participants were initially intended to be recruited for the focus group, four participants provided the saturated data needed for authentication of the current landscape at the focus college and were found to be suitable.

With obedience to the lifeworld research approach of this phenomenological study, I devoted wholly to the act of research by staying as close to the data as possible, using a journal for reflection throughout the process to bridle my thoughts and

reflections. I wrote in the journal before and after each interview, leaving space to react to my conscious questions, comments, prejudgments, and biases. This process allowed me to shelve my influence on how I perceived the phenomenon. It was through this process that I became more open to the reveal of the essence and the descriptions of what academic self-confidence is on the most basic level according to the participants. The lifeworld approach is considered one of “in-ness” and Vagle (2016) stated, “The ontological nature of this methodology is quite strong, as they are most concerned with how the phenomenon is revealed through the research act” (p. 67). These authors attested to the value of exploring the phenomenon through this research method and how critical it is to understand the holistic nature of the phenomenon. The use of the journal allowed me to focus solely on how the participants interacted with the data without my opinions and preconceived judgments present. The data collection process was one of high integrity, openness, and sensitivity as suggested by the authors who developed this approach. With a bridled attitude, I remained open and honest with myself to how I was reacting to the data. With the reflective journal as my guide, I sought to remain as open and accessible to the participants’ lived experiences as possible, remaining cognizant that I am the primary instrument as the researcher and my insight need not enter.

Data Analysis

The data analysis plan for this phenomenological research conformed to the Colaizzi (1978) method of analyzing, a method that supports reflective lifeworld phenomenological research. The Colaizzi method is one that investigates the lived experiences of the participants in a way that starts with the smallest attributes of the

interviews and moves toward defining the phenomenon holistically. The selection of the phenomenological method responds to how intentional relations reveal themselves between the phenomenon and the people in the world (Vagle, 2008). The power of this research remained as close to the human experience as possible to understand the phenomenon that is ultimately brought out by our living in the world (Vagle, 2008). The intentionality of the study of the phenomenon of academic self-confidence led me to use Colaizzi's (1978) method in response to the lifeworld approach. The lifeworld approach states that its goal is to "discover, analyze, clarify, understand and describe meaning" (Dahlberg et al., 2008). Through Colaizzi's method, I was vigilant in remaining close to the intent of reflective lifeworld research to remain openly sensitive with a "bridled attitude," to allow the meaning of the phenomenon to reveal itself through the lens of the lived experiences of the participants (Dahlberg et al., 2008). As I processed the information from the interviews, I deliberately sought to understand and reflect upon what the participants had said without interjecting my insights or experiences of the matter. Although difficult, I was reminded of how differently I perceived the phenomenon, helping me realize how the lived experiences of the participants ought to be researched with thoughtfulness, openness, and curiosity. To remain open and thoughtful, a journal of my reflections and biases documented the process. In this journal, I reflected upon the nature of my thoughts and reactions to the data both before and after the interviews. The reflective journal played a critical role in my research process as it allowed me to be open and honest about the narratives of the lived experiences of my participants. For example, after the first set interviews, I was critically aware of how

differently I perceived the phenomenon when compared to those perceptions of the participants. My understandings and personal lived experiences as a Caucasian woman with years in academia bent the description in ways that were dissimilar than those of the participants. The reflective journal was the vehicle for me to be able to categorize and critically reflect on my individualized understanding of this phenomenon and why and how it differed for Latina/o CC students.

Although many different approaches exist within the realm of phenomenological research, the Colaizzi (1978) method aligned most closely with the reflective lifeworld research branch of phenomenology that I chose. When analyzing the data, I kept in mind that the method of phenomenology is also the craft. I also noted that the experts of phenomenology such as van Manen (2001), Moustakas (1994), and van Kaam (1966) all used similar, yet slightly different methods to analyze the data. For example, all methods ask for a concise description of the phenomenon as one of the final steps that are derived from the data. However, the order of how significant statements lead to clustered meanings differ from method to method (van Manen, 2001; McNamara, 2005). Finlay (n.d.) articulated well how analyzing phenomenological data, regardless of the method, all align in one way: “A key process involved in analysis is the act of ‘dwelling’ with the minutiae of data. [Dwelling] forces us to slow down, to pause, to re-examine taken-for-granted assumptions and the idea that we already know this phenomenon” (p. 1). The “dwelling” in the data, as the author suggests, was a key element of my research process. Keeping the lived world experiences as my focus, I aimed to remain accessible and

sensitive to how students perceived academic self-confidence both when conducting the interviews, transcribing the data, and analyzing.

In comparison with basic qualitative analysis where a researcher would create initial codes, and then organize them into themes, I followed the Colaizzi (1978) method to analyze the phenomenological research. I started by reading the transcriptions several times and extrapolated out “significant statements.” From those significant statements, I began to create meanings, organizing the meanings into clustered themes. Next, I used the data from the participants to describe the phenomenon overall and created an overall description of the phenomenon of academic self-confidence. Lastly, as the method suggests, I validated the description of the phenomenon and the clustered themes for each respondent, both from the phenomenological interviews and the focus group. I followed this process as it is presented, initially reading the transcriptions numerous times before extracting the “significant statements.” During the time of the transcription of each interview, which was done within four days of the interview, I would spend time listening and re-listening to the interviews to create an accurate transcription. From this process, I was able to view the data as holistic, focusing on the significant statements that rose from the data. From the statements, I described meanings documenting them in an excel spreadsheet, which ultimately flowed into clustered themes. Lastly, from the clustered themes I created a holistic description of academic self-confidence from the data, just as the Colaizzi (1978) method suggests. Using the Colaizzi method to analyze the data stemming from the phenomenological interviews, the following processes were used: familiarization, identifying significant statements, formulating meanings, clustering

themes, developing an exhaustive description, producing the fundamental structure, and seeking verification of the fundamental structure (Brooks, 2015).

The experiences of the participants and how academic self-confidence reveals itself as a phenomenon was the key foundation in each of the steps that were followed. The analysis of this data responded with a method that sought to synthesize the parts of the whole to understand the complex and unique phenomenon of academic self-confidence. The narratives of the participants were valued through the lens of CRT by allowing them to narratively construct their experiences to alleviate the strata of hierarchical power that exists in the landscape of higher education. From the clustered meanings, I developed five overall themes from the significant statements: (a) support, (b) failure, (c) familial and cultural alliance, (d) motivation to disempower stereotypes, and (e) intrinsic motivation and growth mindset. In the following results section, the significant statements are shared that led to the meaning that finally led to the clustering of themes defining participants' ideas of academic self-confidence.

The second data set that I analyzed was the focus group. The focus group intended to corroborate or diverge from the results from the phenomenological interview. Following the protocol from the methods section in Chapter 3, to transcribe focus group interviews, I adhered to a process of open coding to pattern coding. The process began with open coding where I coded the interview for repetitive emergent ideas that resonated with those found in the phenomenological interviews. I documented each code after the transcriptions of the interviews. I identified initial codes with the use of varying colors

below each line. By the nature of design, I conducted the focus group after the conclusion of the phenomenological interviews.

In conclusion, because of the similar nature of most of the codes that were found in the phenomenological analysis, the transcribed data findings were synthesized, ideas aggregated, and themes presented together to reveal the thematic landscape of the phenomenon holistically for this study in the results section. I reveal the codes that led to the clustered or emerging themes as well as the discrepant and nonconforming cases in the subsequent section with more detail. Please see Appendix B for a listing of all pattern codes found in this study.

The data analysis process for this study followed the methodology from Chapter 3. From the more than 170 pages of transcribed interviews, the arduous process of coding smaller units into larger units that took place for both the phenomenological and focus group analysis was conducted with scrutiny and care. As the researcher, I was cognizant of the fact that I am the primary instrument and the integrity of the data was kept in the highest consideration. To remain as close to the lived experiences as possible, many of the significant statements from the participants are left wholly and unequivocally unaltered for the reader. Although longer, as the researcher and as part of my intentionality, I felt it was important for the reader to understand and experience the data in its richest form.

Findings

The findings of this study answer and understand more in-depth both the overarching question and sub-questions of this research as well as attempt to fill the gap

in practice on how academic self-confidence may be improved. The overarching research question for this study was the following: What are the lived experiences of Latina/o students at the local CC and their perceptions surrounding academic self-confidence? The sub-questions for this study were the following: (a) What positive experiences support the CC student's concept of academic self-confidence? and (b) What negative experiences hinder the CC student's concept of academic self-confidence?

In this section, I present both the themes that have been found to describe the phenomenon of this study, as the participants perceived it, and also answer the research question. The themes I developed flowed from meanings extrapolated from the phenomenological interview discussions and the pattern coding elucidated from the focus group. In the next sections, I will first present the meanings that were found from the phenomenological interviews, and secondly the pattern codes I derived from the focus group. In Chapter 5, I discuss how I interpreted the similarities of these patterns and meanings and how they led to the thematic conclusions for this research.

The two different phenomenological interviews for each of the six participants provided ample and diverse meanings that are found in Appendix B. For the review and the process of analyzing the data I followed the Colaizzi (1978) method; I identified several meanings during the process of analyzing from the significant statements.

As Appendix B illustrates, many formulated meanings rose from the phenomenological data set. The following are the formulated meanings, listed in alphabetic order: adversity, the benefit, and inevitability of obstacles and failure, coming face to face with negative comments, cultural and familial status and advancement,

cultural stereotypes for Latina women, failure defining difficult moments, family legacy, getting out of the comfort zone, growth mindset, the importance of adversity as motivation, the importance of courses that were not easy, the importance of growth and change, innate ability and persistence, insatiable quest, internal confidence, lack of resources, lack of understanding college systems, Latina/o students at lower standards, not quitting, opportunity and motivation from family, parental sacrifice, power of love and learning, sense of community in Latino culture, the pressure of working a job, supportive college personnel, supportive individuals, support in helping navigate the educational system, using negative comments for good, and work ethic. These meanings and how they help define the themes for this study will be described in the subsequent section.

In addition, from the process of open coding that led to pattern coding as outlined in the previous section, the focus group provided rich conclusions for this research that authenticated and endorsed the data attained from the phenomenological interviews. The purpose of the focus group was to confirm whether or not the data from the cohort applied to the current students at the CC. The focus group for this research did explore and confirm the findings of this study as Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) suggested it would. A comprehensive list of the pattern codes, developed from the initial codes of the analyzed data from the focus group, can be found in Appendix C. The pattern codes found in the focus group were the following, listed in alphabetical order: adversity, the benefit and inevitability of obstacles and failure, coming face to face with negative comments, cultural and familial status and advancement, failure, family legacy, getting

out of the comfort zone, growth mindset, identity, the importance of growth and change, innate ability and persistence, insatiable quest, internal confidence, lack of understanding college systems, not quitting, opportunity and motivation from family, parental sacrifice, power of love and learning, the pressure of working a job, sense of community in Latino culture, stereotypes for Latina/o students, supportive college personnel, supportive individuals, support in helping navigate the educational system, and work ethic. The only pattern code that emerged that differed from those in the phenomenological data set was the concept of identity. A discussion of this outlier is found in Chapter 5. All other repetitive pattern codes were found to pertain to one of the overall themes.

From the two unique data sets from this research, I developed five themes. The themes have been perceived by all participants to positively impact the growth of academic self-confidence in the CC Latina/o student as degree completion was achieved. As specified in Chapter 3, the themes have gone through a process of member checking and all ten participants have agreed with the findings. Throughout this process, participants aided my analysis of this data in helping me form the names of the themes and helped wordsmith the description of academic self-confidence. The five themes developed from emerging ideas from the phenomenological interviews and the focus group are (a) support, (b) failure, (c) familial and cultural alliance, (d) motivation to disempower stereotypes, and (e) intrinsic motivation and growth mindset. Each theme is defined with relevance to the data, supported by participant statements both from the interviews and the focus group. The discrepant cases that were not factored into the analysis are presented after the thematic analysis. To interpret the findings of this study, I

will respond to how the results coexist with the body of literature that precedes this study, react to how the themes respond to the central research question and ultimately explain how the new description of academic self-confidence will help drive better normed institutional practices in Chapter 5.

Phenomenological Findings

Theme 1: Support

The participants of the phenomenological interviews in this study were interviewed so the researcher could delve deeply into understanding their life experiences and how these experiences shaped their perceptions of academic self-confidence during their time at the focus CC. The experiences and background differences differed in the pathways that led them to complete their degrees, but all of them shared a deep resonance with the individualized support they received during the academic journey that allowed them to achieve higher levels of academic self-confidence. Although the source of support differed for each individual, the six phenomenological participants, Evita, Frida, Pancho, Rigoberta, Federica, and Che, all uniquely responded to the value of this support, thus bringing it to the forefront of this research as an emergent theme. The formulated meanings that were coded and analyzed that ultimately led to this theme were the following: supportive individuals, support in helping navigate the educational system, and supportive college personnel. The following section includes samples of significant statements that illustrate the patterning that led to this emergent theme and supports Latina/o CC students' concept of academic self-confidence.

Evita responded to her circumstances as a teen mom and how support from individuals on campus ultimately became a positive experience that was influential in her degree completion. She stated: “Going back, I think the counselors here were extremely helpful. Anytime I needed help on my path of completing my AA, or questions about my credits, or anything, they were always there.”

Additionally, Evita speaks of the importance of a particular individual from high school who set her on the pathway to enter college from the beginning. She stated:

Really, she was the one who mostly pushed me in high school, because of having [my son] young. She was the one who kept me on track, kept me focused, kept my family involved, and brought us all together, always, to get us on the same page and to try to figure out what was best for me. Because being that young, I didn't always know what was best for me.

Similarly, Frida encountered support of counseling staff and instructors who aided in the increase of her academic self-confidence and helped paved the way for degree completion. She shared:

At one point, I'd just break down and then... A lot of it was, you know, it's that communication with the teachers. It's that communication with counselors. I mean, as I said, my counselor, I've known... I mean, [the town] being so large, I had no support so that was tricky. And so she would check up on me constantly and say, "Hey, you know, how are you doing?" Or, "Let's get through your courses. Like, do you need help? 'Cause then we can help." So, for me, it was a lot of comfort level in going into their office to say, "Hey, I can't. I can't do this."

Frida shared that at one of her lowest educational moments, the support that she received made a difference in her academics and her intent to persist.

Similar to Frida's comments, Pancho indicated how the support of college staff and faculty kept him steered in a positive direction, supporting him to increase his educational knowledge of the CC systems. He commented:

The fact that they believed in me and they were always very encouraging. As a matter of fact, several people that were influential were always telling me, 'You need to transfer and you need to go to a four-year institution, you need to pursue a higher degree.' And just the fact that they were pushing me. And for me, being a first-generation college student, that was a big jump.

Pancho explained that, although he knew deep down that he had the power inside of himself to pursue and complete, the importance of the support was essential, especially when it came to transferring out of the focus college. He stated:

So, having a group of supporters that have already gone to college prior than I have, and being there and believing in me, and not only believing in me, but encouraging me to make that step. Really encouraging me made a big difference too. It was just nice to know that other people saw in me what I already knew I had, but it was just already great to have that group of different individuals saying like, you need to go, you need to go. We want you to nail [focus college] but you need to go.

Likewise, Rigoberta spoke to the value of support that her coworkers provided outside of school. She mentioned that as a she adapted to working full-time, this support

changed the trajectory of her educational pathway. She stated: “I had always had a supportive group. At my work, currently, now they support me. They support me 100%. My manager tells me that I can take my homework and do my homework assignments.” Rigoberta spoke of this support in both the first and second interview as a crucial aspect of her success in academia.

Che, conversely, spoke about his feelings of dropping out of the focus college due to the lack of support he felt from his stepdad. He stated: “It was during that time me and my stepdad didn't really get along just because he wanted me to go to the working route and he didn't want me to go into college and wanted me to start helping the household.” However, later in the interviews, he articulated that the support that he did receive from the coaching staff and other individuals helped him persist. He stated:

I think a lot of individuals, friends, a girlfriend at the time, they were really supportive. They were seeing my process and they kept motivating me just because people that really know me, they know that I've never been an A+ student, so them seeing me actually study and them seeing me actually pack my whole life into a soccer bag and having lunch prepared and staying in campus when I should go home and relax and just putting the extra hours and people noticing that and then people telling me that they see that, it really kept me focused and it really kept me motivated.

Che emphasizes the magnitude of this theme with its relation to academic self-confidence. Although there were unsupportive individuals in his life, the supportive individuals outweighed the potentially negative consequences.

Lastly, Federica shared about the pressure she experienced during her pathway toward completion due to the concurrent experience of coming to terms with her sexuality. She commented:

But then at the same time, maybe two years after I was more out and more accepting of who I was, I did have support at the college, including my peers, who as well have had trouble coming out. So that helped facilitate it in the sense of having someone there [who] understood.

Like Che's experience, Federica's challenges during her academic journey were positively impacted due to the support she received from those around her.

This common theme of support was consistent and profound in the transcripts of the phenomenological interviews and was found consistently throughout the transcribed interviews illustrating the student-perceived direct tie that this theme has to improving academic self-confidence in the CC sector for Latina/o students. It is with this knowledge that it was found as the first reoccurring theme in this study.

Theme 2: Failure

The second emergent theme that rose from the data stemmed from the importance and value of failure and its connection to improvement of academic self-confidence. Coupled in several examples with support, the theme of failure materialized repetitively in the phenomenological data. Meanings were formulated that led to this theme were the following: failure, the importance of courses that were not easy, failure defining difficult moments, and the benefit and inevitability of obstacles and failures. What follows are

four samples of significant statements from the phenomenological interviews that illustrate the patterning that led to describing this emergent theme.

Pancho introduced this theme of failure and its importance throughout his educational journey. He argued how failure is necessary to create growth in the world of academia. He started by saying, “I think I only failed one class, which was a math class....And that really hurt my ego. I was like, no, this is a mistake. I can't do it.” However, he states that this failure ultimately pushed him to persist and grow academically. He said, “But what it made me do, it made me be double down on my studies. I said, okay, I got relaxed. I thought I was just going to coast by. But now I mean business and we're going to double down.” Lastly, during his explanation of failure, he touches on the theme of intrinsic motivation and stated, “But I don't think I ever doubted myself in my ability to learn something in the classroom.” This example is just one that illustrates the integral role that failure played in the quest of degree completion. This significant statement, like many others that will proceed, emphasizes the intertwining of the themes that resulted from this study. Pancho’s comment showed that although the initial experience of failure affected him as a shock, ultimately it helped him achieve higher levels of academic self-confidence.

Later, Pancho argued further that failure is a “momentary” setback. He commented:

I may be stressed out, I may fail at things, I may be rejected out of stuff or by people, but at the end of the day, as long as I can get up and do it, again, and again, that's still a win for me. And even though I may momentarily feel like I

can't do something or like if I apply myself to do something and I fail at it, I don't see myself as a failure. I just see, oh that attempt was a failure. I can do over, up my game, and try it again.

Frida further commented on the connection that failure has with the Latino culture in general. She stated:

Like I said before, parents and friends teach us not to fail, but in the back of my mind I just kept telling myself if I fail now and I quit, then they're going to feel like they failed. And my parents should never feel like they failed. They should feel pretty good about what I'm doing.

Frida shows the inevitability of failure during the educational process and how it is embedded into other facets of our lives outside of the educational realm.

Furthermore, Evita shared about a ceramics course she was forced to take that was outside her major of psychology. She spoke about the intimidation she initially had, but how that fear of failure turned into a positive experience. She said, "I'm not the best at it, but at least I'm not getting graded on how good it is, it's my effort. I really liked that class, and I found myself coming in when they offered extra lab hours. It was very fun to me." Evita explained that this experience of perceived failure can also have benefits.

Lastly, Che spoke to his experiences of failure during his time at the CC and how the failure motivated him to continue and achieve his degree. He spoke about what helped him become more academically self-confident. He stated:

Getting out of your comfort zone, not being afraid to be wrong, not being afraid to fail too. I failed math three times. I had to write a letter to the board to let them

take it four times, to let me take it the fourth time....I think that's what people, that's what college students that are Latinos or Hispanic have to realize.

Che's experience resonated with the other participants' perception of failure and its elemental part of the process toward better achievement of academic self-confidence. Paradoxically, the second theme of failure and its relation to the perceived gain of academic self-confidence emerged repetitively from the data.

Theme 3: Familial and Cultural Alliance

The third emergent theme that students perceived as a positive link to improvement of academic self-confidence was the role that family and culture played in their journey toward degree completion. Every student from the phenomenological interviews reacted in some manner to the importance of their family and cultural heritage. This theme revealed itself from meaningful codes such as, but not limited to, the following: cultural influence, cultural advancement, motivation from family, parental sacrifice, opportunity from family, family legacy, the greater good, sense of community in Latino culture, cultural betterment, and familial influence. The phenomenological interview transcripts conveyed that the cultural value of the Latino race and familial connectedness was perceived by the students a vital component to their success in the improvement of academic self-confidence.

Subtheme: Family. The first set of significant statements are taken from the intricate function that family played as the students pursued their AA degrees. Although not always positive in nature from all participants, the majority of the participants

responded to how their Latino families positively influenced their journey toward achieving an academic degree.

Federica argued that watching her parents make a sacrifice for her betterment motivated her to enter the college sector and persist. She stated:

My motivation was both internal and wanting to do it for my mom. It was seeing the struggle that she had here and her telling me, that empowered me to want to show her and other women who came from her perspective, show them that it could be done, whether if they couldn't do it, their children could be passed on to do it.

Federica's comment highlights the influence the family unit plays in the growth of persisting on the academic journey toward degree completion. Federica continued by commenting on the advice she received from her parents before starting her educational journey impacted her. She stated: "Just seeing my parents struggle and they would always... Because they were housekeepers so they would always say it's better to be mentally stressed out than physically stressed out." The importance of family in this example led Federica to push forward and not give up.

Additionally, Pancho articulated that his parents' lack of access to education became a source of fuel for his educational path. He stated:

[My parents] had to travel either by foot or by horse an hour and a half to go to school. And sometimes they would have to do it unaccompanied by themselves in the Sierras somewhere. And so the access for education for them was not the same as access for education for me. So, seeing that from that perspective, having

the opportunity to have access to education where it's so close and so accessible and having all these programs of support really influenced my decision to take advantage of that opportunity and say, 'Hey, my parents didn't have this opportunity as I did, but now I do and I'm going to make sure that I do that.'..... [because] at the time when I was in community college, it was really for my family. And, it was really for my mother, and just to say like, 'Hey, I'm doing this and I'm doing this for you.'

Like Federica, Pancho illustrates how the impetus for his education stemmed from his parents' lack of opportunity. He later shared about how his family continued to be an critical motivator in his pursuit. He stated:

The degree wasn't just for me and for me to get a good job. I noticed that a lot of it was like, I want to do this for my mom. I want to do this for my family. I want to do this, because I want to set the tone and I want to set the example for not only my family, but for my cousins, aunts, uncles, for everyone to let them know that they too can do it. So, setting the tone for them as well and letting know my nieces and nephews, "Hey, this is a path that your uncle took and this is a path that you can take as well."

Pancho's experience echoed how family and the quest toward a better education intersects for Latina/o CC students.

Rigoberta in turn spoke of the initial motivation and grit stemming from her mother's desire for her to attend college. She stated, "When I started going to college I did want to come to college, but I feel like I basically focused more on what my mom

wanted instead of what I wanted.” In this example, the family influence is what sparked Rigoberta’s path toward degree completion.

Lastly, the influence of Frida’s father helped her overcome her initial fear of entering the college sector and achieving a degree. She stated:

He told me to take the leap of faith and, and part of it was his own personal experience. He, he has sixth grade education, but he always wanted to pursue a higher education and just couldn't. So he saw the opportunity for one of his children to do it and said, that is great and I'm going to support you, but you have to pursue something that you love. Not something that I love.

Frida articulated how her growth in the world of academia came from her parents.

This first subtheme of this emergent theme illustrates how this familial stimulus afforded many of the interviewed Latina/o CC students to keep motivated to endure as they journeyed toward better academic self-confidence which led toward degree completion.

Subtheme: Culture. The second subtheme of this overarching theme is the broader role that the Latino culture played in the quest of an AA degree for Latina/o students at the CC. The value of community and importance of achievement as a part of the community at large additionally revealed itself as a subtheme of the third emergent theme of familial and cultural alliance.

Federica emphasized how pertaining to the minority as a gay woman in the Latino culture aided her to strive to achieve. She stated:

I think that's important for people to see and it does also give you a push to be higher and do better and prove that you can do it not only for yourself, but for

everybody around you, and I think that's important. When I can set that standard like, 'She could do it and she's a woman and she's from a Latina descent and she's gay. She pushed through all these hurdles.'

This comment stresses the importance of this theme and what a pivotal role the Latino culture plays in their achievement. Her success was not to be gained as an individual, but rather collective.

Pancho, on the other hand, spoke to how the perceived cultural characteristics of strong work-ethic improved his sense of academic self-confidence. When asked how being Latino may have played a role in his ability to gain academic self-confidence, he stated:

I think the first thing that comes to mind is work ethic. I think that growing up Latino, my family; entire family has a really strong work ethic. And, that really contributed to my academic self-confidence. I think I was so willing to put in the work... And, I think that, I translated that into my college education.

Pancho's example highlights how the perceptions of Latino culture influences the pathway.

Furthermore, Che responded to how improving his education and achieving his degree ultimately had a larger communal value. He stated:

And I think a lot of Latinos are, me included, are realizing that it's, we're doing the right thing and we're being, we have this phrase, *un orgullo hispano*. It's awesome to be a Latino and going to college and graduating, because into the own community that we are, there's a Hispanic community that knows everything

and that sees everything. So them seeing the portfolio of the graduates that year and a lot of them are Latino is like, that just makes them proud automatically. And they don't even know them. You know? Just the fact that Latinos are out there and conquering what they want in life in their own way is just awesome.

This significant statement authenticates this theme of how culture plays a central role in the improvement of academic self-confidence toward degree completion.

The counterbalance of an individualized academic journey, coupled with the motivation and intent of improving the family legacy and the culture's socio-economic positioning, echoed through the comments of the participants. Familial and cultural alliance emerged as the third theme from this study. The two relevant subthemes emphasize that Latina/o CC students perceive familial and cultural alliance as a vital and consistent theme that contributes to the growth of academic self-confidence in the CC sector for Latina/o students. This theme and the two subthemes of family and culture emerged throughout the data repetitively, illustrating the important interconnected role that that family and culture play consistently throughout the educational journey as it relates to academic self-confidence.

Theme 4: Motivation to Disempower Stereotypes

The fourth theme that emerged from the significant statements from the transcribed interviews was the presence of perceived stereotype or prejudice toward Latina/o CC students during the journey toward degree completion. Statements from the participants disclosed that they experienced interactions throughout their quest toward completion that made them feel prejudiced. The participants conveyed that although these

situations negatively affected them during them at the time, motivation rose ultimately from the experiences. Stereotype threat is defined as the following: “Stereotype threat arises from the recognition that one could be judged or treated in terms of a negative stereotype about one’s group” (Psychology Research and Reference, n.d.). Some formulated meanings that led to the clustering of this theme were the following: importance of adversity as motivation, cultural stereotypes for Latina women, coming face to face with negative comments, use of negative comments for good, and Latina/o students at lower standards. This research concludes that the motivation to succeed outweighed the perceived negative comments toward the CC Latina/o students and that the stereotype threat in turn manifested into a conscious decision to complete their degree.

Evita responded to the comments that she received from becoming pregnant at a young age when people around her assumed that she would not attend college. Upon hearing the negative comments, she stated, “I made it my goal that much more. ‘Well, you said I can't so I'm going to do it, and no matter what it takes.’” This persistence for Evita rose out of a perceived negative lived experience that motivated her to complete. When asked about Evita’s academic self-confidence when she started at the focus college, she responded:

I think my academic self-confidence started off really high, based on my want to prove all the stigma and stereotypes wrong about Latino students. And how unlikely they are to even go to college, or like to graduate from college. So, I

think I went in confident knowing that's something I had to do. It was no option for me to fail at that.

This example illustrates how both perceived negative stereotypes and the sense of cultural alliance can motivate.

Federica commented on the stereotypes that she felt as a Latina CC student and the commentaries that she experienced. She spoke about how these experiences pushed her to work harder. She declared, "I felt like I had to work harder, push harder, and prove myself harder so that they could see that we, as Latina women, still have the capacity to reach the Caucasian status quo." Further along in the interview she shared a story of a stereotype threat that motivated her to work harder as she achieved her degree. She stated:

I told a friend of mine, when I was in the business calculus class, I told him how I wanted to go for a higher degree in technology. And the first thing he said was, 'Well, my brother was in the Marines and he couldn't even understand it. So what makes you think you could understand it?' That just drove me more to want to pursue a degree in IT, especially of Latina descent, especially since it's already looked down upon as women in general. So, I want to push forward and prove not just him wrong, but everybody around.

Federica, like the other examples, used this difficult experience not only in the moment, but as a reminder as she leapt forward in pursuit of degree attainment.

Pancho also spoke about the pressure Latina/o CC students experience with regard to their race and how this stereotypical behavior helped him persevere. He commented:

So, there's a lot of pressure right, because there's a lot of good stereotypes, and there's a lot of bad stereotypes about the Latino community. And so, one of my things was, I think it did influence me in definitely trying to go above and beyond. Because, I wanted to make sure that I shattered every negative stereotype about the Latino community that was out there. That kind of made it a personal thing. I just made sure that in my behavior, in my actions, in my words, and everything that I did, I made sure that I was leaving a legacy not only for myself, but my community as well.

Pancho illustrates two of the five themes in this comment. The shattering of negative stereotypes and sense of community both resonated in this significant statement.

Lastly, Che spoke to the intimidation that he felt as he persisted. This was his response when he reacted to whether being Latino played a role in gaining academic self-confidence at the CC. This statement shows not only the presence of stereotypical threat in Che's experience, but his loyalty to his "people." He stated:

It did play a big role, just because I feel like you don't hear about a lot of Latinos going into college. You see them pursuing the workforce, sort of a 9:00 to 5:00 job right after high school. That's if they graduate high school. There's a big stereotype on that, so me being a Latino into college, it was a bit intimidating. But at the same time it was a good feeling knowing that I was a part of a low

percentage, you could say, and that kind of helped me gain some confidence in sticking with it, just doing it for myself but also for my people.

This fourth emergent theme unearths the foundational elements of CRT, the conceptual framework that is the conceptual framework for this study. As CRT pleads for the imperative action of retelling the stories of the minority to highlight the relationships of power, the narratives from the participants are serving to alleviate racial injustices in a system that maintains these injustices as part of the social hierarchies, just as CRT states as its intention.

From the data presented above, the re-telling of the narratives supports the results of this study that claims that motivation can disempower stereotypes, as perceived by the participants, and can lead to higher levels of academic self-confidence.

Theme 5: Intrinsic Motivation and Growth Mindset

The fifth and final theme that grew as a result from the phenomenological transcribed interviews that revealed itself as a strong and repetitive theme because of perceived values that led toward higher levels of academic self-confidence was intrinsic motivation and growth mindset. This theme rose from the following formulated meanings: innate persistence, insatiable quest, internal confidence, power of learning, getting out of the comfort zone, importance of growth and change, not quitting, mindset, and personal grit. What follows are the significant statements from the phenomenological interviews that emphasize this theme.

Pancho, when asked to describe an academically self-confident student, reacted by stating that it was someone who could “learn whatever they set their mind to, fully

knowing and aware that it may or may not be easy.... not someone that will get it right 100% of the time. But someone that says that no matter what, I'm going to figure it out and I'm going to learn this.”

Later in the interview, he spoke about the process of changing his mindset and how it materialized into a pivotal moment in his academic journey. He said: “But once I figured out how powerful I was as far as redirecting my mind, redirecting my thoughts, and having more empowering conversations with myself, that translated into success, being academically self-confident.”

These two significant statements emphasize the personal power Pancho felt that resides inside him. Despite any external experiences, Pancho shared that innately he knew how the power of his mind could will positive outcomes.

Additionally, Federica echoed the sentiments of Pancho when asked how she would define an academically self-confident student. She stated:

I would say someone who knows that they have the power inside of them to pursue whatever it is that they want to study, regardless of their circumstances, whether it be financial, whether it be something that they're struggling with. For example, coming out. I think that is academically self-confident because if you're not concentrated in your head and focused on the things that are going on with inside you, how is it going to be easier for you to concentrate on your studies?

Frida also shared her initial thoughts about how the quest inside her is what led her to take risks and put herself out in the academic arena even though she was the first in her family to do so. She said,

No family, no relatives and nobody has ever graduated. So at that age, I kind of figured, well, you know, I'm- I'm already here and my parents moved to the States to give me a better opportunity in life. So, um, you know, I'm gonna give it my all and see if we can- if I can do it. Um, from then on, I've had wonderful people in my path, including you, who have helped me get on the path and stay on that path and- and try to get my degree since then.

Like with other significant statements, Frida shows how familial alliance and intrinsic motivation both aided her in the journey.

Lastly, Che spoke to the importance of breaking down the barriers and fear that defined him as a student and growing. He shared about an experience in an English course where he was asked to read a book that he thought would be “cheesy.” He shared, I remember in one of my English classes, we had to read a book of the Dalai Lama, *The Pursuit of Happiness*, and I was like, ‘Dude, it's so cheesy. I don't want to read this.’ Right away, just being negative, like my old me, like, ‘Aw,’ like, ‘Why am I here in school?’ Then, once you start reading it and I was actually into the book and I started putting the book into perspective into my soccer career, I was like, ‘Okay.’ You find ways to see things and put it into other perspectives, into your current life situation. You're like, ‘All right. So, I do need this. This is what I need to be doing.’ That builds a lot of academic self-confidence for me.

Che evidences how the growth mindset that he achieved as part of his journey changed him both as a student and a person.

The theme of intrinsic motivation and growth mindset and the importance of breaking out of fear and conformity was established as a strong and reoccurring theme in this study. Its presence during the pursuit of higher levels of academic self-confidence came to the forefront of this research as the fifth and final theme.

Focus Group Findings

The focus group for this study was purposeful in design to authenticate and confirm the data and findings of the phenomenological data as it applied to the current focus CC students. Additionally, as Stewart and Shamdamasi (1990) proposed, this focus group was helpful in the exploration of academic self-confidence, to test the conclusions of the in-depth interviews, and ultimately to learn “how respondents talk about the phenomenon of interest” (p.15). The four participants interviewed for this cohort were Selena, La Malinche, César, and Benito, as introduced at the beginning of Chapter 4. The four focus group participants of this study currently seek an AA from the focus college in various disciplines; however, their pathway and journey toward degree completion vary.

By using a basic qualitative analysis, I analyzed and synthesized the transcribed data from the four students. The focus group interview from the CC yielded rich and thoughtful commentary that helped to form the pattern coding. The pattern codes found from the focus group were the following, listed in alphabetical order: adversity, the benefit and inevitability of obstacles and failure, coming face to face with negative comments, cultural and familial status and advancement, failure, family legacy, getting out of the comfort zone, growth mindset, identity, the importance of growth and change, innate ability and persistence, insatiable quest, internal confidence, lack of understanding

college systems, not quitting, opportunity and motivation from family, parental sacrifice, power of love and learning, pressure of working a job, sense of community in Latino culture, stereotypes for Latina/o students, supportive college personnel, supportive individuals, support in helping navigate the educational system and work ethic. The thematic landscape from which these pattern codes formed are presented in the subsequent section.

Theme 1: Support in the Academic Journey

The first theme of support during the academic journey was found to be a consistent pattern from the focus group data. The pattern codes that led to this theme were the following: supportive college personnel, supportive individuals, and support in helping navigate the educational systems. Selena, a participant from the focus group, shared how the trajectory of her educational pathway has shifted due to the support she has received:

I think what got me through it was just having the support of the people here, and being guided by students who were just like me one day. I eventually kind of started to allow myself to learn and to grow. I think when I first started here, I didn't necessarily felt like I belonged, but I felt like there was a place for me here to somewhat grow and then move on somewhere else.

This value of support in the educational realm connects with the augmentation of academic self-confidence in this example, emphasizing that the more support a student receives, the more secure and academically confident the student may become.

César, another participant in the focus group, concurred with her comment on the value of support. He shared:

Actually, in my first couple semester or quarters here, I met some great people that actually helped foster some self-confidence in my academics. A lot of it came from almost failing out and thinking that I couldn't do it. Those people were just encouraging me, no matter what, how hard it got, just to push forward.

Half of the participants from the focus group overtly and openly shared how this attribute of support was vital as an element that has helped them improve upon their concept of academic self-confidence.

Theme 2: Obstacles and Failure

Secondly, the theme of obstacles and failure was found in the pattern codes from focus group. The pattern codes that led to this theme were the following: adversity, benefit and inevitability of obstacles and failure, failure, and not quitting. The focus group students spoke to the presence of failure as part of the process of education and its relationship to academic self-confidence. Although there were multiple references to the presence of failure and its impact on the journey, two significant statements spoke most vibrantly. Benito shared how failure is unavoidable and an essential aspect of the journey itself.

He stated,

Yeah. Well, I believe that failing is always part of life, and it's important to fail. But when you are doing your first step and you fail, it's very hard to get up from that first step. Sometimes if you fail the first time, you don't want to get up, but if

you start well, and then you fail, you say, 'No, I just did this before, so I can do it again.' I think it's very important.

The second comment came from César within the focus group. He referred to the magnitude of mindset and how failure is an inescapable feature of the college experience. He commented the following:

Just pushing forward and seeing that I got through the first quarter, how difficult it was, it was something that made me gain a little more confidence in myself and say, 'Okay, this is easy, I can do this. If it was that hard, the next class is going to be easy.'

He continued later about how this experience changed the trajectory of his path. He said,

Just that kind of mindset just helped me push forward, and it was a great, almost failure. I don't even consider it failure, because I look at it now as a learning opportunity. Because there's two people in the world I feel, people that take failures and don't learn from them, and people that take failures and turn the opposite direction and make something out of it. I think that failure is something that's kind of overlooked in our academic success, and how we push forward.

His comments verified the value of this theme that resulted from the pattern coding in the pursuit of better outcomes and achievement for Latina/o CC students. Two students in the focus group shared how failure and the students' reactions and resiliency to failure create pathways for increased academic self-confidence in the educational landscape.

Theme 3: Cultural and Family Alliance

Thirdly, the focus group contained multiple initial codes that led to the emergence of the cultural and family alliance and its relation to academic self-confidence. The pattern codes that led to this theme are the following: cultural and familial status and advancement, family legacy, opportunity and motivation from family, parental sacrifice, and sense of community in Latino culture.

The first statement comes from César was asked about his definition of academic self-confidence. He stated,

[Academic self-confidence is] having the ability to, and the bravery to stand up for something that you believe in. It's hard, it's really hard to do. To know that you're standing up for not only yourself but other people as well, I think is something that's huge, and I think that's something that's really, not really looked at in depth. When you look at Latino students in general, I feel like Latino students are, some of the most like giving and devoted students to one another, not only themselves, but they think about their families, they think about so much other aspects than themselves. It just really shows that your belief in yourself goes so much beyond just you.

Selena agreed with the value of earning an education not only for one's self, but also for the collective good and the overall betterment of society. When asked what advice was shared with her prior to starting her journey, she stated, "You, as an individual, you have a moral obligation to your community and to your family, but even to yourself to be the best you can be and push the world forward as much as you can."

Both César and Selena evidence that this pattern is another significant topic to consider when investigating the betterment of academic self-confidence in higher education. There is no doubt by the data that family and culture play an energetic role in the success of Latina/o CC students.

Theme 4: Stereotypes and Lack of Understanding

The focus group of current students' data also contained codes that revealed how the current CC students felt with regard to how they were perceived as Latina/o students. The pattern codes that led to this theme were parental sacrifice and stereotypes for Latina/o students.

Selena shared how she feels about the college staff in general with regard to Latina/o students. She stated,

I don't think they really understand what it means to be Latino or what it means to come from Mexican descent. Knowing that your parents probably risked their lives just for you to be here. I think there's a lack of just understanding.

César also concurred with how stereotypes affect the pathway toward degree completion and how it intersects with the uniqueness of the Latino culture. He shared,

I feel like in our society, there's such a stereotype as to what Latino young adults look like. I feel like it's such a negative stereotype that it really does hinder people that aren't educated or people that don't think about the bigger picture or anything like that. I think it is, it's nice knowing that some of these instructors do see a little bit as far as being more conscious. But, I feel like they don't grasp the culture.

But, if there's one thing I can wish that they knew about our culture, is how family oriented and how loving we are as a culture.

Although only two significant quotes are mentioned here, this was a theme that resonated with all four participants. The body language and concurring gestures ensured that the current CC students feel a disconnect on who they are and how they are perceived.

Theme 5: Growth Mindset

The final theme that emerged from the focus group was growth mindset. This derived from the following pattern codes: getting out of the comfort zone, growth mindset, importance of growth and change, innate ability and persistence, insatiable quest, internal confidence, and power of love and learning.

First, Benito resonated with this theme. He shared the following:

I think what helps you a lot, it's when you really want to do it. When you really, when you go to a class and you enjoy listen to the teacher, talking about whatever he's talking about. When you really like it, that make everything better, and you feel as though you understand everything. I think everything depends on you and your mindset.....To have that mindset that you can do everything you want to do, that help you a lot.

Secondly, Selena, from the focus group, resonated with the value and power of growth mindset when asked what helped her reach the success she had thus far. She stated,

I think there's always a chance and a possibility that, even though things might get hard, I think there's something at the end of the tunnel that is waiting for you. I think you got to grasp it, and you have to take it. Because, I think a lot of us want to do something in our lives. But I think really taking the initiative and being focused gets you somewhere in life. Understanding that you have the capacity to learn and to grow, and to not let fear conquer your mind. I think that's very powerful.

This last theme from the focus group shifts the power back to the students with an innate sense of curiosity and personal authority. The students emphasize in these quotes that the power to succeed and the control of the future resides within them.

The pattern codes that were not found to pertain to any theme were identity, lack of understanding college systems, pressure of working a job, and work-ethic. Although they were representative of the participants of the focus group, I did not find that they fell under the umbrella of the five themes presented for the focus group. The five themes found from the pattern coding from the focus group data set were significantly aligned with the phenomenological data set. The subsequent section highlights the melded findings of the two data sets.

Melded Findings

There was an echo of sentiments between the phenomenological data set and the focus group. The codes and meanings that aligned between the two sets were many. The five themes that were presented in the phenomenological data set and the focus group were parallel, leading me to develop one set of themes that represent both. From those

clustered meanings and pattern codes, I developed five overall themes: (a) support, (b) failure, (c) familial and cultural alliance, (d) motivation to disempower stereotypes, and (e) intrinsic motivation and growth mindset. Although the theme from the focus group yielded stereotypes and lack of understanding, the phenomenological data set evidenced that these stereotypes ultimately motivated students to disempower them. With the intent to corroborate or disconfirm the findings of the phenomenological data, the focus group ultimately validated these findings evidencing that all five themes were consistent for students who graduated within the cohort, but also current students at the focus college. The five themes appeared consistently in all transcribed interviews of this study which led me to formulate one consistent set of themes.

Discrepant Cases and Nonconforming Data

Most of the meanings and pattern codes that were found in both data sets are reflected in the themes presented above. However, the following is a list of the meanings or pattern codes from both data sets that were not representative enough to lead to the creation of a theme: lack of resources to succeed, lack of knowledge to navigate the educational system, pressure of working a job, work-ethic, and lack of a clear identity. Although pertinent for some participants, these meanings did not lead to a theme that described the phenomenon of academic self-confidence.

In the case of all five themes, there were no obvious outliers or discrepant cases that invalidated the themes, however, not all participants spoke specifically to each theme. Both the phenomenological data set and focus group included meanings and pattern codes that were not found in the other set. As the researcher, I did not believe that

the lack of presence from the focus group signified that the meanings were not valid from the phenomenological data set. As shown in Appendices B and C, there were few themes found in the phenomenological data set that did not emerge from the focus group.

Additionally, the only pattern code of identity from the focus group did not emerge as a meaning in the phenomenological data set. It is the researcher's personal opinion that if time allowed, both the theme of identity and the other meanings contained within the phenomenological data set, could have emerged. With that said, since the participants for both the phenomenological interviews and focus group were emailed with the results for validation and accuracy, and no disagreement or disapproval was expressed from any participant, it is assumed that these themes are valid.

The following table shows the meanings and patterns that were derived from the two data sets and how they overlapped. Appendices B and C also contain comprehensive lists for both data sets.

Table 4

Repetitive Meanings and Pattern Codes from Data Sets

Repetitive meanings from phenomenological data set	Pattern coding resulting from focus group data set	Meanings/themes from both data sets
Adversity	Adversity	Adversity
Benefit and inevitability of obstacles and failure	Benefit and inevitability of obstacles and failure	Benefit and inevitability of obstacles and failure
Coming face to face with negative comments	Coming face to face with negative comments	Coming face to face with negative comments
Cultural and familial status and advancement	Cultural and familial status and advancement	Cultural and familial status and advancement
Cultural stereotypes for Latina women	Failure	Failure
Failure	Family legacy	Family legacy
Failure defining difficult moments	Getting out of the comfort zone	Getting out of the comfort zone
Family legacy	Growth mindset	Growth mindset
Getting out of the comfort zone	Identity	Importance of growth and change
Growth mindset	Importance of growth and change	Innate ability and persistence
Importance of adversity as motivation	Innate ability and persistence	Insatiable quest
Importance of courses that were not easy	Insatiable quest	Internal confidence
Importance of growth and change	Internal confidence	Lack of understanding college systems
Innate ability and persistence	Lack of understanding college systems	Not quitting
Insatiable quest	Not quitting	Opportunity and motivation from family
Internal confidence	Opportunity and motivation from family	Parental sacrifice
Lack of resources	Parental sacrifice	Power of love and learning
Lack of understanding college systems	Power of love and learning	Pressure of working a job
Latina/o students at lower standards	Pressure of working a job	Sense of community in Latino culture
Not quitting	Sense of community in Latino culture	Stereotypes for Latina/o students
Opportunity and motivation from family	Stereotypes for Latina/o students	Supportive college personnel
Parental sacrifice	Supportive college personnel	Supportive individuals
Power of love and learning	Supportive individuals	Support in helping navigate the educational system
Pressure of working a job	Support in helping navigate the educational system	Work ethic
Sense of community in Latino culture	Work ethic	
Stereotypes for Latina/o students		
Supportive college personnel		
Supportive individuals		
Support in helping navigate the educational system		
Using negative comments for good		
Work ethic		

Table 4 illustrates how the pattern codes from the basic qualitative analysis from the focus group and the repetitive meanings derived from the Colaizzi (1978) phenomenological interviews intersected meaningfully. With only one repetitive code that emerged individually from the focus group with its relation to academic self-confidence, the codes/meanings that were derived from both data sets were multiple as shown in the table. As the focus group intent was to corroborate the findings of this study, this table illustrates how effectively this was achieved. In conclusion, the students that graduated from the focus college successfully during the cohort and the current students from the focus college concur on all five themes of this study.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness stems from credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability in the realm of qualitative lifeworld research. As stated in Chapter 3, there is not one single way to ensure trustworthiness. Due to this fact, I crafted this research with thoughtfulness and intent to achieve all aspects of trustworthiness. To ensure that this research was credible, I was open and reflective of the process of coding; remaining cognizant that it was a critical process of this research (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). As stated in Chapter 3, each participant was given one week to respond to his or her transcription, the conclusions, and/or comment and make corrections. Each participant received the transcription of the interview within four days of the interview, with request for suggestions or changes. Throughout this process, only subtle changes and suggestions were recommended to any of the transcriptions, definitions or themes. For example, the wording was adjusted in the description of academic self-confidence and the titles of the

themes were discussed. In the end, all ten participants corroborated the findings of this study and the creation of the description of the phenomenon.

Although qualitative data is not considered to be transferable, transferability was considered when I provided rich and thoughtful descriptions of the data. The data was presented with the intent that in differing settings it may resonate and become significant to informing other studies. Additionally, I intended that this research would provoke further interest in this topic and open organizational dialogue on institutional effectiveness concerning Latina/o student perceptions.

Dependability was ensured by using the methods mentioned in Chapter 3, but most notably by recording the interviews using both the audio function on a laptop computer and a digital device for recording purposes. Also, the transcripts from this study were sent to the chair of this study to confirm the accuracy of the findings and to authenticate the dependability. The chair for this study confirmed that the patterns, codes, and themes were authentically represented.

Lastly, confirmability includes the authenticity and genuineness of the perceptions and experiences of the participants. To support confirmability, I employed reflexivity as I engaged with reflexive data generation questions which confirmed that as the researcher I was aware that the participants were the experts of their own experiences (Vagle, 2016). I shared with the participants how my positionality, perspectives, background, and insights as the researcher could influence the research. Additionally, I indicated how I am conscious of my biases as both a Spanish professor at the focus college and as a White woman. By addressing confirmability, I sought to authenticate the perceptions and

experiences of the participants. As a reflexive researcher, I spent time before and after each interview compartmentalizing my thoughts, biases and overall insights in my reflective journal. This process was vital to keep objectivity, openness, and sensitivity held to the highest standard. This process became the mechanism to authenticate that the data were a derivation of the participants' life experiences and not the researcher's. From my human experience of conducting this research, it was completed with objectivity and is credible.

As presented in Chapter 3, all methods proposed and accepted by IRB were followed ensuring the credibility of this research. There was no deviation from the methods that were presented in Chapter 3 or the process approved by IRB concerning credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Overall, this process was iterative in nature and one that honestly and truthfully reflects the data. The integrity of this lifeworld research was held with the highest importance and was not compromised.

Summary

The five emergent themes from this qualitative research exemplify the complexities of how Latina/o students achieve success at the CC level about academic self-confidence. The five themes of support, failure, familial and cultural alliance, motivation to disempower stereotypes, and intrinsic motivation and growth mindset are factored into the description of academic self-confidence created as part of this study with the attempt to describe the phenomenon. Critical race theory (CRT) entered into the analysis of this data during each step, helping me remain thoughtful to how the conceptual framework of this study ultimately helped describe the findings. The five

themes aligned the employment of CRT, most notably with the themes of failure and motivation to disempower stereotypes. These two themes authenticated the preferential systems from which our systems of higher education stem. CRT states that these perpetual systems of illegitimate strata of power in education are inequitable and how we as educators must dismantle them. The themes reveal that although these systems have continually produced inequitable outcomes, some students have found ways to counter the inequity. They have found power in support systems, failure, ways that they respond to the stereotypes, and in themselves as the creators of their lives. In Chapter 5, I will discuss my reflections on the lived experiences of the participants; describe the limitations of this research with recommendations for the future, and the impact for positive and social change.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

In this chapter, I discuss and interpret the findings of this study and respond to the implications and social change it may create. The problem under investigation in this study was the low completion rates of Latina/o students at the CC level. The Digest of Education Statistics (2017) verified that Latina/o CC students are less likely to graduate than those who initially enroll at 4-year institutions. The literature review from this study highlights that there appear to be segregated systems of higher education for CCs where low degree completion rates that Latina/o CC students' outcomes are not equitable when compared to their non-Hispanic counterparts (Felix & Castro, 2018; González, 2015). The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological research was to describe and better understand the lived experiences of Latina/o CC students and their perceptions of the role that academic self-confidence plays in their degree completion.

Although multiple studies have attempted to help understand and reduce the gap that exists for Latina/o CC degree attainment, more research has been requested on how the attribute of academic self-confidence may affect CC degree completion (Crisp et al., 2015). This research is an attempt to fill the gap in practice and address the lack of normed institutional practices to better understand the role of academic self-confidence in Latina/o experiences in the focus CC. As a response to a suggestion by Dowd and Bensimon (2015), this research attempted to focus attention on the equity gap of Latina/o CC students as a way of improving overall completion rates. Unlike the historical trend for CCs, this research aims to address the inequities and respond to social and economic change proactively (see Felix & Castro, 2018; Levin & Kater, 2013).

Each theme developed from this study aims to react, respond, and create understanding to the following research question: What are the lived experiences of Latina/o students at the local CC and their perceptions surrounding academic self-confidence? Additionally, this research attempts to describe and understand more fully the sub-questions of this research: (a) What positive experiences support the CC student's concept of academic self-confidence?; and (b) What negative experiences hinder the CC student's concept of academic self-confidence? Lastly, in this research, I sought to respond to the previous body of literature on Latina/o outcomes and react to whether the findings confirm or disconfirm the previous studies on this topic.

During the analysis process of the two data sets, repetitive meanings and pattern codes emerged. Appendices B and C show how significant the results were in terms of repeated findings from both data sets. The emergent and repetitive findings that led to the developed themes for this study are the following, in alphabetic order: adversity, the benefit and inevitability of obstacles and failure, coming face to face with negative comments, cultural and familial status and advancement, failure, family legacy, getting out of the comfort zone, growth mindset, the importance of growth and change, innate ability and persistence, insatiable quest, internal confidence, lack of understanding college systems, not quitting, opportunity and motivation from family, parental sacrifice, power of love and learning, sense of community in Latino culture, stereotypes for Latina/o students, supportive college personnel, supportive individuals, support in helping navigate the educational system, and work ethic. These meanings materialized repeatedly in both the focus group and the interviews, leading me, as the researcher, to

scrutinize them holistically to form clustered themes that revealed the overall landscape of the phenomenon. From the data analysis process, I found that they fit into the five overall clustered themes described in Chapter 4 from the phenomenological data set.

The key findings of this study that resulted from the research questions led to five overall themes toward better-perceived academic self-confidence for Latina/o CC students. These findings add to the body of literature to react to the gap in practice identified in Chapter 2. Cuellar (2015) detailed that although we know that academic self-confidence rose for Latinas/os at the end of their college experiences, we conversely did not know why or how. The five themes that help address this lack of research were the following: (a) support, (b) failure, (c) familial and cultural alliance, (d) motivation to disempower stereotypes, and (e) intrinsic motivation and growth mindset. Chapter 5 includes discussion and interpretation of these findings with their relation to the body literature that precedes it, the research question, the limitations, recommendations for future research, and most notably, the social change this study may bring.

Interpretation of the Findings

To interpret the findings of this study, I will respond to how the results coexist with the body of literature that precedes this study, react to how the themes respond to the central research question, and ultimately explain how the new description of academic self-confidence will help drive better normed institutional practices. The literature review for this study evidenced that a combination of vibrant campus culture, positive faculty interactions, robust tutoring and mentoring, culturally relevant curriculum, family support, a positive student self-perception, and greater levels of academic self-confidence

and self-efficacy may lead to better educational outcomes for Latina/o college students. The subsequent section speaks to how the preceding literature intersects with the findings of this study. However, a gap in practice existed for how the attribute of academic self-confidence may influence AA degree completion (Crisp et al., 2015). The themes found in this study that may lead to greater levels of academic self-confidence both confirmed the previous literature findings of better achievement in general for Latina/o CC students, but also expand upon the knowledge of how academic self-confidence may be increased in the CC sector for Latina/o students. I believe this research is trustworthy due to the following steps that I followed: member checking for transcriptions, descriptions of academic self-confidence, and overall thematic results. Most notably, however, as the instrument of this research, I remained as close, open, and sensitive to the data, remaining cognizant that “understanding that people are experts of their own experiences” (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 114). This is the intent of lifeworld research and I aimed to adhere to it fully. To begin, I will explain how the themes from this study respond, confirm, and expand upon the preexisting body of literature.

The first theme in this study was the theme of support. As described in Chapter 2, the literature that precedes this study elucidated that a vibrant campus culture (Arellys & Alberta, 2015; Johnson et al., 2014; Rodríguez, & Oseguera, 2015), tutoring and mentoring (Clark et al., 2013; Pérez II & Taylor, 2016; & Salas et al., 2014), and positive faculty interactions (Baker, 2013; DeFreitas & Bravo, 2012; Cuellar, 2014; Lundberg et al., 2018; Trevino & DeFreitas, 2014) were known contributors of academic success for degree-seeking students. The findings of this study show that support from campus

culture, campus staff and faculty, and family positively increase levels of academic self-confidence that led toward better outcomes for degree completion. Participants in this study specifically spoke to the value of faculty, staff, and even other students on campus who helped them gain a better sense of academic self-confidence. In addition, they spoke to the benefit of the support that family or significant others provided financially, emotionally, and mentally. This supports the findings of previous researchers. Sáenz, García-Louis, Drake, and Guida (2018) spoke of the concept of *familismo* and its connection to educational outcomes. Cortez et al. (2014) stated that Latina mothers specifically benefited from the academic journey of their children. Support, regardless of the source, was a repetitive theme that surfaced when students responded to the research question as to how success through the CC was achieved. The existing body of research concurs with this finding, revealing that the overall theme of support is critical on the journey toward degree completion for Latina/o CC students. The findings of this study revealed that support may come in varying forms, but ultimately leads to better educational outcomes and contributes to better perceptions of academic self-confidence. This connection to academic self-confidence contributes to greater knowledge in the body of literature of how the family may augment students' academic self-confidence levels that may also lead to better educational outcomes. This finding directly responds to the gap in the literature mentioned in Chapter 2.

The second theme that resulted from this study was the importance of failure and its relationship to better academic self-confidence. This finding extends upon the knowledge from the literature review of this study as another contributor toward better

outcomes, as perceived by the participants in this study. Crisp et al. (2015) conducted a systematic review of better outcome attainment and failure did not surface as a predictive element. Although failure was not mentioned in the literature of better outcomes for Latina/o CC students as a positive predictor, it was not found to disconfirm any previous literature. I found that failure, which can often be viewed as negative, was ultimately perceived as a positive predictor of achievement in this study. The participants from this study overwhelmingly agreed that failure correlated with higher levels of academic self-confidence that contributed to higher outcomes of success toward the end of their journey, which contributed to the mindset of academic self-confidence. This finding was a surprise to me as the researcher and it is one of the highlights of my research to reveal this finding. I was impressed by the participants' stories of how they persisted when confronting failure and how this attribute ultimately increased their academic self-confidence and forced them to dig deeper toward better educational outcomes. Perhaps this finding illustrates how students can become aware of their strengths and ability to challenge power structures. This directly connects to CRT, the conceptual framework of this study. This theme is powerful and is likely to surprise researchers in the field and create opportunities for deeper dialogue.

The third theme that resulted from this study was familial and cultural alliance and its contribution toward better outcomes for academic self-confidence. The participants from this study shared that although family support is valued, the importance of societal advancement and cultural betterment proved to be a characteristic that helped students persist. This theme aligns with the literature that precedes this study, but also

adds to the body of literature with its contribution (see Clark et al., 2013; Matos, 2015; Perez II & Taylor, 2016). Family support and cultural connectedness are revealed in the literature as an integral contributor for academic persistence showing that familial capital encourages students to persist (Sáenz et al., 2018). However, this study adds to the body of literature, evidencing that familial betterment and societal advancement is found to improve students' academic self-confidence as they pursued their degrees. However, just like in the literature that precedes it, this study shows that familial and cultural alliance is not sufficient alone but, rather, needs to be accompanied by other predictive factors (Carolan-Silva & Ryes, 2013). Crisp et al. (2015) concurred with this finding, arguing that the involvement of the family was a vital aspect toward the pathway toward degree completion. The participants of this study responded overwhelmingly and loudly with their advocacy for how family and culture intersect with their education and its relationship with academic self-confidence. The participants repeatedly spoke to the connectivity that their family and culture played as they pursued their AA degree. This was not factual for every participant, as some responded that they felt a lack of support; however, those who reacted to the value of support shared how vital it was to their success. Multiple participants shared that although the journey toward degree achievement was personal and individualistic, there was a deep sense of achievement on behalf of their family or culture as a whole. Fabián (2020) likewise noted the value of familial connectedness where vibrant communities can reconnect over time and territory showing that culture is not static. This finding also impressed me. The sense of wholeness and alliance that the participants shared with their communities left me with a sense of

overwhelming admiration for these participants and the Latino culture in general (Saenz et al., 2018).

The fourth theme that was found in this study was the motivation to disempower stereotypes. This theme linked with CRT, showing how our systems perpetuate inequitable outcomes. Like the studies that precede this one, CRT was revealed through the themes of this study (Lechuga-Pena & Lechuga, 2018; Izizarry, 2012). This theme, like the theme of failure, did not appear in the literature review for this study, but was not found to disconfirm the literature that precedes it, but instead to extend the knowledge of how Latina/o CC students may improve upon their concept of academic self-confidence. I was similarly surprised by this finding and wrote about its effect in my journal. I was impressed with the participants' thoughtfulness and bravery to respond to stereotypical behavior in positive ways. The participants shared how the perceived negative comments and experiences often gave them the motivation and power to strive forward to beat the odds. I was overwhelmingly impressed and proud of the participants and their intent to empower themselves despite the inequitable educational landscape from which they have succeeded just as CRT states. Although I continue to approve of Gillborn's (2015) assertion that we must not ignore racism or deem it irrelevant, I instead hope to unmask the experiences of our participants to educate how CRT and the racism that defines it must be altered. I was astonished by how this theme intersected with the conceptual framework of this study and its intersectionality with prestige, power, and unfairness (Delgado & Stefanic, 2013). The stereotypical behavior that students experienced spoke to me about the certainty of the unfair and inequitable playing field they experience.

Similarly, researchers in the field may be startled and interested in this finding and use the findings of this study to delve deeper.

Lastly, the fifth theme of intrinsic motivation and growth mindset was related to the subtopic of self-efficacy from the literature review (Chun et al., 2018; Manzano-Sanchez et al., 2015). The participants of this study corroborated that their internal grit and belief in themselves not only predicted positive outcomes for them but also positively influenced their perceptions of increasing academic self-confidence. Many participants from the phenomenological interviews and focus groups relayed that something unquantifiable inside of them gave them the power to persist and pursue their goals. The term *growth mindset* surfaced on multiple occasions, giving students the vehicle to define how both failure and stereotypical experiences would not define their success or future. The research from the literature review on this topic is directly connected with the findings of this study. The literature review spoke to the positive characteristic of self-efficacy and its effect on decision-making and studying to produce better outcomes (Chun et al., 2015). Researchers have argued for the importance of self-efficacy and its effect on students' performance (Han et al., 2017; Manzano-Sanchez et al., 2018). Lastly, Bandura (2006) revealed that, within 13 different institutions, self-efficacy played a vital role in students' academic success. The final theme of intrinsic motivation and growth mindset, as well as the other four that precede it, help to contribute to this invitation to research on how Latina/o CC students may continue to achieve better educational outcomes with the improvement of their academic self-confidence.

Two areas from the literature review were not represented in the findings of this study as overall themes. The two topics were the role that student self-perception plays in educational attainment and the value of a culturally relevant curriculum. It is my personal opinion that these two subtopics from the literature review were not disconfirmed by the findings of this study but rather were not found to be significantly related to the characteristic of academic self-confidence in Latina/o CC students. Overall, I found the themes from this study to extend the vast existing body of literature on Latina/o educational outcomes and their relation to academic self-confidence and contribute toward the gaps in the body of literature mentioned in Chapter 2 (Crisp et al., 2015; Lundberg et al., 2018; Manzano-Sanchez et al., 2018).

One consistent revealing from the literature review that precedes this study and the findings of this study itself are that no single recipe contains the answer to closing the equity gap experienced by Latina/o CC students. Instead, intrinsically motivated, heavily supported and culturally empowered Latina/o students who rise from failure and stereotypes are the students who can reverse the trends. The participants in this study described their educational experiences with an openness and willingness that humbled me, with a desire to share their sometimes difficult narratives to empower those students who follow them. Although the challenges they endured became part of the dialogue, the triumph of an AA degree was more of a focus for all participants. Their honesty and sincerity when describing their perspectives of the phenomenon is why this research will make an impact in the field.

Overarching Research Question

The following central research question of this study drove this research: What are the lived experiences of Latina/o students at the local CC and their perceptions surrounding academic self-confidence? Phenomenological research aims to better understand the describe the lived experiences of participants surrounding a certain phenomenon with intentionality and sensitivity (Vagle, 2018). The interviews from the lived experiences of the participants of this study evidence that academic self-confidence is a difficult phenomenon to describe and define. The participants did not distinctively create this description, but rather it was derived from the uniqueness of the experiences of interviewing and developing a cohesive statement that resonated overall. However, reflective lifeworld research advocates for the description of a phenomenon that has not been described previously (Dahlberg et al., 2008). As described in Chapter 3, Bandura (1997) stated that “confidence is a nondescript term that refers to the strength of belief but does not necessarily specify what the certainty is about” and that “confidence is a catchword rather than a construct embedded in a theoretical system” (p. 382). The experiences of the participants varied in many aspects, but the nuances of their agreement and the repetitive meanings that emerged led to the formulated description. Participants shared that they valued the journey of learning despite the inevitable challenges and barriers they experienced. Each articulated that this journey was not without its complications, but that a deep desire that came from within that was empowered by general support and family and culture was what helped motivate this attribute of academic self-confidence.

The literature that precedes this study never described academic self-confidence specifically, allowing this description to be the first in the field specifically related to Latina/o CC degree-seeking students. The participants shared a deep sense of internal commitment to academia that was fostered by the five themes of (a) support, (b) failure, (c) familial and cultural alliance, (d) motivation to disempower stereotypes, and (e) intrinsic motivation and growth mindset. All participants' participation in this research study contributed to the creation of this description of the phenomenon.

I am both appreciative and awestruck by the participants' responses and descriptions of this undefined "catchword" as it personally relates to them and their experiences. This description embodies the uncertainties and certainties the participants shared upon the request of defining the undefinable. It is my opinion that this vetted description holistically answers the overarching question of this research: What are the lived experiences of Latina/o students at the local CC and their perceptions surrounding academic self-confidence? The description created from this study supports the previous literature that argued for the benefit of validated academic self-confidence in the educational realm (Acevedo-Gil et al., 2015; Cuellar, 2014). It also supports the notion Cuellar (2015) explored about how levels of academic self-confidence do not exist in silos, but rather are experienced with institutional supports and background characteristics of the students. The description created from this study as Latina/o CC students perceive it is as follows: Academic self-confidence is a growth-mindset framework that successfully creates capacity for students to benefit in the world of academia regardless of the perceived obstacles, failures, insecurities, and pressures

experienced. The inextricable external factors that affect academic self-confidence are responded to by taking the courage to ask for help, with the power to pursue clear, personal, and individualized goals that ultimately appreciate the value and love of learning for learning's sake.

The results from this study have been interpreted through the lens of critical race theory (CRT), the conceptual framework. Hernández (2016) argued that how we recognize the social forces of racism, privilege, and power may help students redefine themselves with more self-authorship. Garcia et al. (2018) shared how CRT has been a commonplace framework in higher education in qualitative advanced research in the past 15 years. If the attribute of academic self-confidence can be articulated and understood with more clarity and precision and it pertains to Latina/o CC degree-seeking students, the power of our societal hierarchical structures may become untethered. The multicultural society we build with more education and knowledge can be used as a leveling mechanism to empower the marginalized; better outcomes may be experienced for all, creating a system of justice and equity. As stated in Chapter 1, this research was an attempt at the honest inquiry to acquire knowledge and powerful justification that may be able to reshape the inequitable systems that maintain oppression (see Freire, 2000; hooks, 2000). Moreover, this research was an attempt to fill the gap in practice, bringing forward research to help answer how academic self-confidence may be fostered in the CC sector for our Latina/o students.

Sub-Questions

The five themes that resulted from conducting this research seek to define and respond to the two sub-questions that are offshoots of the central research question. The two sub-questions that stemmed from the central overarching question for this study were the following: (a) What positive experiences support the CC student's concept of academic self-confidence?; and (b) What negative experiences hinder the CC student's concept of academic self-confidence?

All five following themes have been found to answer the first sub-question of this research: (a) support, (b) failure, (c) familial and cultural alliance, (d) motivation to disempower stereotypes, and (e) intrinsic motivation and growth mindset. The subsequent paragraphs explain how each theme uniquely responds to this first sub-question.

The first theme of support responds to the first set of sub-questions on how academic self-confidence supports the students' concept. The participants concurred that support throughout their educational journey was a vital element attached to their success and overall concept of academic self-confidence. Whether the support was from faculty, staff, a parent, a coach, a girlfriend, or a tutor, the interviews stressed how support acted as a catalyst for persistence. This theme resonated strongly throughout the phenomenological interviews and the focus group. Implications for practice can be found in the implications section.

Similarly, the theme of failure was ironically attributed to answering the first sub-question as well. As Chapter 4 illustrates, the importance of failure and its ultimate betterment of academic self-confidence was a profound theme. César from the focus

group said, “I think that failing kind of helped me out a bit. It humbled me, and make me think that I have to put in actual work...” Like César, students argued that even though failure may be perceived negatively by their culture at times, often it gave them the chance to dig deep and realize that failure is a misnomer for opportunity. Implications for practice can be found in the implications section.

Thirdly, the theme of familial and cultural alliance repeatedly emerged as a powerful connection that increased the participants’ perceptions of academic self-confidence and answers sub-question that stemmed from the central research question. I also believe this theme is associated with the concept of identity found in the focus group. The perceived importance of how identity can play a vital role in the way students move forward and complete was a pattern code that I believe would have connected on a larger scale if time would have allowed. The unique aspect of community and familial bonds that exist within the Latino culture was a source of commentary for all participants in this research. The students’ concept of academic self-confidence was inextricably tied to family and culture. Family and culture were many times the reason behind entering the college sector as well as persisting throughout. It could not be argued that this theme empowered the students to achieve and complete and increase their levels of academic self-confidence. Implications for practice can be found in the implications section.

The fourth theme of motivation to disempower stereotypes was a surprising theme that emerged as a positive predictor for better academic self-confidence. In multiple instances, the students shared that perceived judgments and racist remarks left them with a sense of empowerment that could not be revoked. One of the participants shared a

metaphor about how he uses stereotypes and difficult situations from his life as a way to endure. He stated,

Essentially, every time that I'm tired or that I'm having a hard day or something, I have this cookie jar of things. It's not really cookies, but it's all these different things that have had a huge impact in my life. It could be something like my mom, my upbringing, the fact that my parents didn't have a good education, growing up with a single mom because my dad passed away when I was two. That judgmental comment is also in the cookie jar from that one person that told me not to get my hopes up when I told him that I wanted to apply for Stanford, UC Berkeley or Santa Cruz. All those things are in my cookie jar.

Pancho articulated impeccably how perceived stereotypes need not be a hindrance toward better academic self-confidence, but rather an aspect in his life that makes him want to persevere. Implications for practice can be found in the implications section. This theme of disempowering stereotypes intersects with the conceptual framework for this study (CRT). These perceived judgmental experiences evidence just how relevant CRT is with the educational landscape concerning racism. This example above and the theme overall shows how racism and inequity are maintained and perpetuated in our systems (Gillborn, 2015), but also how empowering the narratives of our students can be not only for their achievement but for the achievement of culture overall.

Lastly, intrinsic motivation and growth mindset was a remarkable theme that appeared from the data of the lived experiences of the participants. I believe this theme was the most impressionable to me as the researcher. This unquantifiable characteristic

seemed to resonate with all participants, whether they could articulate it or not. The participants possessed a deep sense of commitment to internal and external growth, which ultimately led to better levels of academic self-confidence. It was this mindset and this resistance to forfeiting despite the barriers that lit up this research. Implications for practice can be found in the implications section.

One the other hand, two of the themes paradoxically were found to answer sub-question *b* as well as sub-question *a*. The second sub-question of this research was: What negative experiences hinder the CC student's concept of academic self-confidence? The second theme of failure and the fourth theme of motivation to disempower stereotypes were found to answer how negative experiences can hinder the students' concept of academic self-confidence. Although initially perceived as a deterrent in their quest toward achievement, the participants found these themes ultimately became predictors for better academic self-confidence. For this reason, these themes are listed under both sets of sub-questions. It was found that perceived negativity can manifest into positive experiences. This was a powerful conclusion that resulted from this study that is a significant and positive surprise.

Students additionally shared individualized experiences of hardships, challenges, and barriers that altered their pathways; however, overall, there was no concrete and definitive patterning found that led to thematic creation. No two responses were found to be the same despite the specific question that aimed to answer sub-question *b*. Some initial codes or meanings that responded to experiences that hindered academic self-confidence were the following: ethnic and sexual identity, family hardships, the

importance of going straight into the workforce, lack of resources, lack of attention from parents, lack of respect in the classroom, lack of understanding college systems, playing sports, and teen pregnancy. However, it was not the focus of any of the participants. All participants in this study invested time for dialogue in aspects that positively affected their academic journey toward better academic self-confidence. As the researcher and instrument of this study, this discovery was very impressionable to me as I analyzed the data. Instead of spending time on articulating what did not serve them, more thoughtful attention was given to the positive aspects that impacted their success. I find this to be a small result in itself, suggesting that even this noteworthy aspect relates to the value of a growth mindset to beat all barriers and obstacles.

As stated in Chapter 3, the phenomenological interviewing drove this study with an intent to delve deeply into the lives of the participants; however, the focus group also enhanced this study significantly. As the researcher, I was awestruck by the resounding repetitive nature of the patterned codes and meanings. The focus group intended to authenticate and confirm the results of the phenomenological data. There is no doubt this was achieved. However, I believe the focus group strengthened the data set from the phenomenological so powerfully. The one pattern code of *identity* that emerged from the focus group did not disconfirm the results of this study, but rather provided an additional theme that may be investigated more fully in future research. All participants, whether from the graduated cohort, or a current student, wholeheartedly agreed with the concept of academic self-confidence and how this attribute may be fostered for better outcome attainment.

Both sub-questions were intended to create space for more detail and specificity from the overarching central question with questions formed intentionally to respond to both. Both were found to be answered with clarity and saturation from the data which stemmed directly from the lived experiences from the participants. From the use of my reflective journal, I was positively surprised by the themes of failure and motivation to disempower stereotypes. With the acknowledgement of my Caucasian status, I was critically aware of how CRT played a role not only in the foundation of this research but also in the conclusion. As the researcher, this awareness helped me validate just how important this research is. I am proud and excited about the changes it may have. With this knowledge, I would like to share my most humble thanks to the participants of this study, without whom this research would be possible. I strived to relate their experiences honestly and with integrity, hoping to eventually alter the landscape of higher education even in the smallest manner. It is with the participants' openness, honesty, and faith in me as the researcher that I conclude this section.

Limitations of the Study

As stated in Chapter 1, the phenomenological research conducted for this study cannot be generalizable to all CCs due to the limited number of interviewed participants and the fact that only one CC is used for this research. There is only one rural setting used in this research. Additionally, it is noted that the lived experiences of the participants for the in-depth interviews and focus groups in this study may not be generalizable to the overall Latina/o CC population. Additionally, this research did not control for gender, age, sexual orientation, or first-generational status.

Recommendations

This study focused on the lived experiences of Latina/o CC students about their perceptions surrounding academic self-confidence. The literature that precedes this study recommended more research be conducted on how academic self-confidence, as a predictor of persistence and completion for Latina/o students, may be understood and described better to help with better outcomes (Crisp et al., 2015; Lundberg et al., 2018; Manzano-Sanchez et al., 2018). From this study, I was able to appreciate and recognize how academic self-confidence is conveyed through the lives of the participants from whom the data were derived. As stated in the limitations section, the themes that resulted from this study may not be generalizable to the overall Latina/o CC population due to the single setting where this study took place.

As the researcher, I believe this is a topic worthy of further research. I believe it would be beneficial to investigate how academic self-confidence may help Latina/o CC students achieve better outcomes to close the achievement gap by controlling for characteristics such as, sex, age, first-generational status, and/or sexual orientation. Additionally, I would recommend further studies on the perceptions of academic self-confidence be conducted in both rural and urban CC settings, focusing on Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) and non-HSIs. Much of the literature that precedes this study focuses on the benefits for better educational outcomes that HSIs can provide.

Furthermore, in this study both failure and motivation to disempower stereotypes were found to be positive for the participants and their success. Due to the fact, the participants from the phenomenological interviews were able to achieve their AA degree

from the focus college and the focus group participants have been successful, further research on how failure and perceived stereotypes play a role in overall Latina/o degree completion is suggested. In this study, I aimed to contribute to the preexisting body of literature on how the educational attainment gap may be lessened for Latina/o CC students by understanding predictive attributes that achieve better outcomes. Nonetheless, this study on academic self-confidence is only an initial and novel understanding of a phenomenon that relies heavily on the individualities of its participants and the lives that they have lived. It is my hope, as the researcher, that this study is a platform for more research on this topic of academic self-confidence.

Implications

The implications of this study are theoretical, practical, and empirical. Theoretically, this study leads to positive implications and possible outcomes for Latina/o CC students thus minimizing the disparity experienced. For practical purposes, the data from this study will driveways for the focus CC to improve degree completion outcomes at a crucial time when more Latina/o students are entering the doors. The five themes that resulted from this study will be presented to the focus college with the intent to create an institutional dialogue that asks why these inequitable gaps exist and how institutionally we can respond to them to change the outcomes. Empirically, the findings of this study can serve as a pivotal point of embarking for researchers to explore this phenomenon of academic self-confidence in more depth.

As stated in the purpose section of this study, this research is an attempt to fill the gap in practice and address the lack of normed institutional practices to better understand

the role of self-confidence in Latina/o experiences in the focus CC. Furthermore, the results from this study will be presented not only to the Board of Trustees and the administrative team overall at the focus college, but the results will also be used to drive institutional dialogue for a new subpopulation of Latina/o students at the college who will begin as tuition-free, first-time, full-time students. I will create space for dialogue that keeps CRT as a frame of reference. Specifically, for example, I would suggest that we find ways to encourage avenues for support and methods to increase growth mindsets in the CC sector. As another example, I suggest we create space for Latina/o CC students to speak to the perceived stereotypes they experience. Lastly, I intend to ask the institution to react and think about the description of academic self-confidence that was created during this study. As a part of this process, I hope that the focus CC will critically reflect upon how our institutional standards and set practices support this definition. As a way to react and respond to the inequities that exist within our educational systems, I intend for these results to drive open and creative dialogue that seeks to understand and describe the Latina/o CC students' experiences surrounding academic self-confidence to increase academic achievement.

Conclusion

The findings of this study evidence the complexity that is associated with improving educational outcomes for Latina/o CC students. The methods and protocols that have addressed CC Latina/o students' lower completion rates have differed according to the literature in a myriad of ways. The findings of this study help describe and better understand how the characteristic of academic self-confidence as seen through

a CRT lens has played a role during the journey toward an associate's degree for Latina/o students. The created description of the phenomenon of academic self-confidence aids college personnel to cognize how this attribute may be augmented in the CC sector.

The findings of this study also concur that the predictive attributes associated with higher levels of completion do not exist in silos. Much like the complexity of human beings in general, the equation for better educational outcomes is individualistic and unique for each student. As researchers and educators alike, we must value the narratives and appreciate the cultural and linguistic differences of our students to empower them to succeed at their highest levels. The five themes found in this study contribute to another set of puzzle pieces to the beautiful and diverse tapestry made from the unique threads of individual students. The powerful narratives from the intrinsically mighty, heavily-supported, and culturally empowered Latina/o students who rise from failure and stereotypes are the students who can reverse the trends. As we remain open and honest to the fact that this puzzle will always contain more pieces for us to discover and understand, we remain available to respond and fight against the systems that perpetuate the fact that this tapestry is finite and unchangeable. We instead fight for the belief that it is dynamic and revolutionizing.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions for Phenomenological Interviewing and Focus Group Initial

Phenomenological Interview Questions

1. Describe your educational path and how it led you to college to pursue an AA degree.
2. How long did it take to pursue your AA degree?
3. What are your career aspirations?
4. Please describe any challenges that you believe could have negatively affected the AA path for you.
5. Please describe any positive experiences that you had that were influential in your journey toward degree completion.
6. Explain what aspects you think made those experiences positive.
7. Describe the people who have been influential throughout your study at this college.
8. When you hear the phrase “academic self-confidence,” what comes to mind?
9. What challenges or barriers have you encountered regarding academic self-confidence in the classroom during your time at the college?
10. Share an experience when you feel academic self-confidence helped you succeed in the classroom.
11. Share an experience when you feel academic self-confidence helped you succeed in outside the classroom.

12. What is your description of an academically self-confident student at a community college?

Second Phenomenological Interview Questions

1. After viewing the transcription of the first interview, do you have any questions? Do you have any further commentary you would like to add?
2. What is your current highest degree?
3. What is your ethnicity?
4. Are you a first-generation CC student?
5. From your experience, how do you think being Latino/a may have played a role in your ability to gain academic self-confidence at the focus college?
6. Share any differences in academics or socially that you believe may have been different as a Latina/o student on campus.
7. Have you encountered any of those differences personally? If so, how did you cope?
8. From your experience, has your race played a role as you pursued your AA degree?
9. From your perspective, are there any services or resources that the focus college could offer Latina/o students that would benefit their academic self-confidence?
10. From your experience, please describe services or resources that are offered that have been positive for you.
11. Are Latina/o students seemingly receptive to the program offerings? How do you interpret their reactions?
12. What programs did you participate in and what was your experience?

13. Based on your personal experiences, share three pieces of advice you would offer to other Latina/o students who are seeking an AA at the focus college.
14. How would you encourage this attribute of academic self-confidence in others pursuing their degree?
15. What external factors, if any, motivated this characteristic of academic self-confidence for you?
16. What good advice, if any, was shared with you prior to starting your educational journey at the focus college?
17. Are there any additional experiences surrounding academic self-confidence you would like to share that you think will further enrich this study?

Guide for Focus Interview Questions

We will begin the interview by introducing ourselves to one another. Please share your name with the focus group, how long you have attended the focus college, and what your proposed area of study is. You will be able to follow along with the questions during the interview. As a reminder, this focus group will be audio-taped to facilitate my notetaking. I will be the only individual that will have access to the audio recording. Lastly, please remember that what we discuss and what you hear within this focus group is to remain confidential and not shared.

1. Discuss your feelings when you first started at the focus of college? Discuss your first impressions of the college?
2. Discuss what comes to mind when you hear the phrase “academic self-confidence?”

3. When do you feel most academically self-confident in a classroom setting?
4. Under what conditions has academic self-confidence been fostered since you have been at the college?
5. Under what conditions have you felt a lack of academic self-confidence in the educational setting?
6. How do you feel Latina/o students experience the journey at the community college differently than other students?
7. How do you think being Latino/a plays a role in your ability to gain academic self-confidence at the focus college?
8. Discuss how you feel about the services and/or resources that the focus college offers Latina/o students.
9. Based on personal experience, what pieces of advice would you offer to other Latina/o students who are seeking an AA at the focus college?
10. Discuss what good advice, if any, was shared with you prior to starting your educational journey at the focus college.
11. Are there any additional experiences anyone would like to share that will further enrich this study?

Appendix B

List of Codes for Phenomenological Data

Although many meanings resulted from the analyzing of phenomenological data from the interviews with the participant, the 31 repetitive meanings were the following, listed in alphabetical order:

- adversity,
- benefit and inevitability of obstacles and failure,
- coming face to face with negative comments,
- cultural and familial status and advancement,
- cultural stereotypes for Latina women,
- failure,
- failure defining difficult moments,
- family legacy,
- getting out of the comfort zone,
- growth mindset,
- importance of adversity as motivation,
- importance of courses that were not easy,
- importance of growth and change,
- innate ability and persistence,
- insatiable quest,
- internal confidence,
- lack of resources,
- lack of understanding college systems,
- Latina/o students at lower standards,
- not quitting,
- opportunity and motivation from family,
- parental sacrifice,
- power and love of learning,
- pressure of working a job,
- sense of community in Latino culture,
- stereotypes for Latina/o students,
- supportive college personnel,
- supportive individuals,
- support in helping navigate the educational system,
- using negative comments for good, and
- work ethic.

Appendix C

Lists of Codes from Focus Group

The 25 pattern codes that emerged from the focus group were the following, listed in alphabetical order:

- adversity,
- benefit and inevitability of obstacles and failure,
- coming face to face with negative comments,
- cultural and familial status and advancement,
- failure,
- family legacy,
- getting out of the comfort zone,
- growth mindset,
- identity,
- importance of growth and change,
- innate ability and persistence,
- insatiable quest,
- internal confidence,
- lack of understanding college systems,
- not quitting,
- opportunity and motivation from family,
- parental sacrifice,
- power and love of learning,
- pressure of working a job,
- sense of community in Latino culture,
- stereotypes for Latina/o students,
- supportive college personnel,
- supportive individuals,
- support in helping navigate the educational system, and
- work ethic.