

The Uncertain Path Toward College: How Intersectionality Shaped the Experiences of Latinas Enrolled at a Hispanic-Serving Institution

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This is a longitudinal qualitative study of Latina college students who were members of a Latina mentoring program at a 4-year Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) in Texas, where they made up the largest student population since 2013. Guided by Chicana feminist epistemology and intersectionality, we discuss educational experiences students had during high school as they considered their college path, when enrolling in an HSI, and during college. We explore the following research question: How did intersectional experiences shape the educational trajectory of Latina undergraduates enrolled at an HSI? We identify how multiple forms of oppression and social identities shaped the high school experiences of Latinas and learned how they found belonging at an HSI by finding spaces and individuals who validated their intersectionality. Through this study, we demonstrate why Latina student intersectionality—not only while in college but prior to enrolling as well—is important for researchers and educational leaders to consider.

Keywords: *Chicana feminism, intersectionality, Latinas, higher education, qualitative*

In 2019, 36% of Hispanics¹ between the ages of 18 and 24 enrolled in college (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021), with the majority (67%) enrolling at Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs; Excelencia in Education, 2021b). HSIs are public or private postsecondary institutions that are federally recognized based on full-time-equivalent undergraduate enrollment of at least 25% Hispanic students (Contreras & Contreras, 2015; Excelencia in Education, 2021a).² In 2020, 569 institutions, or about 18% of all higher education institutions, had this designation, a 93% increase over the past decade (Excelencia in Education, 2021b). Another 362 institutions are identified as “emerging HSIs,” with enrollment of Hispanic undergraduates making up 15%–24.9% (Excelencia in Education, 2021a). However, the federal designation of an HSI has limitations in that it does not define *servicing* and instead focuses on enrollment numbers (Garcia, 2017, 2019; Garcia et al., 2019). This limitation of the designation points to the importance of documenting the experiences of Latinx students at HSIs to further understand what *servicing* means.

Making up 58% of Latinx college students in 2019, Latinas outnumbered Latino male college students (Excelencia in Education, 2019). Given their higher college enrollment, Latinas could be viewed as not needing additional support, but a reliance on looking only at this statistic may obscure the intersectionality that Latinas navigate across the education system. *Intersectionality* refers to the

multiple forms of oppression that affect marginalized individuals and was first coined by legal scholar Crenshaw (1991) when examining the intersecting structures of power, such as racism, classism, and sexism, affecting women of color. Latina college students may have distinct experiences that affect their journey to and engagement in higher education (Espino, 2020; J. Flores & Garcia, 2009; Rodriguez et al., 2000; Sy, 2006; Zambrana & Hurtado, 2015). Before enrolling in college, they may face multiple cultural and sociopolitical realities, such as attending segregated and under-resourced schools, coming from working-class and/or mixed-status families, and being immigrants (San Miguel & Donato, 2009; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008; Zambrana & Hurtado, 2015; Zambrana & MacDonald, 2009). Yet too few studies center the intersectional experiences of Latinas at HSIs.

In this article, we focus on findings from a longitudinal qualitative study at a large public university and HSI that we call Magnolia University (MU), a pseudonym. We interviewed 25 Latinas who were part of a campus Latina mentoring program (LMP), also a pseudonym. LMP was launched in 2016 by MU administrators who identified a critical need for a holistic mentoring program that could support Latina students on campus by honoring their lived realities. Latina faculty, staff, and graduate students mentor students in the program; many of the mentors are MU alumni and first generation, immigrants, or daughters of immigrants



(López et al., 2021). Since its establishment in 2016, LMP grew from serving 18 students to 126 students in 2021.

Through Chicana feminist epistemology (CFE) and intersectionality frameworks, we explore the following research question: *How did intersectional experiences shape the educational trajectory of Latina undergraduates enrolled at an HSI?* We address this question by looking at their high school and college experiences. In the next section, we discuss our theoretical frameworks, followed by a review of literature on Latina college enrollment as well as a critical analysis of the role of HSIs.

Theoretical Frameworks

CFE and Intersectionality

We were guided by the scholarship of Chicana scholars who have documented the experience of inhabiting institutions not created to serve Chicanas, Latinas, and other women of color (Calderón et al., 2012; J. Flores & Garcia, 2009; A. Hurtado, 2003). CFE centers the work of Chicana scholars who have challenged dominant and deficit representations of Chicanas and Latinas. Chicana scholars have often revealed the challenges that institutions have in recognizing Chicana working-class students and understanding their lived realities (Delgado Bernal, 1998; J. Flores & Garcia, 2009). CFE challenges the notion of objectivity in educational research, acknowledges the differences of Chicanas' lived experiences, and presents women's intuitions as valid sources of knowledge (Delgado Bernal, 1998). The Latina students in this study encountered various challenges along their educational paths, and all were successfully enrolled and navigating college at the time of their interviews. As a team of Chicana and Latina researchers, we also used this lens to guide our research design.

Through CFE, we aimed to create a validating space for participants to share their counter-stories of resilience, resistance, and community cultural wealth (Pérez Huber, 2009; Yosso, 2005). Solórzano and Yosso (2001) describe counter-stories as "a method of telling stories of those people whose experiences are not often told" (p. 32). Counter-stories also challenge dominant discourses, and by identifying the counter-stories reflective of their social identities, we aimed to highlight the resistance to oppressive structures of power that we saw in many of the young women we interviewed. Yosso (2005) puts forth a model of community cultural wealth that recognizes the assets that individuals from nondominant communities hold and use to navigate systems, such as educational institutions. These forms of cultural capital could be, but are not limited to, aspirational, familial, cultural, linguistic, resistant, navigational, and social (Yosso, 2005).

Intersectionality allows us to consider how multiple forms of oppression (e.g., racism, classism, sexism, nativism, and ableism) shaped Latina students' educational experiences from high school to college. Intersectionality has its

roots in women of color feminisms; it acknowledges the marginalized identities of individuals and how these identities are simultaneously shaped by systems of oppression and exclusion (Collins, 2015; Crenshaw, 1991; A. Hurtado, 2018; Zambrana & Hurtado, 2015). Collins (2015) cautions researchers using intersectionality to not weigh one form of oppression over others—for example, class over race or gender over race—but instead to examine how they influence individuals' experiences in tandem.

Education scholars have used intersectionality to examine how many forms of oppression have converged to shape the lives of Latinx students in higher education (Alemán, 2018; Cuellar & Salinas, 2022; Núñez, 2014; Zambrana & MacDonald, 2009). Núñez (2014) examines previous limitations in higher education research about Latinos that focuses on the intersectionality of Latinos and asks, "How can higher education research be expanded to incorporate attention to interlocking systems of oppression that contribute to social reproduction of inequities in postsecondary educational outcomes, particularly the case of Latinos?" (p. 35). Núñez (2014) cautions against relying solely on Latinos' multiple social identities as analytical foci and underscores the importance of examining "systemic contexts shaping college access and success" (p. 37). Drawing from previous scholars (Anthias, 2013; Dill & Zambrana, 2009; Roscigno, 2011), she puts forth a multilevel model of intersectionality for college access and success of Latinos in higher education that we found relevant for our study. The model has three levels: (a) multiple social identities (e.g., race, gender, class, national origin, and immigration status), (b) domains of power (organizational, representational, intersubjective, and experiential), and (c) historicity (role of history in shaping experiences) (Núñez, 2014, pp. 49–53). Zambrana and Hurtado (2015) also discuss intersectionality in education research when examining the experiences of Mexican American students. Considering students' life course, they examine the "stages of the life course when critical decisions are made" (Zambrana & Hurtado, 2015, p. 93) through an intersectional lens and how events at every stage in life affect future ones. This perspective aligns with our study, which considers not only the HSI college context but also the precollege experiences that shape Latinas' educational trajectories.

Related to the relationship between CFE and intersectionality and why we use these frameworks together, Hurtado (2020) argues that "intersectionality has always been present in Chicana feminist writings, although it was not explicitly named as such" (p. 29). Collins (2015) also discusses the role of Chicana/Latina scholars in theorizing about intersectionality. For example, Hurtado (2020) and Collins (2015) mention the work of Chicana feminist scholar Anzaldúa (1987) and her contributions to themes of intersectionality, such as "border crossing, border space, boundaries, and relationality" (Collins, 2015, p. 9). Hurtado (2018) applies

Anzaldúa's borderland theory and mestiza consciousness to intersectionality through a lens of social identity theory, which allows for an examination of identity as fluid. These perspectives allowed us to examine our participants' identities at home, school, and college and through various sociopolitical contexts as fluid.

Literature Review

Why Latinas Enroll at HSIs

Critical to HSI research is understanding why Latinx students enroll in them. HSI Latinx students are likely to recommend these institutions to peers in their community (Núñez et al., 2011). Proximity to home and family is another reason that many Latinx students enroll in local community colleges or public universities (Carales & López, 2020; Contreras & Contreras, 2015); students who place a high value on staying close to home are more likely to attend an HSI or emerging HSI (Cuellar, 2012), which tends to be located where large numbers of Latinx live (Dayton et al., 2004). Latinas may experience pressure from family to stay close to home to fulfill familial roles, such as caring for younger siblings or helping with other household responsibilities (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012). However, it is also important to consider the agency that Latinas hold by enrolling in HSIs close to home. Carales and López (2020) argue that staying close to home for college should not be viewed from a deficit perspective as it is sometimes; instead, attention should be paid to the supportive role that family and community play for many Latinx college students (Kiyama & Rios-Aguilar, 2017; Matos, 2015).

In their schooling across K–12 and into higher education, Latinas may confront stereotypes based on their gender, race, class, culture, and immigration status, as well as discourses that they lack motivation to attend college (Aragon, 2018; Cavazos et al., 2009) or the ability to advance in their educational careers (Ek et al., 2010; Valencia, 2002). Yet research has shown that Latinas resist oppressive contexts through their community cultural wealth to counter these negative perspectives (Pérez Huber, 2009; Yosso, 2005). Latinas at HSIs may use the practice of resilient resistance and *familismo* [familism]—beliefs of religiosity, *cuentos* [stories], *consejos* [wisdom], and *apoyo* [support]—to confront the negative educational expectations expressed by others (Liou et al., 2021). Studies on Latinas in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) at HSIs highlight how students use family and the cultural values of education and hard work to overcome competitiveness (Aguirre-Covarrubias et al., 2015) and oppression (Contreras Aguirre et al., 2020) in a White, male-dominated field. Given the overlapping forms of oppression that Latinas face—including racism, sexism, nativism, and classism—there is a need to further understand their experiences and to recognize their intersectionality across multiple levels (Núñez, 2014; Zambrana & Hurtado, 2015).

Critical Understandings of the Role of HSIs

HSI scholars who challenge the notion that the federal definition properly describes what it means to be *Hispanic serving* (Contreras et al., 2008; Santiago, 2012) note that the “federal legislation is a political construct” (Santiago, 2012, p. 163) and that the term is not “clearly defined in higher education research” (Garcia, 2017, p. 112). To address this gap, scholars have characterized what *Hispanic serving* means in the context of HSIs and Latinx students' success and degree completion (Contreras & Contreras, 2015; Contreras et al., 2008). Multiple studies point out that many HSIs are slow to make *Hispanic serving* a focus of their institutional identities and fall short in efforts to achieve equitable outcomes for Latinx students (Contreras & Contreras, 2015; Cuellar, 2019; S. Hurtado & Ruiz Alvarado, 2012).

Most HSIs were not founded with the explicit purpose of educating Latinx students and instead have been charged with transitioning their institutional priorities to serve the students they enroll (Doran, 2015; Gonzalez et al., 2020; S. Hurtado & Ruiz Alvarado, 2012). The disconnect between HSI designation and institutional identity is evident when some HSIs do not explicitly cite being HSIs in their mission statements or mention the demographic of students they enroll (Carter & Patterson, 2019; Contreras et al., 2008). Similarly, some HSIs do not mention the HSI designation or articulate their institutional goals, measures, and practices for serving Latinx students in their strategic plans and thus engage in “Latinx ghosting” through strategic misalignment (A. Flores & Leal, 2020). Garcia et al. (2019) create a “multidimensional framework of servingness” of HSIs that calls on the institutions to consider not only enrollment and academic outcomes but also experiences, internal organizational dimensions, and external influences. Relatedly, Garcia (2017, 2019) proposes a typology of HSIs that emphasizes the idea that if an institution truly means to serve Latinx students, it should embrace an identity that not only focuses on institutional outcomes but also affirms students' cultural backgrounds. The typology provides a model for examining variations among institutions and for understanding institutional identity in the context of Latinx student servingness (Garcia, 2017, 2019).

Scholars have also proposed disrupting traditional measures of excellence and academic success—such as persistence rates and full-time enrollment—to better serve Latinx students (Cuellar et al., 2017; Doran, 2015; Garcia & Okhidoi, 2015). Contreras and Contreras (2015) argue that today's Latinx students are more likely to attend school part-time, work more than 20 hours a week, and enroll in classes intermittently, lengthening the average time it takes to complete their degree. In many ways, the traditional measures of success can promote deficit ideas of Latinx students, much like the language of “achievement gap” has in K–12 education (Chambers, 2009), and thus not adequately reflect how institutions should *serve* Latinx students. Through our study,

we aim to go beyond these traditional measures when learning about the moments that shape the educational experiences of Latinas. One way to disrupt traditional measures is by elevating culturally relevant structures (Garcia & Okhidoi, 2015). In one case study, an HSI institutionalized the Chicana/o Studies Department, which offered courses that met the general education requirements for all students, affirming its commitment to historically excluded students (Garcia & Okhidoi, 2015). In our study, we seek to identify these structures and institutional agents (Museus & Neville, 2012; Stanton-Salazar, 1997) that support Latinas by acknowledging their lived realities.

Methodology

Chicana Feminist Participatory Action Research

For the methodology of this longitudinal qualitative study, we built on our CFE theoretical framework by using participatory action research (PAR; Anderson, 2017). We refer to this methodology as Chicana feminist PAR, or CFPAR (López et al., 2020; López et al., 2021; Sánchez, 2009). PAR allows researchers to produce “knowledge in collaboration with those most affected by social and educational policies” (Anderson, 2017, p. 444). Although PAR can be done with various groups, such as youth, educators, and community members, by naming CFE in our framework and approach, we continuously centered and critically examined the experiences of Chicanas and Latinas in our study—the researchers and the participants. In year 2 of the program, a multigenerational group of mentors and students from LMP launched a research collective led by López (first author). CFPAR allowed us to collaboratively engage in the design of this study and inform the regular programmatic discussions with the director of LMP (López et al., 2020). This article is co-authored by four members of this research collective, and in the following sections, we describe our positionality, the institutional background, data collection and sources, and analysis.

Positionality

CFPAR informed how we reflected on our positionality in relation to this study. Lykes and Hersberg (2012) comment that “by challenging static, bounded notions of ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ or ‘researcher’ and ‘participant,’ feminist-infused participatory and action research clarifies the mediated nature of all knowledge construction” (p. 32). In this way, we had explicit conversations about our positionality and how we were situated as insiders within the mentoring program (as mentors and an undergraduate mentee) and as researchers as well. For example, López acknowledges the privileges and power she holds as a faculty member and U.S.-born person with documentation. She reflects on

her intersectionality as a woman of color, the daughter of formerly undocumented working-class immigrants from El Salvador and Mexico, a former “English learner,” and a first-generation college graduate. Honey, born in Mexico, arrives at this work affirming her position as a naturalized U.S. citizen and first-generation college graduate who has the privilege to pursue a doctorate. Her experiences as an immigrant woman and undergraduate alumna from MU permit her to interpret the nuances of participants’ stories in a way that adds fullness to the research. Rendon is a Mexican first-generation undergraduate student and DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) recipient who transferred to MU from a community college. Her experiences allow her to articulate and understand the lived experiences of the Latinas in this study, who were also her peers. Pérez-Gill is a second-generation U.S. citizen of Mexican heritage who had the privilege of being the first in her family to go out of state to study at a top-tier university on scholarship. She is a former high school counselor to low-income, first-generation Latinx students and comes to this research as a first-generation doctoral student.

Institutional Background

MU is at the center of one of the largest and most diverse metropolitan cities in the United States. As one of the most diverse institutions in the country, MU received its HSI designation in 2012 and was proud to be one of only three research-intensive HSIs in the country at that time. It is also an Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-serving institution, with 23% of all undergraduates identifying as Asian American.³ As of the fall 2021 semester, total undergraduate enrollment was 37,833; 46% of all undergraduates were first-generation students, and according to Commuter Student Services, commuter students made up 85% of all undergraduate students. That same semester, 46% ($n = 4,707$) of new undergraduates were transfer students.⁴

From the fall of 2017, when this study started, to the fall of 2021, the undergraduate Hispanic student population went from 35% ($n = 12,534$) to 37% ($n = 13,965$) of all undergraduates. In the fall of 2021, 60% ($n = 8,280$) of all undergraduate Hispanic students were first generation, and 38% ($n = 1,807$) of all transfer students ($n = 4,707$) who enrolled that semester were Hispanic. Hispanic transfer students represented 49% of all new Hispanic undergraduate enrollees ($n = 3,700$) in the fall of 2021. Notably, and related to the focus of our study, since 2013, Latina undergraduates have been the largest student population when students are disaggregated by race/ethnicity and gender. Since the fall of 2014, Latino males have been the second-largest group. In the fall of 2021, Latina transfer students made up 22% ($n = 1,045$) of all transfer student enrollees ($n = 4,707$), making them the largest group of transfer students at MU. In Table 1, we include more demographic data about Latina

TABLE 1
MU Latina Undergraduate Student Demographics*

Variable	Fall 2017	Fall 2018	Fall 2019	Fall 2020	Fall 2021
Latina total count	5,479	6,027	6,278	6,658	6,641
Latina percentage of total undergraduates	18%	19%	19%	20%	20%
First-generation Latina count	3,870	4,232	4,417	4,656	4,583
First-generation Latina percentage out of all Latinas	71%	70%	70%	70%	69%
Total undergraduates	29,742	31,857	32,769	33,714	37,833

Note. Although the institution uses the term *Hispanic female*, in this table, we use *Latina* to be consistent with our use of this term throughout this article. Total undergraduates include all racial/ethnic and gender groups, including international students. Racial/ethnic background was not available disaggregated by racial subgroups (e.g., Mexican, Salvadoran, Honduran). Due to the confidential nature of immigration status, it is unclear how many students were either undocumented or held DACA status.

undergraduates from the fall of 2017 to the fall of 2021, the time frame of this study.

Data Collection and Sources

Participants. We recruited research participants from LMP, and in this article, we focus on interviews from the fall of 2017 to the fall of 2019 with three cohorts totaling 25 participants. We drew from a larger 5-year longitudinal qualitative study that will conclude in 2023, 1 year after the last cohort graduates from college. Participants were mostly recruited during the academic years 2017–2018, 2018–2019, and 2019–2020 from the incoming students in LMP. Participation in the study was voluntary and did not affect students’ status in the mentoring program. The participants we included in this study remained members of LMP during their time as undergraduates at MU. During some semesters, we received small research grants and provided gift cards for interviews.

In Table 2, we provide additional details about each of the 25 participants in this study, including the number of interviews they gave, their college affiliation within MU, their ethnic background, their immigrant status (if shared), and whether they were a first-generation college student.

Seven of the 25 participants were Central American (Salvadoran, Nicaraguan, and Guatemalan), and eight of the 25 shared that they had DACA status. Additionally, 20 of the 25 were the daughters of immigrants, and 23 were first-generation college students.

Interviews. We aimed to interview participants at least once a year, ideally twice, but during the COVID-19 pandemic, this was not always possible. Having students and student affairs professionals on the research team helped us consider multiple aspects of students’ lives as we created the interview protocol. During initial interviews, we asked participants to recall their K–12 educational experiences and to share about their family and community and the factors and individuals who influenced their college journey. In subsequent interviews, we asked about their mental health, their

plans for after graduation, and how they made sense of their college experiences and ongoing participation in LMP. We also asked them to talk about social and political issues that may have affected them, such as Hurricane Harvey (fall 2017), presidential elections, anti-immigrant policies, and, more recently, the pandemic. The interviews we analyzed for this article took place prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and were conducted in person, face to face; they were audio-recorded and on average ranged from 30 minutes to 1 hour.

Given the participatory nature of this study and our values as Chicana/Latina feminist researchers, we as interviewers aimed not only to listen to the stories that participants shared but also to offer support or reciprocity. For example, sometimes students had questions about studying abroad, internships, scholarships, and mental health resources, and in those instances, we provided information or sought resources for them. We aimed for the interviewer and interviewee pairs to be the same each time to build rapport. This was related to what Abrego (2020) refers to as “research as accompaniment,” where we developed relationships with the participants, witnessed their highs and lows, and felt accountable to them and their experiences at MU.

Data Analysis

Our coding scheme for the larger study was *deductive* based on a CFE theoretical framework and other relevant literature, such as community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), and *inductive* based on the emergent themes we identified in the data (see Appendix A for our codebook). Through data analysis, we aimed to capture the voices of participants to represent the most salient themes in the study. Prior to coding the interview transcripts each semester, we discussed the interviews and selected a transcript to code initially as a group. First, we individually coded the same transcript by hand to determine possible codes while also considering the foci of the study, our questions, and frameworks. Later, we held coding meetings to discuss our individual codes and to decide as a research group on our coding structure, code

TABLE 2
Study Participants (2017–2021)

Pseudonym	Cohort	Total interviews	College	Current status	Ethnic identity	Immigrant status (if shared)	College generation
August	1	7	Education	Graduated	Mexican Salvadoran	U.S.-born; immigrant parents	First generation
Daisy	1	6	Education	Graduated	Mexican	DACA recipient	First generation
Elizabeth*	1	7	Education	Graduated	Mexican	DACA recipient	First generation
Isabella*	1	5	Natural Sciences and Mathematics	Graduated	Mexican	DACA recipient	First generation
Lia	1	7	Education	Graduated	Mexican	DACA recipient	First generation
Marie	1	5	Technology	Unenrolled	Mexican American	U.S. born	First generation
Rose	1	6	Natural Sciences and Mathematics	Graduated	Salvadoran	U.S.-born; immigrant parents	First generation
Sasha	1	4	Liberal Arts and Social Sciences	Graduated; current MU graduate student	Mexican	DACA recipient	First generation
Tulip	1	4	Liberal Arts and Social Sciences	Graduated	Mexican	U.S.-born; immigrant parents	First generation
Zoe	1	2	Business	Graduated	Mexican	DACA recipient	First generation
Irene	2	2	Engineering	Senior; CC transfer	Mexican	DACA recipient	First generation
JuJu*	2	2	Technology	Graduated; CC transfer	Salvadoran	U.S.-born; immigrant parents	First generation
Kari	2	5	Business	Graduated	Mexican	U.S.-born; immigrant parents	First generation
Veronica	2	4	Natural Sciences and Mathematics	Transferred in fall 2020	Mexican American	U.S. born	Second generation
Bibi	3	3	Exploratory Studies	Junior	Mexican	U.S.-born; immigrant parents	First generation
Claudia	3	2	Liberal Arts and Social Sciences	Junior; CC transfer	Chicana Latina	U.S. born	Second generation
Fransheska	3	3	Liberal Arts and Social Sciences	Graduated; attended dual-enrollment high school	Salvadoran Guatemalan	U.S.-born; immigrant parents	First generation
Giselle*	3	3	Liberal Arts and Social Sciences	Junior	Mexican American	U.S. born	First generation
Juanita	3	2	Exploratory Studies	Junior	Mexican	U.S.-born; immigrant parents	First generation
Katalina	3	2	Liberal Arts and Social Sciences	Graduated; attended early college high school	Salvadoran	DACA recipient	First generation
Mary	3	2	Liberal Arts and Social Sciences	Junior	Nicaraguan	Immigrant	First generation
Matilde	3	4	Exploratory Studies	Junior	Mexican	U.S.-born; immigrant parents	First generation
Michelle	3	2	Natural Sciences and Mathematics	Junior	Mexican	U.S.-born; immigrant parents	First generation
Silvia	3	2	Natural Sciences and Mathematics	Junior	Salvadoran		
Xochitl	3	2	Exploratory Studies	Junior	Mexican	U.S. born	First generation
					Mexican	U.S.-born; immigrant parents	First generation

Note. *Participants we quoted for this article. This table includes students who were interviewed more than once. Students who left the study after one interview were not included. *CC transfer* refers to community college transfer student.

definitions, and examples. During these meetings, we again considered how our theoretical framework, literature review, and other interviews would inform our analysis.

After creating the codebook, we uploaded transcriptions to Dedoose, an application we used for coding. We included codes about the sociopolitical context that students faced, their identities, and their precollege and college experiences. In our weekly research meetings, we also revisited the methods and discussed how future data collection might look. For member checking, we sent a draft of this article to participants to verify accuracy in how we represented them. Rendon, a member of the research team and an undergraduate student with similar intersectional identities to the participants, also added rigor to our findings as she shared her own perspectives throughout the research and writing process.

Findings

In this section, we discuss the themes that we identified for many of our 25 participants and share specific examples from four participants we interviewed (see Table 2). We selected these excerpts to illustrate the intersectional educational experiences that many of our participants shared. The four participants (Elizabeth, Giselle, Isabella, and JuJu) were first-generation college students; three were commuters living at home in the time frame we focus on; one was Salvadoran (JuJu); two had DACA status and were born in Mexico (Elizabeth and Isabella); and one transferred from a local community college (JuJu). As of the fall of 2021, three had graduated from MU (Elizabeth, Isabella, and JuJu), and one was a junior (Giselle). Our theoretical frameworks helped us analyze power and systemic oppression along multiple levels (Núñez, 2014); thus, the findings that we present are sometimes nonlinear. For clarity, we organize and discuss our findings by the following major themes: Intersectionality and Precollege Experiences; Role of Intersectionality in Enrolling at an HSI; and Intersectionality and Sense of Belonging at an HSI. After each example, we include a short discussion and conclude with further discussion and implications for research and practice.

Intersectionality and Precollege Experiences

During their first interview, we asked students to share their K–12 educational experiences. Their reflections helped us understand the intersectionality that may have shaped their college experiences. In this section, we discuss the intersectional social identities of participants, organizational domains of power, and historicity (Núñez, 2014) related to the school-to-prison nexus, lack of college preparation for first-generation students of color, disability and special education, and immigration status.

Some participants self-identified as high-achieving high school students who took advanced placement (AP) and

honors courses and were in the top 10% of their classes.⁵ Many attended high schools with majority students of color, and some described the schools as under-resourced. This inequitable schooling context shaped certain racialized and gendered experiences that the participants had in high school. For example, in the fall of 2017, during her first interview, Isabella, a pre-med student with DACA status, discussed how her high school did not prepare her well for college; she also spoke of the strict disciplinary practices at the school, which we see as related to the school-to-prison nexus (Annamma, 2016):

It's not the greatest school compared to, like, [names two suburban districts]. . . . I felt like I was in jail. I had to wear collared shirts, and they were very into, like, this dress-code policy. Like, if you were not wearing the correct stuff, of course you'll get sent to in-school suspension, and I just feel like it didn't prepare me at all. . . . Everything that I learned or that I do now is because I learned it on my own. But, yeah, high school was just like we were in jail; everything was so controlled. . . . It didn't offer a lot of, like, dual-credit, AP classes. They didn't even have enough teachers to teach in those courses. . . . It wasn't very college-driven like other schools that are around [city].

Isabella's reflections point to the intersectionality concept of historicity (Núñez, 2014) related to the inequitable schooling environments that Latinx youth have encountered through generations across the Southwest (San Miguel & Donato, 2009; Valencia, 2002; Valenzuela, 1999). Something else that stood out to her was the organizational domain of power (Núñez, 2014), surveillance, and control through the school's disciplinary rules and practices (Annamma, 2016). This made her recall the jail-like environment, which she juxtaposed with the lack of educators to teach dual-credit and AP classes. She was also keenly aware of the opportunities that well-funded districts in the region had compared with her large, urban, majority Latinx (almost 75%) district. Within her reflection, we also note her sense of personal agency, where she shared that everything she learned, she learned on her own.

JuJu, a community college transfer student and daughter of immigrants from El Salvador, was placed in special education classes due to a medical condition that caused seizures throughout much of her early life. During her first interview in the summer of 2019, 10 years after graduating from high school, she reflected on being tracked in high school and then being surprised during her junior year when she received an English honors award after being nominated by a supportive teacher:

I won the award too. You know, I was really happy. At the same time, I was kind of sad because I . . . special ed students, they don't treat them like, you know, like you could be up there. I felt like I was never going to be an honors student. I felt like I was not going to go to college, because in my mind, I mean, I have people say, "Well, you're in special ed. You know, you can't do this, you can't do that." And, you know, I was like, "Oh, okay." [Interviewer (Ruth): You accepted it?] I accepted it, yeah, because of all the seizures, they

cause you to stay back or not to know subjects that I missed out. So, um, you know . . . at that time, I did believe it, but now it's like, "What the hell?"

Ten years after this high school moment, JuJu was at a point in her life when she critically understood that students placed in special education are marginalized and often not given opportunities to aim for college after high school; in her case, this form of ableism intersected with her social identity as a disabled Central American girl of color (Annamma, 2016). Later, JuJu shared that she had passed the AP government exam in 12th grade, which caused her to experience the dissonance of seeing that she could be academically successful with college-level courses yet being othered in comparison with her peers. While in college, she took the initiative to create an epilepsy training session for LMP to bring awareness and support for students who experience seizures. Her presence at and graduation from MU were forms of resistance to systems of oppression that often mark disabled girls of color in deficit ways.

Related to JuJu's precollege intersectional experiences were her reflections about the familial capital (Yosso, 2005) she received from her immigrant father and her identity as a first-generation college student who did not yet see herself as a college student. During the same conversation as above, she shared the following when asked about whether she had been thinking about going to college during high school:

I was not thinking about college. And that [role model] is my dad because he went to school, but that's another story. So, he helped me with my math homework when I was little. But, you know, once math advances more, it's totally different [from] how it is in other countries. And it's not in Spanish. Everything's going to be in English. There's no way he can teach me. And he helped me. I remember he would have his orange fruits or pencils. You know, how you help your kid try to solve a math problem. He'd sit down and help me with that.

JuJu spoke about her father in a positive and asset-based way, and she shared that he had studied in El Salvador, although he faced limitations in how much he could support her as she progressed through her education. Throughout her life, he encouraged her and supported her not only in academics but also as she faced major surgery for epilepsy. We discuss this as intersectionality because JuJu saw what the dominant discourse often fails to see in Spanish-speaking immigrant parents—that they play a critical care and support role in the education of their children (Kiyama & Rios-Aguilar, 2017; Matos, 2015). She wanted to make it clear that he was her role model and someone who believed in her.

Another social identity that several participants discussed was undocumented immigration status and how it came up in their high school educational experiences while they tried to prepare for college. For example, in the summer of 2019, Isabella shared the following about her transition to pre-AP and gifted and talented classes:

Sophomore year, things got kind of hard because I took AP history, and that's when the workload started feeling heavy. That's whenever . . . I also found out I'm a DACA student. So, that's when I started finding out, "Oh, you know, what kind of college can I go to? How am I going to pay for college? Scholarships?" And that's when I kind of started feeling . . . like I wasn't sure if I going to college or not. I felt very scared. I didn't know what to do, and even though it was a mostly all-Hispanic high school, there wasn't enough resources or enough information that they could give me. I did my own research for finding scholarships. And I think being a first-generation Latina and coming to college has been tough because my parents don't understand sometimes.

Isabella described dealing with the compounding burden of academic rigor while having to navigate the barriers of being undocumented. The reality of knowing that her school, an organizational domain of power, was ill-equipped to support undocumented students interrupted her college path. Later, Isabella mentioned that she found a scholarship for undocumented students on her own, and throughout the study, she was named by other participants as an extremely supportive peer and someone who could answer their questions about DACA renewals. This aligns to Acevedo-Gil's (2017) college-*conocimiento* [consciousness] framework for Latinx students, where Isabella's personal agency and self-advocacy are evident, along with the support for her peers once she learned to navigate multiple domains of power (higher education and immigration).

We heard other examples of counter-stories (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001) from participants about their precollege experiences. In the fall of 2019, Giselle, who was a first-generation college student who attended a high school with majority students of color, shared the following about her high school experience:

[I]t wasn't the best high school, but there was a lot of potential in that building. I can probably say I'm an example of that, and my friends are an example of that. Our valedictorian got accepted to [private universities], and so there [were] a lot of people with so much potential to be great people. It was just one of those things that we all had to believe in ourselves, because the community outside didn't believe in us. It made me just that much prouder of everything that I did, because I appreciated it just that much more, because I came from a school that didn't have a lot of funding. We didn't have state-of-the-art computers, nothing like that. We were all still succeeding regardless of all of that.

Currently, Giselle works at her former high school, supporting students with their college and scholarship applications. Like Isabella and JuJu, Giselle witnessed the inequities in her school and how they affected her as a Latina student. She was also aware of dominant discourses that assumed that students from a school like hers could not be academically successful (Aragon, 2018; Cavazos et al., 2009). The counter-story, or resistance to the systems of oppression, is that she saw the "potential in that building." Ultimately, Giselle and her peers demonstrated aspirational capital to succeed and resistant capital against stereotypes (Yosso, 2005).

Role of Intersectionality in Enrolling at an HSI

Scholars have examined why larger numbers of Latinx students enroll in HSIs (Cuellar, 2019; Núñez & Bowers, 2011; D. Vega, 2018), and this study echoes many of their findings. Some study participants received acceptances into highly ranked public and private institutions, including some non-HSIs, outside their city. Yet they all stayed locally and enrolled at MU. In this section, we discuss how they decided to enroll at MU and how this choice might be seen as related to their social identities. The participants were aware of their intersectionality and thus sought spaces of belonging in their college experiences.

During her first interview in the fall of 2019, Giselle shared the following about the college application process:

I felt proud of myself for being part of the top 10% and being able to receive automatic acceptance, but at the same time, I felt that I didn't get to feel the excitement of receiving an acceptance letter because I expected it. So, that's when I branched out, and I started to apply to private schools. Because I wanted to be able to prove that I am smart. But even then, applying to private schools, it was like I was getting in, but as far as financial aid. . . .

Had Giselle only shared about her lack of excitement because of the way the top 10% program works, this example might not have been labeled as an example of intersectionality; however, she also shared that she believed that she needed to prove she was “smart” by being accepted to schools where the top 10% rule did not apply. This speaks to the racialized experiences of high-achieving students who are on the receiving end of public challenges to policies such as this one that aims to address under-representation in higher education (S. M. Flores & Horn, 2015; Garces, 2015). A dominant narrative based on misconceptions of the policy (and legal challenges to support it): that students of color who are accepted to college under this program have an unfair advantage over White students. The socioeconomic context overlapped here, as Giselle also realized that she would not get enough financial aid to study at a private institution. Giselle's reflections were very similar to those of other students we interviewed, who had considered colleges outside their region as their first choice but, for various reasons, had chosen this university—an HSI where Latinas were the majority and where they would have more of their college costs covered.

In recent years, MU has hosted welcome dinners—called Scarlet Night—for admitted Latinx students and families. They have two nights, in Spanish and in English, and include a resource fair as well as presentations by bilingual and Latinx students, staff, and faculty. This event can be seen as a culturally relevant structure (Garcia & Okhidoi, 2015) that disrupts organizational domains of power. The event made a big impression on many of the participants, even after some had already decided to enroll in another institution. Giselle

mentioned the dinner and the difference it made when finally choosing only two weeks before graduation to attend MU:

[J]ust the fact that Scarlet Night was an opportunity for my Hispanic parents to be able to understand college. That was something that touched me a lot because my whole senior year, I was trying to explain to my mom what I was doing and what the college process was like . . . and Scarlet Night comes around, and they explained it to her in Spanish, and this is what I was trying to do all along. So, that was something really important to me. That was when I started looking around, and I know one of the things that we yell out all of the time is that [MU] is the second-most-diverse university in the nation. The more I looked around, I thought, “Yeah, it is.”

Although Giselle was set on attending another research-intensive public institution outside the city, this moment and the validation it provided for her Spanish-speaking parents changed her mind. The access that MU provided to her family affirmed to Giselle that it truly was a diverse institution. Other students who attended these campus events shared similar reflections. This is reminiscent of Garcia et al.'s (2019) multidimensional conceptual framework of “servingness” in HSIs; “structures for serving” (p. 771) include programs and services for minoritized students that then lead to validating experiences.

After becoming college students at MU, participants reflected on what their alternative experiences at other types of institutions might have been like. During her second year of college, in the fall of 2018, Elizabeth, an education student with DACA status, shared the following reflection about why she had enrolled at MU:

[T]he people that I've met. That's one of the biggest reasons why I'm so glad that I came here. Like, the organizations that I'm in . . . of course, [LMP] . . . the sorority that I'm in, the friendships that I've gained as well. Just everything in general, and I feel like I'm very at home here [MU] just because it's so diverse. Um, so I never feel out of place. I always feel like I'm welcome here. And I feel like it might not be the same somewhere else.

In talking about her reasons for coming to MU and the campus spaces in which she felt a sense of belonging, Elizabeth also reflected on what her experiences might have been somewhere else, perhaps outside her home city and at a predominantly White institution. This comment stood out, given her identity as an immigrant with DACA status, a first-generation college student, and a Latina. Scholars have noted similar factors that lead to Latinx students feeling a sense of belonging in institutions of higher education (S. Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Museus et al., 2017; Núñez, 2009).

Intersectionality and Sense of Belonging at an HSI

Once enrolled, finding spaces of belonging and support that recognized and honored their intersectionality was important as participants pursued their college education at

MU. In this section, we include examples related to immigration status and deportation and the role that affirming spaces and individuals played during challenging moments. During her first interview in the fall of 2017, Isabella shared the following:

I come from mostly an all-Hispanic high school, and I was feeling kind of lonely and out of place. So, [Dr. Williams] told me, she's like, "We need to go talk to Ms. Mary, I have a meeting with her right now, walk with me," and she walked me to Ms. Mary's office, and she told me about LMP, how it was a first-generation Latina [program], and that it is where it all started. I'm like, "Oh, okay, maybe this is going to be something familiar and something that maybe I'm missing."

Dr. Williams, who was instrumental in providing support to undocumented students on campus, and Ms. Mary, a case manager on campus at the time, were the co-founders of LMP and exemplified what it is to be an institutional agent for nondominant college students (Museus & Neville, 2012). They recognized the intersectionality (e.g., social identities, organizational, and intersubjective) that students like Isabella navigate in college and provided tangible support. Isabella also seemed to suggest experiencing a lack of support from her high school and recognized that these individuals could help fulfill something that she had been "missing" in education.

During our study, students also navigated anti-immigrant policies at the state level—including Senate Bill 4, a "show-me-your-papers law" that passed in 2017 and gave local police the authority to require proof of residency from any individual. Given the history of anti-immigrant policies, we considered this law to be an example of level 3 of Núñez's (2014) multilevel model of intersectionality—historicity. In some ways, DACA provided legal protection for many of our participants, but we heard concerns for their undocumented parents. For example, in the summer of 2018, Isabella talked about her mother's immigration detention and subsequent court dates, which spanned her high school and college years:

My mom was detained by immigration my sophomore year of high school. . . . She was released on probation this past semester; we received the letter of a hearing. So it was kind of like a slap in the face. . . . She wasn't supposed to go until 2020. . . . And then, I guess I wasn't performing at my best because I was kind of scared that out of nowhere, they'd just decide that "Hey, now let's move it forward"—everything that is happening with the Trump administration. So I was like, "I don't want to leave." It was very hard. I am very attached to my mom, so it's very hard to come to school and not think about things like that.

Although Isabella had previously shared that she felt supported by the staff at MU and had a sense of belonging, the precarity of her and her mother's immigration status left her feeling uncertain about belonging in the United States. Pérez Huber (2010) examines the experiences of undocumented

Chicana college students and discusses an intersectional perspective that considers the racist nativism that students must navigate. In Isabella's experience, the racist nativism was evident in how federal and state policies affected her educational experiences, to the point where she was fearful that she and/or her mom would have to "leave." Although not directly concerned with education, these policies and well-known anti-immigrant politicians can have a negative impact on students' lives and school experiences (Gutiérrez et al., 2002; López, 2020).

Discussion and Implications

Building on previous research that has examined the intersectionality of Latinx students (Alemán, 2018; Cuellar & Salinas, 2022; Núñez, 2014; Zambrana & MacDonald, 2009), we share the lived realities of a group of Latinas across high school and college that were shaped by their intersectionality. Our participants represent the social identities sometimes overlooked among Latina HSI students, such as being Central American (B. E. Vega & Rodas, 2021), being undocumented or having DACA status (Serrano et al., 2018), and being disabled. Along with acknowledging what students face in education because of their immigration status or disability, our findings also show that Latinas are aware of the disparate educational conditions in their high schools—attended by majority students of color—compared with their Whiter, more affluent peers, and this recognition affects their college preparation. Through Núñez's (2014) multilevel model of intersectionality of Latinos in higher education, we qualitatively identify how intersectionality occurs at different levels (domains of power, social identities, historicity) across the life of a student. Within the discussion of this model, Núñez (2014) shares that counter-storytelling as a method "provides an alternative way to focus on experiences of students with multiple identities and to expose the contradictions and complexities they encounter across various domains of power" (p. 2). One way that we demonstrate the complexities that students encounter through K–12 and higher education is by sharing their counter-stories—their intersectionality experiences in their own words.

Our participants successfully navigated the college-going process, and 13 of the 25 have already graduated from MU (see Table 2). However, our study demonstrates that stronger alignment between high schools, particularly those serving majority students of color, and HSIs is needed. With active engagement between high schools and HSIs, students like Giselle could decide to attend MU sooner than two weeks before graduation, students like Isabella and Elizabeth could have a better sense of their future as college DACA students, and students like JuJu could see their academic potential as disabled college students earlier. We demonstrate a strong disconnect between K–12 and higher education institutions,

and yet in spite of this, we also show that Latinas are able to navigate the system. This finding has implications for high school and HSI partnerships that can be strengthened to acknowledge and strategically respond to the intersectionality of Latinas to improve their educational transitions.

Our participants enrolled at MU for reasons similar to those reflected in HSI research, such as proximity to home, cost, and diversity of students and staff (Cuellar, 2019; Núñez & Bowers, 2011). Once they were enrolled at MU, attending events such as the Scarlet Dinner and finding a community and support through LMP fostered a sense of belonging. Scarlet Night contributed to a culturally engaging campus environment that openly celebrated MU’s diversity. Events like this and spaces like LMP are critical because they strengthen the HSI identity of a campus while aiding the development of a student’s sense of belonging and the positive perceptions of their college experience (Gonzalez et al., 2020; Museus et al., 2017). This notion of students feeling welcome and like their full selves (e.g., immigrants, Latinas, disabled) was valued by institutional agents even when they encountered challenges in their lives. The experiences that participants shared give insight to promising practices that HSIs should support to reach more Latinas—the largest student population at MU.

We also note implications for research. Previous intersectionality research about Latinx college students has spanned higher-education institutional types and in fewer instances reached back to students’ K–12 experiences. With the majority of Latinx undergraduates enrolling at HSIs (Excelencia in Education, 2021b), the need to concentrate efforts in multi-method intersectional HSI research to inform meaningful educational policies and practices is urgent. We considered the breadth of research on Latinx students and HSIs and approached our study from a longitudinal qualitative perspective to understand the experiences of a diverse group of Latinas through their own stories about their educational journeys. Each one of the young women we highlighted can be seen as successful through traditional academic measures, but this view can also obscure their intersectional experiences. It is also important to note that the data we analyzed for this article were collected prior to the pandemic. In the future, research about the intersectionality of Latinas should also consider the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and how it may shape precollege and college experiences of Latinas. We hope this study expands knowledge about the HSI recruitment and retention of Latinas, a well-represented yet underserved group in higher education.

Appendix A: Codebook

1. College experiences (inductive)
 - a. Challenging
 - b. Community college
 - c. Commuter
 - d. Reason for enrolling at institution
 - e. Supportive institutional agents
 - f. Work (during college)
2. Sociopolitical context (inductive)
 - a. Immigration
 - i. DACA
 - ii. Deportation
 - iii. SB 4 (show me your papers)
 - b. Politics
3. Cultural capital (Yosso, 2005) (deductive)
 - a. Aspirational capital
 - b. Navigational capital
 - c. Social capital
 - d. Linguistic capital
 - e. Familial capital
 - f. Resistant capital
 - g. Spiritual capital
4. Family (inductive)
 - a. Family challenges
 - b. Family responsibilities
 - c. Parents don’t understand but support college
 - d. Relationship with parents
 - e. Socioeconomic challenges
 - f. Source of inspiration
 - g. Struggle between college and home identity
5. Hispanic Serving Institution (inductive)
 - a. Diversity on campus
 - b. Engaging Latinx families
 - c. Lack of diversity at other institutions
 - d. Representation matters
6. Identity (inductive)
 - a. Biracial or bicultural
 - b. Central American
 - c. First-generation college student
 - d. Gender (including gender roles and expectations)
 - e. Immigration
 - i. Daughter of immigrants
 - ii. Immigrant identity
 - iii. Immigration status
 - f. Intersectional experiences
 - g. Language
 - h. Latina
 - i. Mexican
 - j. Religious
 - k. Working class
7. K–12 educational experiences (inductive)
 - a. Career plans during K–12
 - b. College preparation
 - c. College-going identity
 - d. High school climate
 - e. Supportive adults in K–12
 - f. Work (during high school)

8. Mental health (inductive)
 - a. Coping strategies and support
 - b. Stress and anxiety
9. Mentee experiences (inductive)
 - a. Encouraging, motivational, or inspiring space
 - b. Impact
 - c. Mentor/mentee relationships
 - d. Reason for joining
 - e. What they want from program
10. Reflective practice (inductive)
11. Sense of belonging (deductive)
 - a. In college
 - b. In mentoring program
 - c. Negative experiences
 - d. Positive experiences
12. Transition from high school to college

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Open Practices

The interview protocols for this article can be found at <https://www.openicpsr.org/openicpsr/project/168721/version/V1/view>
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Notes

1. We use the terms *Hispanic* and *Latino* when citing research that uses that terminology. Throughout this article, we use the gender-inclusive term *Latinx* unless speaking specifically about Latina women.
2. Federal-funding criteria for HSIs also require the institution to have a substantial percentage of students receiving Pell Grants and demonstrate low general expenditures per full-time-equivalent undergraduate student compared with similar institutions.
3. The source of this information is the institution's website, which we have not cited so as not to reveal the institution's name.
4. Transfer-student data are available for new students and not aggregated for all undergraduates.

5. The Top Ten Percent Plan, implemented in 1998 as part of HB 588, aims to increase access to under-represented groups by guaranteeing automatic admission to public four-year institutions in Texas to students graduating in the top 10% of their high school class (S. M. Flores & Horn, 2015).

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