

Academic Achievement Of First-Generation Mexican American Males In A Community College

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The purpose of this study was to examine the complexities of successful attainment and achievement of 10 Mexican American males in a rural Southwest community college. This study strives to offer insights concerning the questions: (a) what behavioral patterns of current family, peers, and conditions in school have influenced the educational decisions of these Mexican American males? (b) what social conditions motivate these Mexican American males to seek and achieve higher education despite adversity?

This qualitative research was also aimed at establishing and understanding how a selected number of Mexican American males have achieved academic success. The researcher chose 10 men with either an associate of arts or an associate of science degrees for an in-depth interview and used a semi-structured interview guide in an effort to prompt oral discourse. The interviewer posed questions concerning academic conditions, family impact, college environment, and financial issues. The responses to the questions led to similar themes involved in these students' course completion and graduation. The researcher used a theoretical framework using Bandura's *Social Learning Theory* (1977) in which he suggests that not only environmental factors, but motivational factors along with self-regulatory mechanisms affect an individual's behavior.

This research illustrated the conditions that facilitated reaching the participant's educational goal and mission, which was to complete a two-year degree at the community college. The inquiry examined the behavioral patterns that have been an influence on the educational decisions of these Mexican American males, and what social conditions have motivated them to seek and achieve higher education despite adversity.

The achievement of Mexican Americans in higher education continues to be a major concern. The success and failure of these students are of national interest. This is especially relevant because of the high non-completion rates in higher education among these groups of students. Burns (2010) focused on the academic achievement of students in community colleges, indicating that at that time special programs are needed to address the attrition problems of Mexican American students. The plans and remedies are based on important studies that have contributed to the achievement of Mexican American students to make significant steps to address their attrition rate.

This research focused primarily on factors that contribute to the success of first-generation Mexican American males at a community college in South Texas. The project explored the completion of a two-year degree of male students by interviewing these men from a local

community college that serves an area of 11 counties in South Texas.

Context of the Study

Even though large numbers of Mexican Americans continue their education at community colleges, there are still many students that dropout after the first semester (Saenz, 2002). Because of their open door policy, community colleges boast of high enrollment, but graduation rates are actually poor. The Mexican American completion rate is significantly low at 18% (Burns, 2010). Indeed research by Valencia (1994) and Burns (2010), indicates that Mexican Americans historically have had the lowest college graduation of all subgroups in the United States. While college dropout rates are not exclusively a Mexican American problem, the extremely low rate for this group may reflect a negative college experience for Mexican American students which impedes developing a sense of achievement. Indeed, completing college and

getting a degree has become a difficult goal for many Mexican American students. In this particular setting, Mexican American male students will undoubtedly benefit from understanding the conditions that foster their academic achievement. This study intended to explore those achievement factors in a community college.

Statement of the Problem

Historically, Mexican Americans have been portrayed as low achievers who lack basic skills, have poor motivation, and who are over-represented in special education classes (Blai, 1972). There is abundant literature that attests their failure to integrate into the American higher education system. While states and the federal government have tried to close the educational gap with different programs, it remains to be seen if these efforts will be successful. The educational problems are compounded by the fact that the Mexican Americans population growth rate is increasing, while their attrition rate at higher learning institutions remains disproportionately low. What must be explored are the conditions influencing first time Mexican Americans who enter college and are able to overcome significant hardships and graduate (Burns, 2010).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the complexities of successful attainment and achievement of 10 Mexican American males in a rural Southwest community college. This research included males who have pursued different areas of study and who come from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds. The study focused on first-generation college students over a two-to-three year period. It investigated some of the challenges that Mexican Americans faced during their years at a community college and how these and other challenges were resolved as they continued their studies. The study identified, described, and analyzed the silent conditions that promoted or discouraged these college students. The exploration of first semester, first-generation Mexican American males is important because the attrition rates for these students are

particularly high between the first and second semester. Students continue their studies, the attrition rates drop, although students face other academic and personal problems in the ensuing years. Community colleges need strategies to retain students, and there are few programs that have successfully addressed retention. These programs all include a blue print of in-depth orientations to college, proactive advising, early warning systems, and well-organized academic support services (McGlynn, 2007).

It was important to focus the plight of first semester students and understand their problems in the following semester in order to develop programs that are relevant to their needs. This was researched through discussion/interviews and surveys of participants' perspectives.

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What behavioral patterns of current family, peers, and conditions in school have influenced the educational decisions of these Mexican American males?
2. What social conditions motivate these Mexican American males to seek and achieve higher education despite adversity?

Theoretical Framework

This research looked closely at the behaviors of successful students. How is it that two students of similar environments succeed in two very different academic trajectories? Can human behavior be acquired and regulated? Bandura (1977) suggested that not only environmental factors, but motivational factors and self-regulatory mechanisms, affect an individual's behavior.

Bandura contended that many of our actions are learned through observations and modeling of others. Bandura (1977) and Crain (2011) that not all behaviors observed are learned. Conditions involving both the learner and the model can play a vital role in the process of social learning and its success. Bandura (1977) described certain requirements and steps that must be followed. These are the steps according to Bandura that are involved in the observational learning and modeling process:

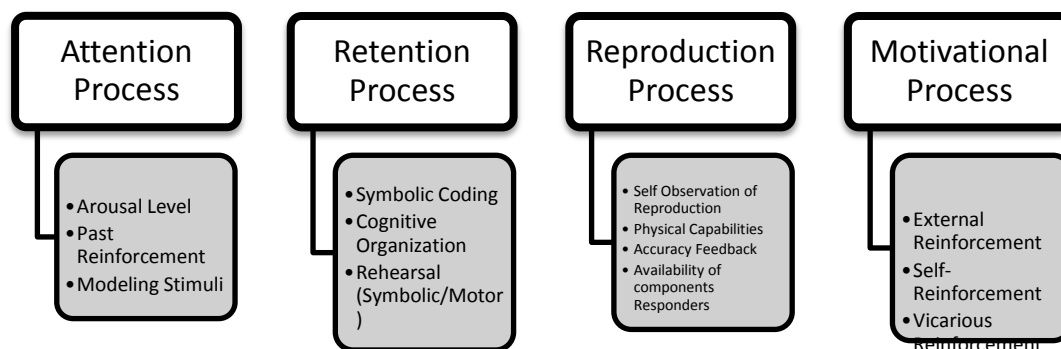


Figure 1. Social Learning Theory Process. Text from Social Learning Theory, Bandura 1977, p. 23.

Bandura (1977), stated that the process of social learning theory consists of four main components: Attention Process, Retention Process, Reproduction Process, and Motivational Process. The attention process is the need to pay attention, and distractions do hinder and have a negative effect on observational learning. The retention process is the ability to retain information which is vital to the learning process. The reproduction process is being able to perform the behavior observed. Finally, the motivational process, which is based on reinforcement and punishment, involves elements important for observational learning to take place. Learners will extract from repeated observations and modeling what they perceive as “appropriate” and bring them into their own repertoire of behaviors. Modeled behavior is most likely to be adopted if the behavior results in outcomes that are valued by the individual more than the behavior’s negative effects.

“Another influential source of social learning is the abundant and varied symbolic modeling provided by television, films, and other visual media” (Bandura, 1977, p. 39). It is through these varied media that different behaviors are shaped and new social attitudes adopted. As this type of symbolic modeling increases, the influence of traditional role

models plays a less important role in social learning.

Cultural patterns of behavior are regulated and transmitted through social systems at various steps of development. A family can only provide some modeling for conduct; other influences and sources will provide skills and behaviors that are required at varied stages of social development. While parents usually initiate their child’s educational aspirations, the child can also be encouraged further by teachers and peers. Parents contribute in the gradual development of behaviors, belief systems, and attitudes necessary for achieving academic success.

Review of the Literature

Social Conditions

Educational background of Mexican American males. There are issues and dilemmas that, according to Burns (2010), persistently affect this population in higher education. Such issues become apparent as students enroll in college. Burns (2010) highlights many problems that hinder the advancement of Mexican Americans especially in that first semester of college. Most importantly, the lack of preparation for college

presents the biggest challenge. Flores (1994) mentioned some of those issues, such as “. . . challenging minority students away from activities that foster inquiry and creative thinking skills; segregating them into minority schools; and, failing to provide a support system or counselors and teachers with whom students can identify . . .”(p. 4). These and other institutional practices directly impact this population. Flores also mentions that colleges need to employ differential tracking to better address this minority group. Saenz (2009) suggested that early interventions, which target and expose students to culturally validating environments, might serve to better address Mexican American students with this central problem—retention in that first college semester.

Academic conditions. The first factor listed by Zurita (2004)—poor academic performance—is a great contributor in the attrition of Mexican Americans. Smedley, Myers, & Harrell (1993) found that “conflicts between academic expectations and questions about readiness to compete academically are an important additional source of academic vulnerability for [minority] students,” (p. 438) which includes African American and Mexican American students.

Furthermore, Garza, & Landeck, (2004) and before them, Rickinson, & Rutherford, (1996), found that “course-related problems were endorsed by the highest percentage of students [as a reason for dropping out], particularly by the group withdrawing in the second and third terms” (p. 4). They note that many students “felt that prior educational experience had not prepared them to cope with the level of their chosen degree course” (p. 4).

I wasn't up to the course. They should have explained what was involved before I started. I am doing a course that suits me better at another institution. The pace is slower and there is more teaching (Rickinson, & Rutherford, 1996, p. 4).

Additionally, academic success in high school was also a possible predictor for academic success in higher education. For example, Fredda (2000) demonstrated that students who

dropped out had substantially lower high school GPAs than students who returned after completing the first year.

Similarly, Reed (2007) cited that the shift in the demographics of community college populations led to a higher percentage of students who are not prepared for college-level course work because “many Hispanic immigrants lack a basic education” (p. 12).

Family impact. Another important issue impacting Mexican American college students involves personal difficulties, particularly when there is a lack of career and educational goals (Chacon et al., 1986; Fields, 1988; Fiske, 1988; Zurita, 2004). These circumstances are indeed a source of stress for Mexican American students, issues that form barriers to integration into college culture. For the Mexican American college-age population, familial relationships and expectations play a complex role in the quest for a higher education.

For example, *Familism*, a cultural value emphasizing family closeness and loyalty, has been identified as a value adopted by many Mexican American populations when there is a factor that influences their continuing education (Vega, 1990). In contrast to the values of individuality and independence emphasized in the dominant U.S. culture, *familism* requires an individual family member to put the needs of the family first, even if it means making personal sacrifices. The emphasis on such personal sacrifices is even further reinforced on daughters in Mexican American families by *marianismo*, a cultural value that “emphasizes the self-sacrificing role of females and highlights the females’ role as family caretaker” (Sy, 2006, p. 368). Although research has shown that Mexican American parents highly value education for their children (Azmitia, Cooper, Garcia, & Dunbar, 1996; Lopez, 2001; Rabow & Rodriguez, 1993), parents also view their daughters as family-oriented caretakers even as they make the transition to college and they place additional pressure on them to continue to fulfill her family obligations (e.g. caretaking, language translation, spending time with family).

In a study conducted by Cabrera and Padilla (2004) of two Stanford University Mexican-heritage students regarding their academic

success, both students cited their mothers as serving as a motivation to succeed in college. The authors added that in both cases the acquisition of knowledge of the “culture of college” was essential for the students to make the important transition from high school to the college setting. The “culture of college” refers to having access to resources that help students not only gain admission to college but to succeed. This, according to the authors is something many Mexican-heritage parents lack but which middle-class parents often accept as a given.

Consistent with other research, Sanchez, Reyes, & Singh (2005) reported findings that the Mexican American students interviewed credited their parents with providing them with the motivation needed to succeed in their college studies. The Mexican American males interviewed were first-generation college students. Their parents not only provided social support (emotional support) but they also served as someone they looked up to despite their limited educational experience in many cases. This gave the participants important social capital, which was vital to succeed in college.

In many cases, the parents shared stories of life experiences indicating the struggles they encountered in both the United States and Mexico because of their lack of education. In most instances, these struggles served as motivation for the students to take advantage of the opportunities in education that their parents had not had.

Environmental Condition

The college environment. Hurtado & Carter’s (1996) findings suggested that the college environment has more to do with the transition to college than with students’ background characteristics. Major difficulties experienced by Mexican American students often involve institution-related issues, such as the nature of college culture and how foreign it appears to some students. In a study of racial relations at an urban community college campus, Weiss (1990) found that “the discourse of college students and faculty reveals that different race, class, and gender groups have qualitatively different experiences” (p. 2). Although Weiss’s study focused on African American and white student and faculty

interactions, the same conclusion might also be drawn about the experience of Mexican American college students.

A study conducted by Hurtado-Ortiz & Guavin (2007) indicated that family experiences serve as a positive influence on Mexican American youth in regards to their college education. Of the study’s 104 participants, half were attending a two-year college. The findings indicated that Mexican American parents play an important role in their child’s education. It was found that even with a limited education experience, in most cases, the parents provided encouragement to succeed in college. Further, older siblings who may have succeeded in college were found to provide a positive influence by modeling behavior, such as good study habits, to their younger brothers and sisters.

Finally, the study by Hurtado-Ortiz & Guavin (2007) also found that Mexican Americans who were more acculturated into mainstream culture were more successful in college, implying that this group may have felt more comfortable in the college setting. These students, according to the study, also possessed more knowledge on available financial aid resources and this gave them the ability and confidence to overcome college financial barriers.

Personal Conditions

Personal attributes. Research has found that Mexican American students pursuing higher education must grapple with issues of personal attributes such as familial background and feelings of self-worth and confidence. According to McWhirter et al. (2007), Mexican American students expect to encounter many obstacles during their college career, including college preparation, motivation, support, and separation from their families. The results also suggested that variables such as family backing and motivation served as positive factors influencing the chances of overcoming encountered barriers and thus helping students achieve their academic goals.

According to Phinney, Dennis, & Gutierrez (2005), adolescents face decisions about their future in terms of education, career, values, and relationships as they make a transition from high

school or work. According to the researchers “most middle-class adolescents, attending college is the norm, and decisions concerning the choice of college and type of program”(p.390). The literature also explained how young Mexican Americans, many of whose parents did not attend or complete college, “deal with more complex educational decisions.” There are a number of factors that interfere with going to college (Phinney, 2005).

Students who are more assimilated into the Anglo American society in general, are more likely to feel comfortable in an Anglo American educational environment and thus more likely to have higher educational goals than students who have little connection to Anglo culture (p. 264). The researchers suggested that, “interventions that target Mexican American youth are less Anglo oriented may be warranted” (Flores et al. 2006, p. 264). This study also found that Mexican American students who believed they had high problem-solving skills were more likely to have high educational and career goals.

Financial issues. Further, Castillo & Hill (2004) suggested that financial limitations are a reason why Mexican American college students often terminate their education. Most hold part-time or full-time jobs and must balance the competing demands of a job and schoolwork. Lower levels of income also contribute to higher levels of psychological stress among Mexican American students, as cited in Phinney et al., (p. 394).

Tinto (2006) described issues related to student income in this way: “Though the access to higher education for low-income students has increased and gaps in access between high-and low-income students decreased, the gap between well-to-do and poor students in four-year degree completion remains” (p. 10-11). Even though low-income students have greater access to higher education than ever before, their graduation rates remain low. Tinto (2006) observed that, “for too many low-income students access to higher education has become a revolving door, the promise of a Bachelor’s degree unfulfilled” (p. 12). He suggested the need for further study of the link between “developmental education” (remedial education) and low-income student retention.

Successful programs

According to Carey (2005), researchers focused in leading several universities because of their high graduation rates. The universities included in the research study were St. Mary’s University (San Antonio, TX), Alcorn State University (Alcorn State, MS), Notre Dame University, University of Northern Iowa, and Syracuse University.

The research found that there is not one single condition contributing to student persistence but that several factor must be considered. Among these were:

1. During the students’ freshmen year, it is critical that universities work student engagement and integration into the college setting.
2. Universities should place emphasis on high quality undergraduate teaching and learning.
3. Student monitoring by faculty.

The research also found that those colleges and universities that focused on integrating students from low socioeconomic backgrounds into the college mainstream enjoyed higher graduation rates that those institutions that did not. Furthermore, the research concluded that those colleges and universities that provided their students with activities facilitating greater student-faculty interaction, and activities promoting students working together in and outside the campus enjoyed higher college graduation rates.

Methodology

Research Design

The purpose of this study was to explore the conditions that contribute to the college success (Associate’s Degree attainment) of first-generation Mexican American males at a southwest Texas community college. According to Creswell (2005), qualitative research often attempts to answer “how and what” questions, so that initial inquiries into the topic describe what is going on. The focus of qualitative research is to gain a deeper understanding of

people's behavior, how they interact with the world, how they make sense of their interactions with each other, and how they use daily experiences. This type of study involves a detailed description of situations, events, and people.

This qualitative research study is an effort to better understand the participants' behavior, prescriptions, perspectives, and understandings of particular situations in the community college experience. The methodology was interpretative (Creswell, 2005), and the process was inductive. The researcher analyzed the abstractions and concepts expressed by the participants' uniquely lived experiences in great depth and detail.

The use of a narrative approach enabled the participants to relate and identify the process of learning from meaningful moments, environment and people that influenced their world and positively impacted their education. Using the narrative research approach allowed the participant and researcher to identify educational desires and personal circumstances that led to academic success.

Research Participants

For this study, 10 participants, age 21 or older, were selected by using homogeneous group purposeful sampling. The reason for using purposeful sampling is that it allows the researcher to select individuals intentionally who will contribute significantly to the study. The use of purposeful sampling methodology is to acquire in-depth information of related issues of central importance to the topic researched (Patton 1990).

The prospective participants first agreed to be contacted about the qualitative study; then, the researcher discussed the purpose of the study at length and in detail with each participant. The purpose of the initial contact was to verify that the participant met the need of the characteristics of the research. In addition, the researcher conveyed to the participant what was being required of them. Through thorough questioning of the participants, the researcher explored the resiliency in overcoming challenges and gave explanation of academic achievement.

The interviews were one-on-one and tape-recorded with intensive note taking. The interviews were exclusive and lasted at least two

hours. Every participant was given an opportunity to elaborate on issues with which he has had direct experience.

Criteria for sample selection

The criteria that were used to select the participants include:

1. Male
2. Mexican American (self-identified)
3. First-generation in family to have completed at least an Associate's of Arts or an Associate's of Science.
4. Family resides in the area.
5. Willingness to participate in the study
6. Evidence of consent (form)

The above characteristics were selected in order to answer and meet the needs of the research questions. First-generation Mexican American males were identified because this is a sub-group that has historically and nationally achieved and attained two-year degree at a low rate.

Data Collection

Data was collected using an Interview Guide and through in-depth interviews. Each interview began with an explanation and purpose of the study. Non-structured questions were utilized in order to encourage spontaneous descriptions of influences that contributed positively to the participants' academic achievement. As Riessman (1993) indicated, with less structured interviews, participants will likely disclose what they consider relevant about their lives and educational experiences. The data collection on the interviews consisted of tape-recording and note taking. The recordings were transcribed by the researcher in order to listen to pertinent aspects of the interview at another time and to capture vocal expressions and emotions.

Role of the Researcher

Throughout the data collection process, the researcher suspended any preconceived notions or personal experience that may unduly influence on what the researcher "hears" the participants saying (Leedy & Ormrod 2005). The researcher was non-biased on the subject of

the study. This increased the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings of the research.

The researcher has exceptional knowledge of the region and the institution. Even though the researcher is one generation removed from the subjects, the researcher can truly identify with the group of the participants and is a considered a reflection of these men. The researcher is from the area and very familiar with the location since it was the researchers' first institution of higher education of attendance and later employment as adjunct instructor. Additionally, because of his work at the community college, the researcher has a deep interest in the findings of this research. This study did shed light on a description of the true factors and conditions that have contributed to the success of the participants' two-year degree attainment.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

The researcher established credibility in this qualitative study, by employing triangulation. This includes observation, intense interviewing, and analyzing data that is being gathered, as well as by planning and implementing an audit trail of the data collection; the researcher builds credibility. Extensive time in the field (interviews) and respondent validation was conducted to establish credibility and verification of the information during the data collection and transference of data (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). After the interviews, detailed written transcriptions and summaries were done and returned to participants for accuracy. The participants evaluated summaries and were told they could add to a section of a summary to then be addressed by researcher and participant. The research used member checking with the male participants; this allowed for clarification on data with the interview question protocol (Creswell, 2005).

Limitations of the Study

A limitation of the study included the small number of students to be used in the sample. Any generalizations about Mexican American students and their community college success may not be prudent.

Another limitation of the study was the amount of time given for the students to remember and analyze past events that could be

questioned in this investigation. In this case, a prescribed list of informed questions was prepared to help minimize lapses in memory. By answering these questions, subjects reflected on past events, enabling them to analyze the events thoroughly, evaluating more effectively how they influenced the success of the participants' college experience.

Findings

The participants' interviews lasted approximately one to one and a half hours using open-ended questions. The interviews were conducted in a variety of settings in which the participant felt comfortable. These interviews were digitally voice-recorded and transcribed. Substantial notes were also taken by the researcher after each session to be used alongside the transcription for further verification and clarification of the data collection and analysis. The researcher examined themes and categories and their relationship and contribution to the academic achievements of the participant's as depicted by Bandura (1977).

Data Analysis

The researcher created a booklet of the questions and the answers from all participants. Then the researcher proceeded to develop a content analysis for each answer in an attempt to produce a descriptive narrative of each question. From a summary of the content analysis, developing categories, contributing factors and themes were identified. The procedure of developing the nine themes consisted of the following process: (a) Collecting and transcribing all digital interviews; (b) Searching and developing selected categories from the questions and notes from participants; (c) Formulating and analyzing to develop contributing conditions that surfaced from the information and; (d) Developing the nine recurring themes of the study after an intensive review and analysis.

Demographic Profile

This study consisted of 10 first-generation Mexican American males between the ages of 21 and 28 years old. All were reared in South

Texas and attended the same community college and received a two year degree.

The demographic information can be seen on Table 2. These profiles further clarify the composition of the groups studied. All names

used in this research are all characters appearing in this research project are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead is purely coincidental.

Table 2

Demographic Participant's Overview.

	<i>Name</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Marital Status</i>	<i>Current Occupation</i>
Participant 1	Ricardo	23	Single	School Educator
Participant 2	Miguel	25	Married	Computer Technician
Participant 3	Humberto	26	Single	Professional Musician
Participant 4	Rodney	24	Single	Businessman
Participant 5	Sigifredo	23	Divorced	College Educator
Participant 6	Carlos	21	Married	Firefighter
Participant 7	Adrian	24	Divorced	Pilot
Participant 8	Eddy	26	Married	Newspaper Journalist
Participant 9	Giovanni	23	Married	Politician
Participant 10	Mauricio	28	Single	Engineer

Participants' Narratives

The participants' narratives directly reflect the interview transcripts and attempts to highlight on the valuable information that is pertinent to their lives. Yet, adding life events that significantly contribute to their success in attaining a two-year degree from the community college. These narratives contain family background, events that impacted their educational choices, some obstacles they encountered while going to college, mentors or others that influenced their decisions to achieve in spite of adversity and other themes that emerged as these 10 Mexican Americans related to the efforts they made to achieve their Associate's Degrees.

Ricardo. Ricardo is a 23-year-old school educator. He is currently divorced and has two children. Even though he was born in a Mexican border town he grew up in South Texas and comes from a typical Mexican American family of hard working parents. His dad is a mechanic and his mother a homemaker. Both parents attended school but did not graduate from high school. Both parents played a vital role in Ricardo's attending and finishing high school, and then in his graduating from the community

college. Ricardo went on to receive a Bachelors of Arts in History and a minor in English.

Once Ricardo finished high school, he was encouraged to continue with his studies by both his parents and one by of his history teachers. Ricardo gives credit to that teacher who would constantly remind him of his potential to further his schooling. He recalls the teacher, Juan Vereda:

I always hated him for telling me that, but he always pushed me. I had a couple more that were not instrumental but would always help, Alonzo Mares, who is now a principal somewhere in the West and ... the Nieto family who always kept saying 'do it! Keep going! Keep trying!' (personal communication, October 2011)

Ricardo's mother also encouraged him at home. She influenced him in furthering his studies even though their financial resources were very limited. On account of limited resources he was not able to live in the college dorm, much less rent an apartment where the community college was located, but he commuted by bus on a daily basis. He was limited to attending this junior college, also due to their financial circumstances. Ricardo's

parents agreed to help him as much as they could if he decided to stay within the area and discouraged him from even thinking of attending another school that would be further away and more expensive.

Ricardo had a lot of positive influences that motivated him to attend the junior college. He even converted some negative determinants into encouraging resources, one of these was commented by a teacher in high school; another encounter by his older brothers' negative attitude. The people that kept motivating Ricardo were mainly school personnel that included his social studies teacher, his high school principal and high school secretary, Dahlia.

Ricardo seems to be a very proud Mexican American who attained his two-year degree at the community college. He realizes that a two-year degree in our times is not enough to compete in the workforce. He added that one must strive to achieve even more by furthering one's studies, for example, obtaining a bachelor's or a master's degree. From his experience Ricardo realized that attending a community college was more rigorous and demanding because of the lack of an adequate preparation in high school. He found this out the first day in college.

Ricardo is a very motivated individual who has come a long way from being a mechanic's son [a simple mechanic apprentice] and to overcoming many difficult environmental, social, personal and academic barriers. Now, as an educator at his own high school *Alma Mater*, Ricardo encourages his student daily.

Today, Ricardo influences the students with whom he works daily. Working as a teacher, he says of his many students can relate to his humble beginnings and they see him as a good role model of what they can achieve. They also see Ricardo's continued efforts to earn a Bachelor of Arts degree in History while working in a school as proof that he is not simply preaching but is actually "doing what he preaches."

Miguel. Miguel is a 25-year-old computer technician who is married with and has three children. He was born and raised and lives in South Texas. Upon graduating from high school he immediately enrolled at the community

college. He mentioned that this was encouraged early on by his parents who motivated him and supported him throughout those early community college years. Miguel is currently a computer technician with a major innovative technology company. He stated that there was no doubt in his mind that he would attend the community college because both parents kept reminding him of this as early as his middle school years.

Miguel related to the researcher how his mother and father lead him to understand the importance of going to college. He always loved to work with computers so therefore that's what he wanted to study and pursue as a career. My father said, "*Mijo, si eso es lo que quieres, mejor métete en eso*, [My son, if that's what you want to do, get into it] that's what you'll do." Miguel also mentioned as another contributing factor that of his personal friends. "My friends played a large role in me coming to this college because of course they were going there and we helped each other as much as we could." So both parents and personal friends contributed to Miguel's continuing his education at the community college. It seems that Miguel had key ingredients to pursue and further his studies. His father, it seems, played a major role in his success at the community college. His father provided support and encouragement.

He continues to be motivated and encouraged by family today. He mentions that one of his cousins who is in the same field also checks up on him. Miguel mentions that through the years he has developed a very close-knit personal network. Miguel mentioned: "That they were very, very key to me succeeding as much as I have, you get a little from here and little from there and you build a village like that. ...Yeah; networking type."

For Miguel completing the two-year degree did not come easy. While the support and encouragement he received were essential to his success; the transition from high school to college was very challenging to him. The expectations at college were both demanding and rigorous.

From his struggles with the required college Algebra course, Miguel stressed that failures do not count, but rather getting up and continuing the fight. College algebra was tough, but he

realized that life would be even tougher without it and the cherished college degree. He was not going to allow a course to keep him from achieving his dreams.

Humberto. Humberto is a 26-year-old single professional musician from South Texas. He is currently preparing for his comprehensive examination to earn a Master's Degree. He received an Associate's Degree from this community college and Bachelor's Degree from an institution elsewhere in Texas. It was self-motivation and family support that led Humberto to continue his studies after completing high school.

Humberto mentioned that he was very self-driven but the encouragement from family and friends contributed greatly to his obtaining a two-year degree attainment. He mentions he followed in the steps of his high school friends. Humberto also credits his family being there for him. His parents and close friends believed that he would dedicate himself to furthering his studies. The combination of the two elements was critical for him completing of his two-year degree. He mentions that even though he had a lot of support and encouragement, the community college's curriculum was demanding. Interestingly, Humberto did not seem to have much difficulty in adapting to the college courses rigor requirement.

Humberto seems to have been very well prepared and self-motivated. He was fully determined to pursue a two-year degree and he continued in a four-year institution and obtained a bachelor's. He is about to receive his Master's Degree. He mentioned that as a musician, he is in constant contact with youngsters, usually students; he makes an effort to talk to them and encourage them to go to college.

Many students see him as being "cool" and he reminds them how deceiving that this and that he is using "being cool" as a means to reach those who are reluctant continuing their education. He mentioned that he is always bringing up this topic of education when he is working with other young musicians whom he tutors on a regular basis. They seem to admire his musical talents, along with the fact that he continued his studies even though he did not have to. Humberto pointed out that he is trying to make education appear "cool."

Rodney. Rodney is a 24-year-old single businessman who comes from a very small Mexican American family, and also was born and raised in South Texas. He attended a small high school before taking the challenge of going to the community college. He, in fact, began taking community college classes while still in high school. Rodney was a very determined individual. He was raised by his grandparents. He saw how hard they worked to provide an education for him. One of his mother's sisters, a very special and dear aunt, also played a very important role in his receiving an education. At the time of his mother's absence, because of her working assignment, Rodney relied on his self-motivation to continue with his schooling.

Rodney was influenced to attend this community college by his family members. He realized early that his parents couldn't really afford sending him to a college very distant from his hometown. The expense and his GPA were obstacles he knew were going to be hard to overcome. Family support was the basic foundation that kept Rodney going through his education at the community college. But one of Rodney's high school teachers had also played a pivotal role in his academic success. He also found support and was encouraged by people who were themselves successful. Rodney fully embraced his upbringings that provided him with positive role models that had a direct impact in his decision on attending college. He was certainly motivated early at a very young age.

This is immediately clearly evident that Rodney is a very proud individual. One can see, from the beginning that just comes out of him loud and clear. His success in attaining of a two-year degree was the inspiration for his pursuing the other degrees that he has received. He is a very self-motivated individual who has had a very positive experience with each success he has achieved. That success was instilled in him at a very young age.

Rodney described how the rigorous curriculum at the community college was very different from his work in high school. He mentioned and acknowledged that he was not academically prepared to face the challenges of studying in college. Rodney related that some type of resistance and discrimination did exist.

This, he commented should have been something of the past.

Rodney advises others to be persistent and fully determined to continue ones college education. Parents, educators and friends may encourage students to further their education, but it is the individual's responsibility to develop a frame of mind to want to do it and have it. Rodney observed that life is not about "handouts," it's about how individuals put the efforts to contribute to the whole society. It is about becoming full functional citizens, according to Rodney. He added that each and every one must fully combat ignorance. Moreover, he observed that barriers such as being stereotyped and discriminated existed, but they can be overcome if there is an inner-motivation within to succeed. Rodney mentioned that while it was very instrumental to his academic success to have a strong family network pulling resources together to provide for the financial needs of his academic journey, the obstacles he faced from the college professors and others in the college can only be understood once the student finds himself in that environment. Rodney finished by stating "persistence, self-motivation, and most of all...no excuses!"

Sigifredo. Sigifredo is a 23-year-old single Mexican American, who works at a bank in South Texas. He was also born and raised in South Texas. He was an only child. His father was the person who motivated him the most and helped prepare for college. His father was Sigifredo's mentor and continues to be at his side. He mentioned that this has made him a self-motivated individual. Of course, his mother has been very supportive as well. He also mentions that his girlfriend also helped and supported him along the way.

Sigifredo is very proud to have been the first in his family to have every received a degree. He mentions that this accomplishment would not have been possible without the tremendous support of his parents who insisted on him attending college upon of completing his high school.

He, like other participants, said that attending the community college was a struggle because of the lack of academic preparation. Sigifredo found it somewhat difficult adjusting

to the new community as well as to the rigorous curriculum. He has advised others of attending or currently attending, college to keep on trying their best. According to Sigifredo, it is up to each individual to want to pursue and become a better person.

Sigifredo attributes his education to a Bachelor of Arts degree and then to a Master of Arts to his self-motivation. Sigifredo also advises others that it takes self-motivation to succeed. He often reminds his own family members of the pride of becoming the first one in his family to obtain a college degree. He often challenges his children to do the same and sometimes points out that receiving a college education was the best "thank you" he could give to his parents.

Carlos. Carlos is a happily married 25-year-old firefighter who was also born and raised in South Texas. He has no children. He was one of three children. At a very early age Carlos was also encouraged to attend school and was always told that he would attend college. Both of his parents played an important role in motivating him to get ahead. He remembered that when he was in elementary school he was exposed to books and taken to the library frequently. Therefore, Carlos claims it made it easy for him to adapt to a more academic life of high school and college. He mentioned that he was greatly self-motivated. Carlos is a very proud individual and mentions of how graduating with an associate's degree from this community college felt like "out of this world."

Even though transitioning from high school was very stressful, he managed to stay focused and plow ahead. He, too, complained that the community college curriculum was at a totally different level for which he and was not prepared. It was a huge hurdle to overcome.

Carlos' advice seems to coincide with that of several others successful interviewees in that continuing to strive for excellence is key to succeeding. There will be sacrifices along the way, but it all pays off eventually. He noted that the stressful phase he was through after high school resulted in his "pausing" his education several times. But he emphasized that he went and completed his studies. Even if someone found steady employment where he is happy, Carlos notes having a degree provides a good

“Plan B” just in case the employment situation changes.

Adrian. Adrian is a 24-year-old pilot who is also from South Texas. Before becoming a pilot, he attended the same community college as the other participants. He was born and raised in a small family of five. His parents had two other children, and claims he benefited from being the middle child. He grew up learning Spanish but when his older brother started going to school, he would come home and teach him English so that he (Adrian) learned the new language even before he went to school. His ambition was to go into medical school, so therefore he prepared himself by taking a rigorous science-based curriculum in high school. He challenged himself with difficult and more demanding courses. But he realized soon after attending his first semester at the community college that he wanted to try something different. He wanted to learn to fly and he immediately changed his major. He is very grateful he did and credits several of his high school teachers for working and encouraging him to do what his heart desired. He also mentioned that these teachers served as his mentors and encouraged and supported his desires of attending college.

Adrian was motivated early in his elementary school year to attend college. He attributes this to his successful grades in his core subjects. He mentions that those early years were important to him because at this young age he developed the desire to become successful, and this served as an engine of self-motivation.

His parents did not receive much of a formal education. His mother completed a fourth grade education and his father finished his sixth grade year. Still, they both played a vital role in Adrian’s education. They both inculcated the notion that education was the key for his future. He therefore developed a frame of mind that led him to pursue his curiosity in what he would learn.

Adrian does credit his parents and of course some of his high school teachers for his determination to pursue a higher education degree, but more than, that he is grateful that it was through them he developed a curiosity for learning. Their efforts paid off, since they propelled him into continuing in a successful

path of education. He sees himself as a successful and proud Mexican American.

Adrian now views the world through a different lens than the one he had when he was growing up. He mentioned that all is possible if you believe in yourself even if you come from an economical disadvantaged Mexican American family.

Adrian points to his parents as being a key motivating factor for his college success. Additionally, that his father told him to just let him know what he needed to do indicates that his parents were fully supporting him, even with very limited resources. He recalled how proud his parents looked the day he received his degree and the satisfaction he felt in showing them that their support paid off. He is happy that, because of the sacrifices made by him and his family, he is now in the position to provide assistance to them whenever they need it.

Eddy. Eddy is a 26-year-old married Mexican American who is currently a very successful sports writer for a local newspaper. He was born and raised around the community college area. He reported that he had attended elementary school in Monterrey, Nuevo León, Mexico. Soon after that, he moved back to complete his education in Texas. He was strongly motivated to further his studies after high school by a close friend of his. Eddy was also influenced by a teacher in high school. He gives this teacher credit for motivating him to continue his studies and helping him with his financial aid paperwork.

Eddy also credits his family for support and encouragement. His parents were always there for him. Even though his parents did not have much of a formal education, they still gave Eddy plenty of encouragement and support. His wife also played a vital role in Eddy continuing on his studies. She motivated, and still motivates, him to further his studies, as does a good friend and supervisor.

Eddy is a very proud of being first-generation Mexican American to have completed and attained a two-year degree. He does acknowledge that he would not have done it by himself. He acknowledges that several people played positive and influential roles in his educational success and degree attainment.

Eddy does admit the transition from high school to college was one huge step for him. He was not academically prepared to begin the rigorous curriculum at the community college. He was placed in remedial classes which prepared him to do the regular college course work. He made reference to his struggle with his English and mathematics courses. And he had to revamp his study habits once at the community college.

Giovanni. Giovanni is a 23-year-old married local politician. He was also born and raised in the community college area. He is one of two children in a single-parent household. His mother played a major role in his attending college and attaining an Associate's Degree. He did also mention that there close relatives who also encouraged him to pursue a college education.

Giovanni ultimately, had to make a decision to join the rest of his peers and relatives in attending college. He stressed that before and at high school graduation there was not much counseling or guidance done by the school where he attended. He mentioned that it was left up to the individual to do their own career and college investigation process. So he and friends researched extensively to which college would be more convenient for them to attend. There was to be some parental encouragement, but he had to search out the college information to better help him make the best decision.

Once, Giovanni began his college career, his brother-in-law stepped in to motivate him to stay in college. This relative and his mother joined forces, encouraging him to do well in college. Therefore, both individuals deserve credit for helping him attain his two-year college degree. This is an accomplishment for which Giovanni is very proud. Altogether, Giovanni succeed in graduating from a community college, he remembers that it was not easy. He was not that much prepared to face the college level curriculum because of poor high school course guidance. He points out particularly to mathematics and science courses which most troubled him.

Despite adversity, Giovanni was able to overcome these and other obstacles and strived to better himself in all possible aspects of his life and academic career. He emphasized that he

never lost faith. When he had any doubts, he would drive home because there he would get his confidence restored by his immediate family members.

Mauricio. Mauricio is a 27-year-old single engineer. He and a younger sibling were also born and raised by the parents, in a home close to the community college. He attended a private elementary school before going to a small public school. He has both parents and one younger sibling. He is a very energetic and determined individual. He had his mind set on going to college from early on.

Mauricio's ideas of pursuing a degree were fostered by both patents. He seems to have had great support from his family for academics. This lead to him become determined and focused after high school.

Mauricio discussed how his family, and specially his mother, influenced him to be successful. He also credited a fifth grade teacher who also was very influential in his upbringing, and he was personally driven.

Mauricio gave great credit to his mother for the motivation to do his best during and after his attendance at the community college. She has served as a mentor, and now his girlfriend has joined his mother and continues to support him as well.

Mauricio was fairly well prepared academically for the challenge of college after his work and was secure sometimes to the point of being confident in his abilities. He was well on his way to conquering his dreams. Mauricio takes great pride in his accomplishments and enjoys working with other students that also are pursuing a higher education career and degree.

Themes and categories

Similar to the findings of research articulated in Chapter 2, the participant's profile and perspectives on their academic success of attaining a two-year degree revolved on their themes: personal identity, resiliency, access, networking, motivation, peer influence, inspirational and mentorship, college preparedness, and counseling and guidance. Through intense deduction and analysis of each of the participants' interview digital transcripts and interview notes, there were nine recurring categories with nine themes.

Personal identity. Carlos sees himself as a “very proud” Mexican American. He also sees himself as someone who always wants more and does not like being stuck in the same place. His inner motivation drives him to be the best and he is thus driven by his mother’s wish that he to keep moving forward.

Personal demographics. This study consisted of 10 first-generation Mexican American males between the ages of 21 and 28 years old. Five of the participants were single, three were married, and the remaining two were divorced. The participants were born and raised within a 60 mile radius from the community college district. Each indicated an inner drive to succeed that was inculcated early in life by their parents and other mentors. They also listed self-motivation as a key factor that propelled them to succeed in college.

Resilience. During the interview process, Adrian stressed that anything was possible if he believed in himself. Adrian came from an economically disadvantaged family where neither of his parents attended school past the sixth grade. But they nevertheless stressed the value of education to him. In turn, he managed to turn his “disadvantages” into a resiliency that helped him succeed in college.

Mindset. Rodney mentioned in his interview that the curriculum at the college was very different from what he received in high school. He added that he did not feel he was prepared academically for the rigors of college. Further, because of social tensions stemming from the 1970s Raza Unida movement, he felt out of place in an institution just two counties away from his home.

Access. According to the interviews, the participants took advantage of the community college’s proximity and the fact that many of their friends were attending the same institution to pool their resources in order to succeed at the community college. An example is car-pooling which allowed several students to ride together in one vehicle in order to save on fuel expenses. Another resource that made access to the college convenient was the available transportation services provided by the local Kiwanis Club in the form of a school bus.

Proximity and opportunity. During their interviews, a majority of the participants indicated that they took advantage of the relative proximity of the college’s locale. The same group mentioned friends and relatives attending that community college and this provided them with a sense of staying within the same ‘network of friends.’

Networking. Miguel, the computer technician mentioned that even today, he continues to be motivated and encouraged by family members. He reported the fact that developing a close personal network with friends and relatives has been key to his college success.

Family support. Several participants emphasized the importance their family played on their pursuit of a college degree. Humberto, the musician, grew up in a two-parent home and was encouraged at home to graduate from high school, then to attend college. He credits his family for supporting him by believing that his efforts would pay off one day.

On the other hand, Ricardo received destructive comments from a family member (brother) and from one of his teachers. He mentioned that he managed to turn the negativity into a motivational factor to succeed.

Motivation. Most of the participants listed self-motivation, family motivation, and motivation deriving from a high school teacher as a major factor contributing to their college success. Adrian, the 24-year old pilot participant cites his early school success in elementary school as a catalyst to developing his self-motivation.

Positive influence and mentorship. Rodney, the 24 year-old small businessman found his academic success partly attributed to the influence one of his high school teachers. He mentioned that he also found support and encouragement from other successful individuals.

Peer influence. All of the participants utilized self-motivation or motivational support from family or peers as a resource that propelled them to succeed in college. According to Eddy, he received positive peer influence from a good friend named Alonzo Garcia who convinced him to attend college.

Personal, family and peer motivation. Every participant in this interview process credited family as one of the factors contributing to their college success. Miguel, the 25-year old computer technician, credited both his family and friends as contributing factors. He stated, “My friends played a large role in me coming to this college because, of course, they were going there and we helped each other as much as we could.” He credits the day-to-day camaraderie he experienced with others sharing similar interests as vital ingredients to his educational success.

Inspirational and mentorship. A majority of the participants indicated they found inspiration from their mothers. Several saw themselves as self-motivated but also listed their mothers’ encouragement as factors contributing to their college success.

Eddy credited his wife and his immediate work supervisor, Barbara Edwards. He indicated that Ms. Edwards inspired him to further his college education and was very supportive of him when he needed time off of work to attend to college-related issues. Further, the same participant found inspiration in the clients he worked with. Many of them were from Mexico and did not speak English, and their needs provided a basis for him to pursue his studies in order to help them more.

Significance of degree attainment. Sigifredo indicated that he was very proud to be the first in his family to earn a degree and that it would not have been possible without the tremendous support he received from his parents. Similarly, in his interview Miguel also added that the achievement of a two year-degree from that community college gave him great pride.

College preparedness. Carlos, the 25 year-old firefighter, stated in his interview that the exposure he received as an elementary student to books and the frequent trips to the library set the foundation for a successful college career. At the other end of the preparedness spectrum, Miguel struggled with the required college Algebra course still countered that no matter how the course, “life would be even tougher without passing it” (personal communication, October

2011). He was determined that no course was going to keep him from reaching his goals.

Academic rigor and preparedness. Contrary to several of the other participants, Humberto stated that even though he found the college curriculum demanding, he did not find it too difficult to adapt to its environment. He credits his discipline for this.

On the other hand, Rodney and Sigifredo both lamented due to a lack of academic preparation as the greatest challenging to for college success. Like Humberto, almost all judged the college curriculum as much more rigorous than their in high school studies. Sigifredo offered this advice to students experiencing similar circumstances.

Counseling and guidance. According to a majority of the participants, they received valuable support from individuals who provided counseling and guidance and served as mentors throughout their academic career. These individuals provided advice such as “believe in yourself, surround yourself with supporters, don’t shy away from the challenge, and always strive to succeed.”

Strong mentorship advising. Several participants interviewed noted that a teacher or several teachers from their high schools were instrumental to their college success. As an example of this, Ricardo credited his social studies teacher, Juan Vereda for constantly reminding him of his potential to succeed in college. He also mentions Alonzo Mares, a principal as “pushing” him to further his education. He also recognizes local family friends (Nieto family) who kept telling him “do it, keep trying!” (personal communication, Oct. 2011) Ricardo also reported receiving mentoring advice from the high school secretary, Margarita.

Discussion, Recommendations, and Conclusion

The stories of these males do shed light on their personal experiences as they overcame the obstacles and barriers that keep many Mexican American first-generation males from pursuing and attaining a two-year degree. The stories shared will hopefully inspire others to persist as

they, too, strive to overcome personal difficulties.

These findings can act as changing agents researchers in academia and for students who address the issue of achievement among first-generation Mexican American males.

Implications of Research

The findings and implications resulting from this research revealed certain patterns in the behavior of Mexican American males pursuing an Associate's Degree at a community college. The existing literature is generally deficient in addressing specific conditions that may contribute to the success of these students. The researcher used the narrative methodology that allowed the interviewer an up-close and personal view and understanding of the participants' sense of drive and determination that led to the completion of that degree. This study will benefit not only the community college which students attended and other colleges but also the targeted population.

This qualitative research is intended to benefit community colleges, as previous studies (Whitman, 1998) by informing the college administrators and policy makers (e.g. board members, stake holders) to promote Mexican American student achievement. Also, college faculty, students, and educational researchers will benefit from the information to identify and better understand the needs of the population studied (Whitman, 1998). Finally, this research study may assist in providing a clear perspective for finding solutions to improve the educational success of all students at this particular community college.

The use of a narrative approach enabled the participants to relate and identify the process of learning from meaningful moments, environment, and people that influenced their world and positively impacted their education. Using the narrative research approach allowed the participant and researcher to identify educational desires and personal circumstances that led to academic success. Therefore these findings can act as a changing agent in order for both academia and individual to address the issue of achievement among first-generation Mexican American males.

Recommendations for Further Research

If the intent is to gain a better understanding of this population of Mexican American males and its needs and conditions that contribute to their success, the potential for further research is endless. But the researcher is convinced that no single study can be expected to deal with all issues arising during the inquiry process. The researcher suggests some areas of further research:

1. The study of academic achievement of first-generation Mexican American males could be compared to that of unsuccessful Mexican American males. Their respective experiences, reflections, perceptions, and feelings regarding their academics experiences could reveal a wealth of findings.

2. The study with other first-generation Mexican Americans from another part of the county would facilitate comparative studies and also add rich findings to the literature.

3. Research focusing on Asian Americans, Anglo American, and African American males would provide more information for a more comprehensive inquiry comparing contributing factors and conditions of success of students in different groups.

4. The study of how marital status has influenced first-generation Mexican American male's academic achievement in a community college.

A qualitative study of first-generation Mexican American females, who face similar challenges, might also provide a wealth of information that can contribute to the understanding of the general Mexican American college student population.

Conclusion

Leaders in higher education would like to help first-generation Mexican American males to succeed academically and thus reach their potential as contributing members of society. This research illustrated the conditions that facilitated reaching their educational goal and mission, which was to complete a two-year degree at the community college. The inquiry examined the behavioral patterns that have been an influence on the educational decisions of these Mexican American males, and what social

conditions have motivated them to seek and achieve higher education despite adversity.

By using a narrative approach, research enabled the participants to relate and identify the process of learning from meaningful moments, environment and people that influenced their world and impacted their education positively. Using the narrative research approach allowed the participant and researcher to identify educational desires and personal circumstances that led to academic success.

The research clearly presented parallel themes related the themes on the review of the literature: academic conditions, family impact, financial resources, college environment, and personal attributes. These reoccurring themes found in this study were definitely pertinent to the Mexican American males' personal identity, resiliency, access, networking, motivation, peer influence, inspiration and mentorship, college preparedness, and counseling and guidance contributed to their academic success. The themes also solidify the theoretical framework used in the research using Bandura's *Social Learning Theory* (1977) in which he suggests that not only environmental factors, but motivational factors, along with self-regulatory mechanisms, affect an individual's behavior.

For generations Mexican Americans males have struggled to succeed academically. This has been difficult for those living in South Texas. But this research will serve as an outline to assist this population in achieving their goals of getting a college education and ultimately acquiring a college degree.

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