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Disconnected: Examining the Help-Seeking Behaviors of Mexican American First-Generation
College Students

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Marisol Mastrangelo

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ABSTRACT

In college, high levels of student engagement, including the formation of relationships with faculty and staff, are positively associated with learning and development. Faculty and staff, known as institutional agents, can provide critical forms of institutional knowledge, resources, and services that can enhance the college experience and encourage student success. For Latinx students, who are disproportionately first-generation college students, these connections can make a significant difference since they may lack access to individuals in their family networks who can help them to navigate college and manage academic demands.

Even though Latinx students have much to gain by creating a campus support network, research suggests that they often have low levels of engagement and fail to foster institutional ties. However, the reasons why Latinx students struggle to form these connections, especially in their first-year when they most need support, have not been well documented; nor has this topic been examined at Hispanic Serving Institutions, even though they enroll more than half of all Latinx college students. Further, the current body of literature focuses on the frequency or quality of interactions between Latinx students and campus faculty and staff but fails to explain *why* these students encounter barriers and to consider the relational dynamics between students, the individuals who work in a college, and the college environment.

Drawing on repeated interviews with 30 Mexican American first-generation college students enrolled in their first year of study at a four-year HSI, and interviews with 26 college faculty and staff, I utilized a social capital framework to examine the factors that negatively shaped how they perceived the supportive potential of campus staff and ultimately discouraged help-seeking behaviors during times of academic and personal need. Social capital refers to the

benefits inherent in social relationships, while help-seeking is a primary way students can establish ties with institutional agents and access the resources available through these connections. After analysis of the data, the following three findings emerged:

1. The college environment operated in myriad ways to promote a culture of independence that led students to feel a need to cope with and manage challenges related to the college experience solely on their own. Students also felt acting independently in college as preparation for adulthood and key to success post-college. These factors made them openly embrace independence as normative behavior as college students and downplayed the supportive potential of campus agents. Additionally, as some students moved through different spaces in a college setting, they also found inefficiencies in service delivery that impacted how they viewed agents as helpers and discouraged their use of available resources.
2. Some students perceived the role and areas of support of academic advisors in limited ways. Some also felt a lack of support when it came to making decisions that would impact their college journeys. Finally, some students dealt with challenging life experiences that compromised their ability to trust campus agents. These three factors were present when examining the dynamics between students and academic advisors.
3. Though designated Hispanic-Serving, there was a disconnect between institutional identity and mission that affected the university's ability to communicate a sense of support to the Latinx student population. As a result, members of the university worried that this mismatch disrupted students' desires to lean on them during times of need.

Based on the findings, I conclude that colleges must proactively demonstrate the supportive potential of campus staff to promote positive help-seeking orientations and facilitate connections between students and college faculty and staff. For colleges to accomplish this objective, they must create a culture of care and find ways to close the distance between students and campus staff.

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Chapter 1: Latinx Undergraduates and Student Engagement

Today, the landscape of higher education continues to diversify as more minority, and first-generation college students enroll in colleges and universities across the US (Gasman et al. 2008; Conrad and Gasman 2015; Harper and Quaye 2014). Latinx students are driving much of this change, outpacing all other racial and ethnic populations.

Among the 17 million students enrolled in college in fall 2015, Latinx students comprised 3 million or 17.6% (NCES 2017). Compared to 2000, when Latinx students numbered 1.4 million, the number has nearly doubled in size, increasing by 126%. In contrast, enrollment among other racial/ethnic groups has fluctuated. Between 2000 and 2010, enrollment among Black students increased by 73%, moving from 1.5 million to 2.7 million, but from 2010 to 2015 decreased by 14%, moving from 2.7 million to 2.3 million. Enrollment among White students revealed similar trends. From 2000 to 2010, white enrollment increased by 21%, moving from 9 million to 10.9 million. Meanwhile, enrollment among Asian students from 2000 to 2010 increased by 21%, moving from 846,000 to 1.1 million, but leveled off between 2010 and 2015, where it has remained at 1.1 million.

As a population that numbers roughly 58 million, or 17.8% of the US population, and is the second largest racial/ethnic group in the US, the emerging Latinx college population signals substantial post-secondary gains, especially since they have historically lagged others in completion of a four-year degree (Census 2016; Krogstad 2016; Krogstad & Fry 2014).

In 2016, for example, 4.9 million (15.3%) of Latinx individuals held a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 6.5 million Asians (53.2%), 50 million Whites (35%), and 5.4 million Blacks (21%) (Census 2016). As a result, their rising educational achievements will not only

have lasting implications on their social stability and economic mobility, with college graduates earning roughly \$830,000 more over a lifetime than high school graduates but will positively impact the health of the nation since many of today's jobs require some post-high school education or training (Onink 2014; Rugaber 2017).

Research on Latinx college students reveals that much of the responsibility to educate and prepare them for success will fall to Hispanic Serving Institutions, which presently enroll 65% of all Latinx college students (Excelencia 2018). HSIs, according to federal guidelines, are degree-granting institutions that are accredited and nonprofit and have at least 25% Latinx undergraduate enrollment (DOE 2018). Over the last ten years, HSIs have experienced significant growth and increased by 78% (Excelencia 2017). Currently, there are 472 HSIs, representing 15% of higher education institutions. They exist across 19 states as well as Puerto Rico, with more emerging HSIs on the horizon.

While rising college enrollment and college choice among Latinx students are closely monitored, we seem to know much less about their educational experiences once they arrive on campus, including the degree to which they engage in behaviors and practices that encourage academic achievement and persistence. This concept is known as student engagement and captures purposeful activities students participate in that impacts their learning and development in ways that enhance their educational experiences and matter for student success (Kuh et al. 2006; Harper & Quaye 2014; NSSE 2018).

One aspect of student engagement that is of high importance pertains to student interactions and connections with individuals who work in a college setting, such as faculty, academic advisors, counselors, tutors, and librarians. Known as institutional agents, these

individuals can share resources, knowledge, and services that yield positive student outcomes (Stanton-Salazar 2011; 2001; 1997). Through such connections, students also increase their stock of social capital. Social capital refers to the resources one can access inherent in the relationships in one's social network (Bourdieu 2007). When students activate ties with individuals who work in a college setting, they gain access to a web of support that can help them effectively maneuver through college and demystify college norms and demands. For Latinx students, who are overwhelmingly first-generation college students (Eagan et al. 2017), these connections are especially meaningful to ensuring their success since they are more likely to enter college lacking critical institutional knowledge. Even though student engagement is essential, research tells us Latinx students often have low levels and tend to encounter difficulty establishing ties with people who work at a college and utilizing campus resources (Kuh 2008; Bridges et al. 2008; NSSE 2017).

However, the reasons why they do not mobilize these ties, especially during the first year of college when students are getting acclimated to college life, have not been well documented. When connections between students and college faculty and staff are studied, there often is a focus on frequency and quality of interactions between students and institutional agents. Much of this research also is captured using quantitative data and analysis. Despite that this data certainly helps to paint a picture of Latinx students' behaviors in college, it fails to provide the reasons *why* they may struggle forming connections and utilizing campus resources. Further, the current body of literature fails to sufficiently consider the relational dynamics between students and the individuals who work on campus, including the factors that shape students' perceptions and understanding of the supportive potential of the very individuals who are meant to serve as

helpers. How students interpret the supportive potential matters because it can directly impact one's decision to form connections with or shy away from institutional agents on campus. What factors might negatively shape how students assign meaning to the roles of institutional agents within a college? Moreover, given that student engagement theory argues that the college environment equally matters in creating the conditions that encourage engagement and student-staff connections, how does a college negatively shape students' perceptions of institutional agents? These are the motivating questions for the study that follows.

Drawing on a qualitative study of 30 Mexican American first-generation college students enrolled in their first year of study at a four-year HSI, I utilize a social capital framework to examine the factors that negatively shaped how Latinx students perceived the supportive potential of campus agents and ultimately discouraged help-seeking behaviors during times of academic and personal need. Help-seeking behaviors are primary ways students can establish ties with institutional agents in a college setting, and access resources available through these relationships. Specifically, it refers to one's comfort, or lack of, to overcome personal, academic, and or family problems by seeking social support from those in one's social network (Stanton-Salazar 2001). To unpack these dynamics, I addressed this topic in two ways. First, I conducted a series of interviews with students to explore at the individual level the factors that shaped how they understood the supportive potential of institutional agents in college, and how this negatively impacted their help-seeking behaviors. Second, I conducted interviews with 26 college faculty and staff to explore how the campus environment failed to create the conditions that allowed students to view campus agents as "helpers" during times of need and ultimately discouraged help-seeking behaviors.

After data analysis, I determined that both individual and institutional factors played a role in constraining the formation of relationships between students and institutional agents in the college. Data revealed that the college environment, including common college practices and organizational inefficiencies, socialized students to embrace independent behavior. Students, through their interactions with institutional agents, understood their roles and supportive potential in limited ways, as evidenced by students' relationships with academic advisors. Lastly, members of the university who served as institutional agents struggled to make meaning of the HSI identity and engage the Latinx population on the ground level in ways that demonstrated their support. Collectively, these factors negatively shaped students' perceptions of the supportive potential of campus agents and discouraged help-seeking behaviors.

In the following sections, I provide an overview of student engagement theory as well as the barriers to engagement for Latinx students that exists in the current literature. I also share research that points to the significance of exploring how students understand the supportive potential of agents to explain their lack of connections with campus agents. Then I discuss social capital theory and how this framework with an emphasis on help-seeking behaviors is useful for examining the factors that shape students' understandings of the supportive potential of campus agents; and consequently, their decision to forgo establishing relationships during times of need. Following this, I provide a discussion of my methods and close the chapter with summaries of the chapters ahead.

Student Engagement and Student Connections with Institutional Agents

In higher education, student engagement is grounded in the belief that what students do in college matters more for student success than who students are or where they attend college

(Kuh & Schuh 2005; Harper & Quaye 2009; NSSE 2018). The activities aligned with student engagement are wide-ranging and include high impact practices like collaborative learning, reviewing notes after class, engaging in analytical thinking based on quantitative reasoning, participating in learning communities, completing internships, and seeking out service learning or experiential learning opportunities. Research suggests that the amount of time and effort students pour into these kinds of educationally purposeful activities can lead to strong grades and degree completion (NSSE 2018).

These activities not only align with strong academic outcomes, but lead to gains, benefits, and positive outcomes in the following areas: levels of confidence, identity formation, civic-mindedness, soft skills for college adjustment and the workplace, critical thinking, the ability to interact with diverse others, interpersonal skills, teambuilding, leadership, self-advocacy, and self-efficacy. Accordingly, student engagement does not just produce strong grades but supports the holistic development of the student (Kuh et al. 2008).

As evidenced above, student engagement encompasses a multitude of practices, but for this dissertation, student engagement will refer to students' frequency and quality of interactions with individuals who work in college. These individuals span the spectrum of higher education and include faculty, academic advisors, and student and academic affairs administrators. Daily, students come into contact or have the potential to interact with these agents whom all specialize in different support areas and possess the knowledge and skills that, in theory, can help them navigate college and enhance the student experience. These individuals are known as institutional agents and play an essential role for students throughout their college journey. Institutional agents provide forms of academic and social support that allows students to become

effective participants within the college, overcome obstacles that undermine their success, introduce or expose them to opportunities and resources, and impart knowledge and skill development that will add to their academic or personal development (Stanton-Salazar 2011; 2001; 1997).

For Latinx first-generation college students, having a robust support network comprised of institutional agents in a college is vital since they may not have family or others around them to guide them through college and make sense of college norms and demands. When needed, these agents can also serve as a safety net by providing students with critical forms of support that help them succeed in an environment that can be difficult to navigate.

While there are many different forms of institutional supports agents can provide within an educational setting, Stanton-Salazar (2001) identifies the following six as key: (1) providing funds of knowledge; (2) bridging students to different resources or connecting them to others in an educational setting; (3) serving as an advocate for the student; (4) acting as a role model; (5) providing emotional and moral support; (6) and providing personalized and soundly based evaluative feedback, advice, and guidance. When students form relationships with institutional agents in college, these are the resources they can access and use to their benefit when navigating a college environment.

Even though institutional agents can transmit directly or negotiate the transmission of institutional resources and opportunities, the process of forming connections, unfortunately, is not a natural given (Bourdieu 2007). As students enter university settings, there are numerous social hierarchies and norms that students must negotiate to get the help they need (Stanton-Salazar et al. 2007). The institution can also directly impact the size and scope of students'

connections with institutional agents in how it creates the conditions that facilitate interaction and connection (Kuh 2008; NSSE 2017). Research reveals that the burden of knowing how to access resources often falls heaviest on minority and first-generation college students, including Latinx, who also tend to need the most assistance (Stanton-Salazar 2001; Bridges et al. 2008; Stebleton et al. 2012). In the next section, I'll discuss the existing body of literature on student engagement to reveal some of the reasons why Latinx may have difficulty connecting with institutional agents and tapping into these resources.

Latinx Students and Barriers to Engagement

Even though student engagement and institutional connections matter greatly, research suggests that Latinx students are academically and socially less engaged in college. Lack of engagement also is true for first-generation and low-income college students, which are attributes of many Latinx students. In the following sections, I will not only draw on the research of Latinx students, but also first-generation college students and low-income college students, especially since Salis and Nora (2012) report that little research accounts for both Latinx identity and first-generation college student status when collecting and reporting data.

To begin, let us turn to the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), a survey instrument that annually collects information about the first year and senior year students' participation in programs and activities that institutions provide for their learning and personal development, and is a comprehensive survey for tracking student engagement. The results provide an estimate of how undergraduates spend their time and what they gain from attending college. Since 2000, data have been collected from more than 6 million undergraduates at nearly 1600 four-year colleges and universities from the US and Canada (NSSE 2018).

According to the 2016 Annual Report, data from nearly 25,000 first-year students at 140 institutions revealed that 21% reported high difficulty getting help with coursework from many sources including peers, instructors, and learning support centers (e.g., tutoring, writing centers, and success coaching). Among this group, about one in five of these students reported having difficulty learning course material *and* getting help with their coursework. Of students who had difficulty learning course material, Latinx students (19%) and first-generation college students (49%) were two populations who also were more likely to have difficulty getting help with coursework (NSSE 2016).

This was a common theme across the research on Latinx students and first-generation college students. Kim and Sax (2009) who examined differences in the frequency of student-faculty interaction by student's characteristics found that Latinx students compared to different racial and ethnic groups reported less frequently interacting with faculty during lecture class sessions and assisting faculty with research as a volunteer or for course credit. When observing differences along first-generation college status, they also found that students whose parents attended college were more likely than students whose parents did not to assist faculty with research for course credit, communicate with faculty by email or in person, and interact with faculty during lecture sessions. Student's social class also contributed to the frequency of student-faculty interactions; as students' social class increased, so did the frequency of communicating or interacting with faculty.

Bridges et al. (2008) and Contreras et al. (2008) in their analyses of Latinx student engagement similarly discovered low levels both inside and outside the classroom, even after controlling for the institutional setting. Kuh (2008) discovered that first-generation and other

historically underserved students tend to not participate in high impact educational practices as frequently as traditional students despite evidence that they benefit from participation on par or even more than their non-first-generation peers. Jenkins, Miyazaki, and Janosik (2009) also found that first-generation college students were more likely to avoid asking questions or seeking help from faculty. Additionally, Engle and Tinto (2008) found that low-income and first-generation college students are less likely to be engaged in in the social and academic experiences that foster success in college, such as interacting with faculty and using support services.

The concern regarding low levels of student engagement among Latinx has led researchers and policymakers alike to offer different explanations that can be grouped along two themes: psychosocial barriers and external life barriers. Even though the research does not explicitly address the barriers Latinx students encounter when forming connections with institutional agents, the factors discussed still have implications for the size and scope of their on-campus networks.

Psychosocial barriers that negatively impact the students' sense of self and self-worth comprise one area of literature that may account for the low levels of student engagement among Latinx students. Students who possess lower levels of self worth often stems from precollege experiences. For instance, research reveals that Latinx students disproportionately graduate from high schools that are public, low-resourced and segregated. When they arrive on campus, they are more likely to struggle with managing the academic demands and expectations of college-level work, have limited knowledge of higher education, and struggle to utilize resources (Hurtado et al. 2015; Conrad & Gasman 2015; Baez et al. 2008; Nunez et al. 2013). Given their

pre-college schooling environment, first-generation college students, including those who are Latinx, are more often placed in developmental courses and often report lower levels of confidence in their abilities to perform academically. They also tend to earn lower GPAs in their first three years compared to continuing generation students (Bridges et al. 2008; Hutchison 2015). Consequently, Latinx students may be more vulnerable to developing a negative academic self-concept and suffering from stereotype threat or imposter syndrome. These feelings can result in low sense of belonging, alienation, isolation from a university, less active coping skills, and a reluctance to ask for help (Strayhorn 2012; Hurtado & Carter 1997; Gupton et al. 2014; Hutchison 2015; Stephens et al. 2012; Bridges et al. 2008).

External life barriers, which captures the lives of Latinx students beyond college, is another area that helps explain their low levels of student engagement (Kuh 2008; Bridges et al. 2008; Hutchison 2015; Gasman 2008). Latinx students are not only more likely to commute to college, but they also are more likely to have significant family obligations or families of their own. They also are overwhelmingly low-income, which results in many having to work, sometimes multiple jobs either on or off campus, and generally more hours than their peers. Strayhorn (2012) found among the Latinx students who came from low or working-class families that many worked more than 25 hours per week. The financial challenges they encountered, he argued, placed an over-reliance on grants and loans, which created pressure to work. These life circumstances can limit the amount of time Latinx students spend on campus and subsequently the opportunity to participate in student organizations, attend faculty office hours, or take advantage of research programs that can enhance their college experience and connect them to mentors (Bridges et al. 2008; Hutchison 2015; Gasman 2008; Gupton et al. 2014).

The studies above demonstrate that Latinx students struggle with student engagement and identifies some of the barriers they may encounter that makes it difficult for them to be more academically and socially engaged on campus. Still, more research is needed. First, while the research suggests that Latinx students struggle with engagement, much of the analysis focused on student-faculty interaction and academic matters specifically. However, it is essential to expand the scope given that the university setting comprises different institutional agents who can enhance the educational experience of college students and the fact that Latinx students may encounter personal challenges that require guidance or support from different systems of support.

Second, while psychosocial and external life barriers help to paint a picture and explain their low levels of engagement, more research is needed that focuses specifically on the factors that shape their campus networks and the formation of connections between students and institutional agents. This topic is rarely the focus of these studies, despite its significance.

Further, the current body of literature focuses solely on the student—including perceptions of themselves or their lives outside of college—and fails to sufficiently consider the relational dynamics between students and the individuals who work on campus. This includes an exploration of the factors that shape students' perceptions and understandings of the very individuals who are meant to help them, which can directly impact their decisions to form connections or shy away from campus agents. This is important because how they understand their roles can have implications for whether they activate these ties, the circumstances in which they utilize these ties, and how often they tap into these resources. It also is essential to explore how the university shapes these perceptions since they are accountable for creating the conditions that lead to high levels of student engagement. There is evidence to suggest that

exploring the relational dynamics between students and campus agents, specifically students' perceptions of agents and how they understand their supportive potential, warrants examination and may help explain low levels of student engagement in new ways.

Research on the Perceptions of Supportive Potential of Institutional Agents and Campus Environments

Different strands of research suggest a strong relationship exists between students' perceptions of support—as it relates to campus agents and environment—and levels of student engagement; particularly when it comes to exploring the formation of students' connections with institutional agents. Let us again turn to NSSE, which identifies supportive relationships as crucial for encouraging student engagement. As stated above, NSSE is a survey instrument that tracks student engagement for first-year and last-year students across universities in the US and Canada. To represent the multi-dimensional nature of student engagement, NSSE developed ten engagement indicators organized around four engagement themes, one of which is *Campus Environment*. *Campus Environment* includes two separate engagement indicators which are *Quality of Interactions* and *Supportive Environment*. Please see the table on the next page for information on *Campus Environment*.

Table 1. NSSE Campus Environment Engagement Indicator

Campus Environment		
Quality of Interactions	College environments characterized by positive interpersonal relations promote student learning and success. Students who enjoy supportive relationships with peers, advisors, faculty, and staff are better able to find assistance when needed and to learn from and with those around them. Items include:	<p><i>Indicate the quality of your interactions with the following people at your institution:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students • Academic advisors • Faculty • Student services staff (career services, student activities, housing, etc.) • Other administrative staff and offices (registrar, financial aid, etc.)
Supportive Environment	Institutions that are committed to student success provide support and involvement across a variety of domains, including the cognitive, social, and physical. These commitments foster higher levels of student performance and satisfaction. This Engagement Indicator summarizes students' perceptions of how much an institution emphasizes services and activities that support their learning and development. Items include:	<p><i>How much does your institution emphasize the following:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing support to help students succeed academically • Using learning support services (tutoring services, writing center, etc.) • Encouraging contact among students from different backgrounds (social, racial/ethnic, religious, etc.) • Providing opportunities to be involved socially • Providing support for your overall well-being (recreation, health care, counseling, etc.) • Helping you manage your non-academic responsibilities (work, family, etc.) • Attending campus activities and events (performing arts, athletic events, etc.) • Attending events that address important social, economic, or political issues

Under *Campus Environment*, strong, supportive relationships between students and institutional agents play a role in their use of services and turning to them for help across areas of need. It also captures from the student perspective, the role the university plays in encouraging connections and their use of campus resources. As a result, the *Campus Environment* Engagement Indicator reveals that the relational aspects between students and agents matters in predicting levels of student engagement across domains and show the importance of the interactive relationship between students and the institution. I will begin by discussing *Quality of Interactions* and the supporting literature that shows that students' views of agents' supportive potential matters for encouraging help-seeking. Then I will similarly discuss *Supportive Environment* and the relevant literature.

Under *Campus Environment*, the first indicator, *Quality of Interactions*, encompasses aspects of student engagement that relate to students' perceptions of the support they receive in their relationships and interactions with peers, advisors, faculty, and staff. Supportive relationships matter because students who experience positive interactions are better able to find assistance when needed and to learn from and with those around them. Survey results from NSSE 2016 Annual Report also suggested that the quality of interactions correlated to retention and attrition; the more supportive the relationships, the stronger the rates of retention and attrition and vice versa.

While we know supportive relationships matter, we know much less about what shapes perceptions of support and in turn the quality of interactions students experience with institutional agents. For instance, how does student's understanding of support inform their decision to mobilize ties and lean on them during times of need? Unfortunately, we are unable to

fully contextualize what support means to students and how it is negotiated, in part because NSSE is administered as a survey. To help add nuance and contextualize NSSE's findings, further empirical and qualitative exploration is needed.

Beyond NSSE, there is some qualitative research that suggests that examining student's perceptions of institutional agents regarding the support they offer is essential to understanding levels of student engagement. Torres et al. (2006) in their analysis of how first-generation Latinx students gather information in college found that many elected to forgo consulting with academic advisors because they failed to perceive them as "experts" or expressed difficulty trusting them as authority figures. Wang (2013) also found that among the first-generation college students included in her study, those who viewed instructors as more approachable were more likely to interact with them. In these studies, however, it is unclear what makes academic advisors "experts" or instructors "approachable."

Additionally, Stanton Salazar, Tai, and Bressler (1999) found that Latinx high school students reporting higher levels of perceived support exhibited the highest likelihood of actively seeking academic assistance from teachers and counselors. Still, their analysis focused on student characteristics such as, race, gender, and generational status, to determine the relationship between perceived support and help-seeking, but not necessarily how these factors shaped their understanding of the supportive potential of institutional agents in the high school and how this impacted their relationship. This research demonstrates that perceptions of the supportive potential of institutional agents matter in facilitating help-seeking behaviors, but we still lack an understanding of what shapes these perceptions.

Stanton-Salazar (2001) in a separate study provided some insight. In his examination of the help-seeking orientations of Mexican American youth, discovered that some of the factors that determined whether students sought help stemmed from their perceptions of the teachers' abilities to help or what they believed were their desire to help. This was predicated on different interactions students had with individuals at the high school. He also identified that students' perceptions were shaped by lack of trust that came from fractured ties between students and agents as well as organizational barriers related to time and accessibility. Stanton-Salazar revealed that different experiences at both the student and school level shaped how students understood the supportive potential of teachers and staff at the high school and impacted help-seeking behaviors. How might this translate to college students and a college setting?

In addition to the *Quality of Interactions* mattering for student engagement, NSSE also identifies the significance of a *Supportive Environment*, which shifts focus to the university. *Supportive Environment* includes students' perceptions of how much an institution emphasizes services and activities that support their learning and development across a variety of domains, including the cognitive, social, and physical. Supportive environments matter because these commitments foster higher levels of student performance and satisfaction. Mainly, this indicator addresses how a university creates the conditions that help students feel a sense of support. This fuels student engagement, specifically the formation of connections between students and institutional agents.

In the literature, feeling supported is often captured by a sense of belonging. Sense of belonging is when students feel valued and a sense of connectedness at their respective institution (Strayhorn 2012). Survey results from NSSE's 2016 Annual Report demonstrate why

this indicator encourages student engagement. Among Latinx students who participated in the survey, 20% answered, "Disagree or Strongly Disagree" to the question "I feel valued by my institution" while 26% also answered, "Disagree or Strongly Disagree" to the question "I feel like part of the campus community." NSSE found that students who felt safe, comfortable being themselves, valued and part of the community had more positive interactions with others on campus, perceived greater institutional support, and believed more strongly that their college experience had facilitated their growth and development across a range of outcomes. These relationships were strongest for students who felt valued by the institution and part of the campus community, even though a sizable number of Latinx students did not.

As suggested by NSSE, student perceptions of a supportive college environment matters for student engagement and building relationships with institutional agents. While this is telling, NSSE fails to provide data that unpacks what about a campus environment shapes when and how students feel valued or part of the community, even though this is crucial for deepening connections.

The importance of a supportive environment in facilitating student engagement and connections to a university and respective campus agents is supplemented by a wealth of research on the impact of campus climate and institutional environments on students. In one study, Hurtado and Carter (1997) found that Latinx students who felt the campus environment was hostile or experienced a conflict between institutional values and home values led to low levels of sense of belonging. When Latinx perceived the campus climate as hostile or lacking diversity, they often expressed more difficulty adjusting academically, socially, emotionally, and

had more difficulty building a sense of belonging to the university (Hurtado, Carter & Spuler, 1996).

Perceptions of a supportive environment also affect student adjustment, which can include the formation of relationships between students and faculty and staff. Research reveals that students who experience discrimination or prejudice in a classroom are associated with classroom performance, academic experiences with faculty, campus social experiences, intellectual development, commitment to the institution, and the decision to stay at a particular college (Nora and Cabrera 1996). Latinx students compared to other racial and ethnic groups were more likely to report discrimination in their classroom and on campus. These studies raise questions around how a college environment communicates support, shapes students views of the supportive potential of campus agents, and impacts help-seeking. Still, these studies fail to incorporate the perspective of the faculty and staff of a university to add greater dimension to these findings. This is important in capturing the student experience because individuals who comprise a university directly shape the experiences and perceptions of their students.

From the section above, we learned that how students perceive institutional agents and their ability to help them cope with different challenges plays a role in their levels of student engagement, including the connections they form with agents and how they mobilize these networks to their advantage. The research also demonstrated how the university environment plays a central role in communicating the supportive potential of campus agents and encouraging the use of resources and tie formation. To help understand what negatively shapes students' perceptions of the supportive potential of agents, the campus environment, and impacts their

decision to lean on campus agents, we can apply a social capital framework. In the section below, I will explain why a social capital framework is useful for exploring these questions.

Social Capital

This research sets out to explore how Latinx first-generation college students think about the supportive potential of institutional agents, what shapes their perceptions, and how these perceptions impact their decision to build relationships with them on campus. This is important because these individuals have resources and knowledge that, in theory, can help them navigate college. Because of the emphasis on networks, including how networks get constructed and the benefits inherent in these relationships, a social capital framework is helpful for understanding how students construct these ties.

Social capital is a term that has been used widely in the educational literature, but the theoretical roots can be found in the work of Pierre Bourdieu (2007). He defined social capital as "the aggregate of the potential resources which are linked to the possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (381). Essentially, social capital means that a person's social network can be a source of advantage. As a result, the volume of social capital possessed by an individual person depends on the size of one's network and the volume of capital that each person in that network holds (Bourdieu 2007). Thus, while a person's social network can be a source of advantage, it is highly contingent on whom the network is comprised of and the resources they possess.

Granovetter (1983) refers to individuals within a social network as strong or weak ties. Strong ties refer to individuals in one's social network who are similar to themselves, while weak ties refer to individuals who are generally different from the said person (Granovetter 1983).

When networks are comprised of both weak ties—individuals not in a person's immediate circle or those who look different—and strong ties—family or peers—they tend to be the most advantageous (Harper & Quaye 2014; Stanton-Salazar 2007). Both weak and strong ties perform functions in one's social network. Strong ties have higher motivation to be of assistance and are typically more readily available. Conversely, weak ties provide people with access to information and resources beyond those available in their social circle (Granovetter 1983: 209)

When it comes to information sharing, weak ties tend to be more beneficial because they bring "new" information to the social network and are of particular value because they tend to bridge to social circles different from one's own.

In college, individuals classified as weak ties in the social networks of Latinx students would include institutional agents since they possess the information and knowledge to help them navigate college, which many may lack given that college will be an entirely new experience for them and their families. Accordingly, when Latinx college students are connected to institutional agents, the agents' knowledge, supports, and services, are the actual source of advantage. There are resources inherent in these relationships that Latinx students can access by activating these ties or forming connections (Portes 1998). This aligns with Stanton-Salazar's (2007) definition of social capital since he argues that it is access to mentors and resources that encourage and educate students. These networks he said, "function as lifelines to resources that permit low-status individuals to overcome social structural barriers and to experience healthy human development, school achievement, and social mobility" (Stanton-Salazar 2007: 343; Granovetter 1983).

However, while college can provide students opportunities to broaden their social network outside the family and increase their social capital, students must proactively seek out institutional agents to receive the help that will allow them to effectively navigate the environment and manage college demands and expectations. When students do not have a family support network that helps them prepare for college, "the information burden shifts from the adults as givers to the students as collectors" (Gupton 2015: 245).

Stanton-Salazar (2007) suggested that the ways students can access benefits and ultimately build their social network are through the act of help-seeking. Help-seeking, according to Stanton-Salazar (2007: 335), refers to a "person's proclivity or disinclination to resolve personal, academic, or family problems through the mobilization of relationships and through the seeking of social support (i.e., coping by seeking help)." For college students, this means they would utilize the resources available on campus to overcome challenges associated with the college experience and lean on institutional agents during times of need.

Despite the value of these social networks and significance of proactive help-seeking orientations, it is important to note that there is a distinction between the resources and the ability to obtain the resources via help-seeking (Portes 1998; Stanton-Salazar 2001). Research has documented that for Latinx students, the activation of ties with key institutional figures presents many challenges, thereby straining access to institutional forms of social capital (Dinka et al. 2003; Nettles 2003). According to Bourdieu (2007), interactions are embedded in power relations and are used to aid in social reproduction.

Consequently, there are many factors that can facilitate or constrain help-seeking behaviors. However, it is through an examination of students' help-seeking behaviors that we can

shed light on that factors that negatively shape their perceptions of the supportive potential of campus agents and impacts their decision to activate ties. In the sections below, I will explore some of these factors, focusing first on the individual-level factors that can shape perceptions and help-seeking behaviors, following by an examination of factors at the institutional level.

Ultimately, the question I aim to address is: If the decision to seek help is based on how students understand the supportive potential of agents, how can individual and institutional factors shape their perceptions?

Individual Factors, Perceptions of Agents, and Help-Seeking Behaviors

There are many sociocultural factors at the individual-level that can shape how students understand the supportive potential of agents and subsequent help-seeking behaviors. First, students' perceptions of agents and help-seeking behaviors may be impacted by one's cultural capital (Bourdieu 2007; Bridges et al. 2008). Cultural capital, which also is a concept associated with Bourdieu (2007), refers to the general cultural background, knowledge, disposition, and skills that are passed from one generation to the next. In higher education, cultural capital can operate as a form of advantage or disadvantage for students depending on whether they have family members who attended college. For instance, among continuing-generation college students, family members can share knowledge and educate their children about navigating a college setting. This includes critical information related to connecting with principal offices, understanding institutional policies, developing problem-solving strategies, and identifying key campus agents that can help in their college journey. Conversely, first-generation college students may not be able to receive comparable support or guidance from their parents who did not attend college since college is an entirely new experience. Unfortunately, when it comes to

activating ties with institutional agents, this also means they may lack an understanding of the individuals who comprise a college setting, the services they provide, and how to tap into these networks. Further, first-generation college students may also struggle to understand the importance of networking with agents and the valuable resources inherent in these relationships.

This set of navigational skills and college knowledge are referred to in a college setting as the hidden curriculum or the unwritten rules and practices of higher education that matter for student success (Smith 2013). One central piece of the hidden curriculum is knowing who the players are on campus and how to use them to get ahead. For Latinx students, the cultural capital they may have inherited from their parents may not translate to a college setting in ways that helps them make sense of the supportive potential of campus agents, thereby limiting help-seeking behaviors.

Additionally, perceptions of the supportive potential of agents and help-seeking behaviors may also get shaped by one's habitus (Bourdieu 2007; Bridges et al. 2008). Habitus, another concept borrowed from Bourdieu's toolkit (2007) refers to one's collective and lived experiences, including the things inherited from family, that shape how individuals perceive the world around them.

All aspects of one's social condition, including race/ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status play a part in the development of habitus. In higher education, one's habitus can influence how comfortable one feels leaning on campus agents during times of need or hardship. For instance, research suggests that low-income and/or minorities report higher incidents of racism or microaggressions across different institutional settings, including colleges, that create a sense of distrust or fear of institutional agents and/or members of authority (Nunez 2015, Hurtado &

Carter 1996, Nora and Cabrera 1996; 2012). Stanton-Salazar (2001) also found that the background effects of race, class, and gender operate to complicate, if not undermine, the development of trusting relations between low-status students and school agents and discourage help-seeking behaviors. Lareau (2003), in her research, found that how children experience institutional settings is highly dependent on parents and the kind of behaviors they model; she found that families who are low-income or working-class more often fear or distrust institutional settings, which then shapes how students move through institutions. Latinx students are overwhelmingly low-income and similarly have been found to distrust authority at high rates (Nunez 2015). Given that the decision to seek help may be based on how they understand the supportive potential of agents, it is important to explore how student-level factors shape such perceptions and impact help-seeking behaviors.

Institutional Factors, Perceptions of Agents, and Help-Seeking Behaviors

A college environment can also impact how students understand the supportive potential of campus agents and subsequent help-seeking behaviors. Substantial research points our attention to the examination of the college environment given that many students will enter college with comparable levels of academic achievements and college qualifications, but have different college outcomes, often driven by where they attend school (Farrington et al. 2013). A college environment may shape how students understand the supportive potential of campus agents through the norms and practices of the individuals who work there, as suggested by Strange and Banning (2001). They argue that the individuals who inhabit a campus environment—including campus agents—are vital in creating the campus climate, which has the power to influence student perceptions and experiences. Thus, campus culture may impact

students' ability to view institutional agents as "helpers" or individuals who help others understand, cope, and deal with their problems. Given this position and their ability to assign meaning to their roles as institutional agents and available supports, the college can directly shape the context for interactions in ways that facilitates or constrains students' help-seeking behaviors.

Part of how a college environment communicates the supportive potential of campus agents and different resources is through institutional identity. How an institution defines its mission is central to how colleges operate; it shapes policies, practices, and reflects a university's commitment to supporting students at various levels of the organization. Given that student engagement theory holds universities accountable for creating the conditions that encourage students' involvement in purposeful activities, they should strive to build bridges between students and institutional agents that enhance their social networks (Kuh & Schuh 1991; NSSE 2018).

Colleges, however, are not always inviting spaces, especially for students of color, first-generation and low-income college students. There are several accounts where students experience racism and hostile campus environments, as noted above (Nunez 2015, Hurtado & Carter 1996, Nora and Cabrera 1996; 2012). Some colleges adhere to structures and practices that reflect assumptions that preserve dominant class norms and cater to those with more greater privilege. As a result, many lack sense of belonging, all of which impacts how they understand the supportive potential of campus agents and the college environment. This also aligns with Bourdieu's analysis (2007), who contends that social capital is the investment of the dominant class to maintain and reproduce group solidarity and preserve the group's dominant position.

Colleges, consequently, may be institutions that perpetuate this ideology. As a result, it is important to explore how the college environment may shape how students understand the supportive potential of campus agents and impact their help-seeking behaviors.

As evidenced, employing a social capital framework allows us to explore factors that shape how Latinx students form connections to institutional agents in a college setting, including what individual and institutional factors shape how students understand the supportive potential of campus agents and impact help-seeking behaviors. This has implications not only for student engagement levels, but their campus social networks. In the next section, I will outline the methods I used to execute this project and explore the help-seeking behaviors of the students in my study.

Methodology

This dissertation is qualitative with two primary data sources: a series of interviews with a cohort of students in college and one-time interviews with a sample of individuals who worked at the college. All data were collected during the 2013-2014 academic year at one four-year college that is Hispanic Serving. I will begin this section by explaining the choice to perform a qualitative study. Then I will describe the university where data collection occurred followed by a breakdown of the data sources and methods.

Research Design

I chose to perform a qualitative study because help-seeking orientations are both complex and nuanced. To fully understand the decision-making processes behind students' help-seeking orientations, students needed to engage in self-reflection, have a space to talk openly about the

challenges they encountered in college, the relationships they had with the individuals who staffed the university, and their perceived ability to help them cope with these challenges.

For staff, the same is true. Interviews allowed staff to talk from different levels—personally, as a unit, and collectively as a university—about the campus environment and shed light on how it created or failed to create conditions that encourage connections. Interviews with college personnel also allowed me to understand the role the institution played in creating the conditions for student engagement. It provided another layer to unpack the students' experiences given that the individuals who staff an organization directly shape students' experiences and the institutional culture.

Essentially, performing qualitative research through interviewing is a form of storytelling that captures individual stories and helps us make meaning of their experiences. Though the experiences of the students and college staff, I was able to understand how students operate in a college setting and their help-seeking behaviors.

In addition to being qualitative, the study was longitudinal. Student participants were interviewed three distinct times during their first year of college. This interview format was useful because it allowed me to capture, in real time, the challenges students encountered during the transition year of college and their problem-solving strategies. The first year of college is a year of adjustment as students must learn to adapt to a new environment, structure, and routine. Accordingly, I felt this time in a student's college journey would provide ample opportunities for students to exercise their help-seeking behaviors during times of need and shed light on how supportive they believed agents to be. Additionally, incoming students enter college with limited knowledge of how colleges operate, including the different resources and services available, so

they enter, in theory, with less bias. This allowed me to examine how the university shaped their understanding of campus agents and created meaning regarding their roles.

Finally, I limited the analysis to a single site to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of both Latinx students and college staff that impacted the formation of connections. By focusing on one institution, I could tease out the nuances and complexities that surrounded how students understood the supportive potential of agents and the implications it had on help-seeking behaviors.

Heartland University

As stated, all interviews were conducted at a single institution, which will be referred to as Heartland University (HU). Heartland is a 4-year public institution that is designated Hispanic Serving. It is in a residential neighborhood of a large city and has three satellite campuses. At the time of the study, the university offered both undergraduate and graduate degree programs and enrolled roughly 11,000 students. The average class size was 24 with a faculty ratio of 15:1. Heartland also offered six resource centers and over 90 campus organizations. Lastly, Heartland is primarily commuter and operates on a semester calendar system.

During the 2013-14 academic year, there were roughly 9,000 undergraduates, of which roughly 3,100 students identified as Latinx, comprising about 35% of the student population. The gender breakdown of Latinx students totaled 1,841 females (37.2%), and 1,277 males (32%). The freshmen class size totaled roughly 2,600 students. According to Barron's rating and the acceptance rate of the institution, HU is categorized as a less/non-selective institution (Roderick et al. 2008).

HU was selected because Latinx students across the nation, overwhelmingly enroll at schools that have comparable institutional characteristics to HU, regarding selectivity and commuter population (Kelly et al. 2010). According to two different reports on Latinx enrollment in selective and non-selective four-year colleges, both concluded that Latinx students were overrepresented in the three lowest selectivity categories (noncompetitive, less competitive, and competitive). Additionally, in some states with large Latinx populations (including Illinois), the proportion of Latinx four-year freshmen attending more selective colleges had either flattened or dropped (Fry 2005; Kelly et al. 2010). Since Latinx students overwhelmingly enroll in colleges that rank in the lowest selectivity categories, HU is precisely the type of institution that warrants an examination.

Despite the concentration of Latinx in higher education, there is limited research that exists on the early transition experiences of these students in four-year institutions (Nora, Barlow, & Crisp, 2006). Since Latinx are generally overrepresented in community colleges, there is abundant research conducted in those institutional settings (Nunez 2009; Fry 2005). When Latinx are studied in four-year colleges, the research documents the experiences of those enrolled in flagship universities, such as large state schools or elite institutions that are predominately white institutions. As a result, HU also fulfills an important niche in that it represents an understudied type of institution.

Data Sources and Methods

Students

To find student participants, I promoted and recruited students using two different approaches. At the start of the academic year, I relied on emails, phone calls, and in-person

appointments to contact faculty across different disciplines who were scheduled to teach first-year student seminar courses as well as directors of resource centers. During these conversations, I would introduce myself, discuss my research, and ask their permission to promote my study to their students by making a brief presentation in their classes or setting up shop in their departments to interact with visiting students. If I was unable to attend a class, I asked the faculty to distribute a flier on my behalf. During the first two weeks of the academic year, I did this to meet students who were interested in participating in my study. For those who expressed interest, I would ask them to write down their name and contact information.

Among the students who expressed interest, I would contact them by a phone number that they provided during my recruitment efforts and walk them through a screening process. To qualify, students had to meet the following criteria: identify as Mexican American (have at least one parent who was born in Mexico), hold second generation status (have at least one parent who was born in Mexico), and have parents who did not attend college. Students also had to be at least 18 years of age and first-time college students.

The motivation for using these criteria was to make the data more generalizable. Among the 58 million Latinx living in the US, there were more than 36 million Mexican Americans, comprising roughly 63% (Census 2016). While the number of foreign-born Latinx living in the US has remained consistent since 2000, today there are more US-born Latinx living in the US. Further, research suggests the nation's Latinx population are defined by its youth, including the second generation. (Patten 2016; Stepler & Brown 2016).

I continued to screen students until I was left with 15 males and 15 females, 30 students in total. In addition to recruiting Mexican American students, I also recruited five more students

who met all the same criteria but identified as non-Hispanic whites, bringing the total number to 35. The reason for including the additional five was to help contextualize the experiences of the Latinx students and learn if their experiences at HU looked different concerning help-seeking behaviors and resource involvement. While I did not include their testimonies in the final analysis, their testimonies provided an alternative narrative to consider when trying to make meaning of the Latinx students' experiences.

Each student in my study was interviewed three separate times during the 2013-14 academic year. The first interview took place at the start of the fall semester, the second at the start of spring semester, and the final interview at the completion of spring semester. I used three separate interview protocols, all of which were semi-structured and enabled me to probe where necessary and follow up on items of significance that related to the study. Each interview was designed to explore how they moved through the college, including how they addressed any challenges they encountered—personal or academic—knowledge and understanding of campus resources and the individuals who staff them, how their relationships with agents operated, and ultimately their help-seeking behaviors. Interviews lasted roughly 80 minutes and were audio recorded. The first two interviews took place on campus in a private room located at HU. The final interview took place at a location of the students' choosing for their convenience. Final interview sites included Chicago Public Libraries, Chicago Park Districts, or HU. Students were compensated \$25 at the end of each interview.

When the study ended, 21 Latinx students completed three interviews, eight Latinx students completed two interviews, and one Latinx student completed one interview. Among the five Non-Hispanic White students, each one completed three interviews. In total, 80 interviews

with Latinx students were performed and 95 interviews overall when factoring in the Non-Hispanic White students. Among the students in my sample, three Latinx students left HU before the end of the Spring semester but remained in the project. I decided to continue meeting with them to explore the factors that led to their departure and their interactions with agents leading up to and after their departure as they considered next steps.

It is important to note that it is possible that the students who participated in the study felt more comfortable interacting with agents, were better self-advocates, and more open about their stories and struggles. This disposition could have impacted their college experience and resulted in proactive help-seeking orientations coming into the study. As I learned, however, many of the students I interviewed struggled with help-seeking and encountered several barriers when forming connections to institutional agents.

College Personnel

To find college personnel and faculty to interview, I used two different approaches. Once student interviews were completed, I created a list of HU's campus organizations and resource centers that have high visibility for students, including academic support programs, multicultural centers, academic advising, career services, and financial aid. Once I had a list of organizations, I contacted by email, phone, or in person-visits, the directors or assistant directors of each unit to discuss the project, invite them to participate, and gain permission to invite their staff to also participate. To identify faculty participants, I again reached out by email, phone, or in person visits to the faculty who taught the freshmen seminars I initially promoted my study in and invited them to participate. I met with anyone who was willing to participate in the hope of

capturing a range of individuals and experiences. Through these efforts, I was able to recruit 26 individuals.

The college faculty and staff who participated in my study represented 18 different departments and units and held a range of positions. Please see Table 2 below for a breakdown.

Table 2. Campus Agents Profiles

Title	Department
Director	Financial Aid
Coordinator	Science Center and Support*
Academic Advisor	Department of Academic Advising
Director	Career Services and Advising
Faculty and 1 st Year Writing Program Manager	English Department
Advisor and Seminar Instructor	Las GANAS*
Faculty and Chair	Mathematics Department
Director	Latino Resource Center
Director	Learning Resource Center
Assistant Vice President	Student Affairs
Coordinator for Academic Support Services	La Villita*
Director	Center for Teaching and Learning
Director	TRIO Student Support Services
Director	Student Disability Services
Adjunct Faculty	Biology and Chemistry Departments
Vice President	Student Affairs
Director	La Villita*
Academic Advisor	Department of Academic Advising
Director	Scholarships Office
Life Science Advisor	Science Center and Support*
Director	Las GANAS*
Vice President	Student Affairs
Director	Women's Resource Center
Advisor and Seminar Instructor	Las GANAS*
Faculty	Environmental Science Department
Assistant Vice President	Student Affairs

**Denotes a pseudonym for confidentiality*

Interviews with college personnel took place from August to October and followed the completion of student interviews. Each participant was interviewed one time. Interviews were semi-structured, which allowed me to probe where necessary and follow up on items of significance that related to the study. The interview was designed to explore their role on campus, including how they understood students' needs and the challenges students encountered navigating a college environment; the barriers students faced when accessing services that are meant to benefit them; how they understood their mission to work with students; and thoughts on being Hispanic Serving. All interviews took place in their private offices on campus, were audio recorded, and on average lasted roughly 75 minutes. Staff and faculty who participated were not compensated for participation.

It is important to note that it is possible that the staff who participated in the study were more interested in discussing how to support students, were more sensitive to student needs, and had strong ideas or feelings regarding how the university should support students (and possibly failed to meet their needs). These ideas and views could have impacted their experiences working at the college as well as the conditions they created to foster connections with students.

Data Analysis

When data collection was completed, all audio was transcribed. Once hard copies of the interviews were available, I analyzed the data. For the student data, I read each student case in a sequence to gain a complete understanding of their first year of college. Based on this information, I created student profiles and highlighted information about the student, including the student's life story, feelings about the college experience, knowledge of resources, interactions with college faculty and staff, problem-solving strategies, and challenges

encountered. Then I read across each profile to get a sense of the collective experience around these areas. With areas of research and help-seeking literature in mind, I generated a set of broad codes to capture large thematic areas. While there were many codes used, the ones that shaped the dissertation included: the college environment, interactions, and experiences with campus agents, perceptions of campus agents, perceptions of self, challenges encountered, help-seeking behaviors, problem-solving strategies, feelings about college, and feelings about the university.

Once these larger codes had been applied and the data filtered, I then went through each of the codes to identify additional thematic areas that gave meaning and context to the larger topical codes. This included codes that captured interactions with specific agents, positive and negative experiences with the college environment, productive or unhelpful interactions with agents, specific challenges that arose in the first year, and positive or negative help-seeking behaviors. With each new code, I continued to boil down the sections within the initial larger code until I had distinct experiences that told a story about the forces that shaped students' perceptions of agents and their impact on help-seeking behaviors.

For the college personnel, I read across the interviews making notes of areas that provided insight into what would encourage or discourage tie formation. These areas included: the mission of their units, experiences working with students, thoughts on how the university catered to Latinx students, and what it meant to be Hispanic Serving. These areas formed the basis for the first set of codes that were applied to the data to capture large thematic areas. Once I applied the codes and filtered the data, I then repeated the process within each large code to identify the themes within each larger code. This second round included codes such as challenges to being a HSI, thoughts on HSI grant funding, how the HSI identity informed their

units and the approaches they used when working with students, staff approaches to working with Latinx students, thoughts on Latinx student needs, challenges, and how to best serve them. Similar to the student data, I continued to boil down the sections within the initial larger code until I had distinct experiences that told a story about how the college environment shaped students' perceptions of agents and the impact on help-seeking behaviors. In the findings sections, all names of students, faculty, staff, and resource centers were changed to protect participants' confidentiality.

Chapter Summaries

In the next three chapters, I explore the factors that impacted how students understood the supportive potential of campus agents and consequently contributed to students' negative help-seeking orientations and resulted in lower levels of student engagement. In the first chapter, I examined the role of the college environment in shaping perceptions of campus agents and help-seeking behaviors. I open with an exploration of how the college structure operates in myriad ways to promote a culture of independence. Students also felt acting independently in college was preparation for adulthood and key to success post-college. As they embraced independence and a desire to manage academic demands and expectations on their own, their understanding of the supportive potential of campus agents was negatively impacted because they opted to make difficult decisions relating to college on their own. While there were students who sought help from campus agents, they experienced inefficiencies in service delivery, which discouraged their use of resources. The college environment simultaneously promoted independence while also discouraging the use of services in these two distinct ways that resulted in students' negative perceptions of the supportive potential of campus agents and discouraged help-seeking.

The second chapter takes a closer look at the factors that impacted how students perceived the supportive potential of one kind of campus agent, academic advisors, and the reasons they chose not to lean on them during times of need. In college, academic advisors are play a significant role since they are one of the only institutional agents with whom students have the potential to maintain consistent contact with during college. In conversations with students, I learned that there were three primary factors circling students views of academic advisors that negatively shaped their perceptions of their supportive potential. First, students viewed their roles in very singular ways and believed they could only offer support as it related to course selection and enrollment. This steered many students away when other challenges arose. Second, students felt academic advisors expected them to make difficult decisions related to college on their own and felt this approach was unsupportive, discouraging their help-seeking. Lastly, despite the efforts of some academic advisors to deepen their connections with students, students' prior life experiences and/or interactions within other institutional settings made it difficult for them to trust academic advisors and prevented them from seeking help.

In the third chapter, I turn the focus back to HU to explore the complexities surrounding the HSI identity and how campus agents struggled to create a campus climate that demonstrated to Latinx students a sense of support. In speaking with a spectrum of campus agents, I learned that they struggled to define what it meant to be Hispanic Serving and how it translated to the ground level. As a diverse institution, there was a desire to cater to all student populations, so staff had difficulty embracing this status while trying to remain inclusive. To create a supportive environment, staff felt there needed to be more intentional and collective dialogue regarding

Latinx students and their needs. In the absence of these conversations, staff worried Latinx students felt a lack of support and compromised their ability to foster connections with staff.

In the final chapter, I reflect on the research and the barriers Latinx students encountered in establishing relationships with campus agents. I discuss the implications for social capital theory as well as additional sociological contributions. I also offer some suggestions for higher education practitioners. I argue that to help Latinx students recognize the supportive potential of campus agents and encourage help-seeking, the members of the university need to create a culture of care that helps students feel safe. To accomplish this, the university members need to engage in intentional dialogue around Latinx students and their needs, find ways to close the distance between their roles as professionals and the students they serve, and help students discover resources in meaningful ways. I also provide directions for future research that builds on this study, arguing for greater research on Latinx students and their ability to form connections with institutional agents in college.

Chapter 2: College Environment and Help-Seeking Behaviors

In the literature on student engagement, the college environment plays a critical role in creating the conditions that encourage students to participate in the kinds of educationally purposeful activities that promote growth, development, and student success (Kuh & Schuh 1991). For this research, this means that HSIs will help Latinx students foster connections with institutional agents by creating a supportive campus environment that allows students to have quality interactions with campus agents and encourages help-seeking behaviors. The literature on strong performing HSIs and Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs) more broadly has identified different institutional practices that promote such connections by designing programs that embed students in high touch networks of support and prioritize collaboration between students and individuals who work in a college. This was highlighted across the literature as a significant institutional characteristic given that Latinx students are overwhelmingly first-generation college students; as a result, they often need internal support to navigate college and manage academic demands and expectations. Despite this emphasis on building their social network, competing research exists that suggests college environments more often promote a culture of independence either as normative college behavior or in response to organizational barriers, in effect severing potential ties.

At HU, I explored some of the myriad ways that the college environment, as an HSI, sent different messages to students that socialized them to act independently rather than leaning on institutional agents during times of need. Consequently, these messages undermined the supportive potential of campus agents for students and discouraged their help-seeking behaviors. The major themes that emerged from the data were as follows:

1. The typical structure and routine that students encountered in college promoted a culture of independence. This included course scheduling, attendance policies, managing course assignments and utilizing new technology, and increased accountability for academic success. Students also felt the emphasis on independence in college as it related to managing academic demands and expectations were meant to help prepare them for adulthood and the workplace, which acted as motivation to embrace it further.
2. Since students embraced independent behavior as normative and essential to their chances for life success, they opted to make difficult decisions related to college and overcome challenges without help. The desire to manage academic demands and expectations on their own undermined their understanding of the supportive potential of campus agents and negatively impacted their help-seeking behaviors.
3. Among the students who sought assistance from individuals who worked at the college, many had difficulty accessing the supports. They dealt with challenges around availability or decentralized resources, which caused dissatisfaction and left them to resolve hardships on their own. These inefficiencies in service delivery also contributed to negatively shaping their perceptions of the support campus agents could provide and impacted help-seeking behaviors.

These themes were present across the students I interviewed. I open the chapter with an overview of the conditions that are found in high performing HSIs, and MSIs more broadly, that promote student engagement through strengthening connections across students, staff, and the university; and foster success for underrepresented students, like Latinx students. Then I offer a counter-narrative based on research that suggests colleges and universities are institutions that reward

and encourage independence. Next, I unpack the points above and draw from student testimonies to demonstrate how the college environment undermined students' perceptions of the supportive potential of campus agents and impacted their help-seeking behaviors. Consequently, this limited their social networks and student engagement levels.

HSIs and Student Engagement via High Touch Networks of Support

As educating bodies, HSIs play a critical role to the Latinx students they serve given the access they provide to postsecondary education and opportunities for social and economic mobility. To be successful in this mission, HSIs need to create institutional conditions that encourage strong levels of student engagement and build a supportive environment that helps Latinx students overcome barriers that can comprise their success.

As illustrated in Chapter 1, many factors can make college difficult for this population and prevent them from participating in the kinds of activities that facilitate strong academic outcomes, especially as it relates to establishing ties with institutional agents. For instance, Latinx students are disproportionately first-generation and low-income college students, which may leave them without critical insights and institutional knowledge that continuing-generation students may have access to through family networks (Hurtado et al. 2015; Conrad & Gasman 2015; Baez et al. 2008; Nunez et al. 2013). As a result, they may be unfamiliar with potential resources or services that can enhance their college experience (Bridges et al. 2008; Hutchison 2015). Often, Latinx students work or commute, making it difficult to spend additional time on campus that could be used to interact with faculty and staff (Kuh 2008; Bridges et al. 2008; Hutchison 2015; Gasman 2008). Latinx students also tend to come from previous schooling environments that are low-performing or low-resourced, which can affect their confidence levels

when approaching faculty and staff or practicing self-advocacy. Latinx students, too, if they feel unwelcomed or unsupported in a college setting, can prevent them from engaging on campus activities (Strayhorn 2012; Hurtado & Carter 1997; Gupton et al. 2014; Hutchison 2015; Stephens et al. 2012; Bridges et al. 2008). Lastly, Latinx students may lack the cultural capital that allows them to master the hidden curriculum, which involves asking questions, interacting with faculty, attending office hours, and utilizing resources (Bridges et al. 2008; Hutchison 2015; Gasman 2008; Gupton et al. 2014). Consequently, Latinx students may not fully understand or be equipped to effectively participate in college settings to make them work for them, rather than against and ultimately contribute to their low levels of student engagement (for additional barriers, please refer to Chapter 1).

Among HSIs, these conditions are often the student needs these institutions, in theory, should seek to disrupt to help Latinx students succeed in college. Toward this end, research on HSIs and MSIs more broadly has identified optimal practices from strong-performing institutions that successfully accomplish this goal. While there many different practices that this research highlights as being instrumental to Latinx student success, one notable characteristic of these colleges and universities is their desire to create college environments that value collaboration and embed students in high touch networks of support (Conrad & Gasman 2015; Cortez 2015; Garcia 2015; Bridges et al. 2008). Ultimately, their goal is to build a supportive and affirming environment, so Latinx students felt empowered and a sense of comfort utilizing resources.

Strong performing HSIs and MSIs accomplished this through different institutional approaches and programs. Operating from an asset-based philosophy, they offered supports where students were paired and worked closely with coaches—either faculty or staff—inside and

outside of classrooms to help them navigate the college environment and created plans for their futures. These institutions created opportunities for high levels of student and faculty interaction, especially with Latinx faculty, whom they argued may be able to better understand and relate to Latinx students' experiences. They had a campus culture that celebrated Latinx histories and experiences across a university setting and found ways to affirm students' identities, aspirations, and regularly recognized their achievements. These activities helped them create a sense of belonging among Latinx students, which was instrumental in making them feel cared for, valued, and comfortable leaning on campus agents (Bridges et al. 2008; Mmeje 2014; Conrad & Gasman 2015; Cortez 2015; Garcia 2015; Staryhorn 2012). Collectively, these educational practices and strategies were effective at HSIs and MSIs because they created an environment that facilitates student connections to a university and increases their student engagement through participation in support networks.

Colleges Promote Independence

While HSIs and MSIs, in theory, strive to create a campus environment that emphasizes collaboration through support networks, there are numerous ways that college environments can steer students away from available resources. For instance, a competing view suggests that many American colleges and universities more often view college as a place for students to be educated to become independent and self-directed; they feel this culture will lead students to realize their individual potential (Conrad & Gasman 2015; Stephens et al. 2012).

Stephens and colleagues (2012: 9) found that across institutions in the US, there is an emphasis on independence, rather than interdependence, that stems from society's focus on "individualism." This is fueled by "ideals of self-reliance, the Protestant Ethic, the American

Dream, and self-determination.” They argue that colleges are one type of institutional setting that promotes such values of independence as normative for college students.

Generally, independence is associated with self-reliance, which occurs when students learn to take considerably more responsibility than they did in the past for accomplishing important tasks and resolving personal problems (Stanton-Salazar 2001: 213.) In higher education, Stephens and colleagues (2012:7-8) found examples of this reflected in curricula, institutional policies, and teaching practices. They felt students were expected to be individually motivated to work and learn independently, develop their own voice, and express their own ideas. In addition, university cultural products reinforce and perpetuate expectations of independence by emphasizing the importance of finding yourself, paving your own path and developing your own interests. Conrad and Gasman (2015) also found that in classroom settings, schoolwork is rarely seen as a collaborative experience where students draw on resources of others or serve as a resource for others (Conrad & Gasman 2015: 259). Additionally, many students have educational backgrounds and come from high schools that emphasized and rewarded individual achievement, not collaboration; a mindset that can carry over into a college environment.

Stephens and colleague’s (2012) research demonstrated this to be true across different kinds of institutional settings. This included top tier and second tier institutions and is widely held as the norm after analyzing data from college personnel working at various levels of the institutions. They also proved that first-generation and low-income college students who experienced a cultural mismatch performed at lower academic levels than their continuing-generation peers. For first-generation college students, however, the emphasis on independence,

and de-emphasis on interdependence, created a cultural mismatch that hindered learning, growth, and performance. This may also impact the connections students form with members of the institution.

While colleges may promote independence among students, the need to be self-reliant can also manifest in the face of organizational barriers to campus resources. Some educational settings may discourage students from forming connections by generating "unsponsored self-reliance" as referred to by Stanton-Salazar (2001: 252). In his examination of Latinx youth, he found students encountered different organizational barriers in their high schools that related to time, accessibility, and location of resources, all of which discouraged students' use of services. He found that the students in his study often needed the most help but had the least tolerance for inefficiencies. Consequently, when challenges to accessing services were presented, students elected to manage or cope with challenges on their own in place of pursuing help. When institutional settings are difficult to navigate or are perceived as hostile environments, students may be reluctant to utilize services.

How might the college environment at HU directly or indirectly promote a culture of independence and undermine the supportive potential of campus agents? How might this negatively impact help-seeking behaviors? I explore these questions below.

HU and Independence

Colleges are institutional settings designed to place considerable academic and social demands on young people, which is why many HSIs strive to embed students in supportive networks to ensure they get the assistance they need to be successful. Despite the intentions to connect students to resources and communicate to students the supportive potential of campus

agents and supports, different aspects of the college environment socialized students to feel acting independently was the norm. In my conversations with students, three aspects of the college environment stood out that played a significant role in leading them to believe that acting independently was appropriate behavior. These aspects relate to course scheduling and attendance policies; managing course assignments and utilizing new technology; and increased accountability for success. In the sections below, I unpack each of these areas.

Course Attendance

The start of college for incoming students is met with tremendous change. They are enrolled in different courses, interacting with new professors, and getting acclimated to the campus. As students adjust during this transition, they are learning what it means to be a college student and how to manage a new set of academic expectations and demands. One area of change that generated robust discussion among students dealt with adapting to new routine particularly around class attendance.

In college, students realized they possessed greater autonomy over their time and learned that the choice to attend class rested with them. Andrew Loza said:

Now, it's more spread out. You're usually used to one building, four - three hallways. Walking around here, you got open space; you got different buildings, you got, different floors and different things...there's no one here [in college] to make sure you're doing what you're doing. In high school, no one's walking around the hallways at a time when everyone should be in class. But here nobody knows. Nobody has to be in class at a particular time so you could be walking around. That's on me that I have to go to class and I gotta do what I'm supposed to do.

The structure of college with flexible class times and a larger spatial spread made students feel a heightened sense of freedom around class attendance that they had to learn to manage. Students, however, were quick to note that this freedom came with greater responsibility. They were now

in control of their time and no longer regulated by external individuals when it came to class attendance. As Gaby Moreno pointed out about this change, "I mean here you do whatever you want. If you wanna get out of the class, you get out of the class." Ariel Robles agreed. "It's like no one is going to baby you here. [No one is going to say] 'Come on let's go to class, you know?' You have to do this on your own. So you have to figure out your time management, and that's very important here." Students not only recognized their class attendance as a responsibility they must manage but felt it was now an expectation coming from the professors. Nicholas Segovia said:

I think [college] is different [than high school]. I really like college because it's a college for like, higher level maturity. They leave it up to you. They don't baby us anymore, which I really love. Like I hate it when I know it's like, 'Can I go to the bathroom?' Like, 'No.' Now, I get to go and come back because I know that they're expecting me to be responsible with privileges that they're giving me.

Nicholas, like other students, referred to managing their time and course attendance as a privilege; if they abused this responsibility and failed to manage their attendance or hold themselves accountable, they were directly impacted. Many students expressed the balance they had to maintain and the consequences that could result if the scales tipped. Derek Ahmuda, for instance, said he felt one of the biggest surprises about college was recognizing this independence and learning to manage his class attendance responsibly. He said, "All the independence that [professors] expect you to have. You know, like, be responsible, get to class on time. They're not gonna repeat themselves if you get there late they're not gonna tell you what they went over." The college environment as it related to class attendance and time management encouraged students' sense of independence. Students also understood that if they

missed class, it fell to them to communicate with their professors, which made students feel even more accountable.

In college, these expectations made the students accept responsibility for their actions — again shifting more responsibility to the student to be on top of their attendance. To students, like Kevin Beltran, this was an important learning moment.

MM: What qualities about college are most important to you?

Kevin: The way they try to motivate you into being independent. Like, scheduling your time and basically coming up with all these responsibilities that you have to do on your own. And try to face them, even though if there's, like, an accident that happens, you would have to face that as well.

MM: Can you give me an example?

Kevin: Yeah, like - like the third week I was kind of sick and then they told me, oh, you should let the professor know ahead of time or something. That way they would know that something came up and you would have proof that you were actually sick and not just ditching class or something.

When students began college, they learned that managing class attendance fell on them, which made them feel an increased sense of accountability and independence. Unlike in previous educational settings, where time was very structured and there were individuals within the school ensuring that students attended class, course scheduling in college is much more open and variable. Students saw this system as a new responsibility they alone had to manage since they had to push themselves to attend class, show up on time, and communicate with professors in the cases of absence. These college norms that were introduced in the early months of the academic year became expectations that were internalized by the student to manage independently.

Managing Course Assignments and Using New Technology

Managing course assignments was another feature of the college environment that students felt demanded increased independence and responsibility. When students entered college, they must adapt to managing course assignments on their own without reminders from teachers. Students felt this expectation and responsibility were entirely on them. Derek, said:

Going to high school and going to college is so different. Like, in high school they hold your hand through everything. Like, 'oh remember this is due.' And in college, like, you gotta adjust to it. It's nothing like that. Like, they tell you once, and you forget, like, that's on you... You know, nobody's gonna hold your hand, nobody's gonna be telling you when the assignments are due, getting, you know, your homework in on time. Like, they just tell you once.

In place of reminders from teachers, students were introduced to course syllabi, which they had to learn to check to manage their assignments and due dates regularly. This change, however, was a new adjustment. Jacob Davila said:

I just really hate getting used to looking at my syllabus all the time, cause [it's] like easy to lose a lot of things. Cause I'm used to being relied to the teacher telling us what to do. And now you have to figure it out on your own on the syllabus.

In college, syllabi replaced interactions with professors in that students had to create their own reminders for due dates, project deadlines, and exam schedules. Tracking assignments with syllabi and learning to stay on top of their assignments without reminders were new behaviors they had to incorporate as college students. This made them feel an increased sense of responsibility and independence. These feelings were amplified by the introduction of online platforms and incorporation of web programs that many professors used in classrooms to manage assignments. Rafael Zarate said:

I have a First Year Experience class. The professor gives us most of the work online. So we have to be on top of that -checking our report and what's it called -college report—I have to check that. I have to check her class-the website- we have to check our Desire2Learn [Course Management System], we have a lot of things, it's a big change.

Having to utilize online technologies was a new change for many of the students and required students to manage more work because there were several systems they had to utilize while being more mindful of their time to ensure they successfully completed all assignments. Since professors were communicating with them via these online tools, they consistently had to be on top of checking these systems. Natalie Munoz said, "Everything you have to turn in is through like, the Internet or whatever. So I have to like - I keep track of it, I check it every day, I check my email every day." In managing this new expectation, Natalie said it was one of the biggest challenges of college. She said:

Trying to manage everything [is one of the biggest challenges about college]. Like your time outside of school and trying to make sure you have everything turned in on time, you're up to date with your homework and your schedule...cause no one's gonna be on you.

The incorporation of syllabi and online technologies by professors as a way to keep track of and submit assignments meant that students ultimately had to be better timekeepers and find ways to stay on top and manage these different systems. This all signaled increased responsibility and independent behavior as the key to success in college. Andrew, said:

The biggest problem [I faced last semester] was probably finishing assignments fully and actually turning them in. Because there were a lot of things online now that it was, like, you know, our professor said, oh, it's due at midnight tonight - I'm not gonna remind you all night... You have to put time in. You have to actually do it yourself. So, that's a little more of - what I found difficult, like, doing things at a certain deadline when you're not being constantly reminded. But you learn to do that on your own because you have to make your own schedule and you have to find out what you have to do and actually do it.

As Andrew noted since "every professor [has] their own system that you have to follow" with respect to course management and submitting assignments, students felt there was more work that fell on them to manage since each professor required different demands. Learning to manage

these demands was a new expectation as a college student and one that made them feel an increased sense of independence.

The Absence of a Safety Net

The college environment also promoted a greater sense of independence by making students feel they alone were accountable for their academic success. Most students felt the college environment no longer provided a safety net that would help them bounce back from academic challenges or poor performance. To students, this meant that they had to be responsible for making sure they stayed on top of their studies, without interventions from professors. As Geraldo Molina said:

You know how in high school the teachers would, like, chase you and all that to do this and that, that, that. Not a lot of professors do that here, Like, “Hey, you know, step it up or like, you're falling behind.” Cause sometimes, like, I need that, like, I need that, like, for someone to tell me, hey, you know, like, you're not doing so good. Or like - sometimes I need someone to tell me what to do or, like - I'm that type of person.

Many students not only believed they had to monitor their own academic progress but felt the expectation to look inward for motivation and were responsible for staying goal oriented. As Nancy Rios said:

I feel that the professors were a little bit different than I'm used to. They were less of a pushing type of deal. It's like you're on your own. If you do it or not, that's up to you. They're not going to be telling you, ‘Nancy, turn in this.’ Yes, that was different.

For students, not having additional support from their professors who could encourage them to stay on top of their academics and perform well made them feel the expectation to be the driver of their success and recover on their own should they encounter any roadblocks. Leticia Rosa said:

I don't think some of the professors care if you come to class or do your work. I'm used to doing my work through high school. And the RO[TC] will push me, and then if I don't

do my work, I know one of those teachers over there would tell my instructor, and my instructor will talk to me, like, why you're not passing that class? So, maybe I'm used to someone pushing me. Yeah....I don't know, I just, do [see a] difference between professors from here and the teachers from high school. The teachers from high school, they will push you, you know? And here, like, if you fall, well you have to get up yourself. Well, I know you have to get up yourself, but like, not pushing you to the limit like you had to be, like passing your classes, or helping more, you know?" she replied.

In describing the college environment, students felt professors no longer "pushed" students to be successful in their courses. The repetition of the word "pushed" suggested that students felt there was no one behind them making sure they were staying on track with their academics; now that responsibility rested with them. Part of feeling the need to be self-motivated and to perform academically was because students also felt that help was no longer directly provided—now the students must be proactive and approach a professor or another campus agent or resource.

Primarily, the transfer of help, which previously flowed from teacher to student, now weighed heavily on the student to get from the professor or other campus agent. Andrew said:

If you need help, you have to ask. No people are gonna ask if there's anything wrong or if you need anything. So that's why it's becoming more, like, you have to go get it yourself. They do provide things for you that if you need it and you're willing to go get it, you can go get it. And I guess they're never really gonna go and hold your hand and go do it for you, you know, help make you through it. So, that for me is the only reason probably why I never went to check, or I never find out these things, because I was expecting them to help me, whereas - it's - it's now more of a you've gotta meet halfway. You know, we'll help, but you also have to try, you know, too, so you have to come look for it...this is, like - you know, this is college, this is, like, older - you're an adult now you're gonna make your own decisions, we're not gonna make you do anything anymore, you know? So, that's kinda - I would've liked that, but obviously not, you know, how this works, you know?

Students learned that it was not only a matter of going out on their own to locate the help but identifying the appropriate resources as well. In HU, there were a number of resources and support services available to students, but many students believed it was on them to find them on

campus. Help was generally less centralized at the college, putting more work on the student to track down the resource. As Crystal Nieves noted with respect to resources and services:

I feel like if you need support, they do have a lot of support for you, but you just have to look for it. That's the thing, the little catch. You have to look for it. Nobody is going to really tell you. You have to look for things.

In a later section, I will discuss the challenges around accessing services, but these quotes are relevant to highlight because they demonstrate how a student needs to be self-driven to find and access the resources in a college environment. Professors and campus agents may not come to the student if struggling, ultimately making the student feel responsible for their success. This served as yet one more way independence was promoted as the key to success and rewarded in college. The college environment in these different ways promoted independence as normative behavior.

Independence Prepared Students for “Adulthood” and the “Real World”

The previous sections documented specific expectations that a college environment required that promoted a culture of independence for students. However, students also felt the college environment expected independence to prepare them for adulthood and the real world. Since they felt this way, it encouraged them to embrace it as normative. To students, college is the ultimate symbol of independence and serves as a training ground to learn to be independent. Sarah Lopez said:

High school and college is just so different, like, you're actually considered an adult, and I feel like you're expected - just because they treat you like adults, you're expected to act like one and be responsible, and, you know, stay on top of things.

For students, this meant learning to manage academic demands and expectations on their own. Adulthood is often synonymous with independence. According to Swyers (2014), adulthood is

highly contextual, and there is something unique about the college environment that made the students I interviewed feel that college expected them to act and behave like an adult.

Many students who expressed this connection welcomed the independence because they saw it as practice for successful adulthood and life after college. As Rafael said, “Here at college, I’m at a learning environment where it’s not like high school anymore. They’re starting to - well, they’re preparing us slowly - I feel that I am slowly starting to become an adult.” College environments prepared students to be adults by making them more independent and learned that they had to rely on themselves to get things done. To Derek, one of the reasons students were expected to manage their own assignments was to prepare them for adulthood and the workplace, where they will be expected to take self-initiative. He said:

Going to high school and going to college is so different. You’re basically, like, considered an adult, so, you know, if you’re an adult, like - if you go to work, they’re not gonna tell you, like, oh, do this do. Oh, did you do that yet? You know, like, professors tell you once - if you don’t do it [your assignments], like, that’s on you, that’s gonna affect you. So I feel like, not only do they [professors] do that because you’re an adult, they do that too, like, you could get use to it for in, like, the real world situations.

In line with the expectation to be independent, students believed that adjusting to college and overcoming any associated challenges was their responsibility. Students connected this expectation with learning to trust themselves to figure out how to problem solve. This was evident when asking questions about adjusting to a college environment. When asked whether students took advantage of the available supports, students often said they wanted to do it on their own and saw this an opportunity to “grow up.” When I asked Gabriel Mena to tell me about a person or program who has helped make the transition to college easier, he replied, “Well I mean, like the people that helped me out, usually [are] family and friends...But I think it has to

do a lot with yourself. And you've got to grow up and just learn how to solve problems yourself, too."

Sarah also believed the college environment in expecting them to be independent helped them to be successful because they must take the initiative with solving problems and find resources to get answers to their questions.

...I do know that [college is] teaching me how to be more independent; maybe even a little bit more responsible, just because I know that I have to do things here actually. I can't have my mom do it for me. I have to look for people like I have to go about it my own way. My mom can't step in and be like, "It's okay. I'll do it for you." So I think that actually everything that's going on and me coming to college is kind of preparing me to be successful, just because I thought it was going to be so much easier, and then I came across all these things, and that alone has taught me how to go about things different and be on top of things instead of just waiting and waiting and waiting, hoping for something to happen. So I feel like just being here is teaching me how to be successful.

Students equated independence with success and saw college as a training ground to develop these skills by learning to overcome challenges on their own. In feeling they were required to be independent, students also believed they were learning valuable decision-making skills. When I asked Andrew what he felt were some of the most important lessons he took away from the first academic semester, he replied:

Just knowing and realizing that there comes a time where, like, you gotta make your own decisions and you gotta accept the fact that nobody's gonna, like, walk you through everything. Cause the sooner that you accept that, and you realize that, you won't be there, like, oh, well, I'm just gonna wait, they're gonna tell me. Like, you'll learn to be more independent quicker...

He continued:

Well, there's a lot more freedom and, you know, a lot more things you can do without, you know, people knowing your stuff and you learn to do it on your own because, in the end that's how, you know, life's gonna end up being. Your parents are not always gonna be there. Your family's not always gonna be there. So, you need know - be able to make decisions on your own, make good decisions and - that's a big, you know, think I learned

here. That, you know, you're not always gonna be with someone you know, or you're not gonna be somewhere that you're comfortable.

Further, making independent decisions was vital because students believed that throughout their lifetimes, they were going to encounter problems but may not have people to turn to for advice making it essential that they get comfortable relying on themselves, as explained by Andrew. Some students viewed college as a test where they must learn to act independently to get ready for adulthood. For Kevin, this meant not asking for financial help from his family. He felt if students could make it in college on their own, then they could make it in the real world. Kevin said:

College is basically you becoming an adult, or trying to develop that. I just think that college is supposed to be something where - it's like, something you deal with in order to find out whether you're right to be independent...Basically, college is supposed to be, like, where you're supposed to be independent, and you know, getting help, like, on the side wouldn't be the type of college experience you would - you're supposed to have. It would just ruin the whole thing and you wouldn't - it's like a way of saying that you're not even responsible to be in the real world.

Throughout several of the examples students provided regarding the connections they made between college, independence, and adulthood, learning to manage challenges without help from the family was prominent. This may be due to the fact that Latinx students, as first-generation college students, felt they had to learn to navigate a college environment on their own since they were often unable to learn on family for assistance. In effect, learning to navigate college without family assistance coincided with learning to become an adult in college by embracing independence.

The college experience, however, is not alone in promoting the perceived expectation to be independent but is reinforced by external influences. Throughout my interviews students

frequently cited high school teachers as a primary source who perpetuated this ideology. Alyssa Vargas said:

Well, in high school they did say, like, college, is nothing like it. The teachers are just gonna be there to give you this and this, and if you don't get it, you're gonna have to find the answers yourself. Like they're only there to teach you - sort of to help you, but not that much. It's, like, they're trying to help you become an adult. Like, you need to do this by yourself, we can't be babysitting you.

Leticia similarly said:

All I heard in high school [is] that professors don't care if you do your homework or if you come to class because it's your problem. You're already an adult. Like, you do whatever you have to do. [They treat] the student like adults.

Outside of high school influences, students felt societal pressure to be independent in college, including in solving their own problems. When asked where the feelings to do things by himself in college comes from, AJ Garza, said:

AJ: I dunno, just the whole once - the idea that you're in college, you're supposed to look out for yourself in a way. You know what I mean?

MM: Why do you feel that way?

AJ: I guess everything, like - (pause) the culture that we live in, do you know what I mean...Like, TV shows or family talking about it or acquaintances, friends, like, do you know what I mean? Like, everyone talks about it.

MM: What are some of those things that makes you feel like it all falls on you?

AJ: Just during college is the time to grow up and you're supposed to do it, in a way, you know what I mean?

As demonstrated above, the college experience, in its entirety, motivated students to embrace independence as normative behavior is because they felt it would benefit them and aid in their ability to navigate life's challenges. While helping college students become independent is undoubtedly essential to get them ready for life, it unfortunately undermined the supportive

potential of campus agents and oriented students towards negative help-seeking behaviors.

Ultimately, the desire to do things on their own became part of what they associated with the college experience.

Independence and Help-Seeking Behaviors

All these different aspects of the college experience made students feel acting independently was normative college behavior and undermined the supportive potential of campus agents. As a result, students often felt a need or desire to problem solve on their own rather than seeking help from those at the university. This fractured potential institutional ties and inadvertently led to negative help-seeking behaviors. As explained by Danielle Reyes:

Sometimes, I'll have a question, but it's like, "I don't know if I should ask it. Maybe I should. Maybe I shouldn't. I've been meaning to ask [my academic advisor] about [a] scholarship, but I feel like I should become a little bit more independent...I feel like I should try to be more independent. I feel like I'm still dependent on people and since I'm still a teen, I'm trying to grow out of that phase and just try to become a grown-up, an adult.

The desire to be independent and solve challenges on their own was so strong for the students I interviewed that it led some students to feel that asking questions would be a bother to campus agents. Rodrigo Salis said:

Rodrigo: Well, I just have this feeling, like even before I started college, that I should be asking questions. [But] I felt like, I don't wanna bother them. Cause I always have that feeling that I'm always bothering people. Yeah, like, you know, oh, I need help with this, I need help with that. Like, I always need help with stuff.

MM: Why do you feel that way?

Rodrigo: Because I'm always present. Like, I always thought that you know, college is gonna be, like, one step higher than the high school type of work. And you're basically, like independent also.

Some students elected to tackle challenges on their own, even when aware of available resources that could help them in times of need. Erica Nevels, for example, was on the verge of failing her reading course but was reluctant to seek help from her professor even though she knew it would simplify the assignments and help her to perform better. She offered the following explanation:

MM: Do you ever think it would be easier if you just went to your professor and asked for help?

Erica: Yeah. I feel like it would be easier. I would understand it faster, but I still don't do that process. I don't know why.

MM: Can you tell me why you feel that way?

Erica: Well, because I guess...I don't know. It's just that I don't like talking to professors about my problems, so yeah...Here, you're just on your own. If you want to pass a class, it's just basically on you...here in college. It's like everything is on your own. If you want to continue in college, it's on your own. If you want to do your homework, it's on your own. So college is basically your own stuff.

MM: Does that affect why you feel like you should just do it yourself before going to a professor?

Erica: Yeah.

The perceived expectation to be independent in college resonated quite strongly for some students, leading them to identify campus agents as "the last resort," as labeled by David Diaz. Natalie took a similar position with respect to selecting a major, even though the topic caused her immense anxiety as she tried to determine a career path that would make her as well as her mother happy. She was very overwhelmed with the process, and even though she knew she could talk to her advisor, felt uneasy about doing so. In the passage below, she explained how the expectation to be independent in college informed this decision.

I think the whole major process is more on you and you just have to decide what you want to do. But you have to research that on your own. Because I feel like it's more of a

'me' thing. Going to college, I'm more independent, and I'm trying to figure it all out on my own, so I feel like that's why. I'm still in the whole trying to do it by myself and not ask for help. Because I think the whole adjusting to college and being more independent and just like 'you,' doing it by yourself, I think that's why I try to do it by myself and then I'll go to asking questions. Yeah, I feel like that's how it's supposed to be because I'm in college and it's like totally different than high school. You're not always going to have someone to go and ask questions to. It's because like you have to keep track of your stuff; you have to know when things are due; it's like teachers aren't going to be on your back every day telling you this is missing or when something's late. So, I feel like that's why.

This sense of ownership over one's education and feeling like a success in college was on them was a recurring theme among my students and often directly tied to feeling the expectation to navigate college's demands independently. This feeling often led students to take on more responsibility for managing obstacles even when support was available. As demonstrated above, selecting majors was a source of anxiety for most students I interviewed, but a part of the college process that is supported, in theory, by campus agents and advisors. Still, many students felt major selections and any curriculum requirements was on them to discern since they believed being in college makes it their responsibility. Nancy offered the following response to explain why she avoids seeking consult from an advisor or professor about a teaching major:

Nancy: I've been using the word judged, but I feel like they're going to be like, "Oh, you're supposed to know..." I don't know. I don't feel comfortable. I feel like I would love to have a person telling me, "Oh, this is what the requirements are," like have a specific person that I could go to and ask all those major questions and stuff, but I don't know.

MM: Why do you feel like you need to know everything?

Nancy: Because I feel like it's...you go into college having a mindset of what you want, and actually taking the time to look into it, which...I mean I have, but I haven't fully understand it type. I don't know. I feel like you're required type if you're going into the thing, it's because you actually know about it and you want to learn about it. I don't know.

MM: Do you generally feel comfortable asking for help?

Nancy: No. I don't. I - it's like, if I need to, then I will. But like, me asking for help, I feel like - and even, I - for asking for help, I feel like I'm supposed to know stuff. Like, I'm not supposed to ask questions. Like oh, no, you're supposed to know this.

Further, some students adopted independent behavior in overcoming obstacles because they encountered what they perceived as inefficiencies in the distribution of resources and supports in the college environment. In the following section, I will explore how gaining access to services was a source of frustration for students who sought help and consequently led to “unsponsored self-reliance” (Stanton-Salazar 2001: 252).

Organizational Barriers and Unsponsored Self-Reliance

To fully explain why students believe they must problem solve on their own also requires an examination of how resources and supports in the college are perceived and interpreted by students (Stanton-Salazar 2001). Subscribing to a belief in independence meant that students recognized that if they desired help, they must take the initiative and seek it out. Among the students I interviewed who elected to seek help from campus supports, some were met with significant challenges; this led to students feeling frustrated, undermined the supportive potential of campus agents, and discouraged help-seeking behaviors. Consequently, students fractured ties with campus resources, felt the need to navigate challenges on their own, and experienced "unsponsored self-reliance" (252).

One area of service where I often heard dissatisfaction related to seeking supports from academic advisers. Students believed campus agents, especially advisors, assumed significant responsibilities in their roles and were busy managing "a whole bunch of students" as AJ Garza described. When I ask Ariel Robles to describe the role of an advisor, she said, "Stressful. Yes, I mean you have like random new faces every year, and they all want you to help them, and you

have to memorize what goes with what category and what they can do. It's a lot to take in." This perceived busyness at times led students to have conflicting feelings about advisors, even when they believed they were helpful. When I asked Gaby Moreno about her advisor, she said, "He's helpful, but his life is like this, too (snapping)...Like, students are, like, in and out, in and out as well." As a result, finding the time to meet with campus agents was a concern that students repeatedly expressed when accessing services, as explained by Andrew:

I think one of the things I find real - not awkward, but more like that it makes things difficult, it's that, if you wanna talk to someone, okay set an appointment for next week, set an appointment three days from now. It's not like you can come in, ask a question, you can go. And I know that would cause a lot of problems, because, you know, there'd be a lot of lines and things like that. But I feel like, oh, yeah, I have a quick question, all right, set an appointment next week at, like 3:00. It's like, oh, but I just wanted a - you know, I just had a quick question here. But that's what made it difficult....And I figured out that, you know, that's in most places, you know, in most departments that you wanna talk to someone. I mean, and I understand that everyone's busy, they got stuff going on, and you just have to accommodate in the end to their time, because, you know, they got a lot going on, they're getting paid to do a lot of other stuff, too. So - and they - they have their busy schedule too. So, I mean, that was the only thing that I found difficult.

When students secured meetings with campus agents, they often felt the quality of support suffered because of overflowing student caseloads. The following passage is from Giovanni Duarte who said he often left advising meetings disappointed with the depth of the conversations and range of topics discussed between him and his advisor. He said:

MM: Is there anything the advisor could have done to make it a stronger relationship?

Giovanni: I wish she was available more. I think if she was available more, there would be less students coming to her at one time, and I think she would build tons of relationships with students. That would definitely if she was more available.

MM: Was she able to share helpful information about your major?

Giovanni: Unfortunately, she was rushed, so she just said "It's online. Go look it up online."

MM: How did that make you feel?

Giovanni: Discouraged. I guess that's part of the reason why I also don't want to ask for help or anything. ...Yes, like they didn't want us to build a relationship with them. It's just sad.

Many of my students felt discouraged about the potential support they could access at the college and caused them to feel alone in navigating challenges. Further, when students were pushed online to find information, this also led them to attempt to address questions on their own.

Another barrier to accessing help is in part due to the nature of decentralized services in a college environment. Students described several experiences in which they attempted to seek help but were required to visit multiple offices before getting the help they desired. Nancy, for example, explained her difficulty in trying to obtain a signature to enroll in an English course, which she felt was a lengthy procedure. She said:

I feel like [finding resources] falls on the student. Yeah. Because the way the campus is Structured, things can be really hidden, and you have to look for them...I wish they had like one person at each area that knew everything about that area. That way, if you ever had a question, like, "Oh, how am I supposed to enroll, or how do I fix this?" They would know everything and that way you wouldn't have to jump around with people. Because that would be so helpful and it would just save so much time...Because they don't - like, information that would be valuable, they don't really put it out there. You have to, like, go looking for it and it's really hard to find. Because you know, you have to ask so many people just to find out how to do one thing.

Not only did Nancy struggle to locate services, but since she felt she did not have one person to talk to, believed it was to disclose personal information that could make it easier for campus agents to provide help. She said:

And also, the people are, like, strangers, so it's kinda hard. And, like - I mean, you can't really talk to anybody else because they're not really involved with your schedule and anything like that, you know. So it's kinda hard to talk to a stranger about, you know, personal things.

Consequently, she, like others felt the college may not be supportive of her needs, forcing her to solve problems on her own.

With services being spread out in a college setting, this caused some students to feel unsure of what campus agents would be most helpful to seek out when they encountered problems, especially those that were more personal. Gabriel was on the verge of transferring out of HU to a community college when he encountered an issue with his financial aid. He expressed feeling overwhelmed by the incident but did not know whom to speak to get appropriate help. He said:

Maybe I needed somebody to talk to, you know because I got to the point like after I went there I was just like-- I didn't know what to do. You know? It's just like I was mad, and I was like frustrated and felt moody about the school. And like maybe if I knew someone around here like a counselor besides my advisor. Like someone to go to and like maybe I would have gone there and talked to them about the problem.

When I asked if he knew whether that service was available at the college, he said he was unsure. Later in our conversation when I asked what he felt the biggest challenge he faced during the academic semester, he said, "I don't know. Just looking where to go."

To fully explain why students believed they must problem solve on their own also required an examination of how resources and supports in the school are perceived and interpreted by students. Subscribing to a belief in independence meant that students recognized that if they desired help, they must take the initiative and seek it out. However, the students who elected to seek help from campus supports were met with significant challenges that led to frustration and resulted in students feeling they must navigate challenges on their own, or "unsponsored self-reliance" (Stanton-Salazar 2001: 252). Unfortunately, students who are often in need of the most help may also have the least tolerance for inefficiencies in the distribution of resources (204).

Discussion and Conclusion

This chapter presented evidence that demonstrated how a college environment, in myriad ways, promoted independent behavior in the daily routines for the students I interviewed. Students also internalized what they felt was an expectation to be independent as preparation for adulthood and life after college. These factors negatively shaped students' help-seeking behaviors by leading them to believe they had to navigate college and manage academic demands and expectations on their own; this thwarted student engagement via connecting with people on the campus. However, this only accounts for some of the students' decisions to decline seeking help. Some students felt disenchanted by the services available at the university when they encountered difficulty trying to access various ones. This also contributed to their negative help-seeking behaviors.

For the students in the study, feeling like they had to navigate the environment on their own created difficulties and challenges when it came to making decisions that impacted their college experience. When students fail to build a campus network and exercise student engagement, it can lead to feelings of alienation or malintegration of the student body (Stanton-Salazar 2001: 250). For students who are in their first year of study, this is highly problematic because much of their success will depend on establishing connections and relationships. Additionally, behaviors that are established early on in one's college career can set the tone for future semesters and lead students to stay away from the individuals who are there to help them manage college and be successful.

Even though MSIs like HU, in theory, may strive to embed students in high touch networks of support, the college environment can significantly undermine these efforts in little ways that have significant consequences. These are the everyday routines and practices that are

overlooked when discussing effective or optimal practices for creating a campus culture that encourages connections. Much of the discussion presented in the literature tends to focus on programming, but this research demonstrates that the actual college routine and the common ways that students are expected to operate in these settings can shape how they understand help-seeking norms. As a result, college and universities may have to take a closer look at how the college environment communicates what it means to be a college student, and how it socializes students to manage expectations through different everyday processes.

For the students who did exercise proactive help-seeking behaviors, this research shows that initial interactions and first impressions can have an impact on students' decisions to use services in the future and have lasting implications. When students experienced one negative interaction, it often deterred them from using services in general, because many felt that every interaction with a resource center or staff member, would feel that way. Universities, especially in high touch or critical offices that have a lot of student traffic, perhaps need to think intentionally about the kind of experience they want and hope to create for students and what that experience looks like on the ground. For some institutions that are low-resourced, or have a high student to staff ratios, it may be more difficult for some offices to create a culture of care; however, this may mean that universities need to rethink their systems, policies, and procedures to create a better experience for their student body.

Chapter 3: Exploring Student-Academic Advisor Interactions

When students entered college, they were introduced to a network of individuals who worked on campus and were there to help them manage different aspects of the college transition. In a college setting, institutional agents can be many different types of individuals, including faculty, student affairs professionals, academic affairs representatives, psychologists, financial aid counselors, librarians, and career services staff (Kuh et al. 1991; Kuh & Schuh 1991; Kuh 2011). Research has demonstrated that student engagement via connections with any of these individuals can be instrumental to their success (Kuh et al. 1991; Kuh & Schuh 1991; Kuh 2011). While faculty tend to be the focus of much of the student engagement research as it relates to student interactions and the impact these relationships can have on student development, persistence, and social capital gains, another institutional agent in a college setting that is particularly meaningful is the academic advisor (Hutchison 2015; Kim & Sax 2009; Light 2001; Longwell-Grice et al. 2016; Reynolds 2011; Smith 2002; Swecker et al. 2013; Vianden 2015; Vianden 2016).

Through academic advising, students gain the skills and knowledge to navigate college life and make effective decisions that will positively impact their educational goals and help them accomplish career plans. For Latinx, who are disproportionately first-generation college students, such forms of support are critical since they may lack the traditional support networks and college know-how that continuing generation students inherit from their parents who earned degrees. Additionally, since students are assigned to academic advisors for a year or longer, this potential for consistent contact provides one of the few opportunities for students to form meaningful connections with an individual who works on campus. Student contact with academic advisors in the first year of study is especially important since they need the most help

acclimating to college and learning a college's policies and procedures, campus resources, and available supports. Based on interviews with students and college personnel, Light (2001:81) concluded that "good advising may be the single most underestimated characteristic of a successful college experience."

While benefits to advising are well documented, and students believe advising is central to their success, most fail to develop relationships or meet with them regularly (Fosnacht et al. 2015). Unfortunately, there is limited data that help explains why. To account for this, I explore the factors that shaped students' perceptions of academic advisors' supportive potential and negatively impacted their help-seeking behaviors. In performing this research, the following themes emerged:

1. Though an academic advisor's role is highly complex and variable, students came to associate them with help focused only on course scheduling and planning. This understanding of the advisor role limited the supportive potential of advisors and negatively impacted the quality of the student-advisor relationship.
2. Most students felt academic advisors needed to be more involved in many of the aspects surrounding college life; they often felt that advisors did not provide enough guidance by allowing students to make their own choices. In the absence of greater support, students felt their needs, both academic and emotional, were unmet.
3. For some students, limiting the helping role of academic advisors appeared as a choice, but often stemmed from mistrust with authority overall or lack of faith that authority figures could help. Some students struggled with trusting advisors despite some advisors attempts to establish positive relationships or strengthen relationships.

These themes reverberated throughout the interviews. I open the chapter with an overview of academic advising literature, including the role of an academic advisor, different approaches academic advisors use when working with students, as well the benefits students gain by meeting with academic advisors. Then I discuss advising principles and practices at HU. Following this, I unpack each of the points above and infuse testimonies from the academic advisors I interviewed to offer a layer of complexity and nuance to students' experiences and help better understand students' perceptions.

The Role of Academic Advisors

Academic advising, as a formalized role in higher education, emerged in the 1980s in response to the changing faculty role which shifted from holistic student development to one focused almost entirely on teaching and research (Foschnacht et al. 2015). As a profession, academic advising, according to the US National Academic Advising Association (NACADA), is described as the following (NACADA 2018):

Academic advising is integral to the teaching and learning mission of higher education. Through academic advising, students learn to become members of their higher education community, to think critically about their roles and responsibilities as students, and to prepare to be educated citizens to a democratic society and global community.

Accordingly, the role of the adviser in a college, including the values, goals, and learning outcomes, is multifold and complex (Love & Maxam 2011). Academic advising functions include, but are not limited to: assisting students in considering their life goals by relating their interests, skills, abilities, and values to careers, the world of work, and the nature and purpose of higher education; assisting students in developing an educational plan consistent with life goals and objectives; providing accurate information about institutional policies, procedures, resources, and programs; guiding students on curriculum, degree programs, and other academic

requirements and options; and referring students to other institutional or community support services (Love and Maxam 2011: 414; Smith & Allen 2006; NACADA 2018).

Not only do academic advisors provide critical transitional advice around course offerings, degree requirements, and support services, but they play a significant role in helping students adjust to the emotional and academic demands of college life. Research places academic advisers as first responders since they serve as safety nets for students and are part of the early warning system when students encounter difficulty (Donaldson et al. 2016). Through their locations in a university, they are often in positions to either service the student directly or channel them to resources that can aid in their recovery. Through these different roles and functions, advisors have the potential to provide valuable forms of support that are necessary for students' college success. They also offer one of "the few institutional mechanisms that consistently connect students to the institution in meaningful ways" (Swecker et al. 2013: 48).

Academic Advising Approaches

In the literature on academic advisors, two dominant themes characterize the approaches they may take when working with a student: prescriptive and developmental. Prescriptive advising refers to a more authoritative relationship between the student and advisor. That is, students pose questions and advisors provide answers more directly. Advisors provide information about courses and class schedules and solutions to students' problems or questions. With prescriptive advising, "the emphasis is on telling students what to do and what they need to know rather than providing them with choices and opportunities for decision making" (Smith & Allen 2006:56).

Meanwhile, developmental advising is based on a teaching model and is focused on student development. Developmental advising is a "student-centered process that acknowledges the individuality of students, helps them integrate life, career, and educational goals, connects curricular and co-curricular aspects of their educational experience and provides the scaffolding that gives them opportunities to practice decision making and problem-solving skills" (Smith & Allen 2006:56).

Generally, most education practitioners advocate for a developmental approach. Still, Smith and Allen (2006) argue that advising should not be viewed as one or the other, but rather should operate on a continuum regarding how advisors work with and support students. Their research argues that students' expectations and needs over the course of their college careers may change and advisors need to be flexible in their approach. This research also suggests that prescriptive advising can lead to developmental advising as students learn to trust their advisors through the information they provide that allows them to navigate a college environment.

For emerging college populations, like Latinx students, using a combination of approaches may be best given that their level of understanding of college norms and demands may be limited upon first entering college. When students enter with less knowledge, it can take time to learn the system in ways that allow them to determine what questions should be asked. As they get more confident and comfortable, advisors may then place more of the decision making and choice on the students. This also aligns with one of NACADA's core advising competencies which argues that academic advisors need to be mindful of the needs of emerging college populations (NACADA 2018). As a result, academic advisors should assess students' needs and provide the necessary guidance utilizing the most effective approach.

Kuh and Schuh (1991) warn that colleges and universities need to be mindful of who their students are as well as how successfully and responsibly different student populations will handle ambiguity and academic expectations and demands. Knowing when to meet with advisors is one example. They argue that "problems occur when there is a mismatch between students' ability levels and knowledge and awareness of conceptual complexity and institutional expectations for self-directed behaviors" (Kuh & Schuh 1991: 140). Latinx students who are overwhelmingly first-generation college students may fall in this trap because they enter the college system with limited awareness or understanding of what it means to be a college student, and how for instance, academic advisors can be critical to their success. This also is in line with one of NACADA's core advising competencies which argues that academic advisors need to be mindful of the needs of emerging college populations (NACADA 2018). As a result, academic advisors should assess students' needs and provide the necessary guidance utilizing the most effective approach.

Despite the approach advisors may utilize, NACADA makes it clear that academic advisors need to establish a rapport with students and build caring relationships through empathetic listening and compassion and communicate inclusively. Rawlings and Rawlings (2005:10) believe students learn about advisors through how advisors respond to them. Thus, they similarly argued that advisors must establish a "civic and dyadic friendship" to facilitate a beneficial relationship. They suggest that advisors create a culture of care that signals to students a sense of support. While the advisor is responsible for communicating care, the relationship must be mutual, and expectations must be set and met on both ends. Rawlings and Rawlings (2005) suggest this can be difficult and found some students may resist a relationship; they may

be unhappy with an advisor who sets high expectations or requires a student to take self-initiative. To avoid this, advisors need to meet students where they are.

On the topic of personal concerns, some researchers state that helping students with personal concerns may fall outside of the scope of the academic advisors reach (Reynolds 2011). However, given that advisors are positioned to have consistent contact with students, they may be the first person to become aware of personal challenges affecting the student. While academic advisors are not counselors, they generally are thought to build bridges between students and other resources that will help them overcome the challenges they are facing.

Vianden (2014) supports this claim and argues that students respond favorably to advisors who show concern, exhibit positive accessibility or availability behaviors, listen to their concerns, and provide helpful or useful information as suggested in other studies. When students encountered unresponsive or unknowledgeable advisors, they indicate a feeling of unimportance, sense of not belonging, drop in morale, and decreased motivation to persist.

Benefits to Academic Advising

Research on the benefits students gain when meeting with academic advisors is well documented. Interactions with academic advisors increase chances for success. Research has found a positive relationship between academic advising and retention, college satisfaction, and personal development (Fosnacht et al. 2015; Pargett 2015). Academic advising also positively impacts student satisfaction, career aspirations, persistence, perceptions of support environment and campus navigation. Vianden (2014) suggests that through strong quality relationships, advisors can establish secure connections between the student and university. Students also

report greater satisfaction when they feel the institution prioritizes them and is based on their advisors expressed interest in and care for them (Fosnacht et al. 2015; Pargett 2015).

While benefits to advising are well documented, and students believe advising is central to their success, most fail to develop relationships or meet with them regularly (Fosnacht et al. 2015). Research unpacking this phenomenon is limited, but Fosnacht and colleagues (2015)., in their study of 52,546 full-time first-year students from 209 US bachelor's degree-granting schools, found that on average students met twice with their academic advisors, while roughly one-quarter or 24% did so only once, and one in ten or 9% full-time first-year students never met with an advisor. In their study, they identified different student characteristics that described what kinds of students were more likely to meet with advisors. They found off-campus students met less with advisors than on-campus students, grades earned reflected the frequency of meetings, and students who attended public universities were less likely to set meetings.

This study reveals some insight into how often students meet with advisors and what kinds of students are more likely to meet with them. I build on this and add to the literature by focusing on the relationship between students and advisors, specifically the factors that can negatively shape how students understand the supportive potential of academic advisors and the impact on help-seeking behaviors. Before I discuss students' experiences with academic advisors at HU, it is essential to provide some information on the advising system at HU.

Academic Advising at Heartland University

At HU, academic advising is divided along two systems depending on when students declare a major. For students who have declared a major, they are assigned an advisor through their respective department. For students who have not declared a major, students are assigned a

general academic advisor who they will continue to work until they declare a major and begin working with an advisor in their department. Most students in my study were in the process of selecting a major and therefore fell into the second category of advising. General academic advising was offered in a centralized location on the main campus in a department known as the Advising Center. The center was open throughout the week and students had the option to meet with their academic advisor by scheduling an appointment or drop by during walk-in hours.

According to HU, the Advising Center promotes student success by providing students with information on university policies and helping them make informed decisions about their college journey. Advisors support students by encouraging them to take responsibility for achieving their academic and personal goals. Throughout the advising process, students can get guidance on degree requirements, explore career paths, and become familiar with support services and resources.

Based on the conversations I held with academic advisors, they would agree that this is an accurate description. Despite this, some factors complicated this kind of relationship from taking this form and limited the supportive potential of academic advisors for the students I interviewed. In the following sections, I explore the dynamics between academic advisors and students to uncover some of the barriers that limited how students understood their supportive potential and produced negative help-seeking orientations.

The Singular Advisor Role

When students entered college, they were introduced to a network of individuals who worked on campus who could help them manage different aspects of the college transition. One person who fulfilled this role that students frequently mentioned during interviews was the

academic adviser. During interactions with academic advisors throughout their first college semester, students formed ideas regarding their role. When asked to describe their function, many would relate it to help around course scheduling and planning, as evidenced by the following remarks made by several students:

(all in separate interviews)

Erica Nevels: [Advising is] just dealing with your schedules and that's it, the way...the process you take with your classes, like which class to take first and last

Geraldo Molina: [Advising is] just to help out determine what we want to do with school, why...when it comes to signing up for classes, stuff like that.

Elsa Ayala: I think [advisors] just help you pick out your classes, see if you're doing good and that's it. [Advising] is like my school, just pick your classes and that's it. It's just programming.

Kevin Beltran: I really don't know what [my advisor's] role is besides helping me choose my classes

Hugo Garcia: Because that's what I thought advisors did...I thought that was all they do, like to help pick out classes or like to help you out with your classes or your schedules.

In the eyes of the students I interviewed, many seemed to associate academic advisors with the Information Core Competency, which focused on advisors being able to share with student's information on curriculum, degree programs, and other academic requirements and options. Even though this is designated as one core advising competency, this very focused and narrow perception regarding the role of academic advisors may have been reinforced or emerged as the most notable helping role because many students said courses and course planning were the primary topics of conversation. For instance, AJ Garza said, "[Academic advisors] would just talk about me signing up for classes, stuff like that." Nicholas Segovia expressed similar views: Mostly [we discuss] just what happens in school. Not really [have we discussed anything beyond selecting a major or classes]. Just about that." For some students, what was left out of the

conversation compared to what was said during meetings was just as important in how they understood advisor roles, as expressed by Geraldo Molina:

[My advisor] just lets us know when to come in for the schedule and nothing else. She never said if you have a problem with one class come in and let's figure out what to do if you are failing a class come in and let's see if we can do anything. Maybe if you are having financial difficulties, you could come in and let's work on a solution.

While a focus on curriculum and course schedules is undoubtedly an essential function to academic advising, how students came to define academic advisers soon started to operate in very limiting ways as many students came to see them serving a very singular role. Some students, upon entering college, believed academic advisors would provide many supports, and in theory, this is correct, but the focus on courses prevented students from thinking this was true. Gabriel Mena, for instance, is one student who experienced this:

Well I mean, in the beginning, I thought [academic advisors] were like where you can go and talk to them about anything. But like when they step into the office, I guess it's signing up for classes and talking about classes or dropping classes. What's wrong with this class? I thought it was like your go-to person.

As research shows, Latinx students need a “go-to” person in higher education. However, due to the perceived focus on courses, any hope students had that academic advisors would be a sense of support across areas of need quickly dissipated. The narrow perceptions students held of academic advisers also discouraged many from building personal relationships, which would have involved sharing details about their lives because they felt this fell outside the scope of the student-academic advisor relationship. This is unfortunate because having closer connections would have strengthened the relationships and created greater rapport and trust with students. For Latinx students, a shared sense of trust is especially critical in getting them to feel comfortable

accessing resources and forming relationships because trust is the building block of relationship creation.

In fact, the conversations on course scheduling and enrollment became so routine for students that when asked if advisors tried to get to know them personally, they often responded as Elsa Ayala did, “I don’t think its [my advisor’s] job.” Advisors were not there to be a sense of support in areas outside of course selection, so students rarely entertained the possibility that they could have a stronger relationship. Nicholas expressed this when he described his relationship with his advisor in the following way: “[I think it’s just like, student-advisor relationship]...I don’t expect [my advisor] to know me or know about my life. I expect [my advisor] to do [the] job and file my classes for me.”

Students who believed academic advisors were not interested in getting to know them personally by learning about their lives also felt less inclined to share personal details. Several students said they would have possibly felt more comfortable if the academic advisors initiated the conversations by first asking them questions or made it a point to share details that would have allowed the students to learn about their lives outside of their roles in the university. When these conversations did not occur, students were reluctant to building the relationship. Leticia Rosa shared:

I see them not getting into that level with me, like talking about their personal life with the student. So, no, I wouldn't try it. Because if they did [want to get to know me], like, [they wouldn't open their life with me, you know? So. Like, why bother...Why waste my time.

For students, the absence of this connection was a key factor in encouraging students to discuss their struggles and possibly seek help from the advisors. As Leticia said, “If there's no connection then there's no life.”

However, when advisors did not engage students in these conversations, it left students feeling uncared for. Students often expressed a desire for their academic advisors to take a more significant interest in their well-being and equated their lack of interest as lack of support. Nancy Rios said:

I feel like [my advisor's] supposed to care, or at least try to care, but sometimes I feel like she's just there, she's not actually supporting me, like, 'How have you been this last week? How about that last test?' Or something like that. I don't know if she's supposed to do that, but I would like her to do that.

Students wanted to have someone in the university who looked out for their best interest and believed the academic advisor would serve this role. In theory, they can, but because of how students understood the role of the advisor as one focused solely on course scheduling, this helping relationship never materialized.

Alyssa Vargas also expressed similar views. Since the relationship between the students and their academic advisers did not evolve beyond discussions concerning course selections, many students were left with the impression that academic advisers did not necessarily care about them as individuals. Alyssa said:

I think to - to her I'm just another face that she needs to help out and tell what to do...but it's probably not a face that she'll remember that much. Like, she only knows my name because I made an appointment...I guess cause the school's sort of, like, a business [school]. It's like, 'All you's guys are just business. I'll help you out, but you're only business to me. This is how I get my job. This is what my job is supposed to be.'

Consequently, the absence of a relationship left students very hesitant about leaning on advisors. Nicholas, for instance, said he didn't want to attempt to form connections with campus agents because they would not be real since they are "paid to care about you [students]." Derek Ahmuda also said, "Basically they are there to do their job. You never know what goes through their head, like if they care or not like why would my problems matter to other people who have

their own problems.” This in part led students to feel that academic advisors' help related to other topics or areas of life was manufactured, because there was nothing for students to relate to on a personal level; the identity of the advisor is wrapped solely in discussion around coursework and school. For any problem that touched on a personal topic, like financial concerns, some students like Ariel Robles, said, "Every school is trained to give you generic answers." This is unfortunate because students like her needed advice, especially when she started missing classes because of her work schedule.

Since students felt that advisors had a limited role and were not interested in developing personal relationships, students felt having stronger relationships with academic advisers would yield very few benefits as they progressed through college. This severely limited the supportive potential of the academic advisors, with any benefits tied to courses and curriculum. When asked if having a personal relationship would be beneficial he said:

Maybe she will try and get me into certain classes that I need and want. So maybe she would go that extra step by contacting the professor for me...but I guess that would be the only thing it would be helpful for.

A handful of students did not think there was any value in forming connections preventing them from trying at all, as Hugo Garcia, said: "I mean, I know there's a saying like "it's not about what you know it's who you know," but I don't think it matters at school."

Because of the focus on courses and lack of personal relationship, this altered how students perceived advisors, including their supportive potential and what they could share during appointments; to the student, the relationship was transactional and linear. One adverse outcome of these perceptions was that it affected the topics of conversations students would have with advisors. They would start to censor the topics of conversations because they felt only

certain things were appropriate to discuss or bring to the attention of academic advisers. Since students and advisors were unable to break past this threshold, they kept the conversations contained and followed specific talking scripts. As Juno Diaz said:

[My advisor's] important because she works at a university and she's a counselor. I feel that's important; not just an ordinary person. I guess if she's important, you have to be more professional... Yeah. And I feel if I talk to her more about other stuff, it gets out of the professional. So, school-related is professional, I guess.

Students soon believed that advisors were either not able to discuss topics that fell outside courses or did not care to hear. This in turn impacted help-seeking behaviors and was evidenced by many student cases. Students' definitions of "school" in the context of advising sessions equated to discussing courses and planning. Consequently, when students had problems that fell outside course scheduling, students rarely felt they could ask advisors for help. These beliefs stemmed from the continued focus on academics, so they felt they had little room to talk about other things. This was problematic given that many of the students I interviewed encountered difficult life challenges that impacted their studies, but not having a personal relationship prevented them from leaning on their advisors.

AJ, for instance, had difficulty completing forms for his financial aid package. Consequently, he was unable to get his award. After attempting to speak with a financial aid counselor, he still did not fully understand what he needed to provide. When I asked if he had considered speaking to his academic advisor for guidance, his answer demonstrated the "box" many students put academic advisors in. He said, "All I know is that that wasn't [advisors] jurisdiction...to talk about. AJ, like so many of the students I interviewed, confined academic advisors to limited roles where the topics most appropriate to discuss related to course scheduling. While some students may not readily think to seek help from academic advisers

regarding financial aid, they are meant to serve as a bridge to resources, serve as an advocate on the student's behalf, or possibly answer the student's question based on institutional knowledge and policies. Further, his choice of words— "jurisdiction"—implied that he believed that his academic advisor could only speak to specific topics. For students, these topics were often related to courses and curriculum.

Financial aid concerns often pose significant barriers to first-generation college students and can be difficult to navigate. While financial aid counselors are meant to help students, there are some students like AJ, who may need additional explanation or help from someone external who understands the system and can decode or simplify the process. Even though there are many individuals whom AJ could have turned to for help, it is revealing that his reason for overlooking his academic advisor as that potential person was wrapped up in how he understood the advisor's role and the topics appropriate for discussion.

For some students, the topics that fell under courses and curriculum were even more narrowly defined to mean registration and course selection. Because of the emphasis on courses, when students encountered academic struggles within their courses, some still did not view the advising sessions as a space to discuss these struggles and the conflicting feelings that may arise from these experiences. When Geraldo, for instance, was struggling in his Calculus course during his first semester, he did not think to speak with his academic advisor to learn about resources or get advice on his options for course completion. He struggled throughout the course and unfortunately failed.

Geraldo shared that he had a difficult time, in part, because mathematics was an area he always excelled in academically. Struggling in his calculus class was a challenging experience

for him, mainly because he wanted to teach math professionally. He struggled tremendously over his inability to perform at the level he was used to. When he finally met with his academic advisor after failing and being placed on academic probation, his academic advisor asked him why he did not pass the course. His response to this revealed the disconnect students made with identifying academic advisors as someone they could talk to about personal struggles, even when they were related to courses. He said:

She asked why I didn't pass Calculus and I just told her it got harder. My mind wasn't set on going in and talking to her about... all the things that were going on. My mind just wasn't set like that. I guess that's why I didn't share anything.

Geraldo experienced academic struggles in his calculus course which stirred up difficult feelings. He didn't think to talk to her about his progress because the conversations only focused as he said on "scheduling and nothing else."

Hugo was another student who struggled to manage the demands of college and working off campus. When his mother, who is a single parent, got her work hours reduced, he increased his work hours at a restaurant to help his mother and sister financially. At one time, he was working nearly 40 hours each week. This created a significant burden on him when trying to keep up with his courses. Of his situation, he said:

Like, the way I see it, school is work and work is like the thing you do on the side. But like sometimes, you're having problems. Like I'm having problems at my house, like financially, so I can't just put school as [my] number one priority. I'd love to. But I can't.

Financial concerns are a significant barrier for students, especially students who come from low-income families. The college transition on its own is difficult to manage and working only adds to the challenges students encounter. Hugo, like other students who were in this situation, didn't see the academic advisor as someone they could turn to for help or advice; this is in part because

this fell outside the scope of topics students felt they could discuss with academic advisors.

Unfortunately, Hugo did not think to share a personal problem, such as this, would be the case:

"I wouldn't tell my...advisors [a personal problem]...Because if I tell them, they'll [say]- why are you telling me this? Or I thought you were here to talk to me about school."

Andrew was another student like Geraldo who had difficulty balancing school and work. When Andrew began his college career, he knew that he would need to help pay his way through college. His parents offered to help for the first two years, but with his brothers gearing up to begin college, his parents could only help for a short time. To start saving money and help his family financially, Andrew began working at a local grocery store where he worked almost 30 hours each week. Andrew, who also was enrolled in the Honors Program, had an intense course load that required him to maintain a strong GPA and participate in different seminars. He said of college experience:

It's a lot [when] you think about everything. That's why I work probably a little more than I should... You know, you come to school to learn, but you gotta pay for it, so you go to work, but it takes time away from school, and it's all contradictory. I know I would like to cut back on work, but sometimes you just can't.

Andrew did his best to manage both commitments but struggled to meet the minimum GPA to stay in the program. When he was required to meet with an academic advisor in the Honors Program, he did not disclose the difficulties he was having with work and school. His reasoning was because he said the meeting was "an academic solely based meeting" where they primarily discussed his progress in his classes. As a result, he was unwilling to share such details and said, "she probably wasn't looking for excuses and that's probably what I was ready to throw at her too." Andrew believed sharing these details fell outside "academics" or his class progress, so it would have been viewed as "excuses" and not relevant for the conversation.

Students' experiences with academic advisors revealed the parameters they placed around their roles. Derek is another student who avoided talking to his academic advisor because they lacked a personal connection driven by the conversations focusing primarily on courses. Many of the students encountered life challenges that were independent of their academic ability, but ultimately impacted their chances for success. Academic advisors had the potential to serve as their "go-to person" as described by Gabriel and help students figure out how to manage the demands. To accomplish this, the relationships need to be cultivated and include more than discussions on course scheduling. This may help students feel more comfortable seeking help when hardships arise. This also will enable students to better relate to their academic advisors and help them feel comfortable sharing their struggles. This was the case for Derek.

Derek is another student who also would have benefitted from being able to confide in his academic advisor but fell into the same trap of only thinking he could talk to him about courses. Derek's brother has cerebral palsy and he often helped watch his brother along with working at a local grocery store and balancing school. This created tremendous pressure, and caused him to struggle in his courses. As he was experiencing this, he felt he could not disclose his concerns to his academic advisor. He said:

I guess you could say we made somewhat of a connection. It wasn't like 'oh, I need somebody to go talk to, let me go talk to my advisor. But if I needed help with classes I would tell him I dunno what class to take.

When asked if he would have wanted someone to lean on he said, "Yeah, because I think they would've, like, made everything easier for me as [opposed] to, like, me having to figure everything out by myself." Derek is another student example of one who censored the

conversations he had with his advisor because the context of conversations was always class focused, so the connection was absent.

Students Desire Greater Guidance

As described in the opening of this chapter, some theories help explain the approaches academic advisers embrace while working with students. It is essential to understand these approaches because they inform the contexts for interactions between advisors and students. In my study, I was able to speak with two general academic advisors. While this is not a representative number, it allowed me to gain insight into some of the ways advisors at HU may approach working with their students. NACADA refers to this as an advisor's advising philosophy (NACADA 2018). According to one academic advisor, he said gives his students greater autonomy and independence with decision making when it comes to topics like course selection. Mr. Robert Givens, who has worked for more than ten years at HU, said:

A lot of students don't realize that the [majority or bulk] of learning is on them. Not on their professors and not on their advisors. They'll have difficulty with the fact that I won't tell them what [classes] they have to take. I will give them this vague idea of general education and then have them choose. Some of them welcome it, but many of them do struggle with it. And they'll resist the freedom. It's this whole idea of taking responsibility for choices as well as having the choice in the first place.

While this is one advisor's philosophy, his approach aligned with how students often described their interactions with their academic advisors when it came to making decisions around their college journey. Students felt that advisors would encourage them to tackle different items on their own, whether it was related to course selection, enrollment, or major selection. However, this was challenging for many of them. This approach also aligned with colleges promoting independence but created immense anxiety when it came to expectations around course

selections. Despite intentions to help instill accountability in students, these students struggled with expectations to do things on their own. Sarah Lopez said:

When I was trying to register for Spring, [my advisor] told me straight up, 'Well, you need to do it on your own.' He just did one class, and then he was like, 'Okay, this is how you do it.' And, like, I still didn't know what I was doing, and he was just like, 'Well, I can't do it for you, that's not my job.' And I'm like, 'Well, who else is gonna help me?'

As first-generation college students who were also first year students, there were many unknowns about college. Outside of their professors and academic advisors, most of the students had not connected or met anyone in the college. When their advisor was unable to help, students felt on their own. Other times, advisors would encourage them to use course catalogs, student handbooks, or Google, but this replaced critical student-advisor interaction. When students were turned away after seeking help, this was discouraging for many of them. As Hugo said:

[The] day that I was registering [for] my classes...[my advisor] was pretty mad that I didn't know what classes I wanted to choose...Not mad, but I could tell he was frustrated because I didn't know what to do." He said to his advisor "oh, I don't know so that's why I came to you," hoping that he could help me choose these classes, and he gave me the catalog, and he just told me, "Here. Pick the classes that you want to choose." So I just read through it...

Angie Otero had a similar experience:

Yeah, I mean because I guess it was just like, you know it's really brief conversation on that topic [majors]. He just said, 'Okay, well here's the [course catalog] book. Just kind of look through it and if you have any other questions, just Google whatever major you seem to be interested in and that should help you.' And that was kind of like it.

Using these resources, like course catalogs, operated in ways that prevented students from feeling supported by their advisors. As first-generation college students, this was difficult because they were looking for guidance from the academic advisor. Leticia said:

[My advisor said] it's just, 'What do you want your major to be? Well, you're gonna go through the book and see what classes you need to take'... So I understand that's their job just to give us a little push, you know, but I don't feel that connection. Like, it's just, like,

'oh well, I coulda done that myself and looked through it, you know? I mean, he did help, he recommended certain classes first and then some later, you know? But I guess some of them assume, like, we already have family that has gone to school, you know. But when you don't have nobody, you're just, like, okay... You wish there was someone at home who could help.

Many students struggled to cope with the lack of guidance because they felt alone to navigate some of these expectations. Several students had encounters with advisors where they desired much greater support and felt alone in setting that was already difficult to navigate. Many also felt the expectations for them to make these decisions on their own was unrealistic. For Elsa, this occurred when discussing her college major. She said:

[Advisors] want us to do it on our own. [They think we're adults and have to do it on our own]...I don't think I can make all my decisions. I don't know a lot about college...I would want her to tell me what should I take, what should I do. Not just tell me, 'I don't know, it's your choice.' I can make my own choices, but sometimes it's hard. You need some advice.

When they did not receive the help they desired, they internalized it as a deficit on their part.

Elsa said, "Maybe that's her job, and it's me that needs more things than that." She was referring to the additional guidance she would like. Students felt that their needs were not being met and they struggled with lack of support. Students also took it personally when they did not get help.

Sarah said:

I feel like if [academic advisors] are gonna be here, they need to do their job. If it's not what they want to do, then they shouldn't be here because obviously we're here to learn and they're here to help if we don't know how to get there.

During these encounters, students felt they did things entirely alone even though they wanted greater support. Many of these students wanted more dialogue and greater input from their advisors. Daniella Reyes expressed similar feelings. When trying to select a major, she said the following about the support she received from her academic advisor:

I feel like I did it all alone...I just feel like she should've talked to me more about stuff...like, classes, 'Are you sure you wanna take this?' And, like, 'Oh, there's, like, other classes that are similar.' Like, try to make me kind of explore more a little. Just in case I change my mind [about my major]. Something else I could do.

In the absence of support from their advisors, students began to rely on books, brochures, and pamphlets and stopped asking questions because they thought they would get instructed similarly. When advisors prompted them to utilize catalogs or external materials, it discouraged them from returning to advisors with questions. Students felt that future encounters would be handled similarly, so many of them avoided seeking help, even when they had questions or concerns. Leticia said:

Like, [my advisor] talk[ed] to us in the class that we had with her...about the majors that you wanna take, why you wanna take that. She told me to look in the books to see what classes I had to take, and that's it. So it was not helpful for me because I already knew to look for it in the books. So if I had trouble, I wouldn't ask her...Because I knew that she would've told me that. She told us at the beginning of the class, 'you will see in the books, what classes to take, what courses and, like, what numbers are right there. I'm like, okay.

When academic advisors seemed to prioritize students' use of catalogs, they again internalized the expectation to do it on their own, even when they struggled, and failed to see the academic advisor as a source of help. This not only led students to do things on their own but made them seek help from other sources. Nicholas said:

[My advisor] kinda just [said] 'Here, choose your own classes.' So I went to one of the computer labs, and I was kinda figuring it out, and then I was just like, I don't think I did this right. So then I went to one of my co-workers who goes here, and she did it for me cause I [told her] I don't know what the hell I'm doing.

While friends served as a source of help, it was essential students felt they could seek help from their academic advisors, who were also going to be the best source of information.

Unfortunately, in trying to get students to be more independent with decision making, students

walked away from those conversations and interactions feeling advisors would not be supportive. College is an entirely new experience, so they were looking for guidance and someone who would help them.

Students Struggle Trusting Advisors

At HU, advising was not mandatory. As a result, meeting with advisors was up to the discretion of the students. The advisors I spoke with said because of this structure, felt it was up to them to create a welcoming environment where students felt encouraged to schedule meetings. Mr. Eric Sanchez, who has worked in advising for more than a decade, explained:

We call and we email, we call, and we email. Without having that mandatory connection it's up to them [to come], and it's up to us to let them know if you want to come our door is open, we're here.

The advisors I spoke to accomplished an open-door policy in different ways. Despite that many students felt that advisors were only there to help them with courses and did not necessarily care about them as individuals, the advisors I spoke with offered a counter narrative; they expressed actively striving to create a welcoming environment for students where they felt engaged and supported. For instance, Mr. Sanchez said he tried to relate to his students as much as possible to convey that he had their best interest in mind.

I just try to be myself. I don't promote myself as an administrator or someone who's above them because we all come from the same background. We all have the same experiences from what I've seen...I'm open with them to show them that I'm genuine and that I want to help them, and not just another number on my roster of students to talk to.

Mr. Sanchez also recognized that his job stretched beyond the scope of academic advising. He said:

I know it's academic counseling that we do here, but a lot of time, too, they need somebody to talk to, someone to listen to...if they need an ear, we give them an ear to talk, and let themselves hear it out loud.

Mr. Sanchez did not mind engaging in personal conversation with his students and often welcomed it. He also applied taking a personal approach to helping connect with his students as he explained:

I get to know them personally is one of my strategies [which he applied when helping students select a major]. Usually, it's like, 'Oh, so what kinds of things were you interested in high school?' I don't force them to choose one. It's 'What kinds of things do you like? When you thought about coming to college, what were you thinking about?' 'I want to go to college because I want to do this or I want to do that. I want to learn...' So, more getting to know them personally and what their interests are first, versus going straight into giving them an exam, okay, you're supposed to do this. Getting to know them personally and let them open up a little more and then start talking more about the majors and discussion, things like that.

Mr. Robert Givens, also an academic advisor, similarly shared that he tries to personalize each meeting with students by approaching each one in a way that will reach them individually.

I think part of the job as an advisor is about learning what tools you possess, and what to use in order to get your students to succeed. And to respond to you. There are many students that come to me with a certain set of expectations, or I interpret it as a certain set of expectations, they want me dressed like this. They want me sitting up at my desk, and they want me using a particular tone of voice where I am telling them what to do. Others will come in and say, 'Hey, I want to talk to you!' And I have to be able to switch between those aspects of my personality... So all of that is governed by the student. I have to have this whole bag of tricks. But it's up to me to know when to apply which one.

Some advisors tried to create a customized experience for their students. Even though some of the students acknowledged the efforts made by their academic advisors to establish a connection, they struggled to trust them and felt they could not lean on them during times of need. Different reasons affected their levels of comfort but tended to stem from complicated family histories that impacted how they thought about and received help. This was the case for Derek:

I mean, it comes down to me, like, yeah, they [academic advisors] were always, like, well, if you guys ever need anything, like, you know, like, you know where to find us.

But, you know, it was more of, like, me, like, me not - you know, like, I dunno, it's - it's hard for me to, like, feel comfortable with, like, somebody I just met in a year and going and vent to them. Okay. Where does that come from - why do you feel like it's - it's hard. I dunno. Just, you know, like, when I told you, like, you know, like, the first meeting, like, how, like, I grew up and stuff, like, I never had anybody there for me. So it's like, it's pretty hard for me to let people be there for me, when, you know, growing up, I never had nobody.

Growing up, Derek was raised by his aunt, and his parents were mostly missing from his life.

Consequently, he struggled trusting others. As Derek noted, time can certainly help, but students cannot predict when challenges will arise or when they will need help. Challenges are prevalent, not only among this population but during the first year, making it essential that have support from campus agents.

Gaby also had significant life challenges that impacted her decisions at school. Gaby's father and brother had been in jail and after getting released, were at risk of deportation. Not knowing the future of her family's whereabouts made deciding a career and respective major difficult. She didn't know whether she should complete a two-year program or stay at HU to complete her bachelors. Even though her worlds were colliding, she did not want to share what was going on. When her advisor probed to understand her thought process, she was reluctant to reveal why she was uncertain. She said:

[My advisor] tries to make conversation, but I really don't. It's not his fault. I don't wanna feel comfortable. Cause there's certain things, I don't like to talk about. Like, for me, everything's separate - school is school, work is work, home is home. Whatever happens at school stays at school. Whatever happens at work stays at work...Home is home...

Gaby had a very complicated family situation that created tremendous anxiety, not just at home, but at school. The situation weighed heavily on her mentally and emotionally. Many of the Latinx students in my study were dealing with significant life challenges and like Gaby, tried to keep their personal lives separate from college. However, the line of separation was blurred, and

the stress from their personal lives spilled over and impacted crucial decisions regarding college or course performance. Students, however, did not feel comfortable disclosing details to their advisors that would have enabled them to better advocate or offer support on their behalf. To maintain separation, students would try to keep problems confined to the family or close friends.

Andrew said:

I mean I would talk to someone at the school that has something to do with school related, but I don't know if I would come up to anybody about personal. I feel like that should be between the people you're are close with.

They also preferred family because students thought they would give better advice, as expressed by Geraldo. “No, I don't feel comfortable talking to people who work at the college. Mostly because they wouldn't know what to say. They wouldn't give as good advice as my girlfriend does.” These apprehensions were prominent among the students I interviewed and reverberated throughout many of their comments.

Student's experiences outside of college also left some of them skeptical that academic advisors could make a difference even if they shared their challenges. For some, the distance between students and advisors did not result because of a poor relationship; instead, it stemmed from students failing to see them as someone who could make a difference in their lives. Even though David Diaz's advisor always gave him a good impression and made him feel supported, he felt unimportant in the eyes of his advisor. David, for instance, said:

[My advisors has] gotten to know me personal, but even though we know each personally, I still wouldn't feel comfortable giving him my personal problems. I feel like he wouldn't be comfortable either hearing my personal problems...I think he has other things to worry about, you know. So coming to the conclusion, ‘oh what does he care?’ He's never given me that impression, but I feel like he would have more important things to do than to have someone sit down and babble in front of him. That has nothing to do with him.

Some students also felt a sense of hopelessness that even if they did disclose their struggles, academic advisors could not do anything that would make a difference in their lives. Meanwhile, some students did not think advisors could offer any help at all. Derek said:

At the end of the day they can't tell you 'Oh, go and do this and all your problems are gonna be solved.' Because if the problems happening with me and I can't even find the solution, what's gonna make me think that somebody else is gonna have a solution for my problem?

Prior life experiences drastically shaped how some students understood the supportive potential of academic advisors and their choice to lean on them during times of need. That some academic advisors attempted to engage students and build positive relationships did little to sway students perception of them is telling. It suggests a collective effort by the university is needed to help push back on negative perceptions to help reshape their understanding of campus agents and available supports. In doing so, they will be able to effectively participate in institutional settings, like college, and learn to meet their needs by having a support system.

Discussion and Conclusion

This chapter explored the factors that shaped how Mexican American students perceived the supportive potential of academic advisors and the reasons they chose not to lean on them during times of need. As one essential kind of support students can tap into, it is crucial to help students overcome barriers to building these connections. Even though this examination applied to the dynamics between Mexican American students and academic advisors, some of the factors that prevented them from leaning on academic advisors may help us better understand the relationships between Latinx students and other institutional agents within a college setting.

The literature on academic advisors and their central role within a university are well documented within policy and research studies. While the role of the academic advisor is

discussed widely, it is necessary that these conversations take place with students to help them understand all the supports academic advisors can provide to enhance their college journeys. The dialogue needs to be both top-down and bottom-up, especially when considering that Latinx students are first-generation college students and enter college with a limited understanding of not only who key players are in a college setting but may be unfamiliar with their roles and how to best utilize their services.

Further, while the research outlines different approaches advisors can take when working with students, academic advisors need to be mindful of the needs of emerging populations and meet them where they are. Working with students, perhaps, calls for greater flexibility and may be in line with research suggesting that approaches are on a continuum, rather than being strictly prescriptive or developmental. Many students expressed needing much more guidance on navigating the college structure across numerous areas of academic need.

More importantly, it seemed that many students would have benefited from stronger relationships with academic advisors, which could have led to greater trust. To establish relational trust, students need to feel cared for, which may require academic advisors to get to know the story behind the face and learn students' narratives. These conversations, with time, may also help win over those students whose life experiences create distance between themselves and institutional agents. For these students, consistency in delivery of services and support may be crucial.

Latinx students need to have strong relationships with academic advisors to ensure their success in college; academic advisors often serve as first responders and have the capacity to build bridges to university resources for their students and ultimately shape their college

experience in positive ways. As Vincent Tinto (2008: 1) famously stated, “Access without support is not opportunity.” Academic advisors need to help Latinx students understand how the supports they can provide matter and will help them navigate their college journeys.

Chapter 4: HSI Identity and Creating a Supportive Environment

Today, 1.8 million or 65% of all Latinx college students attend Hispanic Serving Institutions, which have emerged as a staple in the landscape of higher education. While HSIs have become the top choice for Latinx students, researchers and policymakers alike have noted numerous challenges tied to the institutions that wear this label with regards to how they embrace this identity and create environments that are Latinx-serving (Hurtado & Alvarez 2015; Gasman 2008; Conrad & Gasman 2015; Nunez 2015; Garcia 2017; Fosnacht & Nailos 2015). Concerns stem from the fact that HSIs lack a clearly defined mission and are designated as such almost entirely on enrollment. Research also suggests they fail to create environments that prioritize status and produce successful Latinx student outcomes. Consequently, there is rising concern that HSIs may be better labeled as Hispanic Enrolling rather than Hispanic Serving Institutions (Hurtado & Alvarez 2015; Gasman 2008; Conrad & Gasman 2015; Nunez 2015).

While the current body of research examining identity and the HSI environment has focused mainly on student outcomes, there is a need to supplement this work by exploring what HSI means from those who comprise an institutional setting; including, how they understand the designation and what they identify as the challenges to embracing this status (Garcia 2017). These institutional conversations are meaningful because they shape how institutional identity aligns with mission and have implications on the type of campus climate it creates for Latinx students; and, given that campus climate is essential for encouraging student engagement, the conversations around HSI identity can directly impact how students understand the supportive potential of campus agents and their help-seeking behaviors. Further, student engagement literature often fails to consider the voices of those who work in a university in creating the conditions that encourage these connections.

Using this as a guiding framework, I explore the topic of identity at Heartland University, which became a HSI in 2000 and has since received more than \$15 million in government funding as a HSI to design initiatives that will better provide and serve their students. In my conversations with faculty, staff, and administrators, the following themes emerged that made it difficult for the university to create an environment that was Latinx-serving:

1. Many staff expressed a lack of clarity around the Hispanic Serving label and felt there was a disconnect between the institutional identity and mission. Staff felt the university had not fully developed a cohesive definition of what it meant to be Hispanic serving nor made intentional efforts to support the Latinx student population.
2. Different reasons made developing a definition and embracing the HSI identity in a way that served Latinx students difficult. Much of this stemmed from the members of the university treating Latinx students as part of the greater diverse student body rather than prioritizing them as a distinct population.
3. Staff and faculty were concerned that because of how the university treated the Latinx students, they were creating a campus environment that failed to communicate a sense of support to Latinx students.

In the sections that follow, I provide an overview of Hispanic Serving Institutions, including how it is defined, followed by research on the concerns surrounding the identity and mission. Then I explore the research that has examined the topic of identity and how HSIs mostly fail to support Latinx student populations. Then I explore how the HSI identity operates at HU and unpack each of the points above. I aim to provide insight into the obstacles HU must work through regarding

identity to create a campus climate that serves Latinx students and helps them feel supported as they move through college and foster connections.

Overview of HSIs

The term HSI first appeared in the mid-1980s to identify postsecondary institutions with high Latinx student enrollment but wasn't officially recognized by the federal government until 1992 when HSIs were reauthorized in the Higher Education Act (HEA) of 1965 (HACU 2018). Shortly after, a competitive grant process was created under Title V of the HEA, which gives eligible HSIs access to federal funds to expand the capacity, quality, and educational achievement of Latinx and other low-income students. Under Title V, HSIs must be degree-granting institutions that meet the following criteria (1) they must be accredited and nonprofit; (2) have at least 25% Latinx undergraduate full-time equivalent enrollment; and (3) at least 50 percent of the students enrolled are receiving need-based assistance and a substantial percentage of the students are receiving federal Pell grants (DOE 2018). In 1995, the first cycle of available funding for HSIs under Title V totaled 12 million (HACU 2018); by 2017, that number had increased to 107 million, demonstrating the growing power of HSIs (HACU 2018).

Institutions with high Latinx enrollment that do not hold Title V status may still qualify as HSIs under the Office of Civil Rights in the Department of Education and the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU). For these organizations, HSIs must be accredited, non-profit, public and private institutions where the full-time equivalent enrollment is at least 25% Latinx; though HACU includes full-time and part-time as well as graduate students in their 25%.

According to Excelencia (2017; 2015), a research consortium dedicated to tracking Latinx trends in higher education, the number of universities that qualify as HSIs has exceeded the number of HSIs under Title V. As of 2014, there were 409 HSIs and 160 Title V HSIs. Collectively there are roughly 470 institutions, representing 15% of higher education institutions. They are spread across 19 states as well as Puerto Rico, with emerging HSIs, or institutions that have between 15% and 24% of Latinx enrollment, located in 35 states and the District of Columbia. In the last ten years, the number of HSIs has increased by 78%. In total, HSIs enroll 65% of all Latinx undergraduates or 1.8 million Latinx students. As the number of Latinx students enrolling in colleges continues to climb, the number of HSIs is also expected to grow.

While HSIs have become a staple in higher education, many questions surround what it means for an institution to be Latinx serving and how identity translates to the mission, especially since there are so many kinds of institutions that fall under the Hispanic Serving umbrella. Much of this conversation around the HSI identity stems from the fact that HSIs lack a specific, clearly defined mission and are designated HSI based almost entirely on enrollment of Latinx students. This leads some to question whether these intuitions have a more profound commitment to serving Latinx students or if it is a manufactured identity and would be better labeled Hispanic Enrolling (Garcia 2017; Laden 2001).

Many of these concerns are amplified by the fact that HSIs, unlike Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), were not explicitly established to address the needs of the respective population (Conrad & Gasman 2015). HBCUs and TCUs were created to serve African Americans and Native Americans respectively and are classified as minority-serving institutions under federal legislation. Since

these institutions are defined by law, the number of these institutions will remain unless Congress acts to nominate new universities. HSIs conversely, began their tenure as predominately white institutions, but later become HSIs to reflect the emerging Latinx student population. Thus, HSIs, as a minority-serving institution, do not have the same legal status and are defined strictly by the percentage of Latinx students enrolled (Garcia 2017; Nunez 2017). Further, the fact that the definition is based mainly on Latinx enrollment means that the HSI designation lacks permanency and is consistently in a state of flux. If Latinx student enrollment falls below 25% in any given year, the university is stripped of the label (Conrad & Gasman 2015).

Hispanic Serving or Enrolling: How has the topic of identity been studied?

The question of whether HSIs are committed to serving Latinx students has been examined in different ways, though the body of research is quite limited. Some researchers have pushed back on this idea of a manufactured identity by focusing on common or shared practices across HSIs that suggest Hispanic Serving Institutions are taking their commitment to Latinx populations seriously. Much of this research focuses on effective educational practices found in HSIs and the innovative ways these institutions are creating conditions to support Latinx student engagement and success. This research was discussed in greater detail in the second chapter.

Despite this body of research, others have found many HSIs do not embed the HSI status in their mission statements, which reflects institutional identity. For instance, Contreras and colleagues (2008) in their analysis of 10 Hispanic Serving Institutions, found evidence to suggest a "silence" around the HSIs status. In reviewing the institutional mission statements for the 10 universities, they found no symbolic representation that called attention to being an HSI. The

language, they noted, was only reflected when referring to the institution's programs or special initiatives.

To account for this silence, Contreras et al. (2008) and Nunez et al. (2015) said that it might be too new of an identity, and institutions may still be in the process of developing what it means to be Hispanic serving. They also speculate that institutional leaders may be concerned that embracing the title may cause tension or create stigma for the university because of the negative stereotypes that some attach to Latinx populations. Or, they may not readily or openly embrace the status because they don't want to alienate other student populations at the university.

Researchers have also suggested there are inequitable student outcomes for Latinx students at HSIs and reject the assumption that more Latinx students enrolled in a college equates to increased attention or focus on supporting their needs (Santiago 2008). This research has found Latinx student engagement and satisfaction with college and development at HSIs is marginally better for Latinx than their Latinx peers attending predominately white institutions (Bridges et al. 2008; Contreras et al. 2008; Cuellar 2015; Fosnacht & Nailos 2016; Larid et al. 2007). Additionally, when examining the student outcomes for Latinx at HSIs, they are poor even when compared to their white peers within the HSI. This data suggests that HSIs may not be creating the institutional conditions necessary to indeed serve the Latinx student population and imply a lack of intentionality behind HSI status. Latinx students attending HSIs also do not necessarily graduate at higher rates at HSIs than non-HSIs (Flores & Park 2013, 2015).

This research reveals some of the complexities surrounding HSI identity, and how it can impact the Latinx student experience. However, there is a need for further investigation and explore this question of identity from the eyes of those who staff the university. Further, much of

the research on HSI identity focuses on student outcomes, but not what is happening internally that creates a disconnect between identity and mission. These institutional conversations are essential to examine because how identity is understood by institutional members can directly shape the experience for students, including how students understand the supportive potential of institutional agents and their helping-seeking behaviors. What do they see as the challenges to this label? What might make it challenging to bridge identity and mission? What is needed to become Latinx serving and what are the implications? I explore these questions below.

HSI: Disconnect Between Identity and Mission

Institutional identity is highly variable, but it is crucial that there is a shared and cohesive identity to build a sense of community and unite faculty, staff and students. As a HSI, the identity becomes instrumental in communicating to Latinx students how they will be supported and their needs met. However, when staff were asked to define what it meant to be a Hispanic Serving Institution and how they support the Latinx student population, many struggled to respond. Often, they defaulted to the government definition, which focused on enrollment and funding. Many felt this was problematic and believed the university had not fully developed a concrete understanding of what this designation represented. Mr. Eric Sanchez, who has worked as an academic adviser at HU for more than 10 years said:

I don't think Heartland has truly developed into what it means to be a HSI. We accept the fact that we are an HSI, but not officially define what it is at Heartland. How does that translate to our students?

Mr. Robert Givens, also an academic adviser who has more than 10 years of experience working at the university, elaborated:

Honestly, when we became an HSI, I didn't know what that was. I had never heard this. I didn't know what HSI was, and people started throwing it around, and I said what is that?

But I still don't know exactly what it means to be a HSI. What does that mean? How are we serving the Hispanic population? If we're going to say we are a Hispanic Serving Institution, how? How are we? If you asked me to identify one specific way in which the university is meeting Hispanic needs after we've been designated as an HSI, I could not name one.

This quote captured the complexity many staff expressed as they tried to articulate how the HSI identity connected to the mission of the university and operated at the ground level. As evidenced by the quote, many felt that members of the university acknowledged the designation but did not know how it translated to the students or what it meant at HU. In the absence of a deeper understanding and intentional conversation at the institutional level that unpacks how it translates to serving Latinx students, staff were left to talk about the HSI label in very transactional ways. In doing so, the HSI label operated purely as a descriptor and was viewed as an empty definition. Several individuals described the HSI label like the following:

(all in separate interviews)

LAS Ganas Academic Advisor, Mrs. Araceli Rivera: It only means that we have 30 percent of the student population is Hispanic, that's what it means.

Director of Disability Resource Center, Mr. Eric Mann: Behind the scenes, it's a recruitment tool.

Biology Professor, Dr. Ashley Stone: I think people see it as free money.

Academic Advisor, Mr. Eric Sanchez: I worry that we are using it as an “OK” give me the money.

Part of the reason individuals described it as free money was that they felt the funding awarded to the university as an HSI did not go toward supporting Latinx students. This in turn added to their difficulty in being able to comprehend how identity connected to the mission. For example, Mr. Sanchez, said:

Because of the population of Latino/as in our numbers, HU gets a certain amount of extra money that is supposed to be funneled back into identifying the needs of this population and meeting them. That's my understanding. I don't know that it's actually being funneled back toward a specific purpose. I don't think we are making any special effort toward serving the Hispanic population.

Dr. Geradlo Duarte, as assistant vice president of Student Affairs, similarly said:

It's a Hispanic serving institution which means that it has received the federal designation. It means because we have a certain percentage of students here, it means that we get millions of dollars allocated a certain amount. However, there is no transparency as to where that money has been used. I don't feel like there's some intentional stuff done to actually support those students that I think it gets risky for example there were even a lot of lack of information about what an HSI is here within a Hispanic serving institution.

These hallow definitions of the HSI designation weighed heavily on staff who seemed disappointed by the lack of substance surrounding the HSI label. Without clarity or understanding, staff was left wanting for more. Consequently, they felt the institution was not living up to its potential because the disconnect between identity and mission was ever present and no one knew how the university tried to serve Latinx students. Mrs. Terri Ashkins, who oversees the TRIO Student Support Program at HU said, "We are so proud of the status, but I don't know how that pride is really operationalizing itself into the curriculum, into policy, that sort of thing."

To develop the identity, there was a desire for more intentional dialogue and engagement with members of the university and the surrounding community to explore what the HSI status meant to them. Staff wanted a deeper understanding that accounted for the complexities surrounding the Latinx narrative and represented different voices and perspectives. Together, they wanted to build a definition and understanding of the HSI label that reflected the university and its student base. Dr. Ashley Stone, a biology professor, who felt strongly about making these connections, said:

I don't feel like there are regular conversations about being a HSI. It's not that people look down on it, but I think there could be a lot more to do, to say what does it mean to be a HSI and how we maximize ourselves as an HSI. I wish we would stop and talk more about what that means and that faculty and staff would engage with students and families in the community to be like, 'let's make them think of that.' 'How do we make it?' 'What is that?' And not talk top-down, but bottom-up what that means.

Mrs. Maria Esconteras, the director of the Latino Resource Center, echoed this point:

I think it's really going beyond the designation of the numbers. It's really discussing what [being an HSI] means to our students, what it means to us as faculty and staff of the university. How can we really serve our population best and moving forward from there? I don't know that we have those conversations often.

Faculty and staff wanted to create a definition from the ground up. They desired greater dialogue because they recognized the value inherent in the HSI label and how these conversations would enable them to serve the Latinx population better. They felt greater engagement and intentional dialogue would allow the university to have a stronger purpose as a HSI and allow it to infuse the Latinx identity, culture, and experience into the fabric of the institution.

Through these conversations, they could create a connection between institutional identity and mission because they could promote a campus environment that effectively served and enhanced the college experience for Latinx students both inside and outside the classroom. They each recognized the significance of the HSI label and potential to create a rich and supportive learning environment and a culture of care that catered to the needs of the Latinx population. Mrs. Sarah Hall, the director of the Women's Resource Center, explained:

At its most basic, the HSIs designation is a descriptor. At its most elevated, they are a model for serving previously underserved communities and people. It is about who you hire, what is taught in the courses, [and] creating opportunities to integrate histories, philosophies, and societies into the curriculum.

Throughout their responses and testimonies, the faculty and staff who were interviewed all highlighted in their ways the disconnect they felt between the HSI institutional identity and

mission. They saw endless possibilities to serve the Latinx students in meaningful ways if they were to actively embrace the HSI designation and commit to the purpose of the label beyond enrollment or funding. In the end, they felt Hispanic Serving equated to Hispanic Enrolling. In the next section, I explore some reasons that contributed to the disconnect between identity and mission.

Explaining the Disconnect Between Identity and Mission

Embracing the HSI status and approaching Latinx students with intentionality was difficult for different reasons. One of the most common reasons stemmed from concern over how to balance catering to Latinx students and be inclusive simultaneously. MSIs are generally very diverse institutions; HU is no exception and serves racially, ethnically, and generationally diverse student populations. As an institution that served a spectrum of students, there was great concern from staff and faculty regarding how to operate as a HSI and create a campus environment that supported all students equally. This was a salient concern that many grappled with and may have inadvertently contributed to the disconnect between institutional identity and mission. While some of the literature touched on this concern, it was often discussed as an external worry in terms of how individuals outside of the university may perceive the institution if they openly embraced the status; however, I found that there were internal concerns as well. As a diverse institution, it became difficult for the university to separate their identity as a Minority Serving Institution from a Hispanic Serving Institution. Mr. Mann, the director of the Disability Resource Center, said:

You have to understand HU does not speak from a Latino/as perspective; we speak from a diversity perspective. We simply have too many groups, too many first-generation. African American, Middle Eastern, Indian from Asia, Asian students, Polish students, Serbians, Russians, non-traditional European countries.

When discussing the HSI designation, several expressed that having the status can make it seem that the institution catered more heavily to the Latinx student population over others, which they worried about. There was a fear that having this label projected the image to other university members that Latinx students were given priority. Dr. Paloma Lordes, who worked as an advisor in the Science Center and Support, said:

If we accommodate this one population, what are we doing with the rest? We're an HSI. I get that. Would I like some things to change? Yes. But will that negatively affect other populations as well? It's a very fine balance that I think is going to be really hard to attain.

The reason they felt it would be hard to attain stemmed from a fear that students who were not Latinx would feel less cared for or unsupported, which some staff said they had openly heard. Mrs. Rivera, an academic advisor and instructor in an academic support program for Latinx students, said, "There is a perception that Latino/as students amongst other students of color just have everything, have all the resources." Dr. Janice Wood, who served as the director of Career Services and Advising, similarly said, "I've kind of heard, 'Well this is a HSI, this is only for Hispanic Latino/as populations.'"

Still, some staff was hopeful that there was a way to approach being Hispanic Serving and remain inclusive. While the staff was still trying to figure out what this would look like, part of this conversation they felt should involve greater transparency around the label and what it meant to help students who are not Latinx understand the HSI label and not feel left out. Dr. Juan Chavez, an assistant vice president in student affairs and director of the Cultural Center stated:

A lot of our non-Latino/as students get caught up in the 'oh so you only do stuff for Latino/as students. We're like no, we are a HSI, but we do everything we can for all our students. Can we do things better, yes, but I know potentially that wouldn't go down well. I think if it got more HSI centric or more Latino/as centric it could open up a floodgate.

‘Oh, so you only do these things for them. We make it clear that all students can use those services, but that's what they see, and their perception is their reality.

He continued:

I try to explain what [HSI] means. I try to explain what that Title V means on the grant and that we get the money as a HSI. It doesn't go to Latino/as student individuals. It goes into a pot and goes to everybody. They say why is it called HSIs? Because it's a federal designation. They get caught up in that. We have to debunk a lot of myths to them, so they don't think it's just for Latino/as students.

Another reason the focus on Latinx students and how to best address their needs had not materialized was because some felt that it was hard to identify and piece out what strategies could be applied specifically toward supporting Latinx students. Dr. Gerry Hansen, the director of the Center for Teaching and Learning, said, "How can we better teach Latino/as students when we are still trying to figure out how to teach students in general...we haven't had a good handle on how these things could be applied inside and outside the classroom." Dr. William Garens, also an assistant vice president in Student Affairs, said, "I think the current model of higher is complex that I think it's truly one size fits none meaning it's difficult to generalize what is specifically beneficial for first-generation [college] Latino/as students." Part of this, too, stems from not knowing what Latinx means, as one staff stated. Mrs. Ariel Logan, the director of the Science Center and Support, said, "I don't know what Latino/as is. I mean I know what everyone says. I think it's a catchall political phrase. There's too many people too many cultures too much diversity in this Latino/as. It's kind of like saying western European."

The concerns around supporting all students coupled with not necessarily knowing what supporting Latinx would look like led most staff to create approaches that catered to the general study body. In doing so, they would directly include Latinx students as a large percentage of the student body. In adopting this approach, the focus shifted toward addressing the needs of all

students, as Mr. Mann explained, "I think it's just having those intentional conversations about how to best serve our students and not so much of what type of students we have."

To stay neutral, there was an emphasis on attributes that applied to a broad set of students, independent of race or ethnicity. This included first-generation students (students who immigrated to the US), first-generation college students, and even first-year students; thus, there was a de-emphasis on Latinx and an emphasis on these other student identifiers or characteristics that dictated new initiatives or programs. The Latinx identifier was trumped by these other common denominators, which staff felt this was a more productive approach. Dr. Hansen explained:

I prefer focusing on first-generation college students...I think those are the more important structural issues that we could address if we wanted to. There are structural differences here among first-generation new college students that actually have more potential for successful intervention than if we talk about just Latino/as students or millennials. I don't particularly like those terms they are too broad and too vague for really describing much of anything.

Or as Mr. Mann said:

I think the first year is the more important common denominator. I think first year is kind of the umbrella. First- generation, OK fine. But that's like a first language. I mean if English is your second language you already know that maybe you've got a little extra work to do. Or you've got to focus on certain areas. Whereas if you're the first person in your family to go to college, there is some understanding of I don't know what's going on there and the family too. They may cover it, but it's still here whereas the first-year thing I still think too many people come in thinking that they know and they don't.

Ultimately, some staff felt that the students all needed the same skills, so they did not feel a need to distinguish approaches across racial lines or serve them differently. Mrs. Logan said:

This is a college that serves first-generation anything. Fifty different languages are spoken. But they all eventually need the same tools and skills to be competitive out there it's not a different toolkit for the Latino/as than it is for the student from the Middle East and the Caucasian student. So, in the end, I have to be sensitive to the fact that oh you're here in the US for the first time, and you're not because you have been here several

generations already, but I'm going to give you the same toolkit. I may have to speak a little slower to you because maybe your English competency. I may ask you some questions like how do you and your family go about this. I may ask you some different questions, but ultimately I have to give you the same confidence for you guys to go out there, for these students to go out there and build a life.

Among faculty and staff, these broader approaches emerged as a more productive way to serve the students at the university rather than focusing on Latinx students, despite being a HSI and serving a significant number of Latinx students. While this approach may enable them to cater to a larger student base, the question becomes what is missed by assuming that the experiences of Latinx first-generation college students are comparable to the experiences of other non-Latinx first-generation college students. This would be a question to explore for future research.

Several individuals also referred to the grant language used under Title V as a reason the university failed to focus on Latinx students as an individual population and not just part of the larger student body. Title V, as stated in the opening of the chapter, is a competitive federal grant providing five years of funding to HSIs to expand capacity, quality, and the educational achievement of Latinos and other low-income students (Excelencia 2018; HACU 2018). This language encompasses all students, not just exclusively Latinx students.

As a result, funding was used to support university-wide initiatives, and not necessarily initiatives or programs specifically for Latinx students. This approach to serving all students and lumping Latinx students into the general student body impacted how grant monies were used as well how funding awarded to the university as a HSI was dispersed among programs and initiatives. This language may inadvertently justify focusing less on Latinx students as a standalone population and more as one population among the entire student body. Dr. Duarte, assistant vice president of Student Affairs, said:

Part of the trickiness of the wording of those types of grants is that is supposed to strengthen the institution for everyone. I must say it should not, but at the same time, it becomes a catch-22 given that there's a proportionally higher number of Latino/a freshmen.

And, as a public university that may have a smaller endowment, any funding the university could secure was helpful to maintain the university. Despite getting money as a HSI, the funding goes where it is needed most with the understanding that it will touch Latinx students in some capacity as a significant part of the population. Dr. Duarte said:

I think it's important for us to support all of our students, but I think designating funds for Latino/as initiatives out of this HSI designation is something I have been saying for many years at HU. My understanding is that we don't do that because the university resources are very slim as it is, so we try to put everything in one pot and distribute them out as we see fit which is great. It's good for areas that don't have resources, but I think we would better serve Latino/as students if those funds were earmarked specifically for Latino/as initiatives.

While staff acknowledged why it might operate this way, many expressed a desire to create more programs and initiatives with the funding that would directly benefit or serve Latinx students.

As a result of how the university thought about Latinx students, there were few collective conversations on Latinx and exploring their needs and how this should inform the institutional mission as Hispanic Serving. The desire to focus on all students didn't just operate as an ideology, but in real tangible ways at the ground level. Dr. Daniel Devrees, the vice president of Student Affairs, said:

I don't know that I have seen those conversations around Latino/as students or Latino/as first-generation [college] students specifically...No I don't see specific conversations. I see lots of hallway conversations and different groups having conversations, but not one unified campus focused conversation...just lack of an institutional emphasis on that specifically.

He continued:

As an HSI specifically, we don't specifically talk about Latino/as issues at the President's cabinet...it's not that we refuse to or not that we have never talked about it, it's just that we don't.

There was a silence around Latinx students that became apparent as staff talked about how they served them as a HSI. Even when staff worked in programs that were created by the HSI funding, Latinx students were not at the forefront. Dr. Hansen, director for Teaching and Learning, whose office was created through Title V funds, said of the new faulty programs he designed:

The emphasis there wasn't as much initially in particular on how can we teach better our Latino/as students, the emphasis was on how we can teach better general education classes, and most of the students in the general education classes are Latino/as by default.

In designing policies, members of HU never seemed to start with Latinx students but serviced them as one part of the population. Mr. Mann, in describing this approach, said, "The Latino/as students have a large percentage on campus, we have specialized programs, but we don't make our programs Hispanic servings." Latinx students, consequently, blend in with the larger student population when it comes to discussing strategies, as explained by Dr. Harry Kilbourn, environmental science professor:

I don't come to work every day thinking I'm working at an HSIs. I really come to work thinking okay what am I going to do for my students today? It just happens that this percentage of them are Hispanic.

At HU, staff and faculty struggled to find ways to embrace the HSI status and serve all students equally given the diversity of the institution. In doing so, Latinx students may not have emerged as a distinct population which contributed to less of an intentional focus on this group.

The Missing Pieces: How to Move from Hispanic Enrolling toward Hispanic Serving

The disconnect between identity and mission meant that the campus culture might not have encouraged connections between Latinx students and staff because the university failed to create an environment that was outwardly supportive of this population. Creating more of an environment that was Hispanic Serving and one that would encourage the formation of ties between staff and students, looked different to each staff. Staff felt the university needed to do more to bridge the disconnect between identity and mission and in turn, create an environment that was responsive to the needs of Latinx students and encouraged connections. There were several areas staff identified as needing greater focus and attention; in the absence of these conversations, they worried about the negative impact it had on how students perceived them as supportive and their help-seeking behaviors.

Staff, to begin, saw a direct connection between affirming Latinx culture, identity, and encouraging help-seeking behaviors; they felt creating this campus environment would lead to stronger connections between students and staff. Some staff felt that university should collectively and openly embrace being Hispanic Serving and find ways to infuse Latinx culture and identity into the curriculum. Dr. Alejandra Gomez, the director of a support program specifically for Latinx students, said:

We have to create more of a Latino/as environment. I think if information and knowledge about Latino/as identity and culture was more visible, intentional, and educational, we could have a better understanding and it would create a better climate and students would feel more supported. They would probably feel more encouraged to go and look for support and assistance.

Creating this Latinx environment took shape in different ways. As a HSI, staff felt there should be greater dialogue around what Latinx meant and how this experience may look different from other populations, even within the Latinx community. This is critical because Latinx

encompasses many different cultures and experiences. As noted earlier, some were unsure how to define Latinx or what strategies would be helpful for this specific population. To generate deeper understanding, staff expressed a need to think critically about Latinx subcultures. Mrs. Esconteras, the director of the Latino Resource Center, expands on this by suggesting that it means understanding the complexities that surround the Latinx population to create an inclusive environment. By unpacking the Latinx experience, the university would raise awareness around how the Latinx college experience looked different than other student's college experiences.

[Part of the mission of a HSI should be] understanding what [Latinx] means to students, especially students who are coming from other Latin American countries and have not been in the United States for a very long time. Understanding what that means to what the Latino experience has been in the United States. Understanding where the term Hispanic comes from. Where the term Latino comes from. Understanding that there are many nuances to the Latino community. So understanding all of the dynamics of the entire community and the sub-cultures within the community is something that a HSI really needs to be aware of.

She continued:

We can't clump everybody into the same category. [We have to] work around intersectionality. And understand nuances to the different cultures that we have here, the race-based cultures we have. I wouldn't approach a Korean student the same way I would a Latino/as students or an African student versus an African American student or Palestinian or Moroccan student. They're just so different so finding out what that looks like?

Without dialogue around Latinx students, there was seemingly less understanding around their experiences, their needs, and how to empower, uplift, and support Latinx students. This understanding and collective effort would signal a commitment to Latinx students and create a nurturing environment. Mrs. Rivera, an academic advisor and instructor in an academic support program for Latinx students, said:

We can't cover everything, but understanding and being aware of even how your tone is being interpreted, how your body language is being interpreted. Not becoming an expert

on Mexican culture, but just being welcoming and understand that this student might have come over to the country three years ago and they picked up the language pretty quick for three years and not working on the deficit model, but looking at what they do bring to the table.

Addressing the needs of Latinx student would involve taking a holistic approach, including an exploration of their needs as individuals and not just as students. Dr. Hansen felt this meant engaging in dialogue around supporting Latinx college students as they navigated relationships at home and in their communities. He said:

What I think is largely missing is a concerted approach to this that also gets to the home environment or the communities. I'm not aware of places where we systematically help our Latino/as students talk about what it means [to be in college] and what relationship they now feel they have with their home environment or the communities, with their neighbors whether that's changing and whether it's a good change, [and] how they should be reacting to it.

He believed that supporting them at home aligned with helping them be successful in college and wanted to convey that level of support and understanding to Latinx students at HU. This approach also aligns with affirming and supporting their identity. When students feel cared for, they are more likely to form connections.

Helping them be successful in school meant to others, helping them understand the hidden curriculum. Staff wanted Latinx students to gain soft skills and academic behaviors outside of the classroom that matter for their success. Dr. Janice Wood, director of the Career Center and Advising said:

We need to do a better job of helping our students understand working with a professor, what are office hours, and how to relate to professors. We need to educate more and or be more creative with how we help our Latino/as students, along with all students, to really understand how we operate in this culture.

There also was significant conversation around increasing interactions and support between faculty, staff, and Latinx students. Mrs. Hall, director of the Women's Resource Center, said that

support and assistance is meaningful when faculty and staff not only look like Latinx students but are accessible. This was key to building connections. She said:

We need faculty who look like our students. It's not even so much about having Latino/as faculty and staff with PhDs that have had fantastic careers who are models for students like it is possible you can do that, but those people have to be accessible to the students. The students have to feel like they have support with the faculty and staff that mirror their life experiences.

To further improve the quality of interactions and support Latinx students, many staff and faculty believed training was essential. Trainings were to focus on the HSI status and how being an HSI should inform the way staff and faculty interacted with Latinx students and approach their jobs.

Mrs. Logan, director of the Science Center and Support, said:

I think when we hire staff faculty and staff we need to get training then. If we're a Hispanic Serving Institution, what does that mean and how should that inform how we act? We don't do that. If it's a HSI, how does that inform how they teach? Do they get any special teaching instruction? I mean do they undergo any kind of training or whatever? I don't think so.

But requiring staff to go through training may present its own set of challenges. At HU for instance, where faculty belong to unions, asking them to commit time to additional tasks can be difficult to negotiate. Dr. Denise Frazin, who chairs the first-year writing program, said:

No one goes through any kind of training before they teach here. The thing that always comes up as an issue here is that we're a union-based campus and so how our labor is defined is very much controlled by a big contract. Things can always be offered voluntarily, but to ask them to go would be a violation of contract. It's not only a scheduling matter, but it's hard to have meetings with non-tenured track instructors because it's asking them to spend more time than they are being compensated for.

Additionally, Dr. Hansen, who also runs new faculty orientation said that the culture of higher education could make it hard to persuade faculty to focus on pedagogy or methods for supporting diverse students, including Latinx students, because the system rewards faculty based on

research and scholarship, even at institutions that are teaching colleges like HU, and not necessarily research intensive. He explained:

The major rewards structure for faculty has always been the research and scholarship that they've been doing. That's logically their focus or at least for most of them, which makes it more difficult for an office like this to say, 'could you carve out a little more time also for thinking about how a new approach to teaching?' that is a competition we tend to lose.

The present campus culture at HU, according to the staff, did not reflect these institutional practices or policies and made support for Latinx students feel artificial. They worried about the implications this had for Latinx students and felt it negatively impacted how they understood their supportive potential and help-seeking behaviors. Dr. Lordes, who serves as an advisor in the Science Center and Support said:

I feel like a lot of our students know that we know as staff and faculty that there's a Latino/as presence and were aware of it and then that's the end of it. It's we know you're here let us know if we can help except I don't know if there's any at least from the students' perspective from what I can tell just from having conversations with them of whether there's really a perceived level of support. I think it's sad the faculty and staff I have talked to we all really care about our students. We all really want them to be successful. If we're not communicating that to our students, then I think we need to do a better job of doing so.

Staff felt the lack of dialogue around Latinx students and how to serve them made the HSI designation feel like a taken for granted status, and one they risked losing. Ultimately, there was little about the university that resonated with Latinx students and made them feel supported in ways that drew them to the university. Consequently, staff felt they were at risk of losing Latinx students because they won't they won't form connections to the university or staff. Latinx students won't see within the university a desire or intentionality to serve them and won't feel a sense of support. Mr. Robert Givens, an academic advisor, said, "I think that HU for a long time now has been very welcoming for the Latino/a population. But I think it's accidental. I still feel

like we are taking credit for something that just happened to us." Staff felt that Latinx came to HU for other reasons, and not necessarily because the university was an HSI or openly embraced this identity and mission. Mr. Sanchez, also an academic advisor elaborated:

I think the university relies on the fact that Latino/as students are just going to come here. They are going to come because their uncle and aunt came. They're just going to keep coming, whether they recruit or not. Latino/as will just apply to HU. It's affordable. It's close to the neighborhood. We're a commuter school. I think they rely on that too much, on that, well we don't have to do anything, Latinx will come anyway.

This translated into a fear that because HU was not intentional about developing an HSI identity that demonstrated a commitment to Latinx students, that Latinx students may stop coming to the university altogether and the university will lose it. Mrs. Esconteras said:

Internally we need to be very aware of the fact that we are not really diverse because we are intentionally going out and finding these diverse students...The moment our population drops below a certain level it goes away. So for me, the question becomes we have this privilege because it's very hard to be designated as a HSIs. So now that we have that are we doing everything with what we have and are we doing everything with what we don't have. I think it's a really big deal, but are we just wasting it?

At HU, the disconnect between identity and mission left many feeling the university operated more as Hispanic Enrolling rather than Hispanic Serving. This was problematic because they felt the university had the potential to be more intentional with this identity. As a result of this disconnect, they felt they were unable to create a truly supportive environment that demonstrated to students' campus agents could be "helpers" during times of need. Until changes were implemented in ways staff highlighted, the HSI mission would fail to be realized.

Discussion and Conclusion

Higher education researcher, Vincent Tinto, once wrote, "Access without support is not opportunity," to make the case that it is not enough to provide access to institutions of higher learning, but that we need to supplement access with many support to ensure student success. For

Hispanic Serving Institutions, this maps on to arguments circling whether these institutions are better characterized as Hispanic enrolling or Hispanic serving. To be the latter, HSIs need to figure out not only the supports necessary to ensure Latinx success but how to communicate the supportive potential and build bridges between their campus resources and staff and students.

This chapter brings into question what it means to be an HSI and how universities can fulfill the mission of serving Latinx students. Based on conversations with staff, how Hispanic Serving Institutions are defined is still evolving; and there are lots of complexities that surround this label and how the individuals who comprise an institution understand this identity. HU struggled to conceptualize how being Hispanic Serving operated at the ground level and how the university served Latinx students in their college journeys. This is concerning because part of serving Latinx students involves creating a supportive environment that signals available help and allowing them to build a safety net.

What occurs at the institutional level has ripple effects for the ground level. If the staff are unclear in how the university supports and serves Latinx students, it is possible that Latinx students grapple with the same questions. This may help explain some of the other experiences documented in chapters 2 and 3. Perhaps, if there were more intentional dialogue around the needs of Latinx students, the campus climate would reflect and understanding the resonated with Latinx students and positively shaped their perceptions of the supportive potential of campus agents, this encouraging help-seeking.

However, the inability to create this environment, which has implications for how they understand the supportive potential of those around them, may help explain why outcomes for Latinx college students look comparable to Latinx students attending predominately white

institutions. Even though that university members wanted the Hispanic Serving designation to be more than a reflection of the percentage of Latinx students and demonstrate a commitment to these students, agents across departments and roles struggled to accomplish this.

Exploring what it means to serve Latinx students is a difficult question; but if the answers to this question lead to Latinx students feeling a greater sense of support in an environment that is not only unfamiliar but filled with possible challenges, then it is a question that is worth addressing.

Chapter 5: Research Implications for Sociology and Higher Education

Over the last 20 years, the number of Latinx college students has increased exponentially with research trends projecting continued growth. As the composition of college students continues to diversify, those with a stake in higher education, including those at Hispanic Serving Institutions, need to strategize how to support Latinx students and encourages student engagement.

Students who have higher levels of student engagement, including those who form connections with campus agents, tend to outperform their peers and have higher rates of persistence and graduation. This is important when thinking about Latinx students, given that they have high enrollment, but continue to lag their peers in graduation rates (Fry & Taylor 2013; Kelly et al. 2010). Helping students form connections with campus agents who can help them navigate college may be the missing link. Thus, it is crucial that there are intentional conversations taking place within colleges that communicate to Latinx students the supportive potential of campus agents, the importance of building an on-campus network of support, and how to effectively build these relationships.

Unfortunately, as evidenced by the research, Latinx students who can benefit tremendously from these relationships and the resources they provide, struggle to form connections; and universities may encounter challenges that constrain the ability to communicate the supportive potential of institutional agents to these students.

In the second chapter, I examined the role the college environment played in shaping students' connections to staff. I explored how the college environment operated in myriad ways to promote a culture of independence that led students to feel a need to cope with and manage

challenges related to the college experience solely on their own. Many of these factors reflected standard college practices, policies, or procedures, but socialized students toward embracing independent behavior by shifting greater responsibility and accountability to the student. Additionally, students also felt acting independently in college was preparation for adulthood and key to success post-college, which further encouraged them to manage challenges on their own. These factors made them openly embrace independence as normative behavior as college students and undermined the supportive potential of campus agents. Further, among students who did seek help, many experienced inefficiencies in service delivery that also impacted how they viewed agents as helpers and discouraged their use of available resources. When students had one poor encounter with one campus agent, it often negatively colored their perceptions of other campus agents. The college environment in numerous ways impacted students' views on the available help in the university, making it essential to consider how some colleges embed students into the institutional setting and shape their experiences.

In the third chapter, I used academic advisors as one example to explore the experiences between students and campus staff, and how their interactions shaped students' views on their ability to help during times of need. Through my conversations with students, as well as a sample of academic advisors, it became clear that students perceived the role of academic advisors, including areas of support, in limited ways. The students' narrow understanding of the advisors' role dictated the kinds of questions and topics they addressed during meetings, which undermined the supportive potential of the academic advisors. Though some academic advisors wanted students to be more proactive with their decision-making around classes and majors, some students saw this approach as a lack of support and felt unprepared to make decisions that

would impact their college journeys. The relationship also was strained by some students who dealt with difficult life experiences that compromised their ability to trust academic advisors, even when academic advisors attempted to deepen their connections with the students. This demonstrates the complexity surrounding the relationship dynamics that govern students' interactions with institutional agents.

In the fourth chapter, I again considered the role of the college environment in shaping Latinx students' perceptions of individuals who work in the college but focused on staff and faculty experiences. Though designated Hispanic-Serving, they pointed to a disconnect between institutional identity and mission that affected the university's ability to communicate a sense of support to the Latinx student population. Much of this stemmed from a lack of intentional dialogue surrounding the HSI definition and following institutional policies that would translate to the ground level. As a result, members of the university worried that they disrupted students' desires to lean on them during times of need and ultimately discouraged their help-seeking behaviors.

These findings brought to light some of the individual and institutional factors that shaped how Latinx students understood the supportive potential of campus agents and negatively impacted their help-seeking behaviors. In the sections below, I discuss the implications of these findings for the fields of sociology and higher education.

What do the Findings Reveal about Social Capital?

This research adds value to conversations around social capital. Social capital, as a concept, suggests that there is value inherent in social relationships and networks that generate access to institutional resources and promote status attainment (Dika & Singh 2002; Dominguez

& Watkins 2003). For individuals, social capital can represent social support in the form of ties that help individuals to "get by" or cope, or social leverage, which are ties that help individuals get ahead (Dominguez & Watkins 2003). Ties to institutional agents are particularly advantageous, especially for low-status individuals, because they can act as gatekeepers to resources, opportunities, and knowledge that can help disrupt social reproduction and provide professional and economic benefits. For the Mexican American first-generation college students I interviewed, individuals who worked in the college provided opportunities to diversify their social networks and access social supports that could facilitate their educational advancement and social mobility (Nunez 2009; Tinto 1975).

One way individuals can activate ties and build a social network is through the act of help-seeking, which reflects one's proclivity to resolve problems by leaning on others, including institutional agents, for social support (Stanton-Salazar 2001). However, building a social network via help-seeking is not a natural given and is embedded in power relations that require individuals to navigate a complicated web of social hierarchies (Portes 1998; Bourdieu 2007). Often, the formation of ties is "the product of investment strategies" (Bourdieu 2007:89) that include the skillful art of commanding, negotiating, and managing many diverse and (and sometimes conflicting) social relationships and personalities (Stanton-Salazar et al. 2007). Based on my research, how individuals understand the supportive potential of institutional agents also can be a factor in their decision to activate ties and build their stock of social capital. According to the students' experiences, interactions with institutional agents throughout the first-year of college, and faculty and staff testimonies, perceptions of institutional agents may be influenced by many factors, both at the individual or organizational levels.

At the individual level, one's cultural capital can shape perceptions of those who are meant to help in institutional settings. As noted in the opening chapter, cultural capital refers to ones' cultural background, knowledge, dispositions, and skills that get passed on from one generation to the next (Bourdieu 2007). According to Strayhorn (2012), the differences in the amount and nature of sociocultural capital acquired by Latinx students may limit or expand their opportunity for success in academic settings. Latinx may acquire different forms of sociocultural capital that may or may not be valued or rewarded in school settings. For example, since many Latinx students are first-generation college students, they encountered greater difficulty navigating the bureaucracy of higher education given their unfamiliarity with college.

The students' lack of cultural capital in a college setting or decoding "the rules of the game" constrained their ability to self-advocate and get ahead because they did not know what resources existed on campus or whom they should speak to when concerns surfaced. These factors undermined their views of the available supports from the very individuals who were positioned to support them, not only constraining help-seeking behaviors but limiting their stock of social capital. This suggests that among individuals who may not possess the cultural capital or familiarity with institutional settings (of all kinds), they may struggle to access critical social networks because they may not fully understand the roles of institutional agents, the process involved to access supports or the value to utilizing the resources.

One's habitus also can impact perceptions of institutional agents and the decision to activate ties via help-seeking. All aspects of one's social condition, including race/ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status play a part in the development of habitus and inform how individuals experience the world around them (Bourdieu 2007). In my research, the students' life

and family experiences shaped views of the support individuals who worked in the college could provide and their decision to lean on them during times of need or hardship.

For example, students did not feel comfortable leaning on-campus staff when they encountered challenges often stating trust as a primary concern or a need to keep problems within the family. Students' life experiences, including challenges or struggles, left some feeling a sense of helplessness, even when resources were available, as was the case when students worked with academic advisors. In Bourdieu's scheme, habitus impacts how individuals operate in and regulate one's agency within the larger social structure (Bourdieu 2007). When it comes to creating a social network, it is essential to consider how habitus impacts how individuals interpret institutional agents and the available supports they can provide via help-seeking. Through the concepts of cultural capital and habitus, it is clear how social inequality is perpetuated and impacts tie formation. Many of the students, by the end of their first-year, were unsuccessful in creating a campus support network and increasing their stock of social capital.

While the research focused on barriers to establishing connections between students and campus agents, it is important to note that some students were able to exercise positive help-seeking behaviors, even if they were unsuccessful in accessing the desired resources. Stanton-Salazar (2001) pointed out that institutional agents operate in dual roles as gatekeepers to resources in that they can either provide or deny access to various social supports. Advisors, in their approach to working with the students I interviewed, demonstrated this duality. For example, advisors, in trying to hold students accountable for course and major selection, may have failed to recognize students' needs as first-generation college students. Consequently, the guidance and mentoring advisors provided, at times, did not fully facilitate their success. Often,

students were left to make decisions on their own, which had implications for their college journeys. Still, this demonstrates students could seek the resources; this is a positive finding because it shows that help-seeking orientations are malleable, despite one's life experiences, including their views of campus agents and available supports (Bridges et al. 2008).

The research also supports arguments that building one's social capital also can be driven by the institutional environment. Small (2009) and Salazar (2004) discussed this in their work by demonstrating how organizations can create the context for interactions that can facilitate or constrain access to resources. In my research, the college environment directly shaped how students understood the supportive potential of institutional agents and subsequent help-seeking behaviors. Small (2009) notes that organizational culture and routines can form both social ties and organizational ties, promote trust between parties, and aid in the exchange of resources. Students in my study were socialized by the environment to adopt specific college student behaviors that promoted independence and undermined connections with institutional agents. This fractured trust failed to deepen connections between students and agents and ultimately discouraged help-seeking. Regarding the environment, Stanton-Salazar (2001) also added that inefficiencies in organizational culture could lead to a breakdown of social networks. This was the case for my students who had concerns about accessibility and timeliness and were unable to get the services they needed, even when exercising proactive help-seeking. This resulted in students' negative views of the available supports and led to "unsponsored self-reliance" (252).

Additional research, particularly the body of work on hostile institutional environments adds another dimension to how the environment can impact the way individuals feel about interacting with institutional agents. For instance, Hurtado and Carter (1996) argued that when a

college environment fails to cater to diverse student bodies, such as Latinx, or their participation in organizations, it can lead to departure. Essentially, they believed that even when opportunities are presented to Latinx to get involved in organizations or interact with institutional agents, if the environment does not support their identities, these efforts fall flat.

At HU, there was a disconnect between institutional identity and mission as a Hispanic Serving Institution that affected the university's ability to communicate a sense of support to the Latinx student population. As a result, members of the university worried that they disrupted students' desires to lean on them during times of need. This reveals that institutions can facilitate the creation of networks and accumulation of social capital by creating inclusive spaces that cater to different patrons.

A significant take away from the research is that the accumulation of social capital and process of building one's social network can be compromised in part by the factors that shape how individuals understand the supportive potential of institutional agents. Based on the findings, these factors can stem from both the individual and organizational levels. This research also further demonstrates that the individuals who are in most need of institutional supports struggle to obtain such supports. This is important to reflect on given that many public institutions that exist in society are meant to provide forms of social goods or services. However, it is highly problematic when individuals who are meant to benefit from these services are unable to access the resources and utilize different forms of social supports.

Sociological Significance

This research has clear sociological significance. Student engagement, in the form of connections between students and staff, has not been studied by applying a sociological lens, nor

has a social capital framework been utilized to focus on help-seeking behaviors. Help-seeking behaviors are nuanced and complex, and many factors may impact them; in applying a social capital framework, we are better able to understand what impacts Latinx students' perceptions of institutional agents and their supportive potential when building a campus network of support.

Few qualitative studies explore student engagement, especially how connections are formed between students and staff. Much of the research is quantitative, and those that are qualitative do not approach these questions as the topic of focus nor with intention. Much of it also tends to focus entirely on student connections with faculty, which is important but limited given the number of staff and practitioners who comprise a campus environment and the range of challenges students may encounter. As a result, this research adds more layers to this topic and helps to unpack the motivation behind students' decisions to lean on (or not lean on) campus agents during times of need.

The nature of this project as a longitudinal case study also provides rich insight because it allows us to follow students during a critical year and make sense of the challenges they encounter in real time, as well as the different factors—at the student level and college level—that give meaning to how students form connections. Additionally, collecting and analyzing data from both students and campus agents compliments student engagement literature because it tackles both ends regarding unpacking the student experience while incorporating the college environment. As one site, these testimonies provide insight into how these different factors impact help-seeking behaviors and the ability for Latinx students to form connections with campus agents.

Further, sociological research on higher education has often focused on access and enrollment and retention and graduation, but not necessarily on the experiential core of college life. This area of the college experience is critical because how students move through college has implications not only for retention and graduation but reveals how they experience college (Stevens et al. 2008). Stevens and colleagues also noted that sociologists had performed sufficient research on the experiences of students enrolled in elementary and high schools rather than in college.

Focusing on the educational experiences of Latinx college students also is important because this population continues to grow in the US. Even though immigration has slowed, and fertility rates have declined, the Latinx population continues to rise. As the second largest racial or ethnic group in the US, Latinx play a significant role in the nation's population trends. Overall the US population increased by more than 2.2 million people between 2016-17 with Latinx accounting for 1.1 million or about half (51%) of this growth (Krogstad 2017). Among the Latinx population, Mexicans are the largest subpopulation. The success of the nation in part depends on them and their ability to obtain a college degree, which necessitates greater examination of their educational experiences.

Unfortunately, there is a dearth of research specifically on Mexican American college students including those who are first-generation college students (Salis Reyes and Nora 2012). While immigration research has lead efforts in documenting their incorporation into the US, the need to disaggregate data conducted on the Latinx population remains, particularly in the education sphere. Given the low achievement levels of second-generation Mexican Americans,

performing research on this group is necessary to not only document the barriers that exist, but design interventions to help promote educational attainment (Schneider et al. 2006).

Lastly, many of today's college students or future college students are and will be the children of Mexican immigrants, or the second generation. As a population, the children of immigrants have a significant impact on the social and economic landscapes of the US and their homeland countries since they often have ties to both. As Portes (1997:815) has noted, "the long-term effects of immigration for the host society depend less on the fate of the first-generation immigrants than on their descendants." Although the patterns of adaptation deeply influence the second-generation, issues pertaining to "the continuing dominance of English, the growth of a welfare dependent population, the resilience or disappearance of culturally distinct ethnic enclaves, and the decline or growth of ethnic intermarriages" hinges on the outcomes of immigrant children and grandchildren (815). The children of immigrants, therefore, "represent the most consequential and lasting legacy of the new mass immigration to the United States" (Portes & Rumbaut 2001:22; see also Portes 1997; Mahler & Pessar 2006).

Higher Education Significance

For those invested in higher education policy and practices, additional research on Latinx students is needed as their enrollment in colleges and universities continues to grow. As a college population, Latinx students are understudied; this is concerning given that they are not only underserved in higher education but struggle with retention and graduation rates (Krogstad 2016).

While this dissertation does not address persistence nor graduation rates, increasing levels of student engagement can improve student outcomes, as noted in the research. Accordingly, the

ability of Latinx students to form connections to campus agents can help in this equation and may be the missing link to ensuring they graduate with a degree. As a result, exploring and documenting their experiences is critical to creating the conditions that lead to their success.

Latinx students also are overwhelmingly first-generation college students. Navigating a college environment is difficult for all students, but especially first-generation college students. Given that they have low levels of student engagement, help these students build a strong support network is essential. For these reasons, it is critical that more research is done to study their behaviors in college, including how they form connections, because it may help increase their chances for college success. This research will also help practitioners gain a deeper understanding of how to create bridges between students and staff and foster deeper connections to a university.

Additionally, while Latinx students are overrepresented in HSIs, empirical studies documenting the Latinx experience at HSIs and student engagement among Latinx students are not well studied. Even though HSIs are growing exponentially, there is little research on these institutions. This research fulfills an essential gap since they are the primary postsecondary choice for Latinx students. Moving forward, it is imperative that we continue to document how students navigate these institutional environments and explore how they create the conditions that foster their success by connecting them to faculty and staff.

To help colleges encourage connections, I share recommendations for working with Latinx students, methods for engaging them in meaningful ways, and help facilitate positive help-seeking behaviors.

How to Build Connections

First and foremost, universities need to communicate to students the importance of building a campus network of support. When discussing expectations and demands with students, it is essential to convey that one expectation is to seek help and utilize resources. While it is up to students to recognize their needs, it does not have to fall solely on them to meet their needs. Part of this conversation involves normalizing and affirming help-seeking for students—we all have needs, and it is up to us to make our needs heard. Universities need to let Latinx students know why it matters and is good practice to learn how to self-advocate as a life skill.

Second, universities need to help Latinx students learn and discover resources in meaningful ways. Universities should not merely tell Latinx students about resources, but help them make connections around services provided, understand when and how these resources can be helpful, and how to connect to the people who work in these spaces. Practitioners should aim to clearly define roles and all areas of assistance provided. Part of this may involve taking a holistic approach and letting students know it is acceptable to discuss personal problems when they affect a student's ability to perform in school. Since students had difficulty understanding the roles of academic advisors, practitioners should actively work to demystify roles. To encourage deeper connections to resources, it may be helpful to build personal relationships with students. To accomplish this, practitioners should approach students as individuals and learn details about their lives outside of college. When appropriate, practitioners may elect to share details about their lives as well. This will help create a culture of care and help students feel safe, which can encourage their use of services.

Third, universities need to have collective and intentional dialogue that communicates who students are and their needs to members of the university. Campus faculty and staff should

have access to institutional data that provides details about the student populations and the needs of emerging populations. While requiring campus staff to attend trainings may not be feasible, there are other methods for distributing such critical information. One suggestion could be to create online modules or technology platforms to relay this information to individuals at their convenience. Additionally, institutions that identify as Hispanic Serving or Emerging Hispanic Serving need to engage in critical and intentional conversations around what it means to be Hispanic Serving as well as how status should inform their strategies and the kind of environment they create for enrolled students.

Research Limitations and Directions

To continue this conversation in the hope of facilitating connections between Latinx students and institutional agents, there are new research directions based on this study. First, it is crucial that we continue to disaggregate data on Latinx populations when examining their educational experiences, particularly around student engagement. My dissertation examined one subset of the Latinx population—Mexican Americans. While more research is needed on this group, additional research exploring levels of student engagement among other Latinx populations also is needed. Such studies will help tease out differences across Latinx communities and provide more nuance to how they understand the supportive potential of institutional agents and form connections. It could also be helpful to do research that compares the help-seeking behaviors across different racial and ethnic groups to account for how these student populations experience college and move through higher education. Given the robust discussion coming from institutional agents around first-generation college students' status being more significant than racial identifiers when thinking about how to support them, comparing

Latinx students who are first-generation with Latinx continuing-generation college students may reveal insights that will help education practitioners better support their success and establish connections to resources.

In thinking about populations to continue performing research on to understand better how to establish connections between Latinx students and institutional agents are the institutional agents who comprise a university setting. In my dissertation, I spoke to a spectrum of institutional agents to get at how they create a supportive campus climate, but more research that examines specific institutional agents who work in different spaces in a university—like faculty, academic advisors, student affairs and academic affairs representatives—is key to learning more about the relationship dynamics they have with students. There are many kinds of institutional agents in a university that shape the experience for Latinx students; they all may interact with Latinx students or work in high touch offices where Latinx students may come into frequent contact during their educational journeys. Further, given the disconnect between the institutional agents and Latinx students concerning approaches and how to build connections and trust (as evidenced from academic advisors testimonials), these conversations along with student conversations will get to the core of where the disconnect exists.

Second, there is a need to do more research on student engagement, specifically how Latinx students understand the supportive potential of institutional agents and form connections. Given the range of challenges or obstacles Latinx students may encounter, it is essential to take a holistic approach to examine Latinx students help-seeking behaviors and explore whom they lean on when coping with both academic and personal concerns. Student engagement needs to be pieced out and explored among Latinx students.

Lastly, there is a need to do additional research on HSIs and how they understand the mission of supporting Latinx students, particularly in student engagement and creating the conditions that foster connections between them and institutional agents. HSIs are the primary enrolling body for Latinx students and for that reason play a significant role in their educational experiences and outcomes. Research on HSIs is needed to hold these universities accountable in helping Latinx students be successful in ways that matter, like building connections. Given that HSIs are only going to continue to grow, research needs to follow accordingly.

In creating a research portfolio that examines these areas and continues to build on the body of work available on Latinx students and student engagement practices, universities enrolling Latinx students will better fulfill the mission of serving them. Helping students form connections to institutional agents will serve as a safety net during times of hardship and enable them to feel supported in their college journey.

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