UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCE: LATINX TRANSFER STUDENTS FROM THE APPALACHIAN REGION

by

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ABSTRACT

PORSCHA STREET ELTON. Understanding the experience: Latinx transfer students from the Appalachia region. (Under the direction of DR. ALAN MABE).

Latinx students already constitute the largest minority group of students graduating from the United States secondary school systems and projections show the Latinx population continuing to increase between now and 2036 (WICHE, 2020). Both in the United States overall, and within the Appalachian Region, the increase in the Latinx population and continued projected increase in population, warranted a closer examination as to how these individuals engaged with higher education and ultimately the impact their participation in higher education can have on the economy. Research exists on the deficits of Latinx students and reasons which impact their lack of persistence at the four-year college level, but little literature exists focusing on the assets of these individuals, and little if any literature exists on Latinx students from the Appalachian Region.

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of 6 Latinx students from the Appalachian Region who utilized a two-year institution in the Appalachian Region and then transferred to an urban four-year institution. The participants had to have persisted at the institution for at least two semesters and be in good academic standing. The research study examined the lived experiences of the participants through the theoretical framework of Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth model, examining the various assets these students utilized to help them transition from the two-year institution and persist at the four-year institution. The purpose of this study was to provide a foundation for understanding factors that are important to Latinx students from the Appalachia Region in successfully persisting at a four-year institution after transferring from a two-year institution.

The research was guided by a primary research question (RQ) and three sub questions

(SQ); RQ) What are the lived experiences of first-generation Appalachian Region Latinx students who successfully transfer from a two-year institution to a four-year institution? SQ 1: What are the roles of significant individuals, such as mentors, advisors, teachers, and counselors, in students' lives on their educational journeys? SQ 2: What other factors do these students identify as critical in their successful transition experience? SQ 3: How does a student's community cultural wealth impact their transition experience? Primary data collection was captured through two semi-structured interviews with each participant. These interviews were analyzed, revealing eight themes and sixteen subthemes, all which demonstrate the participant's ability to successfully navigate and persist in higher education. The findings of this study provide possible suggestions and examples of how institutions can better support Latinx students from the Appalachian Region.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family. To my grandmother and *abuela*, Caritena, thank you for always believing in me and for being my first and forever best friend. Thank you for showing me two different worlds and for always taking me on some of life's greatest adventures. Even though you are no longer physically here, you are always with me, and I will love and honor you for all my days. To my incredible husband, Nicholas, and our sweet little girl Camille, you two are such an inspiration to me and I could not have made this journey without you. From your unending love and support, incredible patience, late nights, time apart, and of course our awesome dance parties for writing breaks, you two are my greatest blessings and joy in life. Nicholas, it is an honor to be your wife. Thank you for your love and your steadfast belief in my dreams. I am so grateful every day for the life we have created. And Camille, it is my life's truest joy to be your mother. You have been on this doctoral journey with me your entire life, and I am so grateful to have completed this chapter of life with you every step and sentence of the way. To my siblings, Emma and Jack, I hope you know the sky is the limit and you can do anything you set your mind to. I can't wait to see where life takes you both and know that I am always your biggest champions. To my parents, thank you for encouraging my love for learning, and for letting me have more than a couple flashlights in bed each night, so I could always read "Just one more page." You kindled my love of learning and taught me that although hard work and determination would get me far in life, who I was as a person mattered much more. You made me always remember home, Appalachia, and the community that built and supported me. And to all my family and friends, thank you for your encouragement, love, and support along this incredible journey.

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To the faculty of UNC Charlotte, you have each encouraged, supported, and pushed me to engage with the world in deep and meaningful ways. From the very first class, you met me where I was on my academic and professional journey and encouraged me to push a little further, a little deeper, and to always continue growing. To members of my committee: Dr. Ryan Miller, Dr. Jae Hoon Lim and Dr. Spencer Salas, thank you for walking with me through this process. Your thoughtful feedback, questions, and insights into my research have made me a more reflective and thoughtful researcher and have challenged me to continue reaching for more than I thought was ever possible. And a special thank you to my dissertation Chair, Dr. Alan Mabe, who has been a foundation and to whom I could never repay for his encouragement, wisdom, and belief in my dreams. From the birth of my first child, Camille, to losing loved ones during a global pandemic, like my father-in-law Danny Weaver, to taking a new position, and relocating to a new state, Dr. Mabe has always been a steady presence. His thoughtfulness and kindness always helped me to continue forward, and just when I needed a boost of encouragement most, he would always remind me that whatever I was grappling with on my dissertation would soon pass – if I kept pushing. I am incredibly thankful for Dr. Mabe's genuine support of my research interests, thoughtful questions, and ability to guide me forward. I would not be here today

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

> Our children yearn for educators who will not only provide them with a quality education but an educator who will communicate to them that their culture, language, and backgrounds are valuable assets that will help them achieve success.
>
> -Vanessa Lugo, Denver Studies for International Students at Fairmont

Underrepresented racial and ethnic groups, in particular Latinx students, most frequently access postsecondary education through the utilization of a two-year community college before transferring to a four-year university/college, a type of transfer defined as a vertical transfer (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2020; National Association of College Admission Counseling [NACAC], 2016). With Latinx students constituting approximately a quarter of community college enrollment in the United States and almost 60% of Latinx students attending community college as an initial step in their postsecondary education journey, community colleges serve as the gateway to a baccalaureate degree and beyond (American Association of Community Colleges, 2013; Chronicle of Higher Education, 2012; Shapiro et al., 2017). Further, students in rural areas of the United States attend community colleges at even higher rates due to proximity, open access, and opportunities for partnership with secondary schools, making the rural community college network (with more than 800 campuses across the U.S.) the sector of community colleges in the U.S. with the most growth (Rural Community College Alliance, 2021). This study focused on first-generation Latinx students from the Appalachian Region who transferred from a two-year institution in the Appalachian Region to an urban four-year institution.

Of significance is the necessity to include recent data related to COVID-19 and higher education when accounting for Latinx students. Though currently in its' early reporting stages, the effects of COVID-19 on Latinx students attending two-year institutions and vertically transferring is significant, with a reduction of 6.3% in transfer enrollment since COVID-19 began in the spring of 2020 (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2021). Before COVID-19, the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2021) found that Latinx students were increasing in vertical transfer and demonstrated consistent growth, with +.6% immediately preceding the pandemic; however, prior gains are now trending in the opposite direction.

With community colleges serving as a keystone for Latinx students in furthering their progress toward baccalaureate degree completion, there is cause for concern at the disproportionate percentage of these students who aim to transfer but have yet to be successful in matriculating to a four-year institution and persisting to graduation. With more than 70% of students entering community college intent on vertically transferring, only roughly 10% of these students successfully matriculate (NCES, 2003). Of further concern is that Latinx populations fall behind in achieving baccalaureate degree completion after transferring, with only slightly more than 30% of Latinx students persisting, compared to overall vertical transfer persistence and degree completion of 38% (Kena et al., 2014; Kim, 2011; Pappamihiel & Moreno, 2011).

When considering education as a potential tool for navigating social mobility within the United States, Latinx individuals have historically not been able to utilize their degrees to the same effect as their White or Black counterparts (Darder & Torres, 2015; Hogan & Perrucci, 2020). However, the stark contrast between Latinx individuals earning power without a degree in the United States and those earning a degree is worth examining. The National Center for

Education Statistics (NCES) (2019) compares earnings to educational degree attainment across races/ethnicities. The average annual earnings for Latinx individuals with only a high school diploma are $30,000 (NCES, 2019). Latinx individuals who obtain a two-year degree see a slight increase in overall annual earnings at $34,900; however, the most significant benefit is obtaining at least a baccalaureate degree with annual earnings of $49,400 (NCES, 2019). In understanding the economic benefit that a baccalaureate degree holds for the individual and the United States economy, it is essential to note that individuals identifying as Latinx will become the largest ethnicity in the population (Ortman & Guarneri, 2008). As such, there is an increasing need to understand what has worked for Latinx students who have successfully vertically transferred and have persisted at the four-year institution level (Ortman & Guarneri, 2008). Throughout a typical lifetime, with work entailing 50 years, projected earnings for Latinx individuals with a baccalaureate degree is, on average, approximately $1,000,000 more than Latinx individuals with only a high school diploma (keeping in mind that there is a range of differences depending on the type of work) (Tamborini et al., 2015; NCES, 2019). Even without accounting for an increase in earning power and addressing systemic systems of oppression and inequality, the overall earning gap between completing or not completing a baccalaureate degree is stark. Thus, it is even further impetus for working toward changing the narrative of Latinx higher education achievement.

This chapter provides an overview of Latinx students from the Appalachian Region who begin their higher education journey at a rural, two-year institution and vertically transfer as a means of context to this particular study. The problem statement, research purpose, and research questions described articulate the specific focus of this study. There will be a brief highlighting of the theoretical framework utilized and the specific methodology selected. Following this will

be a discussion of the significance of the study in the greater context of the current body of research and the potential benefits this research can bring. Concluding the chapter is a review of the delimitations and a definition of key terms, which are critical in understanding the specificity of the research study.

Background of the Problem

Latinx students often rely on community colleges as the gateway into higher education, with the goal of vertical transfer and obtaining a baccalaureate degree (Perez & Ceja, 2010). However, despite more than 70% of Latinx students planning to transfer and complete a baccalaureate degree within six years, only 10% of these students are successful (Shapiro et al., 2018). Vertical transfer, though often considered the primary purpose of community colleges by many, becomes more of the exception than the standard (Cohen et al., 2014; Taylor & Jain, 2017). Research focus has often centered on states or regions with large Latinx populations, such as California, Texas, and Arizona (Hispanic Association of College and Universities [HACU], 2018; Martinez & Marquez, 2019); however, there is an increasing Latinx population within rural America and within the Appalachian region that may present even further challenges in vertical transfer, retention, and persistence to degree completion. Students from rural areas generally graduate from a four-year institution at lower rates than non-rural students (A.R.C., 2013). The United States Department of Education (2018) released a report stating that the number of adults 25 years and older who receive baccalaureate degrees from rural areas do so at ten percentage points lower than adults from urban areas. These national urban-rural statistics are also mirrored within the Appalachian region, with the percentage of students who graduate with a baccalaureate degree by the age of 25 or older standing at 23.7% compared to the 30.9% national average, based on data

collected from 2013 to 2017 (A.R.C., 2017c).

Geographic Area

To better understand the geographic profile and region, it is crucial to have a working knowledge of what delineates a rural area from a non-rural area. The United States Census Bureau (2022c; 2016) delineates urban and rural areas based on population, density, land use, and distance; however, for explicitly focusing on population, a metro area is considered 50,000 people or more, while urban clusters range between 2,500 and 50,000 people. The United States Census Bureau (2022c; 2016) delineates that over half of the United States' land is considered rural. When considering the people who live in these rural areas, 20% of the United States population resides in a rural area according to the 2022 Census, an increase from 19% in the 2010 Census (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022c; U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). When considering the people who live in these rural areas, 20% of the United States population, understanding what factors assist or deter students from rural areas from completing a baccalaureate degree is significant for understanding how to better assist the future job economy (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022c; U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). Examining rural and urban differences further, the United States Department of Education (2018) noted significant differences in standardized test scores, lack of resources for students in K-12, and an overall lessened real or perceived access to higher education. Task forces, offices, and stakeholder input are currently being established to determine how to assist students from rural areas, as each area presents unique challenges and circumstances (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Understanding students' experiences in these areas, especially those in rural areas matriculating from a two-year to a four-year institution, is critical to assisting students in graduating with a baccalaureate degree and ensuring a stable and better future economy for

the United States.

Student Persistence and Degree Attainment

This study focuses on first-generation Latinx students from the Appalachian region who vertically transfer from rural Appalachian-based community colleges to a four-year institution and persist at these institutions. This study examines students' persistence, defined by their completion of at least one academic year (two academic semesters) in good academic standing at the four-year institution, to better understand what assets they utilize to persist and what practices are in place that support persistence. These components are explained and connected to demonstrate why this population's unique regional background and personal assets should be studied to better understand Latinx student persistence toward degree completion. Considering that students from rural areas do not complete the same levels of higher education as their more urban-based counterparts, there is a need for further investigation as to what assists rural students in their persistence and achievement of baccalaureate degrees. Further, it is critical to understand the experiences of successful transfer students and determine what assets exist within the students' lives or within the university that supports students to persist and make progress toward degree attainment.

When examining which groups are missing from the degree attainment pathways to higher education, the Latinx community is at the forefront. Over the past several decades, the gap between Latinx degree attainment has widened 11% when compared to their White counterparts (González & Ballysingh, 2012). Further, Latinx individuals seem to fall behind other races and ethnicities when examining baccalaureate degree completion, with approximately 15% of Latinx individuals completing a four-year degree, in comparison to approximately 22% of Black individuals, 33% of White individuals and 54% of Asian

individuals (Ryan & Bauman, 2016).

Latinx Population

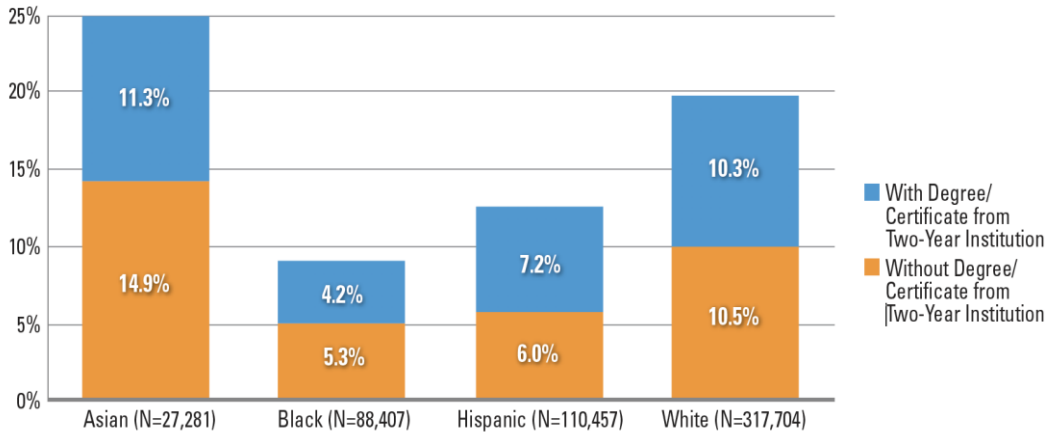
Constituting 18.9% of the United States population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022a), Latinx individuals now comprise the largest minority group in the United States, with trends projecting that Latinx growth will continue. As of 2022, the Latinx population is second only to white non-Hispanics, with Latinx individuals now surpassing 62 million individuals in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022a; Pew Research, 2020a). In the Appalachian Region of the country, Latinx individuals constitute 5% of the population; however, depending on the sub-region of Appalachia, this can be as large as roughly 9%, and within states can be as high as approximately 14% of the population (A.R.C., 2019). While the Latinx population in the Appalachian Region may be lower than the national average, the growth of Latinx populations in the Appalachian region is significant (A.R.C., 2019). 2010-2018 represented the largest minority group growth in the Appalachian region (A.R.C., 2019). Latinx individuals are the largest racial/ethnic minority group within the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022a; Pew Research, 2020a) and have the highest projected growth in the United States for a population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022b; U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). In addition, with the largest population growth within the Appalachian region over eight years (A.R.C., 2019), further researching this population's access to and success in postsecondary education is significant to the health and well-being of the overall country.

Latinx Degree Attainment

In examining Latinx students' attendance at higher education institutions and pursuit of a baccalaureate degree, of those that begin a postsecondary degree at a two-year institution, more than 70% of these students say they plan to transfer and complete a baccalaureate degree

(U.S. Department of Education, 2001). However, despite most Latinx students planning to transfer vertically and complete a four-year degree, less than 10% make the transfer (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). With approximately half of all Latinx students attending a two-year institution compared to only 30% of White students and 36% of African American students, the significance of vertical transfer and persistence to degree completion for Latinx students is critical to understand (Krogstad, 2016). Table 1 demonstrates the completion rate for students within a six-year time frame after they have vertically transferred (Shapiro et al., 2018). While one in four Asian students and one in five White students will complete a baccalaureate after a vertical transfer, only one in ten black students and one in eight Hispanic students will accomplish the same end goal (Shapiro et al., 2018).

Table 1 Completion at Four-Year Institutions for Students Who Started at Two-Year Public Institutions by Race and Ethnicity (N=543,849)*



Rural students, similar to Latinx students' overall participation in postsecondary education, often attend two-year institutions before transitioning to a four-year institution (Byun et al., 2017). In fact, 64% of rural students attend a two-year college at some point in their postsecondary experience; however, out of the 64% of students who attend a two-year college, only 24% of these students move on to a four-year institution (Byun et al., 2017). Considering Byun et al. (2017) findings, there is a significant gap in students transitioning

from a two-year to a four-year institution. Determining how to address this gap is critical in bridging the divide between rural and urban students' baccalaureate achievement. Byun et al. (2011) further examined the differences between rural and non-rural students in achieving a postsecondary degree. They found that the social impact of family and K-12 schools is significant in student aspiration and resilience toward a degree (Byun et al., 2011). In exploring the impact of family and outside influences as crucial to rural student involvement and success in postsecondary education, the theory of cultural wealth is critical to consider when working with the Latinx community (Yosso, 2005).

High Impact Factors in Degree Attainment

Concerning other key factors that impact rural Latinx students, Byun et al. (2011) determined that rural students fall behind their non-rural peers because of socioeconomic status, while Pascarella et al. (2004) noted that status as a first-generation college student significantly impeded postsecondary degree completion. First-generation college students currently constitute a significant proportion of students who enter higher education but fail to complete a degree, with 43% failing to finish (Chen, 2005). Considering that almost half of all Latinx students identify as first-generation college students, there is a need to understand how these students succeed in higher education and to assist Latinx students in completing their degrees (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2018).

While previous studies have examined specific components of rural student higher education achievement (Appalachian Regional Commission, 2017c; Byun et al., 2012; Byun et al., 2017; Hillman, 2016; Hlinka et al., 2015; Koricich et al., 2018; Miller et al., 2007), transfer student success (Allen et al., 2013; Crookston & Hooks, 2012; D'Amico et al., 2014; Dewine et al., 2017; Ellis, 2013; Flaga, 2006; Gard, 2012; Townsend, 1995), and students of

Latinx background (Crisp & Nuñez, 2014; Excelencia in Education, 2019; Felix, 2021; Garcia et al., 2004; González & Ballysingh, 2012; Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005; Pak, 2018; Sáenz et al., 2018), there has been limited research of first-generation Latinx students from the Appalachian Region utilizing a two-year institution and then successfully transferring and continuing at a four-year institution. Two-year college students are disproportionately Latinx, lower socioeconomic status (S.E.S.), and first-generation, and when considering a region, students from rural areas also utilize two-year institutions at disproportionate rates when compared to their urban peers (Koricich et al., 2017; Byun et al., 2011; Byun et al., 2017). While information exists in each sector, this study will add to the existing literature gap concerning the intersectionality of these factors, focusing on Latinx students from lower S.E.S. families, who are first-generation, from a rural area (specifically the Appalachian Region) and who utilize a two-year institution before vertically transferring to a four-year institution (Koricich et al., 2017; Byun et al., 2011; Byun et al., 2017). In addition, this study is unique in its position to generate research results that could aid in rural, first-generation, lower S.E.S., Latinx transfer students' persistence and success, focusing on the assets that these students bring with them and utilize in their educational journey from the two-year to the four-year institutions, as opposed to continuing the deficit narrative that is frequently brought to the forefront (Castro & Cortez, 2017; Leo & Wilcox, 2020; Martin et al., 2018; Ornelas & Sólorzano, 2010). The knowledge gained from this study can serve to aid four-year institutions in understanding ways in which they can best assist these students in transferring and continuing their academic careers successfully on their way to a baccalaureate degree by highlighting the practices in place that are currently assisting these students, as well as creating practices to support these students.

Purpose and Research Questions

This study explores the experiences of first-generation Latinx transfer students from community colleges in the Appalachia Region to four-year institutions. Through this exploration, the lived experiences of these students will potentially provide a foundation for understanding factors that are important to these students in successfully persisting at a four-year institution after transfer from a two-year institution, as determined by the students' successful academic completion of at least two semesters at the four-year institution. This research study centers on the following overarching question, along with three sub-questions:

R.Q.: What are the lived experiences of first-generation Appalachian Region Latinx students who successfully transfer from a two-year institution to a four-year institution?

Sub Question 1: What are the roles of significant individuals, such as mentors, advisors, teachers, and counselors, in students' lives on their educational journeys?

Sub Question 2: What other factors do these students identify as critical in their successful transition experience?

Sub Question 3: How does a student's community cultural wealth impact their transition experience?

Theoretical Framework

Theories surrounding social capital, such as critical race theory, seek to provide individuals historically marginalized in society a platform in which their voices are heard and understood (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Bourdieu, 1977). However, while these theories focus on many marginalized (and often minoritized) groups, individuals from the Latinx community still need to be included in these theories or are incorrectly presumed to have similar experiences to those from other races/ethnicities. As such, this study utilized Yosso's (2005)

community cultural wealth model, which better understands Latinx individuals' experiences from an asset perspective, encompassing aspirational, familial, social, navigational, resistant, linguistic, and cultural capital. Yosso's (2005) model of community cultural wealth focuses on the intersectionality of these forms of capital and presents a holistic depiction of the wealth an individual accumulates throughout their lifetime.

Yosso's (2005) theory of community cultural wealth takes the lens of critical race theory and Bourdieu's social capital (1977) and finds the missing voices of Latinx individuals within these theories and areas of social capital, asserting that the traditional deficit model for races/ethnicities other than White, and the baseline of a White experience as the normative experience, leave the Latinx community entirely out of the conversation of assets and success. Yosso (2005) created a unique community cultural wealth model for Latinx individuals, focusing on the assets these individuals often bring with them through their life experiences; these assets include the following types of social capital: aspirational, linguistic, resistant, navigational, social, familial, and cultural.

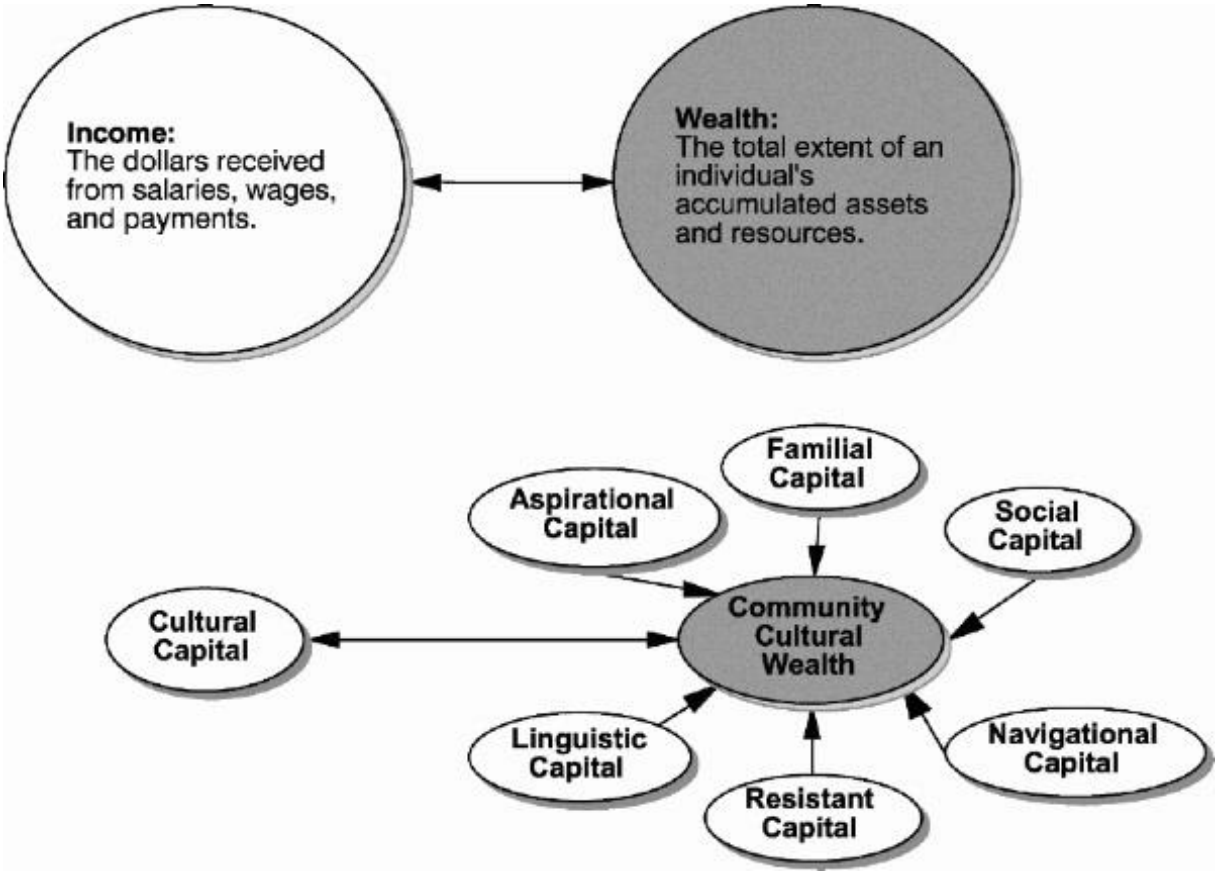
Each sub-component is essential to better understand the foundation for this study's structure, including the interview structure, of semi-structured, for data collection. Community cultural wealth views Latinx students through the assets they carry with them rather than approaching their experiences through a deficit perspective, especially as their journey through higher education may not follow the more traditional norms of social capital (Yosso, 2005).

The sub-components that constitute Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth serve as a unique lens for viewing Latinx student capital. *Aspirational capital* is the ability to aspire to more than one's current circumstances and to genuinely believe in the possibility of

achievement and a better life, despite not having concrete examples in one's own family or greater community (Yosso, 2005). *Linguistic capital* focuses on Latinx students' ability to navigate in multiple languages (Yosso, 2005). Through their experiences within these languages, such as exposure to oral family histories and storytelling, these skillsets are often translatable to the classroom in areas such as visual arts, memorization, and attention to detail (Yosso, 2005). In addition, many students act as the intermediary between their non-English speaking parents and English speakers, further honing skills such as emotional intelligence and social maturity (Yosso, 2005). *Resistant capital* focuses on Latinx individuals pushing against racism and inequality by embracing their uniqueness and self-worth, regardless of what mainstream or the dominant culture tries to determine as worthy (Yosso, 2005). *Navigational capital* focuses on the ability of Latinx individuals to successfully maneuver through a system not designed for individuals of color, systems such as predominately white institutions (PWIs) in higher education, companies, and health care (Yosso, 2005). *Social capital* is the utilization of the community to progress forward, whether for education, employment, or personal reasons (Yosso, 2005). Improving one's situation through networking within one's social community is critical for advancing Latinx individuals (Yosso, 2005). *Familial capital* is a formed identity throughout an individual's life and spans the history and connection within a community (Yosso, 2005). Yosso (2005) discusses how familial capital extends well beyond immediate family to extended and distant family, both alive and deceased, and creates an understanding of the culture within one's community. As Figure 1 displays, community cultural wealth is, at its core, the conglomeration of many forms of capital, which the Latinx community utilizes in navigating and positioning themselves as positively as possible within their unique environments (Yosso, 2005).

Figure 1

Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth Model (as adapted from Oliver and Shapiro, 1995)



While community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) can allow for an understanding of Latinx communities, there is also a need to explore the social and developmental theories present in understanding the differences between rural and non-rural students. Hlinka et al. (2015) interviewed students from an Appalachian Regional Commission rural designated area three times; in high school, beginning of their community college education, and at the end of their community college education; to better determine what students perceived as assisting or inhibiting them from continuing to a four-year institution. Social connections, proper guidelines for navigating the community college, university setting, and transition, and having

clear outcomes in mind were significant in determining whether a student would attend or continue at a two-year and a four-year institution (Hlinka et al., 2015). Hlinka et al. (2015) focused on the importance of addressing rural students as they are the future of these rural community's progress. Without continuing education, these students may lack the skill sets necessary to assist their community's advancement (Hlinka et al., 2015).

Utilizing Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth model to understand and empower Latinx communities serves to frame ways in which higher education can provide a dialogue and space for Latinx communities to demonstrate both the assets and various types of wealth they bring with them to these institutions and how they can enhance and transform these institutions with their social wealth.

Overview of Research Methodology

Considering the nature of the study's research questions is to understand the experiences of the research participants as they have/are navigated/ing their way through higher education, the research questions provide the foundation of the research study using a qualitative research method. Qualitative research seeks to *understand* an individual's experience rather than only research the experience; understanding participant narratives sets qualitative research apart from other types of research (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016).

While there are many different forms of qualitative research, this study utilized a phenomenological research design, as this design researched the lived experiences of individuals (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Phenomenology seeks to study and understand "the world as it is lived, not the world as it is measured, transformed, represented, correlated, categorized, compared, and broken down" (Vagle, 2018, p. 23). As such, this study utilized this approach to understand better the lived experiences of first-generation Latinx students from rural Appalachia and for the

participants' voices to convey the essence and meaning of their journey through higher education.

Within phenomenology, researchers can employ different focus areas; however, for this study, hermeneutical phenomenology was selected as the lens that most clearly aligns with the study's design. Hermeneutical phenomenology allows for the ability to both engage with and provide interpretation to those experiences; "to construct a full interpretive description of some aspect of the lifeworld, and yet to remain aware that lived life is always more complex than any explications of meaning can reveal" (van Manen, 1990, p. 18). While the experiences of the research participants are unique to each individual, collectively, their experiences and voices provide evidence for interpreting key tenants of community cultural wealth and assets these students have utilized in their educational journey.

This research study involved six participants who identified as first-generation Latinx, are from the Appalachian Region of North Carolina, attended a two-year institution in the Appalachian Region of North Carolina, and have completed at least two semesters at a four-year institution after transferring. The participants were also enrolled and actively progressing toward degree completion. All participants were enrolled full-time and were in good academic standing.

Data collection took place through two-hour-long semi-structured interviews. The interviews focused on the topics of *Background*, in particular, the interviewee and their family/friends' connection and relationship with the Appalachian region; *Regional* questions, which focused specifically on how the region influenced their educational choices; *Education: Community College*, focusing on following the interviewee's decision to attend a two-year institution and how they navigated the institution; *Education: Four-Year Institution*, addressing the experiences of the interviewee transferring from the two-year to the four-year; and then

Looking Forward, examining how the interviewee's experiences shape their future trajectories. All interview topics had questions that focused on family, friends, supports, and barriers to try and better understand the participants through a community cultural wealth lens. Semi-structured interviews were utilized as they "incorporate both open-ended and more theoretically driven questions," allowing for both conversations and a particular focus (Galletta & Cross, 2014, p. 45). Member checking was also applied after transcribing interviews, allowing for participant review and any necessary revision(s), increasing trustworthiness and credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Significance of the Study

While Latinx students comprise a large sector of the community college population and thus represent a large pool of individuals who may consider vertical transferring, the actual amount of Latinx students who complete their studies at a community college, successfully vertically transfer, and persist at a four-year institution are severely underrepresented in the literature (Crisp & Nuñez, 2014; Shapiro, 2018; Taylor & Jain, 2017). In conjunction with the absence of research concerning successful vertical transferring of Latinx students, there is a significant absence of research on Latinx students within the Appalachian Region, presenting its unique historical and socioeconomic issues. The literature concerning Latinx vertical transfer is typically looked at through a deficit model (Sólorzano et al., 2005). As is often the case with the literature on people of color, the success of Latinx individuals is minimally researched. This study seeks to address these gaps in the literature – to present research from a positive lens framed through community cultural wealth, focused on the experiences of first-generation Latinx students from the Appalachian Region who successfully vertically transfer.

Through this study, four-year and two-year institutions will have access to information regarding the experiences of these students and what assisted in their retention, persistence, success, acclimation, and adaptation at the two-year and four-year levels. In particular, advisors, faculty, and staff will be able to see what assisted students in their journey through higher education. They can take from this crucial information to implement with other first-generation, rural-based, Latinx students (or similarly minoritized students) moving forward. As a key area of interest, significant figures in students' educational lives, such as advisors, have been identified as critical to student success (Tinto, 2006; Gordon et al., 2008; Allen et al., 2008). Furthermore, Webb et al. (2015) demonstrated the critical role of advising for transfer students, especially first-generation transfer students who are students of color and are from a rural region, in student outcomes. This study further demonstrates the importance of positively and consistently advising and connecting students to the institution, in line with Astin's (1977) discussion of the significance of satisfaction concerning student success in higher education. In addition, the role of faculty and the relationships students develop through working with faculty is also vital in assisting students as these relationships enable "students to find a sense of belonging at their college" (Marine et al., 2020, p. 280). This study will provide practitioners and researchers information they can draw from, as it will contribute to the body of information surrounding areas of success for rural, first-generation Latinx students from the Appalachian region who vertically transfer in pursuit of a baccalaureate degree.

Delimitations

This study took place at one four-year institution and required that the participants had transferred from a rural Appalachian-based two-year institution and completed at least two academic semesters at the four-year institution. The study was also conducted during the

COVID-19 pandemic. The delimitation of a four-year institution was selected as it is one of the closest in proximity to the Appalachian region and is known for its large transfer student population. In addition, the researcher's knowledge of the four-year and two-year institutions allows for a closer examination of how the institution's practices and policies work with and can better support the participant's various forms of cultural wealth.

Regarding this study, there are also assumptions present in the research. The researcher assumes the participants will answer openly and honestly, and the researcher attempts to ensure the participants know they can answer openly and honestly. The interviews will be voluntary; the participant can stop the interviews at any point, and the participant will be able to check interview transcripts for accuracy. There is also an understanding that the COVID-19 pandemic, through its unexpected and unprecedented impact on the entire World, will have altered the experiences of the participants in higher education and through the vertical transfer process. In addition, the study assumes that while each participant's experience is unique to their educational journey, the narratives also collectively contribute to the greater Latinx community and higher education.

Though these delimitations and assumptions are present, this study still presents critical information regarding specific populations and areas within higher education that can enable the higher education community to assist more students in successfully achieving their goals and vision of a baccalaureate degree.

Definitions

The following is an identification of key terms this research study employs. By providing definitions of key terms, there is a common understanding of what these terms mean when utilized in the research study.

- **Appalachian Region** – The Appalachian Region consists of 420 counties across 13 states. These states include Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia (A.R.C., 2020).
- **Appalachian Region of North Carolina**- The Appalachian Region of North Carolina consists of 29 out of the 100 counties constituting the state. These 29 counties are all located in the western and northwestern ends of the state. They include the following counties: Alexander, Alleghany, Ashe, Avery, Buncombe, Burke, Caldwell, Cherokee, Clay, Davie, Forsyth, Graham, Haywood, Henderson, Jackson, McDowell, Macon, Madison, Mitchell, Polk, Rutherford, Stokes, Surry, Swain, Transylvania, Watauga, Wilkes, Yadkin, and Yancey (A.R.C., 2020).
- **Community College**- A community college is also commonly referred to as a two-year institution and most frequently offers certificate and associate degree programs (Associates of Arts A.A., Associates of Science A.S., and Associates of Applied Science A.A.S.). Community colleges typically have open admissions policies and are utilized by individuals who want to complete a certificate, two-year program, or transfer into a four-year institution, commonly referred to as a four-year college or university (Education U.S.A., 2020).
- **Community Cultural Wealth –** Community cultural wealth is the conglomeration of varying forms of social capital for individuals from a minority background. These categories fall most often into six buckets of capital: aspirational capital, linguistic capital, resistant capital, navigational capital, social capital, and familial capital (Yosso, 2005).

- **First-Generation Student-** A first-generation college student is a student who is entering the postsecondary education system with neither parent having completed a four-year baccalaureate degree at the time of the student's entrance into higher education (Ward et al., 2012). However, for this study, the definition also applies to students who may need help understanding how the United States higher education system operates, even if their parents have attained a four-year degree outside the United States.
- **Latinx-** Latinx is a gender-neutral term for individuals from the Latin American region of the World. Latinx, while gender-neutral and increasingly utilized in the LGBTQ+ community as an alternative form of Latina or Latino, is often used interchangeably with Hispanic (Pew Research, 2020b).
- **Phenomenological Study**: A study that investigates the essence and experience of a particular phenomenon, and in particular, how the phenomenon manifests and appears (Vagle, 2018).
- **Transfer Student-** A transfer student is a general term that applies to a student when transferring from one higher education institution to another. For this study, a transfer student refers to a student who has transferred from a two-year institution in the Appalachian Region of N.C. to a four-year institution in N.C.
- **Vertical Transfer –** Vertically transferring refers to a student beginning their postsecondary educational journey at a two-year institution and then transferring "up" to a four-year institution (NACAC, 2016).

Conclusion

Overall, this study will focus on the voices of first-generation Latinx students from the Appalachian Region who vertically transfer from a two-year college to a four-year college in

pursuit of a baccalaureate degree. This study aims to allow the participants' experiences to reveal key assets this community of individuals possesses and utilizes when examined through the lens of community cultural wealth. By better understanding the assets these individuals bring to higher education and how these assets assist in persistence, there is also the ability to address what within the four-year institution's various support mechanisms for students may have aided these students and what may have been absent or ineffective. The introduction in Chapter 1 provides the basic overview of the research study, research questions, methodology, the purpose of the study, and key terms and definitions. In the following chapter, the existing literature surrounding these areas of focus is examined and explored to provide the necessary context and understanding of these focal areas. Following the literature review is an in-depth discussion of the methodology chosen for this research study in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 provides a detailed discussion of the study's findings, including major themes and subthemes, and Chapter 5 discusses interpretations of key findings, conclusions and recommendations.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Chapter two aims to provide an overview of the literature on community colleges and how first-generation Latinx students from rural designated areas in the Appalachian Region of the United States successfully transfer from a two-year institution and complete their education at a four-year institution. The literature serves to examine the history of rural America and, in particular, what makes this subset of the population unique in the context of education as a whole, a focus on the Appalachian Region of the country and how this particular geographical region presents its own unique set of challenges in accessing higher education; how community colleges serve rural communities and often serve as the primary gateway for Latinx, first-generation college students to access more significant educational opportunities, most often outside of their rural communities; and the process of transferring to a four-year institution from a two-year institution, and how these students continue toward degree completion at a four-year institution. In addition, Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth model and the significance of social capital are discussed, as viewing students from an asset perspective is critical in understanding the foundation of the study.

The purpose of this study is to understand the lived experiences of first-generation Appalachian Region Latinx students who successfully transfer from a two-year institution to a four-year institution. Furthermore, within these experiences, the study seeks to understand the role that a student's community cultural wealth has in their vertical transfer and success, the roles significant individuals such as mentors, advisors, teachers, and counselors have in students' lives on their educational journeys and other factors that these students identify as key to their successful postsecondary experiences.

History of Rural America

To understand the issues surrounding education and educational attainment for individuals from rural areas, one must first understand the history of rural areas in North America. As described in Chapter 1, the United States Census Bureau (2022c; 2016) delineates urban and rural areas based on population, density, land use, and distance; however, for explicitly focusing on population, a metro area is considered 50,000 people or more, while urban clusters range between 2,500 and 50,000 people. Anything below 2,500 individuals is considered a rural area (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022c; U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). The United States Census Bureau (2022c; 2016) delineates that over half of the United States' land is considered rural. When considering the people who live in these rural areas, 20% of the United States population resides in a rural area according to the 2022 Census, an increase from 19% in the 2010 Census (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022c; U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). Considering that one in five individuals in America is from a rural area, understanding what factors deter or assist individuals from rural areas in completing a baccalaureate degree is significant in understanding how to assist the future job economy. Of further note, is that the top five states with the most rural populations are, in order: Vermont, Texas, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Ohio, which falls in line with the largest rural populations being located in the south-eastern region of the United States, and in large part within the Appalachian Region (U.S. Census Bureau 2022c)

Examining rural and urban differences further, the United States Department of Education (2018) noted significant differences in standardized test scores, lack of resources for students in K-12, and an overall lessened real or perceived access to higher education. Within this area of the United States, there are "approximately 2,350 rural counties in the United States…and they contain nearly 55 million people, or 21 percent of the nation's population" (Drabenstott, 2001, p. 4). Constituting more than one-fifth of the nation’s population, the

economic anchor of rural communities has shifted drastically throughout the years, moving away from a predominantly local agricultural and manufacturing-based society to one of global industry and now economic uncertainty (Barkley, 1995; Drabenstott, 2001; U.S. Census Bureau, 2016).

During the Civil War, more than 50% of the nation worked on farms; at the start of World War II, approximately 25% of the nation ran farms; however, post-World War II, there was a mass exodus of individuals from agriculture, as changes in the American economy and scientific revolutions altered the farming landscape, leaving approximately 2% of the population managing farms (Drabenstott, 2001). The shift away from full-time agriculture in rural areas led to the rise in manufacturing, with textiles, plants, and coal mining becoming a more prominent focus of rural communities (Low, 2017). Low (2017) describes the significance of manufacturing for rural communities as a large economic driver; however, employment within the sector has declined markedly since the 1950s. Recently, the most significant decline in manufacturing jobs for rural areas was during the recessions in 2001 and 2009, with jobs falling by 30% (Low, 2017). Where farming and agriculture were the first big sustainers of the rural economy, manufacturing was the second largest economic force in rural areas. However, with "71 percent of U.S. counties experience[ing] a decline in manufacturing employment between 2001 and 2015," and the Eastern United States facing the sharpest economic downturn, as this region was the most prominent focus of manufacturing in the U.S., manufacturing has also failed as a sustainable force for rural communities (Low, 2017, p. 4).

While the decline of agriculture, manufacturing, mining, and textiles hit all rural areas, the areas hit hardest were those surrounding what Barkley (1995) describes as the "agricultural heartland, Mississippi Delta, southern Cotton Belt, and mining-and forest-dependent areas in the

West," (p. 1253). Low (2017) points to the financial recessions as significant factors in the economic downturn for rural economies; however, even prior to the recessions, the improvement in trade agreements, transportation, and technologies allowed for globalization and competition within global markets to emerge, forcing rural America to compete on a global scale for "price, quality, service, and delivery," a scene in which rural America could often not effectively compete (Barkley, 1995, p. 1253). Barkley (1995) noted that the United States' largest asset was that of its human population and the ability to develop educated and skilled workers; however, rural areas would face a more difficult time economically with a more skilled-based (rather than labor-based) requirement, as they had experienced decades of poor investment in rural education and had lost most of the skilled workers to more urban environments.

Examining the population demographics of rural areas, the first image that comes to mind is that of a white person of European descent (Lichter, 2012). Media outlets and political statements often categorize hardworking Americans as rural, poor, and white, but this simultaneously ignores the large populations of various races and ethnicities that also populate rural America (Lichter, 2012). Rural America's largest demographic population shift is the large migration of Latinx individuals into these areas (Lichter, 2012). Now operating in a global economy, corporations are connecting rural areas with new migrant populations, causing both the potential for economic and social change and the demise of traditional communities (Lichter, 2012). Data from the latest United States Census conducted in 2020 determined that at 18.9% of the entire U.S. population, Latinx identifying individuals had become the largest racial/ethnic minority population (U.S. Census Bureau 2022a). Both the latest U.S. Census findings in 2020 and the prior census findings in 2010 revealed that Latinx population growth comprised more than 50% of the entire growth in the United States, with the largest region of Latinx growth

residing in the southern and midwestern regions of the country, historically rural areas (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022c; U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). These population shifts are tied in large part to the economy and job market, with a boom in rural Latinx population due in large part to the availability of jobs in "rural industrial restructuring (especially in nondurable manufacturing, which includes food processing) and more generally, to a rapidly globalizing agro-food system" (Lichter, 2012, p. 10). However, despite a significant increase in the Latinx population in rural areas, these individuals are at a major disadvantage when considering socioeconomic mobility and are often much more likely to fall below the poverty level (Kandel et al., 2011).

What then prevents the mainstream story of rural America from being cultivated as a diverse area with many different races and ethnicities? That answer lies mainly within the socioeconomic status and stratification of individuals, as other racial and ethnic groups remain hidden through spatial segregation, segregated neighborhoods, and gentrification often reminiscent of by-gone Jim Crow laws, slavery, colonization, and migration patterns of wealthier individuals (Wilcox et al., 2014; Lichter, 2012; Golding, 2014). Even with the growing diversity in the Latinx population, there appears to be little equality in housing or community space (Lichter, 2012). Lichtner (2012) describes the hotspots of Latinx migration patterns to rural areas as suggestive of enclaves or ghettos, which keep the population removed from others in the area, meaning the assimilation and integration process is highly stunted. With little necessity to interact and integrate with the surrounding community, Latinx immigrants and communities create a sub-culture within the regions in which they live (Lichtner, 2012). In addition, working low-wage and low-skill jobs, such as at meat-packing factories, may also inhibit socioeconomic mobility, keeping Latinx populations further separated from the rest of the rural community (Lichter, 2012). Gentrification of neighborhoods in rural areas is also of concern, as Golding

(2014) describes potentially pushing races and ethnicities to live in specifically designated areas, with little to no possibility of mobility to more desirable neighborhoods because of the steep incline in house prices for more desirable tracts of land, even when these parcels are relatively close to the lower income neighborhoods.

Furthermore, the issue of socioeconomic mobility and segregation in many rural areas brings up the continual cycle of inequality and inequity as schools are often segregated or not given equal resources and investments (Golding, 2014). For example, many businesses are either seasonal or are more frequently run by corporations located in urban areas, keeping the primary wealth outside of the rural communities (Golding, 2014). Of interest when considering gentrification in rural areas is Golding's (2014) study focusing on gentrification across all rural counties in the United States. This study had to remove the Mississippi Delta and Appalachian regions from their study, as these areas suffered from more extreme versions of poverty and skewed the data when included. Kandel et al. (2011) discuss the integration of Latinx individuals and families "in rural America hing[ing] on mechanisms of social and economic mobility, including English-language skills, education, and legal status" (p. 125). However, the threshold for Latinx families in rural America to successfully integrate into the community and thrive in a rural environment is rather bleak, as the likelihood for a Latinx family with a minor in the home to fall below the poverty threshold is significantly higher than in non-rural areas and places families at a disadvantage for all quality of life standards, including primary and secondary education, let alone higher education (Kandel et al., 2011).

Considering the evolution of rural America both socioeconomically and racially, the Appalachian region serves as a focal point for this study in understanding inequalities in educational opportunity and attainment. What exactly makes Appalachia and the Appalachian

region different from the general identification of rural America, and how do the people who live here impact higher education and the narrative about this at-risk population?

Appalachian History and the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC)

A brief history of rural America, particularly the economic challenges the area has faced, and the people who live there, is essential to understand in conjunction with these individuals' educational issues. Moreover, while these issues are prevalent in all of rural America, this study focuses on students from rural designated areas within the Appalachian Region of the United States. The Appalachian Region of the United States consists of parts or all of 13 states, from New York to Mississippi, for a total of 420 counties, 205,000 square miles, and a population exceeding 25 million individuals (Appalachian Regional Commission [ARC], 2010). The three distinct regions within the Appalachian Region are Northern Appalachia, containing the counties/states from New York through portions of West Virginia; this region is the largest in population and urbanization; Central Appalachia, consisting of regions of Kentucky, West Virginia, and Tennessee, is considered to be the most challenged economically and to be the least populated; and Southern Appalachian, containing counties/states starting in Virginia and reaching to Mississippi (Isserman & Rephann, 1995). In its initial development, the Appalachian region mirrored most other developmental regions; however, the differences began early on with more direct transportation routes being utilized in the early 17th century (Barron, 1977). The after-effects of the Civil War led to prior Union soldiers seeking and holding positions of power within these rural Appalachian communities and resulted in leaders withholding funding for economic and social development, resulting in public services such as health and education untouched and undeveloped (Barron, 1977). As separation from the rest of the developing United States grew, the Appalachian region appeared to create its own set of developing rules, with

family becoming a cornerstone of the community rather than education, economics, or commerce (Barron, 1977).

In response to such a large region of the country lagging economically and educationally, The Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) was established in 1965 by President Johnson, who sought to create a system of federalism that raised the Appalachian region from its' chronic issues with poverty, a struggling economy, and a struggling people (Isserman & Rephann, 1995). In 1965, Congress determined that the Appalachian region suffered from a non-stable and flailing economic base because of inadequate and uneven allocations of resources and structure. However, it was determined that the area would thrive when given the proper tools for physical infrastructure and educational resources (Appalachian Regional Development, 2012). Congress revisited the Appalachian Regional Development mandate in 1975 and again in 1998, determining that while there had been progress, this region of the country still lacked the basic requirements of consistent health, educational, and general public services, and with the shift in the workforce to a more global economy, the Appalachian region severely needed assistance in developing human capital through education and technology (Appalachian Regional Development, 2012).

The ARC initially set out two main goals: to create highways that would connect rural areas to the rest of the country and to foster new areas of development and growth through education and industry (Isserman & Rephann, 1995). However, the ARC soon realized the need for a broader set of goals and an agenda to assist individuals in this region more intentionally. Thus, a strategic plan was born to push Appalachia to be as lucrative as more industrialized and urbanized parts of the nation. The three large pillars the strategic plan rests on are to increase jobs and to alleviate the persistently high unemployment and poverty rates, to increase

individuals receiving a postsecondary education (not necessarily a degree, but to receive some form of education at the postsecondary level), and to increase access to quality healthcare in the region (ARC, 2015). Focusing on the second pillar for postsecondary higher education, the current ARC strategic plan spanning from 2022-2026 continues to build upon the prior strategic plan spanning from 2016-2020 focuses on increasing postsecondary education opportunities to create a qualified and responsive workforce (ARC,2022; ARC, 2015). The objectives of the current strategic plan when focusing on postsecondary education seek to foster the growth and success of programs from Pre-K through grade twelve (ARC, 2022). This will allow students to be more academically prepared for the rigor of higher education and to increase career-specific education, so if the economy in Appalachia shifts, the individuals who live in Appalachia will be able to shift as well – finding and maintaining employment in the Appalachia region (ARC, 2022). In addition, the plan seeks to increase the access individuals have to technical skills and digital literacy (ARC, 2022). Of note, the current plan is a major departure from the prior educational focus on science, technology, engineering, arts, and math (STEAM), as the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the gap between Appalachia and the rest of the country regarding technological skills and digital access (ARC, 2022; ARC, 2016).

North Carolina and the Appalachian Region

Looking at the counties within North Carolina that are part of the Appalachian Region, specifically, the counties in North Carolina that fall under the purview of the Appalachian Regional Commission, they are: Alexander, Alleghany, Ashe, Avery, Buncombe, Burke, Caldwell, Cherokee, Clay, Davie, Forsyth, Graham, Haywood, Henderson, Jackson, McDowell, Macon, Madison, Mitchell, Polk, Rutherford, Stokes, Surry, Swain, Transylvania, Watauga, Wilkes, Yadkin, and Yancey (Appalachian Regional Commission [ARC], 2008). Within these

counties are 1,763,434 people according to the most recent U.S. Census in 2022. This is up 3.6% from 1,698,908 people in the U.S. Census in 2010. Educationally, this region is home to 13 community colleges: Tri-County Community College in Cherokee county, Southwestern Community College in Jackson county, Haywood Community College in Haywood County, Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College in Buncombe County, Blue Ridge Community College in Henderson County, Isothermal Community College in Rutherford County, McDowell Community College in McDowell County, Mayland Community College in Mitchell County, Western Piedmont Community College in Burke County, Caldwell Community College and Technical Institute in Caldwell County, Wilkes Community College in Wilkes County, Surry Community College in Surry County, and Forsyth Technical Community College in Forsyth County; four UNC-system higher education institutions: Western Carolina University in Jackson County, The University of North Carolina at Asheville in Buncombe County, Appalachian State University in Watauga County, and Winston-Salem State University (also a Historically Black College and University) in Forsyth County; and 10 other colleges and universities in this region: Brevard College in Transylvania County, Carolina Christian College in Forsyth County, Lees McRae College in Avery County, Mars Hill University in Madison County, Montreat College in Buncombe County, Piedmont International University in Forsyth County, Salem College in Forsyth County, South College Asheville in Buncombe County, Wake Forest University in Forsyth County, and Warren Wilson College in Buncombe County. While this may seem like an initially impressive list, when compared to the rest of the state, the Appalachian Region offers fewer options for higher education. 13 community colleges in the Appalachian Region compared to 45 community colleges across the rest of N.C., four UNC System higher-education institutions in the Appalachian Region compared to 12 in the remainder

of the state, and ten other colleges and universities in the Appalachian Region compared to 52 in the remainder of North Carolina. Overall, "in Appalachian North Carolina, 59.3 percent of adults ages 25 to 44 have some type of postsecondary education, compared to the 63.3 percent in the nation as a whole and the 64.6 percent in non-Appalachian North Carolina" (ARC, 2017, p.5).

Situating North Carolina in a broader context, the ARC examines each state per fiscal year within the context of industry, health disparities, and regional investments. Considering each of these contexts, industry for the fiscal year 2017 saw job growth in the region at an increase of 7.5%; however, non-ARC-designated counties in N.C. saw overall job growth of 11.1% (ARC, 2017). The most significant growth sector focused on utilities, with 31.9% of the growth for ARC counties in NC in 2017 (ARC, 2017). Health disparities found between ARC-designated counties and non-ARC designated counties in N.C. included a significantly higher rate of Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (21% higher), Injury deaths (20% higher), an increase in physically and mentally unhealthy days (3% higher), the prevalence of diabetes (slightly more than 1% higher), depression (roughly 2% higher), suicide incidence (34% higher), poisoning deaths (53% higher), infant mortality (3% higher), teen birth rate (2% higher), and the number of uninsured individuals under the age of 65 (roughly 2% higher) (ARC, 2017). Regarding investments, 2018 saw the investment of close to eight million dollars between education, community and leadership development, economic strategies for businesses, and critical infrastructure (ARC, 2017). Of note is that all of the ARC-designated counties in North Carolina except for one (Buncombe County) are labeled as either Transitional, At-Risk, or Distressed, the three lowest ranking levels on the five-level matrix for county economic designation (ARC, 2022b).

Rural Education

American Community Colleges

Cohen et al. (2014) describes the formation of community colleges in the United States, as a response to the four-year institutions' desire to focus only on research and higher-level thinking rather than to be weighted down with poorly prepared students straight from the secondary school systems. Creating a separate system of colleges as an extension of secondary school systems allowed for what Cohen et al. (2014) describes as the ability "to accept the less-well-prepared students who nonetheless sought further education, and to organize continuing education activities for people of all ages. But it also doomed community colleges to the status of alternative institutions" (p. 7). Community colleges were given the task of training people to meet the country's needs through vocational education and to prepare students to transfer to a four-year institution while also being a hub for the community for recreational education (Cohen et al., 2014). Cohen et al. (2014) defines community colleges as "*any not-for-profit institution regionally accredited to award the associate in art or the associate in science as its highest degree.* That definition includes the comprehensive two-year college as well as technical institutes, both public and private…[and] includes community colleges that collaborate with universities to offer baccalaureate degrees" (p.5). Serving such varied interests has led to many waves of influence within the community college, including political (local, state, and federal), economic and job markets, and the community's citizen interest and involvement. The community college is unique because it serves a specific area and group of individuals, acting as a hub for many communities. President Truman's Commission on Higher Education legitimized the importance and validity of the community college as a central hub that feeds students into four-year institutions or churns out skilled laborers ready to enter the workforce in 1947 (Cohen et al., 2014; Crookston & Hooks, 2012). Since the initial commission, many presidents have

aligned with the importance of the community college, such as President Eisenhower, President Clinton, President Obama, and most recently, President Biden. Each president perhaps had a different end goal in mind. However, each recognized the significance of an educated and employable workforce with the credentials to transition into the demands of an increasingly uncertain and globalized economy.

Rural Community Colleges

American community colleges, founded at the beginning of the twentieth century, opened the educational doors for many students who otherwise would not have had access to higher education (Cohen et al., 2014). One such group of individuals community colleges have particularly impacted are students from rural areas. These individuals often do not have access to any other postsecondary institution within a feasible driving distance (Hillman, 2016). Recognizing the unique challenges that rural community colleges face regarding their role in the community and engaging with a severely at-risk population, the President of Muskingum Technical College in 1989, Lynne Willette, gathered the presidents of all of the community colleges that serviced the 402 counties which constituted the ARC, to discuss how the regions community colleges could "play as intermediaries to address long-term regional economic, social, and cultural challenges, especially in high poverty areas" (Kennamer & Katniss, 2011, p. 237). Taking notice of the work the presidents of the community colleges were doing in the ARC, the Ford Foundation created the Rural Community College Initiative (RCCI) in 1994, combining two of its major divisions – Rural Poverty and Resources and Education and Culture with the intent of taking economically distressed communities and pushing them toward prosperity (Kennamer & Katsinas, 2011). The RCCI focused on only 24 community colleges in the ARC but ensured that community colleges from all regions of the ARC were present in the

study (Kennamer & Katsinas, 2011). Despite geographical differences, the institutions' similarities were astounding, with "a history and culture of poverty, low education rates, low out-migration rates, and very little economic development" (Kennamer & Katsinas, 2011, p. 243). From 1994-2002 the RCCI focused on labeling and developing strategies to assist community colleges in becoming economic engines within their communities (Kennamer & Katsinas, 2011). Overwhelmingly, the colleges reported that the investment in their institutions was more than economics; it focused on bringing awareness and understanding to the unique needs of rural colleges and increasing the rural community college's knowledge and connections with other rural community colleges (Kennamer & Katsinas, 2011).

Further examining rural community colleges and economic impact and opportunity for growth, Crookston and Hooks (2012) examined community colleges in rural designated areas across the entire United States to determine the impact that community colleges have as economic forces within their community. Crookston and Hooks (2012) sectioned off the economic impact into 7-year bands spanning from 1976 to 2004, determining that community colleges had clear positive economic associations in the first two bands from 1977-1983 and 1984-1990, had no impact from 1991-1997, and had a negative impact from 1998-2004. The critical research demonstrates that the fiscal climate affects rural areas more significantly (Crookston & Hooks, 2012). With a decrease in funding available to these community colleges, community colleges have had to resort to significant increases in tuition, essentially stunting the enrollment of their already significantly at-risk population of students (Crookston & Hooks, 2012).

Community colleges located in rural areas have a much larger impact on the immediate community than in urban areas, as the community college in rural areas is a designated hub for

the community. Whether intentional or not, rural community colleges serve as both a catalyst for students to expand their educational and potential employment opportunities as well as serve as part of the identity of the community as a whole, providing services and connections to all individuals in the community (Miller et al., 2007). Miller et al. (2007) describe rural community colleges as serving "as the cultural and community center for their communities," in particular through four sectors of "leisure education programs, cultural enrichment programs, economic development programs, and educational opportunities" (p. 27-28). Through providing different services and opportunities for various community constituents, from the dual enrolled high school student to the young child learning how to swim, to art performance, to the seventy-year-old woman wanting to take ceramic classes, the ability for the rural community college to function in these four various sectors significantly impacts the reach and influence of the college as the college serves to "both link the college with the community and link the individuals in the community" (Miller et al., 2007, p. 30).

Hlinka et al. (2015) focus on students in some of the poorest socioeconomic rural counties in the Appalachia region of Kentucky and how they navigate community college to begin their postsecondary educational career with the end goal of obtaining a baccalaureate degree. Overall, Hlinka et al. (2015) determined that students attending a rural community college are often dealing with juxtapositions between three large areas: needing assistance versus forging their paths, continuing their education versus helping their families, and staying within the community versus leaving the community – all compounding with their fundamental beliefs and support from their families and the need for education as a means to gainful employment. Within the rural setting, students, high school administrators, and high school guidance counselors noted that students often lack the confidence to leave home and move away to a four-

year institution (Hlinka et al., 2015). Considering race within rural communities, Hillman (2016) determined that both communities with larger percentages of White and African American individuals had many postsecondary options within a local geographical distance, at both the two and four-year levels, and both public and private institutions. In contrast, the number and type of postsecondary institutions are limited when examining areas with higher Latinx population density and are often only two-year institutions (Hillman, 2016). Alarmingly, Hillman (2016) demonstrated that Latinx families tend to settle in areas with low educational services, making it difficult for individuals to move to better-served areas. For example, an increase in the Latinx population by a single measurable unit correlates with fewer four-year institutions (public) by almost 85%, as well as fewer selective four-year institutions and private two-year institutions; thus, leaving the easiest (and often only) option for postsecondary education to be at a public two-year institution (Hillman, 2016). Within rural communities, the closest postsecondary institution is often reported as anywhere from 45 minutes to two hours away, meaning students have to move to a new area, often urban, and leave the comforts of their security net – their parents, friends, job, and routine (Morton et al., 2018). Distance is critical to students, with the enrollment of students at the community college level coming almost exclusively from students in a very centralized location, with a sharp decline in enrollment for students living more than 15 miles from the campus and becoming nonexistent any more than 50 miles to campus (Vineyard, 1979). Considering the community college as a particular funnel for students within the community, there may be thought of understanding and comfort with the institution since the students are perhaps familiar with faculty/staff or the campus itself. However, faculty at the community colleges noted that students from their community often needed extra support, in particular in their first year, as they transitioned from high school to college-level academics

(Hlinka et al., 2015). In addition, the faculty felt like there was a process of transition in which the students needed substantial assistance (the faculty labeled it as "coddling") before they could gradually give the students more ownership and freedom of their academics and success ("cutting the apron strings") (Hlinka et al., 2015, p. 7). The second area of interest is students' difficulty with continuing their education in relation to assisting their families (Hlinka et al., 2015). Through both student and faculty data, there is a clear consensus that students feel pushed (in a positive manner) to continue their education; however, it is also abundantly clear that if there is a family need, say, a grandmother falls ill, or a mother develops cancer, then the pull of the family will result in the student forgoing academic work for family concerns, no matter how long or short the duration (Hlinka et al., 2015). The family unit again plays a large role in rural students' path to a higher degree and is often compounded by the fact that most of these students, as in the study conducted by Hlinka et al. (2015), are first-generation college students; "as a result, while students and their families may vocalize the importance of a college education, they often offer only superficial support for behaviors conducive to maintaining a solid GPA, persisting in continuous enrollment, and completing a college degree" (p. 8). Third, Hlinka et al. (2015) investigated the student's differing desire to stay in their local community versus their desire to leave, finding that many students wanted to stay because they felt an innate sense of belonging and connectedness not just to their family and community but to the actual physical place and space of their hometown. However, every student who wanted to stay or return to their hometowns focused their careers on education (K-12) or the medical field (nursing, physician), as these are often the two largest and most reliable drivers in rural communities (Hlinka et al., 2015). Those who wanted to leave the community were often looking for more job opportunities rather than wanting to leave their community (Hlinka et al., 2015). These individuals recognized

that, outside of education and healthcare, little was available to them in the workforce (Hlinka et al., 2015).

Echoing the issues of geographical location and workforce opportunities, Vineyard (1979) describes the issues rural community colleges face in an extensive list ranging from low enrollment in a large geographical area, lack of available jobs for graduates, to lack of exposure to higher education opportunities. The list of issues for rural community colleges Vineyard (1979) provides spans an entire page, expressing the breadth and depth of issues unique to rural community colleges and students; however, the importance of the community college and the impact the community college can have on an area economically and socially cannot be overvalued or overstated. Vineyard (1979) laments the rural community college's falling behind non-rural community colleges and poses the rhetorical question, "has there not indeed been an invisible wall behind which those in rural community colleges have been relegated their place of professional service in the shadows of anonymity" (p. 43). The response is straightforward – resources need to be funneled into these communities and community colleges if actual change and equity for all individuals to access a postsecondary education are to occur.

Online education is also an ever-growing part of rural community college systems that seeks to remove many of the traditional barriers to accessing higher education; however, for rural students, access to online education is not the golden parachute it may initially appear to be (Jaggars, 2014). While students may have access to greater flexibility through online education, including less time commuting and an ability to maintain employment, there are also significant drawbacks such as lessened (whether real or perceived) knowledge and retainment of the course material, digital literacy issues, broadband issues, and limited course interaction (between faculty and students) (Cejda, 2007; Federal Communications Commission, 2019). Rural America faces a

more substantial digital divide than non-rural areas, and as FCC Commissioner Rosenworcel stated: "Too many rural households and tribal areas fear that they may be forever consigned to the wrong side of the digital divide" (Federal Communications Commission, 2019, p. 15). Within North Carolina, COVID-19 and the abrupt shift of many courses to be delivered in a remote-only manner further highlighted the broadband issue many rural residents faced; as a result, The Rural College Broadband Access Project utilized federal dollars allocated during the height of the pandemic to improve the Wi-Fi infrastructure at 20 of its community colleges, including three in the Appalachian Region (N.C. Community Colleges, 2020). While these improvements are imperative for these institutions to maintain enrollment and continued educational progression for students, the Wi-Fi supports only enhance the Wi-Fi on campus and fail to remove the barriers to broadband access students need outside of the institution (N.C. Community Colleges, 2020).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, broadband issues were exacerbated and visible on a national scale, due to remote work and educational instruction. As a result, the Biden-Harris Administration set a goal of providing internet access to everyone across the country through the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, providing $65 billion in expanding broadband access and equity across America (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2021). Within the Appalachian region specifically, the Appalachian Regional Committee (ARC) has focused on a subset of 50 communities spanning across the region that are in critical need of broadband support, providing an additional $6.3 million through an initiative called the Appalachian Initiative for Stronger Economies (ARISE) (ARC, 2023). ARISE will support the major Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act funding, which will begin to be dispersed to communities in late 2023 (ARC, 2023). Specifically, the ARC hopes to give a voice to communities that are often overlooked such as

incredibly remote communities (ARC, 2023). If these communities do not receive broadband infrastructure and support through our government's major investment opportunities, these communities will be left even further behind (ARC, 2023).

Transfer Process

Considering the nearly 70% of all secondary education students who matriculate to a postsecondary institution immediately upon the completion of high school, it is worth noting that "40 percent of these [students] attend a two-year college" (Cohen et al., 2014, p. 4). Students at a community college often face issues transferring to a four-year institution; some barriers have to do with outside commitments such as work and family, physical location and proximity to an institution, and community and cultural values, while other issues have to do with the institutions themselves – poor advising, lack of degree or course transferability, cost, and lack of easily accessible resources. In Tinto's model of student retention, Tinto (1975) holistically focuses on the interaction between the student and the postsecondary environment. Specifically, Tinto (1975) determines that retention of students is based on how integrated the student becomes within the institution, both academically and socially. Failing to retain students at postsecondary institutions, especially when students leave voluntarily, is considered a good barometer of the health of the institution's overall climate (Tinto, 1987).

Considering integration and academic success, advising is essential for students' successful navigation of postsecondary institutions and perhaps is even more critical for students when considering vertical transferring. Gard et al. (2012) studied students in their first semester at a four-year institution who had just transferred from their community college and overwhelmingly found that poor advising was the first issue students brought up as a challenge they had experienced. These students had almost all been poorly advised to the point that they

took additional years to complete their degrees (Gard et al., 2012). When assessing what facilitated students' vertical transferring, students focused on the importance of advisors, particularly university advisors (Gard et al., 2012). In Gard et al. (2012), the significance of advisors was vital, bringing up the quality of advising. Townsend (1995) likewise determined that students who transferred from a community college to a university found the university advisors and staff to be exceptionally helpful while feeling that the community college staff were not as helpful in completing the transfer process overall. However, other studies report advising at the community college and university levels as insufficient and nonbeneficial to transferring students, whether through misinformation or lack of access and quality time to review student concerns (Ellis, 2013; Dewine et al., 2017).

Further still, Allen et al. (2014) analyzed the differences between pre- and post-transfer students regarding their advising experience. They found that overall, students found advising at the university inferior to that at the community college (Allen et al., 2014). Students in this study found that advisors at the university level were not as helpful in navigating the new environment with students, were not helpful in meeting students' expectations or emulating prior positive experiences, and that any mistakes or mishaps on the advisor's part left the student with more severe consequences (Allen et al., 2014).

Overall, advising is critical to student success, and students believe the need for high-quality and accurate advising at both the community college and university levels is essential to aid in successful transfer and degree completion. Allen et al. (2013) assessed students pre- and post-transfer from a community college to a four-year institution and found that students at both stages valued all services advising had to offer. Most importantly, students want advisors to have accurate information available for them and to assist them where they are in their education

journey, whether at the beginning of their path through selecting courses and a degree path or well on their way to completing a degree, students have repeatedly valued accurate information above anything else (Allen et al., 2013). In addition, students valued advisors connecting students with other institutional resources, getting to know the student on a more one-on-one level, and tailoring advising and career-related activities and tools to the student while also providing room for students to grow and take ownership of their particular degree and career path (Allen et al., 2013). D'Amico et al. (2014) also determined the significance of meeting with an advisor, especially early on in transferring to a four-year institution, as this was a "significant positive predictor of second semester GPA and earned hours ratio" (p. 393). With a sample of close to one thousand students, D'Amico et al. (2014) sampled a wide variety of student experiences and backgrounds, including many at-risk students, with almost half of the students being non-traditional age (above 24 years in age), first-generation, and close to 20% of African American students, highlighting the significance of advising for students for whom higher education may already present unnecessary or more complex barriers.

Flaga's (2006) findings point toward the need for advisors to collaborate between community college and university settings, as students who vertically transfer have the largest gap in accurate information and could benefit the most from a collaborative advising network. Collaboration between advisors at the different institutions could potentially alleviate issues such as misinformation, knowledge gaps, and lack of understanding transfer issues; "advisors serve as guides for students within their campus environments. If community college advisors understand both campus environments, they can help students to prepare for the differences they may encounter at the 4-year university" (Flaga, 2006, p. 11). Currently, without collaboration, the expectations of advisors at the four-year institution may not be in alignment with where students

are in their educational journey, and though well-intentioned to push students to be self-guided and self-directed can also lead to angst and frustration with a lack of understanding the new academic environment (DeWine et al., 2017).

Psychosocially, many students confront beliefs from their family and community that often go against that of receiving an education, in particular for students from high-risk backgrounds, such as coming from a low-income family or being a first-generation student or student of color (Gard et al., 2012). Gard et al. (2012) discussed the strain many students felt from their families, noting that many parents – particularly fathers – pushed their children to quit pursuing a degree to work for money. The overarching perspective from the parents was that their children should be working to help support their families rather than pursuing education (Gard et al., 2012).

Preparation for coursework is also of concern for students in transferring. Gard et al. (2012) and Townsend (1995) determined that most students believed the university courses would be significantly more challenging than those at the community college. Considering rigor, many students believed that the quality of students at the university was of a higher caliber than that at the community college, leading to what many students felt was a significant difference in classroom instruction between the community college and the university (Townsend, 1995). The perceived fit of transfer students to a four-year institution regarding academic preparedness has the longest-lasting and most significant effect on the persistence and success of transfer students (D'Amico et al., 2014). Understanding the difference in academic rigor between community colleges and four-year institutions poses a concern that students transferring into a four-year institution will not be as successful as their native peers, also known as transfer shock (Ishitani & McKitrick, 2010). However, some effects of transfer shock could be mitigated with the transfer

student's enrollment full-time in coursework, as Ishitani and McKitrick (2010) determined in an analysis of more than 500 students. Regardless of transfer or native student status, students performed academically similarly when they were full-time; however, transfer students who only attended the institution part-time were at a significantly greater risk of experiencing a decline in academic performance (Ishitani & McKitrick, 2010).

Latinx Students

Latinx populations are estimated to be rapidly growing across every section of the country. When examining high school graduation rates, there is a considerable growth of Latinx students enrolled in public schools across the country; in 1998-1999, there were 270,836 graduating Latinx students (NCES, 2015). Fast-forward to 2012-2013, there were 640,413 graduating high school Latinx students, and the projection for these students in 2025-2026 is 920,630- almost five times the number of students a few decades prior (NCES, 2015). Of note is the growth of Latinx students at an accelerated rate compared to any other ethnicity/race (NCES, 2015).

By 2036 the total population of Latinx individuals graduating from high school will grow to more than 28% across the nation, with a minority-majority becoming a more realistic reality across the nation, as overall, more than 50% of the high school graduating population will be of minority race/ethnicity (Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education [WICHE], 2020). In fact, this shift to a majority-minority across the U.S. graduating from high school is projected to occur by 2025 (Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education [WICHE], 2020). Further, out of any race/ethnicity, Latinx individuals are graduating from high school at a higher percentage than any other traditional minority race/ethnicity (Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education [WICHE], 2020). Despite the population’s large numbers and growing

percentage of the population, when examining data on Latinx individuals in the age band of 24-65 (the largest age band) to examine college-level attainment, Latinx students fall behind every other race/ethnicity that is tracked (WICHE, 2016). When looking across each of the nation's four regions – Midwest, Northeast, South, and West – the Latinx population surpasses that of any other minority race/ethnicity in the graduating public secondary school systems, showing more than a three-fold growth in population in the Midwest, Northeast, and South, and an almost 2% growth in the West (WICHE, 2016). Considering the Southern region's particular growth of Latinx students, projected to total more than 25% of all high school graduates in public schools by 2034, and the push for more students to receive a higher education, research needs to focus on Latinx students to determine what barriers and access points can be improved upon to assist these students in achieving a higher education degree (WICHE, 2016).

Examining the Latinx population, of note is the number of individuals within the total accounted-for population born outside of the United States (NCES, 2010). As of 2007, there were approximately 45.4 million Latinx individuals within the United States, and of those 45.4 million, approximately 44% were non-native to the U.S. (NCES, 2010). NCES (2010) also notes that the subpopulation of children (considered as individuals under 18) non-native to the U.S. but currently living in the U.S. as of 2007 is the highest amongst Latinx individuals, with 49% of all non-native children being of Latinx origin. Within individual households across the United States, levels of poverty affect all individuals; however, the percentage of Latinx children living in poverty in 2007 was 27% and is significantly higher than the average of 18% of children living in poverty (regardless of race/ethnicity) (NCES, 2010). Examining the level of highest education completed, NCES (2010) evaluated parents with a school-aged minor living in the home (6-18 years of age), determining that Latinx mothers had the least amount of educational

attainment, with 39% of Latinx mothers having less than a secondary education and only 11% having a minimum of a baccalaureate degree. These findings placed Latinx mothers as the lowest achieving for both a secondary degree and postsecondary degree when compared to any other racial/ethnic group (NCES, 2010). Latinx fathers within this same subgroup were also of the lowest achieving racial/ethnic group, with 41% not having completed secondary education and only 8% having completed at least a baccalaureate degree (NCES, 2010). With the actual and projected growth of the Latinx population and the lack of resources these individuals have to draw on, whether financial, social, or cultural, the statistics point to a severe and growing lack of education among this population. Understanding potential resources to assist Latinx students will be critical in assisting more individuals to complete a secondary and postsecondary degree.

Latinx Students in Appalachia

As context, it is important to know about the population of the research study. Latinx is an all-encompassing term that applies to all individuals from the Latin American regions of the world and is often used interchangeably with the term Hispanic. While having an all-encompassing term is beneficial, it does not allow for a deeper understanding of individual cultures and communities. Someone from Mexico will have a very different culture than someone from Guatemala, Costa Rica, or Peru. Ancestry will differ within each region, but for the focus of this study and the Appalachian Region within North Carolina, more than half of Latinx individuals identify as Mexican, almost a quarter are of Central American ancestry – such as Guatemalan, El Salvadoran, etc., and slightly more than 10% identify as Puerto Rican (UNC, 2020). Participants' ancestry ranged but were reflective of the state's Latinx makeup.

Latinx Student Success and Shifting Frameworks

Community cultural wealth is a framework developed by Yosso (2005) in response to a perceived lack of frameworks that benefited underrepresented students, particularly students of color. The original, or seminal, framework, especially for student persistence or success, within postsecondary education is often attributed back to Tinto (1975). Tinto (1975) discusses that students persist in postsecondary education when they are both academically and socially integrated at the institution; a student may be successful in one area, but if they are not successful in both areas, they are at an increased rate of dropout. Tinto (1975) acknowledges additional attributes impacting a student's success rate, including demographic, secondary school experiences, and family expectations. However, Tinto (1975) states that these attributes, while impacting commitment to the institution, are not the primary driver for student success, but rather that "it is the individual's integration into the academic and social systems of the college that most directly relates to his continuance in that college," (p. 96). This framework places the onus on students to adapt to the institution and surrounding environment while placing no responsibility on the institution to assist students in their academic and social integration. As a result, this structure potentially places more obstacles in the path of minority students, as postsecondary institutions were established with the dominant White culture in mind.

More recently, Tinto (2012) expanded research into further reasons students may not persist or succeed in postsecondary education; however, many researchers have criticized the work stating it was not genuinely encompassing of minority students' experiences, in particular students of color, and should be revised (Guiffrida, 2006; Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005; DeVries et al., 2020).

Students over the past five decades since Tinto's original student success framework (1975) have shifted in their characteristics and often, no longer fit the "traditional" college

student model. This model has been very white-centered, with students coming to a four-year straight from high school, from middle or upper-class homes who had parents able to support students' education (Bahrainwala, 2020). Students did not need to work to support themselves or their families, and these students most often lived on campus (Bahrainwala, 2020). This traditional student model no longer represents most students on campus; however, campus policies and practices have not shifted to accommodate a more non-traditional student base (Bahrainwala, 2020). Latinx students frequently constitute part of the more non-traditional student base, and when considering Latinx students today, they are much more likely than any of their peers to be first-generation, with 44% identifying as first-generation, in comparison to 34% Black, 29% Asian, and 22% White students (Excelencia in Education, 2019). Latinx students are also much more likely to attend a 2-year institution, enroll part-time, work, and live off campus (Excelencia in Education, 2019). Campuses should then readjust their framework, policies, and models based on the students entering their institutions. The current malalignment of the student population does not enable these students to thrive and perform at the height of their abilities. A realignment of postsecondary institutions to close the "achievement gap" benefits the entire campus and has been shown to help all students succeed (Flono, 2015; Yosso et al., 2009).

Summary

Latinx students are increasing in their population within the United States and are projected to become the largest minority population within the next few decades. Frequently, Latinx students account for large percentages of total enrollment within two-year colleges, yet these students have lower completion or transfer rates than their non-Latinx peers. The literature reviewed in this chapter served to outline the history and contextualization of Latinx students within the United States, Appalachian Region, the transfer process for these students, and how

Latinx student success stems from a reframing of current institutional policies and practices to focusing on the assets and social wealth they bring with them into postsecondary education. The current literature discusses the need to increase access to Latinx students when considering postsecondary education; however, there is a gap in the literature concerning how Latinx students utilize their social capital and community cultural wealth through navigating the postsecondary education system, including vertically transferring, and persist while in college.

The traditional framework situates the students as the only active entity in navigating their experiences within higher education, situating the institutions as static entities that can do nothing to assist students with "deficits." However, within this study, the strengths students bring to postsecondary institutions are highlighted, demonstrating how institutions can assist students through engaging with and utilizing their assets. Institutional engagement and support could create a shared responsibility and synergy between the student and institution, assisting students in their path toward degree attainment.

The following chapter will describe and outline the methodology for the research study, which was utilized when investigating how students successfully navigate through vertical transfer and persist at the receiving institution.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Despite the increase in Latinx students in the United States, and the high percentage of Latinx students who utilize a two-year institution before vertically transferring to a four-year institution, there is limited research on the experiences of Latinx students who successfully matriculate to the four-year institution and the assets these students bring with them (Yosso, 2005), especially when considering this population from the rural Appalachian region (Koricich et al., 2017; Byun et al., 2011; Byun et al., 2017). Rather, the literature on Latinx students focuses on the deficits that these students bring with them to postsecondary institutions and are often anchored to students having inherent character flaws, providing institutions with rationales for student's poor performance or lack of success (Castro & Cortez, 2017; Leo & Wilcox, 2020; Martin et al., 2018; Ornelas & Sólorzano, 2010). Through viewing Latinx students most often through a deficit lens, institutions miss the opportunity to see the various assets these students bring with them to college and, thus, miss ways to support and promote the success of Latinx students.

As discussed in Chapter Two, Latinx students from the Appalachian region utilizing a two-year institution before matriculating to a four-year institution face challenges when considering entry to higher education, retention, persistence, and completion of a degree (Byun et al., 2017; Ortman & Guarneri, 2008; Shapiro et al., 2018). Latinx individuals constitute a growing percentage of the United States population, with Latinx individuals projected to more than double by 2036 (WICHE, 2020). Latinx students constitute the largest percentage of non-white students within the United States community college system, at 27% in 2021 (American Association of Community Colleges [AACC], 2021). However, as Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth model maintains, the educational structure within the United States serves to

uphold the dominant culture while other cultures, such as the Latinx community, are often marginalized and overlooked within the postsecondary educational framework.

Understanding that Latinx communities were not thought of when the postsecondary structures were put into place, this study seeks to identify the practices in place that affirm and support these students through their postsecondary journey as well as areas in which these student's assets (through a community cultural wealth lens) could be further supported in attempting to realign postsecondary practices to assist in student success (Garcia et al., 2004; Felix, 2021; Yosso, 2005). In addition, this study seeks to understand the experiences of Latinx students and how the assets they bring with them assist in their persistence (Sáenz et al., 2018) at the four-year institution after transferring from the two-year institution (Felix, 2021). In addition to contributing to the developing body of literature on Latinx transfer students, the experiences shared, and knowledge learned from this study can inform institutions of how they can better assist and support Appalachian-based Latinx transfer students on their higher education journey. This chapter will provide the methodology and design selected for the research study by reviewing the research questions, the researcher's role and subjectivity, the protection of human subjects, and ethical considerations. The sampling criteria implemented for data collection, instrumentation, and data analysis procedures are detailed. Further considerations of trustworthiness and limitations are also discussed in the following sections.

Research Questions

This qualitative study aims to understand the experiences of first-generation Latinx students from the Appalachian region as they have transitioned to a four-year institution from a rural, two-year institution. One overarching research question, along with three sub-questions, guided the design and implementation of this qualitative, phenomenological research study on

how the experiences of Latinx first-generation students from the Appalachian region and their community cultural wealth impact their ability to successfully navigate and persist at an urban four-year institution when transferring from a rural two-year institution.

RQ: What are the lived experiences of first-generation Appalachian Region Latinx students who successfully transfer from a two-year institution to a four-year institution?

Sub Question 1: What are the roles of significant individuals, such as mentors, advisors, teachers, and counselors, in students' lives on their educational journeys?

Sub Question 2: What other factors do these students identify as critical in their successful transition experience?

Sub Question 3: How does a student's community cultural wealth impact their transition experience?

Research Design

Phenomenology was selected as the type of qualitative research utilized, as phenomenology can convey the experiences and events of the world from individual perspectives through an in-depth analysis of individuals' lived experiences, and thus frequently entails in-depth interviews to accurately capture a particular phenomenon (van Manen, 1990; Patton, 2015). Researching and understanding the lived experiences through a phenomenological study also allows for the participants' experiences to become the focal point of the study, grounding the data in lived experiences and allowing the researcher to construct meaning from these experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2016; van Manen, 1990).

More specifically, this study utilized a hermeneutical phenomenological design (van Manen, 1990; Heidegger 1953/1996) to better understand and interpret transfer experiences from Latinx individuals from the Appalachian Region at a single institution. The focus on culture,

personal history, background, and context, within hermeneutic phenomenology, coupled with the researcher's focus on community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), allowed the researcher to gather both data surrounding the phenomenon and individuals' unique experiences (the part) and interpret the experiences/phenomenon, to produce a more comprehensive description of the phenomenon and essence of the experiences (the whole) (Heidegger, 1927/1962; Laverty, 2003). A critical focus of hermeneutic phenomenology is that historicality impacts understanding, as does the hermeneutic loop, which allows for both checkpoints and feedback to co-construct reality between researcher and participants (Heidegger, 1927/1962).

Subjectivity and Researcher Role

The influence and desire to research Latinx first-generation college students from the Appalachian Region who utilize a rural two-year institution and then vertically transfer comes from my personal and professional experiences. As a first-generation Latinx and White female who grew up in the Appalachian Region of the country, under the care of my Latinx *abuela* for much of my childhood and adolescence, I recognize the barriers that are present based on location, region, language, cultural background, and family resources. When beginning my collegiate journey, I had no one to turn to for assistance. It felt like there was a hidden curriculum I wasn't privy to understanding based on my background, including my location, region, cultural background, and family resources.

My interest in researching this population, originating from personal experience, is also that of a shared experience. While I managed (with a significant amount of luck, assistance, and tenacity) to make it through my undergraduate career, I also recognize that many people in my community do not make the journey to begin or complete a higher education degree. I always knew there were "people like me," but I never saw or knew them; in other words, I always felt,

and sometimes still feel, lost, alone, and isolated. I wanted to conduct this research so these seemingly silent voices could be heard, to serve as a resource for institutions to assist Latinx students, and to recognize student assets that benefit students in degree completion and the institution in retention and fostering authentic connections between student, community, and institution.

Considering Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth model and my own experiences raised in a Latinx home and environment, I can distinctly remember utilizing and witnessing each of the sectors of the community cultural wealth model. The two that come to mind most clearly are aspirational and familial capital. I have always believed that I would achieve a better life than my family and could eventually help provide for my family, even though I didn't have many concrete examples that I could model my life after. I knew that education would be essential for me. I believed that if I worked hard, I would be able to meet my basic needs, such as food and shelter, and that I could give my future children a better life and start to perpetuate generational wealth, even to future generations I will not be here to meet. Secondly, familial capital has shaped me into the person I am today, whom I will become, and whom I will be remembered as after I am gone. Family isn't only nuclear and immediate family; it is those who have gone before you, those who will come after you, and those who are living now. Family is expansive, and when you are family, you are always celebrated, welcomed, encouraged, disciplined, and reminded of who you are. Having a large family that spans generations reminds you to never lose sight of the sacrifices your ancestors made so that you can enjoy life now. It also reminds you of your duty to your family and to diligently work to repay what you have been given.

Professionally, my interest in this particular population is influenced by my positions at two four-year institutions, two based in the Appalachian Region and one in an urban region. My positions within these institutions as an advisor, mentor, coordinator, and director have allowed me to interact with thousands of students, from advising and mentoring first-generation students, transfer students, scholarship recipients, and students in every academic major a campus offers. My exposure to students has been incredibly wide; however, the individuals I have engaged with are rarely from the Latinx community. The individuals that I have had the privilege of interacting with from the Latinx community, regardless of age, sex, year at the institution, or where they were in their progress toward degree completion, all revealed many of the same challenges and frustrations when attempting to navigate the four-year institution after a transfer, especially in reference to the malalignment of assets and experiences the students brought with them and the expected or more typical assets and experiences of their peers. Further, a common theme I have observed in professional interactions with this population of students is the students' belief that their accomplishments and persistence are a reflection of their luck rather than individual merit. While I recognize that each individual's story is unique, the repetition of similar experiences and stories has also influenced and guided the beliefs I have carried into this research.

Understanding that this research is also part of who I am, I had to be careful of my own experiences clouding my judgment or pushing me to look for things that may or may not be there, potentially blinding me to other critical findings. I recognize that this research study is a co-construction of the participants' experiences and narratives. Through my own experiences I was able to engage with the participants in a way that produced a more powerful and deeper statement of their experiences. Co-constructing the narrative between researcher and participants allowed for hermenutical phenomenology to continue its' natural cycle of engagement,

reflection, and development, ensuring that I allowed the true essence of what I was researching to come to the forefront rather than trying to make the data align with theory, or with my presumptions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I also acknowledge that while I allowed the data and the participants' experiences to speak for themselves, my unique background could have influenced what I choose to share from the participants and my interpretation and explanation of their experiences.

Sampling

Setting

The setting for this research study is a large, urban, public research-intensive four-year institution located in the Southern part of the United States, and for the purposes of this study, will be referred to as "Urban University" or "UU." UU was selected as the institution for the research study for several reasons; for one, this particular institution is the closest public urban institution to the Appalachian region, which may lend itself to being an ideal institution to attend as an individual's familial responsibilities may require they remain closer to home. Secondly, this institution has a significant transfer population. Finally, the institution is a large institution with over 30,000 students; this population is also noted for its diversity, access, and work with the Latinx community. Latinx students at UU currently constitute 10% of the student population. Based on its student demographics, I was able to recruit eligible and willing participants at UU. UU has published in its campus profile that it is the leading institution in the state for transfer students, has a significant number of non-traditional aged students aged 25 and above (24.5%), roughly 7% of students identifying as first-generation, and 37% of students identify as a racial/ethnic minority. In addition, the campus has majors in more than 150 areas of study and bolsters a large and vibrant academic community. The diversity in degree paths was reflected in

some of the participants' paths, particularly the male participants, allowing for a more comprehensive representation of the assets of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) regarding the first-generation Latinx population when vertically transferring from the Appalachian region to an urban region. UU was also selected for this study as the researcher is familiar with the institution and has existing institutional knowledge of the structures and systems at UU, allowing for more straightforward navigation and understanding when conducting the study, as the researcher could better understand the experiences of the participants. Further, utilizing a particular four-year institution allows the researcher to focus on the participants' experiences and common context at UU rather than trying to determine or understand the impact various institutional experiences introduce in the participants' responses.

Participants

The researcher sampled six first-generation Latinx students from the Appalachian region who utilized a two-year institution before transferring to a four-year institution within the Southern region of the United States. Further, all participants were required to have successfully completed two semesters (part-time or full-time enrollment) at the receiving institution. Successful completion is determined by maintaining a 2.0 GPA or higher and demonstrating progress toward degree completion. The participants that were a part of the study allowed for an in-depth exploration of the participants' experiences and also allowed for the participants' active feedback and clarification, creating rich data for the researcher to describe and interpret in the findings section (Creswell, 2013). In addition, through multiple participant experiences, the researcher can acknowledge each participant's uniqueness, context, and background they bring into the study while also searching for common threads that are the essence of the lived experience under study.

Participant selection took place over two phases. First, the researcher sent and received a letter of support from UU's University Transfer Center regarding identifying potential participants. The letter of support was submitted as part of the researcher's submission to the UU's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Once the researcher received IRB clearance, the UU's University Transfer Center generated a report of all first-generation, Latinx transfer students from an Appalachian designated county, who transferred to UU from a community college within an Appalachian designated region, that had been enrolled (part or full time) for at least two semesters and were in good academic standing.

The University Transfer Center (UTC) sent a recruitment email to potential participants on the researcher's behalf after the UTC identified potential participants. The email summarized the purpose of the study, the nature of the participants' involvement, and how the collected data would be utilized and published. As participants responded to the initial email, the researcher looked to see if maximum variation sampling could be utilized. Maximum variation sampling intentionally seeks to create a diverse pool of participants so that the researcher can note intentional differences while having a cohesive connection to the studied phenomena (Sandelowski, 1995). However, based on the number of responses, the researcher did not exclude any of the volunteers. The researcher emailed the participants, who indicated they were interested in participating in the study. Each of the participants completed an informed consent document and filled out a demographic questionnaire. Some of the key participant demographics are displayed in Table 2.

Of note, when participants were responding to the initial email the transfer center sent out, for the first two business weeks there was only one response. When the researcher engaged with the first respondent, they went back to their peers and informed them that they felt as if they

could trust me and the community could trust me. Each of the participants which then submitted inquiries and became part of this study, all independently informed me they had heard I was a safe space for them to come and speak with and be a part of the study. Thus, community and the power of a peer network was key in the ability for me to recruit participants.

Table 2: *Participant Demographics*

PSEUDONYM	GENDER IDENTITY	ETHNICITY-SPECIFIC CULTURE OR ORIGIN	MAJOR OF STUDY	CURRENT CLASS STANDING/ EXPECTED GRADUATION DATE
Liliahna	Female	Mexican	Social Work	Senior/May 2022
Roberto	Male	Mexican	Finance/ Music	Senior/May 2022
Miriam	Female	Columbian	Social Work	Senior/May 2022
Diego	Male	Mexican	Economics	Senior/May 2022
Veronica	Female	Peruvian	Social Work/ Spanish	Senior/May 2022
Julio	Male	Mexican	Computer Science	Senior/May 2022

Data Collection Techniques/Sources

The interviewing process took place over four weeks, with two interviews being conducted with each participant at approximately one hour for each interview, allowing for an in-depth and reflective data collection process. All participants were provided a pseudonym, which they could select if they so chose.

Participants were interviewed in two separate hour-long, semi-structured interviews over four weeks. Semi-structured interviews allowed for varying questions, with some posed as open-ended and others grounded in theory. However, all questions were connected to the overall research and assisted in understanding the essence being studied (Galletta & Cross, 2014). The

questions utilized in this research study build off of the six facets of Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth model and are included in Appendix D. Utilizing a semi-structured interview in this particular research study was critical, as the narrative and lived experiences of the participants are the focus of the study. As such, the development of interview questions was designed in a particular fashion to "create space for participants to narrate their experiences; however, the focus of the questions is very deliberate and carefully tied to [the] research topic" (Galletta & Cross, 2014, p. 47). Within the study, the interview followed the design of the semi-structured interview, categorized with the initial questions serving to illicit a narrative within the participants' experience, and transitioned into greater details from the participants as related to the narrative they shared, and then finally concluding with any lingering questions concerning the narrative and providing an opportunity to connect theory and framework within the interview (Galletta & Cross, 2013).

No more than two weeks elapsed between the participant's first and second interviews, allowing for the first interview to be completed, transcribed, and given back to the participant for any corrections before the second interview took place, but as not to become so far removed from the interview that the participant did not have a more continuous experience with the interview process. The questions asked during the first interview served as a basis for understanding the participants' regional and familial backgrounds and navigating to the community college. The second interview focused on the participants transferring to and persisting at the four-year institution.

Each interview for each participant was recorded electronically and transcribed verbatim, a best practice for qualitative research since the researcher will not be splitting time or attention in the interview with attempting to take notes, allowing for a more natural conversation and

ability to capture participants' exact words (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Once transcribed, participants were provided copies of the interview transcripts to amend, clarify, or adjust any information provided during the interviews. Transcripts of the interviews were shared with the participants to verify accuracy and allow for any clarification or elaboration necessary to accurately capture the essence of their experiences. Further, the researcher conducted member checks with each participant following each interview to ensure the researcher's interpretations aligned with the participant's actual experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Member checks were conducted following each interview to ensure the researcher accurately interpreted the participants' experiences. In addition, as a token of appreciation, each participant completing the interviews was given a $25 Amazon gift card.

Throughout the interviews, the researcher kept a reflective journal, reflecting on each interview, the research experience, the framework utilized to guide the interviews and research, and the researcher's personal experiences, which often intersected with the research participants. There were four steps in the data analysis: immersion, coding, creating overarching categories, and identifying themes. Throughout each stage of the research and data analysis, there was ongoing reflexivity.

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the current encouragement for teleworking, the interviews were offered to the participants both in-person and virtually. The research offered participants these choices so the participants could select if they preferred to meet on UU's campus, in a specific area, masked, and at an appropriate distance for the interview, or if they preferred to be at a place of their choosing and conduct the meeting via Zoom which would contain audio and video capabilities for both researcher and participant. While utilizing virtual methods for conducting interviews for qualitative research is a relatively new phenomenon, the

benefits of virtual interviews seem to indicate that the convenience, time scheduling flexibility, and enthusiasm for virtual meetings are propelling virtual methods of the interview as a preferred or even typical option rather than an alternative option (Sah et al., 2020).

Data Analysis Procedures

Data analysis allows for the data collected during the research study to be examined, organized, and categorized to better understand how the data address the study's research questions and purpose (Taylor et al., 2016). Each interview was transcribed professionally and subsequently checked by the researcher to ensure accuracy and verbatim transcription. Once transcribed, the researcher began the analysis process, which for this particular study is a phenomenological exploration seeking to understand the experiences of a particular population and how the assets they bring with them are supported or could be further supported in their persistence toward completing a baccalaureate degree; this will direct the researcher to analyze the data through a series of phases (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015; van Manen, 1990).

When examining the data, it was important for the researcher to keep in mind the principles of hermeneutic phenomenology, in which "data use is concerned with surface meaning and sharing human experiences…the purpose is to reveal that which lies in, between, and beyond the words while staying close to the phenomenon of interest" (Crowther et al., 2017, p. 829). Hermeneutic phenomenology seeks to bring attention to the often overlooked and small nuances of the human experience that reveal a broader picture of human society (Wilson & Hutchinson, 1991).

Data analysis through a hermeneutical lens lends itself to utilizing an analysis that seeks to determine meaning across data, resulting in the researcher's use of thematic analysis (Braun &

Clarke, 2006). Specifically, "thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Within the phases of thematic analysis of the data, I immersed myself with the data, akin to Creswell's (2002) preliminary exploratory analysis, and reviewed each transcript multiple times to garner a deeper understanding and comprehension of the interview data. Through the review of each transcript, I made notes on the physical transcript, including highlighting, underlining, and noting pieces of information that I referred back to regarding the purpose of the study (Saldaña, 2011). Through the second phase, I established initial codes, in which the transcripts, through the utilization of in vivo coding, were broken down into codes focusing on the voices of the participants and the explicit relaying of participant's experiences and reflections (Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Saldaña, 2011). In vivo coding is a means of preserving the participants' language and attempting to honor the participants' voices. Once the codes were created, they became clustered into categories and potential themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell, 2013; Saldaña, 2011). These categories/themes were then collated, defined, and supported with the data, research questions, and literature to present findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Within the process of interviewing, creating transcripts from the interviews, coding, deducing themes, and applying those themes, the researcher also engaged in a type of co-construction of the participant's narrative through ongoing dialogue with each participant, ensuring that the looping or circular understanding is part of the methodological process (Koch, 1995).

Strategies for Quality

Multiple strategies were utilized to maintain the integrity and trustworthiness of this research study. Guba and Lincoln (1989) discuss the importance of ensuring trustworthiness

when conducting a qualitative study by making sure the researcher demonstrates credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The researcher attempted to address these established criteria in the following ways.

First, the researcher has included a subjectivity statement to acknowledge and be transparent about potential research bias and how personal and professional experiences could potentially affect the research process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher constructed the subjectivity statement to bracket the researcher's unique experiences in relation to the phenomenon being studied and set aside potential bias (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In addition, the statement served as a reminder to the researcher to continuously reflect during the research study process to allow the research to speak for itself (Berger, 2013). The researcher's subjectivity statement supports the confirmability of the data, as the researcher worked to ensure rigor was present and readily evident.

Secondly, the researcher ensured member checks were conducted throughout the study to ensure the researcher did not misinterpret the participants' experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Finally, as the researcher was new to this field of research, the researcher sought guidance from faculty members supervising the researcher's study to ensure proper steps were taken to conduct an analytical, in-depth, ethical, and sound study.

Ethical Considerations

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) state that the responsibility of ethics lies solely with the researcher, with the researcher having put into place measures that ensure that each step of the process is met with trustworthiness, credibility, and ethical diligence. I have attempted to anticipate any ethical issues that could potentially arise as the study centers on interviews with human participants as the primary data source. As such, the researcher made every effort to

ensure the study participants were not put at risk in any significant manner and tried to minimize these risks. In an effort to ensure that the study was vetted and adhered to proper protocol, the study was approved by the IRB prior to any data collection. The data collection followed the IRB's approved procedures and did not deviate. All study parameters were voluntary on behalf of the participant, including the study's intent, duration of the interviews, and time commitment to review the interview transcripts. Participants were informed in writing and verbally that they could withdraw from participating in the study at any time. Participants were also given an informed consent document, requiring each participant to review the document and agree, in writing and verbally, before engaging in the research study. The interview questions centered around the experiences of the participant and the cultural wealth and assets first-generation Latinx students bring with them in vertically transferring from a community college in the Appalachian region to a four-year institution. While the questions were not sensitive in nature, the researcher acknowledged that there was an opportunity for sensitive responses to be given by the participants, as is the nature of qualitative research.

Regarding sensitive answers, the researcher had a list of resources to give the participants, such as the university's counseling center, if those resources were necessary to share with the participant(s). However, none of the participants' interviews resulted in the researcher needing to share this document. As additive measures, participants were also allowed to review their transcripts. They were provided with final interpretations of the interviews and research study for review. Participants' names and personal information were also removed from any document that could identify the participant. All names or identifiable markers were replaced with pseudonyms to allow for the data to be shared. The original transcripts were only accessible

to the researcher and were stored securely on a password-protected and encrypted device. Once the transcription process was complete, the audio recordings were deleted.

Summary

This chapter provided a review of the methodology used by the researcher when conducting a hermeneutic phenomenological research study on first-generation Latinx students who are from the Appalachian region and who utilize a two-year institution in the Appalachian region before transferring to a large, four-year institution, and their experiences with community cultural wealth regarding student persistence at UU. Specific subsections within the chapter focused on the research questions, design, researcher role, and subjectivity, sampling including a description of the setting, purposefully selected participants, data collection techniques through semi-structured interviews, the utilization of thematic analysis of the data, strategies for quality, limitations, and ethical enhancing strategies.

Twelve participant interviews were the primary form of data collection. Each participant was interviewed by utilizing a two-interview model, with the researcher interviewing the participants over the course of two weeks. During the initial interview, the questions focused on the student's history in Appalachia, their family, community college experience, and the decision to transfer to a four-year institution. The second interview focused on the students transferring to the four-year institution, their experiences navigating the institution, and their aspirations after completing their degree. Each interview was also examined through the lens of Yosso's community cultural wealth model (2005), centering on familial, aspirational, social, navigational, resistant, and linguistic capital. The guiding research question and sub-questions were placed alongside the participant's narratives to further assist the researcher in focusing on the participants' shared experiences.

The following chapters will present the study's findings and the experiences of the participants' postsecondary educational journey through the lens of Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth and how these students' social capital assists in their continued success, as well as implications from these findings.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of first-generation Latinx students from the Appalachian Region who transferred from a community college in the Appalachian Region to an urban research institution. This study explored the participants lived experiences through Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth model, looking at the assets the participants brought with them as they worked toward completing their baccalaureate degree, rather than a more traditional deficit model. The research was propelled by the following overarching question, along with three sub-questions:

RQ: What are the lived experiences of first-generation Appalachian Region Latinx students who successfully transfer from a two-year institution to a four-year institution?

Sub Question 1: What are the roles of significant individuals, such as mentors, advisors, teachers, and counselors, in students' lives on their educational journeys?

Sub Question 2: What other factors do these students identify as critical in their successful transition experience?

Sub Question 3: How does a student's community cultural wealth impact their transition experience?

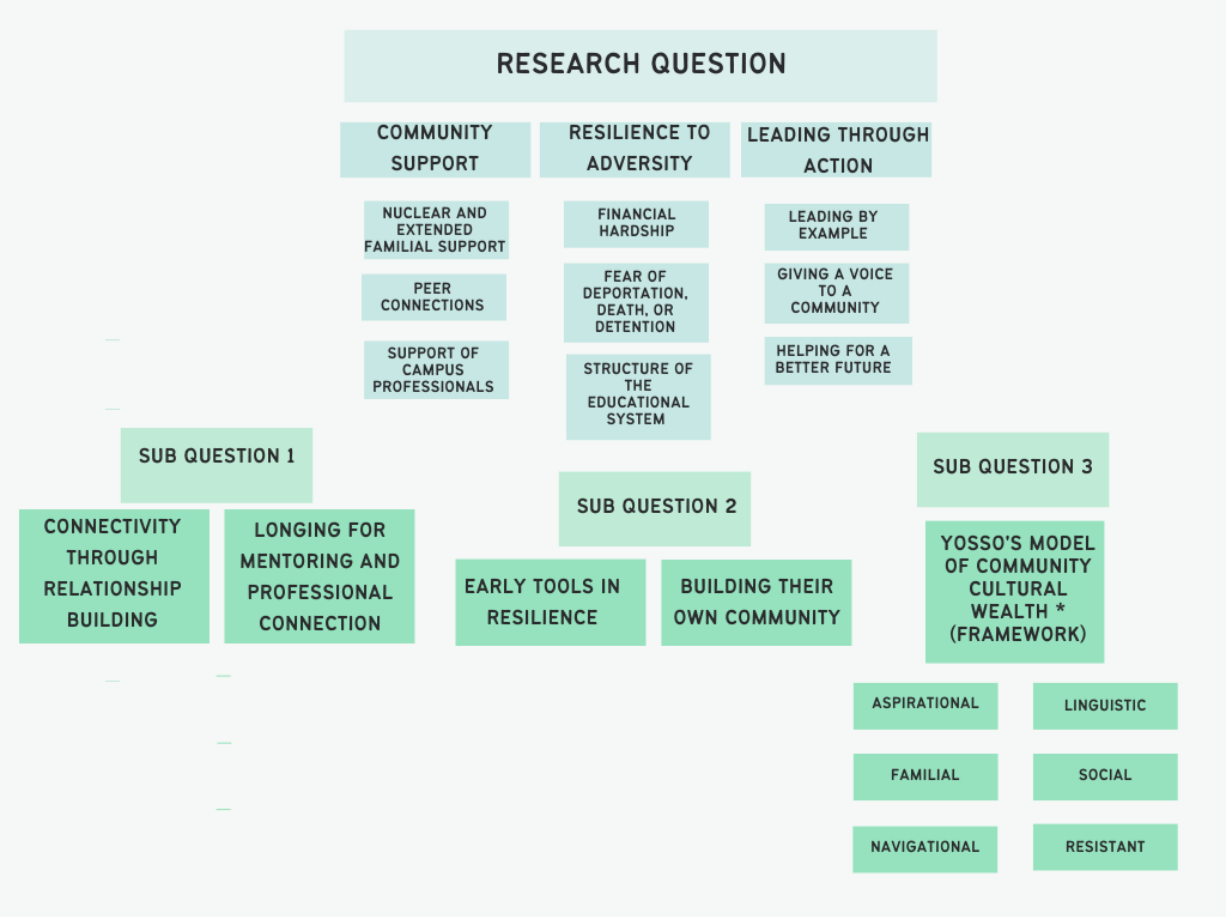
This research study explores the lived experiences of 6 Latinx first generation college students from the Appalachian Region who utilize a two-year institution and then vertically transfer to a four-year institution and persist at the four-year institution. Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner, and transcripts were analyzed through the lens of Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth model to better understand the assets these participants had developed over the course of their lifetimes and utilized to help them succeed in and persist in pursuing a degree in higher education. Through the emergence of significant

themes and subthemes, the researcher was able to demonstrate the essence of the participants' lived experiences.

The first stage of data, immersion, required the researcher to construct transcripts from the audio recordings of each interview. The interviews were transcribed through a transcription software program, Temi, and then checked for accuracy and verification by the researcher. The researcher provided copies of the transcripts to the participants for further verification and clarification. In addition, the researcher also repeatedly listened to the audio of the interviews and reviewed the researcher's written reflections to immerse themselves in and engage with the data (Green et al., 2007).

Once the researcher was immersed in the data, the researcher could then code the data and begin to determine categories, or buckets, of information. These categories of participant narratives then laid the groundwork for identifying themes. The findings of this chapter are organized to focus on eight themes and 16 sub-themes, which demonstrate the co-constructed information from the participant interviews and the interviewer's analysis. The findings are laid out to demonstrate how participants engaged with the interview process and reflected on their higher education experiences and the assets they possess. Data, such as excerpts of participant narratives, accompany each of the findings and the researcher's interpretations. These findings are highlighted in Table 3.

Table 3*: Major Themes and Subthemes*



Research Question:

What are the lived experiences of first-generation Appalachian Region Latinx students who successfully transfer from a two-year institution to a four-year institution?

The primary focus of this study is to engage with participants in understanding their experiences as first-generation Latinx students from the Appalachian region and their journey through successfully transferring from a two-year institution to a four-year institution. Understanding participant experiences and what these individuals bring into their higher education journey allows the researcher to provide context regarding their transfer to and persistence at a four-year university. The participant's responses demonstrated that their

experiences were characterized by an intersection of multiple factors and influences, which could be grouped into eight themes and 16 subthemes, with six of the subthemes comprising Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth framework. For the leading research question, the following major themes were discovered: community support, resilience to adversity, and leading through action.

Community Support

Lifelong stories of unconditional community support were evident throughout the participants' interviews as they described their experiences navigating higher education and eventually transferring to and persisting at a four-year institution. Within the thematic exploration of the participants' narratives, there were consistent intersections between nuclear and extended familial support, peer and professional connections, and support of campus professionals, all of which served to further feed each participant's desire to attend a higher education institution and complete their higher education degree.

Nuclear and Extended Familial Support

Each of the participants described a deep connection to their families – both nuclear and extended. The support of their families served as the foundation through which the participants' higher education experience was constructed. Each of the six participants described an unwavering and consistent narrative their families would tell them about the importance of continuing their education and education as the key to a better life, not just for their benefit or their family's benefit, but for the benefit of society as a whole.

Liliahna, a current senior studying Social Work, described her familial support as constant and the lens through which her family made many decisions for her future, sharing,

> I feel like my parents influenced a lot about me going to college. My mom wouldn't even let me start work before I was 16, because my mom thought I would become money hungry once I saw the money from my checks and not want to finish school. A few of my uncles had did that in high school and she was like no, you have to go to school. My mom put us in different schools than we were zoned for because she said the Northside schools of our district weren't good enough, so we had school choice, and we went to the better public schools. No one in my family had even got a GED, so it was so important to my entire family, my parents, uncles, cousins, that I go to college and set the bar and be an example for all my younger family.

Roberto, a senior double major in Finance and Music, echoed education being the epicenter of familial decisions, describing his childhood by saying,

> My mom didn't speak English when we first immigrated to North Carolina. I was in Kindergarten when we moved. So I only spoke Spanish too. But every day, we would read these books. We had a huge bin of books people donated from the church, and my mom would sit me down and we would read and read and read. She told me we would learn English, and we did. Then for fun, my mom bought me and my brother and sister Math books. That was our fun as kids. We didn't have TV or get to do any extracurriculars, but somehow, she made Math books fun. She wanted us in the best schools. She pushed for us to take the best classes, and she was so excited when I had the chance to take Early College classes in high school. We all watched her get her GED, learn English, and it was like we grew a lot together. My dad just told me to work harder than anyone else and not give up. And I am glad I listened to him when I was at the

> community college because so many of my friends are in jail now from back home or they have been deported or they are dead.

Two of the participants who immigrated to the United States and were only able to relocate with their nuclear families also described their family as the center of their universe and who impacted every aspect of their lives, including their educational journey. A senior Social Work major, Miriam shared that she was born and raised in Colombia and immigrated to the U.S. as an older child. The importance of her family is shared when she talks about her mom and stepdad, sharing,

> It's just my mom, my stepdad, and me. It's really nice to have these two people, even though it's small, but I know that there is so much love, like so much abundance of everything I could ever want. That it is enough. It kind of feels like a warm blanket over me whenever we are all together. My mom gave me a lot of emotional support. And she wanted me to go to college.

Julio, a Computer Science major, and graduating senior also discussed the significance of his small nuclear family after immigrating to the United States from Mexico.

> When I was about 2.5 months old, we moved to the United States from Mexico. It's just me, my mom, and dad. My parents always made a point to try to put me in the best schools possible. They taught me how important education is. Encouraged me to go to after school programs, join clubs like chess club, karate club, and playing violin. I wouldn't be able to be in college at all or finish up without them.

Diego, a senior majoring in Economics, and Veronica, a graduating senior in Social Work, also echoed the importance of their family's support. Diego noted, "my family has

supported me through this whole time," and Veronica called her family her "biggest champions and support system."

Veronica described her extended family as a major source of inspiration, sharing,

> My family, like my uncle, my aunt, they influenced me to go to college. Always told me I could do it you know and always got my cousins interested in asking me questions and then they get excited too you know. And seeing them life me up and look to me you know I always kind of wanted to be a role model for my cousins.

Each participant discussed their family's significance and role in their journey to higher education. Each participant's family valued education and pushed their child(ren) to engage with education in meaningful and direct ways – whether through extracurricular activities, putting their child(ren) in the best schools in the district, or helping fund their postsecondary education experiences. Familial support of education as a path to a better life for the student was present in every interview. Participants acknowledged and understood how their families' support helped propel them into higher education. Their gratitude and pride in their families for pushing them into higher education was readily apparent. Veronica summed up her family's impact by saying,

> If you have Hispanic or Latinx parents that haven't gone to school, or parents who are immigrants especially, they don't really understand the American college system. They just want you to succeed. They just want you to have a good career you know, a good life. And they know college is the best way for you to do that. Like my going to college was always a top priority. It was never a question.

Each of these narratives provides critical context to the lived experiences of these participants and how their families' support and belief in higher education as a path to a better life helped lead the participants to pursue a higher education degree.

Peer Connections

Critical engagements with peers, both within degree paths and within the broader university, were also expressed by each of the participants. Key descriptors such as "helpful," "important," "lifesaver," "life-changing," and "motivator" were all used across participant interviews to characterize the significance of connectivity both on and off campus. These connections helped participants feel connected to the campus and the surrounding city and served as fuel to continue their degree and persist when things were difficult. Liliahna focused on the importance of friends she made within the Social Work Program, stating,

> I learned how to navigate campus because I have a friend, in my social work program. She told me about the Latinx organization and so many other student events and things on and off campus. So, if it wasn't for her, I wouldn't have found out about anything. I feel so lucky to have her as a friend.

These connections have broader ramifications outside of helping participants feel connected to campus; they also help participants transition to the next step after graduation or in addition to being in school. Liliahna continued describing the significance of being connected to her peers as helpful for the workplace as well,

> For example, I was looking for a job, specifically at a hospital because I really want to be a case worker. Well, one of my classmates, she works at a local hospital as a receptionist. And she connected me to her network there and I was able to get my foot in the door. So, it's like if we know things that can benefit others in our program, we try to connect them with those opportunities. And I feel like that's what keeps me motivated. It makes me feel welcomed and encouraged because we are all just trying to help each other.

Roberto developed a key peer connection and support with his roommate when he transferred to UU, helping him find a sense of belonging and connection to the institution despite the challenges he faced. His connection with his roommate also helped him find a broader sense of community, which helped the transition process:

> My first semester basically was a waste. I didn't need any of those classes. And it wasn't just me, like a bunch of other transfer students said the same thing. And then my roommate he is also a transfer student. He transferred the same time I did. We met in a class neither of us needed. But it worked out because then I found a community and started feeling more comfortable at school.

Some of the challenges during Roberto's first semester also highlight the importance of finding a peer network and support. Roberto described feeling isolated after transferring, especially when moving from his previously established network and community sharing,

> I already knew that the statistics say we are the highest in the state for Latinx students, but that percentage is probably like what 10 maybe 15 percent, you know what I mean? It's already small. And then once I entered the Music department, I was the only Latinx student. So, I've been a little bit isolated.

Julio and Diego both discussed the importance of when they started making connections with peers across campus and within different majors as a "game-changer" or " life-saver." They each faced some isolation from their home community and struggled until they could connect with people on campus. Julio framed his experience with peers truly helping him feel like he belonged, remarking,

> At first like I didn't know anyone. Don't get me wrong, I don't need any friends. I have my family and my community back home, but it was just really lonely at first. I felt like I

> was split between two worlds. Like my parents wanted me to go and my friends and they want me to be successful but at the same time there is this bitterness you know. Like I got out and they didn't. So, it can be hard to feel like you have to be one way here and another way totally back home. But once I started finding people. Like I have a friend in Marketing. A friend in Engineering. I have a friend who works at the airport. And like, I was worried I was going to be the only brown person here, but once I got connected to people here, I would say it definitely made a difference. I didn't think it would, but it helped me feel like I belonged.

And Diego echoed many of the same sentiments, saying,

> Coming to school was kind of difficult because all of my friends from back home were Mexican like me, but then when I left to go to college and transferred here and wasn't living at home anymore, they resented me for that because like, they said I started acting white and that I had only white friends and that I started dressing a certain way. They said they had lost me. But that wasn't the case I was just trying to go and make something out my life so I could give back you know. To them. To the community. Anyways, I didn't feel like I needed friends, but I started to find people here I really connected with you know? I just care about if people are reliable or not, and if I could trust them. And I found that here in my major. I got a job at Amazon because I am getting my degree in Business, and they have plans for me to move up into management if I want. I get to practice my skills. And now I'm helping other people get jobs and internships and it's just really rewarding.

Veronica summed up the importance of finding peers by saying:

> I joined one of the meetings of the Latinx student union, and I became a member, and I am a member of the Latinx Honor Society, and you know, I formed like a friendship with them. I found my community. This university was my opportunity to, you know, um, meet people who, who speak like me, who look like me, and I feel comfortable with them. So, I've gained a bunch of friendships because of the Latinx clubs here and I'm very thankful for them.

Miriam echoed feeling connected to campus based on her peers and other people's willingness to reach out, sharing,

> I knew I wanted to be involved so I tried to make sure I connected with people, so I signed up and joined organizations, mostly Latinx, and that is where I met a lot of my community. We would meet as a group and then we would have like movie nights and rotate whose place we would all hang out at. I know that I wouldn't have made friends or felt as connected if I hadn't looked to be involved on campus.

Despite often feeling isolated, that they were fine on their own, or even feeling afraid of the unknowns, all of the participants showed a willingness to engage with their peers, which resulted in the participants feeling as if they had found their community. Participants also became engaged on campus and felt more assured in their decisions to attend the university.

Support of Campus Professionals

While family support for students was recorded in each of the participants' interviews, and peer support was also noted as an added level of comfort for many participants, support from campus professionals was also present in each of the responses, highlighting the significance of campus faculty and staff to the retention and persistence of the participants. Participants detailed the significance of positive connections and interactions across departments and disciplines in

higher education as either helping or hurting their sense of place, belonging and ability to master content.

The power of campus professionals on participant educational journeys is powerfully conveyed in the decision-making process on the student transfer process, as well as their retention and persistence toward degree completion. For example, Roberto initially described his start at the university as challenging and isolated after learning that he was the only Latinx student in his major. In addition, he felt that the overall Latinx population was smaller than he had expected at the university. But despite feeling isolated in his major and classes, Roberto conveyed that the difference maker had been the professionals on campus, sharing,

> My Music advisor has been the best advisor I've ever had. She is so amazing. She helped me a lot. And really her taking an interest in me and getting me on the right track was the turning point for me here. Like I actually felt like I was a real college student. That what I was doing mattered…And the professors are the most amazing professors I've ever met. Like they are not only geniuses, but they are just good people. Like I can't explain how thankful I am for the professors in my program. They have helped me grow so much and made me feel and see like I have so much more potential than I ever saw in myself.

Many participants echoed similar feelings of isolation and challenge in transferring. However, the consistent narrative was that the professional staff made a huge difference in participants feeling connected to the institution. Miriam echoed these thoughts, saying, "I love all my professors and the faculty that I've had, they are all extremely kind and understanding and they really want all of us to succeed." Diego said that the "main thing that has been positive here is the professors." He went on to elaborate with examples, sharing,

> I had another professor who actually showed me all the resources the library has to offer. It wasn't a major class, just a general education course, but like I had no idea we had all these cool resources, and I would have never known those things without taking that class and having her as a professor.

For two participants, their transfer process had an additional layer of attending another four-year institution before coming to this institution – but both participants left the prior four-year institution to transfer in part because of their lack of community with either peers or campus professionals – further demonstrating the significance of campus professional support. Julio was disappointed in his first experience at a four-year institution remarking, "I didn't have any reasons to stay. I didn't make really any friends there. And I didn't connect well with the faculty. It was like I was invisible. So, I left." And Diego similarly felt like he didn't belong, saying "There was nothing there for me. I was unhappy and didn't see a future for myself there. So now I am here."

Cultivating relationships with the faculty and staff on campus was paramount in creating a sense of connectedness and belonging and inspiring individuals to continue persisting toward degree completion and become more engaged with the campus.

One of the participants, Liliahna, was still determining if she could or should get a four-year degree. She had already stayed at a community college for over two years, and she knew she could transfer back and finish the degree she had started. She said she almost made that decision, but the faculty made her feel like she belonged at this institution. Liliahna shared,

> At first, I felt like I should have just stayed at the community college, finished my degree, and then been done you know? But then I got into my core classes for my major and the classes were smaller, and people were more connected, and the professors gave you

> actual attention like one-on-one. And the professors in my program were super welcoming and they showed us what it meant to be a student here, to be proud to be here, and they showed us that people actually did care. They are the reason I stayed. I almost left, but I am so glad I didn't. I'm glad I stayed.

The relationships formed in the classroom, connecting participants to the campus, the university, and their major, were critical in their retention and persistence. Each participant discussed the importance of feeling seen, appreciated, and included. The times when participants thought of leaving an institution or left an institution (without the intent of transferring) were supported by their families because of a lack of connectedness to the campus.

Resilience to Adversity

Through the interviews, participants described their lived experiences of being a first-generation college student, living in the Appalachian region, and transferring to a four-year institution from a two-year institution. Within their stories were accounts of resiliency to adversity. However, many participants had never considered their experiences difficult or their ability to overcome a challenging experience as a form of resiliency before their interviews. Further discussion with participants regarding their engagement with adversity revealed that the tools their support systems had provided them along the way were enough to sustain and encourage them to overcome these challenges. The significant challenges that the participants had to overcome were heavily based in financial hardship, including balancing work with schoolwork, the stress of deportation and community violence, and the structure within the education system itself, including a lack of generational knowledge. Each participant reflected on their internal motivation to manage the challenges presented to them and how they had been able to continue on their path toward obtaining a baccalaureate degree.

Financial Hardship

The narrative of learning how to manage their lives around financial hardship was a prevalent story shared by each participant. When discussing their experiences with financial hardship, each participant believed that despite their circumstances, they were on a path toward a better future and better life for themselves and their families. All participants believed that their ability to obtain a baccalaureate degree would open the doors of possibility and that education was the key to increased opportunity, including financial stability, and would impact their present and future.

While each of the participants expressed a positive outlook toward their future financial state, they each discussed key examples of financial hardship through their early childhood that seemed to provide them with tools of resiliency and problem-solving which made them better prepared for the financial hurdles and general challenges they were presented with, as related to higher education.

Roberto discussed an example of something he called a "core memory" regarding the lack of finances his family grew up without, sharing,

> My mom, she worked at TJMaxx and at first, she only worked in the back opening boxes and stocking shelves because she didn't speak English. And she cleaned houses. My dad, he was a janitor, and he worked like manual labor jobs. So, I mean they were jobs but they didn't pay a lot you know. Anyways, growing up I knew we didn't have a lot; you would hear people complaining about their 50K jobs and I knew combined my parents made like 30K, but it didn't matter – we were happy…One of my core memories was there was one day that my mom came home from cleaning houses and she was calling for all of us to come to the kitchen. One of the ladies she cleaned for bought a new toaster

> and she told mom she could have it if she wanted or mom could throw it away. One of my sisters was like "We're rich. Oh my gosh, we're rich," because we had never seen a toaster. Like we had seen them maybe on TV, but we had never owned one. And we were all like we're finally rich now. All because of a toaster.

Of note is that during this discussion, Roberto was laughing and smiling, and it was evident that this core memory was a positive memory. He knew his family financially was not wealthy, but they were happy and celebrated even the little things together. Echoing a similar sentiment, Julio also described his family's finances as strained but smiled and laughed about his not having any idea that his life looked different than anyone else as he grew up. Julio shared,

> My family, we immigrated here when I was a baby. And we obviously couldn't afford our own place to live permanently. And so, we would just rent an apartment and eventually the prices would go up and we'd move out. And I just always thought it was normal when I was growing up. I would think, like hey, it's been a year when are we moving? I never knew people bought a home and lived in it forever.

Liliahna described her living situation as cramped but full of love,

> When we first immigrated here it was just me, my mom, and my dad, and then my grandparents came, and my aunts and uncles came, and then my brother was born, and we were all living together at one point in one house together. There were 10 people living in a tiny home for five years and I was little, so I just thought that was what you did you know. Even when some of my family moved out of the house, we all stayed in the same neighborhood so we could still all walk to each other's houses pretty quickly. And I just thought everyone lived right with their family you know. We might not have

had a lot, but my family is the best part of my life, and they are like my biggest influence to go out and do something great you know.

Other participants shared that their formative years were filled with love because of their families. However, as they grew older, they became more aware of their family's lack of financial resources. Diego commented that his one goal that had never changed in life was "to make enough money to support myself because we grew up rough." Similar to their K-12 experiences, the participants all highlighted the struggles they faced regarding finances when transitioning to higher education. Roberto discussed his family's EFC listed as zero. And when asked how he managed to fill out the FAFSFA and navigate the financial aid system, his response was simple, and through laughter, he responded with,

> Google…I just used Google. I was just praying something didn't get rejected. I was waiting for the hammer to come down on me you know. Like I didn't do something right, but yeah. Google taught me.

Roberto also spoke about the shock of coming to college and realizing things he needed that he did not know he would need saying,

> I remember like when I first got to campus, I didn't even have a laptop. I didn't know I needed one, so I would run to the library and use the ones there and check out loaners and do anything I could to keep up with coursework and homework. There are so many examples of things like that. I didn't have a calculator for math. I didn't know what music theory even was. I didn't know I would need to do an internship and balance my job and classes. I didn't even have many clothes. I packed one backpack to come to college. I literally had like nothing. But you know, it creates character.

Julio discussed his first experience with going to a university as being riddled with financial hardship stating,

> My first experience with college was rough. I went for one full year to another college, and it was hard, and I didn't really like it there, but I was doing good you know. And then I had to leave. My family didn't realize how much it was going to cost to send me to college. So, after the first year, the money ran out. They were like we want you to do this, and we will figure it out, but maybe you should try a community college to get your associates degree and from there decide where you want to go and exactly what you want to do. So, I came home and started at the community college…I'm sure things might be different now, but I am glad that things happened the way they did and that I am here now.

As Julio discussed his journey through higher education, the financial hurdles were at almost every corner. However, through his persistence and family support, he will graduate with his baccalaureate degree this semester. Just a small excerpt of the financial hurdles Julio faced when trying to get an education is captured below, with Julio sharing,

> Something that I learned and was just shocked about was that if you aren't a citizen, it doesn't matter if you can prove you have lived in one state for 10 years, 15 years, whatever, they won't let you have In-state tuition. You will always be classified as out-of-state. And out-of-state tuition is so high – it is like triple what in-state students pay. I have lived in the United States since I was 2.5 months old. I am 22 now and I'm still not a citizen. I was originally a DACA student, but that was taken away. Now we are on a path to citizenship called VCU because my dad was a victim of a violent crime by a citizen. So, I am legally here, but I am not a citizen. So that's what happened with my

> first school. Out-of-state tuition was just too much. Even community college I was out-of-state, so it was still way high, but cheaper than a 4-year. And now that I am here, I am finishing as fast as I can. My parents have paid for everything except for this last semester I was able to get an internship and it covered all my expenses. I've just gotten lucky with my parents and opportunities I have had. We all are on a path to citizenship. It isn't great and it has taken decades and will still take years but at least we have a path.

The participants' responses highlighted that while financial challenges have been present throughout each stage of their lives, they learned how to navigate these challenges in such a way as not to become defined by lack of resources or to give up, but rather, see a positive come from their struggle – whether that was through family, thinking creatively, or using their opportunities to create a better future.

Fear of Deportation, Death, or Detention

Learning to overcome incredible hardships and challenges was not limited to only those of financial origin. Many participants demonstrated resiliency when discussing their experiences throughout their lives, which focused on the fear of being deported, dying, and being imprisoned, as these were all a regular part of their lived experiences within their communities. Their resiliency came from the participants embracing their support systems and leaning into their profound belief in a better future. Roberto discussed the reality of deportation, detention, and death in his lived experiences, saying,

> My parents are illegal, so they can't go back and forth to Mexico and here. And a few of my uncles they used to live here, but when I was like 10, a few of them got deported and then a couple of them just decided to move back, so I have like barely any cousins or anyone else here now you know? I've been back to Mexico once when I was 14, since I

> am legal, and it was so scary – even though I knew I was legal, I didn't want to go back again because I thought something might happen…And like a bunch of my neighborhood friends, like some of them are in jail now or some have been deported, a few of them were murdered, you know, and it's like sad and it's always kept me on a narrow path because that could have been me.

Roberto's support system, especially his father, continued to encourage him. He went on to be in advanced courses in high school and then had the opportunity to take courses through an early college program and then continue to college.

> My dad, he has always told me you know, like you have to do your best you have to go on and go to college, he always tells me I have to work hard because he doesn't want me to be another one you know? He doesn't ever want me to lose any opportunity, so he always encouraged me to be the best and do the best, and I'm glad I listened to him…When I started at the 2 -year here he told me that I was smart and that I could go to a 4-year, and he pushed me to transfer. I would have maybe stayed at the 2-year, but he was like you are smarter than that you have to go on. So here I am.

Julio discussed his citizenship status as legal but that he did not have full citizenship yet, which causes him some anxiety and stress, sharing,

> It's just taken a long time to get citizenship and we still aren't citizens yet. The only reason we have a path right now is because my dad was attacked by someone with a gun. Like I can work, and I can live normally. I just can't leave the country. I can't travel anywhere without taking the risk of not being able to come back. So, I haven't seen any of my extended family since I was 8 just because it is too risky to go back. We talk to them but it's not the same. I can't take a job that requires international travel. Things like

> that. But like before my dad was attacked, we were so afraid of being deported. People would get taken away by ICE all the time so it was always like will it be us next you know. My family is grateful for the pathway to citizenship now. My parents feel really lucky.

Miriam described her own experiences and fear of deportation after she and her family immigrated to the United States from Columbia, sharing,

> My family came to the United States legally but then we overstayed, so we were illegal immigrants for 10 years. We have citizenship now, but during the 10 years we were illegal it was so hard. We were so afraid of the police or even something as simple as a license check because it could get us deported. But there was a therapist that I went to see, and he is my hero. He specifically worked with immigrant populations because he had been an immigrant at one point too, and he would help us feel safer and that we weren't going to get shipped away. He helped us navigate a lot of the legal system and he helped me and my mom a lot. He inspired me to be like him. And now you know I am graduating with my degree, and I am going to graduate school to get my Master's degree and it's in large part because of my therapist.

Similarly, Veronica's family immigrated to the United States from Mexico, and even though she was a citizen, the fear of deportation was very prevalent in her community, which influenced her entire career trajectory. She described seeing and hearing stories in her community of people being abused, cars being stolen, and crimes being committed against these individuals. However, the fear of deportation prevented many survivors of crime from reporting the crime. Seeing her community struggle in such a brutal way only served to fuel Veronica's

desire to help her community. Veronica's desire to help her community was so strong that she chose a social work career to work exclusively with immigrant communities.

Participant narratives of their lived experiences, such as demonstrating resiliency despite having to overcome fear for safety and well-being, provide essential context to the understanding that first-generation Latinx students may have assets that are not as common as their continuing education and non-Latinx counterparts, especially when considering predominately white institutions both at the two and four-year level. These participants never saw their lives as poor or bad inherently because of their circumstances but rather leaned into a support network within their community and worked to help one another in the short term and in thinking of futuristic planning.

Structure of the Educational System

As participants described their navigation of the educational system, it was also clear that the structure within the education system, both at the K-12 and the higher education level, was not designed with the ability to be readily accessible to all students. Many participants had difficulty navigating the education system and often felt isolated and forced to remain quiet. However, the participants continued to demonstrate resiliency as they learned to navigate the educational system through different avenues to try and keep up with their peers.

Roberto discussed his entire K-12 experience as one where he constantly tried not to be labeled as less than his peers, often silencing himself and working quietly to learn as much as he could about American culture saying,

> I started out Kindergarten here and was labeled as an English Language Learner. They switched me out of that in 1st grade but even though I could talk okay I didn't know anything. I didn't know what anything was. Like kids would be talking about football and

> I was like what in the heck is football. So, I would check out books at the library about football because I felt so dumb. I never understood like anything kids would talk about – movies, songs – I remember all the kids in 3rd grade were really into The Wizard of Oz and I was like what is this flying monkeys and tornados, it sounded wild, and I just didn't understand, so I would check out as many books as I could, and I decided not to talk so I didn't look dumb. So, I didn't say a single word my entire 3rd grade year at school. I didn't talk at all my 8th grade or 9th grade years either because I was still so afraid I would sound dumb to the teachers, and they would think I wasn't smart you know.

Miriam described her experiences in K-12 as less than ideal and felt a lack of support from the K-12 system when she moved to the United States, stating,

> So I did not enjoy my high school. I didn't have a good time there. I didn't really have any friends and there was no support there. I felt like no one understood where I was coming from or what my situation was with my family. I feel like I would have been like better prepared for high school and like college and everything if there would have just been someone to explain things to me like a GPA and how important it was or just to not leave me behind in class you know. Like my family didn't know what a GPA was, they just told me to do good. And like one of my English classes my course average was a 45. I shouldn't have passed but they just pushed me along and I just didn't understand anything.

When Miriam reflected on her transition into higher education, she reflected a lot on the support of her mother and her drive to make a better life for herself, and that despite hardships, she figured out a way to succeed in higher education, saying,

> My mom gave me so much support and especially emotional support. She didn't know anything about the system here, she was just learning English, but she was always right there with me supporting me and encouraging me to go to college. There was a time I didn't think I was going to make it to college you know. First of all, my grades were awful from high school I had just barely above a 2.0, I was illegal at the time, I didn't qualify for DACA, so I was like what am I supposed to do? Someone told me my only option was to marry someone for citizenship and I was like no absolutely not. I'm not marrying someone just for papers you know. And I really wanted to go to college like for myself for my mom and I was like no I am going to push myself and figure it out. And it took a little time, but I went to the community college in my hometown, and I told myself things were going to be different from now on, I was going to ask for help, push for resources, I had to make it. And I did my best and made really good grades and I got into this university and now I am going on to get my Masters and it's just like yeah, I did this. I am accomplishing this goal I have had my whole life.

Even when learning to navigate the higher education system, Roberto described this feeling of being shut out by a system not designed for people who looked like him or were from similar backgrounds as he was, revealing:

> I started college through the early college program, so I was 15 and in high school when I started taking community college classes. Just one at a time you know. I remember the first class was called ACA College Transfer, it was like all focused for you to transfer from a community college and not stay. I had never really thought about college and then it was clear like this wasn't what you were supposed to do you were supposed to move on to a bigger college. And it instantly felt like there were so many gates up to me ever

> getting there you know. Like I had gotten to take community college classes, but then it was like oh I had never thought about a 4-year school before, and I instantly felt like I wasn't good enough. The way I felt was like college was a concept meant for other people but not me. It felt like so impossible. Like how does a poor person get to college, and even if they do how do they like justify college and going into debt rather than working to help their family? But my parents instilled in me that I was going that I had to go. I was the first person from my entire community, my whole church, everywhere, that was going to go so I just kept studying and kept working twice as hard to make it you know? Make everyone proud.

And when Roberto arrived on campus at the four-year, he described his transition as one of the most challenging things he had ever done, laughing and saying,

> It was so hard. I didn't know anything. I couldn't get any of the classes I needed. I didn't know how what to do or where to go and I didn't have nobody to guide me. I didn't know campus, I had never been before. I didn't have any friends. It was so scary it was just me.

Julio's experience with arriving on campus was also one filled with several hurdles to overcome, but he laughed as he recounted his transition to the university his first semester sharing,

> My first semester was not smooth. Not at all. So here you have to complete orientation before you can like register for classes or sign up for housing and all the things you need to do, right? So, I sign up for orientation and I had to take a tuberculosis test and it tested positive. It was a false positive. But the test isn't something you can go and do and get your results like right then you know? So, I had to wait and schedule another test, and it delayed orientation, and like delayed everything. I didn't have a place to live. I didn't

have a car. I didn't have like anything for a little bit. It just seems like it wasn't even real you know but I mean it was fine, it all worked out it was just a really rough start. It was just really hard.

Through each participant's reflection on their experiences through the educational system, there was a consistent echo of similar narratives and feelings – of isolation and learning how to navigate the higher education system alone. They all expressed a deep love and admiration for their families whose emotional support and encouragement acted as a buffer and helped support them despite the lack of support they found within the educational system. Moreover, despite the significant hurdles and negative experiences participants had encountered within the education system, each participant used words such as "opportunity" and "lucky" to describe their ability to pursue a four-year degree and potentially impact their entire families and communities in the future.

Leading Through Action

As participants shared their unique experiences, hardships, hurdles, and histories, there was also a clear statement of the participant's ability to impact more than just their individual lives through their consistent trailblazing actions, leading the way for not just themselves but for their families and communities. Feelings of altruism, pride, and enthusiasm for being able to give back to their families and entire communities through the completion of a four-year degree were voiced as motivation for the participants persisting in the educational process. Despite experiencing tremendous hardship and struggle, participants felt like they had to be an example for their community and a voice of change for their communities, as they believed they were overlooked.

Leading by Example

All participants shared a deep desire to be an example for their family, friends, and community. Expressing a desire to be a leader for her family, Liliahna stated that none of her family had graduated from high school and that "as a first gen I kind of had to set an example for my entire family." Veronica similarly remarked that she "took on a lot of responsibility as a kid for my family, I helped them as a translator, and was a bridge to a different world. I always knew I needed to lead by example for my whole family." Both Liliahna and Veronica knew that for their families to imagine a different life and understand that there were more opportunities available, they had to be the people to whom their family looked, regardless of age.

Two participants described leading by example as going beyond just leading for their family and that they had a purpose of leading the entire community. Roberto discussed his drive as something larger than himself, saying,

> Of course I have to give back to my family. But I have to give back to everybody. I don't want to sound arrogant at all, but like people back home are all the time coming up to me like bro, one day, I'm gonna get a job with you. They say like I'm going to make our community better like I am going to be the start of something big you know. So, like whether I become a CPA or a Musician or whatever I know that I am always going to have to give back to my community because they are what built me, you know what I mean. They forged me into the person I am today. I just want to be able to support everybody and like give them everything because I wouldn't be anything without them.

Also describing her desire to be a leader in the community is Miriam, who shared that her decision to pursue social work was based entirely on her experiences with a licensed professional who had helped her navigate American systems as an immigrant. Based on the help she had

received in her own life, she knew she wanted to help as many people as possible. Miriam indicated that she had always felt that she had to help her community, stating,

> I have a huge passion in social justice and in helping vulnerable and oppressed populations. I know how it feels to feel like no one sees you or no one cares and then to have one person be there for you and what a difference it can make in your life you know. Giving back to other people has been something I have just always known I had to do. When I first discovered Social Work and read the mission statement on the department's website here for Social Work I teared up because I knew that I had found what I was meant to do, and how I can show my community hey this is possible you know?

Participants' experiences within their own families and communities were described as poor, no one in their families had been able to get an education, and their families and community had only ever worked low-wage jobs and jobs that, as Diego stated, made them feel "Overlooked. It's like we are just seen as the garden workers and the help for all the other people you know." Each of the participants felt as if they needed to be an example for their families and communities. Diego shared this perspective by saying,

> When you think of a doctor, you obviously think of a white man. You don't think of a female. You don't think of Latinx or a Black man or woman, you just have a certain image for all these roles and they just don't look like us. And like I want to be that for my community. I want people to say oh yeah, I know a guy who is this or that and it can be real to them – like they can be those things too you know.

Their desire to be a leader was a strong motivator to help elevate their families' and communities' place in life and pushed them to continue their education and, at minimum, obtain a baccalaureate degree.

Giving a Voice to a Community

Throughout the interviews, participants also focused on their communities' lack of voice, representation, appearance, and other individuals' willingness to help them. Specifically, the participants wanted their accomplishments to be a launching point for change within their communities.

Veronica described her reason for pursuing a degree in Social Work as being able to give a voice to people who are often overlooked or have little power, to give a voice to "the injustices and the inequities" she sees within the community. Veronica spoke to the need for more representation in professions of people from Latinx backgrounds as a way for these communities to be seen. She went on to say,

> I feel like both at the university level and in the community, we need more bilingual and Latinx professors, advisors, professionals in the community, because it is so hard to explain your background or relate to someone, or even know you have someone understand you and advocate for you. I've not had a single Latinx faculty member here, not a single advisor, and I haven't worked with any supervisors that were Latinx. Everyone here has been inclusive it is just harder to feel truly seen when no one looks like you or understands your communities' struggles you know.

Liliahna, also majoring in Social Work, echoed the same sentiment as Veronica, saying she chose her major because it allowed her to help the people in her community. She is also pursuing a translation certificate to work with Latinx communities and give them a voice in

settings such as hospitals and courtrooms. When describing her rationale for adding a certificate in her native-language Liliahna relayed,

> I need to get this because the certificate teaches you a lot more professional conversation. For example, I am fluent in Spanish, but I don't inherently know how to speak like a medical doctor or understand how to translate prescriptions or theories or billing codes you know. Learning specifically how to communicate a more professional side of our language would allow me to have a bigger impact on the Latinx community and help more people.

Roberto described earning his degree as for himself and his entire community "to be an example to everyone, to show them this is possible." He went on to describe his hope for his community to "not be pushed out or to the fringes of society," wanting to help guide his community members to college and understand the impact a degree can have on not just their lives but the lives of their entire family, community, and region.

These narratives help to demonstrate the desire for the participants to utilize their degrees to help give their communities a voice and to be better represented in the community.

Helping – For a Better Future

The participants' narratives consistently focused on the future, specifically on helping their community have a better future. Across the participant interviews, the participants discussed "help" and " helping" as being critical to a better future 273 unique times. Helping permeated every narrative and desire to continue in their educational journey and beyond. Helping was the hope that moved the participants along toward their futures. According to Liliahna, she "always wanted to help people," and through intentionally selecting her career

field, she knew she could "help [her] community more in the future" and "make a change and better people's lives."

There is also a recognition that while finances are necessary, this notion of helping the community is even more critical. Liliahna discussed potentially making less money in Social Work than other more seemingly lucrative fields like Finance or becoming a Lawyer, but described her devotion to completing her degree and choosing this field as a way to bridge a knowledge gap in her community, saying,

> It's the understanding that you are doing this because you are trying to help people, help give everyone a model to look up to so they know they can do it too, and then their families see them as a model, and then their families and their friends see models, and then everyone in the community knows they can go get a 4- year degree too, and then everything changes for the good. It's knowing that getting my degree means something bigger in the longer run.

Veronica focused on the impact she would have in helping her community as the biggest motivator in her life, stating,

> I hope to make an impact on my community and definitely leave a legacy. I want to be the change that other people want to see in the world. I want to see that in the community, and I want to achieve that so that my Latinx community, and even other people, can see that there is a way to change your future, and a way to make a difference in people's lives in our community. That's my absolute biggest hope and biggest reason for pushing forward.

A sense of selflessness and a deep desire to improve the lives of their entire communities appeared to be present in the participants' narratives surrounding their desire to complete their

four-year degrees. Participants also had a genuine sense of purpose and responsibility in leading, helping, and creating a better future for their entire communities. The participants wanted to, as Roberto described, "give back to the community, to everything, to everybody who has supported me and helped." They never took for granted the sacrifices their parents made, and the help friends and people in the community had given them. They wanted to reciprocate the love and care they had received tenfold back to their families and communities.

Participants lived experiences as Latinx students from the Appalachia region, having transferred from a two-year college to a four-year college and having persisted at the four-year college, demonstrate a resiliency to adversity. The positive impact of their communities' support throughout their lives set the foundation for these participants and helped cultivate and foster a sense of responsibility to their communities. The participants' understanding and belief in their ability to have a positive impact on multiple levels – themselves, their immediate and extended family, their community, and beyond – encouraged them to lead by example and as a model of what was possible while actively trying to make positive changes in their own lives.

Sub Question 1: What are the roles of significant individuals, such as mentors, advisors, teachers, and counselors, in students' lives on their educational journeys?

Exploring the roles of professional mentors in the participants' lives as directly related to their educational journeys was the second subset area of focus in the research study. The data collected in answering this first sub-question helped participants reflect more intentionally on how the professionals in their lives impacted their educational journey. It allowed the researcher to understand better how significant individuals outside of the participants' families helped support the participants. However, of note, there were significant barriers to forming close connections with professionals in the participants' lives, all stemming from fear – whether being

perceived as inferior, risking the safety of their family through deportation, or fear from previous experiences – many participants did not form deep relationships with any professional in their life. Even with the relationships that were formed, only one participant had a relationship with a professional that had a transformational and lasting impact on the participant's life. The data did, however, show a deep desire for connectivity. The participants expressed ways in which they believe future students could establish connections to professionals to support them in the higher education journey and process.

The narratives focus on the potential for impact in the future rather than experienced connectivity with professionals, except for one participant. The experiences of the one participant who did have a community mentor that impacted their life support many of the core beliefs of the other participants in how people in the future could be better supports for students from similar backgrounds. The two major themes that emerged from the participant narratives were: connectivity through relationship building and guidance for the future.

Connectivity Through Relationship Building

All six participants discussed the power of connecting with someone and forming a relationship as something that would have been or was critical to their engagement with higher education and persistence to degree completion. Only one student had experienced this level of connectivity with someone in a professional role, Miriam, who brought up her connection with this person numerous times in her narrative, shared:

> My number one role model and just person I was connected with growing up besides my mom was my therapist. He was a therapist at a community center. I started going there when I had some issues in high school and he is just such a leader, and he really helps you. He really like met me where I was and always helped me no matter what. He taught

> me a lot but maybe most he taught me how to give back. It's what I am in my program. I want to help people just like him. He was my role model growing up and I want to be that for other people.

All of the other participants, when asked to think of engagement with mentors, advisors, counselors, professors, or any other potential leader, recounted negative experiences at some point in their lives which seemed to create a fear of reaching out or trying to connect with individuals. Miriam, who was the only person who had a positive relationship with a professional in her life, still shared story after story of how professionals engaged with her negatively. When discussing high school and anyone whom she felt connected or whom she worked with, her response was,

> The teachers there never cared about me. They just passed me along even when I should have failed. And then the counselors when it came time to apply for college told me like don't even bother applying because you'll never get in. No one ever had time for me. I was just this burden that everyone wanted to get rid of. I wasn't the best student, no. But I know if someone would have just taken the time to help me, I could have just had a bigger head start.

Roberto, who would share positive engagement with faculty at the university level, still shared that there was no lasting impact from anyone that was a professional in his life, saying,

> I really like the professors here. I respect them. I think they are nice. But I am not close to anyone here. I didn't have really any engagement with anyone in high school or at the community college, but I didn't care as much there you know. I was like this doesn't really matter. Here I really like I want to be like them, I want to learn from them. I do wish there was some way to have deeper conversations and connections, but it's just it's

> hard to connect on a personal level. No one here is like me you know? I feel like everyone is nice, but that's it.

Veronica echoed Roberto's sentiment of faculty being nice but not connecting on a deeper or more meaningful level, but it was something she wished the university and colleges, in general, could work to make more accessible for students that identified as Latinx, sharing,

> My whole time, whether at the community college or here at the university, I have only had one Spanish professor, and I am positive it's because I am taking a Spanish course. I don't think if I was in a Spanish class, I would ever have even had a Latinx professor, an advisor, a counselor, nothing. She is the first one I have ever had. And I mean all my teachers in my degree program are inclusive of us, it's just I think the university and really all colleges they need more Latinx professionals, so they could understand what we've been through you know, our challenges and struggles. That they could relate to us, and we could have kind of a safe space and a role model you know. Again, my professors are nice and great, that's not it. They just don't understand people like me. I'm thankful to have supportive professors, even though they don't look like me or speak the language.

Four of the six participants said they thought colleges should have more professionals from similar backgrounds that they could relate to. Each participant described their professors at the four-year level as kind, but as Liliahna shared,

> I think the professors are really nice and they are helpful, but I find that I gravitate more toward home and where people understand me more. And I try not to bother the professors too, like I will ask my peers first and we can usually figure it out. I just don't think I have anything big enough to really engage with my professors one-on-one about.

In examining the institution's factbook for the semester immediately preceding these interviews, for faculty members at all levels, from full professor to lecturer, Hispanic faculty totaled 43, the lowest of any race/ethnicity at the university. For comparison, Black faculty totaled 101, Asian faculty totaled 144, and White faculty totaled 754. As a percentage, Hispanic faculty constitute only 4% of the total number of faculty. Given the large size of the institution, with over 30,000 students, there is a small likelihood that the participants would encounter a faculty member of a similar or shared cultural background. The institution does not publish data regarding the race or ethnicity of staff, so there is no absolute way to compare how many Latinx staff students could encounter, or the percentage compared to the total staff at the institution. However, if the data is similar, students assigned to a Latinx advisor, for example, are probably very low.

Participants wanted to connect with professionals, but it was evident that there was a divide that included the belief that because no one identified as Latinx around them, they would not be able to understand, so participants engaged on a very transactional level with the professionals around them. In addition, these participant's experiences demonstrate a lack of engagement from the professionals on campus in mentoring, supporting, and assisting students throughout their educational journey.

Longing for Mentoring and Professional Connection

Participants expressed a longing for mentoring and professional connection during their educational journey, as most participants described a sense of wandering until they figured out what to do, or just completing steps and checking boxes when they knew such things existed. Deeper connections at the university could lead to more positive engagements and open more

opportunities up to students for continued education or simply more exposure to pre-professional and career development.

Engagement Levels and Impact of Professional Connection

Two of the participants did describe positive experiences with their advisors and shared a thankfulness for deep and genuine engagement. One participant, Julio, had two different experiences with advisors, but in the interview, he casually brushed over the negative experience and highlighted the positive. He shared that in his first semester, he had 15 credit hours of courses that did not count for any pre-requisites or actual requirements for his degree program and that when he realized on his DegreeWorks none of his credit hours would help him progress toward degree completion, he was perplexed and frustrated, sharing,

> I communicated with my advisor, I asked if these courses were correct, one of them was even recommended by the advisor. Like I subbed out a class I had for this class because I thought that's what I needed. I made some friends in a couple of classes so that's good. Mostly other transfers who were having similar issues, but I was just like what? This very expensive semester that I am being charged as an out-of-state student for is like it's for nothing. But then I got a different advisor in my major and things really turned around. He's great. Like so great. It was the turning point for me – like when I felt like I was actually in college. I learned about all these great resources, he connected me with other people on campus, helped me figure out how to catch up from being behind in coursework. I did have to take an 18-hour semester, but I am going to graduate on time, and I attribute a lot of that to him.

Participants also described how they wished they had a mentor in the professional setting because it could help them learn more about their options in higher education and beyond.

Roberto discussed applying to scholarships he researched for Latinx students and realized that he should have been applying to them for years. He shared,

> I just applied to a couple of scholarships, and I made it to the final round of a pretty big scholarship through the Hispanic Scholarship Fund and I think it really clicked when I was finishing that round of the scholarship. I realized how hard it is for like people who look like me and people where I come from to be able to like make it farther than a lot of people. And it's just hard to know where to find things and what to apply for. I mean I only found out about this because a girl at my church applied, and she was like hey Roberto you should apply to this too. Like thank goodness we tell each other things. I wish that I had someone out there looking out for me or telling me 'Hey you should look at this or that.' I don't know. I do know that no matter what I will give my best and always work hard, I just want to make sure in like 10 years I can look back and say you know I reached my potential I did everything I could. I mean I have, but it would be nice to know how to navigate this whole other world out there.

Four participants discussed frustrations with advising, as there were miscommunications or lack of communication, which resulted in incomplete or incorrect schedules, courses that could not be used to satisfy any requirements, and generally feeling that they were missing out on things academically because their advisor did not meet with them.

Liliahna shared that at the community college and the university level, she felt very frustrated with the advising process, giving examples of being given a checklist of courses to choose from in different categories only to have the course she took not be the actual course she would need for her major. For example, she shared,

> I had to take a Math, and there was a whole list of them. I circled Pre-calculus and asked if that would satisfy what I needed. That advisor told me yes. So, I took Pre-calculus and then the next semester I had a new advisor, and he told me I needed Statistics and should have never taken Pre-calculus because it didn't count for anything for what I needed. So, I had to take another Math course. I have had eight advisors. It seems like they change every semester. Some are helpful. Some are not. Most just treat you like a list. Like they say this email can count as our advising I have removed your hold you can register for your classes. And I'm just like what? What if I am missing something. I don't know. It's not all on advisors, I do a lot of research and I've gotten better at it over the years but like when I transferred here, we use Canvas and DegreeWorks and Banner. At the community college, we used BlackBoard and Starfish and just none of the systems were the same so I stumbled around for quite some time before figuring out how to navigate anything and I wish you know there had been some help from advisors, some hands-on transition.

Veronica shared that she wished advisors had engaged more and could "share resources and point out things that may be of help." To ensure other students were able to learn about resources on campus Veronica became a peer mentor, sharing,

> I'm a mentor for freshmen students here. I am part of the advising for freshman excellence program here at the university. And I always tell the new freshmen to not be afraid to ask questions. You're not alone. We are here to help you. And to get involved because when you're involved that's where all your opportunities come and networking opportunities, sometimes job opportunities. And I love learning with them and really feeling like I can guide them and answer questions. I wish that I had an advisor that really

> took the time to get to know me you know and point out things that maybe I could get involved with, so I love being able to give back as part of this advising program.

Of note is that none of the participants that were interviewed had participated in any research with faculty members, and only one student would continue into a graduate school program. In examining each participant's narratives, when asked about research work with faculty or graduate school, none of the participants had engaged in conversations about academic research or progression to a graduate degree with any professional on campus. Even the one participant planning to attend graduate school, Miriam, when probed more for how she managed to apply to graduate school entirely on her own, shared how she navigated the process by replying,

> I reached out to a few of my faculty members for letters of recommendation. Told them where I had applied and what I was planning to do. That was it. I navigated the whole process on my own. I only applied to one school. I figured I would get in if it was meant to be and luckily, I guess it worked out.

Participants had no exposure to academic research or enrichment opportunities outside of the classroom during their time at the university, which could further support their desire for more mentoring and professional connection. All participants shared a lack of knowledge in knowing what questions to ask and often ended up walking away feeling like they were missing something but did not quite know how to communicate those feelings. Overall, guidance for the future, whether a more immediate impact such as course registration, connecting to campus resources and professionals on campus, or even looking out into the future for graduate school or post-graduate opportunities, was something most of the participants felt was needed more at the university.

Sub Question 2: What other factors do these students identify as critical in their successful transition experience?

Participants discussed many key areas that helped them be successful in their overall collegiate experience. Specifically, when focusing on the transition experience from the community college to the university, participants relied on their experience in overcoming change and challenges and utilized tools in resiliency. The participants all discussed finding community within the four-year institution as key to their ability to transfer successfully.

Early Tools in Resilience

Five participants specifically recounted how challenging their first semester was at the university after transferring. When describing the first semester after transferring, words and phrases such as "hard," "awful," "alone," "lost," and "no idea" or "no clue," were apparent in the participant narratives. The participants all transferred within two semesters of one another, but at most, they had one pre-Covid semester. As a result of a global-wide pandemic, the transition process was delayed or even exacerbated, especially for the participants who transferred the semester the pandemic sent everyone at the university home, or the following semester when everything was virtual because of the pandemic. Pre-pandemic transfer students found the transition to a university challenging through feeling lost, both on campus and in working through their degree paths. Roberto shared his experience navigating his first semester on campus as challenging but still maintained a positive attitude. Roberto shared,

> I felt like I had to work twice as hard as everybody else you know. Like the first day in music theory, I thought how am I ever going to do this, I taught myself how to play music, you know, I never had lessons or anything we couldn't afford nothing like that. And I had never even seen music theory before. So, like I had to teach myself everything,

> and I remember thinking I was just so not prepared for university. But I knew it would just make be better in the end. So, I took it as a positive, like it creates character.

For participants who entered their first semester as the first semester of the pandemic they had perhaps an even more challenging time transitioning as they didn't have the time to adapt to a new campus before having to completely shift their educational experience again. Julio shared his rather complicated first semester on the university campus, saying,

> Once I got here it wasn't smooth. I have a whole story about how I thought I had tuberculosis and almost missed orientation and housing…I probably need a whole hour to tell you just that story. And then when I got here, I thought it was going to be a normal year…things were fine at first. I was going to new clubs that I've never even seen before, trying to get to know people in my classes and stuff and then Covid hit, and we all got kicked out. So, you know that was quite a semester to transfer.

But despite the unpredictability of the semester, Julio continued to keep a positive attitude, sharing,

> The nice thing about going home during COVID that semester was that those particular classes could have been remote to begin with. So, I actually wasn't bothered by having to be home for that first semester. The second semester was a little easier remote because I actually paced myself a little better at that point…But now, I am grateful to be back on campus, join my clubs back in person. I actually became an officer in the Kung Fu club.

Liliahna transferred to the university during the middle of the pandemic, so her experience was completely virtual until the semester in which the interview was conducted. She recounted her experiences, saying,

> I transferred mid-pandemic, so everything was virtual. Some of the courses I was in were pretty big, since I switched my major and they were the intro courses. So, like some of those courses were over 100 people in them, and I think that's really hard to get to know anyone. And then four out of my five classes were asynchronous, so it felt like I was teaching myself most of the time. But it was fine. Even the next year, all my classes were still online, but once I got into some smaller classes, we would have like group chats and stuff and that really helped feel like we were getting to know each other.

Even though the participants experienced challenges in transitioning from the community college to the university, they managed to describe something positive that came out of their experiences. As discussed earlier in the chapter, the participants' positive attitudes, even in the face of significant and potentially catastrophic challenges, reflects their resilience drawn from their early life experiences growing up. The participants always maintained the determination never to give up and to persist.

Building Their Own Community

Throughout the participant's narratives and this chapter, the community has been connected to family, friends, and the community from their hometown. This sense of community was described by participants as a source of stability and provided a sense of place and purpose. In addition, the lens of the community also expanded in relation to the transfer process and successful transitioning of many of the participants, connecting the community to a metaphysical space. For example, Diego described finding and remembering your place in the community as the key to grounding oneself, sharing,

> There was so many things that were so frustrating to me about transferring. Nothing was straightforward or easy. I had to make multiple trips to different offices here just to go

> over questions and I was trying to figure out all out on my own. But I will say despite all the frustrations I tried really hard to find my sense of community. And I may not be a typical student like I have to work all the time and I go home a lot with my family and stuff, but this place is really special it's so alive here, you know. And that's what I think is so important is find the community that makes you feel alive and like that there are possibilities. That's how I feel here, and I know that feeling will stay with me forever.

When participants were asked what they would recommend to other transfer students to make the transfer experience successful, all six participants described working hard, finding a sense of community, and being an advocate for themselves, as the key tools to success at a university. For each of the participants, campus was described in an overall positive manner. However, despite there not being direct conversation stating that UU was not a welcoming institution, the participants' experiences reveal that campus was not inherently welcoming or supportive. Rather, participants have had to utilize their resilience to aid in their transition and figure out how to navigate their educational experience through creating social networks and building their own communities.

Sub Question 3: How does a student's community cultural wealth impact their transition experience?

This research study's utilization of Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth model as a framework examined the assets participants brought with them and served as a lens for better understanding how cultural wealth impacted participant persistence and success. The responses from the participants illustrate that their experiences are interconnected to each of the components which make up Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth model: *aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational,* and *resistant.* Working through each tenant of Yosso's

model with the participants helped to reveal these assets as evident and integral to the participants' persistence and success in higher education.

Aspirational

Aspirational capital is defined as the "ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future even in the face of real or perceived barriers" (Yosso, 2005, p.77). All six participants discussed their aspirations, focusing on giving back to their families, both nuclear and extended, and giving back to their communities. Focusing on the community, Liliahna, Roberto, and Miriam emphasized being active members in their community and providing a path for others to achieve a better life in some way through the participants having achieved a baccalaureate degree.

Liliahna, an upcoming graduate next year in Social Work, described her aspirations as connecting back to her community, sharing,

> I'm a Social Work major and I guess since I'm in the community and I see what's going on with our community, I want to work with the Latinx community. I've always wanted to help Latinx in general, because there's a lot of things that aren't talked about or like lot of things that like you see, but there's no action done. I feel like I'm ready to go out there and like help people and be able to make a change and try to, you know, better somebody's life.

Roberto, a graduating senior doubling in Business and Music, echoed Liliahna's sentiment of achieving a degree, sharing,

> I want to do it more for like my community. You know? I want to give back to everything to everybody who's like supported me, helped me.

The other four participants, Miriam, Veronica, Diego, and Julio, all expressed their aspirations of achieving a degree as relating directly to helping their family, whether through

serving as an aspiration for their family members to achieve a degree in higher education or through an aspiration to help their family financially. Veronica, a graduating senior majoring in Social Work, wants to help her family through being a role model for others to aspire to achieve a college degree, stating,

> I'm the only one in my family who is going to college. So, I was like, you know what, I'm going to go and I'm going to get my degree because I want to make a high, positive impact to my younger cousins. And I want them to see me and be like, 'Wow! You know, she has been successful,' and hopefully, I would inspire them to also go to college, and choose what they want to do, choose what makes them happy.

The participants overcame many obstacles at every level of their educational journey. They continued to prove their capability to their peers, teachers, and themselves to better their lives and the lives of others. Many participants were challenged in the educational system starting in elementary school. Four participants were placed in English Language Learner courses. One student was placed in Exceptional Children coursework for a year because the school system did not have the resources needed for an interpreter. Another participant was not placed in any English Language Learner courses and was instead given a peer to help translate material which proved disastrous. This participant, Miriam, recounted her start in American schools as problematic, sharing,

> I started learning English in 5th grade when I moved here. And I didn't even have a proper translator. I was assigned a classmate who did not like me and she refused to translate. So, I would be like 'Hey what's happening? What's the teacher saying?' And she would just tell me "Stop annoying me. Stop talking to me." So, I never knew anything that happened that whole first year. I just tried to learn English by listening to

everyone all the time. And I loved reading. So, I just read a lot and pushed myself to learn. So that helped me a lot.

None of the participants were given the tools they needed to succeed in elementary school, yet they loved learning and wanted to catch up to their peers. As they moved into middle and high school, there were more subtle pushes for them, such as teachers asking the participants if they were prepared to attend a postsecondary institution, with many of these students often being tracked in K-12 at various points not to be able to attend a postsecondary institution very easily through English Language Learner tracks, and non-honors, or non-college-prep courses. However, they all aspired to go to college as children. Moreover, they all aspired to achieve a degree from a four-year once they started at a two-year institution as they learned their impact on their immediate lives and the lives of their community could be greater with a four-year degree. The participants never wavered in their belief that a four-year degree would create more opportunities for them to achieve more advancements and success in the future.

The transition to a four-year institution was challenging; however, the aspirations of the participants and the support of their families and communities helped provide participants with an increased belief in what they could accomplish. Achieving a baccalaureate degree for the participants was expressed as just the beginning of a completely different life than they had ever known. And their aspirations helped to provide a laser focus for the participants. No matter the obstacles, hardships, and hurdles, all six participants seemed to find a way to keep going because their aspiration for a degree and better life mattered to them above all else.

Linguistic

Linguistic capital refers to the skills a student learns through communicating with others in multiple languages or styles of language, often through storytelling, visual arts, and cross-cultural social-emotional awareness (Yosso, 2005).

The participants all described their engagement with multiple languages and the complex ways they found being bi-lingual to be both an asset and a barrier throughout their childhood and educational experiences. However, the participants were able to acknowledge the skills and power of being bi-lingual and use their experiences to propel them into higher education and support their aspirations to help their communities. For all the participants, there was a mentality of learning multiple languages and always being able to engage in multiple languages out of necessity.

Liliahna described learning English as a process she did with her family, specifically her mother and father, stating,

> My brother was very sick when he was little. He was always in the hospital and needed a lot of surgeries and medical care. I was little, like first or second grade when he was born and understood English as well as any six- or seven-year-old, you know? I didn't learn English until I started school, but I caught on really quick. Anyways, there was so much medical language and things to try and figure out. I would act as a translator for my grandmothers at their appointments, but like for my brother there was so much, so my mom, dad, and I worked a lot together to learn. They didn't have an interpreter or anything so it was on us to figure out what was being communicated. So that's really what made us learn English – my brother.

Liliahna wants to earn a translation certificate because she believes she could use it to help her community. Earning a translating certificate would give Liliahna a better command of

what she describes as "professional language" in medical fields. Liliahna stated that she remembers that even when she could say a proper word or use a term correctly in a medical setting, there was often no direct translation into Spanish, making it even more confusing or complex to try and translate and understand. She further relayed,

> It is so frustrating to double check with someone in English that you are saying things correctly but then realizing there is no equal word in Spanish, so you are trying to relay one word which really stands for an entire procedure, or a concept and a lot gets lost in translation, literally. Earning a certificate and being able to really understand more professional language and not just slang and conversational Spanish I think will be really helpful for the whole community. There is this missing piece in the community. We don't say these things on a daily basis. So, I want to be that for my community. I want to make sure they do understand the professional world.

Veronica echoed Liliahna in stating that she had often acted as a translator for her family, but that she often felt frustrated when they were in a professional setting such as healthcare, stating,

> I spoke English great. Spanish was my first language of course, but I picked up English super great even before I started school. But like it was rough growing up trying to translate things that I had never seen before like documents, stuff with money, and healthcare things. Like it felt like I was getting hit on both sides you know. Like the doctors and things, it was almost like they were kind of mad at us for not understanding what something means you know? The sighs and stuff. It felt like they were thinking 'You speak English fine, why don't you get this,' you know, and then on the flip side of things the doctors would use big fancy words that I wouldn't understand or like a

> prescription name, and then my parents would be yelling at me for not being able to translate or understand what was being said. It just felt impossible in some cases. But I guess it was good, it did make me more knowledgeable in the end.

Each participant discussed their experiences acting as a translator. While they all had negative experiences with trying to act as a bridge between two cultures and languages, each participant believed it made them better at communicating and empathizing with others. The initial gap between understanding their family's culture and American culture also led the participants to read and engage with American culture more in-depth and intentionally than perhaps native English speakers in America. "Read," "Library," "Study," and "Teach," regarding learning the English language and navigating between multiple cultures, languages, and expressions, were utilized 75 unique times by the participants and came up repeatedly in how they learned to navigate an entire system (from school to music, entertainment, sports, medicine, and forms). However, their experiences could be an advantage for these students as the skills they picked up in their formative years remained with them as they navigated higher education, especially in seeking out resources, the ability to read for understanding, and critical thinking skills.

Many of the narratives show the participants' engagement with multiple languages and the desire to help those coming behind them. Miriam discusses her desire to help students in the current K-12 system stating, "Even today, I volunteer at local schools that don't have translators for all the students and help them make sure they understand their assignments and where they can go for resources." Roberto talks about working with his younger siblings, cousins, friends, and community members whenever he goes home. He said his willingness to teach everyone has earned him the nickname "Big Man" back home and that people bombard him when he goes out

with questions. While he wants to give back to his entire community, he was most animated when recalling some of his experiences with his siblings during the Covid-19 pandemic when he had to attend university remotely, and they were attending K-12 remotely, sharing,

> When I was home for the pandemic my siblings would all gather around and listen to the professor for lecture and just ask me a thousand questions about what things mean. As the eldest child I didn't have a sibling to show me the way you know, but I am so proud to be that for them. We go over all their questions and what things means all the time. They put me on this pedestal which I mean not going to lie is nice sometimes you know, but it's just seeing them get it, to see it click in their heads, that's the best part.

Diego and Julio consider their linguistic skills a key to their future, saying they know it will help them be more marketable and competitive for future jobs.

Linguistic skills, such as being bilingual, have helped create a skillset that supports these students in their educational journey and inspires the participants to continue giving back to their communities.

Familial

Familial capital is viewed as a shared vision and understanding of where one comes from, including one's ancestry, history, and the importance of specific goals and ideas within a community. More extensive than just a nuclear structure, familial capital is understanding where one belongs over time and is a shared sense of ownership and connection to one's community (Yosso, 2005). Familial engagement expands beyond the immediate home and extends to community events, clubs, and church and is perhaps best described as immersive, creating deep connections and supports within the community, especially socially and emotionally.

The participants all described a deep connection with their family and an awareness and understanding of their histories – their ancestors, where they came from, what it meant to carry their name, and what they were doing for the future generations of their families by going to college to pursue a degree in higher education. The support of their families, whether financially, emotionally, or socially was an asset to these students as they continued on their higher education journey and often helped them to persevere in difficult circumstances.

Miriam articulated her desire to continue past a baccalaureate degree, excitedly saying she would attend one of the country's most prestigious institutions for a Master's in Social Work starting in the Fall after graduating with her bachelors in the Spring from this institution. She very excitedly described her need for a Master's stating,

> I just know this will give me the best chance you know, to really make a difference. I think back to my education experience here in the United States and I just don't want that for anyone else. My mom she was the biggest emotional support. She was always there for me. But if it weren't for her involving me in things for immigrants in our community and making me do things at first, I would have never gotten to where I am. When I graduate with my Master's I am going to go back and make sure like people know hey you did this, you helped me get here, you know. I wouldn't be here without them.

Roberto's narrative and family capital were also very intrinsically connected. His entire life, he has been surrounded by and immersed in his family and community. He is held up as the "bright light of the community." There does not seem to be any jealousy by family or community members, just genuine excitement for what he is doing and where he will go. When talking about completing his dual degrees at the institution, Roberto shared,

> My heart is in music. No doubt about it. But I just don't know if I can risk it all for a career in music, you know? Like if I don't make it my parents don't have anything. Like everybody's counting on me to make it you know. It's a huge deal to them, you know. I'm a Latino and like the first person in my entire neighborhood, in my church, to go to college…Everyone is like man Roberto you are going to be famous, you're going be on tv, we are all going to work for you. And it's awesome, not going to lie, I feel like I am famous when I am home, but that's why I also got a degree in Business. I need to be able to have a back-up plan and stability. Everyone has supported me so much and I am just so excited to make it for all of us you know?

Participants all discussed the emotional support of their families, even if they did not know how to support them at the university. Several participants shared similar stories of their parents wanting them to focus exclusively on their studies and not worry about anything else, so many participants' education was being paid for by their families, including more than a traditional nuclear household. Julio shared that he would never have continued in higher education, especially after having to come home for a year when his family initially ran out of funds to send him to college, if it was not for his parents and his uncles and grandparents in both the United States and Mexico helping to send him to college. Julio shared,

> My main connection is to my family. They are the whole reason I am here today. When I first went to a different university I had to come home after freshman year because we ran out of money. I had a really good GPA, my classes were easy, but I came home. I thought it was over then you know, like what can you do if you don't have money? I thought I'd work and that would be that. But my family was like no you have to go to school, you have to get an education. So, I started at the community college, which was

> still expensive but less than a four-year you know? And like when it came time to transfer, my entire family was like we are going to help you. Don't worry. Just go. We will make the money. And up until I got a paid internship, they all paid for my school which is just – I am just so thankful. And I want to do good for them. Succeed for them, you know. I wouldn't even have this chance without them, and I've made it you know. I graduate in less than two weeks.

None of the participants felt pressure from their families to earn a degree for prestige or money. The value of education from their families' perspective focused on the possibilities it created. The cost, while a factor for each participant and often why they started at or attended a community college, was never going to outweigh the perceived benefit of postsecondary education. Veronica captured her family's unwavering support in her studies, sharing,

> My parents have always been supportive of my decisions. So, after telling them I was planning to change my career, you know, they didn't know what social work entailed. So, I explained it to them, and at the end of the day they just understood whatever makes me happy, you know, they are also happy…they never had the expectation toward me that I should be a lawyer or a doctor or something.

She continued by sharing her experiences with the Latinx community, which showed her that the family's focus was separate from any status or field of study. Veronica said,

> In my experience, like with my other friends who are also Latinx, I've realized that our parents, they just want you to succeed. They just want you to have a good career, a good life you know.

Veronica also beamed with pride, reflecting on her family's support, "That makes me proud of them, you know." Veronica's reflection on her family's support was echoed throughout

each participant interview. Each participant discussed their family's supportive nature and shared this sense of immense pride in their family and how they supported them along their educational journey.

It is also important to note that each participant's family cultivated a sense of community that spread beyond the classroom. The participants would recant stories they grew up hearing of their parents' immigrations, who had helped them, the networks they had formed, strangers giving them a chance to work, and people welcoming them into their community. The participants recognized and honored their parents' sacrifices while also realizing the power of community and the inextricable interwovenness of community in daily life. This sentiment of being actively involved in the community and giving back to the community in some way was present in each participant. From working and volunteering in hospitals, school systems, and the court system to being active in church, clubs, and organizations, the participants had a deep sense of self concerning bettering the lives of other individuals within the community.

Liliahna spoke passionately about the sacrifices of her parents as a great motivation for her to enter and continue higher education, but of equal motivation was a deep desire to help her community, saying,

> I feel like I am ready to go out there and help people and be able to basically make a change and try to better someone’s life.

When looking toward the future, participants described completing their degrees as a massive accomplishment for their entire family and the community – whether that be their physical community or a community where they felt they could serve. Participants would mention if they found classes easy or challenging, but they were never grade, or achievement focused. Instead, the participants focused on service. Familial capital kept the participants

focused on the end goal – the degree – and the impact of that degree on their family and community rather than trying to achieve a perfect slate of accolades, GPA, internships, or some other often perceived marker of success.

Social

Social capital is defined by Yosso (2005) as "networks of people and community resources" (p. 79). These networks provide support in tangible and intangible ways that help to bolster an individual's ability to successfully engage in and navigate the community at large, especially when concerning larger systems such as employment, healthcare, education, and the legal system (Yosso, 2005). More specifically, Yosso (2005) describes this form of capital as being divided into instrumental support – helping individuals succeed within these larger systems and communities through tangible resources, and – emotional support – helping individuals succeed through providing positive psychological support.

Considering instrumental support, the participants described how their peers would help them learn how to engage with the university system. Participants frequently described how older Latinx students would reach out and engage with them to help provide resources on extracurricular activities, clubs, and general advice about the institution and area. Within the academic realm, participants also described their peers as helpful in academic guidance and supporting them within their designated programs.

Some participants also described instrumental support from educators that helped them engage with higher education systems. Liliahna discussed her decision to attend a two-year institution after her mother connected her to one of her friends in the community, sharing,

> So, my original plan was actually going straight to a four-year, but then I kind of freaked out. I freaked out and I was like I don't know if I want to go to a four-year just because I

> wasn't really 100% sure of what I wanted to do. I got into the university I applied to. But I just didn't know you know? And that's when my mom introduced me to her friend. And her friend told me she was in a nursing program at the local community college. She told me about the program, and she explained to me what an Associates was and what options you had with a two-year degree. And then she was basically telling me that there was like a lot of other options I could choose from at the community college. And that one of the options was to do my general classes and then transfer to a four-year. So, I emailed the university and said I need to cancel coming and they said OK, so that's how I ended up at the community college.

Liliahna discussed how her mom's friend connected her to a career center at the community college and introduced her to a network of professionals that helped guide her to transfer.

Students also utilized social capital through emotional support. While their immediate family members could often not provide instrumental support in learning about the higher education system, they did provide substantial emotional support that helped propel students forward in their educational endeavors. Participants' peers also provided significant emotional support within academic programs and the Latinx community, contributing to the participants' success. The dynamic between family and peer support was almost identical in each participant's narrative. The family provided emotional support and would listen, encourage, and express empathy toward the participant, but the family did not know how to help with problems or issues relevant to the educational experience. However, the constant love and support from family provided comfort for each participant. Peer support was highlighted by participants as key to their feeling a stronger sense of belonging and resilience in their educational journeys.

Miriam shared how connecting with peers at both the community college and the four-year institution helped her feel more confident in her skills and abilities sharing,

> I really liked the students at the community college. I made one of my best friends there. I thought everyone was really friendly and approachable. And smart too. We would help each other out in classes…Here I have also made some great friends and lifelong friends. I'm close to everyone in my major and program which since we have clinicals is important. And from the beginning to now it's like yeah, I do get this, and I can do this. And I want to give back to other students too.

Liliahna echoed Miriam in saying how important the people at the university have been in providing a sense of community and belonging on top of helping her in the program, saying,

> The people in my program have been so helpful and just so welcoming. And they actually care about if you do good and they want you to succeed. They have helped me a lot. It's so nice. We all like get together and work on classwork, we check each other's things like I'm pretty good at writing so I will look over my friends writing sometimes, but like I am not very good at math, and luckily we don't have a lot of math in my major, but there is some science content and I get nervous about it. And it's just a good community.

Students also joined Latinx organizations at the four-year institution, creating a dynamic support network among peers who shared similarities. Each student recounted different memories and experiences with joining Latinx clubs and organizations as a positive addition to their collegiate experience. Many students also discussed how important being part of a larger community was during the COVID-19 pandemic. Julio shared his sense of community after joining Latinx organizations on campus saying,

> When I got here the first semester, I joined a lot of Latinx clubs. I joined some other clubs too like Karate Club and a Gaming Club, but I was really excited about connecting with other members in the Latinx community. We would all meet up and go volunteering, go out in the community and help and I really liked that. And then COVID-19 hit, and we all had to go home. And I just felt really lost. Like this great community I had become a part of just got ripped away. Obviously, we couldn't go out and volunteer or help people anymore, but I will say the Latinx clubs we all at least checked in on each other, would connect when we could on Zooms, and it helped me not to feel just completely cut off you know. Like it reminded me there was a point to all of this.

Veronica also reinforced the importance of community with the Latinx community through all the challenges of the pandemic and the excitement of returning to campus to engage with this community when it was safe. She shared,

> I transferred here right before Covid hit, like I was only here for a few months, and I had made a point to join like every Latinx club we have here. And then when we all went home, I didn't know if I would ever make friends or connect you know, but all of these clubs they held meetings through Zoom. And I remember making friends with people in these clubs and I found my community here, even when we were virtual. I am really thankful for everyone in these clubs and since we've come back to campus it's been great to just get together, do community service, and just take advantage of the opportunity to learn from people who are like me and have stories similar to me, and plan how to keep engaging with other Latinx students coming into campus.

The instrumental and emotional support these participants experienced helped them successfully network within higher education and create a community where they felt a sense of belonging.

Navigational

Yosso (2005) defines navigational capital as the "skills of maneuvering through social institutions…not created with Communities of Color in mind" (p. 80). Similar to social wealth, these institutions are often based on employment, healthcare, education, and the legal system, and one's ability to navigate these systems is often heavily based on the social environment in which an individual is located. Through the participant interviews, navigating through higher education from a process and a climate perspective was discussed at length as challenges, and constants participants worked through.

As first-generation college students, each participant described their own stories of navigating the higher education system as requiring an extensive amount of work on the front end – before being admitted. Not having direct familial knowledge of how the college system worked, the participants believed they had to be much more persistent and inquisitive in learning about what they needed to do to gain admittance and succeed. Several participants discussed this very steep learning curve to the actual knowledge process. Roberto shared that he realized he was going to have to ask more questions or use alternative resources after he started community college, sharing,

> I didn't have to apply to the community college completely on my own since I was a dual enrolled student in high school. But I didn't even know about it you know. One day a school counselor I had never seen before came into our class and told us about this dual enrollment program. My friend Victor said his sister had applied and was in the program

> and it was good. He told me he was going to apply so I did too. I was nervous because I had no idea what to expect but it was a good experience. But I realized no one there was just going to get a two-year degree and I was like 'Oh wait, this isn't the end – I need to figure out how do I get into a big college – a four-year school.' And that's when I knew I needed help. It was alphabet soup to me. FAFSFA. EFC. W-2. SSN. It was like I knew English, but I still clearly didn't know English. So, I googled everything. Google taught me everything I needed to know about applying to college.

Echoing Roberto's experience with using Google to help them apply to college, Miriam shared,

> I didn't really know what to do you know. What to study, where to go. So, one day I just sat down and Googled all my questions, did my research, and figured out what I wanted to study and where I wanted to go.

Many other participants discussed how they were afraid to ask for help initially, saying things such as, "I just followed the directions and prayed it was right," or another participant said: "I would fill out these forms and just wait for the shoe to drop." Participants had different motivations for not asking for help, but many discussed how they did not want to be perceived as less intelligent than their peers. One of the participants, Roberto, frequently expressed his fear of being perceived as not intelligent if he asked professionals questions at the high school and community college level, but after entering the university setting, he became more comfortable with asking questions to professionals on campus sharing,

> Once I made it into university, I realized like I needed to start thinking about what comes next. And I started asking questions. I went and had help building a resume. I went and asked for help to find internships you know. And if I wouldn't have asked, I would just not have anything really but my classes, and I learned that you have to do more than that.

> You need that experience and to build your resume for jobs. If I could give any advice to anyone it would be to ask questions. Go to office hours even if you don't have questions. You have to put yourself out there. I'm a hardcore introvert but I've made myself be more extroverted because it helps you in so many ways and makes you connections you would have never know about otherwise you know.

Veronica echoed Roberto's narrative, discussing how she wished she had known to ask questions in the beginning and, even if she did ask a question, to be persistent if she did not understand something. Veronica shared,

> I wish I had known it was ok to ask questions. That it didn't mean I wasn't as good as everyone else or as smart as everyone else. And even when I would ask a question it seemed like everyone else just knew that, or the explanation was so simple I felt like I should just get it you know. That's something I have had to learn, and I try and teach my family, my community like it's ok to ask questions. I tell all my cousins and friends ask questions. And even when you ask questions, ask more questions.

Participants discussed the importance of being determined to accomplish a goal, such as getting into college and then doing well. However, there was a lot of self-awareness and growth in the participants learning to be more proactive and use the existing networks they were a part of to accomplish their goals.

Julio perhaps summed up the lessons with navigational capital most succinctly when he was discussing his path in navigating higher education, stating,

> I grew a lot maturity wise and realized that if people think I'm not smart or I don't understand something that's not about me. If I need help, then I need help. I work hard, I

> am engaged. You have to ask questions. You have to put yourself out there. It's the only way you can get where you need to be.

Even when considering future employment prospects and mobility, several participants discussed learning how to navigate through the system after watching their peers and learning how opportunities developed. Diego discussed his observations for internships and future job security from watching his peers work through their summer plans sharing,

> So, in business we have to have internships to graduate, for the honors track. It's part of the requirement. I knew coming in as a transfer student I hadn't had the chance to network maybe in the same way as my peers, but I was working a part-time job at Amazon so I knew I could maybe do an internship on top of my job there but wanted to see how to branch out some too you know. So, I started asking questions. Where did you go? How did you get in? And the answers really surprised me. It was a lot of my dad has a friend. Or my brother called this guy. And I thought ok, well that's never going to happen for me, but you know I'll just work twice as hard, network, reach out, show up, and I did that. I even made it to a final round for an internship, interviewed with the CEO, and then I got a call from his assistant a few weeks later and he said look this guy really wants to hire you, but he has a friend whose son needs an internship too. He doesn't have work for two people. And I learned that it really is a lot of who you know. So, at my job at Amazon, I make it a point to engage with my managers, get a lot of face time. And I've gotten two promotions since then. I mean I work hard. But I am learning that sometimes hard work is only recognized when people know who you are.

Several other participants discussed their ability to get a job or an internship through their peer network. Liliahna shared,

> Sometimes it's just about having someone vouch for you. To say, 'yeah I know this person, they are a hard-worker, they do good.' And that's how you get your foot in the door. I am really grateful for my friends here because it has gotten me internships and even a part-time job that otherwise, I wouldn't have ever known how to get into.

When asked what helped them navigate college the best, it was apparent that the participants all learned how to be a part of the social systems and structures while practicing persistence and determination to accomplish their goals and determine what came next after graduating from the university. From learning how to access college to advancing through their coursework and getting their feet in the door for internships and jobs, these participants demonstrated determination, resourcefulness, adaptability, and learning how to navigate systems in ways that would lead them to be successful.

Resistant

Resistant capital is best defined by Yosso (2005) as engaging in behavior that challenges and opposes perceived ideas or the status quo. Participants often expressed this form of capital by feeling like they needed to prove they did not fit into the stereotypes they believed were held of Latinx students and to prove that they were just as smart as their peers.

Four of the six participants referenced conscious choices regarding their physical appearance. These stories were all brought up organically and as part of their upbringing. For example, Roberto described his appearance as a direct result of his upbringing and experiences with people who fell into those stereotypes, sharing,

> Growing up my dad was always like you can't get any tattoos. Don't dress with baggy pants or big shirts. Don't ever get a buzz cut. Don't wear flashy jewelry. And I used to be like man when I'm older I'm going to get a tattoo if I want you know. But then I would

> see my friends from high school get singled out when I would go back home. Like the tattoos and buzz cuts and clothes made people think they were drug addicts or in a gang or whatever and they wouldn't get jobs, or people would be afraid of them, or they would just have a lot more interactions with the police you know. And I was like ok for people to take me seriously I have to look a certain way. So, I always dress professionally, no lounge clothes outside my apartment. I always fix my hair, and I'll never get a buzz cut. I don't have any tattoos and I'll never get one. No piercings. No flashy jewelry. I get it you know. I don't want to make my life any harder, so I want to prove like I am good, and I fit in.

While Roberto's example was the most detailed, other participants echoed these sentiments. Diego shared, "I always dress professional when I go out, even for like picking up fast food," and Miriam stated, "I always keep my hair styled simple, I will never dye my hair loud colors like pink or green because I know I wouldn't get jobs, people wouldn't take me seriously." Physical appearance was one way many participants felt they needed to prove they were not a part of any actual or perceived stereotypes. However, another focus point was proving they were engaged in course material and as competent as their peers in coursework. While none of the participants were focused on their grades in the sense of making straight A's, they were focused on ensuring their classmates and professors knew they could positively contribute to the class by being active in discussions and always being prepared to contribute. Participants discussed ways to prove to their professors and classmates that they were prepared for class and understood the material. Different examples were shared, from how they engaged with the course material, to how they engaged with their professors, but each of the examples was to prove that they belonged in that particular space.

Liliahna shared how she would always comment more than necessary on discussion board assignments saying,

> We would only have to comment on like two people's posts in the class, but I always did at least five or six, you know. I know that those are supposed to be just check the box kind of assignments, but I never wanted my professor to think I was slacking in any way. I wanted them to know I really did know the work.

Roberto described showing up to office hours as a way to prove he knew material, sharing,

> Like almost nobody goes to office hours for professors, and I was like, I'll just show up. You know? That's not one thing that once I started going with like one professor, I would show up all the time, then I started doing it with other professors. I would just start showing up with other professors and, you know show I was doing the work and then it helped me start developing relationships, that I do think I will keep in the future.

Other participants utilized this form of capital through things such as tracking how many times they spoke in classes, allowing everyone to talk but making sure not to be forgotten, always volunteering to be group leaders for projects and presentations, utilizing resources like the writing center for proof of using resources on campus, and overall ensuring that their presence in the classroom was always regarded as positive. The participants recognized that there was a behavior code and ideal they needed to conform with in order to participate in upward mobility within the American system. However, participants recognized that they are being held to a standard that those in power are not held to, with negative stereotypes of their cultures and communities being held against them and influencing their decisions to conform to American society's cultural norms.

The significance of these decisions cannot be overstated. While at first glance it may appear that these students are not trying to subvert the traditional status quo, they are demonstrating intentionality in their decisions. It is their choice whether to get tattoos, dress a certain way, participate and engage in class a specific way. They considered the alternatives, considered expressing themselves in a non-traditional manner, but ultimately decided their actions would empower them, and by proxy help their communities, the most, if they were able to continue achieving their goals without hitting roadblocks they believed they could prevent through their own decisions and efforts.

Overall, the participants expressed different levels of the seven types of community cultural wealth. However, each participant utilized these types of capital as a way in which to persist and navigate the higher education system. Table 4 below displays how each participant utilized the six components of Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth model when navigating higher education.

Table 4: Participant's Utilization of Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth Model

	ASPIRATIONAL	LINGUISTIC	FAMILIAL	SOCIAL	NAVIGATIONAL	RESISTANT
Liliahna	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓
Roberto	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓
Miriam	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗
Diego	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓
Veronica	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Julio	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗

Summary

Chapter 4 outlined the major thematic findings of the phenomenological study investigating the experiences of first-generation Latinx students from the Appalachian Region, who transferred from a two-year institution to a four-year institution, and how their assets helped them persist at the four-year level. Interviews were conducted with six participants in a two-interview process, resulting in 12 total interviews. These interviews revealed that the participants' ability to navigate higher education, transfer, persist, and succeed at the university level relied heavily on assets described in Yosso's community cultural wealth model (2005), including the following components: *aspirational, familial, social, linguistic, resistant, and navigational.* Participants' reflections on their educational experience revealed a deep connection to the community and a strong desire to give back to everyone who supported them along the way. The participants provided rich and powerful narratives which detailed many aspects of their lives from childhood to the current state, examining role models, the impact of family, the power of education, and their decisions to persist despite facing hardships and challenges. Chapter 5 will discuss the intersection of the framework utilized, literature, and findings in order to bring out holistic and rich interpretations and recommendations of this study.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of first-generation Latinx students from the Appalachian Region who transferred to an urban research institution from a community college in the Appalachian Region. A phenomenological study utilizing a hermeneutical lens was utilized by conducting qualitative interviews with six participants, resulting in two interviews per participant for 12 interviews. The findings from this study were developed through the analysis and thematic interpretation of the participant's narratives. The following research question and sub-questions guided the study:

RQ: What are the lived experiences of first-generation Appalachian Region Latinx students who successfully transfer from a two-year institution to a four-year institution?

Sub Question 1: What are the roles of significant individuals, such as mentors, advisors, teachers, and counselors, in students' lives on their educational journeys?

Sub Question 2: What other factors do these students identify as critical in their successful transition experience?

Sub Question 3: How does a student’s community cultural wealth impact their transition experience?

This chapter provides a summary of select findings from the data presented in the previous chapter. In addition, this chapter discusses the theoretical framework and scholarly literature the researcher applied to the analysis of select findings, discusses the study's limitations, suggests future implications for professional practice, and concludes with recommendations for further research.

Summary of Select Findings

This study revealed eight major themes and 16 subthemes, which emerged through analyzing the participants' lived experiences as first-generation Latinx students from the Appalachian Region who transferred to an urban research institution from a community college in the Appalachian Region. The participants' narratives were placed alongside the guiding research question and three sub-questions to ensure a clear focus was maintained while ensuring the rich voice of the participants' experiences remained the focal point of the analysis. Participants' experiences were also examined through the lens of Yosso's community cultural wealth model (2005), which places the participants' experiences in a positive asset-based framework and examines their experiences through the following categories: *aspirational, familial, social, linguistic, resistant, and navigational.*

Participants' motivation to obtain a higher education degree and persist in higher education was deeply driven by their family and community's belief in their ability to obtain a higher education degree and make a better life for themselves and their entire community. Education, including higher education, was looked at by participants as a journey and a process through which their education could transform the lives of all those around them. The participants discussed how their belief in the transformational power of education was also a part of their family's and community's beliefs. Through obtaining a four-year degree, participants believed their education could impact not just their life but the lives of their family, community, and for generations to come. Earning a degree could serve as a catalyst in their communities for growth and change. Based on prior research, the participants' beliefs are supported, as they would become the anchor from which their future children and families could attending college as continuing generation students and studies have shown that these students are often more prepared academically (Pike & Kuh, 2005) and financially to succeed in higher education. The

participants' belief in the power of education continued to drive them forward and outweighed any perceived or actual barriers participants experienced. Resiliency to adversity was also critical to the continued persistence of these participants. Experiences from a young age, such as significant financial constraints, lack of educational opportunities, and a constant fear of being deported, could be managed within the participants' daily lives. Through these experiences, participants learned how to successfully navigate and manage adversity. And when issues arose in their educational journeys, participants could utilize the tools they had already learned to continue pursuing their degrees without significant setbacks or catastrophic outcomes.

Overall, participants were optimistic about their futures and believed that completing a degree from the university was the key to whatever came next in their lives. Of note is the participants experiences and connection to Appalachia. The participants connection to their family, connected them to the region in which they lived – in Appalachia.

Discussion of Significant Findings

The focal research question and three sub-questions of the research study centered on participants' experiences and understanding these experiences as a part of their higher education journey. Participants' experiences revealed many factors impacting their higher educational journey. As highlighted in Chapter 4, eight major themes and 16 subthemes emerged. The findings were guided by the conceptual framework of Yosso's community cultural wealth model (2005) and scholarly literature, which was applied to the researcher's analysis.

Yosso's development of an asset-based framework to view Latinx students (2005) provided the framework in which the participants' narratives and detailed lived experiences were analyzed for this research study. This model focuses on cultural wealth, best understood as the convergence and totality of six areas: *aspirational, familial, social, linguistic, resistant, and*

navigational. Each of these areas focuses on an often-invisible reservoir of support and experiences throughout an individual's life, which combine to form cultural wealth. Cultural wealth challenges the more traditional deficit model thinking, which asserts that students struggle or fail in education because they or their families do not value education or do not have the normative skills required to succeed (Yosso, 2005). While these areas of wealth are not readily apparent in surface-level interactions, this model takes a holistic approach to understanding and supporting students and provides a basis for professionals within higher education to learn how to engage with and support students more comprehensively.

The research study asked participants to describe how they had maneuvered through the higher education system and persisted at UU. A key finding directly connected to Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth model was the participants' belief that family and community support were central to their ability to persist within higher education. Participants' experiences throughout their lives solidified their families' and communities' support, especially in pursuing and achieving a baccalaureate degree. The support of their nuclear and extended family and the community became a narrative almost larger than life, representing a path for the opportunity, growth, and positive transformation for everyone. Other research on Latinx students supports the importance of family and community (Cohen et al., 2014; Gard et al., 2012; Hlinka et al., 2015). Despite not having family or community members who could help participants navigate higher education, family and community support bolstered participants' confidence and belief in achieving success. Of note, students did not mention achieving high grades, or test scores, even though each participant was in good standing and had demonstrated continued academic success. When participants were asked to reflect on their success as evidence of their hard work, they discounted anything unique or special about themselves. Instead, participants maintained that

their success was due to either luck or simply never thinking failure was an option. Through the participant's mindset of achieving a degree as something larger than themselves, there was also a deeper connection to their communities and in returning to their hometown in Appalachia to improve the quality of life for all those around them. While there is literature to support a connection to the family for Latinx families (Barron, 1977), participants' strong feelings about returning to Appalachia and serving as a model to their communities appear to be influenced by factors Wilson et al (2018) describes as familial, social, ecological, and external tethering, all of which are unique to or further enhanced by living in the Appalachia Region. Hlinka et al., (2015) also noted a distinct longing from rural students to return to not just their families and communities but to the physical space the students were from.

In addition to family and community support, participants also described peer and social capital at the institution as critical to their personal and academic success. From connecting with individuals regarding clubs and organizations to working in study groups on coursework and projects and gaining a network within their new community, peer and social capital were the glue that gave participants a sense of place and belonging at UU. The literature and scholarly research examining persistence for Latinx students supports a connection to peers as a factor in student persistence (D'Amico et al., 2014; Tinto, 1975). Peer connections extending outside the classroom into clubs and organizations further connected participants with the university community and the greater city in which the university is located. Participants used this opportunity to network with others, give back to community members, and help transfer students coming in to have a smoother transition to the university. In addition, advising has also been shown to have an incredible impact, both positively and negatively, regarding student persistence and success (Allen et al., 2013; D'Amico, 2014; DeWine et al., 2017; Flaga, 2016). Advising, is

already built into the support structure for all students at any higher education institution, so in theory the support exists for students to be properly and efficiently advised; however, when done poorly, students can experience delays in time to graduation, take courses not essential to degree progression, and ultimately waste time and money, which can have a disastrous effect of persistence of students, in particular transfer students (Allen et al., 2013; D'Amico, 2014; Flaga, 2016). Overall, the participants in this research study experienced advising in a negative manner, discussing additional courses needed to complete their degrees on time, a waste of limited financial resources on courses not needed, and feeling as if they weren't important to their advisor or were left to figure things out completely on their own. Participants reported wanting to engage with their advisors and commented on a desire for advising to look different for university students in the future. However, for these students, they were left to network within their peer communities to determine the appropriate courses to take for successful degree completion.

Another direct and persistent connection across participant experiences was evidenced in aspirational capital and the belief in future achievements as motivation to work through barriers or challenges. Participants all shared being role models for their families and community and being the change for generations yet to come. These participants worked through incredible financial hardships, a lack of primary school preparedness, and challenging transitions from community college to the university. The participants' tools in resiliency and tolerance for adversity were primarily based on their aspirations, which were supported and fueled by family and community.

Navigational capital was evidenced in the participants' ability to navigate the higher education environment, especially over time, as participants learned what was beneficial and

helped them succeed both in and out of the classroom. From engaging with professors at the beginning of the semester to asking questions regarding campus life, to learning how to network for jobs and internships – helping to prepare for future career growth and mobility – participant experiences helped them cultivate and develop navigational capital. Navigational capital was also the area where participants shared that they wished their engagement with campus had differed when they initially transferred. None of the participants expressed regret for themselves. However, they wanted to share the importance of navigational capital with anyone coming into the university, so they could help prevent them from struggling or feeling lost.

Participants also utilized linguistic capital to engage with their communities and serve as a future bridge, connecting their homes and communities with professional institutions and places such as healthcare and educational settings. The desire to utilize language as a bridge resulted in many participants taking coursework at UU in their native language and preparing to complete language certificates to become more proficient in translating. Specific areas in which participants expressed a desire to better communicate with and serve their communities included healthcare, the judicial system, and education, which are vital for meeting a community's basic needs.

This research study supports Yosso's model (2005) as identifying an interconnected web of assets that can exist independently but most often support and connect, creating a powerful entity known as community cultural wealth. When examined together, it becomes apparent that Yosso's model of community cultural wealth (2005) helps to explains how participants develop and utilize the tools and skills necessary for their persistence and success in higher education and can serve as a model for which to engage with higher education professionals in creating a more inclusive and supportive environment. Many of the findings, especially the importance of family

and significance of community serve to compliment Yosso's model (2005); however, the experiences of these participants also serve to challenge the existing model's potential restrictions when considering forms of capital such as social and resistant.

For example, this study revealed a lack of social influences outside of the participants peer groups. When considering professionals working across different areas of potential influence, such as higher education, the medical field, legal field, etc., there was very limited, if any, network with individuals in these roles. Thus, making participants' reliance on peer networks and their ability to form their own subcommunities within an institution such as academia, the only way in which they learned to maneuver through the system. Rather than coming in with power of knowing how to maneuver through the higher education institution, these participants learned in a more trial by error model, and slowly learned how to both support themselves and their peers after they encountered and overcame obstacles and challenges.

Examining the lens of resistance, this form of capital describes engaging in behaviors which go against the status quo or what is expected to conform to the dominant culture. And while the participants reflected and demonstrated intentionality, for example in their dress, clothing choices and style, tattoos, and overall appearance, there decisions were not seeking to subvert expectations. Rather, these decisions demonstrate an intentionality behind the decisions, which in this case would appear to mirror the status quo. The choices participants made were personal and thoughtful, but were not attempting to transform existing societal norms, which makes resistance capital another example of how the participants complicated Yosso's model (2005).

Finally, the Appalachian Region presents a unique lens through which to view university participants. As research shows, there are fewer educational opportunities in rural communities

(Hillman, 2016; Hlinka et al., 2015; Morton et al., 2018; Vineyard, 1979), and these participants are more likely to have even fewer options to access higher education due to their living in Latinx communities which typically have even fewer options to higher education than other communities of color (Hillman, 2016). However, the participants discussed a love for their homes and a deep desire to return to their homes and better their communities. While there is research that shows a juxtaposition between accomplishing one's career dreams and remaining close to family (Hlinka et al., 2015), these participants did not express any internal debate or strife but rather a self-assuredness that they were going to or wanted to return to the Appalachian Region to serve the region. Home, and the concept of identity as related to one's home, was incredibly strong in these participants. Appalachia as a place, was where these participants felt the most connected, the safest, the strongest desire to go back to, and to help support once they received their degrees. Home was not their initial birth country or the years they had spent living in a different area for their education, but rather was connected to a region and area in which they had become an integral part during their formative years.

Limitations of the Study

This research study presents several limitations that are important to note. First, the sample size of the research study was relatively small, with six participants. Moreover, while the participants were distributed evenly by gender identity, with three male and three female participants, all three female participants were from the same field of study at the institution, which could have impacted their engagement with the researcher and the study. All six participants were immigrants from other countries whose families immigrated to North America and the Appalachian Region. While they were all raised for most, if not almost all, their formative years, ranging from infancy to childhood, in the Appalachian Region, it is worth

noting that there is not a generational connection to the region for these participants. The participants not being born in the United States or the Appalachian Region may or may not negatively or positively affect their connection to the Appalachian Region. In addition, participants were informed of the researcher's position as an employee on campus. And while the researcher's position had no direct connection to any of the participants, it is essential to note that the participants could have altered what they shared with the researcher based on a perceived level of power or commitment to the institution on behalf of the researcher.

Finally, it is vital to note that COVID-19 significantly impacted the experiences of each participant while attending the university. In the semester in which the interviews took place, the semester did take place in person, but there was a delayed start to the semester and return to campus. In the two semesters prior to the one in which the interviews took place, the campus was either entirely remote or had an altered schedule based on the prevalence of COVID-19 and the guidance of the University System, CDC, and best practices that were emerging. Each participant's experiences at the institution were heavily affected by COVID-19. As a result, significant areas of focus, such as the transition to campus/university from the community college, the ability to connect with peers, faculty, staff, and the institution overall, and the experiences they were able to have, such as internships, clinical experiences, and even socially through clubs, were all experienced in a much different format than in a pre or pos-pandemic college environment.

Implications for University Practice

This study intended to fill a gap in current research related to Latinx first-generation college students from the Appalachian Region and their experiences transferring from a two-year institution in the Appalachian Region to an urban four-year research institution. While literature

exists on various areas of Latinx life and educational experiences, literature regarding Latinx students from the Appalachian Region appeared almost nonexistent. And when trying to find research that viewed this specific demographic of students through an asset perspective rather than a more traditional deficit perspective, there were no other resources that the researcher could find in the current body of literature.

In relation to support for the Latinx transfer student population, this research can serve as an opportunity for higher education institutions to shift conversations and potential resources regarding the support that this demographic of students needs and how they can best address these needs rather than using previous assumptions or more traditional deficit models. Through utilizing the framework of Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth Model (2005) and viewing each of the five components of community wealth within higher education, an abundance of illustrations exists of how participants engaged with the entire higher education system and demonstrated an eagerness and ability to persist and succeed in completing their degree. Implications of this study could present an opportunity to explore further pre-professional development opportunities available to faculty and staff, often surrounding marginalized or invisible populations.

While each of the areas within Yosso's community cultural wealth model (2005) was apparent in the participants' experiences in higher education, of note were the interactions with professionals in the higher educational setting, such as faculty and staff, and the importance of those interactions to either help or hinder students in their continued persistence. Participants reported many positive experiences with faculty at the institution. However, staff interactions were much less consistent and more transactional in nature. There were also consistent narratives across participant experiences, echoing a lack of understanding from individuals not from the

Latinx community and a deep desire to engage more with individuals who shared their backgrounds.

In addition, campus communities can engage within their areas of expertise in more holistic manners, from academic advising to financial aid services; there can be more of the onus on the higher education professionals to listen, learn, and work with students who are first generation, Latinx, from the Appalachian Region, transfer students, many of whom are immigrants, or who were English Language Learners. Most services and offices within higher education act under the model of students being a continuing generation student. Any difference in life experience and background often creates barriers for students to access, persist, and succeed in higher education.

While this research study examined the experiences of one specific community, the implications are larger and can be utilized to better serve many different communities in higher education. Professional development opportunities for members of campus to engage with students more broadly and holistically through applying frameworks and models like Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth Model (2005), especially for a university like UU that has the largest Latinx transfer population in the state, can better equip college professionals with the tools necessary to actively engage with students and support them in their educational journey. These pre-professional development opportunities would impact many students who are often marginalized or not as readily visible.

Recommendations for Future Research

As discussed in prior sections in this chapter, there is empirical research and literature on Latinx students, transfer students, and first-generation students, and applied research utilizing Yosso's community wealth model (2005). However, the research on this group from the

Appalachian Region appears relatively nonexistent. Considering the major area that the Appalachian Region covers in the United States, the industry and culture that is unique to the region, and the increasing population and projected growth of Latinx individuals in this region, additional research would help determine the tools and skills these students utilize in their persistence to achieve a higher education degree. These tools and skills could be taught to campus professionals. In addition, longitudinal studies could measure the impact of student success on their family, community, and region over an extended period.

Mentioned as a limitation of this study was the fact that each of these participants was an immigrant to the Appalachian Region, though all the participants had spent most of their lives in the Appalachian Region. The participants expressed a significant connection to the community within the Appalachian Region and a feeling of pride in the area, historically connected to a unique culture within Appalachia (Robinson, 2015; Nichter, 2018). Participants did not express a strong connection, if any, to their native countries but repeatedly stated that after graduation, they wanted to stay near or in the Appalachian Region if possible. Future studies could examine a deeper dive into the connection to the culture and place of the Appalachian Region among native residents, those who have immigrated to the region, and those who do not reside in an Appalachian Region. Another research possibility connected to the Appalachian Region could relate to following research participants for a longer duration and examining their impact on the Appalachian Region once returning for their careers. An even further exploration of Appalachian culture and influence related to career choice and selection could be examined in understanding and assessing the Appalachian Region's culture as related to gender identity and career choice when compared to those, not in the Appalachian Region.

For UU and other institutions, it may be possible that a subcommunity exists among faculty and staff but is not reaching and connecting with students. For example, at UU, there is the Latinx/Hispanic Faculty and Staff Caucus, a network of professionals on campus who share information regarding things connected to the Latinx community as it relates to campus, pre-professional development, sharing resources, and celebrating successes. Further research regarding existing and low-cost communication channels at universities and the impact these communication channels could have on students is worth further investigation in the future. Groups such as these could connect with major student organizations such as the Latinx Student Union, reaching students more consistently and could potentially have a significant positive outcome with increased engagement at the institution across all levels.

While this current study utilized the framework of Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth Model (2005) to explore and frame participant experiences, other frameworks serve to counter the more traditional deficit model of Latinx students or students in traditionally marginalized populations such as LatCrit (Valdes, 1998) would be critical to understanding ways in which institutions can support students through higher education.

Additionally, this study focuses on students who utilize a two-year institution and then transfer to a four-year institution and persist at the four-year institution, but there is a need for further research at the two-year institution. Research at two-year colleges can assist in determining Latinx students' intent (to transfer or not), completion of a two-year or technical degree/certificate, and their ability to utilize community cultural wealth to persist and succeed at the two-year level, and what potential supports can assist students both at the two-year level and in successfully transferring to a four-year institution if this is the end goal for students.

Finally, since there is little to no research on this topic, there would be a great benefit to the educational community for additional research on first-generation Latinx students from the Appalachian Region to be conducted. Multiple areas of study could serve to further understand how decisions and choices made by this subset of students are directly connected to the region in which they were raised. In comparing participants from the Appalachian Region with those not raised in the Appalachian Region, more data could be collected on surrounding areas, such as the impact of regional culture, career choice, and the importance of returning and contributing back to the community in Appalachia. In addition, a longitudinal study could research the long-term impact of returning to work in the community for both community and generational growth. These participants described a deep connection to the place of Appalachia, their home, rather than where they immigrated from, which echoes other research on individuals' connection to Appalachia as a region (Hambry et al., 2022) but further studies would need to be done to determine how the Appalachia Region differs for Latinx students compared to non-Appalachia Regions, and how this connection to place may affect life choices.

Appalachia as Home

Appalachia for myself is a deep part of who I am. While I have lived in other towns and had the opportunity to live and study in other countries, I find myself always searching to return home, to Appalachia. The desire to give back to my community is my biggest motivator, it's my personal why in life, and on the surface it may seem a bit unfounded. Isn't there poverty in Appalachia – yes. Aren't the people of Appalachia falling behind the rest of America, let alone the world – maybe. Isn't there less educational opportunities, less work opportunities, less you insert the adjective – yes. But the people and place value one another. They value community. There is a deep connection to family and place, and a sense that no matter where you go

Appalachia is always waiting to welcome you home. The participants in this research study each shared similar feelings of Appalachia – this deep and abiding sense of pride, love, and joy for their communities and for their homes.

Summary

This phenomenological research study explored the lived experiences of six first-generation Latinx students from the Appalachian Region who transferred to an urban research institution from a community college in the Appalachian Region. The study also sought to better understand the assets these students utilized in successfully transferring from the two-year institution and persisting at the four-year institution. Yosso's community cultural wealth model (2005) was utilized as a framework for interpreting and determining the thematic findings in this study. In addition, scholarly literature provided further insight and context into and discussion of the research findings. The outcomes of the research study provide the basis for implications related to pre-professional development for faculty and staff, emphasizing student services as they are often the first individual's students engage with when they transfer and begin attending a university. Through increased awareness and training for campus professionals, a holistic approach to students would increase access and eliminate many institutional barriers to higher education for first-generation Latinx students from the Appalachian Region.

Concluding Remarks

Many research studies show that Latinx students are projected to increase in population size over the next decade across the entire country, and in areas such as the Appalachian Region, Latinx growth will represent the most significant percentage of population growth. In addition, several research studies focus on Latinx students transferring from community college to the university. However, there needs to be more research on the assets these students bring with

them and what tools they use to transition to and persist at the university level successfully. This population of students – first-generation, Latinx, transfer students from the Appalachian Region, utilize different tools and areas of support than many of their peers. While all students on a collegiate campus require the support of campus professionals, the research study revealed areas in which faculty and staff could further develop tools and utilize frameworks to provide a more holistic approach to their engagement with students. Research on different aspects of this population exists, but there is limited research on this specific group of Latinx students from the Appalachian Region. The current research study sought to fill a gap in the scholarly literature.

Findings in this research study provided insight into the participants' lived experiences and how Yosso's community cultural wealth model (2005) can be utilized to better understand student assets and their success in navigating through the higher education system, as well as how this model can be utilized for future research. The participants lived experiences revealed rich narratives regarding their assets and tools in navigating and persisting in higher education. These experiences were grouped into thematic interpretations, which demonstrated the resiliency of these students and the impact their education could have on not just themselves but on the future of their families, communities, the Appalachia Region, and for generations to come. These findings serve as a basis for future research, exploring various other unique aspects of this population, the impact on the Appalachian Region, and how supports can be designed on campus among faculty and staff to support and engage a growing population of students in higher education more holistically.

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APPENDIX A: INFORMED CONSENT

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Title of the Project: Understanding the Experience: Latinx Transfer Students from the Appalachian Region
Principal Investigator: Porscha Street Elton, Doctoral Candidate, the University of North Carolina at Charlotte.
Faculty Advisor: Dr. Alan Mabe, Interim Chair and Visiting Professor, the University of North Carolina at Charlotte

You are invited to participate in the following research study. Participation in this research study is voluntary and you can choose to leave at any time. The following information provided below is to assist in you deciding whether or not you would like to continue as a participant. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to ask.

Important Information You Need to Know

The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of first-generation, Latinx students from the Appalachian region as they have transitioned to a four-year institution from a rural, two-year institution.

- We are seeking students who are Latinx, have transferred from a community college, and are from the Appalachian Region to participate in two individual interviews discussing their experiences navigating through postsecondary education from an asset perspective.
- You may choose to not answer any questions you do not wish to answer.
- You will be asked to take place in two semi-structured interviews which will last between 45-60 minutes each.
- This study may help us better understand assets that Latinx students from the Appalachian Region bring with them to postsecondary education, and how these assets can be cultivated and supported during student's time in postsecondary education.
- Please take the time to read this form and ask any questions that you may have before deciding whether or not to participate in this study.

Why are we doing this study?

This study is taking place in an effort to better understand the experiences Latinx students from the Appalachian region bring as they transfer to the university from a community college. Specifically, the study focuses on the assets these individuals bring with them through examining various forms of social wealth and social capital. This information will seek to inform the practices in place which can further support future Latinx students from the Appalachian Region.

Why are you being asked to be in this research study?

You have been asked to participate in this research study because you are Latinx, from the Appalachian Region, and have transferred from a community college while maintaining good academic standing at the receiving institution for at least two semesters.

What will happen if I take part in this study?

If you choose to take part in this study you will complete two semi-structured interviews that will last between 45-60 minutes in duration each. After the interview, you will be asked if you would like to review the transcript for accuracy and any clarification; this may take an additional 30 minutes per transcript. Your total time commitment if you take part in this study will be approximately 150-180 minutes.

What benefits might I experience?

The results from this study will serve to provide recommendations for how to better assist Latinx students from the Appalachian Region who transfer into a four-year institution through supporting and encouraging varied forms of social wealth and social capital. These results may contribute to changes in practices in place to assist in student success.

What risks might I experience?

Within this research study there is little risk involved through your participation. However, if you feel at any time any emotional or psychological discomfort, you may stop the interview or you may skip the question.

How will my information be protected?

To ensure your privacy is maintained at all times, all names or identifiable markers will be replaced with pseudonyms to allow for the data to be shared. You will be able to select a pseudonym of your own choosing. All interviews will be audio-recorded and then transcribed verbatim. Once the transcription process is complete, the audio recordings will be deleted. The original transcripts will only be accessible to the researcher and will be stored securely on a device which requires password-protection and is encrypted. The only individuals with access to the data will be the principal investigator and faculty supervisor.

How will my information be used after the study is over?

Once the study has concluded all data with any identifying information will be destroyed/deleted. Any possible data that may be shared with other researchers for use in their studies or as may be necessary for publishing our results will not contain any identifiable information.

Will I be paid for taking part in this study?

After completing 1)the 11 questions online survey, 2) first interview, and 3) second interview you will receive one $25 Amazon gift card. Should you decide to withdraw from the study and not complete the three mentioned steps you will not be eligible to receive the $25 Amazon gift card.

What are my rights if I take part in this study?

Deciding to take part in this research study is completely up to you as participation is voluntary. If you decide to participate in the study and at any time decide you would like to leave the study you may do so; you may also choose to skip or not answer any questions you do not wish to answer.

Who can answer my questions about this study and my rights as a participant?

For questions regarding this research study, you may contact either the principal investigator Porscha Street Elton at Porscha.elton@uncc.edu or faculty advisor Dr. Alan Mabe at amabe3@uncc.edu. If you would like to discuss your rights as a research participant regarding this study with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact the Office of Research Protections and Integrity at 704-687-1871 or Uncc-irb@uncc.edu.

Consent to Participate

By clicking the "I agree" button below, please note that you are agreeing to participate in this research study. Please make sure you understand what this research study entails before you press the "I agree" button. Once you submit the form, you will receive a copy of this document to maintain for your personal records. If there are any questions, please contact the researcher(s) using the information noted above.

I understand that I am agreeing to take part in this study and thus far, I understand what the study is researching and my questions have been answered.

APPENDIX B. DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONAIRE

Understanding the Experience: Latinx Transfer Students from the Appalachian Region

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS

The first set of questions focus on your demographic information

1. What is your age? _____ (fill in the blank)

2. What is your Ethnicity?_____ (fill in the blank)

3. How do you most identify regarding your gender?
    a. Female
    b. Male
    c. Non-Binary/Genderqueer
    d. Transgender
    e. Not Listed, Please Specify _____
    f. Prefer not to answer

4. Which Appalachian county(ies) did you grow up/live in? _____

The following set of questions focus on your educational background

5. What community college did you attend? _____ (fill in the blank)

6. Did you completed a degree/certificate/diploma before transferring to UU? If so, please select all that apply.

__ AA (Associate in Arts)

__ AS (Associate in Science)

__ AAS (Associate in Applied Science)

__ AFA (Associate in Fine Arts)

__ Certificate/Diploma (Please Specify)_____

__ I did not complete a degree, certificate, diploma while before transferring to UU.

7. How many credit hours did you earn before transferring to UU?
    a. 1-15 credit hours
    b. 16-30 credit hours
    c. 31-45 credit hours
    d. 46-60 credit hours

e. 61+ credit hours, no degree/certificate/diploma
f. 61+ credit hours, degree/certificate/diploma
g. Other (Please Specify) _____

8. What is your current class standing at UU?
____First-Year (0-30 credit hours)
____ Second-Year (31-60)
____ Third Year (61-90)
____ Fourth-Year (90+)

9. What is your current major at UU? _____ (fill in the blank)

The last set of questions are to collect information to move forward with participation in this research study.

10. Please indicate if you would like to meet face-to-face or virtually through Zoom for the interviews to take place.
___ Face-to-Face Interview
___ Virtual Zoom Interview

11. What days and times are you available for an initial 45-60 minute interview? Please list specific dates and times. (*For example, T/R 10-11am).* _____

Survey Submission Response:

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey and participate in this research study to better understand the experiences Latinx students from the Appalachian region bring as they transfer to the university from a community college. The principal investigator will reach out to you shortly.

APPENDIX C. INITIAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

PROJECT INTRODUCTION:

This qualitative interview is semi-structured and centered on a few key open-ended questions. In the process of the interview, the interviewer will also ask probing questions to understand the lived experiences and messages the participant is conveying in the interview.

Good Morning/Afternoon. My name is Porscha Street Elton and I am a doctoral student in the Higher Education program, with a concentration on Administration at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. I am conducting this study to understand the experiences of Latinx transfer students from the Appalachian region to four-year institutions. Through exploring your experiences, I hope to understand how and why you have persisted at UU. I also hope to gain a better understanding of how community cultural wealth influences your perception of your experiences as a successful transfer student. There are no correct answers to any of these questions. Your experiences are unique to you and are all valid experiences, thoughts, and opinions. Please answer these freely and honestly.

This interview will be recorded and should take no more than an hour in duration to complete. Once the interview is complete, the recording will be transcribed, all identifiable information will be taken away, and the recording will be destroyed. You will be provided the transcript to check for accuracy once it is transcribed. Your participation in this study is voluntary and if at any time you wish to no longer proceed, we can end the interview. Additionally, a pseudonym will be utilized in place of your real name. Is there a pseudonym that you would like me to use?

Before we begin, do I have permission to record our conversation?

Are you willing to still proceed with the interview?

Do you have any questions about the interview or study?

Participant Name_____

Pseudonym Selected _____

Date Verbal Consent Obtained _____

Interviewer Signature _____

APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

(FIRST INTERVIEW)

OPENING THE INTERVIEW: To begin, the first series of questions are focused on your history, context of your family, region in which you were raised, and how you made the decision to begin your postsecondary education at (insert the specific name of the community college).

Background:

1. Can you tell me about yourself and your support network?
    a) What part of the Appalachian Region are you from?
    b) How long have you lived there?
    c) Can you tell me what your family is like?
        i. What does your nuclear household family look like in composition?
        ii. How is your extended family (outside of your nuclear household) involved with your life?
        iii. Can you speak a little about your experiences with your family?
        iv. What are things that your family always does together, any special celebrations, routines, daily events, etc.?
    d. What are your friends like?

3. Who did you look up to growing up? Can you tell me about why you looked up to that person/them?

Regional Questions

1. Can you tell me your experiences growing up in the Appalachian Region?
    1. What are some of the benefits of living here?
    2. What are some of the difficulties of living here?
2. What was your K-12 experience like?
    1. What are some examples of things you loved in school?
    2. What are some examples of challenges you had in school?
    3. What role did your family, friends, and community play in your education?

Education: Community College

1. Growing up, did you speak two languages within your home, or speak one language at home and another at school? If you spoke two languages, can you tell me about a time where speaking two languages was beneficial or harmful in your school experience?
2. How did you decide to attend (insert the specific name of the communication college)?
    a. How did your family, friends, and community play a part in influencing your decisions?
3. Can you tell me about your experience at (insert the specific name of the communication college)?
    a. How did you navigate the student experience?
        i. Registration, FAFSFA, Course Progression, Reading a Degree-Works Program, Working with Faculty

b. What things do you think helped you succeed at (insert the specific name of the communication college)?
c. How did you engage with your classmates and your faculty in the classroom?
    ii. How did you contribute to class?
    iii. How did you interact with the faculty?
    iv. How did you ask questions?
    v. How did you ensure you understood what was expected of you?

Do you have anything else that you would like to share with me that we have not had the opportunity to discuss?

APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS (SECOND INTERVIEW)

OPENING THE INTERVIEW: To begin the interview, the first set of questions focus on your experience and decisions to transfer from (insert the name of the community college) to UU, and then discusses the assets which have assisted you in your success at UU.

Education: Two-Year to Four-Year Institution

1. Can you describe your experience in deciding to transfer to a four-year institution?

2. Can you tell me about your experiences with the transfer process to UU?
    a. What were the things that helped you transition successfully?
    b. What things were barriers to you transitioning smoothly? How did you navigate these barriers?
    c. Tell me about a time your family, friends, community influenced your transition experience?
    d. In what ways have you stayed connected to family while at UU?
    e. In what ways have you stayed connected to the Appalachian region while at UU?

3. Can you tell me about your experience at the university?
    a. How did you navigate the student experience? How did you make friends?
    b. How did you work through and understand Registration, FAFSFA, Course Progression, Reading a Degree-Works Program, Working with Faculty?

4. What helped you be successful at the university?

5. Tell me about a time where you engaged with your peers? Faculty? Staff?

Looking Forward:

1. How have your experiences influenced what you want to do after graduation?
    a) What are your hopes for the future?
2. If you could give advice to transfer Latinx students coming to UU in how to navigate and succeed here, what would you say?

Do you have anything else that you would like to share with me that we have not had the opportunity to discuss?