

# HISPANICS EXPERIENCE THE COLLEGE APPLICATION PROCESS

by

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(Under the Direction of Pamela O. Paisley)

## ABSTRACT

This study sought to describe the lived experiences of the Hispanic seniors at one high school as they experience the phenomenon of the college application and decision making process. Fourteen students who were self-identified as Hispanic seniors at a suburban high school located in Georgia were selected for the study. The participants were interviewed by the researcher during the spring of 2011. Findings from this study resulted in three common themes and two sub-themes: the influence of parents- parental support, the influence of parents- parents' educational level, navigating informational systems, and the decision to be pro-active. The findings and shared experiences provided by the participants will assist in recommendations for the foundation of program development in order to help future Hispanic students and parents as they work through this pivotal and significant life transition.

INDEX WORDS: Hispanic, senior, college application process

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Jose was a strong, Hispanic student with a 97 numeric average. He took academically challenging courses throughout his four years of high school. He was not overly involved in extracurricular activities, but he maintained a part-time job for three years and joined some multicultural clubs at the high school. Jose was a good student who was respected within his community. Despite his successes, he was navigating the US educational system on his own; his parents were very supportive of his education, but they were not familiar with the school system. His parents' English skills were very limited, so Jose handled his academic affairs on his own.

In February of 2005, Jose came to his counselor and told her that he decided that he would like to go to college. Knowing that Jose was a strong student, his counselor was naively surprised that he had not already submitted his applications. She asked him where he would like to go to school next year. Jose responded that he decided that he would like to attend the University of Georgia. In that moment, his counselor realized that he had fallen through the cracks as Jose had already missed all of the deadlines for the University of Georgia. How was it that a young man who was so academically talented could have missed all of the information that was provided to students, parents, and the community regarding the college application process, deadlines, and all of the intricacies of the transition from high school to college?

#### **Statement of the Problem**

The face of the student population has changed dramatically within the American educational system. Schools are more diverse than ever before due to desegregation legislation, immigration protection, and an overall changing culture within the United States (Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000). Particularly in the south, the Hispanic population has continued to show a

steady increase over the past ten years, and shows no signs of slowing (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2011). In fact, this population has increased so greatly, that they are now considered the second largest nationally represented group within the school system; second only to the White, non-Hispanic students (Kohler & Lazarin, 2007; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2011).

As these demographics change, many school professionals are also aware of achievement gaps across multiple dimensions (e.g., grades, test scores, course rigor, college-going rates) between Hispanic and White, non-Hispanic students. Hispanic students are those non-Caucasian students who identify as being of Spanish, Mexican, or Latin descent; the term Hispanic will be used to identify all of these populations for the purpose of this study as all of these students are identified as a single category by the educational system. Additionally, the high school that will be used for this study is predominantly Caucasian, therefore the national comparison data that is provided will also be representative of the school that is being studied; Hispanic students will generally be compared to their White peers.

Hispanic seniors are applying to college and transitioning at a significantly lower rate than their peers (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2011). Although all students might struggle with aspects of the transition process, many marginalized students have additional obstacles to overcome during this process. Of the many marginalized populations in the educational system, the Hispanic population is one of the fastest growing populations in the country (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2011). Unfortunately, the information that is presented regarding Hispanic student ranks this marginalized population in some of the lowest categories nationally. The Hispanic high school graduation rate remains significantly lower than their White peers (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2011). According to Nuñez,

“among U.S. secondary school students, migrant students, the majority of whom are Latino and Mexican American, are the least likely to graduate from high school, take college preparatory coursework, and enroll in college” (2009, p. 182). Additionally, the percentage of Hispanic dropouts (18.3%) is significantly higher than both their White (4.8%) and African American (9.9%) peers (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2011). Within the state of Georgia, the percentage of Hispanic students taking the 2009-2010 GA High School Graduation Test for the first time had a higher failure rate in every subject area than their White peers: Language Arts (39% fail rate vs. 28% fail rate), Math (50% fail rate vs. 35% fail rate), Science (49% fail rate vs. 41% fail rate), Social Studies (41% fail rate vs. 28% fail rate), and Writing (11% fail rate vs. 5% fail rate) (Georgia Department of Education, 2011). The same is true for all ten of the State of Georgia End of Course Tests that are mandated for various subject areas; the Hispanic failure percentage was higher on every exam (Georgia Department of Education, 2011). With such a blatant discrepancy in the educational achievement, there is clearly a need for additional research, understanding, program implementation, and support of the Hispanic population as they work toward their transition from high school to post secondary institutions.

Hispanic students are also struggling on the college side of the transitional process. The achievement gap between Hispanic students who earn bachelor's degrees and their White peers is even greater than the divide between those same groups graduating from high school (Fry, 2004). Although Hispanic enrollments in post secondary institutions have increased, there are just over ten percent of Hispanics in the US who have earned a college degree (Brown, Santiago, & Lopez, 2003). The National Educational Longitudinal Survey reports that less than one-quarter of Hispanic students earn a bachelor's degree by the age of twenty-six, and that almost two-thirds never receive any post secondary credentials (Fry, 2004). Part of the reason for this

discrepancy is because Hispanic students are overrepresented in two-year institutions (Arabona & Nora, 2007). Although many of these students may have intentions to transfer to a four-year institution in order to obtain a bachelor's degree, a study by Hoachlander revealed that after six years of enrolling in a community college, only 6% of Hispanic students had actually been awarded a bachelor's degree (Arabona & Nora, 2007; Hoachlander, Sikora, Horn, & Carroll, 2003). In a time when having a college degree is more important than ever, it is imperative that these disparities are challenged and changed.

Due to the needs of this population and the discrepancy in their educational achievement, counselors have specific responsibilities for assisting these students and parents with the college application process and the transition from high school to college. There is need for support and information for this community that is not currently being met within the school systems. In order to serve this population in a practical manner, the following concerns need to be addressed through advocacy and curriculum: (a) providing safe and adequate facilities, (b) creating a college-going culture, (c) providing a rigorous curriculum, (d) employing qualified teachers, (e) offering academic and social support, (f) creating opportunities to develop a multicultural identity, and (g) building community partnerships (Mendoza & Silver, 2004). Counselors need to be prepared and ready to address these concerns through advocacy as well as direct service to the Hispanic families. By understanding the needs of the Hispanic population, counselors will be better equipped to assist parents and students successfully complete the college application and decision making process, and ultimately help Hispanic seniors successfully transition from high school to college.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this study is to describe the lived experiences of the Hispanic seniors at one high school as they experience the phenomenon of the college application and decision making process. These shared experiences can provide the foundation of program development within the school in order to help future Hispanic students and parents as they work through this pivotal and significant life transition.

### **Rationale**

Although research studies have been instrumental in studying the Hispanic population and providing information about Hispanic students' disparities during the transition process (Garza et al., 2004; Lopez, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001; Nuñez, 2009), there are still major gaps regarding how to best serve this population in a high school setting. The lack of program development based on these research studies only perpetuates the gap for the Hispanic population. Despite the possibility of postsecondary options remaining seemingly out of reach for many Hispanic students, there is still little research that addresses the specific needs and factors that can help to facilitate their college access. According to Nuñez, "little is known about migrant students' college access" (2009, p. 181). One study revealed that "outreach programs designed to increase the college knowledge of Hispanic students and families hold promise for reducing the observed discrepancy" (Downs, Martin, Fossum, Martinez, Solorio & Martinez, 2008, p. 227); however, there are few programs that have been created and researched using this model, particularly with regards to the college application process. The problem remains that there are very few outreach programs for this population, perpetuating a lack of information. Even when a program exists for the Hispanic students, there is still a lack of information as programs fail to track information about the participants; information such as if the participants

go to college, where participants attend college if they do go to a post secondary institution, or data that compares the participants' outcomes to those of an equivalent group of non-participants (Gandara, 2002; Nuñez, 2009; Tierney, 2002). There continues to be a gap in literature for the Hispanic population trying to transition from high school to a postsecondary institution.

### **Barriers**

As Hispanic students continue to enter the education system they experience barriers and express needs that vary from those of their non-Hispanic peers (Garza et al., 2004; Lopez, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001; Nuñez, 2009; Zalaquett et al., 2007). Hispanic students have more risk factors than most populations, and are overrepresented in categories such as low-family income, being held back in school, earning a C or lower for a GPA, having parents without a high school degree, having sibling dropouts, changing schools, and bearing children while still in high school (Swail, Cabrera, & Lee, 2004). The obstacles that Hispanic students may face while applying to college also persist, and include items such as: (a) first generation immigration status, (b) limited technology access, (c) language barriers, (d) socioeconomic constraints, (e) lack of access to college representatives or college programs, (f) lack of genuine effort on the part of the schools and counselors to reach out and provide college information to Hispanic students and families (Auerbach, 2004; Chacon, 2000; Cutler, & Lee, 2002; Downs et al., 2008; Ortiz & Gonzales, 2000; Tornatzky, 2002; Torrez, 2004). Further obstacles may involve issues related to documentation status or others challenges that involve equity and access to resources associated with a lack of familiarity with the United States education system (Garza et al., 2004; Lopez, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001; Nuñez, 2009; Zalaquett et al., 2007). According to the National Educational Longitudinal Study, seventy-two percent of all youth had at least one parent attend a post secondary institution as opposed to less than half of Hispanic

youth with parents who attended a post secondary institution (Swail, Cabrera, & Lee, 2004), supporting the notion that they are not familiar with resources or the US education system.

With a lack of knowledge, these students and parents experience additional challenges in high school; many Hispanic students are tracked into lower ability courses. According to the National Educational Longitudinal Study, just over half of the Hispanic students completed standard geometry and never completed any higher level math courses (Swail, Cabrera, & Lee, 2004). Aside from struggling academically, economic challenges at home, health concerns within their families, and work-related conditions due to a higher unemployment rate, all contribute to higher dropout rates and lower academic achievement (Nuñez, 2009; Zalaquett, McHatton, & Cranston-Gingras, 2007) within the Hispanic communities; about ten percent of Hispanic students receive a GED instead of a traditional high school diploma (Swail, Cabrera, & Lee, 2004).

These issues become particularly difficult for both students and parents when the Hispanic students are ready to transition from high school to postsecondary institutions. Hispanic students enroll at two-year institutions at a higher rate than four-year institutions; only about twenty-two percent of Hispanic students enroll in a four-year college (Swail, Cabrera, & Lee, 2004). Many Hispanic students also delay enrolling in post secondary institutions or will attend as a part-time student, which lengthens the amount of time it takes to earn a degree (Swail, Cabrera, & Lee, 2004). Research shows that individuals who received a bachelor's degree earn more than those students who received a high school diploma; therefore this step of the transition process is very important for Hispanic students and their families. The transition process from high school to college can be a very lengthy and cumbersome process. A successful transition requires action at both the high school and the post secondary institutions; at the high school

level, we focus on the college application portion of this transition. For the purpose of this study, the term transition will really be focused on the college application and decision making process and the contributions of the public high school.

### **Significance of the Study**

The college application process is a lengthy and complicated procedure. There are many steps within this process that Hispanic students and families may not comprehend; steps that are necessary in order to successfully apply to a college (Tornatsky, Cutler, & Lee, 2002).

Unfortunately, high schools are infrequently providing the information to the Hispanic community; often not in their native language (DiBerbo, 2000). Many of the Hispanic seniors have demonstrated the capabilities to pursue higher education, yet are not pursuing this option; often due to a lack of communication at the high school level (Fry, 2003).

This study will utilize a phenomenological method that will employ the ideas of Lat Crit Theory (Creswell, 2007; Delgado-Bernal, 2002). The phenomenological approach was chosen in order to understand the essence of the college application process for the Hispanic seniors. The college application process is truly a phenomenon that impacts a large number of students every year. Phenomenology allows the researcher to discover the meaning and essence of the experiences for the participants (Creswell, 2007).

Additionally, the researcher will also be using the lens of Critical Race Theory (Villapando, 2004); specifically that of Lat Crit (Delgado-Bernal, 2002). Critical Race Theory is charged with lifting constraints placed on individuals based on race. Critical Race Theory has three primary goals: (a) to present information about the discrimination of a group of people based on race, (b) to eliminate racial defeat while recognizing that race is a social construct, and

(c) to recognize any other areas of difference or inequalities experienced by the individuals (Creswell, 2007; Delgado-Bernal, 2002).

There is a growing need to investigate the factors that impact the lived experience of the Hispanic seniors as they work through the college application and decision making process. This research study attempts to examine the phenomenon of the college application process for the Hispanic students during their senior year; this will be conducted through a series of individual interviews with the Hispanic seniors from the high school. By attempting to understand their lived experiences, and examine the emerging themes among the Hispanic students, the researcher hopes to gain insight into the overall needs of this population within a particular high school setting. The most significant potential outcome for this study would be for the researcher to use the results from the participants to develop and implement a program for future Hispanic students that uniquely addresses identified needs. Depending on the results of this study, additional implications would potentially include an additional study of this population.

### **Research Question**

The study is designed to describe a sample of Hispanic seniors as they experience the college application process and to investigate the following research question (RQ) during that process.

RQ (Central Question): What is the experience of the college application and decision making process for Hispanic seniors at the high school?

### **Operational Definitions**

**\*Hispanic-** Group of people of Spanish descent.

\*For the purpose of this study this term will be used to represent all students of Hispanic and Latino decent for the purpose of consistency within the paper;

this is also due to the nature of the school system and the way that they categorize their students' race.

**Senior-** A student who is in his/her final year of high school and will graduate at the end of the school year.

**College Application Process-** The process/steps by which all students need to complete in order to be eligible for admission for a college or university. These steps include, but are not limited to, completing the college application, submitting a transcript, submitting letters of recommendation, submitting ACT or SAT scores, and submitting an application fee.

### **Chapter Summary**

The Hispanic population continues to grow at a very fast rate; therefore increasing the number of Hispanic students in the United States educational system (Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000). However, with an increase in number is also a series of new challenges for this marginalized population that varies from their peers. These students face issues related to language barriers, documentation status, additional academic challenges, and economic related concerns (Garza et al., 2004; Lopez, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001; Nuñez, 2009; Zalaquett et al., 2007). These issues directly impact the Hispanic students' success in high school, matriculation, and ability to successfully complete the college application process and transition to college. As many high schools do not have a support system in place to assist these students and parents, the Hispanic students are not receiving the information that is needed to complete the college application process. The purpose of this study is to describe the lived experiences of the Hispanic seniors at the chosen high school as they experience the phenomenon of the college application process. By hearing the voices of the Hispanic students as they experience this

process, the researcher hopes to gain insight that may help to better understand the needs of this population.

Jose may have been a Hispanic senior who initially fell through the cracks his senior year. Luckily, he was able to seek assistance from the counseling office so that he could make a plan to apply to other four-year colleges who were still accepting applications after February. Jose later transferred to the University of Georgia where he earned his degree in Business. He was also able to help his sister Celina go through the college application process two years later and encouraged her to meet with her counselor in the fall of her senior year so that she would not miss any college deadlines. However, what about all of those Hispanic seniors who did not know to come into the counseling office or seek assistance on their own? What about the students who were not as capable as Jose? These students need assistance also. This study will describe the experiences of Hispanic seniors' college application and decision making process in order to possibly assess Hispanic students' needs for the future.

## CHAPTER 2

### SELECTED REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

There are many factors involved in the transition process from high school to college. Initially students simply try to decide if they are going to attend college, and then where they are going to attend college. However once this decision is made, the college application process can be a cumbersome endeavor. Students must make decisions about their high school academic course selection and rigor of their curriculum, complete the application process, fill out scholarship information, all while maintaining a strong numeric average during their senior year of high school. In addition to the natural pressures of the application process, external factors such as parents, peers, and school personnel can also impact students' decision making process.

There are two sets of tasks that students must complete in order to successfully enroll in a suitable four-year college (Roderick, Nagaoka, et al, 2008). These two sets of tasks include first taking the basic steps toward enrolling in a four-year college such as applying to college, applying for financial aid, and gaining acceptance, while the second involves being "fully engaged in the often overwhelming task of finding the right college for them" (Roderick, Nagaoka, et al, 2008, p. 2). The results from this study revealed that only 41% of the seniors in their targeted school were able to achieve both of these sets of tasks; therefore allowing them to apply to and enroll in a 4-year college (Roderick, Nagaoka, et al, 2008). While all students may struggle with some aspects of the transition process, marginalized students have additional obstacles to overcome during this process. Of the many marginalized populations in the educational system, the Hispanic population is one of the fastest growing populations in the country (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2011). With a rapidly growing population, the Hispanic dropout rate from high school remains at 18.3%, while only 9.9% of African

Americans and only 4.8% of white students were reported as high school dropouts and showing a downward trend (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2011). Due to the needs of this population, counselors find themselves in a unique position to assist these students and parents with the college application process and the transition from high school to college.

### **Transitioning from High School to College**

Today's youth have a variety of options available to them once they graduate from high school. Students may choose to attend a four-year university or college, a two-year college, a technical school, the military, or enter the work force. The transition from high school to college is a significant and uncertain period of a young person's life. Students and parents have many aspects to consider as they explore the options that are available to them. They must consider what postsecondary options interest them based on their goals for the future, they must consider specifically which schools they will attend, they must consider if they are a good candidate for those universities, and they must consider if they can afford the price tag associated with the schools they are considering. There are many questions and very few certainties. The preparation should begin very early in all students' careers so that both parents and students are ready and able to successfully make the transition; ninth grade is not too early to begin planning for postsecondary options (Quint, Thompson & Bald, 2008). During ninth grade both parents and students can begin planning for postsecondary options by selecting their courses and having the appropriate academic preparation; this is truly the first step to the college planning process. Such training takes place at the school including the academic intensity and the rigor of the high school curriculum, which is part of the process for making a smooth transition to college (Adelman, 2002). Studies by Adelman in 2006 and Oakes and Saunders in 2007 continue to demonstrate that "students, including those with previously low achievement levels, who take

more rigorous, academically intense programs in high school enroll...in postsecondary education at higher rates than similar students who pursue less challenging courses of study” (Bangser, 2008, p. 8). While rigor is extremely important; there are other external factors that impact the transition process. Factors such as parents, friends, high school teachers and counselors can also aid in students’ transition to college (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Saunders & Serna, 2004; Smith & Zhang, 2009). In 2009, Smith and Zhang assessed the data from multiple articles to identify a variety of key factors during the transition from high school to college. During this study, they examined the following three main sources of influence: parents, peers, and school personnel.

Cabrera and La Nasa (2000) and Hossler, Schmit, and Vesper (1999) identified parental encouragement as the strongest factor predicting students’ planning for college. Society implies that parental encouragement does not have the impact on high school students that it once did. The data from Cabrera and La Nasa as well as Hossler, Schmit and Vesper revealed otherwise. These studies demonstrated parental support in a positive and encouraging manner; perhaps even challenging schools to further encourage parental involvement and participation in the college application and transition process. This would be particularly important for parents who did not attend college or are unfamiliar with the educational system within the United States (Quint, Thompson, & Bald, 2008).

Hurtado, Carter and Spuler (1996) also found that peer support was an important factor in making the transition to college, although they acknowledged that some of this support might produce negative outcomes such as lack of good study habits. Not surprising, most individuals who work with adolescents understand that peers impact decisions; these may be positive or negative influences, but they will have an impact. The same then can be true for the decisions surrounding the college application process and transition to postsecondary institutions. If

students can make positive peer choices early on, this can then positively impact their decisions related to their transition to college in the future.

The third influential factor was discussed in the study was school personnel. Hurtado, Carter and Spuler (1996) found that college academic advisors were important factors in facilitating students' transition to college, while Kelly, Kendrick, Newgent, and Lucas (2007) indicated that fifty percent of the students they studied did not receive any help from their high school guidance counselors regarding college. This information presents an interesting contrast. Given the recent push for advocacy in counseling by CACREP and ASCA, fifty percent is a low statistic. More counselors are being trained in counseling advocacy and career development. Counselor education and expectations of counselors are continuously being strengthened by programs such as CACREP and ASCA. ASCA, as well as many districts, expect counselors to advise and assist students with the college/career process (Chibbaro & Cao, 2007; McGlothlin & Davis, 2004). When college and career development is lacking neither the students nor the community receive the best services. High school counselors need to focus a percentage of their time on the needs of students and their options after high school.

There are many factors that students and parents need to familiarize themselves with in order to prepare in advance for the college application process and the transition to college. However, if students and parents become aware of the school factors such as course selection and rigor as well as the external factors such as parental involvement, peer pressures, and the role of school personnel, then families can take all of these factors into consideration in order to put together a well devised plan for options after high school.

### **Needs of Marginalized Students**

Although all students have decisions to make, and need assistance with regard to options after high school, there is a particular population that needs further assistance beyond that of the general population. Recent research studies have referred to migrant students as “invisible due to the lack of attention they receive in educational research and practice” (Nuñez, 2009, p. 183). What is known about this population is that they face challenges with regard to academics, language barriers, cultural and social isolation, and socioeconomic issues (Garza et al., 2004; Lopez, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001; Nuñez, 2009; Zalaquett et al., 2007). These marginalized students are also less likely to attend schools that “provide access to high-level college preparatory courses, adequately qualified teachers, and counselors available to guide them in the college application process” (Nuñez, 2009, p. 183). Studies by Fry, Tornatsky, Cutler, and Lee, and Stern suggest that these students are not completing the college application process due to a lack of knowledge about the procedure (Fry, 2003; Stern, 2004; Tornatsky, Cutler, & Lee, 2002). With less access to resources during their high school years, minority students are less likely to attend college and earn a degree than their white peers (Noeth & Wimberly, 2002). Although all students need information regarding the transition process, students of color tend to rely more on their high school counselors than their white peers (Smith & Zhang, 2009). In one study, seventy-five percent of Hispanic and African American students in urban high school settings reported that their counselors were helpful and took on a central role in their college planning (Noeth & Wimberly, 2002). Similar to the reports by Smith and Zhang, peers and family also played a major role for these minority students. Specifically, the mother’s influence was a very significant factor for this group (Noeth & Wimberly, 2002). However, despite parents’ encouragement impacting these adolescents, many students reported

that the parents were actually unfamiliar with the college application process and the many steps required to transition to college (Noeth & Wimberly, 2002).

Not only do students and parents have questions regarding the application process, but also concerning scholarship and financial opportunities. Hispanic students and families have been significantly affected by the rising cost of college concurrently tied to the reductions of grant-based aid (Auerbach, 2004; Downs et al., 2008). These changes in the economy have a stronger impact on this population as the Hispanic families often have fewer financial assets than their white peers (Downs et al., 2008; Swail et al., 2004). Counselors can be “particularly influential with students from disadvantaged backgrounds; important elements include the provision of information on college costs, financing options, and courses required for college admission” (Bangser, 2008, p. 10). College costs and financial aid availability can be a major issue for marginalized students (Noeth & Wimberly, 2002). Providing basic information to these families may determine whether or not a student may, in fact, be able to attend college in the long run.

First-generation students have a much greater challenge, and are therefore at a greater risk for a complicated transition from high school to college (Ishitani, 2006; Pascarella et al., 2004; Pike & Kuh, 2005). One of these challenges, as mentioned previously, is that parents do not know or understand all that is involved in the transition process. “First generation...students often do not receive timely college planning information, might not take the necessary courses, and might struggle with cultural conflicts between their new college-oriented world and the world of their friends, families, and communities” (Noeth & Wimberly, 2002, p. 3). Many times these students and families do not know where or how to seek out the necessary information for

college applications, scholarships, and transcript requests. There are many factors that can be associated with a low level of college knowledge among Hispanic students and parents including the following: (a) first generation immigration status, (b) limited technology access, (c) language barriers, (d) socioeconomic constraints, (e) lack of access to college reps or college programs, (f) lack of genuine effort on the part of the schools and counselors to reach out and provide college information to Hispanic students and families (Auerbach, 2004; Chacon, 2000; Cutler, & Lee, 2002; Downs et al., 2008; Ortiz & Gonzales, 2000; Tornatzky, Torrez, 2004). If parents and communities are unable to provide the information for these students, then it must come from some other source. Since these marginalized students are less likely to receive this information at home the information must come from the high school; they cannot make a successful transition from high school to college without accurate information and resources, and it is up to the schools to help provide this information to this overlooked population.

### **Transitioning Hispanic Seniors from High School to College**

Many school professionals are aware of the achievement gap between Hispanic and white, non-Hispanic students. Hispanic students are those non-Caucasian students who identify as being of Spanish, Mexican, or Latin descent; as previously stated, the term Hispanic will be used for the purpose of this study to include all of these students; the educational system that is being studied identifies all of these backgrounds as a single category. Between 1979 and 2008 the number of school-age children who spoke a language other than English at home increased 12% (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2011). Specifically, Hispanic enrollment in public schools have increased from 7 million in 1999 to 13 million in 2010 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2011). Currently, Hispanics experience the poorest educational attainment of any group in the United States (Georgia Department of Education, 2011). Hispanics struggle

in high school as seen in many of their standardized test results. Within the state of Georgia, the percentage of Hispanic students taking the 2009-2010 GA High School Graduation Test for the first time had a higher fail rate in every subject area than their white peers: Language Arts (39% fail rate vs. 28% fail rate), Math (50% fail rate vs. 35% fail rate), Science (49% fail rate vs. 41% fail rate), Social Studies (41% fail rate vs. 28% fail rate), and Writing (11% fail rate vs. 5% fail rate) (Georgia Department of Education, 2011). The same is true for all ten of the State of Georgia End of Course Tests that are mandated for various subject areas; the Hispanic failure percentage was higher on every exam (Georgia Department of Education, 2011). Hispanic students are not adequately prepared to enter high school, let alone to graduate from high school and transition to college (Huber, Huidor, Malagon, Sanchez, & Solorzano, 2006). Hispanic students are “disproportionately enrolled in low-ability tracks in high school” (Downs et al., 2008, p. 228). Tracking can come from a lack of knowledge on part of the student and parent; however some of the ownership is also on that of the advisement of the school officials; “unfortunately, there is evidence that school counselors often improperly advise Latino students to enroll in courses that will not adequately prepare them for college” (Downs et al., 2008, p. 228). This lack of preparation then results in a higher dropout rate and lack of Hispanic students represented in postsecondary institutions (Huber et al., 2006). In 2004, only 28% of Hispanic students were academically prepared to attend college upon completing high school as opposed to 47% of their white peers (Downs et al., 2008; Swail et al., 2004).

Despite their low level of achievement, Hispanic students continue to have aspirations to pursue higher education (Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000). Higher education is often a goal that stems from their families (Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000). Data indicates that Hispanic parents expect their children to succeed in school and further their education past high school (Stern, 2004). Parents

realize that a college education will help “avoid unemployment and the general problems associated with poverty” (Noeth & Wimberly, 2002, p. 22). However, recent data shows that Hispanic students are far less likely to enroll in a two or four-year public college when compared to their white peers (Education Trust, 2008; Kohler & Lazarin, 2007) Although many students hope to attend postsecondary institutions, data indicate that often Hispanic parents do not know what their children need to do in school and how to ensure that their children are on an educational track that will lead to college (Stern, 2004). Part of this confusion is likely due to the language barrier and the fact that many of these parents have never gone through the college application process themselves.

There have been few studies about Hispanic parental involvement in the college application process. One study conducted by Tornatzky (2002) revealed that in order to help their children make a successful transition between high school and college, Hispanic parents must know about the process and what actions need to be taken and when those steps need to be administered (Tornatzky, Cutler, & Lee, 2002). Tornatzky’s study indicated that initially, two thirds of Hispanic parents missed over half of the items of a simple survey regarding “college knowledge” (2002). This study, as well as others, revealed that parent college knowledge programs are the most significant when they are presented both in English and in Spanish, presented in a brief and concise manner, and presented during times of the day when parents are naturally off work (Downs, et al., 2008; Tornatzky et al., 2002; Torrez, 2004). Information for families needs to be provided in English and in Spanish as language barriers continue to be part of the problem; however there are only a few bilingual outreach programs for parents that are trying to narrow the information gap about college by using this format (Downs, et al., 2008; Tornatzky et al., 2002; Torrez, 2004). Many times information and knowledge about college and

the college application process are not made clear to Hispanic students and parents; this is particularly true of the families who do not speak English or have limited experience with the U.S. educational system (Auerback, 2004; Ceja, 2004; Nuñez, 2009). One program was able to demonstrate that by providing the information to parents in their native language, Hispanic families were able to gain knowledge and confidence about the college application process, therefore easing the pathway to college (Auerbach, 2004). The problem remains that there is not much research about programs construction or implementation, particularly programs that involve the parents and families. Family involvement is a missing component in this equation.

Although strides have been made to close the achievement gap, there are many areas that need to be improved upon to help Hispanic students reach their potential and attend postsecondary institutions. Data show that students of Mexican descent are in the group that is the least likely of all Hispanics to obtain a high school diploma. Additionally, these students are also unlikely to enroll in or complete a 4-year degree (Caldwell & Siwatu, 2003). Students of Mexican descent represent a large portion of the Hispanic students in local school systems, particularly in the south. Data on these students should be used to assess the achievement gap as well as implement programs in order to narrow the gap for this population. However, the achievement gap is not limited to students of Mexican descent. According to Cook and Kaffenberger (2003) the percentage of Hispanics graduating from high school and enrolling in two year institutions has remained the same for the past two decades. Additionally, researchers have also found that minimal progress has been made in closing the gap that exists for Hispanic students obtaining a college diploma when compared to non-Hispanic white students (Kohler & Lazarin, 2007). Only 12% of Hispanics earned a bachelor's degree or higher compared to almost 18% of Blacks and almost 31% of Whites (Kohler & Lazarin, 2007). Although there is research

indicating that the achievement gap for Hispanic students is an ongoing concern, few studies have proposed strategies and programs designed to narrow these opportunity gaps. To date, the literature consists of reasons for the achievement gap for Hispanic students while very few interventions are researched and discussed.

### **Theory to Consider in Working with Hispanic Families**

Before professionals can begin working with the Hispanic population, professionals need to be aware of theories and strategies that have been proven effective with Hispanic students and their families. A common theory to use when working with this population is LatCrit. LatCrit is a branch of Critical Race Theory that focuses on the multidimensional identities of Hispanic individuals (Delgado-Bernal, 2002). Critical Race Theory is focused on empowering individuals or groups to overcome constraints placed on them based on class, race or gender (Creswell, 2007). A researcher who would be operating from this theory would need to acknowledge their own power in the relationship as well as always be focused on working to use the theory to bring about change in the realm of social justice (Creswell, 2007). A counselor who operates from this view point would be able to take issues such as ethnicity, language, immigration, and culture into account as they work with their clients. This lens would not only be beneficial to the individual students, but would play a role in working with the parents and families as well. This theory encourages counselors to assess their own biases and ideas about working with this population. We all enter into the profession with our own beliefs of the world based on our own experiences. In order to most effectively work with the Hispanic students and their families, counselors should be sure to operate from a social justice perspective that takes into account the specifics of the Hispanic culture.

Both Critical Race Theory and LatCrit are being used by educational scholars in the K-12 settings in order to assess racial barriers (Villalpando, 2004). Scholars utilize Critical Race Theory in order to present the experiences of a marginalized population (Alemàn, 2009; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Critical Race Theory can be used in order to understand educational issues such as testing, curriculum and tracking, and school discipline (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Two recent studies demonstrate how Critical Race Theory has been utilized in the K-12 setting. Davila and de Bradley employed Critical Race Theory in order to “serve as a snapshot of the status of Latina/o/a students” (2010, p. 44) in the Chicago Public Schools. The outcomes of this study paralleled social inequalities that exist on a national level; however, CRT and LatCrit informed all of their discussions (Davila & de Bradley, 2010). By using the CRT and LatCrit perspective, the researchers were able to recognize that English is viewed as the dominant language; they were able to reframe ELL students as possessing an asset as opposed to having a deficit (Davila & de Bradley, 2010). This assessment led to inappropriate placement in the special education program, limited access to the gifted program, and higher probability for grade retention (Davila & de Bradley, 2010). Additionally, the researchers recognized that Hispanic dropout students were not perceived as “worthy” of receiving guidance to reenter the educational system; however non-Hispanic students would receive assistance to reenter the schools. As seen by the results of this study, Davila and de Bradley were able to utilize Critical Race Theory in order to present the inequities that were revealed in their study.

A second study that used Critical Race Theory in the K-12 setting explored the access and availability of AP courses for Hispanic students. Similar to many school districts, this sample population had an underrepresented Hispanic population in AP courses; although the high school was 68% Hispanic, only 45% of this population was enrolled in an AP course

(Solórzano & Ornelas, 2002). Two court cases have emerged as a result of unequal access and availability to AP courses in the California High Schools (Solórzano & Ornelas, 2002). It is important to note these cases to show that students and parents are actively pursuing changes in order to remove the inequalities.

### **The Role of School Counselors in Helping Hispanic Students Transition to College**

For many Hispanic students, the application process may be a daunting task. It is likely that these students are the first people in their family attempting to attend a college or university either in the United States or their native country. There are many steps involved in the process, and many Hispanic families do not possess basic knowledge regarding the college application process (Tornatsky, Cutler, & Lee, 2002). Additionally, many high schools do not routinely provide application process information to these students and their families in their primary language (DiBerbo, 2000). Many Hispanic seniors possess the necessary skills and academic scores to pursue higher education; however, many of these students are not pursuing this option. Recent scholarship suggests that these students are not pursuing higher education because they lack the knowledge about the process and their parents may not have the information about applying to college or how to select a college (Fry, 2003; Stern, 2004; Tornatsky, Cutler, & Lee, 2002).

High schools are a critical source of college planning information for both high school students and their parents (Noeth & Wimberly, 2002). Staff assists students and parents with course selection, graduation requirements, the college application process, college applications, college admission test preparation, and financial aid and scholarship applications. Many first-generation students and parents rely heavily on the school for information, using school personnel to provide all of the information on colleges and financial aid (Horn & Nunez, 2000;

Noeth & Wimberly, 2002). College knowledge and information is a key and central component in the relatively low college attendance rates of the Hispanic students; therefore, increasing the college information that is provided through the schools to students and parents, would provide a promising way of addressing the situation (Downs et al., 2008). Unfortunately, there are school counselors, administrators, and teachers who demonstrate behaviors that perpetuate the low academic performance of Hispanic students. The perception that professionals are not supportive of Hispanic students is likely to impact their achievement and motivation. Low expectations held by school personnel may undermine the high expectations set by Hispanic parents (Stern, 2004). If educators tell students they will not attend secondary institutions, then these students are likely to fulfill this prophecy because they may not be challenged or expected to succeed at high levels. In addition to negative perceptions hindering Hispanic students' motivation to attend college, these students are likely to encounter additional obstacles to achieving at high academic levels. Stern (2004) identified three obstacles including the lack of teacher support, the lack of school counselor involvement, and students being left on their own to figure out the college application process. School counselors can confront these barriers by believing that Hispanic students can achieve at high levels and by advocating on behalf of these students.

School counselors have specific roles and duties that can be used to effectively help Hispanic students face academic obstacles. The first step, narrowing the achievement gap of Hispanic students, requires school counselors to be prepared to advocate for these students. School counselors must work collaboratively with school administrators and teachers while advocating for Hispanic students (Stanard, 2003). Recent data suggest that access to a staff that is culturally sensitive and diverse in nature can positively influence migrant students to engage at

a higher level and consider going to college (Garza et al, 2004; Nuñez, 2009; Zalaquett et al., 2007). School counselors need to position themselves to be the voices and leaders in the school to bring about change. School counselors can keep the achievement gap data in conversations with administrators while creating a supportive network for change. Collecting data on Hispanic student achievement and implementing programs tailored to these students based on school data are likely to help narrow the achievement gap. School counselors must also recognize that due to close family ties within the Hispanic community, they are likely to be working closely with the students' families. These families traditionally adhere to *familismo*, which means that families are central and of great importance (Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000). Generally, family needs are considered more important than the needs of the individual (Atkinson, 2004) so systemic interventions that include families should be employed because the family is central and is often Hispanic students' primary source of support (Santrok, 2004).

Because the Hispanic students' families are important and often involved when these students are making major decisions counselors need to be prepared to work with the family as well as the students. Increasing numbers of researchers have expressed the need for student and parent college knowledge via outreach programs in order to successfully assist Hispanic students navigate the college application process (Auerback, 2002, 2004; Chacon, 2000; Downs et al., 2008; Gandara, 2002; Oesterreich, 2000; Segura, 2002; Torrez, 2004). Families may lack information regarding postsecondary options, which is critical to successfully completing the application process (Tornatsky, Cutler, & Lee, 2002). School counselors must be willing to provide a foundation and guide them through the application process. A study by Oakes, Mendoza and Silver (2004) identified seven areas of concern that need to be addressed by schools in order for Hispanic students to successfully transition from high school to college.

The first area of concern is for students to have safe and adequate facilities. Parents and students expect that they will be safe and have the proper and adequate facilities when they attend school; however, that is not always the case. Some students attend schools where they do not feel safe or do not have their needs met. This can make the difference between success and failure. When students do not need to worry about their learning environment they can focus on their education (Mendoza & Silver, 2004). Therefore they are more likely to be successful in their classes than those students who are focused on the settings around them.

The second area of concern is for students to experience a college-going culture. Many students will rise to the level of excellence expected of them. Therefore, school personnel who expect all of their students to go to college are more likely to have students who are willing to try to do so. The staff and the culture help improve their chances by setting the expectations of a college-going culture (Mendoza & Silver, 2004).

Within this college-going culture, students need to experience a rigorous curriculum, which is the third area of concern in order for students to successfully transition to college. The coursework that students take in middle school and high school is very influential in increasing opportunities for college (Mendoza & Silver, 2004). Students, who challenge themselves early and often, by taking rigorous courses, are more adequately prepared for the challenges of a college curriculum (Auerback, 2002).

In order to be successful in rigorous courses, students need qualified teachers; this is the fourth area of concern for a successful transition. Schools strive to keep the best and most qualified teachers from year to year. Qualified teachers have more tools and strategies when working with diverse populations (Mendoza & Silver, 2004). Not only can diverse populations

and marginalized students benefit from highly qualified teachers, but so can the general population.

In addition to qualified teachers, students need to feel that they are supported. Academic and social support is the fifth area of concern as students transition to college. As discussed previously, the college application process can be a lengthy, confusing, and time consuming process. School personnel need to provide the steps for the college application process and provide continued support for students and parents throughout the process (Mendoza & Silver, 2004). With continued support for both students and parents, the Hispanic students will be more likely to have a successful transition.

The sixth area for concern is that students have opportunities to develop a multicultural identity; this is particularly important for the marginalized populations. Students need to feel accepted for who they are as an individual. Particularly for marginalized students, it is important to “create a school culture that acknowledges and respects each student’s linguistic and racial/ethnic background” (Huber et al., 2006, p. 5; Mendoza & Silver, 2004).

The final area for concern in a successful transition is community partnership. Hispanic families put a lot of emphasis on the sense of community. It is very important that the school is a part of this community partnership with the family. The school needs to be able to provide parents information about the college admission process and financial aid information (Mendoza & Silver, 2004). Parents need to know that they can come to the school with any questions that they may have during this process.

When all of these seven areas are addressed, the Hispanic students and families will be much better prepared to complete the application process and transition from high school to postsecondary institutions. By working with both the students and the families, obstacles such as

lack of support and misinformation can be overcome. This knowledge that is provided through the schools will likely assure that student and parents are informed and can advocate for placement in college preparatory classes, understand the college application and financial aid process, and will be better suited to support one another throughout the remainder of their education in the United States education system (Auerbach, 2004; Downs et al., 2008).

### **Chapter Summary**

Counselors are in a unique position to help support both Hispanic students and parents with the college application process as well as the transition from high school to college. There is need for assistance and information from this community that is not currently being met by the school systems. In order to serve this population in a proactive manner, the following concerns need to be addressed: (a) safe and adequate facilities, (b) college-going culture, (c) rigorous curriculum, (d) qualified teachers, (e) academic and social support, (f) opportunities to develop a multicultural identity, and (g) community partnership (Mendoza & Silver, 2004). Counselors need to be willing and able to address these concerns through advocacy as well as direct service to the Hispanic families. The Hispanic seniors face challenges that differ from their peers including: (a) first generation immigration status, (b) limited technology access, (c) language barriers, (d) socioeconomic constraints, (e) lack of access to college reps or college programs, (f) lack of genuine effort on the part of the schools and counselors to reach out and provide college information to Hispanic students and families (Auerbach, 2004; Chacon, 2000; Downs et al., 2008; Ortiz & Gonzales, 2000; Tornatzky, Cutler, & Lee, 2002; Torrez, 2004). These obstacles cannot hinder students' matriculation or their success in the college application process. Hispanic students and parents have high expectations for their options after high school (Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000). By understanding the needs of the Hispanic seniors, counselors, parents, and

students can successfully complete the college application process and transition Hispanic seniors from high school to college.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

The following components of the research methodology are discussed in this section: (1) conceptual framework, (2) research participants, (3) sample, (4) research procedure/data collection, (5) instrumentation, and (6) data analysis. I have also addressed issues such as trustworthiness and researcher bias, which are of utmost importance to the validity of the study.

#### **Conceptual Framework**

For this study, I used a phenomenological approach. Within phenomenological research, the researcher identifies a phenomenon, and tries to grasp the universal nature of that event (Creswell, 2007). The researcher collects data from individuals who have experienced this phenomenon, and then “develops a composite description of the essence of the experience for all of the individuals” (Creswell, 2007, p. 58); the descriptions generally consist of “what” the individuals experienced and “how” it was experienced. Once all of the data is collected, the researcher will analyze the data by coding this information to identify emerging themes. These emerging themes should provide the universal essence to the phenomenon and the research questions that instigated the study.

The phenomenological approach was chosen for this study for a variety of reasons. The overall goal of this research study was to understand the essence of the college application process for the Hispanic seniors at one southeastern metropolitan high school. The college application process is truly a phenomenon that impacts a large number of students every year. Due to the lack of literature on the transition process for Hispanic students from high school to college, a phenomenological approach allowed me the ability to understand the daily lived experiences of these seniors. Phenomenology also allowed me to discover the meaning and

essence attributed to these experiences (Creswell, 2007). The Hispanic students were given the opportunity to adequately and completely describe the college decision and application process, which could be accomplished through this particular theoretical framework. The phenomenological approach was best suited for this as it allowed several individuals' common experiences to be understood and described collectively.

In addition to the phenomenological research design, I also used the lens of Critical Race Theory; specifically that of Lat Crit. Critical Race Theory is focused on lifting constraints placed on individuals based on race (Delgado-Bernal, 2002). When used in practice, Critical Race Theory has three primary goals: (a) to present information about the discrimination of a group of people based on race, (b) to eliminate racial defeat while recognizing that race is a social construct, and (c) to recognize any other areas of difference or inequalities experienced by the individuals (Delgado-Bernal, 2002). Within this research study, I worked with Hispanic students; therefore it was very important to have a theory that completely aligned with the goals of working with this population. The first goal of Critical Race Theory was addressed by simply focusing on this population in which information was presented about a marginalized population who often experience discrimination. The second goal of the theory was addressed through the nature of the qualitative study. The students' racial construct was still being validated although the inequity of the discrepancies were attempting to be eradicated through insight and understanding of the students' experiences. The third goal of Critical Race Theory was taken into account by being aware of the students' demographic information as well as by being sensitive to any differences or inequalities they may have become apparent during the study.

## Participants

Participants in this study were from the senior class of a suburban high school in one of the largest counties in the state of Georgia. The County School System had just over 30,000 students, and the High School was the largest school in the county with just over 2600 students. The total racial/ethnic composition of this school was as follows: 7% African American, 86% White American, 5% Hispanic, 1% Asian American and 1% other (i.e. multiracial).

Specifically, the students who were selected to participate in this study were part of the Hispanic population within the senior class. Additionally, all of the participants had already applied to college or were planning on applying to college by the end of the school year. There were 620 seniors in the class of 2011. Of those seniors, 25 were self-identified as Hispanic: 8 females, and 17 males. Of the 25 Hispanic students, one was being served in the Special Education program, two were currently being served in the ESL (English as a Second Language) program, and seven were currently being served in the TAG (Talented and Gifted) program. Three of the students were also marked as economically disadvantaged as they are currently being served by the Free and Reduced Meal program. It is important to note that only three of the students are economically disadvantaged; the other students would be considered in the middle to upper middle class socioeconomic range.

All of the participants in this study received a classroom guidance session during the fall of their senior year about the steps of the college application process, a school-wide program provided to all seniors. The classroom guidance was conducted in one class period and was 55 minutes in length. The presentations covered information on college entrance information and searches, SAT/ACT exams, how to send high school transcripts, and information on financial

aid. All information from the classroom guidance session is posted online for students who are absent as well as for parents who would like to review the information.

### **Sample**

As this was a phenomenological study, it was very important to find a sampling technique that aligned with that tradition. Creswell shares that there are few sampling strategies that should be used for this tradition because “it is essential that all participants experience the phenomenon being studied” (2007, p.118). Of the 620 seniors in the high school, there were twenty-five students who were identified as Hispanic seniors at the high school. Again, all of these students received a classroom guidance training regarding the college application process. Then, for the purposes of this study, all twenty-five Hispanic seniors were considered by me as a candidate for the individual interviews. All of these students were initially contacted in order to see if they were interested in participating in the interviews; however as the phenomenon being studied was the college application process, only those students who were planning on completing the college application process were the eligible candidates for the individual interviews. Of the twenty- five students, twelve of the students initially responded by returning the parental permission form and assent form in order to participate in the study; additionally, two students let me know that they were not planning on attending college immediately after high school so they were no longer candidates for this study. After contacting the remaining students a second time, two more students returned the forms giving me a total of fourteen students who were willing to participate in the interviews. The additional nine students who did not respond were not included in the interview process; however, I was able to obtain information about their college application process through their school records at the high school.

## Demographics

The demographics for this study were collected both from school records in addition to the students during their individual interviews. The school records provided statistical data such as gender, parental information, whether the students were on-track for graduation, and who had submitted requests for transcripts through the counseling department. The individual interviews provided information such as if the students were first generation college students, the academic levels of their parents, and their national origin.

**Table 1: Demographic Information**

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Parental College Attendance Status</b>	<b>First Generational College Student</b>	<b>National Origin</b>	<b>Free &amp; Reduced Lunch</b>	<b>AP Courses</b>
Tanya	Not in US	Yes	Venezuela	No	Yes
Norma	In US	No	Mexico	Yes	Yes
Francisco	In US	No	Bolivia	No	Yes
Andrew	In US	No	Columbia	No	Yes
Lourann	No College	Yes	Mexico	No	Yes
Alyssa	Some college; did not graduate	Yes	Cuba	No	Yes
Eric	In US	No	Mexico	Yes	Yes
Camilo	In US	No	Mexico	No	Yes
Juan	No College	Yes	Mexico	No	No
Stephanie	Not in US	Yes	Dominican Republic	Yes	Yes
Diego	Not in US	Yes	Mexico	No	Yes
Carolina	Non-Grad	Yes	Cuban	No	No
Thomas	In US	No	Cuban	No	Yes
Daniella	Not in US	Yes	Mexico	No	Yes

## Research Procedure and Data Collection

In addition to the school records, there was one primary method of data collection that was used for this study. The data collection consisted of a series of semi-structured interviews with the Hispanic seniors at the high school regarding the college application process. These

interviews served as the substance of the study as they provided a rich in-depth look into the college decision and application process for this population. I focused on how each of the participants personally experienced this phenomenon.

This research study utilized a phenomenological design in an effort to obtain information on the following characteristics: (a) plans after high school, (b) knowledge about the college application process, and (c) need for assistance with the college application process. The research objective was to understand the phenomenon, which was the college application process, through the lived experiences of the Hispanic seniors. Additionally, I hoped to gather information on their overall needs during the transition process, which would then lend itself to the long-term goal of program development.

The investigation did adhere to the guidelines enforced by the school district and the Institutional Review Board of the University. Data collection occurred over a two month period from March to May of 2011. Collaboration with local principals, school counselors and teachers facilitated my ability to gain access to the senior students at the high school during the school day.

Once approval was provided by the Institutional Review Board of the University, I evaluated available school data in order to access the Hispanic seniors. I initially contacted all of the seniors who were classified as Hispanic; however some of these students did not complete the college application process. Although their experiences would have been informative, they were not part of the phenomenon; therefore they were not part of this research study and were not considered further for interviews. Parental permission forms and student assent forms were provided to the Hispanic students who were planning on completing the college application

process at the time of initial contact so that the forms could be completed and returned prior to the interviews.

After the forms were returned, I met with the Hispanic seniors who planned on completing the application process individually in order to conduct interviews. The interviews were conducted in conference rooms at the high school. As school is the natural setting for these students with regards to the college application process, this was the best option for the data collection. The interviews were tape recorded as permission for participation and taping had already been acquired prior to any contact with the students. The interviews lasted approximately thirty minutes depending on the responses of the interviewees. The interviews provided rich descriptions regarding their experience of the college application process. I was interested in the challenges that each of these students faced throughout this process as well as how these students successfully navigated and completed this complicated application process. After each interview the recording was transcribed and provided to the participants for review. After all of the interviews were completed, the transcripts from these interviews were coded in order for me to identify emerging themes in the data.

## **Instrumentation**

### **Interviews**

The Interview questions (Appendix A) were developed by the researcher in an attempt to gain in-depth insight to the experience of the Hispanic seniors as they worked through the phenomenon of the college application process. The questions focused on the needs of these individual students, the challenges that they may/may not have overcome, and the aspects that they felt were the most important to helping them succeed in completing the college application process. The questions were conceived based in the theories of Critical Race Theory and

Phenomenology. Most of the questions were informed by phenomenology as this allows the students to describe their experiences of the given phenomenon- specifically, questions one, two, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, and eleven. Question three was grounded in the ideas of Critical Race Theory as they were focused on the educational level of a marginalized population.

### **Data Analysis**

Staying true to Creswell's suggestion, I tried to take in all of the data by reviewing the data once it was collected and made notes in the margins (2007). I did this with each interview individually as soon as the interview was complete. I also implemented the assistance of a research team. The team participated in reviewing all of the data from the participants' interviews. As all of the interviews were complete, we summarized the notes for the entire data source. All of the data was entered in an Excel spreadsheet so that we could easily identify common themes and codes among the participants. We identified the codes and key words that continued to emerge in the interviews and specific examples from each of the sources were then matched to each of the codes and key words. Having the codes identified, I then created a data display to compare the data from all of the interviews. I shared this information with my data team so that we could discuss all of the data points. Not only did the research team ask questions about the results, but they were also involved in the consensus coding process in order to also help with the trustworthiness of this study. In order for the research team to agree that a code or theme had emerged among the participants, a majority of the participants must have discussed the theme during their individual interviews.

### **Research Question**

The study was designed to describe a sample of Hispanic seniors as they experienced the college application process and to investigate the following research question (RQ) during that process.

RQ (Central Question): What was the experience of the college decision and application process for Hispanic seniors at the high school?

This qualitative research question was answered by the data that was derived from the individual interviews with the Hispanic students. Through the data analysis process these descriptions were coded for similarities and themes that emerged among the students therefore uniting their experiences in the phenomenon of the college application process.

### **Trustworthiness**

As mentioned previously, I implemented the assistance of a research team to provide peer review as well as debriefing as an external check for this study (Creswell, 2007). The research team consisted of two other members and me. As the primary researcher, I am a practicing school counselor in my third year of a PhD program in Counseling and Student Personnel Services at a major southeastern university. One of the additional peer research team members is also a practicing school counselor, while the other is a practicing school administrator; both members of the research team were in my PhD cohort, working towards their degrees in Counseling and Student Personnel Services. Aside from working with my research team, I also implemented member checks for all of the interviews; the typed transcripts were submitted to each interviewee in order for them to review the content and make any changes or clarifications to the information that was provided.

**Bias**

Internally, I also needed to evaluate myself to be true to the trustworthiness of the study. In a phenomenological study “one must reflect, first, on the meaning of the experience for oneself” (Creswell, 2007, p.207). I needed to assess my own biases with this particular population. This should also be an area where I used the research team as a system of checks and balances, as they were able to challenge and question me in order to really help keep trustworthiness in this study.

Prior to this study, I had previously worked with the Hispanic seniors in another school setting. The previous school had the fastest growing Hispanic population within the county in this suburb of Atlanta. However, the school had no action plan in place to assist this growing population or their families. As a counselor in the school, I partnered with the ESOL teacher to create a program that addressed not only the needs of the students, but also addressed the needs of the parents; there was both a weekly group for students as well a quarterly meeting for the Hispanic parents. Based on these experiences, I had a preconceived bias that the Hispanic seniors would need additional support from the school in order to successfully complete the college application process. However, in transferring from the previous school to the current school where the research was being conducted, I attempted to implement this same program for Hispanic students and their parents. The program was not successful. The two schools were only ten minutes apart, so I was interested to consider the needs of this Hispanic population in contrast to the needs of my previous population. It is important to note that although the schools are close in vicinity, they are very different in demographic structure; the current school where the research was being conducted has a higher socioeconomic population than the previous school. The two Hispanic populations that I was working with were very different based on this

demographic information alone. Researcher bias was something that I needed to own and monitor with the help of my research team as the Hispanic population at the current high school was very different than the Hispanic students with whom I worked previously; the students in this study needed to be able to express their own experiences without my bias affecting the outcome.

### **Chapter Summery**

This study was a phenomenological study that also considered the ideas of Lat Crit Theory. The focus of the study was to understand the experience of the decision and college application process for the Hispanic seniors at the selected high school. This was accomplished through a series of semi-structured interviews that allowed the Hispanic seniors to share their experience as they went through the phenomenon of the college application process. Data was collected in accordance with the suggestions of Creswell, and was summarized and compared for emerging themes.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

As a phenomenological study allows a researcher to discover meaning and essence that are attributed to an experience, this chapter is the opportunity to present that information. Through interviews with Hispanic seniors, who have experienced the college application and decision making process, this study attempted to find meaning in their needs, their support systems, their backgrounds, and their process. This chapter presents that analysis of the data collected through the interviews. For this chapter, the participants have chosen pseudonyms to take the place of their identities; many chose names that represented individuals who were influential in helping them successfully transition or achieve throughout high school.

#### **Analysis of Interviews**

In order to begin the analysis of the interviews, I reread the transcriptions and replayed the interviews multiple times in an attempt to fully understand the experiences of my participants. Once I felt that I had fully grasped the content of the interviews, I then followed the procedure outlined by Creswell (2007), which condensed the data into smaller thematic units. As I read the transcripts, I made notes in the margins regarding statements the participants made about the phenomenon. I then reviewed and compiled my notes in a spreadsheet; this information, along with the interviews, was shared with my research team for review, feedback, and insight. I then combined the notes from all of the feedback, looking for overlapping themes. The next step of the analysis process consisted of selecting the statements that best described the phenomenon. This was accomplished by considering the number of times a similar statement was made by the participants. The significant statements were then grouped together to form the themes of this study. At the end of the data analysis, three major themes proved to be significant.

## **Discussion of Themes**

As the themes were identified, they were shared with the research team in order to increase trustworthiness. Both the primary researcher as well as the research team agreed that the following themes were significant: the influence of parents, navigating informational systems, and the decision to be proactive. Additionally, the influence of parents was divided into two sub-themes: parental support and parent educational level. These themes are illustrated in the following examples of quotations that have been taken from the fourteen interviews with the Hispanic seniors.

### **Influence of Parents- Parental Support**

Given the traditional connections within the Hispanic culture, families would naturally impact the decision making process. This theme has been divided into two sub-themes. The first piece that will be explored is the support that was provided by parents during the college application process. When describing the college application process, Hispanic seniors were united around the idea that their parents were the greatest support and impacted their decisions. The influence of the family really resonated with these students. When asked if anyone helped him with the college application process, Thomas responded in the following way:

Um, just my parents, really. I don't have an older sibling so I'm kind of a guinea pig for the family. So we kind of went to a lot of seminars; UGA would have little informational seminars also. And we went to a couple of schools like an hour away and did tours. But everything we did, we did as a family. We didn't make any decisions single handedly or anything like that.

Tours and college visits were a popular method of support. In a discussion regarding her support system, Norma described the ways that her father supported her through the college application and decision making process.

He was really excited about the whole like college stuff cause he didn't have a choice where to go to college. He just went where he could afford cause he was the only one in his family that went to college; he had to pay his own way. So he's like really never toured campuses. So like one weekend he's like 'Let's go to the University of Tennessee this weekend' then next weekend he would be like 'We're going to Alabama,' or 'We're going to Auburn.' So it would just be like he would tell me when we were going and we would get in the car and like go to the campus for a day and like come back. He was definitely the most supportive cause he like had me like open my mind and like be open to looking at other schools and not stay focused on just one, which was good.

Although visiting colleges can be beneficial for both the student and the parent as they work through the college decision making process, some families do not have the luxury of making the trip to the campuses. However, parents can still be influential and supportive in other ways. Many of the participants looked to their parents as a source of information on the college applications. Eric explains how his parents helped him with his application and the way that this was a bonding opportunity for their relationship.

My parents helped me a lot with the applications and gave me some information for the applications. Cause there was a bunch of stuff that the [college] applications asked me for. Stuff that I didn't even know. And it was cool to find

out what my parents did when they went to college and how much they actually knew.

Camilo had a similar experience.

My mom helped me walk through everything. Because she knew most of the details; she knew all of the details that I did not know in the application process. Like when my parents went to college, the exact places that they work, stuff like that. So she was helping me fill that information out multiple times for the multiple applications.

Daniella also looked to her parents for support in this same manner.

My step-mom really helped me work through this process. I always double checked all of those facts that you need to fill out about yourself, grades, stuff like that. With the essays, there was this company that my parents found for me that does guiding through the financial parts of the college application. And then one of the programs includes an SAT/ACT prep course as well as reviews your essay...that was really helpful. I'm glad my step-mom did that for me.

While some parents were providing specific information and details on the college application, other parents were simply present and active with their children during the process. Diego felt that his mom was going to do everything that she possibly could to help him successfully transition to college.

My mom stressed out a lot. She researched every little piece of the college process. She's the kind of woman that will figure everything out and then help you through it; it made the process a lot easier.

Andrew expressed that his parents helped him manage deadlines.

My parents helped me the most by taking the time to sit down with me on the computer and remind me ‘Ok, you need to do this’ or ‘You need to get this done by such and such a date’ so that I would get things in on time. I guess it just helped when they were persistent with everything.

Tanya simply appreciated the opportunity to work as a family unit.

My mom, my dad, and I sat down and went through everything that I had done. It was really refreshing.

The presence of Stephanie’s mother allowed her to feel supported throughout the college application process. Stephanie stated that she would “bounce ideas off of her [mother] and [her mother] would just help me through the decisions.” Likewise, Carolina appreciated the support that her mother demonstrated by being present and available. When asked if anyone helped her with the college application process, Carolina explained:

Yeah, my mom, with everything, it is always my mom; she has always been the one who is by my side.

According to these Hispanic seniors, parental support and influence was a very positive, common experience. Although there were different levels of support reported by the participants, all of the support was desired and appreciated by these students.

### **Influence of Parents- Parents’ Educational Level**

In their discussions of parents and parental support throughout the college application process, a second theme emerged among the participants that will be referred to as the parents’ educational level. However, different from the role of parental support, parents’ educational levels were discussed both positively and negatively. The Hispanic seniors’ responses divided them based on those students whose parents attended college in the United States, those students

whose parents attended college in another country, those students whose parents began college but did not earn a degree, and those students whose parents did not attend college. Based on these categories, the students expressed different experiences.

Many of the Hispanic seniors whose parents attended college in the United States felt that their parents were knowledgeable about the college application process and were able to assist them as they made decisions throughout the year. As previously mentioned, students like Eric, Camilo, Thomas, and Andrew, all of whose parents attended college in the United States, did receive direct assistance from their parents. What is interesting about this group of students is that they realized that they still could have used more help with the college application and decision making process. Andrew shares that:

I'm the first one in our family. I'm the oldest brother so we didn't really know how to do everything. We just had to read it online. Some of it was just vague so we figured it out but it took longer than it should have. It should be easier now for my younger siblings. They should be able to do it like that [he snaps]; because my brothers know everything now and my parents know everything too. They will just be better at it then if my parents were going through it for the first time on-line, which is really difficult.

Norma agreed.

It would have been easier if my parents would have like had the past experience of like maybe helping someone else. Cause I'm the first born so maybe helping another child through the process or like going through this same kind of on-line process themselves. Cause they didn't go to big universities with like these huge

applications so they were kind of taken back by the process even though they went to school in the US.

Many students would have liked additional assistance throughout the college application and decision making process. The next group of student responses, however, separated themselves into a different category. These students had parents who did not attend college in the United States. Therefore many of these parents were not familiar with the United States educational system, and definitely were not familiar with the college application process. Diego was a student who fit that description. When asked if his parents attended college, he explained:

That is a tough question because they went to college in Mexico. I'm not really sure about their college experiences. My dad attended a college in the city, and I'm not sure where my mom went. But they do both have degrees from Mexico.

Later in our discussion Diego described the application process for his family.

It is very stressful. My mom stresses out a lot. She wants to know everything and will do everything that she can to figure out the information. It is harder for her and for me since I'm the first person who will be attending school in this country.

Daniella was also a student whose parents attended college outside of the United States. Daniella explained to me the application process that she and her parents were used to in their country of origin.

My step-mother went to the University of Lima in Peru. And then my dad, he went to college in Venezuela; one of the top ones in the country. It is so different because how you apply over there. What you do is take a test for the specific college. Then depending on your scores, and depending on everyone else's scores in the country, you get in. It is not like you have to take the SAT or an ACT and

your grades don't really matter as much as they do here. So that is different. And then college there you have to still live with your parents; like you do back and forth every day. So it is not like 'Oh you are going to college' and 'It is such a big deal' in the sense that 'I won't see you again for a long time.' It is more independent here.

So where do students turn when their parents' educational experiences are so different from their own? Some students were unfortunately left to figure out the college application process on their own. Stephanie's parents both went to college in the Dominican Republic. However, she did not feel that they were able to assist her throughout the year.

I honestly haven't gotten much background or information on any of the schools.

My parents went to school somewhere else...somewhere outside of the country, so they didn't know the whole process of it. So I sort of just had to learn how to do it on my own. I thought it would be a lot easier than it was.

When the educational process is so different from one country to another, access to information becomes very important. And what about those students whose parents did not complete college or never attended college? How were they able to access the information to successfully begin the process the transition process from high school to college? Alyssa's parents attended a community college, but did not earn a degree. Luckily for Alyssa, she had an uncle who was very concerned about her post secondary plans.

He would call me like everyday asking me how everything was going with the applications and stuff. And he would send me a lot of scholarships and stuff.

Cause he has...I mean his son is going to the University of Florida...he got accepted so...he is also a senior like me.

Unfortunately for Alyssa, a concerned uncle cannot replace the role of parents. When asked if there was anything that could have make the college application process better or easier for her this year she responded with the following:

I wish my parents would have helped me more with everything that I had to do. Like if they helped me with the actual process and pushed me more to get everything in...transcripts and scores and stuff. But they thought it was my responsibility because I'm old enough and older so...but I left everything to the last minute, which ended up hurting me in the end.

Aside from being on their own to locate important college resources and application information, students whose parents did not attend college may even find themselves in a role reversal situation; they may actually be teaching their parents and supporting their parents through the college application process instead of being supported during their senior year. Juan found himself in this situation.

My parents are from Mexico, so they were not familiar with all of the applications. I was doing most of it on my own. I tried to help my parents understand but there's like a language barrier and it's that they are not really used to it. They just don't understand. I got a book in Spanish from my counselor so my dad will read that to try to help. It is just so hard at times. Like with financial aid...I wish there was more information in Spanish cause I think my dad is still a little hazy on that; he is not sure how that all works out.

Juan went on to share a bit more about his experience this year and the role reversal that took place in his home.

It's been pretty hectic at times. Cause I'm the oldest of six so of course I am going to have to teach my little brothers and sisters how to actually go through this process. But I hope at that time that my parents can actually get a hold of it and just...just be like an example for my community and my family.

Lourann will also be a first generation college student. She too expressed that she taught her parents about the college application process this year, experiencing the same role reversal as Juan. When asked about the most challenging part of the process, Lourann spoke of being on her own.

Everyone else has parents who help with their applications, proof read their essays, give all this advice. But my parents...I don't really rely on them for much. If anything they rely on me. So I kind of had to do everything myself and then tell my parents about it and try to explain it to them. It is kind of stressful...especially because you feel like everyone else has help.

Lourann continued to explain this dynamic further.

I think a lot of the stress comes from not knowing. Since your parents didn't go to college and you are going to a really good high school in the US, they think that you know everything and that you have everything set up...but you are actually unsure. So then...but I'm sure if you are from Hispanic decent you are used to your parents depending on you and you are used to being pretty independent. So you grow up with the mentality that you always have to do things for yourself. And then I try not to ask my parents for anything because I'm afraid that they might feel guilty for not knowing. So the independence is a good thing, but it is stress.

According to these Hispanic seniors, their parents' educational backgrounds directly impacted their college application and decision making process. While this was a common experience for all of the students, some were influenced positively while others were impacted negatively.

### **Navigating Informational Systems**

The participants of this study reported navigating through a variety of informational systems in order to gain access to the necessary college application information. These students and families were willing to utilize many resources in order to gain the knowledge that they required. Although some students turned to the conventional methods of college searching techniques, others struggled through the process; constantly looking and hoping for someone who would have been able to assist them.

Lourann began her process with some of the most traditional steps in the decision making process.

When I was deciding where I wanted to go to college and what I wanted to study I would talk to my teachers; they were probably the biggest help because they know programs that are good. Then I would go online and check them out. I also went to the conference and college fairs so that I could get more information on the schools and that was helpful...you get to talk to the reps and they check you out. That was how I decided where I wanted to apply.

Daniella also utilized similar techniques.

I just did a college search, and then I did the campus visits. And then after that I just looked at what is best for me and what I want. I had already chosen a major...I have been sure of psych for four years now, so it was just finding a school that fit with that.

Other students looked to those closest to them including family, friends, teachers, and counselors for information about colleges and the college application process. Alyssa based her decisions on the information that came from her college-age friends.

A lot of people that I know go to Kennesaw and they love it there. They always say good things about it...so I think that I will like it there too. And then one of closest friends is studying International Business. I had never heard of it. So he explained everything to me about it and it really interested me so I want to do that now.

Juan received his information from both his high school counselor as well as his college contact.

Ms. Johnson [high school counselor] helped me out a lot when I was looking for information. She provided me with materials like to show my parents and she gave me information in both English and in Spanish. Then when I had decided on a few colleges they really did help me out a lot also. They really do a lot to help out with people of Hispanics and people of minorities. So they really helped to try to get my parents engaged and walk me through the steps that I didn't understand.

Thomas also received his information from college representatives.

It was really hard to find information about what the schools like to see and what they would want on your application; like you hear different things from your friends or your peers. You know that schools want a 4.0 or they want such and such on the ACT...but like once I went and talked to the people from the actual college, like actually went to Georgia and talked to the people holding the seminars, I actually felt a lot more prepared than I thought I had been; because it is getting a lot harder to get into UGA now. I had met all the requirements, but

before I knew exactly what they were really looking for I was kind of freaking out about it; but then I realized everything was okay.

Although some of the participants were able to utilize their resources in order to navigate through the informational systems and retrieve the necessary college information, others were less successful. Some students struggled all year with the inability to successfully find the way to the desired information, which caused them to miss deadlines and struggle with the organization of the many steps that must take place for a successful transition from high school to college. Andrew was a student who fell into this category. Despite getting accepted to Arizona State, he missed a key piece of information that will impact his plans for the future.

So we thought that the application and the financial aid were part of the same application cause that is how it was with other schools. Apparently that wasn't the case. I guess they did not tell us when the scholarship deadline was so then we missed it. Like it was before even January so we have to pay out of state if I'm going to go there, which is a really big deal. I was going to get in-state tuition. Apparently it is in really small print somewhere, but I just feel like someone should have shared that information with us.

Lourann also missed some deadlines along the way due to the inability to navigate through informational systems.

I had no idea where to start. The first school I applied to was Brenau, but I didn't know if that was all that I needed to do. But then I found out that they wanted letters of recommendation, transcripts, all kinds of stuff...and I didn't know how to get any of that. Just the common stuff that everyone else already knows that I didn't know. So I had to figure it all out. And I didn't think that I would be able to

get it all figured out in time or get it done in time. I had no idea that there were deadlines for scholarships. That is the sucky part. I had no idea. So I missed out on some deadlines for schools and scholarships. But luckily I got a few in.

Stephanie had a similar experience.

My mom works at a high school, so she was great and brought home some scholarship information for Hispanics and some other scholarship stuff also. Honestly I haven't even looked at them. I'm sure most of the deadlines have already passed at this point. I just get so overwhelmed. The information is coming so quickly, and I really don't understand it. It would have been really helpful if I could have gotten all of this stuff more nailed in my head earlier in high school. Cause I didn't think it was a big deal until everything was so late, and then it kind of piled up on me and deadlines have passed.

Carolina also struggled with deadlines due to a struggles locating information. Carolina had planned to attend the University of South Carolina until she discovered that she too had missed information regarding a very important scholarship deadline.

I was set on USC. Then I looked at the scholarship information, because I cannot go there if I don't have a full ride; my family cannot pay for out-of-state tuition. And so I thought I was completely set for USC. But then I found out that the requirements and deadline for the scholarship had changed and I would not be eligible. I was so disappointed. I had a back-up plan of UGA, but I really wanted to go to USC.

Aside from missed deadlines, the Hispanic seniors experienced problems with the overall organizational pieces of the college application process. Many of these students expressed that

they were not able to navigate through informational systems in order to find information regarding transcripts, letters of recommendation, SAT/ACT scores, and other critical items for a successful transition. Tanya expressed such struggles.

Some of the colleges required certain things to be sent from organizations that made the process confusing. Also they wanted different pieces of the application process sent to this department of that office. So when this item makes it here, but this same item doesn't make it here then it is hard to figure out; they should have all been received at the same time. I don't know what to say...I sent them at the same time. Then we didn't know with the letters of recommendations that were sent from the teachers because some of them never made it on time, which caused a problem. It was very stressful. And the same with the SAT scores as well. I decided to send them and pay for the thing, but I also decided to take them again in January. I was not aware that College Board sends all the scores at the same time. So after several months of the schools not getting the SAT scores, I was freaking out. I had requested them and paid for them in November and I needed the colleges to have them now. It was really hard to figure out.

Francesco had similar struggles navigating systems.

I had a really difficult time understanding how to request a transcript. I don't know...maybe I was unorganized. But, because it was a separate part of the application process it was, in my opinion, really challenging. I couldn't remember if I had sent my transcript to a school or if my SAT scores or my ACT scores had been sent; that was tough too since they are also a separate part of the process.

But all of those little pieces were really hard to keep track of and really hard to find information on...like how to do it.

Navigating informational systems directly impacted students ease with the college application process.

### **Decision to be Pro-Active**

According to the participants in this study, the decision to be pro-active either made the college application and decision making process easier or could have made the process easier for them had they chosen to take that route. Being pro-active was described by the students as submitting early applications, beginning the decision making process before senior year, and being active in the course selection process throughout high school. This theme was expressed by most of the seniors as a step they would have changed about their college application process or as the best decision they made throughout their application process. Diego was a student who dallied throughout the college application process.

You know how teachers, counselors, and parents tell you 'Don't procrastinate,' ... well I wish I would have taken that advice. I didn't do early decision. I didn't want to risk the colleges just looking at test scores and then making a decision based on that. I wanted them to look at my personality and letters of rec and stuff like that. But I would have done it differently if I could do it again.

Camilo applied for early decision and was pleased with his decision. When asked what one piece of advice he would give to a junior who is about to start the college application process he responded by saying:

I would suggest to get it all done and to do early application. I see people now who are applying and I can tell that it is really stressful. But to get it all done

during first semester really helps to push everything along and you can make your decision so that you are not rushed; you know that you are making the right choice. It is nice to have it all planned out.

Andrew agreed that he would also offer the same suggestion.

I would suggest applying early to the school that you want. You really don't lose anything by applying early and if you get accepted you get to start everything ahead instead of having to worry about it for another semester...you know what you are going to do. So that really helped me. You know...okay...I'm going into second semester like...okay I'm going to Arizona State...like okay what can I do to prepare for this? Or what forms do I need to turn in? It helps to get the decision in early instead of waiting until now. I can breathe for a second.

Daniella concurred.

Get your applications done during the summer. Don't wait because they usually have the essays already posted online even though the applications are not even open yet. Cause during school, depending on your course load and after school activities and all that, it can be very time consuming. So you don't want to be like... 'I'll just wait for the deadline.' Cause you never know...you might find out that you need a teacher rec or a counselor rec and they probably already have tons of other requests waiting on them before they can get to yours.

Aside from applying early, students also agreed that there was a need to prepare for college earlier in their high school careers. Francesco stressed the importance of preparing by taking a rigorous curriculum beginning in the ninth grade.

Taking a lot of AP classes was a big thing. Because when I got here as a freshman, people were like 'It is just freshman year...it doesn't matter.' But the teachers were like 'No, it really does matter...you have to start now because when you are in senior year you are already going through the process it will be too late.' So I think it is a big thing. I'm glad that I took AP classes and I'm glad that I tried from the very beginning...since freshman year...to get good grades.

Lourann also realized the importance of actively preparing early for college.

It is so important to be proactive. I think that through high school I realized the need to push myself; I had to make myself stand out if I was going to go to college. So I took the AP classes and the honors, which I never thought I could do. But then I ...just being around people who I saw working and studying all the time...marked it in my brain that they had to work for it, and that was inspiring for me. So I just did it. I saw people studying. And I got good grades without studying, but they got better grades...so I did what they did. That is how I learn. I see my friends preparing for college, and so I do that too. It is really important.

Alyssa shared that being proactive could have directly impacted the outcome of her high school experience.

When I was like a freshman and a sophomore I did really bad in school. I didn't think it was important or that it mattered. I didn't think that it was like such a big deal for like colleges and stuff like that. My GPA was really bad for my first two years. But then I like realized it last year when I was a junior...so I started doing better, and better, and better. So like I think that people who are like freshman and

stuff should realize that it really is a big deal and that is really is important to try their best.

Across the board, the Hispanic students expressed that early preparation and action was beneficial in their college application and decision making process.

### **Synthesis of Experiences**

After presenting the themes of the study, the final step in a phenomenological study is to provide a synthesis of the experiences. According to Creswell (2007), the goal of the researcher is to discover the essence of the phenomenon by reducing the experiences of all of the participants to a brief description. The following section presents a synthesis of what the students revealed in these themes.

All three of the themes that emerged in this study became interconnected by the students' responses. Both of the sub-themes that emerged in this study, parental support and parent educational level, revealed the impact that Hispanic parents have on their children. Throughout both sub-themes, participants discussed the amount of knowledge, time, and additional resources their parents could contribute. These aspects of knowledge, time, and resources would then impact other themes that emerged such as navigating informational systems as well as the decision and ability to be proactive in the college application process. Despite their struggles, students revealed that they, and their parents, took the steps that were required in order to successfully complete the transition from high school to college; however, it was not always on-time, in an organized manner, or without frustration and confusion. These Hispanic students conveyed that although they successfully completed the college application and decision making process, they would have liked to have done it earlier and with more assistance.

### **Chapter Summary**

This study was guided by the following central research question: what was the experience of the college decision and application process for Hispanic seniors at the high school? Themes emerged in the categories of the influence of parents, the access and availability of information, and the decision to be proactive. Additionally, the influence of parents was divided into two sub-themes: parental support and parent educational level. Describing the Hispanic seniors through rich, thick descriptions, the students were able to portray their experiences of the college application and decision making process.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

In this chapter I summarize the first four chapters. I also discuss the study's results as they relate to literature regarding barriers for Hispanic students, navigating informational systems for colleges and the application process, and parents' expectations for their students. I additionally address the limitations of this study and identify future opportunities for research. Finally, the chapter ends with the goals I have in terms of future outcomes related to Hispanic students, program development, and the college application and decision making process.

#### **Summary of the Study**

Hispanic seniors are applying to college and transitioning at a significantly lower rate than their peers (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2011). Hispanic students are also struggling as they transition to college. Hispanic students continue to face obstacles in applying to college including: (a) first generation immigration status, (b) limited technology access, (c) language barriers, (d) socioeconomic constraints, (e) lack of access to college representatives or college programs, (f) lack of genuine effort on the part of the schools and counselors to reach out and provide college information to Hispanic students and families (Auerbach, 2004; Chacon, 2000; Cutler, & Lee, 2002; Downs et al., 2008; Ortiz & Gonzales, 2000; Tornatzky, 2002; Torrez, 2004).

The purpose of this study was to describe the lived experiences of the phenomenon of the college application and decision making process for Hispanic seniors. In this study, I conducted in-depth interviews with the Hispanic seniors who experienced the phenomenon of completing the college application process. Three themes and two sub-themes emerged as significant based on the results. The themes were: the influence of parents, navigating informational systems for

the college application process, and the decision to be proactive; the sub-themes were parental support and parent educational level.

### **Relation to the Literature Review**

The findings from this study share similarities with the information that was presented in the literature review. The first similarity is that parents of Hispanic students have high expectations for their children and want them to pursue a college education. As stated in the literature, higher education is often a goal that is encouraged by Hispanic families (Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000). Hispanic parents want their children to succeed in school so they may further their education past high school (Stern, 2004). The majority of the participants named their parents as the most supportive and most influential person in the college application and decision making process. Even the parents who were not familiar with the United States educational system demonstrated their high expectations for their children by searching for resources, trying to become familiar with the process, or simply making themselves available through the gift of time. Parents wanted their children to know that going to college was important and that they supported their students through this process. The participants spoke passionately as they described the ways in which their parents supported them through the college application process. Parents have a hard time communicating with teenagers sometimes, but all of these students knew that their parents had the expectation that they further their education beyond high school; not only that, but they had their parents' support to do so. The college application process, and transition to higher education, could be accomplished because their parents had higher expectations and support for these participants.

The second idea that related the literature to the study was that they both discussed a number of barriers that Hispanic students face as they are going through the college application

process. One of the barriers addressed by the literature, as well as the participants, was the idea of first generation status. The literature suggests that first generation students have a much greater challenge, and are therefore at a greater risk for a complicated transition from high school to college (Ishitani, 2006; Pascarella et al., 2004; Pike & Kuh, 2005). One of the main challenges, as also described in the study, is that parents do not know or understand all that is involved in the transition process (Noeth & Wimberly, 2002). In this study, half of the participants had parents who attended college outside of the United States, did not graduate from college, or did not attend college at all. This data puts our participants and their parents higher than the national average since the National Educational Longitudinal Survey reports that less than one-quarter of Hispanic students earn a bachelor's degree by the age of twenty-six, and that almost two-thirds never receive any post secondary credentials (Fry, 2004). The participants reported that many times these parents were not able to assist them throughout the college application process. The students had to educate the parents about the United States educational system, and there was really a role reversal that was happening in these families; the students were taking the lead, and the parents were following by example. Unfortunately, many times the students did not know the information themselves, or had incomplete information, which led to problems throughout the college application process. This is why it is particularly important for schools and counselors to provide information to both students and parents. Even though more of the parents in this study had some college experience beyond what the national statistics suggest, all of these participants expressed that additional parental knowledge and education would have benefited them during the college application and decision making process.

Another barrier addressed in both previous research and this study was the difficulty navigating informational systems. Specifically, the literature referred to the lack of access to

college representatives as well as a lack of contact and lack of effort on the part of the high school counselors (Auerback, 2004; Chacon, 2000; Cutler & Lee, 2002; Downs et al., 2008). According to the participants in this study, some of the students had positive experiences in this area; they were able to successfully navigate through informational systems. Some of the students specifically mentioned college representatives or their high school counselor as being very helpful and providing useful information as well as support throughout the transition process. However, other students really struggled and were not able to successfully navigate through informational systems in order to find the necessary resources and information. They commented that they found themselves searching for the information on their own. Many of these students were the same participants whose parents did not attend college or did not attend college in the United States. So again we see the reference back to the struggles for first generation students; they had a harder time accessing the information that was critical to helping them successfully complete the college application process. Although there was a divide in the responses among the participants, the consensus that could be made was that the access to information is vitally important and that it could and should be made more readily and intentionally available in the future for all students and parents.

The final similarity between the review of the literature and the results of this study were that both discussed the importance of early preparation for the college application and decision making process. Research is very clear that preparation should begin very early in all students' careers so that both parents and students are ready and able to successfully make the transition; ninth grade is not too early to begin planning for postsecondary options (Quint, Thompson & Bald, 2008). References were made to the importance of course selection, rigor in academics, and preparing for college prior to senior year (Adelman, 2006; Oakes & Saunders, 2007). The

information in the literature review echoes the information from the participants. The participants directly discussed the need to prepare earlier in high school. The students who took advantage of early preparation discussed how greatly this impacted their successes; the students who did not begin preparing until their junior or senior year of high school discussed how in hind-sight they would have changed their pattern of behavior. Students recognized the importance of freshman and sophomore year; these grades will impact their options after high school. Students also recognized the need to be active in their course selection process. As many Hispanic students are traditionally tracked into lower ability courses and less represented in AP courses (Solórzano & Ornelas, 2002; Swail, Cabrera, & Lee, 2004), this too will limit their options after high school. The participants in this study discussed preparing early by taking AP courses, paying attention to course selection, and finally submitting applications earlier to colleges. The participants in the study were able to recognize how early preparation either prepared them or could have prepared them for a smooth and successful college application and decision making process.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Several limitations must be considered in terms of this study. As this was a purely qualitative study, the findings cannot be generalized to any other population. There are also additional factors about this particular sample set that provide further limitations. As the results reflect the experience of only fourteen participants, this may be viewed as a limitation. Additionally, all of these students came from one very successful high school in an affluent suburban area. The geographic area alone placed limitations on this study.

Socioeconomic status also influenced the study. Although half of these participants were first generation college-going students, some participants acknowledged that they had access to

resources based on their socioeconomic status that other students may not ever be able to afford. For example, some of these students were able to visit colleges all over the country, some had access to private consultants who could review their applications, and others had private tutors who would review their essays. Although this was not true for all of the fourteen participants, more affluent socioeconomic status was certainly a factor for some of the students.

### **Implications and Future Research**

Both implications for practice as well as future research are apparent following the completion of this study. Two ideas that were first presented in the review of the literature were echoed in the findings of this study and offer implications for practice. First, Tornatzky (2002) suggested that Hispanic families need to be involved in the college application process. His research study revealed that Hispanic parents must know about the process and what actions need to be taken and when those steps need to be administered (Tornatzky, Cutler, & Lee, 2002). Throughout their discussions regarding parental support and parent educational level, the participants in this study agreed that it was important for their parents to be involved in the college application process. In practice, this is a wonderful opportunity for high school counselors to reach out to the Hispanic parents and community. These events for Hispanic parents can be held outside of the schools in order to welcome the entire Hispanic community. Locations such as recreation centers, church halls, and neighborhood community centers are great places to bring the community together in a neutral setting so that parents feel comfortable attending. These events need to accommodate families in ways that they feel a partnership with the school. Childcare needs to be provided, and day and time needs to be amenable to families. Counselors need to offer informational events in both English and Spanish for Hispanic parents so that they may become involved in their child's college planning process. As the participants

discussed the importance of early planning, these Hispanic parent nights need to begin with the freshman year (or even earlier) and continue yearly until students graduate. By involving the parents early and often they will be informed on topics such as course selection, rigor, and the college application process. Although not a direct implication of this study, the Hispanic parent nights could also lead to vertical teaming among elementary, middle and high school counselors around these issues. Allowing Hispanic communities to become familiar with college planning, course selection, and school involvement would be beneficial at every level of education.

An additional implication presented in the literature and then discussed by the participants of this study involved the significance of having timely and relevant information. The need for knowledge regarding how to navigate the informational systems, by both Hispanic parents and students, resonated with the seniors during the interviews. Aside from providing the information to the parents, it is also important to provide the information to the Hispanic students directly. In practice, this can be accomplished in a small group or classroom guidance setting. Again beginning in the ninth grade, counselors need to provide the requirements for graduation, course selections options, and college entrance requirements to students. In the tenth grade they should be working on interest inventories, focusing on strengths, building their student resume, and participating in their course selection. By the eleventh grade, the students in the group should be covering items such as college searches, SAT/ACT prep options, college fair and college visit opportunities, and practice applications. Then by the twelfth grade, these Hispanic students should be ready to narrow down their college searches, work on financial aid information, and finalize their application and decision making process. Students would be receiving the appropriate information every year to help them progress through the transition process. Additionally, they would have a source of support from their counselor, the other group

members, and their parents who would have received similar information in their own evening events. Making the application process a systemic approach for these students and parents is the best way to help them successfully transition from high school to college.

The final implication for practice from this study would be to continue to build relationships with college representatives, community representatives, and scholarship representatives who can and are willing to assist the Hispanic students and parents as they work through the college application process. As mentioned in the review of the literature, one of the obstacles that some of these students face is their documentation status (Auerbach, 2004). Knowing representatives at colleges and having representatives for scholarships that are willing and available to assist these students is a very important piece of information that can be provided to both parents and students (Hurtado, Carter and Spuler, 1996). Undocumented students are more limited in their financial searches, so any additional assistance or contact information that can be provided will greatly help them successfully transition from high school to college (Downs et al., 2008).

Specifically in the state of Georgia, we are currently in a legal transition for undocumented families. As of July 1, 2011, Georgia will pass the Illegal Immigration Reform and Enforcement Act of 2011, which will greatly impact this population (Redmon, 2011). Among other factors, the bill would punish people who transport or harbor illegal immigrants would require many private employers to verify that their newly hired employees are eligible to work in the United States, and would penalize people who use falsified identification to obtain a job in Georgia (Redmon, 2011). Many families are concerned as to how this will impact their livelihood as well as fearful of being incarcerated or deported. Therefore this is a very real barrier that many Hispanic families are currently facing in Georgia.

Future research recommendations are closely linked to both the implications and the limitations that have been discussed for this study. As this study was only conducted at one high school, future research would need to be conducted to determine if the needs of the Hispanic seniors in the surrounding area, in a different geographic location, or with a different socioeconomic background are the same as the needs expressed by the participants of this study. Ideally, high school counselors would be able to put a program into practice for Hispanic seniors and their parents not only for the high school in this study, but other schools in the area or nationally as well. In order for this to occur, more qualitative research needs to be done to assess if the needs are similar from school to school while more quantitative research needs to be conducted to allow for generalization.

Additionally, as programs are developed for both Hispanic students and parents, research needs to be conducted and published to assess the effectiveness of these programs. As discussed in the review of the literature, limited research exists about program construction or implementation, particularly those programs that involve Hispanic parents and families. Either qualitative or quantitative research could be conducted to evaluate outcomes from these programs. Specific examples may include, but not limited to, research regarding other socioeconomic groups, other racial populations, other cultural groups, program development assessments, or parent studies.

### **Future Direction and Goals**

Moving from one school with a large Hispanic population to another school with a small Hispanic population, I was very curious to hear the students' stories and personal experiences with the phenomenon. Based on my own biases and beliefs, I anticipated that there would be a fairly significant distinction between the two populations based on the other differences I have

observed in the school settings. However, based on the discussions with the participants and the findings, I now understand that these Hispanic seniors have many of the same needs as the students at my previous school. A key difference between the two populations is that these students receive more support from their parents and families. Although not researched in this particular study, based on the demographic information of the participants, I wonder how much of that is contributed to the socioeconomic make-up of the participants.

Based on the outcomes of this study, I plan to implement both a student group as well as parent events beginning with the 2011-2012 school year. The student group will be a quarterly group for Hispanic students beginning in the ninth grade. The students will be separated by grades level so that their activities and college planning information will be grade and age appropriate. The parent events will be divided into two separate events for the first year. The fall event will be for parents of junior and senior Hispanic students, while the winter event will be for parents of freshman and sophomore Hispanic students. Again, this is separated by grade level so that the college planning information will be grade appropriate. I plan to keep both qualitative and quantitative documentation on both the student group as well as the parent events in order to assess their value.

The population in my current school continues to change; not only does this change occur naturally, but the county has also recently changed the zoning lines for the upcoming year. Therefore we will be receiving many of the students from the Hispanic community with whom I worked at my old school. With the integration of this larger Hispanic population, it is vitally important that the counseling department be pro-active in our efforts to involve both the parents and the students in the college planning and transition process.

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## APPENDIX A

**Interview Questions**

- 1- What are your plans after high school?
- 2- How did you decide that was the direction you wanted to go after graduation?
- 3- Did your parents attend college? Was it in the United States (optional follow-up)?
- 4- How far along are you in the process (college application)? OR What have you done to prepare for \_\_\_\_ (work, military, moving, etc...for those not attending college)?
- 5- What has been the most challenging part for you?
- 6- Was there anything that surprised you about the process?
- 7- Is there anything you would have done differently?
- 8- Who helped you the most in this process?
- 9- What information was the most important in helping you through the process? Where did this information come from?
- 10- What else would have made this process easier for you or your family?
- 11- Do you have anything else you would like to share?