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Hispanic Students in Higher Education

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Running Head: HISPANIC STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE MIDWEST: FACTORS
INFLUENCING THE EXPERIENCES
OF HISPANIC STUDENTS

by:

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Abstract

This project looked at the experiences of Hispanic college students at a private university in the Midwest. The literature review guided the interview protocol questions to better determine what experiences impact the retention of Hispanic college students. The use of interviews helped gather qualitative data that touched upon support services, social and academic influences, campus climate, sense of belonging, cultural influences, and challenges. The findings indicate that bridge programs, student organizations, faculty advisors, family support, and a welcoming environment influence Hispanic college students positively, which in turn helps them stay in college. The study found that poor advising services and challenging academic rigor are perceived to be the greatest obstacles for Hispanic college students.

Keywords: college students, experiences, Hispanic

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Higher Education in the Midwest: Factors Influencing the Experiences of Hispanic Students

Introduction

As the Hispanic population grows, the volume of Hispanic students entering college is also expected to increase. Although the growth of well-prepared Hispanic students has also increased in the last 30 years, Hispanic students continue to underperform compared to other student groups (Miller & Garcia, 2004). The growing Hispanic population has contributed to the larger representation of Hispanic students in college, and the trend is expected to continue until 2050. However, Hispanic students have higher attrition and institutions struggle to develop effective retention programs (Miller & Garcia, 2004).

Without adequate retention strategies, Hispanic college students are expected to have the lowest college graduation rates in two and four year institutions (Solorzano, Villalpando, & Oseguera, 2005). It is also alarming that 12.7% of the Hispanic population hold a bachelor or higher degree compared to 18.7% of the Black population, and 38.7% percent of the White population (Folder & Nam, 2007). It is crucial to understand how Hispanic students in a four-year private university navigate through college. This qualitative study looks at how support services, social support, campus climate, sense of belonging, and cultural influences impact Hispanic college students. Moreover, the study identifies some of the challenges and positive experiences. Based on the literature, the areas identified in the study influence college success.

Literature Review

As the number of Hispanic students graduating from high school increases, colleges and universities continue to develop recruiting strategies to attract students to

their respective institutions. However, once on the college campus, institutions struggle to effectively develop programs to retain Hispanic students. Miller and Garcia (2004) indicate that Hispanic college students have higher attrition as compared to White and Asian Americans.

Access and equity continue to be an issue in the nation and specifically in predominately White institutions (PWI). Higher education institutions continue to invest in the area of student retention, but also continue to expand programming to target specific ethnic populations, such as Hispanic students. According to the 2000 Census, approximately 13 percent of the U.S. population identify themselves as Hispanic, which makes Hispanics the largest racial/ethnic group in the United States. However, Puerto Ricans and Mexican Americans, the largest Hispanic groups, are more likely to be concentrated in urban centers, live in poverty, and experience poor educational conditions (Solorzano et al., 2005).

Institutions across the nation are paying attention to socioeconomic status and cultural characteristics, but students of color, especially Hispanics, continue to have the lowest percentage (12.7%) of bachelor degrees in the nation (Folder & Nam, 2007). The educational attainment of Hispanics continues to be a societal problem and there is a need to understand the experiences of Hispanic college students in order to assist them successfully throughout their college career (Gloria, Castellanos, Lopez, & Rosales, 2005).

Studies have incorporated both quantitative and qualitative data to study the overall factors influencing Hispanic college students, specifically the experiences impacting attrition rates. In an effort to gain additional perspectives on the factors

influencing the experiences of Hispanic college students, particularly in a predominately White institution, researchers around the nation have studied the phenomenon, and in many instances have provided suggestions and recommendations to increase the number of Hispanic students graduating from college.

In this collective case study, qualitative data is used to study the factors influencing the experiences of Hispanic college students and also the types of support services available to them in college. Green (2007) stresses the importance of meaningful qualitative data in case studies and explains how the researcher can obtain an in-depth understanding of the issue under review. A review of pertinent scholarly literature identifies a broad range of social, cultural, academic, and institutional factors influencing the experiences of Hispanic students across the nation.

Background Information

It is important to understand the historical aspect of student retention and how retention is influenced by various social, cultural, and institutional factors. Lang (2002) points to the 1970s and early 1980s as a critical point for student retention programming, especially programs designed for students of color. Organizations such as American College Test (ACT) and National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS) were two of the first to study student retention across campuses. Lang (2002) provides a conceptual background, which outlines student characteristics, socioeconomics, and cultural influences, to illustrate past and current retention trends.

As the Hispanic population grows, the volume of Hispanic students entering college is also expected to increase. Although the growth of well-prepared Hispanic students has also increased in the last 30 years, Hispanic students continue to

underperform, compared to other student groups (Miller & Garcia, 2004). The growing Hispanic population has contributed to the larger representation of Hispanic students in college, and the trend is expected to continue until 2050, but Miller and Garcia (2004) explain that the number of Hispanic students obtaining a college degree have the lowest college GPA, when compared to Whites and Asian Americans.

College GPA plays a role as students apply for graduate school and employment. It is imperative for institutions to find ways to target the needs of Hispanic students and develop strategies to retain them. Hispanic students will continue to drop out of college and struggle while pursuing a degree. Oseguera, Locks, and Vega (2008) state that colleges and universities must evaluate their actions, behaviors, and resources, as those factors tend to contribute and promote student retention.

Institutions must prepare all students to compete in a global economy, but if the largest ethnic population continues to be uneducated, the nation as a whole will not be able to move forward. Hispanics are the largest ethnic group in the United States, but have the poorest educational transition and college completion rates (Solorzano et al., 2005). Without adequate retention strategies, Hispanics are expected to have the lowest college graduation rates in two and four year institutions (Solorzano et al., 2005). For example, among 100 Hispanic students who begin elementary school, slightly more than half will graduate from high school, and ten will complete a college degree (Solorzano et al., 2005).

Institutions should tap into various types of capitals that have assisted successful Hispanic students graduate from college (Cerna, Pérez, & Sáenz, 2009). Hispanics are productive members of society and higher education is key to the future of America.

Higher education institutions must target the needs of Hispanic students and create successful retention programs to help the Hispanic community move forward and onward.

Social Support

In order to help Hispanic students succeed in college, administrators should consider their college experience and the types of support systems in place. Gloria et al. (2005) studied 99 Hispanic college students and found that Hispanic students who perceive educational and social support from faculty, family, and friends have a decrease in academic nonpersistence decisions. The study looks at nonpersistent behaviors, which can determine whether or not a student drops out of college. Gloria et al. (2005) found that university comfort is the strongest predictor in attaining a college degree for Hispanic students. Increased sense of cultural congruity, decreased perceptions of barriers, and positive perception of the institution helps the student stay in college, which positively impacts attrition (Gloria et al., 2005).

Scholars have also looked at factors influencing Hispanic students at the psychological level. For instance, Solberg and Viliarreal (2007) look at self-efficacy, social support, and stress of Hispanic college students. Students who lack social support and self-efficacy tend to have more psychological and physical distress (Solberg & Viliarreal, 2007). It is important for institutions to understand Hispanic student perspectives and assist them whenever possible. In many occasions, institutions spend resources on researching students of color and not enough on funding programs to assist those students.

Hispanic students have additional stressors, and social support is a factor as they navigate the college campus. Solberg and Viliarreal (2007) found that students who perceive to have social support have less stress than students who perceive to have less social support. Personal adjustment is a factor for every student in college, but it has been found that self-efficacy expectations also impact the student's ability to adjust to the campus and continue as a college student (Solberg & Viliarreal, 2007).

Young Hispanic students often find themselves at PWI's and they must adjust to the environment, which results in stress, especially if the student lacks social support. Solberg and Viliarreal (2007) found that stress is an important factor for Hispanic students. Students who perceive social support have lower distress levels. College graduation rates can be enhanced if institutions work to enhance social support networks, develop intervention programming, and facilitate self-efficacy expectations (Solberg & Viliarreal, 2007).

Social support and self-efficacy impact the experiences of Hispanic college students. Hispanic students need various types of support systems to address the relationship with their peers, family, faculty, and institution. In fact, peer, institution, faculty, and family support accounts for about 51 percent of the student's adjustment to college (Schneider & Ward, 2003).

Ethnic Identity

College adjustment impacts every college student, but particularly Hispanic students who bring their ethnic identity to the college campus. Schneider and Ward (2003) examine the role of perceived social support and ethnic identification adjustment to college. Scholars have found that there are two types of Hispanic students, highly

identified Hispanics and less identified Hispanics. Students who are highly ethnically identified Hispanics are at risk in institutions where Hispanics are underrepresented; therefore, having support from peers, faculty, family, and institution can help students make it to graduation day.

Hispanic students are uniquely different from other groups. Studies have explored multiple factors impacting students in college, but in many occasions, institutions struggle to understand the experiences of Hispanic students. Torres (2004) argues that the more institutions understand cultural socialization processes, the more they can assist Hispanic students in college. Moreover, institutions must understand how Hispanic students make meaning of their college experiences. Torres (2004) explains that there are Hispanic students who may seem acculturated to the American culture, but they experience conflict in the educational environment. The lack of Hispanic faculty and staff who may serve as mentors and advisors makes the college experience more difficult. It is important to incorporate the experiences of Hispanic students when creating policies and programs. Hispanic students face conflict as they try to attain a college degree, and institutions must understand that these issues are just as important as any other student development issue (Torres, 2004).

Familial Support

Institutions typically focus on the type of support systems the university can facilitate, but familial support is extremely important to Hispanic students. Schneider and Ward (2003) indicate that Hispanic peer support may not be enough and that students need additional support systems, such as familial support. The impact of familial support on students may determine how well students adjust to the overall campus, emotionally

and academically. Family support is also one of the main factors in ensuring that the Hispanic student's emotional and institutional adjustment positively impacts the student's college experience (Schneider & Ward, 2003). Orientation programs should be in place to deal with issues concerning parents. Hispanic parent orientation must target their needs and allow them to understand the expectations and level of work required of the student (Torres, 2004). Parent orientation is a way for families to get involved on the campus and continue supporting the student.

Sense of Belonging

Hispanic students in higher education are looking for a home away from home. Students want to feel comfortable in their environment and surroundings. Research has found that college environments influence the student's sense of belonging, especially amongst racial/ethnic groups (Johnson et al., 2007). Hispanic students are not the exception when it comes to sense of belonging. It has been found that Hispanic students are most likely to perceive less sense of belonging, than White students. In addition, Hispanic students are the only group that perceives interactions with diverse peers to have a significant impact on sense of belonging (Johnson et al., 2007). Research also finds that having a sense of belonging in residence halls is important to all students, but particularly to students of color.

Hispanic students are in need of various support systems. Academic and social support systems are important to Hispanic students, but those aspects must incorporate sense of belonging, and touch base on the importance of feeling part of the whole group. Strayhorn (2008) found that Hispanic students who do well academically and spend more time studying feel more connected to campus than those who perform poorly in their

academics, while low-performing Hispanic students feel less connected to campus, and may eventually end up leaving college. Another finding of this study is that Hispanic students who have frequent and constant interactions with those of diverse backgrounds have a greater sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2008). Highly ethnically identified Hispanics are less adjusted to college, which can lead to attrition, while less identified Hispanics are able to navigate the campus more easily than highly identified Hispanics (Schneider & Ward, 2003).

Hispanic students' experiences vary, especially in the first and second year in college, but their sense of belonging in the third and fourth year in college is also important. Hurtado and Carter (1997) found that Hispanic students, who have more interactions with their peers and faculty members outside of the classroom in their junior year, tend to have high sense of belonging. Hurtado and Carter (1997) also found that students' GPA is not associated with sense of belonging, but students who are involved in religious organizations and Greek life have a stronger sense of belonging. The most important finding of the study is that Hispanic students who are members of a social-community have the highest sense of belonging as related to campus life. This finding is relevant to the current research study, as it can help higher education administrators incorporate social aspects of campus life into current initiatives to retain second and third year Hispanic students.

Campus Climate and Institutional Initiatives

Institutions looking to increase the retention of Hispanic students should try to understand the student's background and stance in higher education. Solorzano et al. (2005) points to educational inequities and barriers impacting Hispanics in college.

Institutions often have structures, policies, and practices that have a negative impact on the academic achievement and success of Hispanic students in college. For instance, many universities do not offer academic support services, such as bridge programs and peer study groups, to help students succeed academically (Solorzano et al., 2005). Higher education environments can often be intimidating for Hispanic students and their family. Some institutions will be friendlier than others, but at the end, institutions can be intimidating for any type of student.

Gloria et al. (2005) state that the academic environment influences the experiences of Hispanic students pursuing a college education. Hispanic students often have to juggle their own cultural values and beliefs and the values and beliefs of the mainstream culture. A student's perception of the academic environment impacts the student's social and academic life. Gloria et al. (2005) claim that the impact of perceived prejudice and discrimination and its effects on academic performance is yet to be explored, but racial ethnic minority (REM) students have a significant amount of stress compared to White students. For Hispanic students, financial stressors seem to be a problem, and it impacts college drop-out rates (Gloria et al., 2005).

Hispanic students' persistence to continue navigating the college campus depends on factors such as social support, stereotypes, expectations, and supportive institutions (Oseguera et al., 2008). There are many underlying factors influencing the experiences of Hispanic students and it is up to the respective institution to find solutions. For instance, Oseguera et al. (2008) argue that Hispanic students are vulnerable on the college campus because they tend to have negative academic self-concepts and negative perceptions of the campus climate. Hispanic students' underrepresented position in society and conflict

within the campus culture and home makes them a lot more vulnerable and at risk of dropping out of college (Oseguera et al., 2008).

Miller and Garcia (2004) look at institutional research as a way for administrators to evaluate the experiences of Hispanic students. The authors state that student-oriented research is a way to develop effective policies to meet the needs of students. The authors also stress that Hispanic high school students continue to be underrepresented in all academic areas, which impacts the preparation of Hispanics for college; improving the outcomes for Hispanics in college depends on enhancing institutional efforts to help Hispanic students. Miller and Garcia (2004) point out that since Hispanics are less prepared for college, they have lower academic achievement in college. Research findings indicate that even students who are amongst the top of their high school class have considerably lower college grades as compared to their peers (Miller & Garcia, 2004).

Retention programs around the nation have been implemented and rigorously evaluated; Miller and Garcia (2004) suggest that institutions should consider the following components when designing, planning, and implementing institutional initiatives to retain Hispanic students:

- a) Leadership: institutional leaders must be committed to the program and must share the values and mission.
- b) Recruitment: maintain connection to community, build K-12 partnerships, and engage underrepresented groups.
- c) Engaged faculty: develop ways to incorporate faculty and students.

- d) Personal attention: meet individual learning needs through mentoring and tutoring.
- e) Peer support: students are offered opportunities for support and advice.
- f) Financial assistance: provides students the opportunity to focus on coursework rather than financial struggles.
- g) Research opportunities: offer opportunities beyond the classroom where students can connect to community and the world.
- h) Evaluation: continue to evaluate efforts and ask the right questions.

Miller and Garcia (2004) state that retention programs help, but programs should be consistent, inclusive, and respectful of the whole person. Senior university officials should evaluate campus climate and its impact on Hispanic students. Utilizing institutional research can help senior administrators get an idea of what Hispanics are going through academically in order to help them succeed academically. Institutional research data is also a valuable way to discover what is going on and develop programs to influence progress (Miller & Garcia, 2004).

Campus Culture

Campus culture is also one of the most prevalent challenges in student retention. Lopez-Mulnix and Mulnix (2006) studied the commonalities between universities that have developed outstanding multicultural outreach programs and whether or not their culture and leadership influenced excellence in multicultural programming. The authors compared symmetrical to asymmetrical universities in the study; in general, universities should serve society as a whole and should have a symmetrical culture, which includes being open-minded, organic, decentralized, collaborative, and innovative (Lopez-Mulnix

& Mulnix, 2006). Asymmetrical universities are centralized, rigid, traditional, bureaucratic, individualistic, and less likely to develop multicultural programs. For example, Solorzano et al. (2005) argue that colleges provide economic, social, and political benefits to the small number of Hispanic students that graduate from college successfully, but that many institutions also exercise oppression and “sustain a campus culture that marginalizes, devalues, and silences these students” (Solorzano et al., 2005, p. 287).

Successful Retention Programs and Strategies

Institutions should have programs that are inclusive to the social needs of students, while also targeting academic life to help students succeed in their classes. Borland (2002) asserts that retention programs are great, but assessment should take place to ensure the student’s social and academic needs are being met, which is necessary to help Hispanic students navigate through college successfully.

As institutions recruit and retain Hispanic students at PWI’s, University Counseling Centers (UCC) can influence institutional systems by providing psychological, social and cultural support (Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000). When counseling Hispanic students, counselors should consider factors such as psychological concerns, social support systems, faculty mentors, family support, culture, and other environmental factors. Hispanic students have higher educational aspirations, but they do not persist until graduation, unless adequate support systems are in place (Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000).

Some universities have developed inclusive strategies that focus on the student’s basic needs, but others have remained stagnant throughout the years. Metzger (2006)

found that students should be in an inclusive environment where the social, emotional, and academic areas are taken into consideration. For instance, some institutions have found that students who study abroad, especially minority students, have higher retention rates than those who do not study abroad. Unfortunately, only 5% of the students who studied abroad in 2002 were Hispanic college students (Metzger, 2006).

Retention strategies have a strong focus on issues impacting students at various levels; therefore, colleges and universities continue to observe and monitor their effectiveness. Lang (2002) suggests that pre-college programs, bridge programs, counseling, mentoring, and special services should be used as major retention tools. Living Learning Communities (LLC) that incorporate diversity are also extremely effective (Green, 2007). LLC's provide students the opportunity to learn about themselves and others living on the same community floor or residence hall. In these communities students develop inclusive social networks that help them get accustomed to the college campus. More importantly, students build peer relationships that help them stay in college.

Mentorship. Hurte (2002) explains that peer and faculty mentorship is one of the best retention tools and many institutions rely on this strategy to retain students. For example, the University of Tennessee in Knoxville currently uses *The Arranged Mentor for Instructional Guidance and Organizational Support* (AMIGOS) mentoring model. AMIGOS is one of the best mentoring tools used today in higher education. After careful assessment, the mentee and mentor are paired, participate in problem-based activities, and attend trainings and information sessions. The mentors must be faculty members or professionals available to meet with their mentee on a regular basis (Hurte, 2002).

Peer-mentoring has had a positive impact on both the mentor and mentee (Hurte, 2002). For example, Good, Halpin and Halpin (2000) studied an engineering program located at a large university. The program consisted of a peer-mentoring strategy to determine its effects on retention. Students went to celebrations, events, tutoring and other programs throughout the study. The program positively affected the mentee and mentor academically and socially. It should also be noted that the student's positive perception of the university is directly related to mentorship opportunities (Gloria et al., 2005).

Student-driven initiatives. Student-driven initiatives also have an impact on whether or not a student stays in college, especially for Hispanic students. Maldonado, Rhodas, and Lachica (2005) studied the University of California, Berkeley, and the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Their findings indicate that Student-Initiated Retention Projects (SIRP) are one of the main retention strategies at both universities. SIRP is a student run, student funded, and student organized initiative that focuses on retention through events, mentorship, community, and most importantly, academics. Gloria et al. (2005) state that formalized peer-mentor programs and collaboration with Hispanic student organizations can assist students to develop internal and external university connections, which can enhance their sense of familial support and educational efficacy. Schneider and Ward (2003) also state that general peer support has an impact on Hispanic student college adjustment. The authors recommend that increasing minority faculty and Hispanic students on campus may impact the support Hispanics receive from the institution.

Gloria et al. (2005) stress the importance of familial support in higher education. Hispanic students attain college survival skills through their peers and often make sense of their environment through social support, which enhances their overall college experience. Peer social support is critical to Hispanic student persistence in higher education, but there is limited empirical research on the topic. Gloria et al. (2005) stress that faculty and administrators often impact Hispanic students' success, but the amount of mentors is limited in higher education.

Student involvement. Student involvement is also an integral part of the retention process as students seek to socialize and stay on top of their academics (Caison, 2005). Integration theory explains social influences that can cause students to drop out of college. Caison (2005) relies on student integration theory to understand what type of students leave higher education and what type transfer to another institution. Caison (2005) states that one of the main reasons students drop out of college is due to their inability to socialize and keep up with their academics. Tinto's (1987) theory reveals that student attrition can be attributed to the lack of or inadequacy of social and academic integration to the campus culture (as cited in Caison, 2005, p. 426). Oseguera et al. (2008) have also examined how Tinto's theory of integration impacts Hispanic student retention; therefore, it is noted in the literature that students should be given opportunities to attend interpersonal and social interaction events in an effort to integrate them to campus life.

Hispanic students see the importance of attending social events on campus and off-campus. Students understand the meaning of being involved and engaged on campus, and many claim to want to be a change-agent at PWI's (Jones, Castellanos, & Cole,

2002). Regardless of what type of institution Hispanic students attend, a study found that Hispanic seniors, in both Hispanic Serving Institutions and PWI's, look very similar when it comes to involvement, engagement, satisfaction with college, and overall student development (Nelson Laird, Bridges, & Morelon-Quainoo, 2007). Therefore, being involved and engaged on campus impacts the experiences of Hispanic students, while other support systems, such as cultural and social centers, may also help students graduate from college.

Cultural & social centers. Institutions across the nation have developed cultural centers that provide services to help students of color navigate the college campus. Jones et al. (2002) point out that PWI's reluctantly allow cross-cultural centers for minority students to enter their institution, which is unfortunate because the centers have actually served ethnic minority students in college. Cultural centers have positively impacted ethnic minority students in the social, academic, and cultural arena. Although cultural centers are important to the overall institution, many of them have remained marginalized (Jones et al., 2002).

Cultural centers enhance ethnic minority college experiences and decrease the number of ethnic minorities who drop out of college. Cultural centers also indicate that the institution respects diversity and enhances multiculturalism (Jones et al., 2002). Minority students in general face prejudice and these experiences impact their college experience. However, cultural centers are viewed as a great support system to receive social, cultural and advising support (Jones et al., 2002). In a study performed by Jones et al. (2002) Hispanic students encountered racism on campus and viewed cultural centers as a "scapegoat for all efforts related to ethnic minority students" (Jones, 2002, p. 28).

However, for the most part, Hispanic students enjoy cultural centers, where they receive assistance from center staff.

Overall, retention has been an issue of concern since the 1970s and early 1980s. Hispanic students will continue to graduate from high school and continue to have the highest attrition rates compared to other student groups (Miller & Garcia, 2004). Universities around the nation must understand the impact of the growing Hispanic population on society as a whole. The United States must compete in a global economy, but the largest Hispanic population, the largest racial/ethnic group, continues to be the least educated in the country.

Research Purpose

The number of Hispanic students who hold a four-year college degree is alarmingly low and should be a concern for all stakeholders in society. It is important to better determine what factors influence the experiences of Hispanic college students. Thus, to gain a better understanding of these factors, this case study involved Hispanic students at an urban, medium-size, PWI located in the Midwest. There are many unanswered questions as to why a large number of Hispanic students drop out of college; therefore, this qualitative study is being conducted to find out what factors influence the experiences of Hispanic college students and what types of support services are accessible to target the needs of this population.

Interviewing college students from various Hispanic backgrounds will provide in-depth responses related to their college experience, which plays a role in the overall retention process. The research findings will serve as a tool to enhance retention programs across college campuses, particularly predominately White institutions. The findings will also assist senior administrators in determining what type of action steps

should be taken into consideration to better ensure that Hispanic students make it to graduation and become productive members of society.

Method

Participants

Hispanic students who were members of the Latin American Student Organization (LASO) were invited to participate in the study. The sample used in this study was a purposive convenience sample, which allowed the researcher to select students readily accessible (Creswell, 2007). The participants were solicited via email (see Appendix A). The researcher contacted 23 students who were randomly selected from the LASO membership list. Seven students volunteered to participate in the study. The researcher hoped to get a larger sample, but many students were unavailable to participate due to their involvement in class, work, and other campus activities. The seven participants come from various Hispanic backgrounds to include two Puerto Ricans, four Mexican Americans, and one Colombian; three participants are women. The sample is diverse and it is a true representation of the student body at the current institution. The sample includes one sophomore, three juniors, and three seniors. It was very interesting to find out that five of seven students are the first ones in their families to go to college, which brings in all the factors associated with first-generation college students. Most of the participants were fluent in English and Spanish and six participants were born in the United States. One participant was born in another country and moved to the U.S. at the beginning of freshman year in high school, which makes the participant an English Language Learner. The sample brings unique characteristics to the present

qualitative study. The sample represents several Hispanic subgroups, including U.S. born and foreign born, first-generation, and bilingual participants.

Research Design

The present qualitative research study utilizes a collective case study design grounded in theory to allow the researcher to gather insights and perspectives and also guide the data analysis (Creswell, 2007). The focus of this case study is to obtain an in-depth overview of the factors influencing the experiences of Hispanic college students at a predominately White institution located in the Midwest. Using the case study approach allows the researcher to interact with the participants, analyze the data gathered, and take note of the emergence of multiple perspectives (Green, 2007).

For the purpose of this study, the researcher looks at students' views and perspectives in order to understand the issue at hand, which involves the experiences of Hispanic college students, the largest racial/ethnic minority group in the U.S. Each perspective brings its own unique way of looking at higher education, but it is also important to consider the context of the study. The emergence of various perspectives is what makes a case study grounded in theory work. Social scientists have used case studies to illustrate differences of opinions, views, and perspectives on the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2007).

The undergraduate population at the respective PWI consists of about 8,000 students, and about six percent of the student body identified themselves as Hispanic. The freshmen class consists of about 2,000 students, and about eight percent of those students have Hispanic backgrounds. At this specific institution, about 20 percent of the incoming freshmen are from a minority racial/ethnic group.

Procedures

In order to look at different perspectives and contexts, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews using an interview protocol (see Appendix B) to guide the session. The goal of the interviews was to gather insights and perspectives on the factors influencing the experiences of the participants. Semi-structured interviews were utilized to examine the topic under review. The interviews were audio recorded to make sure the researcher did not miss relevant information that could influence the findings. The interviews allowed the participants to elaborate on their college experience and interact with the researcher, which created an organic conversation.

Variation in views and perspectives occurred during the interviews, which is one aspect of conducting qualitative studies. The interview protocol included questions based on scholarly research that are relevant to successful support systems, campus climate, sense of belonging, and ethnic identity (Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000; Oseguera et al., 2008; Miller & Garcia, 2004; Johnson et al., 2007; Schneider & Ward, 2003). The questions also covered areas, such as campus life and overall college experience, to allow participants to comment on other aspects of college life.

On the day of the interview, participants were reminded about audio recording process and transcription. The interviews were conducted in spring 2010 and transcribed for accuracy at the end of each interview. Some of the questions seemed repetitive, but the participants were able to elaborate on most of the responses. In some instances, participants went from one question to the other; therefore, in a few interviews some questions were omitted because the participants had answered the question previously.

The average length of the interviews (30 minutes) was enough to gather the necessary data for the study. The researcher took notes during the interviews to ensure that facial expressions, body language, or other non-verbal communication was captured in the interview. Another aspect of the methodology included field journal entries. The journals helped the researcher, who happens to be of Hispanic background, align the data analysis and interpret interview data. The researcher works in the field of higher education and is passionate about the retention of Hispanic students. In order to maintain an unbiased interpretation of the data, the researcher kept a journal to be able to go back and make sense of the data. Once the researcher finished conducting the interviews, transcribing the interviews and analyzing them, each participant received a copy of the emerging themes and patterns. Participants were given the opportunity to review the data obtained and provide comments on whether or not the data represented their views and perspectives accurately. Participants were also asked for permission to use quotes from the interviews in the study.

Data Analysis

The transcribed data really put things into perspective. Themes and patterns came to light while reading the responses, coding the data, and analyzing the data. There were several steps taken in the data analysis process. Reading the responses after transcribing them helped the investigator remember the interviews. It was helpful for the investigator to be able to relate to the data and also reflect on the respondent's facial expressions as they answered the questions.

After reading the responses several times, the investigator was ready to start coding the information. The investigator underlined, highlighted, and circled words, sentences, and paragraphs. The themes and patterns were consistent across the data. The investigator underlined information relevant to the research, circled words and expressions, and highlighted key sentences. Once the data was coded, the investigator read the questions and responses one more time to make sure important data was not overlooked.

One of the challenges in collecting qualitative data is finding a useful and efficient way to organize and analyze it. Once themes were identified, on a separate college ruled notebook, the investigator transferred the coded information manually. This allowed the investigator to read the data again and continue to focus on themes and patterns. Each respondent was given a number in order to code the data by participant. Once all the data was transferred to the notebook, the investigator was able to go back to each response and organize the data. Coded data gathered from the interviews was placed in a chart to highlight patterns and themes within the data.

The chart was e-mailed to each participant after the data was collected and sorted. The participants agreed with the data and gave permission to use quotes. One challenge was the amount of information provided by the participants. The investigator would have liked to add additional rows to the chart, but the interview protocol only allowed for certain information to appear on the chart. Once the data was organized by theme, it was easier to analyze and to interpret.

Findings

The findings represent the information gathered through the use of interviews and evaluation. The first question in the interview process asked participants to talk about helpful support services. Four of seven participants indicated that they attended programs coordinated by the office of undergraduate admission, which helped participants meet other students, get acquainted with the university, and join LASO. All of the participants stated that student organizations, multicultural fraternities, and LASO have had a positive influence on their social life. Four of seven participants are enrolled in an academic bridge program designed to assist first-generation college students, which has been helpful, especially in the areas of tutoring, printing, and financial aid.

Four participants stated that academic support services, such as tutoring and mentoring, have been helpful. Three of the four participants who stated that academic support services are helpful to them are also enrolled in an academic bridge program, which typically provides social and academic support. Three participants indicated that being involved in LASO, peer study groups, and mentorship programs has positively influenced their academics. Another finding includes the role faculty members play in the lives of students. For instance, three of seven participants stated that interacting and

making friendships with faculty members helps them academically and socially. One participant stated that his faculty advisor sets time aside to meet outside of class and office hours, which helps the participant stay on task.

The second interview question asked the participants to discuss the types of social and academic programs that have been helpful to them. All of the participants stated that LASO is the main social network. LASO has helped students adjust to college and develop a sense of community. A couple of participants said that faculty advisors are helpful and knowledgeable, but four of seven participants had poor advising experiences as incoming freshman. For example, participants stated that advisors were unaware of campus resources and did not interact with students at a personal level. A couple of participants unknowingly enrolled in classes that did not count towards their major. In contrast, one participant indicated that her bridge program advisor provided social and academic support.

Participants were asked to describe how they felt about campus climate and sense of belonging. Six of seven participants expressed feelings of belonging primarily because the university is welcoming and the student body is open-minded. Although the campus community is friendly, three participants experienced culture shock as incoming freshman due to the lack of campus diversity. A couple of students stated that they felt the campus was segregated, which did not allow minority groups to interact with the majority group. For example, a couple of participants stated that White students only hang around with other White students, which influence minority groups to collaborate and join the same cultural organizations.

When participants were asked to talk about cultural influences, most of the participants stated that their cultural background has influenced their involvement in college. For instance, two participants are members of a Latino-based fraternity focused on social justice issues, another participant is part of a multicultural fraternity, and all of the participants are members of LASO. Participants involved in Greek life also have a high sense of belonging. Another finding is that two participants commuted to college and did not have a great experience because they often had to balance home and school. Both participants are first-generation and enrolled in a bridge program. One participant has had a campus job since sophomore year, but he does not participate in many campus activities.

The final question asked participants to describe their overall college experience. Participants expressed that their college experience had been generally good. All of the participants had a positive perception of the university, and most of them felt that the university was welcoming. Another major finding includes the fact that participants felt that LASO helps students form bonds, social networks, mentorship opportunities, and friendships. Participants see LASO as their main social network; therefore, most students felt that LASO has provided a supportive environment, socially and culturally. For most participants, LASO has helped them adjust to college and get involved on campus.

Participants have social support from various student groups, but a major challenge for participants is academic rigor. All of the participants indicated that they have had academic barriers in college. Six of seven participants indicated that the lack of college preparation was a result of attending a public school. Some of the participants felt that they were not prepared for college; therefore, they struggled in class and had a rough

transition to college. A few participants indicated that they wished they would have taken challenging courses in high school to prepare them for college. One participant in particular stated that there are not enough support services on campus, which causes Hispanic students to fail. Another participant stated that most of the Hispanic students that enter college are not prepared academically; therefore, they end up leaving college.

The findings show a variety of positive college experiences and also reveal some of the challenges impacting Hispanic students. LASO and multicultural fraternities serve as the main social network at the respective institution. Students also feel a sense of belonging, which has contributed to college success, as most of the participants are in their junior and senior year in college. In an effort to provide a broader overview of the findings of the study, Table 1 illustrates the themes and patterns within the qualitative data.

Table 1							
<i>Factors Influencing the Experiences of Hispanic Students in Higher Education: Data Analysis Chart</i>							
Questions	R1	R2	R3	R4	R5	R6	R7
Q1. Support Services	Admission programs. LASO. Student Groups.	Admission programs for minority students. High school teacher.	Office hours. Tutoring. Meeting and Interact with faculty & advisor. Admissions office.	Found mentors and friendships with faculty. Peer study groups. Administration Support.	Mentor. Bridge Program. Admission office.	Academic support. Students. Tutoring. Social and mentor network.	Bridge program. Guidance. Counseling center. Advising.
Q2. Social and Academic Influences	Summer bridge program. Positive relationship	Poor advising. LASO as social network. Fraternity helps interaction with administrator.	Peers are goal-oriented. Friends focus on social and cultural issues.	Poor advising. Relied on other faculty for advice. Student leader. Worked campus offices.	Bridge program advisor did not help. Met friends during bridge program.	Faculty members are influential. Bridge program advisors. Leadership classes.	Poor advising. Found faculty advisor. Lack of diversity. Cultural shock. Nice people.

Q3. Campus Climate and Sense of Belonging	Open minded. LASO, sports. Good experience.	Lack of diversity. LASO helped adjust to college. Everyone is open minded and helpful. Love it.	Active on campus. Contributes to school as a whole.	Sense of belonging after joining cultural organization like LASO and fraternity.	College is segregated. Minorities interact, other groups don't interact with minorities.	Cultural shock. Experience bias. Being different. Sense of belonging.	Cultural shock. Nice people. Easy to make friends. No campus involvement. Feels welcomed. Belongs.
Q4. Cultural Influences	Very close to family. Sense of community. Family support.	First-generation. Role model. LASO	Culture helps see social issues and view things differently.	Culture influence leadership in Latino based organization	Went to schools with all minority students. Lack of diversity. Commuter.	Americanized. Spanglish. Uncomfortable being bilingual. Campus food vs. Mexican food. LASO.	Shocking experience. Campus job. Commuter.
Q5. Positive College Exp.	Welcomed Friendships. Joined LASO group.	Random roommate. LASO and fraternity. Parental support.	Challenged in class. Sees others helping and goal-oriented.	Good experience. Peers as family. LASO. Bonds.	Pleasant experience. Safe place to be. Cool people. Small classes.	Faith. Retreats. Diversity. Friends. Bonding. LASO.	Faculty advisor. Bridge program.
Challenge	Has social support. Academic challenges. First-generation.	High expectations. Segregated Academic rigor. First-generation.	Academic challenges. Lack of services to help Hispanic succeed.	Lack of preparation lead to academic challenges. High expectations First-generation.	Rough transition. Commuting. First-generation.	No Diversity. Family conflict. Campus food. Academic. First-generation	Language. Lack of preparation. Transition. Lack of diversity. First-generation.

Limitations

Although 23 students were invited to participate in the study, only seven students from three Hispanic subgroups (Mexican American, Puerto Rican, Colombian) volunteered to participate in the study. The participants in the study attend a four-year private institution located in the Midwest. The findings of the study may apply to similar

institutions in the Midwest. In addition, only three Hispanic subgroups are represented in the study; therefore, students who come from subgroups not represented in the study may be going through different higher education experiences. Another limitation is the fact that most of the students in the study had Mexican American backgrounds. The data analysis includes all the participants in the study and does not focus on specific group characteristics.

Discussion

Without adequate retention strategies, Hispanics are expected to have the lowest college graduation rates in two and four year institutions (Solorzano et al., 2005). As stated earlier, among 100 Hispanic students who begin elementary school, slightly more than half will graduate from high school, and ten will complete a college degree (Solorzano et al., 2005). Scholars around the nation have investigated the factors behind the trends. It is important to point out that most of the published literature aligns with some of the findings of the study. The discussion is broken down in several areas consistent with the interview protocol: Helpful Support Services, Social and Academic Influences, Campus Climate and Sense of Belonging, Cultural Influences, Positive Experiences, and Challenges.

Helpful Support Services

The participants have a sense of what type of support systems have been helpful to them in college. Most of the participants pointed out that the office of undergraduate admission at the respective institution has been helpful to them, but the literature review does not support this finding. To better understand successful programs, it is important

for scholars to explore how admission related programming impacts incoming Hispanic freshman.

Findings from this study indicate that the LASO organization is a great social support network for students. Solberg and Viliarreal (2007) found that students who perceive to have social support have less stress than students who perceive to have less social support. In this study, participants indicated that LASO provides a sense of community and social network, while others stated that LASO allowed students to join peer study groups, rely on upper classman, and develop friendships.

College support services include academic bridge programs designed to help first-generation students transition to college. Lang (2002) suggests that pre-college programs, bridge programs, counseling, mentoring, and special services should be used as major retention tools, and it is evident in the study that pre-college and bridge programs positively impact Hispanic students. For instance, four of seven participants entered college as part of a bridge program; three of those participants were also part of a pre-college program.

Participants who participated in college bridge programs indicated that the program has helped them socially, academically, and psychologically. One participant in particular stated that program advisors do not only provide academic support, but also social and psychological support. Scholarly literature supports this finding. For instance, Metzger (2006) found that in order for students to succeed in college, students should be in an inclusive environment where the social, emotional, and academic areas are taken into consideration.

Social and Academic Influences

Studies suggest that Hispanic college graduation rates can be enhanced if institutions work to enhance social support networks, develop intervention programs, and facilitate self-efficacy expectations (Solberg & Viliarreal, 2007). In the current study, the findings show that social and academic influences are important to Hispanic college students. Social networks seem to be a major factor for participants, and LASO is the biggest social network system for Hispanic students at the current institution. Participants said that LASO has the family structure needed to help Hispanic students adjust to college, which is supported by Schneider and Ward (2003) who discuss how general peer support has an impact on Hispanic student adjustment to college. In addition, several participants indicated that LASO has helped them create bonds and friendships. One participant in particular is a leader within the LASO. The participant claims that being a leader has helped him interact with the Office of Student Development, university leaders, and other students outside of LASO.

Schneider and Ward (2003) state that peer, institution, faculty, and family support account for about 51 percent of the student's adjustment to college. In this study, social support networks seem to work very well for Hispanic students, but six of seven participants said that they have received poor advising services in college. The participants stated that college advisors did not meet their needs and did not know how to advise them appropriately. Participants said that faculty advisors tend to be more helpful than regular college advisors. The scholarly literature did not indicate how advising services impacts Hispanic students in college. This finding is important and should be explored in the future.

Campus Climate and Sense of Belonging

Research has found that the college environment influences the student's sense of belonging, especially amongst racial/ethnic groups (Johnson et al., 2007). In this case study, six of seven participants felt that they belonged to the overall campus community. Although one participant felt that the university is segregated, most of the participants described the campus and student body as "welcoming" and "open minded." A couple of students stated that they love the campus environment and that everyone is willing to help.

Hurtado and Carter (1997) found that Hispanic students, who have more interactions with their peers and faculty members outside of the classroom in their junior year, tend to have high sense of belonging. In this study, it was found that students who are active on campus also feel a high sense of belonging. One participant stated that being active on campus helps contribute to the whole campus, while other participants indicated that being involved in organizations and fraternities help students become part of the student body. Caison's (2005) study also claims that student involvement is an integral part of the retention process as students seek to socialize and stay on top of their academics.

Three participants expressed that they experienced culture shock when they entered college. Participants said that the university needs to increase ethnic diversity. For example, one participant indicated that minority students only interact with other minority students. One of the main themes throughout the data analysis includes the relationship between participants and LASO. Most of the participants see LASO as a support system that targets college adjustment, which coincides with scholarly literature from various scholars. Gloria et al. (2005) state that peer social support is critical to

Hispanic student persistence in higher education, but there is limited empirical research on the topic. In this study, LASO has been helpful to all the participants, which is likely to be impacting college success, as there are three seniors, three juniors, and one sophomore in the study. This is a major finding in this study and should be considered in future research.

Cultural Influences

Schneider and Ward (2003) indicate that Hispanic peer support may not be enough and that students need additional support systems, such as familial support. Most of the participants stated that their family is supportive of their education and that their culture has helped them get involved on campus. For example, two participants stated that cultural influences have helped the participant's involvement in leadership roles and social justice issues.

Cultural influences can determine whether or not a student stays in college. In this study, two participants commute to campus, which they describe as a disadvantage. One participant stated that she has not had the same experience as her peers and that she often has to worry about parking and home issues.

Another cultural influence is the fact that all of the participants come from bilingual backgrounds. Most participants like being able to speak Spanish, but some participants feel uncomfortable. As one participant said, "I am uncomfortable speaking all English in school and then all Spanish at home." The participants have to juggle to keep up with both languages, and also to keep up with the American culture. One participant dislikes campus food, and indicated that it is difficult to balance Mexican and American food. Torres (2004) explains that there are Hispanic students who may seem

acculturated to the American culture, but they experience conflict in the educational environment.

Positive Experiences

Although Torres (2004) claims that Hispanic students face conflict as they try to attain a college degree, participants in this study have had several positive college experiences. The participants' experiences vary, but their overall perception of the college environment is good. Most of the participants describe the college campus as welcoming. The participants' experiences have been shaped by faculty and administrators, challenging courses, bridge programs, and retreats. Gloria et al. (2005) stress that faculty and administrators often impact student success, which supports the participants' statements.

Every participant indicated that LASO and peers have made their college experience a positive experience. A couple of participants stated that their peers have become their family and LASO has helped them bond with other students, which reinforces the impact familial support has had on students and their adjustment to college (Schneider & Ward, 2003). Gloria et al. (2005) also point out the importance of familial support in higher education, which is crucial in retaining Hispanic students.

LASO has a mentorship program that allows upper classman to mentor incoming freshman. The mentorship program has helped students at the respective institution get involved and seek advice, which may be one of the reasons most of the participants have made it to their junior and senior year. This finding is also supported by Hurte (2002) who explains that peer and faculty mentorship is one of the best retention tools and many institutions rely on this strategy to retain students. Some of the participants have been

part of LASO's mentorship program, but there is no current faculty mentorship program at the current institution. Faculty mentorship programs are worth looking into as more Hispanic students enter the college campus.

Challenges

The participants did not perceive social challenges, but each participant did bring up academic challenges. All of the participants indicated that the major barrier in college is academic rigor, and five of them said that they had a rough transition from high school to college, which is supported by Solorzano et al. (2005) who claim that Hispanic students have the poorest educational transition and college completion rates.

A couple of participants stated that being a first-generation college student can be a barrier, especially when it comes to adjusting and getting to know academic expectations. Oseguera et al. (2008) argue that Hispanic students are vulnerable on the college campus because they tend to have negative academic self-concepts and negative perceptions of the campus climate. In this case study, the participants looked at academic rigor and academic expectations as one of the major challenges in navigating through college. This finding is supported by Miller and Garcia (2004) who explain that the number of Hispanic students obtaining a college degree have the lowest college GPA when compared to Whites and Asian Americans. Participants stated that there needs to be more services geared towards Hispanic students.

Implications

The growing Hispanic population is the largest racial/ethnic group in the U.S. Hispanic students will continue to enroll in higher education institutions, but the needs of this population must be evaluated in order to increase the number of Hispanic students that graduate from two and four-year institutions. This qualitative study found that support services, such as bridge programs and faculty advisors, help students academically and socially. LASO's social support is helpful to students, especially in their freshman year, but participants in the study faced academic challenges. Future research should focus on what types of academic support services are helpful to first-generation Hispanic students.

Hispanic students are expected to have the lowest graduation rates in two and four year institutions (Solorzano et al., 2005). Although, some of the findings in the study, such as the importance of social and academic support, provide a better understanding of the types of factors influencing the experiences of Hispanic college students, it is imperative to explore the impact of admission related programs on the experiences of Hispanic students. Furthermore, future research should center on successful Hispanic professionals, and how their college experience influenced college success.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Recruitment Email

Good morning/afternoon,

I am a graduate student in the College of Professional Studies at Marquette University. I am in the process of conducting a research study on the factors influencing the experiences of Hispanic students in higher education. I would like to know if you are interested in participating in the study.

I will conduct individual interviews to gather research data. The interview is confidential and a required informed consent must be signed by you prior to the interview. The time commitment consists of one 30 to 45 minute interview and a 15 minute follow-up session. Please let me know if you would like to participate in this research study.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Thank you!

Eva Martinez
College of Professional Studies
Marquette University
Eva.martinez@marquette.edu

Appendix B: Interview Protocol Questions

1. What type of support services have been most helpful to you in navigating college?
2. Tell me about your advisors, peers, or key administrators in your day-to-day experience as a college student? Prompt: EX – Tell me more about that.
3. Describe how you feel about the campus climate and your overall sense of belonging? Prompt: EX - Can you elaborate on that?
4. Tell me about your cultural background and how you think your culture has contributed to your overall college experience? Prompt: EX – What is your ethnic background?
5. Describe your overall perspective on what type of experience you have had at Marquette thus far? Prompt: EX - Can you give me more examples?

*Appendix C: Consent Form***AGREEMENT OF CONSENT FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS**

“Higher Education in the Midwest: Factors Influencing the Experiences of Hispanic Students.”

Eva M. Martinez, Principal Investigator

College of Professional Studies – Marquette University

You have been invited to participate in this research study. Before you agree to participate, it is important that you read and understand the following information. Participation is completely voluntary. Please ask questions about anything you do not understand before deciding whether or not to participate.

PURPOSE: The purpose of this research study is to examine the factors influencing the experiences of Hispanic students on the college campus. I understand that the data acquired from this research study will be used to write a publishable research study in a peer review journal. You will be one of approximately 10 participants in this research study.

PROCEDURES: If you give consent to be part of the study, you will be asked several questions pertaining to your college experiences and you may also be contacted via email for follow-up clarification. You will be audio recorded during the interview portion of the study to ensure accuracy. The audio recordings will be destroyed once they have been transcribed. The transcription will be destroyed after 3 years beyond the completion of the study. For confidentiality purposes, your name will not be recorded, but you will be assigned a pseudonym name to protect your identity.

DURATION: Your participation will consist of one 30 to 45 minute interview conducted in a professional setting, and potentially one 15 minute follow-up session.

RISKS: I understand that the risks associated with participation in this study are no greater than what I would encounter in everyday life. If I do not feel comfortable answering a specific question, I am allowed to skip the question. If I do not feel comfortable being part of the interview, I can end the interview session at any time.

BENEFITS: I understand that there are no direct benefits associated with participation in this study. However, participation in this study helps provide a better understanding of the factors influencing the experiences of Hispanic students in higher education.

CONFIDENTIALITY: I understand that all information I reveal in this study will be kept confidential. All my data will be assigned to a pseudonym name rather than using my name or other information that could identify me as an individual. When the results of the study are published, I will not be identified by my name. I understand that direct quotations may be used in research publications, but they will not be associated with my name. I understand that the data will be destroyed by shredding paper documents and deleting electronic files 3 years after the completion of the study. I understand that all data will be kept on a password protected computer and that research records may be inspected by the Marquette University Institutional Review Board or its designees and (as allowable by law) state and federal agencies.

VOLUNTARY NATURE OF PARTICIPATION: I understand that participating in this study is completely voluntary and I may withdraw from the study and stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled. I understand that I can request to withdraw from the study before, during, or after the interview. I also understand that after April 30, 2010, the research study will be submitted to peer review and I will not be able to withdraw from the study after that point. I understand that if I withdraw, all audio recordings and transcriptions will be immediately destroyed.

CONTACT INFORMATION: If I have any questions about this research project, I can contact Eva M. Martinez at 414-288-8065 or eva.martinez@marquette.edu.

If I have questions or concerns about my rights as a research participant, I can contact Marquette University's Office of Research Compliance at (414) 288-7570.

I HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO READ THIS CONSENT FORM, ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE RESEARCH PROJECT AND AM PREPARED TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS PROJECT.

Participant's Signature

Date

Participant's Name

Researcher's Signature

Date



Be The Difference.

Marquette University

This is to certify that I have examined
the professional project by

Eva Martinez, B.A.

and have found that it is complete
and satisfactory in all respects

This project has been approved by:

Jay Caulfield, Ph.D, Project Director
College of Professional Studies

Approved on
