First Generation Latina Persistence

Group Mentoring and Sophomore Success

by

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to help increase success for first-generation Latina students at Arizona State University by providing a group mentoring support experience during the spring semester of their sophomore year. Thirteen first-generation Latinas in their sophomore year were recruited from the Obama Scholars Program at Arizona State University. These students participated in one or two 90-minute group mentoring intervention sessions during the spring semester of their sophomore year and responded to reflection questions at the end of each session. Additional data were collected through e-journaling and field notes to document the mentoring process and the short-term effects of the group mentoring intervention.

Study participants named three themes as critical to their college success: college capital, confidence, and connections. Participants also reported that the intervention of group mentoring sessions helped them increase their knowledge of available resources, feel more confident about their remaining years in college, make connections with other first-generation Latinas, and convinced them to recommit themselves to working hard for immediate academic success to achieve their goal of becoming the first in their families to become a college graduate.
DEDICATION

To my beloved grandfather, Irv Golden. Though Gramp was an “old-fashioned” man with a strong chauvinistic flare, he believed in life-long learning. He instilled in me at a young age to, “always question authority.” To my eighty-nine year-old grandmother, Mildred Golden. Yes, I am finally finished with school…at least for now. You have shared with me numerous times over the years that you always wanted to be a teacher. Well, grandma…you have always been my teacher.

To Vivian Miranda, one of my doctoral cohort members, who left a memorable impression on me years ago. As a sophomore in college, I worked as Vivian’s assistant to coordinate ASU’s annual student leadership conference “Insuring Tomorrow.” Vivian was working on her master’s degree in social work at the time. Together, we brought Jaime Escalante to campus as the keynote speaker. Jaime Escalante, is the educator who the movie Stand and Deliver was based on. Edward James Olmos played Jaime’s character in the movie and made whispering emphatically, “Hey Johnny, you can do it” and iconic catch phrase of the late 80s. Hey Viv…we did it!

To Willie J. Young, who has called me “Dr. G” for more than a dozen years, and who has served as a mentor, role model, and motivator through numerous ups and downs in life. Family first. Willie has reinforced the power and potential of cross-racial (and cross-gender) mentor connections. One of Willie’s favorite quotes is, “Not every flower blooms the first day of spring.” It is spring today for me, Willie.

To my “crazy” and wonderful uncle, Ira Stein, the first to earn a doctorate in the family after a long and slow higher education road. You shared with me
many moons ago that pursuing a doctorate is an intensive and extensive lesson in persistence. Truer words were never spoken! Now we both have terminal degrees in persistence. To my brother, Rick Golden. It feels fantastic to join you as Dr. Golden. And to Bucky. You have brought balance, perspective and deep joy to my life.

To my parents, Robert (my editor-in-residence) and Teri (my first and best teacher) Golden. You are each first-generation college students who successfully raised your daughter to believe she can do anything she sets her mind to, no matter the obstacles. You are the reason I have college capital. My love of learning and drive is deeply rooted in my parents’ belief that with education comes opportunities. College was not just an expectation in my family, it was a given. You are the reason I am a confident adult. You are the reason I seek out connections to maximize whatever situation I find myself in. As a parent, I aspire to emulate the patience and unconditional support you (to this day) have afforded me, even when confronted with “Amy logic.” I am proud to be your daughter and love that you are my parents.

To my son, Isaac Ross, who cannot wait to begin his own college career (2nd grade first). Isaac has witnessed his momma study, work hard, set goals, struggle, get frustrated, take a breath, refocus, and traverse adversity to achieve what, at times, seemed impossible. Life will always happen, not always as planned or envisioned, regardless and often in spite of the best laid plans. It is how each of us chooses to react and respond to real-life circumstances that makes all the difference. I waited my whole life for you. You provided me the strength and desire to persist. Always remember, be the best you can be. I believe you can accomplish anything you set your mind to . . . stay cool.

stay cool.
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To Dr. Duplissis, you have been the ultimate educational advocate and my cheerleader through the process. Your patience, insight, and candor have been invaluable. Thank you for your encouragement and insistence on seeing the bigger picture. To Dr. Clark, you have served as my chair and “glue” through the dissertation experience. You breathed life into the concept of action research and harnessed my energy toward a meaningful intervention of which I am extremely proud. I cannot imagine this academic adventure without your enthusiasm and insistence on success. And finally, to Dr. Janelle Kappes, my colleague, my “process consultant” and honorary committee member, you served as my lightning rod. You grounded me, helped me from bursting into flames, and focused my energy effectively. Words of gratitude will never be quite enough.
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Introduction of the Topics

From the researcher’s perspective, the broad theme of this action research dissertation was to answer the question, what can I do at Arizona State University to promote persistence to graduation of first-generation undergraduates?

Why does it matter? There are two fundamental reasons. First, institutions of higher learning have an implied ethical and fiduciary responsibility to make a good-faith effort on behalf of student success (i.e., retention and graduation). Secondly, from a business perspective, it is in the best interests of the institution to have a high graduation rate. In terms of return on investment, universities invest numerous resources to boost enrollment. Additionally, higher graduation rates enhance an institution’s reputation, funding (in many cases), and ultimately, greater enrollment—and so the cycle repeats.

Evidence reflects that universities generally commit significant resources to recruitment, enrollment, and the freshman experience. However, ASU and other universities historically have not done a great deal to reach out to sophomores, despite research that reveals a very large dropout rate during the sophomore year. Why? And what can institutions like ASU do to address this compelling issue?

This research project and dissertation focuses on a particularly vulnerable subset of the student demographic: first-generation Latina college students. For reasons fully described and validated in the dissertation, the exponential benefit
to this particular group of students exceeds that of other college students whose parents and other family members have been to college.

The national enrollment of first-generation college students has increased 14 percent between 1988 and 2008 (Graves, 2009). Almost three-fourths of the increase in collegiate freshmen enrollment nationwide in 2008 was due to enrollment by minorities (Yen, 2010). The increase in college enrollment reflects the nation’s rapidly changing demographics. Forty-three percent of all students enrolled in the K-12 system are minority students (Yen, 2010). In higher education in 2008, freshmen enrollment jumped by 15 percent for Latinos, 8 percent for African Americans, and 6 percent for Asian Americans, compared with an increase of 3 percent for Whites (Yen, 2010). Twenty-five percent of college students do not return after their first year in college (Ishler & Upcraft, 2005; Upcraft, Gardner & Barefoot, 2005). Fifty percent of all undergraduates do not graduate (Braxton, Hirschy & McClendon, 2004; Dickmeyer, 2004; Upcraft, Gardner & Barefoot, 2005). First-generation college students (FGCS) graduate at a lower rate than their continuing-generation college student counterparts (Berkner & Choy, 2008; Choy, 2001; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005).

Compared with their peers whose parents are college graduates, FGCS were more likely to be Black or Latino/a and come from low-income backgrounds (Martinez & Klopott, 2005; Xionglei, 2005). Research from the last decade shows that FGCS persist at a lower rate than their continuing-generation peers (Choy, 2001; Corrigan, 2003; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). Furthermore, low-income FGCS are susceptible to multiple risk factors, including, but not limited to, lack of academic preparedness, family responsibilities, restricted institutional
choice, poor attendance patterns, and high employment hours (Ceja, 2004; Corrigan, 2003; Dennis, Basanez, & Farahmand, 2010).

The term “college knowledge” or “college capital” has been used to indicate what FGCS lack in comparison to their continuing-generation counterparts (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak & Terenzini, 2004; Vargas, 2004). Once FGCS overcome the initial set of challenges to college admission, their struggles start anew. First-generation college students experience the typical college transition issues, such as meeting new people, making friends, time management, studying, and balancing work, family, and social life with even more intensity than their continuing-generation student counterparts. The evidence suggests that parents of FGCS are unable to provide assistance in ways that college-educated parents may for their students (Choy, 2001; Pascarella, et al., 2004; Vargas, 2004).

First-generation college sophomores report that they feel “in-between” in every respect (Pattengale & Schreiner, 2000). However, many university administrators believe that once entering freshmen persist beyond the first year, targeted programs and services are no longer necessary (Evenbeck & Hamilton, 2010; Pattengale & Schreiner 2000).

Investigating the experiences of first-generation college students is timely for colleges and universities across the United States. Retention of students continues to be a vital issue for administrators, practitioners, governing boards, as well as for local and national governments. This emphasis is especially relevant as the shift from initial access (inputs) to persistence, graduation, and degree completion (output) rates receives increased attention.
The Arizona state legislature is pushing to make universities more accountable for the ways they spend their money by tying state funding to graduation rates (Ryman, 2011). This state and national trend, known as performance-based funding, represents a major shift in the way public institutions receive state funding. Academic achievement is a fiduciary responsibility of Boards of Trustees and Presidents (Ewell, 2006). The Arizona Board of Regents is expected to finalize a performance-based funding plan and submit it to the state legislature in the fall of 2011 (Ryman, 2011). If the legislature and the governor approve the new formula, the changes would take effect as early as the 2012-2013 academic year (Ryman, 2011).

Successfully enrolling and graduating first-generation students is of special interest for the state of Arizona, based on its projected high-school graduation numbers and population growth data (Finder, 2007; Fischer, 2010). It costs the university more to recruit a student initially than it does to retain one (Rund, 2009). While public institutions have made admission process easier for first-generation college students, there remains a gap between initial access and ultimate graduation (Pike & Kuh, 2005). Little research exists regarding what impact, if any, the sophomore year experience has on the persistence and college graduation of first-generation students.

The Local Context

Arizona is the second fastest growing state in the United States (Hansen, 2010) with a 24 percent population growth from 2000 to 2010 (Mi Familia Vota, 2011). Arizona also rates number two nationally in growth of the Latino population - an increase of 46 percent (from 1.29 million to 1.89 million) during the first ten years of the 21st century (Mi Familia Vota, 2011). Few states in the
country have experienced college student growth as rapidly as has Arizona. Arizona State University was at the top of the list of institutions nationwide experiencing an increase in freshmen enrollment in 2008, an increase of 21 percent (Yen, 2010). In 1990, about 31,000 students graduated from the state’s public high schools. By 2005, there were nearly 52,000 high-school graduates. Arizona is projected to experience a 55 percent growth in numbers of public high-school graduates, reaching nearly 73,000 by 2018 (Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, 2008). More than half of the public high-school graduates in Arizona by 2014 will be ethnic minorities with Latino/as representing just over 40 percent (Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, 2008).

Arizona State University is the only higher education institution in the state that has made a commitment to expand to meet the growing needs of this in-state educational demand (Finder, 2007). ASU enrollment already exceeds 70,000 students. Thirty-four percent of the 2010 freshmen class was composed of racial and ethnic minorities, an increase of 8 percent from 2005 (ASU News, 2010). Specifically, the Arizona State University (ASU) leadership has agreed to absorb 90 percent of the in-state educational demand and plans to continue growing enrollment to more than 90,000 students by 2020 (Finder, 2007). Low-income and FGCS (often co-occurring categories) are the largest growth population of entering college freshmen in Arizona (Fischer, 2010).

**College Graduation Success.** Arizona’s six-year combined graduation rate across all public universities is nearly 58 percent (Ryman, 2011). While this percentage is slightly higher than the national average of 55 percent, it remains of concern to lawmakers and university administrators (Ryman, 2011). ASU’s
freshmen-to-sophomore retention rate was 69 percent in the 1990s, climbed to 75 percent by the mid-2000s and reached 81 percent in 2010 (ASU News, 2010). The Arizona Board of Regents (the governing board for all state-supported Arizona colleges and universities) released a strategic plan in 2008 highlighting that the state of Arizona is “failing to keep pace with other states in the effort to recruit and retain low-income, first-generation and other 21st century students” (Lumina Foundation Focus, 2010). There is a clear gap between enrollment of first-time, full-time freshmen and their longer-term college success (persistence). It is particularly important for Arizona State University to focus on graduating first-generation college students.

With just less than six in ten students graduating within six years (Ryman, 2011), higher education in general, and ASU as a New American University, should and must shift to a dual-focus: student enrollment and degree completion (Shirvani, 2009). The so-called bottom line is just one of the reasons. Stated another way, institutions are losing their investment when students do not graduate (Rund, 2009). While this action research study is not intended to be generalized to different populations of first-generation students at ASU or at other institutions, it is intended to be locally and immediately useful for professionals and future first-generation Latinas at Arizona State University.

**Obama Scholars Program.** As Director for Strategic Initiatives in Educational Outreach and Student Services (formerly The Division of Student Affairs) at ASU, I have responsibility for developing, implementing, and supporting the Obama Scholars Program. The Obama Scholars Program is a large-scale initiative to increase access to higher education for Arizona high-school graduates who directly enroll full-time at ASU, whose family income is
below $60,000 as demonstrated by the FAFSA, and who maintain full-time status and satisfactory academic standing. For students who meet these criteria, the Obama Scholars Program pays their estimated direct costs of college for four years. Approximately 40 percent of Obama Scholars are Latino/a. Of the 40 percent of Obama Scholars who are Latino/a, 79 percent are also first-generation college students.

I have looked at my organization and concluded that a specific area that needs improvement is how sophomores, specifically first-generation Latinas, are supported. Currently, ASU does not offer a university-wide sophomore-focused program or initiative. Based on the evidence found in current literature regarding group mentoring, first-generation students, and the sophomore year experience, I believe that creating a group mentoring effort is one way to improve support for sophomore Latinas. This belief arose from conversations with one of my students, who is currently a Junior in the Obama Scholars Program and who I will refer to as Anna.

At the beginning of what developed into a mentoring relationship, Anna passionately shared how important it is for students to continue to network and meet mentors on campus throughout the sophomore year, and also how valuable it is to meet peers who share similar interests, backgrounds, and/or majors. As part of the Obama Scholars Program, all freshmen in the program are matched in a one-to-one model with a peer, faculty, or staff mentor. Just over 1,800 students were a part of the inaugural cohort of the Obama Scholars Program and matched with a mentor. The program’s expectation is that each student will meet with his or her mentor at least monthly throughout the freshman year. The mentoring component of the program is limited to the freshman year.
Obama Scholars were surveyed at the end of their freshman year regarding program expectations and satisfaction. The survey results suggested that students were interested in having more direct connection to their colleges and in having more interaction with other students in the program. Anna echoed these sentiments and stressed that she and other Obama Scholars she knows are interested in getting to know their peers, other Obama Scholars who are students in their major, and continuing this process beyond the freshman year.

The role of continuing some form of mentoring in the sophomore year appears congruent with FGCS needs (Graunke, & Woosley, 2005). As I contemplated rolling out a second round of mentoring for sophomores in the Obama Scholars Program, it was important to consider issues of scalability, logistics, and the impact on campus resources that implementing such a component of this magnitude may have. With these considerations in mind, the metaphor of a “booster shot” evolved. The idea of the booster shot (short-term group-mentoring) is that the impact created by short-term group-mentoring may have long-term effects (persistence), much like a booster shot does for children with their immunizations. Group mentoring within a focused, brief timeframe addresses some of the resource constraints.

A majority of first-generation college students (FGCS) throughout the United States are Hispanic (Hurtado, Saenz, Santos, & Cabrera, 2008). According to a recent study conducted by the Hispanic Scholarship Fund (2007) the nation’s leading organization supporting Hispanic higher education, 68 percent of the freshmen Hispanic scholarship recipients were FGCS. When comparing persistence for first-generation and continuing-generation students, Latinos are found to be 35.4 percent less likely than first-generation White
students to persist (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). First-generation Latinas have less involvement with their peers, are more likely to come from low-income families, have comparatively low degree aspirations (Chen & Carroll, 2005; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996) and a lower likelihood of applying to graduate school (Choy, 2001). These factors alone make it difficult for first-generation Latino/a students to make strong connections with others in college without some overt intervention(s). Being Latino/a is negatively related to persistence for first-generation students (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). The specific goal of this research is to inform university administrators at ASU about the potential impact and costs of one intervention designed to close the gap between access and graduation for first-generation Latinas.

First-generation college students are more likely to enroll in two-year institutions (Chen & Carroll, 2005; Horn, Nevill, & Griffith, 2006; Staklis, 2010). Statistics from a study by Staklis (2010) also reveal that FGCS are predominantly female, Hispanic or black; attend college in their home state; are more likely to have qualified for financial aid; and work 30 hours a week. First-generation college students are twice as likely to leave in the first two years (freshman and sophomore year) than their continuing-generation peers (Berkner & Choy, 2008).

**Key Terms and Definitions**

**Latina:** The terms “Latino,” or “Hispanic” are often used interchangeably to refer to a group of Americans who share a language and common cultural origins. However Latino/as or Hispanics, come from many different countries, varied backgrounds, all with distinctive ethnicities and histories (Brown, Santiago & Lopez, 2003). In the United States, the three largest subgroups of Hispanics are Mexican-American, Puerto Ricans, and Cuban-Americans. As diverse as this
population is, so are the numerous strengths and needs of the Latino student population (Brown, et al., 2003). The umbrella term “Hispanic” is used by the U.S. federal government on all forms and documents. Hispanic does not refer to a person's race; rather, Hispanic defines a region of origin: Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Central or South America, or of some other Hispanic location. Latino/a is often preferred by the older members of this vast and diverse community and is professed as a “self-selected” label absent of the perceived oppression (Wolfe, 2011). Latino is used when the contextual intent is gender neutral, identifying both men and women. Latina is used when specifically referring to women.

**FGCS:** First-generation college students are students from families with no history of successfully achieving an undergraduate degree (two-year or four-year).

**Group Mentoring:** Group mentoring is an organized planned mentoring approach in which cohorts of individuals purposefully meet with mentors on a regular basis.

**Mentor:** The term refers to a person who helps facilitate the growth and development of a younger, less experienced individual in the same institution or profession.

**Sophomore:** The term refers to students in their second consecutive year on the same college campus.

**Sophomore year experience:** The term refers to a student’s collective experience during his or her second consecutive year on the same college campus.

**Academic integration:** This refers to the degree to which a student identifies with an institution’s academic requirements and effectively utilizes tutorial and other
academic support services. Academic integration includes: student/faculty interaction, study skills and academic assistance (Astin, 1993, Tinto, 1993).

Cross-race mentoring: This refers to Latina students matched with a non-Latina mentor.

Social integration: This refers to the degree to which students identify with the social characteristics of the institution. Social integration includes: peer interaction, social adjustment, and interaction within the university. Facts that most affect the social integration of students include peer interaction, social isolation, satisfaction with college life, social support and self-esteem (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1993).

Theoretical Framework

The mentoring experiences of these participants were examined, in part, through the theoretical lens of academic and social integration, an important model in the literature addressing college student retention. Academic and social integration of students is often a primary goal of colleges and universities. Aspects of academic and social integration are addressed in the literature from a persistence perspective (Tinto, 1993). Student development theory has been used to explain, in part, the way in which mentoring relationships function. Broadly defined, student development theory attempts to explain experiences of development and growth as students interact with the world (Jacobi, 1991; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; 2005). Formal, organized mentoring can be particularly beneficial for women and for students of color (Chao, Walz & Gardener, 1992). Students of color and women are often not the “chosen ones,” since mentors tend to look in the mirror and select students who look like they do (Haring, 1997). Few studies have examined the dynamics of cross-race
mentoring (Dreher & Cox, 1996). Cross-race mentoring directly affects not only who is chosen to participate but also the degree to which the mentoring relationship develops (Thomas, 1989). The participant voices provide insights into how the group mentoring experience interplays with academic and social integration for first-generation Latinas.

For this study I recruited first-generation Latinas within the Obama Scholars Program. The goal of this action research study was to create and evaluate a small-group mentoring intervention during the sophomore year, in the hope that it would positively impact college success and persistence for the participants. The study was guided by relevant scholarly literature within the context of student development, specifically Astin’s (1993) student involvement theory and Tinto’s (1993) student departure theory.
First-Generation College Student (FGCS)

According to the U.S. Department of Education through the Higher Education Act (2008), first-generation college students (FGCS) are defined as students from families with no history of successfully achieving an undergraduate degree. This definition allows for the potential of one or both parents to have attended post-secondary education but not having earned a degree. It is important to clarify what definition FGCS is referring to in the literature. For example, FGCS may refer to any student whose parents did not attend any college (Choy, 2001) or limited college (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). A student’s parental education (along with family income) reliably predicts the probability about whether or not that student will graduate from college (Mortenson, 2004). For the purposes of this study, the term “first-generation college students” will refer to students whose parents did not graduate from college.

Who is coming to college today? The typical college student profile has changed dramatically over the last twenty years. Today, students from low-income and/or first-generation college families represent almost 45 percent of K-12 enrollment, a figure that has grown from 31 percent in 1989 (Graves, 2009) and is only expected to continue to grow. K-12 enrollment and high-school graduation rates can be useful indicators of the connection between the supply of high-school graduates and the corresponding demand for higher education, according to Knocking at the College Door, a report from the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE), published in March 2008. Since studies (Berkner & Choy, 2008; Choy, 2001; Horn, 1998; Lofink & Paulsen, 2005)
demonstrate lower retention rates for first-generation students than for those whose parents are college educated, universities are trying to gain a better understanding of first-generation students in order to curb attrition.

First-generation students are disproportionately low-income, non-White, and female (Hurtado, et al., 2008; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). In the last forty years, Latinas entering four-year institutions have steadily increased to a high of 61.4 percent (compared to an almost mirror inverse relationship for men) (Hurtado, et al., 2008). Lohfink and Paulsen (2005) suggest that first-generation students tend to make choices based on their different worldviews than do continuing-generation students. And first-generation students receive less support from parents regarding the commitment to enroll in college (York-Anderson & Bowman, 1992). For many underrepresented students, the family expectation often is to continue to live at home and to carry out family duties while attending college (Ceja, 2004). This may produce conflict in desire as students weigh future home and academic demands.

Parents who have not attended college tend to have less direct knowledge of the economic and social benefits of higher education (Clark & Dorris, 2006). Thus, some of these parents prefer that their children work rather than attend college. First-generation students are at times faced with the difficult choice between pursuing a college education and fulfilling the family expectations of immediate employment and contributing to the family’s income (Lee, Sax, Kim, & Hagedorn, 2004; Terenzini et al., 1996). Compared with their peers whose parents were college graduates, first-generation students are more likely to be Black or Latino/a and come from low-income backgrounds (Martinez & Klopott, 2005; Xionglei, 2005). Additionally, completing college is closely correlated with
socioeconomic status and family education background (Haycock, 2001; Viadero, 2000).

The literature differentiating between the freshman and sophomore year experiences of first-generation college students is small in size. Research on first-generation sophomores suggests specific strategies to begin the process of building an institutional response to these students’ needs (Tobolosky, 2008). For this reason, such strategies might include a mixed design approach that entails focus group sessions and student surveys in order for institutions to develop a better understanding of sophomore FGCS support needs (Evenbeck, Boston, DuVivier, & Hallberg, 2000). When comparing persistence for first-generation and continuing-generation students, Latinos/as were found to be 35.4 percent less likely than first-generation White students to persist (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). Findings further suggest that in order to increase first-generation sophomore success, institutions should offer programs and classes during the sophomore year that would help students learn more about their academic career interests (Graunke & Woosley, 2005; Juillerat, 2000).

A few studies have demonstrated that, even after controlling for student background and other factors affecting persistence, first-generation students still have low persistence rates (Choy, 2001; Corrigan, 2003; Horn, 1998; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). Further, low-income first-generation college students are typically susceptible to multiple risk factors that affect their persistence in higher education, including, but not limited to, lack of academic preparedness and/or readiness, family responsibilities, restricted institutional choice, spotty attendance patterns, and high weekly employment hours (Ceja, 2004; Corrigan, 2003; Dennis, et al., 2010). Retention, persistence, and graduation are highly complex
and multi-dimensional issues. First-generation college students have to first overcome the barriers of even getting to college. Woven into the Latino culture is the value of maintaining a strong connection with family and community. More specifically, Latinos feel a strong sense of responsibility to improve the status of other Latinos (Rendon, 1992/1996; Turner, 2002).

A vast majority of students, overall, experience some degree of trauma during the transition to college. In addition to predictable high school to college transition issues, first-generation college students’ experiences often involve substantial cultural, familial, and social transitions as well (Dennis, et al., 2010). First-generation college students are navigating an all-new higher education culture without the safety net that many of their age peers have in place. Research suggests that first-generation college students do not have parents or older siblings to rely on for guidance in ways that college educated parents can provide and offer to their own college-enrolled children (Choy, 2001; Pascarella, et al., 2004; Vargas, 2004).

Institutions may be intentional by facilitating opportunities for underrepresented students to get together to meet each other through socials and academic activities to encourage and promote networking among peers (Turner, 2002). A study by Longwell-Grice and Longwell-Grice (2008) revealed that FGCS often perceive faculty members as being indifferent and uncaring toward students who seek additional assistance outside of class. First-generation college students may develop the greatest benefit and need the most assistance from contact with faculty (Pascarella et al., 2004), but at the same time they are traditionally reluctant to ask for help (Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008).
Are our colleges and institutions prepared to help first-generation college students effectively persist to graduation? In the first year of the Obama Scholars Program (Fall 2009), there were 1,806 students who met the criteria (Arizona high-school graduates who directly enrolled at ASU full-time, whose annual family income was consistently below $60,000). Precisely 67.9 percent were first-generation college students. Of the first-generation college students in the Obama Scholars Program, 83.8 percent persisted to their sophomore year, as compared to 88.6 percent of the continuing generation Obama Scholars. Of the first-generation Obama Scholar sophomores who were female, 47.2 percent were Latina as compared with 25.2 percent of the continuing-generation Obama Scholar sophomores. This action research study is designed to be helpful by identifying one way (group mentoring in sophomore year) that higher education professionals may provide interventions and support first-generation Latinas through their sophomore year at Arizona State University, with the ultimate goal being to increase degree attainment.

First-generation college students are not, of course, a homogeneous group (Roberts & Rosenwald, 2001). According to an article in the Journal of Phenomenological Psychology titled *Desire for Higher Education in First-Generation Hispanic College Students Enrolled in an Academic Support Program: A Phenomenological Analysis*, empirical studies have been conducted to examine a multitude of aspects regarding FGCS (Olive, 2008). Personality characteristics, cognitive development, academic preparation, and first-year performance of FGCS have all been hot topics of research. However, there appears to be little in the literature that explores first-generation college students’ sophomore-year experience explicitly.
The Sophomore Year Experience

Student affairs practitioners and university administrators believe that once entering freshmen persist beyond the first year, programs and services are no longer necessary (Pattengale & Schreiner, 2000; Tobolowsky, 2008). The presumption is that such students can now succeed on their own without the level of intervention and support programs created and provided institutionally during the freshman year. Tobolowsky (2008) tells us that, “Educators should be interested in the sophomore year because this is the year in which students make many of the decisions that help them succeed in subsequent years, such as clarifying their sense of purpose, making major declarations, and narrowing their career options” (p.60). “Excluding the first year, more students drop out of higher education in the second year than any other year of college” (Tobolowsky, 2008, p. 61).

Defining the term “sophomore” is challenging if the definition is merely based on earned academic credit (Gahagan & Hunter, 2006). Increasing numbers of students enter college with advanced placement credits from high school that may classify them as sophomores during their first academic year. Conversely, students who transfer from another institution may be in their second, or sophomore, year but may have only earned enough valid or relevant credits to be classified at the freshman level. For the purposes of this study, unless defined differently by another author, the term sophomore will refer to students in their second consecutive year on the same campus.

The term “sophomore slump” was first used almost sixty years ago to describe what appeared to be affecting sophomores by some ill-defined condition marked by inactivity, apathy, ineffectiveness, and even laziness (Freedman,
1956). Feldman and Newcomb (1969) disagreed with Freedman and defined the sophomore slump as “students dissatisfied with the college as an institution and their experiences in it.” Some sophomore students experienced a marked identity crisis (Margolis, 1976). Although scholars do not agree on the exact definition of the term, they do agree that sophomores experience particular difficulties that lead to dissatisfaction (Feldman & Newcomb, 1969; Juillerat, 2000; Tobolosky, 2008), which may result in lower retention rates (Flanagan, 1991). The so-called sophomore slump may come down to students’ inability to adjust to stressors experienced during the second year of college (Cuseo, 2005). While the first year of college is clearly critical, the second year—the sophomore year—is as well. One hypothesis is that students who successfully complete their sophomore year and enroll in their junior year persist to graduation at a higher rate that compares with students who successfully complete their freshman year. Stated another way, college success, as reported by first-generation Latinas in pilot study interviews, equates to graduation.

At ASU, based on ten-year persistence and graduation data (2000-2010) from the Office of Institutional Analysis, the rate of college success (graduation) increased an average of 10.66 percent for students who persisted from their freshman year to their junior year. The freshman year persistence average from 2000-2005 was 77.08 percent. Of the students who persisted their freshman year, 73.54 percent graduated within six years (total length of undergraduate years). Of the students who persisted their sophomore year, 84.2 percent graduated within six years (total length of undergraduate years). This equates to an increase of 10.66 percent for students who successfully negotiated through the so-called sophomore slump.
First-generation college sophomore students feel in-between in every respect (Pattengale & Schreiner, 2000). Ironically, because first-generation sophomores gain a better understanding about college, they often become disillusioned and skeptical. One study showed that first-generation students lag behind their counterparts in coursework as early as the first year of college (Xiong, 2005). They often struggle with or question their major as well (Pattengale & Schreiner, 2000). Graunke and Woosley’s (2005) research found that “certainty in the choice of major was a significant predictor of sophomore academic success... In other words, sophomores who expressed higher levels of certainty about their major also achieved higher grades” (p. 374). Schaller (2005) tells us that “sophomores look backward and see their first year of college and their childhood, and they look forward and see the rest of their college career and their future” (p. 19).

College sophomores may go through as many as four stages of development during that year, ultimately going from exploration to development of self identify (Sanchez-Leguelinel, 2008; Schaller, 2005). The four sophomore stages are random exploration, focused exploration, tentative choices, and commitment (Schaller, 2005). The sophomore year is “the transition between wide-eyed awe and upper-class confidence” (Gahagan & Hunter, 2006, p.19). Much attention is focused on first-year students, so when students enter their sophomore year without all of the same targeted support and programming, they may feel “dissatisfaction and a sense that they lack institutional support” (Gahagan & Hunter, 2006, p. 19). Gahagan and Hunter (2006) suggest that “offerings in career services, undergraduate research, service learning, and study abroad can all be organized to promote student engagement and learning during
A delivery method and additional connection with career services can be achieved through mentorship programs that target the sophomore year.

**Group Mentoring**

One of the first comprehensive and systematic studies related to the mentoring phenomenon was *Seasons of a Man’s Life* co-authored by Daniel Levinson (1978). It is important to note that the book examined the mentoring process as it pertained to the lives of primarily adult White males as they progressed from early to middle adulthood. The term “mentor” is typically attached to a person, usually one who is older and helps facilitate the growth and development of a younger, less experienced individual (Jacobi, 1991; Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson & McKee, 1978; Wunsch, 1994). Mentoring has come to be characterized as one of the most important relationships a person can have in early adulthood (Levinson, et al., 1978). A significant improvement in the literature in recent years has been made with investigating the impact of mentoring on different types of students, including women, underrepresented students, first-generation college students, and at-risk students (Bernier, Larose, & Soucy, 2005; Bordes & Arredondo, 2005).

Often called “team mentoring” or “group mentoring,” organized group mentoring is a planned mentoring approach in which cohorts of individuals purposefully interact with assigned mentors on a regular basis (Freedman, 1996; Grossman, 1998). Numerous organized group mentoring programs have existed in a variety of forms on college campuses predating the 1970s. According to the federal guidelines of GEAR-UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Program), organized group mentoring provides a clear framework
for group mentoring activities (Silver, 2000). Organized group mentoring plays a significant role in the academic success of underrepresented students, specifically Latinos in college (Grossman, 1998). Through organized group mentoring, academic performance, campus engagement, and graduation are significantly increased (Freedman, 1996; Grossman, 1998). Group mentoring also seeks to promote healthy self-esteem to increase academic performance (Silver, 2000).

Organized group mentoring follows the same precepts as one-on-one mentoring: advocacy, role modeling, emotional support, career guidance, and referrals. While organized group mentoring may offer less intensive contact than one-on-one mentoring programs, organized group mentoring promotes positive peer social interaction as well as positive interaction with the group mentors (Grossman, 1998). As a result of the group mentoring meetings, many students not only utilize the mentor as an academic and professional resource, but they also utilize one another as resources (Haring, 1997). Students involved in group mentoring often develop peer networks and learn from each other within the mentoring context. My pilot study participants noted that they each found it “comforting” to know that they “were not the only ones” having these feelings, thoughts, and experiences. This researcher observed two of the pilot study participants making arrangements to study together in the weeks following the initial focus groups.

Organized group mentoring promotes group identification or a sense of belonging and attachment to group values through the cohorts’ involvement (Higgins & Kram, 2001; Smith, 2001). Organized group mentoring also promotes a set of values, beliefs, ability, and social experience that are value-specific and
relevant to the cohort (Smith, 2001). Two of the three pilot study participants approached and engaged with the action researcher noticeably more often and for longer conversations subsequent to the initial focus group. One participant asked the researcher to serve as a reference on a job application.

A positive relationship exists between first year Latinos’ perceptions of mentoring and their comfort with the university environment (Bordes & Arredondo, 2005). Additionally, mentoring is associated as a strong predictor of academic success for women (Josselson, 1996).

“Identity formation begun in college years continues to age 30 and beyond” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p.268). According to Dervarics and Roach (2000), when Latinos actively participate in organized group mentoring programs, they increase the overall body of knowledge necessary to negotiate the unfamiliar collegiate atmosphere.

According to Perry (1970), the most effective mentor is one who meets the student where he or she is. Faculty/student interactions, especially interactions that occur outside of the classroom, are the single most important aspect of positive identity development for students (Jacobi, 1991). Social integration and social support theory is relevant to mentoring because it acts as a buffer and assists students in working through their academic, personal, and social stresses (Jacobi, 1991). Jacobi (1991) argues that because of the context of academic and social integration, mentoring impacts students’ academic progress and subsequent retention (Tinto, 1993).

**A Theory of Student Departure: Vincent Tinto**

To improve persistence rates for first generation students at ASU it is important, at a minimum, to understand why students do not persist to graduation
and leave college before graduation. This action research dissertation was conceived as a capacity-building, asset-driven, success supporting project. Vincent Tinto is a prolific writer who developed a theory known as “Student Departure.” In Tinto’s (1993) longitudinal model of institutional departure, he claims that a student’s exodus from an institution of higher education often has little to do with academic success. Tinto (1993) explains: “Positive integration serves to raise one’s goals and strengthens one’s commitments both to those goals and to the institution within which they may be attained” (p. 116). Conversely, the model points out that, other things being equal, the lower the degree of one’s social and intellectual integration into the academic and social communities of the college, the greater the likelihood of departure. To the degree that the individual also participates in communities external to the college (e.g., family, work, and community), the model argues, events in those communities may also shape persistence in college. Tinto strongly believes that students' cultural characteristics and individual attributes significantly affect whether they persist to graduation or not. According to Tinto (1993), “to be fully effective, college communities, academic and social, must be inclusive of all students who enter” (p. 187).

A Theory of Student Involvement: Alexander Astin

Whereas Vincent Tinto’s theory focuses on why students leave institutions, Alexander Astin’s theory focuses on how student involvement influences retention and persistence, also known as student success. “Student involvement reflects the amount of physical and psychological time and energy the student invests in the educational process” (Astin, 1993, p.2). Additionally, the effectiveness of involvement is relational to how accessible the opportunities
are for students, thereby sharing the responsibility for student involvement and holding institutions accountable for providing ample opportunities for students to get engaged (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Broadly stated, the student involvement theory states that the more involved students are in their environment, academically and socially, the more successful and satisfied they are with their college experience, and the more likely they are to persist. One of the premises behind the student involvement theory is that opportunities for involvement must be available for students in which to engage. The concept of validation builds upon the student involvement theory and expands the premise of involvement being owned solely by the student. The connection between a student’s role in involvement verses validation will be made in the final chapter.

This chapter introduced and defined frequently used terms, as well as the three main topical areas: first-generation college students, the sophomore year experience, and group mentoring. Astin’s (1993) and Tinto’s (1993) theories of student involvement and student departure, respectively, were also introduced. Chapter Three will outline the research design utilized for the intervention in this action research study.
Chapter 3

RESEARCH DESIGN

Introduction

In this chapter, I provide a description of the design of this action research study. The design of the study was primarily qualitative, with a quantitative component that was used to contextualize the need and potential impact of this action research. Multiple perspectives were considered and integrated through the mixed methods data collection process (Woolley, 2009). A mixed design approach that incorporates focus groups and survey data lends itself to in-depth understanding (Evenbeck, et al., 2000). The qualitative component of the study explores more fully the participants’ perspectives regarding the intervention. Qualitative methodology can help researchers explore the inner world of the participants (Creswell, 1998) that is revealed through the action processes and the relationship(s) from which the researcher “gains knowledge, perspective and new insights of the problem” (Creswell, 1998, p. 15).

Interpretivism is the basic research paradigm I operated from. Interpretivism allows the researcher to gain insights through discerning meaning-making (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The qualitative data were collected through the use of audio recordings, meeting/field notes, and open-ended reflection responses through e-journaling. The quantitative component of the study utilized enrollment and survey data to gain a more complete understanding of the phenomenon of sophomore persistence among first-generation Latina college students.
Research Design

The intervention implemented in this study was small-group mentoring. During the March-May 2011 timeframe, four groups of volunteer ASU sophomore Latina students supported by the Obama Scholars Program—which included two to four persons each—met twice. The initial goal was to have a total of fifteen participants comprise two to four groups. The groups organically divided based on scheduling and participant availability, resulting in four groups across two of the four ASU campuses. In the group mentoring sessions, two to three weeks separated the first from the second meetings. Reflection questions were sent to each participant: one week following the first group mentoring meeting (Appendix F), and approximately three weeks following the second group mentoring meeting (Appendix H). The extended time-frame between the reflection questions following the second group mentoring meeting was intentional, to allow students to have gotten their spring semester grades before receiving the reflection questions (Mills, 2007; Stringer, 2007).

Each group mentoring session began with an introductory segment: name, major, and one open ended, leading question. The first group mentoring session lead-in question was, “share why you are here.” The second group mentoring session was, “share the story behind your name(s).” While the participant population was not a representative sample of all first-generation Latinas, enrollment in the junior year by study participants was compared with the same year’s enrollment by first-generation Latinas in the Obama Scholars Program, as well as with the sophomore year cohort as ASU. Field notes were kept throughout the group mentoring sessions, as well as audiotapes, to identify and document trends and common themes (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003).
Themes were generated by the researcher as I read and re-read my field notes and audiotape transcripts of group mentoring sessions. I created concept maps to assist in visualizing potential connections among emerging themes. Additionally, reflection questions were administered to the participants following the group mentoring sessions to capture additional participant insights on relevant topics, as well as to record participants’ testimony about the immediate impact of the group mentoring sessions on their college success.

E-journaling is a useful tool for promoting critical reflection, enabling participants who might not otherwise have been able to have their voice heard (Bampton & Cowton, 2002). E-journaling has been found to improve integration of decision-making skills and the level of skills acquisition (Crippen & Brooks, 2000; Patton, Agaranzo & Woods, 1997). The benefits of journal writing are that responsibility for learning belongs to the student, students are actively engaged in the reflective process, and journal writing is a student-centered approach (Kerka, 2002).

Timeline

I led four (two to four persons each) group meetings, termed “group mentoring meetings,” totaling thirteen active participants. Fifteen students expressed their intention to participate in response to the recruitment email. However, two of the fifteen did not attend any group mentoring session and were unresponsive to follow-up communications, bringing the actual participant number down to 13. Each mentoring group met twice between March and May 2011. The broad topics discussed in the group mentoring meetings (based on Tinto’s (1993) Student Departure theory and Astin’s (1993) Student Involvement theory) were: academic success; connection and involvement with the campus
community; academic/career/future goals; and negotiating roles and relationships with family/culture. Participants had the opportunity for one-on-one mentoring meetings with the action researcher (in addition to the group meetings), if so desired, to allow for more individualized attention.

Selection of Participants

First-generation Latinas in their sophomore year were recruited from the Obama Scholars Program at Arizona State University. Participants were identified in partnership with the Financial Assistance Office (which initially identifies all Obama Scholars) and cross-referenced with demographic information collected by the university through the office of Institutional Analysis. Latinas in the Obama Scholars Program who persisted to the sophomore year were sent an IRB-approved email (Appendix B) requesting voluntary participation in the study. First-generation status was verified through initial screening questions.

Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted in February 2011 to assist in streamlining the survey questions, process, and identification of topical themes. The pilot study was a qualitative design using a focus group. I conducted a three-person focus group to learn about participants’ experiences and views regarding the Obama Scholars Program, first-generation students' beliefs about college success, and to help determine the topics to be discussed in future focus groups. Semi-structured questions were used to generate focus group discussion (See Appendix E) (Constantine, Kindaichi, Okazaki, Gainor & Baden, 2005; Creswell, 1998).
Methodology

Action research involves an intervention in which practitioners “introduce small-scale innovations into their practices through action research to study the consequences and make evidence-supported arguments for improvements in local education contexts” (Olson & Clark, 2009, p.217). Action research is more of a holistic approach to problem solving, rather than a single method for collecting and analyzing data. As a result, it allows for several different research tools to be used as the project is conducted. These various methods, which are generally common to the qualitative research paradigm, include keeping a research journal, documenting collection and analysis, participant observation recordings, questionnaire surveys, structured and unstructured interviews, and case studies.

Action Research. The first step in action research is to look at the local situation or organization and identify a part of the operation that needs improvement. Action research implies that the practitioner will be serving as the active collector of data, the analyst, and the interpreter of results. Action research has the potential to generate genuine and sustained improvements to the researcher’s local setting. Action research gives practitioners new opportunities to reflect on and assess the subject at hand; to explore and test new ideas, methods, and materials; to assess how effective the new approaches are; and to make decisions about which new approaches to include in future plans (Olson & Clark, 2009).

Action research takes place in real-world situations and aims to solve real problems. It is often the case that those who apply the action research approach are practitioners who wish to improve understanding of their practice, or they
may very well be academics who have been invited into an organization by
decision makers aware of a problem requiring action research, but lacking the
requisite methodological knowledge to deal with it (O’Brien, 1998).

Action Research Question

1. How does group mentoring impact first-generation Latinas in the
sophomore year regarding their persistence/college success?

Data Collection. At the beginning of the first group mentoring session, the
participants received an expanded informed consent letter (Appendix C),
(informed consent information was included in the original recruitment email
(Appendix B)) and demographic survey (Appendix D). The researcher kept the
consent letters and demographic surveys in a locked file cabinet to maintain
confidentiality. Each of the two group mentoring sessions lasted between 60 and
90 minutes. Each of the four groups were asked the same set of open-ended
questions (Appendix E & G) to allow participants to elaborate on questions, as
necessary (Johnson & Christensen, 2004; Mills, 2007; Stringer, 2007) as well as
to maximize trustworthiness, reliability, and validity. The questions were aligned
with Tinto’s (1993) Student Departure Theory and Astin’s (1993) Student
Involvement Theory. The meetings were held on campus in one of the main
student services buildings. All group mentoring meetings were audio-taped.

Member checks were conducted to ensure accuracy of the information
and concepts derived from the data (Johnson & Christensen, 2004; Mills, 2007;
Stringer, 2007). Member checks (Creswell, 2009) is the terminology used to
refer to the process of sharing the collected data with participants in order to
“check in with the members” to verify that the data collected is accurate. The
member check process was integrated into the group mentoring sessions, as
well as through individual communication between the researcher and each participant. Member checks provided further insight into the findings of the study and helped to clarify any qualitative data collected.

**E-Journaling.** I wanted to use a research method that could capture and reflect the narrative accounts of participants’ experiences. Following each group mentoring session, participants were emailed questions to reflect upon and respond to electronically (Appendixes F & H). The advantage of email-based research is that participants control when they respond and provided more thoughtful/reflective answers (James & Busher, 2006). Another advantage is a collaborative approach between the participants and the researcher regarding “understanding of the participants’ perspective through open and honest dialogue (Anderson & Kanuka, 2003) leading to increased rapport (Lebesco, 2004). Disadvantages of emails are that the gap between sending questions and the response may lead to loss of coherence, forgetting what had been said previously, difficulty getting clarification of meaning of the question(s), as well as the interference of everyday life/distractions and disturbances (James & Busher, 2006). As expressed succinctly by Kerka (2002), “a journal is a crucible for processing the raw material of experience in order to integrate it with existing knowledge and create new meaning” (p.1).

This chapter described the design of the group mentoring intervention, the research paradigm of interpretivism, and action research methodology. The action research question was specified, followed by the data collection methods. Chapter Four describes the data analysis and results of the study.
Chapter 4

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Data Analysis

The responses to questions recorded during the group mentoring sessions and the written answers to follow-up reflection questions were entered into an Excel spreadsheet. To determine what the themes were and to quantify the data, frequency statistics describing the common themes were calculated (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2007).

I developed group mentoring questions (Appendix E & G) and reflection questions (Appendix F & H) based in part on Tinto’s (1993) Theory of Departure and Astin’s (1993) Student Involvement Theory and the Pilot Study.

Quantitative Data Analysis

The thirteen participants all self-identified as female. When asked to report their ethnic background, the participants responded: one as white, twelve as Latina, one as Native American and one as multiracial (participants were able to check more than one category). Of the participants who self-identified as Latina or multi-racial, all thirteen selected Mexican heritage (options were Cuba, Puerto Rico, Latin America, Spain, Other- please specify). All thirteen participants attended Arizona high schools in Maricopa County, which includes the greater Phoenix area. Table 1 displays participants’ self-reported high school GPA (grade point averages). Eleven of the thirteen participants indicated that they took honors courses or AP (advanced placement) courses in high school. Five participants indicated that they had taken four or more honors or AP courses. All but one participant lived on-campus during their freshman year. All thirteen participants indicated that they received financial assistance in addition
to Obama Scholars Program support (six participated in the work-study component): eleven in the form of grants, seven received additional scholarships, and five accepted loans.

**Figure 1. Self-Reported High School Grade Point Averages of Participants**

When asked how and why participants decided to pursue college, the top reasons, as shown in Table 2, were: “I want to get an education” (10), “I want a good/better job than if I didn’t go to college” (9), “There was never a question about going to college, just which college” (8), “I want to go to graduate/med/law school” (8), “My parents/family wanted me to” (7), and “I want to learn more about things that interest me” (7).
Table 1. Reasons Given by Participants for Enrolling in College

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons for pursuing college</th>
<th>no. of responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My parents/family wanted me to</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My older siblings went</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I didn’t know what else to do</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There was never a question about going to college, just which college</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I want a good/better job than if I didn’t go to college</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I want to learn more about things that interest me</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I want to make more money</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I want to go to graduate/med/law school</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I want to get an education</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My teacher or mentor encouraged me to go</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I want to learn about other cultures</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I wanted to get away from home</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: N=13. The number of responses exceeds the number of participants due to the open ended nature of the questions, which allowed for participants to give more than one answer.

The levels of formal education attained by parents of the study participants are shown in Table 2. All participants were coded as FGCS through the university system (data captured beginning with freshmen cohort 2009). The potential discrepancy and/or confusion in the self-reported data, as compared to the institutional-run data, underscores the importance of establishing a clear definition for what constitutes a first-generation college student and then applying that definition consistently.

Table 2. Participant Reports of Highest Level of Formal Education of Parents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of formal education</th>
<th>Mother</th>
<th>Father</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grammar school or less</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some high school</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school graduate</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college (community or other)</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College degree</td>
<td>1*</td>
<td>1*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some graduate school</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate/medical/law degree</td>
<td>1**</td>
<td>1**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*parents have earned college degree since participant entered college, **parents received college degree in a country other than the United States

Notes: N=13

The participants in this study reported that issues surrounding “changing one’s major” were common and significant during the first two years of college. Table 3 reveals that two of the thirteen participants began their freshman year...
with an undeclared major, seven of the participants changed their major officially by the end of their freshman year, and three others officially changed majors during their sophomore year. Only one of the thirteen participants did not change her major (and does not plan to). However, she clearly stated that she would like to change her major. She is doing well in her classes (honors student) and, in her view, has progressed too far in the program to switch majors now. She has no interest in pursuing a career in her major and is actively trying to augment her classroom learning with out-of-the-classroom experiences that she perceives to be meaningful and beneficial to her future plans for graduate school and career.

Table 3. Self-Reported Frequency and Academic Year Participants Changed Their Major

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>When did participants change their major?</th>
<th>How many times?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Freshman year</td>
<td>7 (one time)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophomore year</td>
<td>2 (two times)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expect to change in future</td>
<td>1 (one time)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have not changed and do not expect to</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Began as undecided/undeclared/exploring major freshman year</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: N=13. The number of responses exceeds the number of participants due to the open ended nature of the questions, which allowed for participants to give more than one answer.

Qualitative Data Analysis

I prepared the group mentoring schedule in advance and worked to ensure consistency by asking the same questions of all the participants in the group mentoring sessions and in the e-journaling, using the same wording in the same order. I followed the outline of Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) in analyzing the journal entries and field notes. First, I created the raw data set by transcribing the audiotapes and notes taken during group mentoring sessions. I entered the qualitative data into an Excel spreadsheet and grouped categories and concept patterns into open codes (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). I began the analysis process by acknowledging that data interpretation must be
supported with text. The next step included removing data that did not relate to
the research endeavor. Raw text is the lowest level of coding. From raw text,
the researcher identifies relevant text, thereby reducing the data set to a
manageable size. From reading and re-reading raw text, themes emerge.
Frequently repeated words and phrases were identified. Themes were identified
by grouping frequently repeated words and ideas as shown in Figure 2.

**Figure 2. Frequently Repeated Words and Ideas from Mentoring Sessions
and Reflection Responses**

![Bar chart showing frequency of terms like Learning Campus Resources, Confidence Boost, Motivating/Refocus on Academics, One of the Few/Rep Culture/Pride, Connect with Others Like Me, Close w/Family, Graduating/Graduation]

Notes: N=13. The number of responses exceeds the number of participants due to the open
ended nature of the questions, which allowed for participants to give more than one answer.

The process known as axial coding was used to merge the categories
from the open coding stage to develop themes that describe and enrich the
understanding of the data (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Such
understanding is enhanced through deductive and inductive means of the
interrelatedness of the codes or categories (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Oliver
(2004) tells us that guidelines or decision rules may be used and applied in selecting themes. A theme was included if it met one of the following three decision rules: 1) mentioned by multiple participants; 2) a majority of participants indicated it was significant or; 3) key respondents with in-depth e-journal entries responded to the theme (Oliver, 2004).

Each reflection journal and mentor session field notes were coded using the open coding technique of Strauss and Corbin (1990) to develop themes or “thinking units” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006). A review of literature reveals gains in student learning, promotions of thinking, and reflection through e-journaling, as well as providing a vehicle for students to share their voice (Black, Prater, & Sileo, 2000; Connor-Greene, 2000; Vogt & Vogt, 1999). Lincoln and Guba (1985) have pointed to the need for qualitative researchers to be vigilant in ensuring the authenticity of the voices of the participants. Asking participants to reflect on their narratives helps researchers not only to authenticate participants’ accounts but also to develop a greater understanding of the phenomena being studied (Seale, 1999).

**Group Mentoring Session One Summary**

When asked why they chose to attend ASU, nine of the thirteen participants stated that they always knew they were going to college, five said they chose ASU in order to stay close to their family, and eight decided to attend ASU because of the financial aid package, particularly the Obama Scholars Program. In reporting what was most helpful during their freshman year of college, half the participants concurred that a combination of living on-campus and learning about campus resources was the most beneficial. All but one participant changed their major since beginning college. When asked, “What
was the reason for changing your major?” the participants stated that they did not like what they were studying and/or decided to choose something they liked more.

When asked, “What does college success mean to you?” nine of the thirteen participants immediately responded with one word: graduating. The follow-up commentary included “becoming a better person,” “doing well,” and “becoming more independent.” In response to the question, “What does being a first-generation college student mean to you?” the consensus was “a motivated student” and “family pride.” More than half of the participants cited time-management as the biggest challenge they have had to overcome since beginning college, followed by being overwhelmed by too many choices and dealing with distractions. Participants shared that they have been most successful in overcoming their time-management challenges by using a calendar, learning how to set priorities and having a consistent study time every day. When asked how they deal with stress, almost half shared that they work-out and a third indicated that they spend time with their family.

**Reflection Question Following Session One Summary**

The one reflection question following the first group mentoring session was, “What has helped you succeed and/or connect this past year (sophomore year)?” A third of the participants stated that getting involved and engaged (sororities, intramurals, student organizations) provided additional support and relief of stress. One fourth of the participants specifically mentioned connecting with their faculty (instructors and advisers) as being particularly helpful to their sophomore year success.
Group Mentoring Session Two Summary

Each of the four groups collectively shared that it was hard balancing the pressure of family expectations with their own desire to “make them proud.” The vast majority of the participants talked often (if not daily) with their parents/families and even went home to spend time with their parents/families, especially in times of stress. Students reported strong parental support, both of their aspiration to attend college and later as they traversed the challenging landscape once at college (Hispanic Scholarship Fund, 2007). When asked what being Latina at ASU meant to them, nine of the thirteen participants talked about being proud. They are proud to represent their culture. At least one person per group specifically brought up “being here for others, my friends that cannot or aren’t.” The topics of pride and pressure became comingled as the conversations continued: pride at being the first in their families to attend college, and being “one of the few” Latinas in college, pressure that accompanies being “the first” or “one of a few.”

Three-fourths of the participants said that their college/career goals are to graduate, and almost half of the participants stated that they plan to attend graduate school (law, medical, social work were specifically mentioned). When asked what they would like to experience before graduating from ASU, a third of the participants said that they would like to study abroad, and all were concerned about the affordability of that option. Only one of the participants had already attended an informational session about opportunities for studying abroad. None of the participants were aware that studying abroad was possible through the Obama Scholars Program. The final open-ended question in the second group mentoring sessions was. “How may I be helpful to you?” Three
participants shared that continuing to serve as a resource and assist in connecting them to additional networking opportunities would be appreciated. Three participants were interested in more information, knowledge, and resources that might be available to students in the Obama Scholars Program, as well as additional financial aid and scholarship opportunities.

Reflection Questions Following Session Two Summary

When asked what the participants liked most about the group mentoring sessions, the opportunity to “meet others like me” was a shared sentiment. Participants enjoyed sharing similarities, common values, and being affirmed that they “are not alone.” Participants were asked how they felt about the placement of the sessions in their college career. A third felt that the group mentoring sessions were placed well because it afforded them time to “learn how to be an effective student.” Two of the participants commented that earlier in the semester may have been more helpful, since grades were “pretty much solidified by the time we started meeting” and one indicated that they would have preferred the sessions to be at the end of the freshman year or during the fall of sophomore year. Only two participants commented on how the group mentoring experience could have been better or more impactful. Both would have enjoyed more students participating. Overwhelmingly, the participants responded that they enjoyed getting to know the other students in the group, specifically “other Latinas, like me.” Comments varied, but included, “it motivated me,” “it felt good to know that we have similar family values,” “it’s like an instant connection,” and “I feel less alone.”

Participants shared why they decided to participate in the study. Responses ranged from wanting to give back to the Obama Scholars Program,
to having their “voice be heard” to “you asked” to wanting to be “part of a group” to “it just sounded interesting.” Participants were asked to reflect back on how being involved in the group mentoring experience was helpful to their success and/or feeling connected with ASU. At least one member per group, and then others concurred with head nods, that the group mentoring sessions motivated them to “keep working hard” and “refocus on my academics.” Participants found it helpful to be a part of a group and “connect to others in the Hispanic community.” Participants agreed that the group mentoring had an indirect impact on their spring semester performance by “boosting their confidence” and “remembering my purpose for being at ASU.” One participant shared how participating in the group mentoring sessions allowed her to relate to two of her social work classes in ways she didn’t think she would have otherwise. Participants also shared that they “learned a lot that I wouldn’t have otherwise” and realized that they are “part of a larger community and we can support each other,” which ties back to the feelings of not being the only Latina, or one of a few, on campus.

Research Question

1. How does group mentoring impact first-generation Latinas in the sophomore year regarding their immediate responses and subsequent persistence?

Results

The last stage of data analysis occurred as I reflected on what was learned from the coding processes to identify themes. This process was used to check theory against the data. I drew on additional literature to expand upon the understanding of the themes and patterns and to help develop a natural flow to
explain the phenomena being studied (Johnson & Christensen, 2004). Three themes emerged from my analysis of the data, which I will now refer to as The Three Cs: college capital, confidence, and connections.

**College capital.** Previous studies confirm that Latinas are more likely to have strong relationships with their parents and families and to rely more on their peers for academic support than Latinos (Barajas & Pierce, 2001). The potential for peers and parents of FGCS to serve as quality informational and support sources is limited by their lack of college knowledge (Perez & McDonough, 2008). Latinas describe a stronger responsiveness to their parents’ educational expectations and strive to fulfill them (Lopez, 2003). I have often heard and used the saying, “we don’t know what we don’t know.” For me, this idiom encapsulates what FGCS describe as feeling and experience. One participant specifically shared that through the group mentoring sessions that she was informed of numerous campus resources that she was previously not aware of and had no idea existed.

Though FGCS and their parents do not have the “college knowledge,” the lack of college knowledge does not comment on their commitment and/or ability for the student to be successful in the collegiate endeavor. The one participant who did not live on-campus during her freshman year stated that she had wanted to because she knew it was important for her college success, but her mom didn’t want her to live away from home and she wasn’t going to go against her mom, “…and that was that. I wasn’t involved in any organizations (my freshman year) like I was in high school. I just, kind of, went along. My family doesn’t really understand college life, like living on-campus, my mom wants to understand. But, it’s because of our values, you know, our culture…in
the Mexican culture, it’s not okay for girls to leave the home before they marry. My mom believes that.” Another participant talked about the role her family plays in her college life now: “When it comes to family, I thought I’d go to them more. I’ve been so independent in college. They don’t really know about stuff, like the FAFSA. I still have to fill it out for them and tell them where to sign.”

Participants stated that although their families may have lacked “college knowledge,” they are still a major source of support. A majority of the participants reported that they talk often with their parents/family and consider them a source of comfort and encouragement. When the participants were asked what they wish they had known before they started college, they reported: having and using a planner/calendar (5), getting involved and using campus resources (6), focusing on academics from the beginning, including going to all classes (5), asking questions, and asking for help (4). Study abroad consistently percolated to the forefront of conversations in response to the prompt, “What would you like to experience before you graduate?” and “What would you like to know more about on campus?” Six of the thirteen participants indicated that they plan to attend graduate school but said that they had little to no information on next steps at this time. The topics of campus resources, getting involved, studying abroad, and asking questions overlap with Astin’s (1993) Student Involvement theory and indicate that FGCS and Latinas face many of the same challenges predicted by Astin’s research. Changing majors and managing finances emerged as two sub-categories within the broader theme of “college capital” or “college knowledge.”

**Changing majors.** First-generation college students need more than someone merely directing them to the campus career center. First-generation
college students reported that they need assistance developing a sense of inquiry toward a selection of major and then following up with questions about how selecting a major impacts career choices. Making a clear connection between a student’s major and his or her potential career choices may also assist in retaining students by providing a direct path linking their major to the benefits and long-term aspirations of higher education (Ayala & Striplen, 2002).

Two participants enrolled in ASU as “exploring” majors (undecided or undeclared). One strongly believed that every student should start as an exploring (undecided) major and go through the career/major exploration curriculum to help determine what each student was good at, liked, as well as to get to know “what’s out there”. “My parents only knew the basics: teacher, doctor, lawyer. There is so much more available, especially at ASU. I mean, really? How can any student know what they want, even when they think they know? Isn’t part of college to figure out who you are as a person and who you want to be as an adult? Why start out being limited…” by being forced to pick a major?

The other undeclared student strongly believed it was “a waste of time” for her to start out as an exploring major. “Just pick a major and start there. It doesn’t really matter. Everyone switches majors a few times anyway.” The most consistent reasons these participants gave as to why they changed their major was: they weren’t doing well or didn’t like the classes they were in, the classes in the major were not what they thought they would be, they wanted to find a major that they liked and in which they did well in the classes. Is changing majors and uncertainty surrounding majors a FGCS phenomenon? Is this a Latina phenomenon? Is this a millennial phenomenon? What influence does the high
frequency of changing majors have on persistence? How might the university address this issue? Might students have more college success if they choose the right major early in their freshman year (Smart, Feldman & Ethington, 2006)?

Within the sub-category of changing majors, time management and study skills emerged as issues of concern under the broader heading of academic success. Participants reported that they ran into difficulty with developing and sustaining study skills. The researcher observed two of the pilot study participants making arrangements to study together in the weeks following the initial focus groups. The group mentoring provided a vehicle for the participants to seek out and obtain academic assistance and learn about resources on campus of which they were unaware. One participant shared with the rest of the group how she had successfully obtained financial aid through the summer semester when another group member said that she was concerned with how she was going to be able to afford to take summer school classes.

As the mentor, I was able to reassure the group that seeking academic assistance is normal and expected. I gave a few examples from my experience working with “some of the most successful students--honors students who practically live in the writing and math labs.” I was able to advise the participants that taking advantage of the academic resources on campus is not perceived as a sign of weakness. We discussed the fact that successful students learn how to learn and constantly look for ways to do better. Often, successful students will seek out assistance immediately when assignments are made, rather than wait until they feel stuck or perform poorly. This seemed to be a bit of an “ah-ha moment” for many of the participants. They began nodding their heads, and one even said that this was not something she would have ever thought other
students did or would think to do herself. I reviewed the importance of going to visit their professors during the published office hours within the first two weeks of classes to introduce themselves. By doing this, it makes coming to a professor later with a question or point of clarification much easier. We discussed how using office hours early in the semester shows initiative, commitment, and interest in the subject and how merely introducing yourself to your professor can help you connect. Professors to whom you have introduced yourself will more likely recognize you in the lecture hall and outside of the classroom.

**Finances.** Participants discussed their lack of knowledge and ability to navigate the system effectively with regard to financing their education and the plethora of financial resources available at ASU. A majority of the participants reported that the reason they chose to attend ASU was because of the Obama Scholars Program, without which they would probably not be in college at all and certainly not at a four-year institution. The participants confirmed that an offer of financial assistance is among the top influences on Latino/as in making their college selection.

Financial literacy, the importance of filling out the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) in a timely manner, budgeting, scholarships, grants, loans and how the work-study and study abroad programs work were all mentioned as stressors and topics about which the participants wished they had known more about before they started college, and even now at the end of their second year. One participant said that life became an overwhelming challenge in college. She had to learn to deal with “grown-up things” like health insurance, buying groceries, and worrying about how to pay for school. Another student
reported that dealing with financial aid and the disbursement process was always a struggle for her. “There always seems to be a reason why getting my financial aid takes so long. It’s so frustrating. I end up getting late fees and having to deal with more stress.”

Confidence. Two categories of confidence emerged in analyzing the data: personal confidence and academic confidence, or recommitment.

Personal confidence was reflected in the participants’ comments about feeling validated and affirmed. When asked why they chose to participate in the study, the participants spoke of a desire to “give back to the Obama Scholars Program, show my appreciation, since if it weren’t for the program I wouldn’t be at ASU.” Participants also discussed their desire to get involved and articulated that the mere fact of “being asked” to participate compelled them to do so. The participants saw participating as an opportunity to give back to the larger community and to receive something (being part of something larger, connecting with the campus, a mentoring opportunity) in return. One participant stated, “Honestly, I do not know what made me participate in the group mentoring research study in the first place; it just seemed that, at the time, I needed mentoring of some sort.”

One of the more outspoken participants reported that she participated because she “took it as an opportunity for my voice to be heard and [to] discuss my viewpoint.” Two participants from different groups said they felt “honored” to be asked to participate. No one had ever asked them to do something like this before. Other participants in both groups nodded their heads in agreement and affirmation of this comment. One participant went on to say that she never would
have volunteered herself for something like this but decided to participate because she had been personally invited to do so.

By participating in the group mentoring sessions and responding to the reflection questions, one participant reported that her "feelings and thoughts were validated because others said things that I constantly have in my head but cannot find the words to express." Another participant commented that the experience "introduced me to resources (on campus) and gave me the confidence to seek assistance in improving my grades" when asked how the group mentoring experience impacted her academics.

As the group mentoring sessions developed, the participants began to take greater ownership of the process by responding to questions in unexpected ways. One participant felt comfortable and open enough to reveal to the group that she is lesbian. She began sharing how coming to terms with her sexuality had been an overarching challenge for her in high school and college—for herself, for her "so-called friends," (as she described them), and for her family. This depth of sharing and vulnerability was a completely unexpected outcome of the first group mentoring session. This level of self-exposure and willingness to be vulnerable also reinforced the claim that these meetings were meaningful and safe for at least some of the participants. (Mann & Stewart, 2000).

Positive influence on participants’ academic confidence was implied when participants verbalized their recommitment to their academic goals: doing well in classes and graduating. Participants shared similar feelings, including: "I’m now thinking more clearly about what I want…participating got me thinking about what I still want to accomplish before I graduate…I’m back on track with my priorities and will focus on separating my personal issues from my academic
performance.” When asked how the group mentoring experience was helpful, one participant shared that it, “really strengthened me and made me more positive about my college career.”

**Connections.** Connections were achieved to some degree as a result of the group mentoring sessions, both among student peers and with university staff. “I now have a group that I can go to for help or guidance and I feel much more connected at ASU” was a common sentiment that spoke to both the confidence and connections themes. “It’s nice to know that I’m not the only Latina at ASU…I mean I know there are other Latinas here…but they are hard to find.” “I have made new connections with my group members and hopefully we can help each other out. The facilitator has been great connecting me to things I did not know, so she will be a great help in the future.” Another sentiment that was shared by several participants was: “The group helped me connect to more Latinas just like myself…this opened doors for new opportunities like getting to know the facilitator/mentor and how much of a resource and help she can be throughout my stay at ASU.” When asked what was most meaningful about participating in the group mentoring sessions, one participant said, “Getting to know other students was the best part of the experience because I was introduced to girls with similarities and who are in my reach in terms of looking for help or support.” Participants reported that the group mentoring experience provided a sense of connection previously lacking for some of the participants. The participant who lived at home during her freshman and sophomore years said that it has been difficult to meet other students and to connect in meaningful ways outside the classroom, most notably with any other Latinas. Participants
noted that they found it “comforting” to know that they “were not the only ones” having these feelings, thoughts, and experiences.

Mentoring that utilizes a group approach serves as a means of academic integration. This approach provides students with a broader base of academic resources, specifically peer networks. Students are able to seek academic help and spoke of learning from each other in a mentoring context as illustrated from sharing how to obtain summer financial aid, as stated earlier in this chapter.

Self-esteem is an important component in social integration. The extent to which a student possesses and maintains a positive self-image not only assists in successful social integration, but in the overall collegiate experience being positively experienced as a result (Griffin, 1992; Tinto, 1993).

Limitations

One participant was unable to attend any of the group mentoring sessions but was intent on participating. She answered all the group mentoring session questions electronically (in addition to the reflection questions via e-journaling). While this participant was able to contribute to the overall topical conversations, her opportunity to connect with peers was nil and her ability to connect with the facilitator/mentor was decreased due to the lack of face-to-face time. This participant served as an Obama Scholar mentor to one of the freshmen students and approached me at the Obama Scholars mentor reception. She introduced herself to me and we made a connection. However, I felt that the interaction was much less than it could have been, compared with the connections I experienced with the face-to-face participants.

A second potential limitation was the timing of the group mentoring sessions. The March-May time-frame put the sessions after spring break but
before finals. A majority of the participants felt that the timing of the group mentoring was good in that it “allowed me enough time to figure things out and learn how to be an effective student.” However, three participants commented that they “would have preferred if the mentoring would have been sooner, maybe around spring semester of freshman year of fall semester of sophomore year…when there are so many questions and concerns.”

Summary

The goal of this action research was to determine what benefits first generation Latina students attribute to their participation in two group mentoring sessions offered during the spring semester of their sophomore year. Three themes emerged from analysis of the conversations and e-journal entries of first-generation Latinas in the sophomore year: college capital, confidence, and connections. Participants reported that they still struggle to negotiate the college campus, life and resources, as well as with understanding and making effective use of the academic support services available to them. Participants said that the group mentoring sessions increased their personal and academic confidence. The group mentoring sessions and reflection questions served as a booster shot, validating their abilities and commitment to being the first in their families to graduate from college. “It is helpful to know that there are other students like me who have some of the same values, goals, aspirations or just anything in common. I now know that somehow I am not the only rare fish swimming in the ocean.” Even participating in just a single group mentoring session had a positive effect for participants to connect with their peers and staff. One participant commented that the reflection questions forced her to pause and take stock of all that she had accomplished in almost two years of college. While she
reported that she was a little frightened that there were only two years remaining in her undergraduate career, she now felt more energized, confident, and recommitted to “go forth and conquer.” The feeling of excitement and appreciation of the chance to stop and remember “why I am here…to get an education” and to graduate was a common sentiment among the participants.

An unanticipated outcome of the intervention was that little to no outside contact beyond the group mentoring sessions occurred (or was reported) among the group participants. Three participants commented that they became Facebook friends, but none indicated that they met outside the boundaries of the mentoring groups or had any additional interactions with other group members. The lack of peer interactions beyond the group mentoring sessions was a surprise, especially in light of the participants’ multiple comments about the value of “connecting with other students like themselves” and appreciated “feeling a part of a group.”

Another unanticipated outcome of the intervention was the limited role that financial issues or concerns played, at least as reported by the participants. I expected that financial stress would be a prominent theme throughout the intervention. While concern about finances did appear in the data, it felt more like a constant undercurrent…always present but rarely spoken about. One participant said, “oh yeah…one more thing…I’ve really noticed with all my Hispanic friends is that the topic of finances always comes up. It’s interesting that it’s a topic that always comes up like ‘what type of financial aid do you have?’… With my white friends, it’s not something we talk about…interesting.” Latinas receive less financial support from their families (Hispanic Scholarship
Fund, 2007) than Latinos. Financial difficulties are cited as the main reason so
many Latino/as do not complete college (Hispanic Scholarship Fund, 2007).

The level of comfort and personal connection the participants felt with me
was another unanticipated outcome. One participant at our first group mentoring
session shared with everyone that what had been most challenging for her since
coming to college was “coming out” to friends and family. We followed up with
each other a few times through email. Since this participant talked quite a bit
about being alone, lonely and not having many friends (having lost many due to
her now announced sexual orientation), I offered to meet one-on-one with her,
and provided information about student clubs and organizations, staff contacts,
as well as Counseling and Consultation as resources for her. She was most
appreciative and has since joined one of the student groups. I was surprised by
the participants’ responses indicating how helpful and supportive they perceived
me to have been and that they intend to follow up with me in the future with
questions, needs, or concerns. One participant asked me to serve as a
reference for a job application. Two others followed up with me over the summer
regarding some financial aid concerns. Another participant called and asked if I
could help her sorority by having a collection box in my office area.

The comfort and confidence FGCS and Latinas need to succeed in a
college or university setting (Allen, 1992) is more often available or delivered in a
cross-race mentoring dynamic. Cross-race mentoring is critical, since there are
limited FGCS and Latina faculty and staff on college campuses to serve as
mentors to FGCS and Latinas. Cross-race mentoring relationships increase the
number of resources and probability of success for FGCS and Latinas and also
suggest ways in which non-FG and non-Latina faculty and staff may become a
part of the mentoring process for FGCS, Latinas, other students of color, and non-traditional students (Haring, 1997). Because participants were comfortable approaching me as their mentor, they directly benefited from my access to resources as a staff member.

All of these examples are what I would consider small, easy to implement, and just parts of my job. I am happy to help, assist, and connect students as best I can. The sincere appreciation and gratitude expressed by the group mentoring participants leads me to believe that my actions were significant to them. If it had not been for the reflection questions component of the intervention, I would not have known the impact of my actions. For me, this realization underscores the importance of validating students and being the initiator rather than waiting for students to take advantage of the resources universally available to them. I also became more aware of the value of taking the initiative, meeting student where they are, and providing appropriate levels of challenge and support. I do not believe that this is exclusively a FGCS phenomenon. Merely broadcasting the availability of involvement opportunities will not work for students who lack the college capital, confidence, and/or connections (Rendon, 1993). Students “who are unaccustomed to taking advantage of opportunities to participate in academic and social infrastructures, can involve themselves easily in college. What we learned is that when external agents took the initiative to validate students, academically and/or interpersonally, students began to believe they could be successful” (Rendon, 1993, p. 11).

The final two unanticipated outcomes of this action research were that every participant reported being stressed by the process of changing their major,
and that limited, small group mentoring (as little as one meeting) had a self-reported positive impact for the participants. The notion that a booster shot of one or two small group meetings may have immediate positive effects on students' recommitment to their academics, cause them to refocus their priorities, and increase their self-confidence was not expected. This finding bodes well for the scalability issues involved in providing a program-wide group mentoring component for the Obama Scholars Program in the sophomore year.
Summary of the Study

The intent of this study was to make a positive difference in a local setting. My analysis of the data suggests that an immediate impact has been made and that the seeds of college success have been nurtured and may very well produce additional long-term effects. The problem identified was to support college success for first-generation Latinas in the sophomore year. The intervention was group mentoring during the spring semester of the sophomore year. Three themes emerged from my analysis of the mentoring group data: college capital, confidence, and connections. A sense of belonging, feeling a part of the campus community, and being connected to the ASU experience were unanticipated though important outcomes of the study. Students who report feeling connected to campus tend to do better academically, persist at higher rates, and are more satisfied with their college experience (Astin, 1993; Pittman & Richmond, 2008; Tinto, 1993).

Discussion of the Findings

From my perspective and judging from the participants’ comments, group mentoring was successful. Even just one group mentoring session was useful, according to the participants. The strongest sentiment expressed about participating in group mentoring was that participants felt validated, relieved, and even reassured that they were “not the only ones who had these feelings, thoughts, or were in this situation (being a first-generation Latina at ASU).” These thoughts and feelings were articulated during and after the very first meeting by more than one participant. Students felt honored and privileged to be
asked to participate in the group mentoring sessions. “It gave me a voice.”

Students articulated a desire to give back to the Obama Scholars Program by participating in the study, since it was because of the Obama Scholars Program that they were able to attend college, specifically at Arizona State University.

Literature suggests that cross-race mentoring relationships may be faced with formidable challenges and has argued that cross-race mentoring relationships may not provide the same value to the students (Dreher & Cox, 1996; Renn, 2004; Thomas, 1989). The experiences of participants in this study appear to contradict those claims in that the participating ASU students developed the necessary levels of trust and acceptance in their mentor. The researcher observed initial shyness through diminished body language, limited eye contact, and fidgeting with pens or paper on the desk. However, a pattern of behavior began to emerge that manifested itself in all of the groups. By the end of the second participant’s response to the lead-in question, all participants appeared to be noticeably more comfortable in the space.

During the group mentoring sessions I observed a gradual increase in direct eye contact, and head nods with comments of “yeah, me too” occurred when something was said that resonated with the participants’ experiences. Participants’ answers became longer, thereby sharing more information and details. The verbal behavior patterns began to change into a more natural conversation, rather than a series of questions and answers. The participant’s body posture relaxed, shoulders came down and faces became more expressive overall. Increased student success attributable to group mentoring was measured by looking at the enrollment of the study’s participants in the junior, or third year (fall 2011), of college. Furthermore, students stated that they felt a
good connection and felt comfortable with the action researcher, despite the fact that I am not Latina. Participants declared in the group mentoring sessions and in their reflections that they appreciated and valued being asked for their input, giving them voice, as well as receiving genuine attention. “My feelings were validated.” “I took this as an opportunity for my voice to be heard.” “You asked.” “Mattering” refers to the belief that individuals have regarding whether they matter to someone else, that they are the subject of someone else’s attention, and that others care about and appreciate them (Scholssberg, Lynch, & Chickering, 1989).

The participants’ perspective regarding group mentoring was predominantly positive and timely. One participant shared that the group mentoring sessions, “served as a recommitment to my academics.” Another participant stated that the group mentoring and reflection questions were reminders of why she was in college: to do well, graduate, have a good career, make her family proud. The group mentoring sessions, specifically the final reflection questions, served to re-motivate students regarding their college careers: to pause and reflect on their accomplishments thus far, halfway through their college career, as well as focus in on the time left and what they would still like to achieve. The sessions heightened awareness with regard to additional resources available on campus, explained how to navigate and network, as well as how and who to ask for questions. The group mentoring sessions also served as a confidence boost to ask questions, strive toward their goals, and re-energize themselves in the process. “This gave me the confidence to seek assistance improving my grades and introduced me to [new] resources on campus.”
Contradictions to the Review of Supporting Scholarship

First-generation Latinas are reported to have low degree aspirations (Terenzini, et al., 1996). However, eleven of the thirteen participants indicated that they took honors or AP (advanced placement) courses in high school. Five participants indicated that they had taken four or more honors or AP courses. Table 2 shows responses about how and why participants decided to pursue college. “I want to get an education” (10); “I want a good/better job than if I didn’t go to college” (9); “There was never a question about going to college, just which college” (8); “I want to go to graduate/med/law school” (8); and “My parents/family wanted me to” (7).

According to previous studies (Ceja, 2004; Lee, et al., 2004; York-Anderson & Bowman, 1992), FGCS receive less support and commitment from their parents regarding college than continuing-generation students. Participants in this study contradicted previous findings stating numerous times that college was an expectation from their parents/families, is a source of pride from their parents, and the participants continue to receive support from their parents and families regarding their college pursuits. What the parents of the participants revealed they may lack in “college capital” or “college knowledge,” they make up for in commitment and support for their daughters’ education.

Consistencies with Supporting Scholarship

Previous studies (Graunke & Woosley, 2005; Pattengale & Schreiner, 2000) indicate that FGCS often struggle with and/or question their college major and/or career choice. Wrestling with uncertainty surrounding one’s major and/or career choice may be typical for sophomores to experience (Schaller, 2005). All the participants in this study were challenged in some way with their choice of
major. Twelve of the thirteen participants changed it. The one participant who did not change her major does not intend to pursue a career in her major and is “too far along” to change. While changing the major course of study is not unique to FGCS or Latinas, based on the data the participants of this study provided, it does appear to be grappled with at a heightened level of anxiety and with more uncertainty and stress than continuing-generation and non-Latina students. By participating in a group mentoring program during the sophomore year, student stress could be alleviated or reduced by having a cohort, as well as a mentor, to talk with, vent, and brainstorm additional stress-release options. Through group mentoring, the mentor could help connect participants early and often with career specialists to further assist in diminishing anxiety levels.

The participants in this study also shared another seemingly classic sophomore year experience: the transition toward more confidence (Gahagan & Hunter, 2006; Schaller, 2005). Participants acknowledged—especially through their reflection responses—experiencing increased confidence through the group mentoring process. Demonstrating a strong interest in studying abroad resonated with about a third of the participants, which is another characteristic typical of sophomores (Gahagan & Hunter, 2006).

Regarding mentoring, as reported in prior literature (Grossman, 1998; Haring 1997), participants utilized each other in the group mentoring sessions as academic and social resources. Additionally, and in alignment with previous studies (Higgins & Kram, 2001; Smith, 2001), participants felt validated by their peers in the group mentoring context. A few participants expressed similar feelings of, “it feels good to know I’m not the only one” and “it’s nice to know that
there are other [Latinas] out there who share the same values and similar beliefs as me.”

Implications for Future Research

A longitudinal study that follows this cohort through to graduation and beyond would provide rich data about the longer-term impact of environment, family, peers, mentoring, and identity development. I would also like to follow up with a comparison study of men and of other students from multiple ethnicities within the Hispanic culture that would potentially shed light on possible gender and racial differences on how sophomores respond to group mentoring.

Institutions like ASU should be more intentional about creating public and private spaces where students may belong (Renn, 2004). Students need outlets for communication and connection: online discussion boards and classroom group work, including individualized attention from faculty and staff (King, 2011). Additional research in these areas regarding how to reach out and initiate connections actively—specifically with FGCS and Latinas in context-specific environments—would likely provide rich data and specifics on how to implement findings.

Implications for Future Practice

Lessons learned from this research include the claim that faculty and staff need to ask, reach out, and engage with FGCS, specifically Latinas. Faculty and administrators need to rethink the teaching/learning environment, as well as faculty/student relationships. The responsibility for supporting student learning and for initiating engagement cannot rest solely with the student. Especially with FGCS who lack the “college knowledge” and may have additional cultural obstacles to overcome (questioning authority, traditional gender roles), it is
incumbent on faculty and staff to create environments in which we intentionally meet students where they are and stop insisting that they meet us where we are.

Validating students and assisting them in getting connected in college (Rendon, 1993) is a key to FGCS and Latina success. The concept of involvement is different from the concept of validation. Involvement places a large portion of the responsibility and initiative on the student. Validation shifts the responsibility and initiative to faculty and staff to reach out and assist students to “learn more about college, believe in themselves as learners, and have a positive college experience” (Rendon, 2006, p. 5). First-generation college students are least likely to respond to probing questions and are least likely to ask faculty and staff questions, for fear of appearing incompetent. First-generation students, in particular, do not know what they don’t know (Rendon, 2006).

Recommendations to academics are to re-energize and re-validate FGCS. Validation appears to help students get involved and become more powerful learners (Rendon, 1993). The student who becomes excited about learning feels cared about as a person, not just as a student, and becomes motivated to succeed regardless of the obstacles or challenges. The single best predictor of student satisfaction with college is the degree to which they perceive the college environment to be supportive of their academic and social needs (Kuh, Kinzie, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006).

To identify and track FGCS better at ASU, the collection of data related to FGCS needs to be strengthened. A first step would be to revise the ASU admissions application so that students are provided more detailed information regarding who qualifies as a first-generation student based on ASU’s definition of
FGCS. In their sophomore year, one-third of the participants declared their interest in pursuing graduate school. It is recommended that a marketing campaign related to the Ronald McNair Achievement Program and other graduate grants/scholarship opportunities be developed and made available to FGCS.

Additionally, development of a comprehensive sophomore year experience program and/or adding sophomore year development to existing programs and services are strongly recommended. The expansion of selection of majors and career choices at the freshman year through ASU 100 courses, as well as the development of a sophomore year exploratory major/career track, is also encouraged. An additional recommendation is to strengthen the relationship between current FGCS and Latina-focused programs with the campus career centers, which have been shown to be particularly successful for FGCS (Ayala & Striplen, 2002).

**Connection with Tinto and Astin’s Models**

Both Astin’s and Tinto’s theories share commonalities regarding the engagement of students. Arizona State University fully embraces engagement—known as “The Sun Devil Way: Achievement, Engagement and Responsibility”—as one of three leading pillars that guide programs and support services to students. These pillars are fully described to all students and their families during orientation and then reinforced throughout the academic year, indirectly through individual referrals and through media campaigns and awards of excellence for individuals and student groups. Additionally, relationships with peers, faculty, staff, and family are essential elements in increasing student success and persistence (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005).
The data collected from the participants in this action research study reveal strong links to both Astin’s (1993) Student Involvement Theory and Tinto’s (1993) Student Departure Theory. The three themes that emerged—college capital, confidence and connection—align with aspects of both theories. Tinto (1993) and Astin (1993) claim that connections with and involvement in college life strengthen student commitment to their academic goals and leads to increased persistence. Peers play a large role in college student success and can positively affect persistence (Tinto, 1993). “The student’s peer group is the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years” (Astin, 1993, p.398). However, the data from this action research study also indicates that merely telling new students about the importance of becoming engaged, providing involvement opportunities and academic support services is not enough, especially for FGCS and Latinas. Understanding the vital role of validation and need for staff and faculty to initiate engagement opportunities is a necessity for FGCS college success.

Conclusion

As a result of group gatherings, and in addition to utilizing each other as resources, students utilize mentors as an academic and professional resource (Haring, 1997). The analogy of a booster shot has been used, and the evidence shared through this action research supports the claim that limited, small-group mentoring (even just a single session) positively impacted a small group of ASU FGCS, all of whom were Latinas, in their sophomore year. Participants reported an increase in college capital, confidence, and connections. These three themes emerged from the data and are supported by previously published research as being positively correlated with college success and persistence.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

IRB APPROVAL
To: Christopher Clark
   FAB

From: Mark Roosa, Chair
   Soc Beh IRB

Date: 01/24/2011

Committee Action: Exemption Granted

IRB Action Date: 01/24/2011

IRB Protocol #: 1101005805

Study Title: First generation, Latinas: understanding the impact of the Obama Scholars

Program on retention and persistence

The above-referenced protocol is considered exempt after review by the Institutional Review Board pursuant to Federal regulations, 45 CFR Part 46.101(b)(2).

This part of the federal regulations requires that the information be recorded by investigators in such a manner that subjects cannot be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects. It is necessary that the information obtained not be such that if disclosed outside the research, it could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability, or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

You should retain a copy of this letter for your records.
APPENDIX B

RECRUITMENT EMAIL
Dear Obama Scholar:

I am a student in a doctoral program under the direction of Professor Christopher Clark in the Teachers College at Arizona State University. I am conducting a research study to see how the Obama Scholars Program at ASU helps first generation Latina students succeed.

I am inviting your participation, which will involve completing an initial survey to collect demographic information, one scheduled focus group lasting approximately 90min during the beginning of February 2011 and one follow-up reflection survey. Your participation and feedback on the surveys and focus group will help inform phase two of this study which focuses on mentoring, the sophomore year experience and first generation Latinas retention and persistence.

Please respond back to this email if you are interested in participating by January 31st and I will follow up with you regarding next steps: scheduling the focus group around participants’ schedules. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Amy Golden
APPENDIX C

PARTICIPANT SIGNED CONSENT FORM
INFORMATION LETTER – phase two
First generation Latinas: understanding the impact of group mentoring in the sophomore year on retention and persistence

Date

Dear Obama Scholar:

I am a student in a doctoral program under the direction of Professor Christopher Clark in the Teachers College at Arizona State University. I am conducting a research study to see how the group mentoring in the sophomore year at ASU helps first generation Latina students succeed.

I am inviting your participation, which will involve three stages: 1) completing an initial survey to collect demographic information and participating in two to three pre-scheduled small group mentoring sessions lasting approximately 60 (sixty) to 90 (ninety) minutes each occurring March through May 2011. 2) keeping (and submitting through email) an electronic journal in response to posed questions, and 3) completing a reflection survey following the final group mentoring session. Your participation and feedback on the surveys and focus group will help inform phase two of this study which focuses on mentoring, the sophomore year experience and first generation Latinas retention and persistence. You have the right not to answer any question and to stop participation at any time.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty.

There are three broad categories of direct benefits to you, in addition to indirect benefits of improving the Obama Scholars Program for other current and future first generation Latina students specifically, as well as overall university retention efforts for students. 1) participation in the small group mentoring sessions, 2) developing a cohort and support connection with those in your small group, and 3) additional attention and support from myself as an university administrator committed to your collegiate success. The topics we will discuss in the small group mentoring sessions include: academic success, connection to campus, involvement in campus life, academic and career goals and overall college success strategies. At the end of each small group mentoring session, you will be asked to document individual action items (which complement the areas discussed in that session) to be completed by the next small group mentoring session. There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to your participation.

Your survey information will be kept confidential and all names will be assigned a numeric code to ensure confidentiality. Complete confidentiality cannot be guaranteed about what is said in the small group mentoring sessions to the extent that the other participants may talk about what is discussed. However, all participants will be encouraged to keep the information discussed in the small group mentoring sessions confidential. The master list
of names will be destroyed once the data has been coded. The results of this study may be used in reports, presentations, or publications but your name will not be used.

I would like to audiotape the small group mentoring sessions. You will not be recorded unless you give permission. If you give permission to be taped, you have the right to ask for the recording to be stopped. The tapes will be destroyed upon the completion and successful dissertation defense on or before June 2012.

If you have any questions about this study or your involvement in the study, please contact Amy Golden at 480-965-7661 or email: amy.golden@asu.edu or Dr. Christopher Clarke 602-543-6300 or email: christopher.michal.clark@asu.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this study, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, through the ASU Office of Research Integrity and Assurance, at 480-965-6788.

By signing below you are agreeing to participate in the study.

________________________________________
Print name

________________________________________
Signature

Date

By signing below you are agreeing to be taped.

________________________________________
Signature

Date
APPENDIX D

DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY
Thank you for participation in this demographic survey for a research study and helping us to create successful environment for students in the Obama Scholars Program. Any identifying information will be kept confidential, all names will be removed and assigned a code and used only for data collection and statistical purposes. Your participation is voluntary and you may decline at any time as indicated on the letter attached to this form.

Please answer the following questions:

- I am: ____ male ____ female
- What is your ethnic background? _____White, _____ Latino/a, _____ Native American, _____ African American, _____ multi-racial
  If Latino/a or multi-racial, what do you identify with? _____ Mexican, _____ Cuban, _____ Puerto Rico, _____ Latin American, _____ Spain, _____ other
  (specify ________________)
- The highest level of formal education my parents received (mark one for each):
  Grammar school or less  Mother  Father
  Some high school  _______  _______
  High school graduate  _______  _______
  Some college (community or other)  _______  _______
  College degree  _______  _______
  Some graduate school  _______  _______
  Graduate/medical/law degree  _______  _______
- My high school GPA was _______
- My high school was located in which AZ county: (list counties in AZ as choices)
- I took honors or AP courses in high school _____ yes  ______ no
  If yes, how many ____ 1, ____ 2, ____ 3, ____ 4 or more
- How many hours per week do you recall spending studying in high school? ____ 1-5,
  ____ 5-10, ____ 10-15, ______ 15+
- Do you receive financial aid in addition to the Obama Scholars Program ____ yes, ____ no
  If yes, what type ______ grants, ______ scholarships, ______ loans ______ work study
- Did you work on campus during your freshman year _____ yes, ____ no
  If yes, how many hours per week _______ 1-10, ______ 10-15, ______ 15-20
- Did you work off-campus during your freshman year _____ yes, _____ no
  If yes, how many hours per week _______ 1-10, ______ 10-15, ______ 15-20,
  ______ 20-30, _______ 30-40, ______ 40+
- Are you working on campus this year? _____ yes, ____ no
  If yes, how many hours per week _______ 1-10, ______ 10-15, ______ 15-20,
- Are you working off-campus this year? _____ yes, _____ no
  If yes, how many hours per week _______ 1-10, ______ 10-15, ______ 15-20,
  ______ 20-30, _______ 30-40, ______ 40+
• Did you live on-campus your freshman year? ____yes, _____no
  If no, did you live at home? _____yes, _____no
• Do you live on campus this year (sophomore year)? ______yes, _____no
  If no, do you live at home? ______yes, _____no

• How many hours per week do you recall spending studying during your freshman year?
  _____1-5, _____5-10, _____10-15, ______15+
• How many hours per week are you spending studying this year (your sophomore year)?
  _____1-5, _____5-10, _____10-15, ______15+

• Did you officially change your major your freshman year? ______yes, ______no
  If yes, how many times? ____1, ______2, ______3, _____4+
• Have you officially change your major this year? ____yes, ______no
  If yes, how many times? ____1, ______2, ______3, _____4+
• Do you expect to officially change your major in the future? _____yes, ______no

• I chose to go to college because (check all that apply):
  • My parents/family wanted me to
  • Even though my parents/family did not want me to
  • My friends are all going
  • My older siblings went
  • I didn’t know what else to do
  • There was never a question about going to college, just which college
  • I want a good/better job than if I didn’t go to college
  • I want to learn more about things that interest me
  • I want to make more money
  • I want to go to graduate/med/law school
  • I want to get an education
  • My teacher or mentor encouraged me to go
  • I want to learn about other cultures
  • I wanted to get away from home
APPENDIX E

GROUP MENTORING QUESTIONS

(FIRST SESSION)
1. Tell me how you decided to come to college at ASU?

2. What, if anything helped you adjust/succeed/connect with ASU your freshman year?

3. Did you change your major? If so, when and why?

4. What does “college success” mean to you?

5. What does first generation college student mean to you?

6. What has been most challenging for you since starting college?
   a. How have you overcome/address that challenge?

7. How do you deal with stress?

8. What are your next steps in college?
APPENDIX F

REFLECTION QUESTION

(FOLLOWING FIRST SESSION)
1. What, if anything helped (is helping) you adjust/succeed/connect with ASU this year (sophomore year)?
1. What is the story behind your names? What do they mean?

2. What role does your family play in your college life?
   a. How do you deal with the pressure/pulls of family and culture?

3. What does it mean to you to be Latina at ASU?

4. Is it important to seek out other Latina’s on campus? Why or why not?

5. What advice would you give a freshman, first generation college student?

6. What are your college/career goals?

7. What do you want to experience before you graduate from college?

8. How can I be helpful?
APPENDIX H

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

(FOLLOWING SECOND SESSION)
1. Describe what the group mentoring experience was like for you.
   a. What did you like and dislike about it? (length of meetings, frequency or meetings, etc.
   b. How do you feel about the placement of the group mentoring meetings occurring during the end of the spring semester your sophomore year? (helpful or not, why or why not, when would group mentoring be most helpful for students?)
2. How could the group mentoring experience have been better and/or made more of an impact for you?
3. How did you feel about getting to know the other students in your mentor group?
   a. What was helpful (or not) about getting to know other first generation, Latinas?
   b. Did you have any contact with group members outside of the group meetings? If so, please elaborate.
   c. Have you stayed in touch with anyone from your group mentor meetings?
4. What made you agree to participate in the group mentoring research study in the first place?
5. As you reflect back, how was being involved with the group mentoring research helpful to you, to your success and/or feeling connected with ASU?
6. Are your spring semester grades what you expected them to be?
   a. Did participating in the group mentoring have an impact on your academic performance? If so, please explain.
7. You are half-way through your college career at ASU. As you look forward to your junior and senior years, how has participating in the group mentoring affected you?
8. How has participating in the group mentoring made a different and/or impacted how your view your remaining time (your junior and senior years) at ASU? Please elaborate