Breaking the Circumstance:

Key Factors Influencing Latino Male Aspirations for a Four-Year College Degree

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Dedication

This dissertation demonstrates my whole-hearted passion for promoting equitable education for Black and Brown boys. In writing this dissertation, I experienced many feelings. First, I was excited that I had the opportunity to learn deeply about a topic to which I am extremely connected. Then, I was filled with anger and resentment due to the lack of research and the inherent racism within some of the published literature regarding Black and Brown college degree attainment. I am joyous because this work has made me a better student, teacher, and leader.

This dissertation is dedicated to all the Black and Brown boys who defy the status quo despite circumstances beyond their control and demonstrate excellence in their educational efforts. I have had the privilege of serving as a mentor, teacher, advisor, and leader for many schools serving this population, and I am both blessed and honored to do this work.

This dedication is a thank you to all the students I have interacted with over the years. Each one of you has inspired me in so many ways. My life is changed each school year, and I am extremely proud of my students--- past, present, and future. Each of you will change the world for the better one day!

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I want to begin by thanking my family. Each member of my family has been highly supportive of my educational aspirations. My parents have supported me despite their lack of experience with educational attainment. In particular, I want to thank my mother. My freshman year of college was challenging. I had moved out of my parent's home, had a minimum-wage job, and attended school full-time. Due to these circumstances, I was unable to purchase a math textbook. This math course was required to enter the college of education. Additionally, I failed the math portion of the entrance exam four times. In the state of Illinois, you are only allotted five attempts.

I remember calling my mom extremely upset about it. Without hesitation, she asked me to meet her for lunch. Even though my parents live in extreme poverty, my mom took out two hundred dollars and gave it to me for food and the textbook, leaving her with no money. Two months later, I passed the math class and the entrance exam. I was admitted into the college of education shortly after. This single moment determined what my future would look like, and had it not been for that moment, I wouldn't be graduating with a Doctorate at age 29.

Next, I would like to thank my partner, Gabriel. He has been with me throughout this journey. He has been my confidant, motivator, and support. He has been there to celebrate successes and when I needed to vent. He has supported my decisions regarding my education or career regardless of how he will be impacted. He pushes me to improve daily and I am thankful for having him in my life.

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Abstract

While the number of Latinos in public schools in the United States is increasing rapidly, four-year university degree attainment amongst Latino males in their senior year of high school continues to fall lower than any other ethnic or racial group. While literature reveals support for Black males, little to no literature addresses Latino males in their senior year of high school. Further research focuses on community college degree attainments or intervention programs, such as Gear Up or Trio.

This study investigates what influences senior Latino male PODER Public Charter Schools students to aspire to a four-year college degree. In this parallel, convergent, mixed-methods research, surveys and focus groups were conducted with fifty senior Latino males at PODER (pseudonym) Public Charter Schools throughout the United States to understand the topic better. Their responses were noted in four influential categories: school connectedness, academic preparedness, community engagement, and relationships with peers/faculty.

The findings of this study suggest that Latino male student voices and feedback are rarely received nor acknowledged and should be intentionally sought out and incorporated regarding academic and non-academic programming. Further, requiring at least one advanced placement course, access to early college exposure, and intentional post-secondary advisement planning may influence senior Latino males to aspire to a four-year degree. The school and community interconnectedness may enrich the academic, socio-emotional, and communal investment. Finally, investing in restorative practices, celebrating, and recognizing student achievement along the way, and assigning senior Latino males to grade-specific advisories led by a trusted adult with similar identity markers could result in higher aspirations for four-year degree attainment.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The National Center for Educational Statistics (2019) notes that 36% of all Latino students in the United States enroll in some form of post-secondary educational institution. A post-secondary educational institution refers to any institution that provides learning beyond high school: technical school, community college, or university (NCES, 2019). Latino is defined as an individual's cultural identity or generational relations to an individual from a Spanish-speaking nation (Gonzalez & Morrison, 2015). However, of the 36% of Latino students enrolled, only 21% graduate from post-secondary educational programs. More Latino and Black students are graduating from high school this past decade; however, many do not attend post-secondary institutions, and those who do, persist at a much lower rate than their white counterparts (NCES, 2019).

In part, Latino students' post-secondary attendance results from not completing high school. Historically, 22.4% of Latino students aged 16 to 24 drop out of high school yearly (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019). Latinos have a higher dropout rate than their Black or white peers. Edelman (2010) would attribute these statistics to how poverty and other inequities fail students, a moral epidemic in our society. This national failure to engage senior Latino males allows public institutions to reproduce cycles of oppression and racism (Farmer, 2010). Lack of academic rigor and lower expectations reinforce oppressive systems within public educational institutions before and after the new Jim Crow laws, which enforce inequitable educational access and opportunity. Arguably, these are still an issue in 2022.

Furthermore, when considering the lowered college attainment for Latino males, it is critical to evaluate the juvenile incarceration rate of Latino males. Rovner and Fettig (2021) show in "The Incarceration Project" that Latino males were 28% more likely to be incarcerated than their white peers. This data is alarming, as dropout rates and the low

number of Latino males attaining a four-year degree may be related to the high incarceration rate.

Theoretical Framework

When coupling the way cyclical poverty intersects with racial background and the lack of four-year degree attainment for Latinos, it is imperative to consider Critical Race Theory (CRT). Bell first termed CRT in 1980. This theory finds how inequities, inequalities, and systemic oppression are leveraged to maintain the status quo and continue to remove the economic and educational opportunities afforded to people of color. While this theory is consistent for all people of color, this theory aligns explicitly with the oppression faced by individuals who identify as Black. While many Latinos may identify as Black, there are specific cultural elements that Latinos face uniquely, thus leading to Latino Critical Race Theory or LatCrit (Bernal, 2002; Cooper et al., 2017).

LatCrit is concerned with the progression of Latinos and the issues often ignored by Critical Race Theorists (Bernal, 2002). Latinos face these unique challenges, including immigration status, language, ethnic background, and cultural norms (Pérez Huber, 2010; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2002). Latino Critical Race Theory also shares core tenets with traditional CRT. These tenants include interest convergence, color blindness, and counter-storytelling, perpetuating oppressive systems for people of color in the United States (Dernal, 2002; Cooper et al., 2017; Martinez, 2014).

Context of Setting

PODER Charter Schools, a national brand of public charter schools, promote college access and achievement for all. Due to the nature of public charter school law, all students matriculate after a random lottery. Essentially, students and their families choose to enroll their children. All the PODER Public Charter Schools nationwide are grounded in college preparatory programming. Moreover, PODER has branded itself on its robust alumni support

programming, where students who graduate from a PODER school are provided programming, services, and support through post-secondary graduation.

As part of the PODER Public Charter School Model, all students must engage in "Advanced Placement for All." This means that at the end of their high school experience, they would have the opportunity to earn up to six Advanced Placement credits. Further, the high expectations expand beyond the academic programming at PODER. In terms of classroom and school expectations, students are held to the "no excuse" model, meaning that students must meet all the expectations or risk being faced with consequences, including exclusionary discipline (PODER Foundation, 2010).

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2020), PODER Public Charter Schools serve 112,767 students in approximately 255 schools. These schools serve 83% of students of color, of which 39% identify as Latino. About 88% of PODER students are eligible for free or reduced lunch, 12% receive special education services, and 18% receive English language development support.

Through an independent report supported by the PODER Foundation (2020), 91% of students decided to remain in the PODER network for the 2021-22 school year. NCES (2020) reported that PODER elementary and middle schools perform approximately 20% higher in mathematics and English language arts than their respective district or state nationally. PODER schools perform approximately 30% higher in mathematics and English language arts at the high school level than their respective district or state. According to the national clearinghouse data on post-secondary matriculation, this achievement is evident when considering post-secondary outcomes.

According to NCES (2020), approximately 94% of all students who attend a PODER high school graduate. Further, 82% of students attend post-secondary education and 35% graduate with a four-year degree. The National Center for Educational Statistics (2019)

reports a 23% college completion rate for Latino males, while PODER Foundation (2019) attained a 76% college completion rate. It is still being determined why there is such a vast difference in these percentages. This study aims to detect the influences behind the phenomenon.

Purpose and Significance of Study

This study investigated what influences Latino male students at PODER to aspire to a four-year college degree. This organization was selected due to the success rate of Latino male students who aspire to attain a four-year degree.

This study is significant because Latino males across the United States are increasing. Due to this rapid and substantial increase, high schools must prepare to support first-generation Latino males aspiring to complete a four-year degree. In part, much of the current research identifies Latino males as 'people of color'; however, there is no distinction between the needs of Latino males in their pursuit of success and their counterparts, such as African Americans (Bliss et al., 2018; Desai & Abeita, 2017; Dukakis et al.,2015; Farmer, 2010; Harper, 2105; Huerta et al., 2018; Villavicencio et al., 2018). Most current research focuses on either two-year or vocational schools or the completion of a four-year degree with the support of an intervention such as GEAR UP (Calhoun et al., 2019; Ducheon, 2018; Hines et al., 2019; Page et al., 2019). Some research exists on the characteristics that lead first-generation Latino males to apply for four-year institutions (Conroy et al., 2016; Davis & Heller, 2019). However, no research surrounds what inspires and influences high school senior Latino males to aspire toward a four-year degree.

Coupling the absence of research and current data trends, specific questions are prompted, such as: do high schools and universities believe Latino males should aspire to attend university? Do these institutions believe these students can complete a four-year degree? If so, why have we not seen positive movement in the number of first-generation

Latino males aspiring to and completing a four-year degree and fewer first-generation Latino males dropping out of high school and college? These and other questions need to be answered.

Research Question

The following research questions will guide this study:

RQ1: What factors influence Latino male students enrolled in PODER Public Charter Schools to aspire to pursue a four-year college degree?

RQ2: How do these factors influence Latino male students enrolled in PODER Public Charter Schools to aspire to pursue a four-year degree?

Researcher's Lens

As a Latino male who grew up in a very impoverished part of Chicago, I have been impacted by societal norms for Latino males. For the entirety of my childhood, I was identified as low-income and lived below the poverty line. I grew up in governmental housing (Section 8) with my parents, who still live in poverty. I attended the Chicago Public Schools and was the first in my nuclear family to graduate from high school. The schools I attended were over 95% Latino and 100% Title I eligible.

The circumstances dramatically impacted the life I was born into; however, school always felt like a consistent and safe place. Growing up in poverty is a tremendous barrier and demotivator for some, but it was quite the opposite for me. I felt enraged that the system marginalized children because of a circumstance they had no control over. Therefore, I dedicated my academic and professional life to modeling the possibility. My passion for the work stems from our students' inequitable schooling.

While I had come from this same system, I was fortunate to be academically proficient. I had tremendous support from my teachers, counselors, and parents. There was never a question about me attending college; however, I did not realize the immense financial

burden it would cause. I remember my freshman year as my first year living alone. I was unable to purchase the required textbooks. While I never had financial support from my parents, my mother knew how much education meant to me, and that semester she could get enough money to buy my books. Without that support that semester, I am confident I would have become another statistic.

The high school I attended only graduated 33% of its students. During my high school experience, Chicago Public School decided to offer "AP for All." This program was designed to allow every student to take advanced placement courses regardless of academic proficiency. I was an inaugural student in this program, which boosted my confidence in my academic achievement and supported me in seeing college as a valid option. Interestingly, all the schools I have worked at have employed this same method, and I believe this program could drastically impact the lives of Latino male students living in poverty. I decided to commit my professional life as a practitioner and scholar to determining what programs support students who grew up in the same circumstance.

After graduating from high school, I attended Northeastern Illinois University, a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI), where I graduated with my bachelor's and master's degrees in Latino Studies and Education. My studies prepared me to teach in the neighborhoods where I grew up. I have been a teacher, principal, and district leader in schools serving over 90% Latinos and 100% Title 1. My investment in Latino communities and poverty motivated me to complete a four-year degree. This investment is my desire to break the status quo and demonstrate that Latino males that come from poverty can achieve a degree and end cyclical poverty. Growing up, I knew that obtaining a bachelor's degree would be the only way to end the generational poverty from which I came.

My desire to investigate what influences senior Latino males to aspire to attain a four-year degree derives from my personal and professional aspirations. First, I achieved the

'goal' that this research seeks to understand. I know what influenced me personally: being the first in my family to graduate high school, college, and graduate school and defy the odds. However, my experience and motivators may or may not be like others. Therefore, I am undertaking this research to understand the recent experience of Latino males better. As a current school administrator, if I better understand this phenomenon, I may be able to nurture and support the education of Latino male students. Second, I am currently a district leader for a charter school network that believes in the value of college completion for first-generation Latino students; thus, I hope that this research will further allow me to support the creation of learning institutions that support the students and communities we serve.

Methodology and Subjects

Creswell and Creswell (2018) suggest that the research methodology is derived from the research questions. This study enacted a parallel, convergent, mixed-methods approach to answer the research questions. By enacting both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies, I hope for the transferability and applicability of the results (McMillian, 2015). Data from senior Latino males in the PODER school system who aspire to four-year degrees will be collected through a survey focused on identifying influential school characteristics and focus group interviews through which these students responded to prompts about how and why they have aspired towards a four-year college degree.

The survey instrument, validated and tested by a research firm, covers four areas: school connectedness, academic preparedness, community engagement, and relationships with peers/faculty. It was distributed to all senior Latino males in PODER who aspire to obtain a four-year degree. Data was analyzed descriptively to quantify school design characteristics as most and least prominent.

The qualitative data were collected simultaneously through focus group interviews in the five PODER regions. Each focus group consisted of approximately ten subjects (Kruger

& Casey, 2000), with 50 subjects total of senior Latino males aspiring to a four-year degree. Students were purposively selected as school counselors will assist with identifying students who meet the criteria and may be interested in participating. The quantitative and qualitative data were converged to produce findings and recommendations.

Limitations of this Study

While this study produced valid and reliable data, several limitations exist. First, as the researcher, I hold a position of authority. My role with PODER is as a regional support team member meaning that I am directly responsible for the achievement and health of the secondary campuses I supervise. As a district leader, I am now responsible for the data used in this study. Further, my supervision of our district creates a power dynamic and bias in the lens through which I view this data.

I mitigated my potential bias by removing all student identifiers after the data had been provided by an outside research firm. Next, as suggested, I had frequent conversations with my dissertation chair about my ideas surrounding the data and implemented measures to control for any bias. Finally, while collecting data, I kept a journal, allowing me to express my thoughts so that they do not interfere with the data collection or subsequent analysis.

Along with my position, it is critical to consider that this data and findings are consistent with charter schools. This data is specific to PODER Public Charter Schools and no other charter schools. Although these schools are public and follow strict lottery regulations, the schools are specifically designed as college preparatory. Therefore, the students who attend PODER express the desire to attend college, which may or may not be the norm in other types of schools. The district ensures that every school design element, from academics to student culture, is that of a district preparing all students to go to and through college. Thus, traditional public schools or other schools serving Latino males living

in both urban and rural poverty may not find the outcomes of this study as transferrable to their context.

Operational Terms and Definitions

The following terms will be used throughout this study:

1. **Latino:** the cultural identity of an individual from or has generational relations to an individual from a Spanish-Speaking nation. (Gonzalez & Morrison, 2015)

2. **Four-Year Institution:** an educational institution that offers bachelor's degree programs.

3. **Intervention:** supports put in place to improve a specific outcome.

4. **Critical Race Theory:** the theory posited that the majority (whites) would only support the empowerment of Blacks if it served the majority's best interests (Bernal, 2002; Martinez, 2014).

5. **Latino Critical Race Theory:** the theory posited that the majority (whites) would only support the empowerment of Latinos if it served the majority's best interests (Bernal, 2002; Martinez, 2014).

6. **Achievement Gap:** the gap between people of color and their white counterparts when discussing academics (Carter & Welner, 2013).

7. **Opportunity Gap:** the gap between people of color and their white counterparts when discussing the educational experiences offered (Carter & Welner, 2013; Milner, 2012).

8. **Penal Realism:** refers to the current educational structures that act as mechanisms to mirror those of prison (Desai & Abeita, 2017).

9. **Marginalization:** treatment of a person, group, or concept as insignificant or peripheral that occurs when a person or groups of people are less able to do things or access essential services or opportunities (Carter & Welner, 2013).

10. **Stereotype Threat:** a concept that speaks to the underperformance of an individual when placed in or faced with a stereotyping situation; stereotype threat was found by Rosenthal (1994) to be directly tied to how the subject of stereotyping cognitively processes and behaves as a result. (McCutchen, 2015; Gloria et al., 2017).

11. **School-to-Prison Pipeline:** the intentional or unintentional parallels in educational institutions and prisons that promote a future of incarceration (Yang et al., 2018).

12. **White normalcy:** societal norms being created and normalized by individuals of Anglo origin, thus, not being designed with other cultures in mind but defining the standard for all individuals in society (Neville-Shepard, 2019; Farmer, 2010).

13. **Interest convergence:** considers what is most beneficial for white people before anything else (Bell, 1992).

14. **Color blindness:** is the consideration that race does not exist, commonly manifested as 'I do not see color' (Bell, 1992).

15. **Counter-storytelling**: leveraging stereotypes to cultivate a false narrative around people of color (Bell, 1992).

Overview of Remainder of the Study

Chapter 2 is a review of the literature. The chapter begins with a discussion of the origin of Critical Race Theory, which will frame Latino Critical Race Theory. This theory will demonstrate how the tenets of Critical Race Theory are present for Latinos, which result in oppressive systems that do not promote success for Latinos. Chapter 2 reviews the theoretical and research literature relevant to school design characteristics that either promote or demote first-generation Latino males' completion of a four-year degree. Chapter 3 consists of the methodology that the researcher will enact. The chapter includes outlines of the approach, the case study methodology, the sample population, data collection methods, and data analysis methods the researcher will use to complete the study.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

Extant literature focuses on critical theoretical perspectives on four-year college completion for Latino males. Latino and Black students enrolling in a four-year institution had increased from 6% to 17% in 2018, but only 54% of Latino and Black students will complete college, as opposed to 63% of white students (Ducheon, 2018). When considering this phenomenon's cultural, academic, and social aspects, Spruill et al. (2014) suggest core characteristics and strategies for secondary schools and universities that help promote four-year college degree completion. Although research indicates the value of solid academic programming, mentorship, college access, and building student advocacy, most current literature combines Latino and African American males. It focuses on community colleges or educational interventions to promote college completion. Building on Perez's (2015, 2017) and Huerta's (2018) contributions, this literature review focuses on the role of secondary school in supporting Latino males in completing a four-year degree. Many successful secondary school initiatives are only successful if Latino males believe in their ability to complete college.

Latino males' mindsets around completing a four-year degree are formed through the lens of racial identity and aspiration. Spruill et al. (2014) describe how race negatively influences college persistence rates for Latino males. While many Latino male students hold higher academic success aspirations than their white counterparts (Huerta, 2018; Perez, 2017), they are not completing a degree at the same rate as their white and Asian counterparts (Huerta, 2018; Spruill, 2014). Huerta (2018) and Perez (2017) explore this idea further by naming financial and social advantages for white students that Black and Latino males do not receive as a cause for the lower completion rate of Latino males. These advantages include better academic preparation, a less likely chance of being a product of cyclical poverty and having relationships that promote the completion of a four-year degree both at home and in

secondary institutions (Perez, 2017). To that end, the disadvantage for Latino male students is directly related to the social and cultural differences between them and their white counterparts.

Identity consists of both social and cultural traditions for Latinos. When considering the role of culture in a student's success in post-secondary schooling, it is critical to consider how cultural constructs either support or neglect skills and attributes necessary to succeed academically (Quintanilla, 2017). For example, a student's immigration status could hinder obtaining financial support or even admittance into a university (Pérez, 2017). Similarly, in most universities, English is the language of instruction; thus, students who have not mastered the English language may face difficulty performing (Delgado Bernal, 2002). This example of a social or cultural challenge is the beginning of barriers in front of Latino males. These barriers exist externally, like in the example around language, and internally when considering previous generations' paths.

The paths of previous generations are associated with cultural acceptance of education and the value one's family places on educational attainment. Dukakis et al. (2014) and Spruill (2014) agree that there is a negative association, culturally, around the idea of opportunity cost. These researchers define this term as the benefit analysis for Latino males when considering if they should or should not attend post-secondary schooling. Both researchers found that it is typical for a Latino male to begin working and earning income following high school completion. This finding was consistent with Perez's (2017) research indicating the financial burdens placed on Latino males, as being in debt or borrowing is a harmful cultural stigma, resulting in higher dropout rates for Latino males at four-year institutions. These barriers and burdens do not exist only in four-year institutions but begin within the K-12 learning experience.

Within the K-12 learning experience, a lack of resources and support occurs culturally and socially. Dukakis et al. (2014), Spruill et al. (2014), Perez (2014, 2017), and Huerta (2018) assert that the lack of organizational norms and structures to promote college in urban high schools represents the most significant challenge for Latino males seeking to graduate from college. These high school design elements include academic rigor, college access, college preparation support, and mentorship. Fostering academic rigor and meaningful relationships with adults could foster a college-going culture. These relationships exemplify the social aspect of educational institutions that could act as either a motivator or a demotivator for student success.

Social constructs are foundational when considering the advantages and gaps for Latino male students. Gonzalez (2016) first considered culture's role in Latino males' success in completing a four-year degree. Spruill et al. (2014), Huerta (2018), and Perez (2015, 2017) argue that social and academic deficits coupled with societal restraints and institutionalized racism are the root causes resulting in lower four-year degree completion rates for Latino males. The idea of institutionalized racism in post-secondary schooling was coined by Fries-Britt (2002) when directly connected to the challenges of academics and social isolation, thus resulting in equity gaps labeled by Critical Race Theory. This chapter will explore the cultural, academic, and social context of Latino males completing a four-year degree through the theoretical lens of Latino Critical Race Theory (LatCrit). Four themes emerged: Change the Narrative, Eliminate Barriers, Supports Beyond Teacher and Learning, and Self Advocacy. When considering the systemic nature of this issue, it is critical to evaluate the systemic oppression within the educational institution, which results in a lack of educational attainment for Latino males. This phenomenon is attributed to Latino Critical Race Theory.

Theoretical Framework

Bell developed the Critical Race Theory (CRT) in 1980. The theory frames the systemic nature of inequity and racism, outlining five tenets embedded in our societal interactions. Critical Race Theory provides a window for Latino males' experiences completing a four-year college degree. Bell et al. (1980) developed the Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a theoretical framework to interpret and examine how race and racism impact cultural modes of expression and subsequently oppress people of color. One way this theory actualizes in practice for educators and teachers is through the perception of student capacity for educational success (Perez-Felkner, 2015).

Several tenets exist in the foundation of both CRT and LatCrit. Bell et al. (2005), Bernal (2002), Cooper et al. (2017), and Martinez (2014) agree that the permanence of racism, interest convergence, color blindness, and counter-storytelling all continue to perpetuate oppressive systems for people of color in the United States. The permanence of racism is intentionally maintaining the status quo to position people of color beneath their white counterparts. Interest convergence considers that what is most beneficial for white people must be considered before anything else. Color blindness is the consideration that race does not exist, commonly manifested as 'I do not see color.' Finally, counter-storytelling leverages stereotypes to cultivate a false narrative around people of color. This research displays the white fragility and privilege in our society and societal structures.

While Critical Race Theorists argue that institutionalized racism and injustice negatively impact all racial minorities, researchers such as Bernal (2002) and Cooper et al. (2017) assert that Latinos face unique challenges resulting in institutional injustices. Thus, Latino Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) became a derivative of Critical Race Theory (Martinez, 2014; Olson, 2003). Bernal (2002) defines this premise as racial or ethnic inequalities that directly challenge Anglos' social, historical, and cultural experiences.

LatCrit explores 'race-neutral' laws and policies perpetuating racial or ethnic inequities. Bernal (2002) and Martinez (2014) argue that colorblindness and meritocracy blatantly disadvantage people of color. Further, LatCrit is concerned with the progression of Latinos and the issues often ignored by Critical Race Theorists (Bernal, 2002). While certain similarities exist between the related theories, it is critical to acknowledge the cultural, historical, and social differences between African Americans and Latinos. This phenomenon occurs when considering immigration status, language, ethnic background, and cultural norms (Pérez Huber, 2010; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2002). These researchers also confirm that Latino and Black students attending urban schools in low-income communities show less than equitable results in four-year college-degree attainment in any post-secondary educational institution.

In the United States, schooling is considered a systemic institution. As such, racial and ethnic disparities occur when considering the experiences Latino students have in a system developed and maintained through an Anglo lens (Cooper et al., 2017). CRT and LatCrit scholars acknowledge that oppressive systems and inequalities persist, harming people of color. However, CRT does not account for Latinos' social and cultural oppression. LatCrit explains how the educational system is unjust in providing Latino students with opportunities and continuously perpetrates inequitable systems that result in a lack of college completion, particularly for Latino males. These unfavorable outcomes for Latino males are partially due to the systems employed in the United States educational institutions.

Changing the Narrative

Often, secondary schools do not provide equitable learning opportunities, thus widening the opportunity gap. Edelman (2010) argues that these public institutions, "masked as schools," contribute to imprisoning youth of color. Educational and penal realism marginalize youth within a school system (Desai & Abeita, 2017). Penal realism refers to the

current educational structures that act as mechanisms to mirror those of prison. Rovner & Fettig (2021) show that "Latinx youth were 28% more likely to be detained or committed in juvenile facilities than their white peers" (p. 1). Educational institutions should provide safety and protection from injustice. A qualitative study by Conroy (2016) explained this injustice and further labeled students. He asserts that positive classroom environments start with school-wide staff training about the power of labeling a student as a "troublemaker" or "underachiever" without providing additional opportunities for students to meet or exceed academic and social expectations. Schools serving students of color in low-income communities should acknowledge their history of systematic racism and develop systems that dissolve this narrative (Yang et al., 2018).

The narrative placed on children of color is one of oppression, in which narratives are internalized, resulting in a lack of belief that Latino males can go to and through a four-year institution with substantial academic achievement (Huerta et al., 2018; Yang et al., 2018; Perez, 2017). This inequity is one of many challenges that urban schools serving the youth of color living in poverty face academically, socially, and structurally (Perez, 2017; Yang et al., 2018). The reality of the circumstances in poverty is cyclical and tends to be generational. Perez (2017) confirmed the idea of cyclical poverty through focus groups, demonstrating that most participants could not recount their educational goals despite the participants being Latino male students having solid academic records. Due to the continuous and consistent data showing Latino males living in poverty have lower four-year college attainment rates, these narratives have become normalized. Mathews (2019) explains that these generational or cyclical circumstances are exhibited in popular culture, resulting in a " normal " narrative and an internalized belief that Latino male students living in poverty are less likely to succeed in post-secondary schooling.

Popular media reinforced this normed perception. The portrayal of people of color in television programming and other media outlets, such as social media, normalizes the life circumstances of impoverished people, particularly those of color. Chaudry and Gruzd (2020) explored this concept through their parallel mixed-methods study using Black and Brown individuals on social media platforms. The researcher found that the lack of discourse around equity and race matters has begun causing a disconnect within society. For these reasons, schools should act as a hub of support and motivation to break the status quo and rebuild the narrative focused on the possibility and opportunity for Latino and Black youth who live in poverty. Further, thoughtful considerations to dissolve systems contributing to the unjust experiences of students of color living in poverty should be examined.

Neville-Shepard (2019) examined the concept of dissolving inequitable school-based systems in a parallel mixed-methods study. An analysis of the discipline issued to students of color for the same infractions as their white counterparts showed an increased rate of 33% more exclusionary discipline. These researchers argue that social norms exacerbated the internalized expectations for students of color in the education or work setting due to created expectations around 'white normalcy.' The term 'white normalcy' is defined as societal norms being created and normalized by individuals of Anglo origin, thus, not being designed with other cultures in mind but defining the standard for all individuals in society (Neville-Shepard, 2019; Farmer, 2010). This structure is consistent with what the school system has done by providing poor academic experiences for marginalized groups since the inception of public schooling (Farmer, 2010).

In recognition of these lower expectations and ineffective school structures, schools serving Latino students in poverty attempted to provide additional support to close the opportunity gap. These supports include early college access, exposure, and increased academic rigor. However, according to research by Flennaugh (2017), Latino and Black

students living in low-income communities reported feeling that they are not receiving an equitable education at the high school level. Additionally, academic expectations for Latino and Black students differ from their white counterparts. Flennaugh (2017) noted a disproportionately low number of advanced placement (AP) courses in urban low-income schools serving students of color. These racialized educational narratives exemplify the Critical Race Theory Framework in that professionals and students accept lower expectations for people of color. According to Davila and De Bradley (2010), students often internalize these narratives, resulting in a false sense of ability. These narratives' internalization often results in less social and academic success for Latinos.

Davila and De Bradley (2010) further assert that the dropout issue for students of color living in poverty is a historical struggle ignored by the United States school systems. Rivera-McCutchen (2015) demonstrated through focus group interview protocols that students of color living in poverty often do not pursue and complete a four-year degree because they believe they are incapable of succeeding within the United States school system. Due to the lack of intervention by the United States school system and continuous lack of support, internalized narratives about ability are considered the norm. Students of color living in poverty face inequitable educational systems because of the stereotype threat placed upon their circumstances (McCutchen, 2015; Gloria et al., 2017). In a qualitative study by Gloria et al. (2017), Latino male students normalized discriminatory interactions with peers and faculty within and outside of schools. These discriminatory interactions explored through focus group interviews revealed a Latino male's interaction with being asked by white students where they could purchase drugs. In another qualitative study by Perez (2017), Latino male students relied on social networks to achieve academic determination. Thus, acceptance of internalized negative stereotypes results in Latino male students needing to find individuals to break the negative narrative around their abilities to perform within public schools in the

United States academically. These role models can begin by cultivating social networks that promote academic achievement and denounce negative stereotypes.

Social networks of other successful Latinos can support activating academic determination and achievement for Latino male students in post-secondary institutions. Ducheon (2018) discovered in her qualitative research that Latino male students were not provided the same educational opportunities as their white counterparts, which resulted in a lack of academic determination. Students described their perception of being underprepared for college through the focus group interview protocols. They provided the example of needing the option to take advanced placement (AP) courses, which resulted in less rigor, less practice, and, ultimately, less preparation. This lack of preparation contributes to the negative narrative that Latino students have about achievement in post-secondary institutions.

College preparedness is a fundamental operation of secondary schools. However, research supports that students living in less-than-ideal environments often receive a subpar education, which does not promote college attendance or success. In a case study by Huerta et al. (2018), young men of color in urban schools reported feeling that educators might attempt to reinforce them as 'failures.' Additionally, the participants in the study explained how they internalized the stereotypes generated by the educators who serve them. The participants' perceptions indicate that many teachers believe young men of color will become teenage parents, gang members, or tormentors of society.

These societal stereotypes are reinforced in schools as images of being "less than," leading to the idea of moral imagination. Farmer (2010) describes moral imagination through his qualitative study as culturally embedded social relations that oppress people of color. The reality is that not all schools serving these communities are the same. Harper (2015) conducted a photographic case study in a district serving students of color living in poverty during a school visit. The images lacked the common stereotypes of sagging pants, fighting,

or physically or verbally tormenting others. The study emphasized that the societal expectations for secondary schools serving students of color living in poverty are low and unfounded. Unfortunately, society has created a false narrative reinforced in our school system for students of color living in poverty. These systems emphasize stereotypes and allow communities to remain oppressed by not receiving the same education as their white and more affluent counterparts. Huerta et al. (2018) and Perez (2015) agree that schools across the country often leave behind students of color. Many urban schools have committed to eliminating barriers derived from stereotypes to allow all students to achieve, regardless of circumstance, and to destroy the structures that result in inequitable academic experiences for these students (Huerta et al., 2018).

Barriers Impacting Academic Achievement

Rovner & Fettig (2021) state that students of color face academic deficiencies due to a lack of preparation by their secondary institutions. Coupled with the challenges they may face in their home and communal environment, completing a four-year degree often results in difficulty. Huerta et al. (2018) identified that 60% percent of Latino participants who obtained a post-secondary education were aware or agreed that their secondary institution underprepared them for post-secondary education. Perez (2015) concurs with Huerta et al. (2018) that Latino male students believe attending college is essential to achieving their personal, educational, and professional goals. Both researchers find the mindset a critical attribute to attaining higher education—this study was conducted through focus group interview protocols. Villavicencio (2014) explored the importance of early college access and awareness. This study found that Latino males, particularly first-generation collegegoers, may lack social networks to support college admission and transition.

Although researchers identified that Latino males understand the benefits of attaining a college degree, there is still a significant disparity in Latino males completing a four-year

degree. Latino males face barriers such as social adjustment and a possible lack of academic achievement. These personal barriers faced by impoverished students of color are consistent with the Stereotype Threat Theory. Murthy & Zurkel (2015) identify that students from said communities entering post-secondary education may struggle with belonging and academic performance due to societal stereotypes. Salazar (2017) coupled the Stereotype Threat Theory with Social Judgment Theory by developing 'anchors,' representing intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Through this qualitative study, Salazar concluded that stereotypes were reinforced or denied depending on an individual's anchor. This concept would act as both a barrier or benefit to breaking these stereotypes and preconceived narratives of students of color living in poverty. While these challenges are partially due to stereotypes and internalized racism, the barriers also arise from students' lack of preparation in secondary school.

In a qualitative study performed by Calhoun et al. (2019) through focus group interview protocols, students indicated that their lack of college preparation stemmed from the lack of social skills instruction in secondary school. This lack of preparation is consistent with the research of Huerta et al. (2018), as schools in urban settings serving students of color in high-poverty areas often do not maintain high expectations for students, resulting in a lack of social and academic preparation. Consequently, these students need help when adjusting to post-secondary educational institutions. Further, in a qualitative study by Quintanilla (2017), the researcher suggested that social and academic preparation could be bolstered through more robust parental engagement, programming, and student leadership training. These initiatives could begin as early as elementary school and continue through secondary school to combat internalized stereotypes around Latino males not feeling prepared to enter and complete a four-year degree. Unfortunately, if not addressed systematically in schools, these

social barriers impact academic achievement, persistence, and, ultimately, completion of post-secondary education if the status quo is maintained (Calhoun et al., 2019).

Often, Latino students indicate they need to be more aware of college expectations due to their lack of preparation in high school (Rodriguez et al., 2018). This idea was developed through a quantitative study conducted by Ponjuan et al. (2015). His research showed that more investigation needs to be undertaken on Latino males and the college-application process. Namely, secondary schools should provide further outreach efforts such as college fairs, financial aid seminars, family college tours, and specific support for Latino students. Rodriguez et al. (2018) argue that students need social and academic acclimation to a post-secondary setting to succeed and should have early exposure to college campuses, academics, and cultures. Hines et al. (2019) defend that schools should fill in the gaps at home. Additionally, Hines (2019) promotes secondary schools supporting the college application process due to parental figures not having this experience. High schools should be a promoter of college enrollment, not an obstacle.

Academic models vary nationwide, resulting in students' different educational preparation. The various programs, expectations, and models invoke significant disparity when preparing students for post-secondary education (Huerta, 2018). Davis & Heller (2019) argue that schools serving at-risk students must continue to fight to increase students' human capital. The premise of their argument is not to make excuses for lack of achievement but instead to break barriers to ensure that students have a fighting chance to succeed and achieve in post-secondary institutions. Villavicencio (2013) also found a connection between excuses and lack of achievement and reinforced that there are compelling arguments showing that solid attendance in the k-12 setting could result in immediate and long-term academic achievement both in secondary school and a post-secondary institution. These researchers

describe interventions that could eliminate the barriers Latino males face in their pursuit of being prepared to enter and ultimately complete a four-year degree.

In conjunction with the Stereotype Threat Theory and Latino Critical Race Theory, the lack of preparedness of students of color living in poverty is not a barrier created by the students themselves but rather by systematically oppressive educational systems. Although Latino students attain a lower college-readiness rate than their white counterparts, there is no reason to suspect these performance deficits are innate (Moore et al., 2010). Eliminating barriers within school systems could drastically improve the college-readiness rate and perhaps the college-completion rates of students of color living in poverty. Conroy (2016) states that if a student comes from poverty, they likely will need financial support to complete college; thus, the researcher proposes as a conclusion to their research that there be a governmental policy aligning to free college and agreements with universities to support eliminating the financial barrier that many students of color living in poverty would face. These barriers exist at home, in society, and at school. These supports must go beyond teaching and learning to promote more equitable outcomes for Latino males.

Impact of Adult Relationships

Researchers also focused on the hub of support that a school can offer to students. These supports can be life-changing for students of color living in impoverished communities. Davis and Heller (2019) show that students from these communities often lack support, resulting in the school's much more active, hands-on, and interactive role in the students' lives. Perez (2017) identified that the absence of adult mentors on campus resulted in Latino males not feeling connected to schooling. While Vega et al. (2015) find, through a parallel mixed-methods study, that some Latino and Black students feel their family members support them in many ways, they also think that their parents lack the knowledge and skills to help them with academics or post-secondary schooling matters. While parental support is

critical in the success of Latino male students, researchers have found that positive adult relationships in secondary and post-secondary schools are essential in ensuring students complete college.

Through focus group interviews, Hines et al. (2019) found that many Latino males believe their mothers and older cousins instilled aspirations for graduating college despite not having a college-going experience. Gloria et al. (2017) explores the lack of parental support through the lens of needing to make money through employment as a core cultural focus for Latino male students. This stereotype is reinforced through Latino Critical Race Theory when considering the social and cultural elements that Latino male students must overcome to have the support to achieve in post-secondary institutions. Students not having support beyond academics from school personnel could result in a lack of completion of post-secondary schooling.

Strong representation of Latino faculty and staff on both secondary and post-secondary campuses could result in more substantial success and four-year degree attainment by conveying a more connected feeling. Conroy (2016) believes that teacher mentorship is a powerful tool to support Latino male students and proposes a similar model be developed both at the middle school level and within the capacity of community-based organizations. The power of this relationship was reinforced by Quintanilla (2017), who argues that mentors are influential when mentees look like mentors and share similar life experiences. Hines et al. (2019) show that they have one or two teachers who have a particular interest in students as people first, which has increased their chances of attending and graduating college. Ponjuan et al. (2015) agree with this and state that Latino student retention and increased degree completion are more likely when Latino faculty and staff are on campus. When educators provide support beyond academics and denounce the status quo, students feel the support and could ultimately benefit from these relationships through a higher post-secondary education

persistence rate. These relationships support building the intrinsic motivation and social-emotional skills necessary to persist toward college completion.

Social-Emotional Support at School

Relationships with trusting adults support the development of a student socially and emotionally. Through several focus groups, Knaggs et al. (2015) suggest that students of color from low socioeconomic communities benefit from having the mentorship and support of school staff. Their research indicates that not only could students set realistic goals for themselves, but they also created an action plan for achieving these goals. Villavicencio (2013) agrees that parental awareness, school staff mentoring, leadership opportunities, advisories, and freshman academies could promote connectedness and necessary support for Latino male students while providing them with the skills needed to succeed in a four-year institution. One interview by Perez-Felkner (2015) indicated this essential support and motivation. A participant stated, "Evelyn Santos referred to her favorite teacher Mr. Renstraum as the father [she] never had and reported that when she feels down at home, she will come to school and then my advisor would hug me, and then I would just feel so good," (Perez-Felkner, p. 16, 2015). The researcher also indicated that these students' post-secondary success was partially due to teachers demonstrating a genuine interest in the student's success and well-being.

These increases in post-secondary completion could create a new narrative for students of color living in poverty. Harris & Kimaya (2015) show that providing students with social and academic support beyond the classroom could help students confront the stereotypes placed upon them and support their push for secondary and post-secondary completion. These relationships were further explained in a parallel mixed-methods study performed by Morales (2010), showing that students describe these relationships with school personnel beyond the classroom as empathetic, supportive, strict, and "down" (trustworthy).

Coupled with relationships promoting those attributes, students could develop a stronger sense of self, resulting in an increased agency. An increase in agency and self-advocacy could be a factor that supports students on their journey to persist through both secondary and post-secondary schooling.

The power of school extends beyond the classroom to support students in having a stronger sense of self and acts to denounce stereotypes and change the normed narrative through the lens of Latino Critical Race Theory and institutional racism. Rivera-McCutchen (2015) suggests through quantitative analysis that students who did not complete college, particularly those of color living in poverty, believe they were incapable of succeeding. These narratives and supports could be the acting factor that drives intrinsic motivation, leading students to be more willing to take risks and advocate for themselves (Knaggs et al., 2015). By denouncing the perceived stereotypes and eliminating the internalized racism that Latino males have, students could increase their ability to push themselves to achieve.

Agency and self-advocacy are the most significant factors leading to secondary and post-secondary education completion. Calhoun et al. (2019) argue that students from impoverished communities often face coping challenges when provided with more academic rigor and stress. Through focus group interviews, Gloria et al. (2017) express that many Latino male students believe completing post-secondary education is a means of "cheating destiny." When Latino males receive the mechanisms, support, and encouragement, their views on college completion could increase completion rates. Calhoun (2019) suggests that students with strong motivation and support are more likely to acknowledge their challenges and create a support plan to ensure success.

Perez (2015) emphasizes that support plans are most beneficial when strong peer support networks are created based on similar academic aspirations and intellectual interests. When Latino males believe in their abilities and have adequate support, their chances of

success can be improved. Murphy & Zurkel (2015) agree that students of color who are academically underperforming or underprepared rely on their connectedness to peers and school support. Further, Gloria et al. (2017) describes the need for cultivating a welcoming environment on post-secondary institutional campuses. These functions of character development could result in improved outcomes for Latino males.

Specific student attributes are also linked to academic performance and achievement. Morales (2010) finds that students of color living in poverty are more likely to persist and reach their educational goals when a strong work ethic, internal locus of control, and persistence are fundamental. These researchers state that students may need more than adequate academic performance with agency. Agency and self-advocacy stem from the idea of a preconceived narrative about students of color living in poverty. These narratives create barriers. The barriers created are often demolished by having support outside the classroom through a mentor teaching agency skill, which may increase a student's ability to persist through secondary and post-secondary education and improve academic achievement.

Conclusion

Huerta (2018) explains how the United States school system has maintained the status quo for impoverished Latino males. Latino Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) and empirical research support how self-narratives, academic barriers, and social-emotional needs of Latino males are ignored by the school system, thus, resulting in a lack of post-secondary educational attainment. Much of the current research either employs qualitative research methods or focuses on community colleges for males of color (encompassing Latino and Black males). The gap exists when using a mixed methods research design and concentrating on four-year college attainment for Latino males living in poverty.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the research methodology for this parallel, convergent mixed-methods study. McMillian (2015) suggests that this approach bolsters validity, reliability, and generalizability because the researcher conducts both quantitative and qualitative elements in the same phase of the research process (Creswell & Pablo-Clark, 2011). The researcher analyzes the two components independently, then interprets the results together. The quantitative method employed in this study is a survey of all high school senior Latino males in PODER schools across the United States who aspire to obtain a four-year degree. The qualitative method will involve five focus group interviews with approximately 10 Latino male senior students each (50 students total). The focus group participants are a subset of the survey participants that are purposefully selected.

Quantitative Methodology

Fowler (2014) asserts that there are two primary purposes of using surveys to understand a specific phenomenon better. First, surveys provide a data set rooted in numeric statistical analysis. Second, surveys allow researchers to obtain larger data sets than simply conducting individual interviews. The research used for this study has been previously validated and deemed reliable by an outside research firm compensated by PODER Charter Schools. Furthermore, Fowler (2014) describes that using surveys allows for a minimization of errors that could arise when analyzing data. These research methods were selected to quantify school characteristics identified by Latino male seniors that potentially influence them to aspire to obtain a four-year degree.

Descriptive statistical analysis will provide information about central tendency, a statistical measure that identifies a single value as an overall representation of the entire data distribution. The following will be determined using descriptive statistical analysis: mean, standard deviation, frequency, and percentage. Essentially, this is the single value that best

represents the data collected. Finally, the distribution provides probability on common and uncommon values throughout the data set. This statistical distribution is likely based on a bell curve.

The survey used in this study has been vetted and tested by a professional research firm independent of but paid for by PODER. The survey was developed by Hinnant-Crawford & Virtue (2019) and titled 'New Tech Network Comparative Analysis.'

The survey is entitled "PODER Forward: Class of 2023 Decision Results" (see Appendix A). The survey covers four topics: school connectedness, academic preparedness, community engagement, and relationships with peers/faculty. The four sections of this survey attempt to support understanding which of these four elements lead to the many post-secondary plan decisions that students may choose. It was distributed to all senior Latino males in PODER who have indicated they aspire to obtain a four-year degree (n=1,500). Due to the nature of the data collected, I used descriptive statistical analysis to present the characteristics noted by the subjects.

The survey was sent in January 2023 through the PODER Google Listserv to the 2023 graduating class. Once collected, the data was disaggregated to the senior Latino males who aspire to obtain a four-year degree so that only their data was used for this study. The survey data was entered into SPSS; the researcher ran a descriptive statistical analysis to provide frequency data (Wilson & Joy, 2017). Statistical significance, central tendency, and dispersion will be identified (if present). The researcher enacted this data analysis procedure as the research questions attempt to find the relationship between four-year degree aspirations. This study does not have a dependent variable but does include several predictor variables, such as school connectedness, academic preparedness, community engagement, and relationships with peers/faculty (independent variable(s)). These predictors are essential

in determining which independent variables correlate to the aspiration of attaining a four-year degree (Wilson & Joy, 2017).

Qualitative Methodology

The literature supports that access to academically rigorous classes, strong adult mentorship, and discipline systems that are positively focused generally lead to students intending to apply for a four-year institution. However, in the post-pandemic world, schools have shifted to restorative practices, project-based learning, and more student choice. I was interested in using focus groups to explore those factors that influence and do not influence senior Latino males to aspire to obtain a four-year degree and how those factors affect them.

Krueger and Casey (2020) state that focus groups are a lens through which researchers gain a more robust perspective of people's thoughts and feelings. Morgan (1998) believes focus groups are ideal for gathering and interpreting meaningful data to create new meaning. These two researchers identify that focus groups allow a broad understanding of the topic. Further, Morgan (1998) suggests that focus groups allow for a new listening method that supports learning from people. All these researchers believe that focus groups are a way to promote disclosure and to understand better the actual thoughts and feelings that participants experienced. Krueger and Casey (2000), building on Morgan (1998), recommend that focus groups have the following five components: people who represent the interest group, provide qualitative data, a discussion-based format, a minimum of four and maximum of 12 participants, and a minimum of three to four focus groups with any one type of subject.

Morgan (1998) suggests that the focus group interview protocol will allow for the participant's voice to be thoughtfully heard and acknowledged without bias or unintentional swaying of words from the researcher. Creswell (2014) states that focus group interview protocols allow participants to share their authentic feelings, ideas, and perceptions with researchers without judgment.

I utilized a disciplined inquiry process to achieve these focus group interview parameters for this topic (Eichelberger, 1989), in which prompts were posed systematically to the participants. Prompts one through eight serve to investigate who, what, and how students have been influenced. Prompts nine through 13 align with the survey sections to gather qualitative data that will hopefully shed light on how these areas are perceived by the students. Finally, prompt 14 seeks to garner student input on what else could be done to inspire Latino males to aspire to obtain a four-year degree.

1. Why are you aspiring to obtain a four-year degree?

2. What or who influenced you to aspire to obtain a four-year degree?

3. What or who did not influence you to aspire to obtain a four-year degree?

4. How did they influence you or not?

5. What support do you have to obtain a four-year degree? Specifically, who is supporting you, and how are they supporting you?

6. Were there barriers in the way when you were considering obtaining a four-year degree? If so, what were they?

7. How have these barriers influenced you and your plan?

8. Have you overcome these barriers? If so, how did you overcome these barriers? If not, why not?

9. How, if at all, have stereotypes influenced your thinking or plans to obtain a four-year degree?

10. Academically, how do you anticipate that PODER has prepared you to obtain a four-year degree?

11. How do you anticipate PODER is preparing you to obtain a four-year degree?

12. Do you feel your connection or lack of connection at PODER has influenced your aspiration to obtain a four-year degree? Why?

13. Overall, do you believe that PODER's model effectively supports your decision to obtain a four-year degree? Why or why not?

14. What else could be done do to inspire more Latino males to obtain a four-year degree?

While conducting focus groups allows for a more accurate and robust perspective of our school's perception, some challenges are faced when conducting research with the method. First, as the researcher, I must remain neutral, posing the questions, asking for follow-up or clarification from subjects, and otherwise not interjecting my thoughts. During the focus group, I intentionally did not respond to the responses either verbally or nonverbally to maintain the integrity of the focus group interview (Creswell, 2014). Kruger and Casey (2004) strongly recommend that the researcher act as a moderator in that there is a slight interruption and only minimal additions to the conversation. In addition, Krueger (1994) asserts that, in some situations, a dominant group member may persuade other participants to state a belief that may be different than they would say in a semi-structured individual interview. Furthermore, other subjects may only participate partially. To mitigate these challenges, I will invite those participating less to add more comments.

Using focus groups allows researchers to gain insight and perspective (Kreuger & Casey, 2000; Morgan, 1998). I decided to utilize focus group interviews because of the importance of exploring the perspectives of the students who experience these college preparatory schools. Further, I conducted these focus groups while collecting survey data. Working in focus groups and distributing the survey simultaneously, I compared and contrasted students' perceptions with their survey data. I kept a reflection journal of my thoughts as they arose. I anticipated that students would speak more precisely and with greater detail about their perception of the four survey buckets: academic programming, school discipline, school connectedness, and adult relationships.

Focus Group Procedure

Through non-random purposive sampling, the school counselors in the five regions identified Latino male students who attend PODER Public Charter High Schools, aspire to obtain a four-year degree, and are likely to be interested in participating in the study. As this number of potential participants is likely more significant than the maximum for focus group participation, counselors assigned numbers to students and used a random number generator to select 15 students in each region. As not all potential subjects may enter the study, it was hoped that by inviting 15, at least 10 students in each region (50 total) will engage.

The researcher emailed each potential student participant and their parent to invite the student to the study. Parents were asked to return an informed consent form if they wished for their student to participate (except if a student is 18 or older, in which case the student will return the informed consent). Afterward, the researcher sent each student a calendar invite, zoom link, procedural safeguards, and a reminder via email with a copy to the parents. All focus groups will be conducted during school hours via Zoom, which the researcher coordinated through the school counselors. School counselors provided a quiet location for the student participants.

At the beginning of the focus group meetings, the researcher introduced himself and discuss the purpose of the study and the research questions. Students completed their informed assent in Google forms as part of a brief demographic survey which included these prompts: PODER region, age, the country which your parents/family are from, how long you have lived in the USA, and how long your parents have lived in the USA. Data from these prompts were helpful in disaggregating responses to these subject characteristics.

Each participant engaged in one 45-minute focus group interview. The researcher used Rev.com to transcribe the recorded interviews. Finally, the researcher provided the

transcription to the participants for correctness and approval to ensure validity. This process is referred to as member checking (Creswell, 2014).

Data Analysis

The data collected from the focus group interviews were analyzed through deductive coding. Then using descriptive reasoning solidified themes from the participant's voices (Creswell et al.,2018; Saldaña, 2015). Creswell (2014) describes a code as a construct or symbol interpreted to determine patterns or characteristics for the analytic process. The deductive coding was chosen due to the employed survey's predetermined themes. The researcher concluded findings based on the themes and research questions.

The researcher analyzed codes using NVIVO software and by hand with a Long Table approach (Krueger & Casey, 2000), each being used to keep the other in check. In the Long Table approach, the researcher utilized hard copies of the interview transcripts to sort and code data. The focus group questions were on the top row. The quotes from the focus groups were added to the column directly under the research question. The quoted "codes" were highlighted to notice better and identify trends. The common questions were bracketed into themes. Finally, trends and patterns were highlighted in hopes of identifying findings.

Converging Quantitative and Qualitative Data

Data from the quantitative survey were compared and contrasted with data from the qualitative focus groups. Data loss would not be a factor in this research study, as all questions must be answered before submission. The data from the four focus areas in the survey were compared with the themes that arise from the interviews. Those areas and themes were compared and contrasted within role-like and role-dislike groups of the students based on their responses to the demographic questions. By enacting this approach, the researcher identified findings in this study's quantitative and qualitative designs, thus engaging in the data interpretation process simultaneously, as opposed to separate analyses.

Chapter 4 will present the findings from this parallel convergent mixed-methods approach,

and Chapter 5 will provide actionable recommendations.

Chapter 4: Findings and Discussion

This study investigated what influences senior Latino male PODER Public Charter Schools students to aspire to a four-year college degree. At the time of this study, PODER was the largest charter management organization in the United States. The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: What influences first-generation Latino males to aspire to pursue a four-year college degree?

RQ2: How do these factors influence first-generation Latino male students to aspire to pursue a four-year degree?

This study was designed to answer these research questions through a convergent, mixed methods approach with simultaneously administered survey and focus group interviews. After collecting the data, I analyzed the quantitative and qualitative results independently, then compared the findings.

The survey was distributed to seniors who attend PODER Public Charter Schools ($N = 1500$). Eighty-seven percent of students completed the survey ($N = 1310$). After participant qualifiers (Latino, Male, and receiving free or reduced lunch) were added, 404 survey responses were analyzed ($N = 404$), representing 47.3% of the senior Latino male student body. This survey, entitled "PODER Post-Secondary Survey," was developed by New Tech Network (2019) and was deemed a valid and reliable instrument.

The qualitative methodology employed was semi-structured focus group interview protocols with 50 Latino males attending PODER Public Charter Schools who aspire to attain a four-year degree ($n = 50$).

This chapter presents the data collected in the surveys and focus groups and analyzes the same. Through triangulation of both the quantitative and qualitative data, patterns

emerged. The findings from this chapter will inform the creation of recommendations in Chapter Five.

Quantitative Analysis: PODER Post-Secondary Survey

In December 2022, PODER administered the "PODER Post-Secondary Survey" to all students in their senior year. The "PODER Post-Secondary Survey," created by New Tech Network, a national school design organization, was validated and deemed a reliable source. The survey remained open for two weeks. Two reminders were sent to students to complete the survey and to the building principals and the school counselors, who again reminded students to complete the survey. The survey was distributed through Google Forms, a platform familiar to the students.

Survey data was collected across the four pre-identified categories: school connectedness, academic preparedness, community engagement, and relationships with peers/faculty. Of the collected responses, the only responses used for this study were from the participants with identity markers Latino and Male.

The survey required students to answer their level of agreement with each of the statements. The level of agreement was rated on a Likert scale, with one being 'strongly disagree' and five 'strongly agree.' Responses of 'agree' or 'strongly agree' indicate a positive experience with each design element and are referred to as a positive response. Responses of 'disagree' or 'strongly disagree' indicate a negative experience with each design element and are referred to as a negative response.

Region

PODER Public Charter Schools operate in each region of the United States; however, since it is a growing network of national schools, not all regions have high schools. PODER operates schools in the Northeast, South, and West Coast regions. The Northeast comprises the following states: New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts. The West

Coast is comprised of California. The South comprises the following states: Texas, North

Carolina, and Florida. The Texas region was the first founded and largest region in the United

States. There are seven high schools in the Northeast, thirty in the South, and nine on the

West Coast.

Since this study was particularly interested in factors influencing Latino male seniors

to aspire to attain a four-year degree, the survey was distributed to the following regions with

high schools: South, East, and West. Of all the surveys collected ($N = 1310$), 80% of

participants attended a PODER school in the southern region of the United States, 14% in the

Northeast, and 6% on the West Coast (see Table 1), and most were 17 or 18 years old (see

Table 2). As most PODER high schools are in the South, a significant percentage of student

subjects were also from that area.

Table 1:

PODER Public Charter School Participant Region

Region	Participant Response
Northeast	14%
South	80%
West Coast	6%

Table 2:

PODER Public Charter School Age of Latino Senior Males

Age (in years)	Participant Response
16	0%
17	60.3%
18	35.9%
19	3.8%
20	0%
21	0%

Post-Secondary Plan

The research questions that guided this study were developed with the curiosity of

what influences senior Latino males to aspire to pursue a four-year degree. For that reason,

only responses from students who indicated an interest in pursuing "university (4-Year College)" (65.4%) were analyzed in this study. Nationally, PODER (2019) reports that 100% of students are accepted to college, and 76% matriculate and attain a four-year degree. While the percentage of Latino males with this aspiration is lower than 100%, the reasons are likely consistent with the literature. Many students in the focus groups stated they plan to attain a four-year degree; however, they first plan to go to either the military or community college for financial reasons. After the participant qualifiers were added, 404 student surveys were analyzed. The tables below are a descriptive statistical analysis of the findings from the study. Refer to Table 4 for the participant's post-secondary plan.

Table 3:

PODER Public Charter School Participant Post-Secondary Plan

Post-Secondary Plan	Participant Response
Vocational / Trade School	5.1%
Community College (2-Year College)	24.6%
University (4-Year College)	65.4%
Workforce	1%
Military	3.9%

The next section of this chapter presents survey data within the four categories: School Connectedness, Academic Preparedness, Community Engagement, and Relationships with Peers/Staff.

Category 1: School Connectedness

School connectedness is described as an environment where each student feels connected to the educational institution individually and collectively (Gloria et al., 2017). This perception of senior Latino males' sense of belonging was determined through five survey questions. Students responded positively to the question that their voice is heard when expectations are made in the school ($M=3.6$, $SD=0.80$). Zero students indicated 'strongly disagree,' and over 50% of students indicated 'agree' or 'strongly agree.'

There were slight positive perceptions around the questions that pertained to the expectations making sense (M=3.33, SD=0.95) and the ability to change certain expectations (M=3.4, SD=0.88). For both questions, the frequency at which students indicated 'agree' or 'strongly agree' was approximately 50% of all students. Further, Latino males indicated that there is only a slightly positive sense of being welcomed (M=3.27, SD=0.93) and a slightly positive feeling that they can be themselves at school (M=3.4, SD=0.82). When comparing the frequencies of these two questions, 13% of students indicated "disagree' or 'strongly disagree' and nearly 50% indicated a neutral response.

In this category, students indicated slightly positive feelings. While many students indicated 'neutral' for all the questions, zero students 'strongly disagreed' alongside the questions with the highest frequency of 'agree' with the ability to co-create expectations, change expectations, and students being able to be themselves. There is a clear indication that senior Latino males feel their voices are heard within the school's structure and in the school's social elements. Refer to Table 4 for response data related to school connectedness.

Table 4

Survey Responses - School Connectedness

Survey Question	Response Frequency					Descriptive Statistics	
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	*M*	*SD*
School staff, teachers, and students make the expectations together	0	27	162	161	54	3.60	0.80
The expectations make sense	27	27	161	162	27	3.33	0.95
There is a process in my school for students to change the expectations	0	54	188	108	54	3.40	0.88
I feel welcome at this school	27	27	188	135	27	3.27	0.93
Students can be themselves at my school	0	54	161	162	27	3.40	0.80

Category 2: Academic Preparedness

Huerta et al. (2018) and Calhoun et al. (2019) indicate that high academic expectations, directly taught social skills, access to highly rigorous coursework, and available student leadership opportunities could positively promote academic preparedness for the pursuit of a four-year degree. Further, Quintanilla (2017) indicates the need to more robustly involve the families of Latino males that live in poverty in the post-secondary planning experience beginning in elementary school. PODER Public Charter Schools engage in a college preparatory program. Thus, every student is required to take Advanced Placement for all courses regardless of their academic proficiency. Moreover, college counseling is intentional and requires students to visit at least 15 colleges through their secondary experience and apply to at least nine of said colleges. PODER Public Charter Schools

intentionally celebrate acceptance to four-year institutions through their signing day events and specific college preparation seminar courses.

With these academic programming characteristics in mind, Latino male students indicated a slightly positive experience when asked about taking at least one Advanced Placement course (M=3.53, SD=0.80). Nearly 50% of students selected 'agree' or 'strongly agree' when asked about Advanced Placement courses. They indicated that the courses were challenging (M=3.67, SD=0.79), helping them prepare to go to college (M=3.87, SD=0.89), and required real-world thinking (M=3.73, SD=0.68). For these questions, over 50% of students indicated 'agree' or 'strongly agree.' Further, Latino male students indicated a slightly positive experience when considering the time spent learning topics (M=3.73, SD=0.77). Moreover, it is noteworthy that for this question, 0% of students indicated that they 'strongly agree.' When asked about understanding the learning objectives (M=3.93, SD=1.00), feeling the learning is active (M=3.87, SD=0.96) and that learning is productive (M=3.53, SD=1.09), more than 50% of students responded with 'agree' or 'strongly agree.'

Along with the intentional academic model being rooted in access to highly rigorous content, PODER Public Charter Schools provides intentional college counseling programming to support students' post-secondary planning. Senior Latino males indicated a positive experience with their schools, discussing options after high school (M=4.2, SD=0.83) and teaching job-hunting skills (M=4.4, SD=0.71). For this question, zero frequency was indicated in both the 'strongly disagree' and the 'disagree' responses.

As a result of the academic model at PODER Public Charter Schools, senior Latino males indicated a slightly positive experience in their pursuit to apply for a job (M=3.53, SD=0.89), get a job (M=3.73, SD=0.86), apply for college (M=3.67, SD=0.87), obtain financial aid for college (M=3.73, SD=0.86), and take classes at a four-year institution

(*M*=3.6, *SD*=0.95). For each of these questions, more than 50% of students indicated 'agree' or 'strongly agree.'

While PODER Public Charter Schools have designed their academic programming around preparing their students to aspire to pursue a four-year degree, senior Latino males indicated a slightly negative experience with learning meeting their needs (*M*=3.13, *SD*=1.03), in which over a quarter indicating 'disagree' or 'strongly disagree.' When asked about the speed of the courses (*M*=3.0, *SD*=0.97; *M*=3.47, *SD*=1.02) and the learning tasks requiring deeper thinking (*M*=3.47, *SD*=0.89), 54 students indicated 'strongly disagree' and zero students indicated 'strongly agree.' Further, senior Latino males believe slightly that teachers provide opportunities for productive struggle in learning (*M*=3.13, *SD*=1.09). Regarding this question, over 50% of students indicated 'neutral' or 'disagree.'

In this category, zero students indicated a 'strongly agree' frequency with the learning speed. Further, zero students indicated a frequency of 'strongly disagree' about the overall learning speed, a requirement of deeper thinking, challenging courses, the ability to investigate problems, and understanding the learning objectives. This is notable because the same data frequency aligns with the question regarding students taking at least one advanced placement course. Based on the frequency data, students taking at least one advanced placement course indicated their slight content with the content, speed, and overall college preparation these courses provide. This frequency data is consistent with when students were asked to indicate their perception of their ability to succeed in both college and career, as well as options for students after high school. For these two questions, most students indicated 'strongly agree'.

Furthermore, overwhelmingly students indicated a positive frequency with all questions regarding college preparedness. The data reinforces the mission alignment of PODER Public Charter School's model of being a college preparatory school system focused

on high academic offerings and college access. Refer to Table 5 for response data related to

academic preparedness.

Table 5:

Survey Responses - Academic Preparedness

Survey Question	Response Frequency					Descriptive Statistics	
	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Neutral)	Agree	Strongly Agree	*M*	*SD*
Learning is designed to meet my needs	27	80	135	135	27	3.14	1.03
The speed of learning new things in my courses is about right for me	54	27	188	135	0	3.00	0.97
Schoolwork is challenging	27	27	135	162	53	3.46	1.02
The speed of learning new things	0	81	134	108	81	3.47	1.03
I work on tasks that require deeper thinking	0	54	162	134	54	3.47	0.89
My teachers ask questions that make me think	54	27	135	161	27	3.20	1.11
My teachers ask more questions than they give answers	54	27	162	134	27	3.13	1.09
My teachers let me struggle to find solutions	54	27	161	108	54	3.20	1.17

						Mean	SD
rather than just giving me the answers							
I have taken at least 1 AP Course	0	27	189	135	53	3.53	0.80
The courses I take are challenging	0	27	135	188	54	3.67	0.79
The courses I take helped to prepare me to go to college	0	27	108	161	108	3.87	0.89
I am required to investigate real problems	0	0	162	188	54	3.73	0.68
I get to work on a problem or question for an extended period of time	0	27	108	215	54	3.73	0.77
I understand our learning objectives	0	54	54	161	135	3.93	1.00
Learning is active	0	54	54	188	108	3.87	0.96
My classes feel productive	27	27	134	135	81	3.53	1.09
Applying for a job	0	27	215	81	81	3.53	0.89
Getting a Job	0	27	135	161	81	3.73	0.86
Applying for college	0	27	162	134	81	3.67	0.87
Obtaining financial aid for college	0	27	135	161	81	3.73	0.86
Taking classes at a community college	0	54	81	188	81	3.73	0.93

Taking classes at a 4-year college	0	54	134	135	81	3.60 0.95
Success in college	27	0	81	54	242	4.20 1.17
Success in a career	27	0	81	54	242	4.20 1.17
My school talks with students about options after high school	0	0	108	108	188	4.20 0.83
My school teaches job-hunting skills	0	0	54	135	215	4.40 0.71
My school helps with college applications	80	81	81	81	81	3.01 1.41

Category 3: Community Engagement

The role of community engagement within schools allows for a wraparound approach that provides students with academic and social support beyond the classroom (Harris & Kimaya, 2015). PODER Public Charter Schools have intentionally partnered with community-based organizations to enrich academic learning through experiential learning activities within the community and social-emotional support models through mentorship. These community-based organizations are rooted in the school community's needs and reflect the cultural backgrounds of the students served at each school across the country, thus, making the learning and social activities relevant to their lives. When asked whether the work is relevant to students' lives, it is implied that experiential learning rooted in the community impacts the overall investment and knowledge building for senior Latino males.

While this characteristic of PODER Public Charter Schools was recently added to the model, senior Latino males overwhelmingly indicated a positive experience when asked if

their schoolwork is relevant (*M*=4.53, *SD*=0.07). In this category, zero students 'strongly

disagreed' or 'disagreed.' Further, over 75% of students indicated a frequency of 'strongly

agree.' PODER's work in community engagement positively impacts student learning and

senior Latino males' social-emotional well-being. Refer to Table 6 for response data related to

community engagement.

Table 6:

Survey Responses - Community Engagement

Survey Question	Response Frequency					Descriptive Statistics	
	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Neutral)	Agree	Strongly Agree	*M*	*SD*
The work I complete for school is relevant to my life	0	0	54	81	269	4.53	0.72

Category 4: Relationships with Peers/Staff

Coupled with Latino Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) and Stereotype Threat Theory, a

strong representation of faculty within a secondary institution could result in Latino males

denouncing negative stereotypes, feeling more connected, and feeling more motivated to

pursue a four-year degree (Conroy, 2016). Furthermore, Villavicencio (2013) indicate that

Latino male students could defy their current circumstance and pursue a four-year degree

with the necessary academic and social skills that may only be present with the representation

of Latinos on staff.

PODER Public Charter Schools believes that relationships are at the core of all the

work done with students, families, and the community (PODER, 2019). PODER has

committed to hiring teachers, leaders, and staff of color through their strong partnerships with

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Hispanic Serving Institutions

(HSIs). Moreover, the secondary school day provides an advisory block with a teacher-to-

student ratio of 1:10. This adult is typical of the same gender and ethnic background as their advisees and will serve as their advisor for the four years they are in secondary school.

Senior Latino males indicated having a slightly positive experience with peer-to-peer collaboration (M=3.67, SD=0. 87; M=3.87, SD=0.72). For both questions, zero students indicated 'disagree' or 'strongly disagree.' Further, senior Latino males indicated a slightly positive experience with students respecting each other at school (M=3.53, SD=0.81). For this question, most students indicated a frequency of 'agree.' Further, senior Latino males indicated slightly positive experiences regarding being respected by their peers (M=3.33, SD=0.95) and whether they could be themselves at school (M=3.47, SD=0.89). For both questions, zero students indicated 'strongly agree,' and most students indicated 'agree.' Additionally, 50% of students indicated that they 'agree' or 'strongly agree' on each of these questions. This is consistent with the literature, as students' connection to the school is strongly related to having faculty that have affinity identity markers. Additionally, by LatCrit, students are likely to defy circumstances or stereotypes if they relate to the school through identity representation.

Senior Latino males indicated a slightly positive experience with their teachers celebrating things that happen in their lives (M=3.73, SD=0.68) and teachers being available to listen to students (M=3.73, SD=0.77). For both questions, zero students indicated 'disagree' or 'strongly disagree.' Finally, when asked about teachers supporting students when adverse life events occur (M=3.66, SD=0.70) nearly 75% of students responded with 'agree' or 'strongly agree.'

While the social-emotional support of Latino males indicated positive responses from students, the experience related to schoolwork or problems that students were facing socially or emotionally, senior Latino males indicated an adverse reaction. Senior Latino males responded neutrally when questioned about teachers helping with schoolwork (M=3.0,

SD=1.03). 75% of students indicated a 'neutral' or a negative response. When asked about being available to talk through social problems (*M*=3.21, *SD*=0.84), over half of the students indicated a 'neutral' response, the highest compared to the other questions.

In this category, senior Latino males indicated positive experiences in collaboration, giving and getting feedback, respecting each other, and teachers celebrating the positive things that happen in students' lives. Further, in the question regarding teachers being available to talk when students have a hard time and teachers listening to students, most students indicated a frequency of 'agree,' and zero students indicated 'strongly disagree.' Refer to Table 7 regarding responses related to relationships with peers and faculty.

Table 7:

Survey Responses - Relationships with Peers and Staff

Survey Question	Response Frequency					Descriptive Statistics	
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral)	Agree	Strongly Agree	*M*	*SD*
I have learned how to collaborate with other students	0	27	161	135	81	3.67	0.87
My teachers give helpful feedback on my work	0	54	161	81	108	3.60	1.02
Other students give me feedback on my work	27	107	81	135	54	3.20	1.17
I give feedback to other students on their work	27	26	244	80	27	3.13	0.88
Other students treat me with respect	27	27	161	162	27	3.33	0.95
Students at my school respect each other	0	27	189	134	54	3.53	0.81

Teachers are available to talk about problems I have with schoolwork	53	27	216	81	27	3.00	1.03
Teachers are available to talk about social problems	27	0	268	81	28	3.21	0.84
Teachers are happy for me when good things happen in my life	0	0	162	188	54	3.73	0.68
Teachers care when I am having a hard time	0	27	109	241	27	3.66	0.70
I feel like I can be myself around the teachers in my school	0	54	161	135	54	3.47	0.89
Teachers listen to what I have to say	0	27	108	215	54	3.73	0.77
I work collaboratively with other students on our projects	0	0	135	188	81	3.87	0.71

Summary of Quantitative Findings

Finding 1: School Connectedness

Latino male students at PODER Public Charter Schools had indicated their positive connection with the school was primarily due to their voices being heard. Further, students indicated that their input is elicited when expectations are made, and they did believe the expectations could be changed. Students indicated a sense of belonging for them at the school. Senior Latino males indicated they feel welcomed and could be themselves at school and with their peers.

Finding 2: Academic Preparedness

At PODER Public Charter Schools, each school follows the same college preparatory and college-going culture across the country, regardless of region. Senior Latino males indicated that they had taken at least one Advanced Placement course. They believe the courses are challenging, allow for real-world thinking, and ultimately support them in preparing for college courses. Senior Latino males believe that the learning in their courses is active, productive, and follows a pace conducive to learning new topics.

Since each student is provided with a college counselor starting in their junior year of high school, it was critical to understand how Latino males experience this end of the academic model. Senior Latino males indicated that they understand their options after high school and that their schools do an excellent job teaching job-hunting and college access skills. Senior Latino males believe they are prepared to apply for a job, get a job, obtain financial aid, and succeed when taking classes at a four-year institution.

Senior Latino males did indicate that they believed their learning needs were not met and that the speed of the courses needed to be more productive. Senior Latino males also believe that teachers did not require higher-order thinking, which resulted in students not feeling that learning was genuinely preparing them for higher rigor. They also indicated a need for more support in applying for college.

Finding 3: Community Engagement

Senior Latino males indicated that community engagement and partnerships with community-based organizations supported academic and social-emotional learning. Senior Latino males felt this was vital to the PODER Public Charter School model.

Finding 4: Relationships with Peers and Staff

PODER Public Charter Schools has intentionally hired and retained teachers and leaders of color. Further, building a community amongst the students is a significant part of the high school model. Latino males indicated that they often have peer-to-peer collaboration and that students respect one another at school. However, senior Latino males respected by their peers could be themselves at school.

Senior Latino males feel celebrated and indicated that their teachers are available to support them with positive and adverse situations that arise in their lives. However, senior Latino males did not feel their faculty was supportive when support was needed with

schoolwork, nor did they indicate having a faculty member available to talk through negative social interactions.

Quantitative Conclusion

Most student responses were in each survey category's 'neutral' frequency. However, across categories, findings emerged. Students found that their voices were heard by teachers when considering the expectations made at the school or the expectations students should want to be changed. Further, senior Latino males felt they could be themselves at school and that teachers both listen to students when good things happen and when students are having a hard time. Additionally, senior Latino males felt respect was present in their school's academic and social community. Senior Latino males indicated that this voice is also present when collaborating with other students and when feedback is provided.

Respect, collaboration, and relationships are also in the academic model and community engagement. Students felt that the work completed was relevant to their lives due to community engagement. Senior Latino males believed this enriched the Advanced Placement for All program. Moreover, the academic preparedness model supports more profound learning and the speed of learning new things and requires active learning. Additionally, senior Latino males believed their courses were challenging and helped them to prepare for college.

These academic preparedness characteristics supported senior Latino males to succeed in college and careers. Students felt strongly about their ability to get a job, apply for college, take college-level classes, and apply for financial aid. The perception of success in post-secondary planning for senior Latino males culminates in these four characteristics.

However, students felt negative about the schools supporting college applications when considering post-secondary planning. This lack of support is also present in teachers

being available to talk with students when they struggle with schoolwork and social

problems.

Qualitative Analysis: Focus Group Interviews

In January 2023, I conducted five semi-structured focus group interviews with ten

students each (*n=50*). All these students were senior Latino males who attend PODER Public

Charter Schools and aspire to attain a four-year degree. The focus group interviews aimed to

investigate more of the 'how' and 'why' behind the survey responses (as all students

participating in the focus group had also taken the survey). Students were recommended for

focus groups by their school counselors, who believed the students and their parents would

give assent/consent to participation. The focus group questions were aligned to the four

categories of the survey that was provided: school connectedness, academic preparedness,

community engagement, and relationships with peers/faculty. The focus group interviews

lasted approximately an hour each. Before engaging in the focus groups, students were asked

to complete the assent, consent, and brief demographic survey.

Once the focus groups concluded, the responses to each question were categorized

within the survey categories, and new categories were created, if necessary, to reflect the

unique qualitative data. The questions were open-ended with no interruption or guidance

from me, the researcher. Students spoke about their perceptions and lived experiences related

to the four categories.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the codes and themes presented, both NVivo

and the Long Table Approach supported the codes and subsequent themes to emerge. This

study took a deductive coding approach meaning pre-determined categories were defined

before coding (Creswell & Creswell, 2014). While NVivo was a valuable technological tool,

I found the Long Table Approach more effective and efficient. The Long Table Approach

allowed for codes and themes to emerge within the context of the entire sentence, which supported me in finding cross-categorical responses, codes, and themes.

I began coding by reflecting on my written journal during the focus groups. While students spoke, I noted keywords or phrases, then tallied words that groups seemed to have in common. Next, I entered all the recordings into Rev.com, which produced transcripts. Next, I enacted the Long Table approach electronically in Microsoft Word. Each question was listed across the first row. Then, as specific words emerged, they were added to the table. Using the "Find" feature in Microsoft Word, I could locate specific instances, both numeric and in responses, where the codes emerged. Then, a color was assigned to each word or phrase. After 10% of the transcriptions were coded (required by NVivo), I inputted the data into the software. All my codes were validated, and NVivo began developing specific patterns. Although I used NVivo for validation and reliability, I completed the coding for the rest of the transcriptions through the Long Table Approach.

Once the codes were identified and organized, I began grouping the codes into categories or themes. Themes were identified when more than two codes appeared in any given question. The questions were then grouped into the four categories of the survey, and through the commonality of two or more cross-themes, the final themes were determined.

The tables below represent the participant's demographic information, the region where they attend PODER Public Charter Schools, and an analysis of the codes and themes that emerged from their responses.

Participant Identity Markers

Due to the nature of this study being nationwide, senior Latino males from all ethnic backgrounds participated as subjects. Most PODER Public Charter Schools students identify as Puerto Rican, Dominican, and/or Mexican. Students from Puerto Rico or the Dominican

Republic are categorized as Caribbean, whereas Mexico is considered part of North America. Refer to Table 8 for the participant's ethnic identification.

Table 8:

PODER Public Charter School Focus Group Ethnic Background (n=50)

Ethnicities	Participant's Identification
Caribbean	21
Mexico	25
Central American / South American	4

Finding 1: School Connectedness

Gloria et al. (2017) described the feeling of connectedness within an educational institution as individuals and groups feeling a sense of belonging to the values and people in the institution. During the focus groups, participants were asked two questions to access their perception of school connectedness. The first question was, "How if at all, have stereotypes influenced your thinking or plans to obtain a four-year degree?" and the second was, "Do you feel your connection or lack of connection at PODER has influenced your aspiration to obtain a four-year degree? Why?".

Three themes emerged. The first theme that emerged was the lack of personal connection. Within this theme, the following codes were identified: number, name, robots, and feel. When asked to describe the connection, or lack thereof, at PODER to influence them to aspire to attain a four-year degree, most students said they felt like they were treated as "a number." A Puerto Rican male student from the Northeast described his experience by saying, "No, it is not. It is a lot more separated, and it is, it is started to become more like a public school. Like where in public school you are a number".

The student described his experience as one in that he did not feel connected to the school personally. When the students were asked to expand on the perception of the lack of

personal connection, they alluded to feeling they were treated as "robots". A Dominican student from the Northeast described his experience by saying, "… not to consider people's feelings and everything is not like, we are not robots". This response drew much emotion from the other participants in this group. Students began speaking with a more direct tone, their body language seemed tenser, and the speed of their communication was more rapid. One of the students who agreed about being treated as robots affirmed this sentiment and shared his experience with the school not allowing students to have feelings. A Puerto Rican student from the Northeast added his experience by saying, "The school doesn't let you feel how you want to feel. They only care about how we look instead of how we feel".

This statement was filled with emotion, and he described the root cause of this feeling as the school's interest in academic data and less about the students that attend. Afterward, another student affirmed the need for more connection by sharing his perspective and identifying that no one knows the students by name. A Dominican student from the Northeast shared, "Yeah. I mean, I'm not gonna tell it to anybody. But they don't even know your names." While only some participants agreed with this, an overwhelming number of students affirmed with head nods and the school's hand signal for 'agree'.

Most students from all regions across the United States commented that the lack of personal connection is due to adults in the school not caring for them as people. Students described that same approach within the academic model.

The second theme that emerged was the student's experience with a feeling of personal failure due to their lack of academic achievement. The following codes were identified within this theme: one-size-fits-all, enough, and validation. Most students in all PODER regions of the United States described their experience with the lack of connection to the school being a direct result of how they are treated by adults in the school when they face

academic challenges. A Mexican student from the West Coast explained that adults in schools:

> …sometimes lack the empathy to understand some students' situations since, you know, we mentioned earlier, the one size fits all kind of thing. You're trying to teach every single student the exact same way. And if one student refuses or just is unable to, they keep forcing the same thing over and over and over. And if it doesn't work, the student gets in trouble.

Many students affirmed this response with verbal "mm-hmm" or non-verbal nods. While many of the students described the "one-size-fits" all approach as a direct reason for the lack of connection, several students described not feeling good enough due to the lack of validation and lack of celebrating student strengths. A Mexican student from the South stated:

> …whenever you get something, and then you fail at one of the big things when you feel like you've worked really hard to get it, you know, it starts to feel like maybe it starts to feel less like you're not trying. it feels more like you're just not able to. You're just not good enough for it. And that sometimes those moments can sometimes drive people down, but it just turns out maybe they're just struggling or maybe they need to adapt in a different way.

Most students in two of the five groups affirmed this type of experience within their schools. A South American student from the West Coast specifically followed up by saying:

> if you work hard, it is an honor and you don't get that much validation. It feels like maybe there's not that much reward coming, you know, because the brain, it works from reward. If you reward the brain, then the brain will say, 'well I should keep doing this', or 'I should try and go further to get more reward'. But, when you don't really get a reward or validation it, eventually just starts to feel like, maybe I just don't need to do this at all.

A Mexican student from a different group had a similar experience, specifically lacking recognition. The student stated:

> I guess more like recognition of the individual person and the actual achievements. Cause this school really likes to set goals. You did the goal. Check that off. All right. Moving along. It's like, not really congratulations or, good job or, and you finally did it. There's no real validation. There's no real noticing of this. It's not like they're actually trying to help you feel fulfilled or help you do all the things you're trying to do. It's like they're acting because it benefits them. So that way they think their school's more efficient".

His description of his experience resulted in another student becoming emotional and stating:

> It's not, it's really not, it really doesn't work. It's kind of sad. A long time ago, if you told me to set up a goal, I would've set up like a billion goals. I've been really excited to beat them all. But today, in this day, if you ask me to set a goal, I'd really rather not say anything because, I know in the end it's just not gonna be worth it. I'm not gonna feel validated for it. It's just gonna feel meaningless in a way.

Evidently, this question resulted in many feelings from many students from across the United States. At least half of the students alluded that this frustration stems from the fact that the school has a heavy focus on academics but lacks the ability to teach students social skills to prepare them for life beyond high school.

The socialization elements, students described, as both a challenge for students and staff, which is why a lack of personal connection results in a lack of school connectedness. A Puerto Rican student from the Northeast stated:

> But they're just not really allowed to because this school's so strict. Not even teachers, even teachers directly tell us, 'all right, look, the leaders are gonna come in. Just everybody behave. I'm gonna have to act a little bit more strict, you know, just so that

way, you know, I'll look good because they don't really like being the strict. They all like to be relaxed. They all like to be social, you know, they like to goof around sometimes.

Immediately after, another Puerto Rican student from the Northeast described how although his friend wants to be a math teacher, he will leave high school without the skills to speak publicly. The student stated:

He understands like the receptive ability. He understands how to take any information. The only thing he really needs to understand is how to relay the information to other people. There's no real communications class or social class or anything.

Most students, particularly from this region, found the challenges around socialization to be an actual barrier to their success both at school and in planning for post-secondary life.

Many students from across the United States described this lack of socialization not only in the classroom or within the discipline structures, but schools still need to develop enrichment or extra-curricular activities for students to socialize. Three of the five groups of students affirmed this reality in their schools. A Mexican student from the South described the challenge by saying:

This school for example, it doesn't have that many opportunities. Especially when you look at the clubs. I personally want to be an animator, but there's just no technology classes in this entire school. Just no technology whatsoever. A lot of people like to play sports. I know that. And this school's sports, I'm not gonna lie, are pretty lacking. I feel like they don't try hard enough to actually push the sports team to be better. I feel it could be way better than they are. Knowing some of the who some of the players are, I'm really comfortable that they can be good players. I just feel like the school's just not focusing on it.

Students from across the country described the need for socialization to be present in the school to feel more connected. Almost all the students described some form of their schools not having clubs, sports, or enrichment. Every group then made a direct connection to the discipline structure. They believed they could not socialize without the risk of a disciplinary consequence. A Mexican student from the West Coast described this reality by saying, "… because people are talking or socializing when they're not supposed to. Even though in reality, we don't have that much transition. And people get impatient".

Finding 2: Academic Preparedness

PODER Public Charter Schools has developed a national brand for being a college preparatory school system. High academic expectations, rigorous coursework, and student leadership opportunities are recommendations from Huerta et al. (2018) and Calhoun et al. (2019) embedded in this college-going culture model. To better understand how the academic model either supports or doesn't support a student's aspiration to attain a four-year degree, students were asked the following questions: "Why are you aspiring to obtain a four-year degree?"; "Academically, how do you anticipate that PODER has prepared you to obtain a four-year degree?"; "How do you anticipate PODER is preparing you to obtain a four-year degree?". From the student responses, 'college preparatory' was the theme that emerged. Within this theme, the following codes emerged: future, high, expectations, well-rounded, approval, and collaboration.

In every region across the United States, all students recognized that their schools are college preparatory and that they will leave academically prepared to attend and succeed in college. A Puerto Rican student in the Northeast described his desire to attend a college preparatory high school in the following way, "I wanna go to a college prep school. Cause I feel like in the future they will help me after I get out of the military. Help me with my college and stuff and get a degree". Interestingly, students of different ethnic backgrounds in

both the South and the West Coast mentioned the desire to go to the military first, then attain a four-year degree for financial purposes.

While students in each region mentioned barriers, they spoke extensively about the high expectations that the school provides. Students in the Northeast seemed to disagree that the expectations were developmentally appropriate. A Dominican student in the Northeast described this by saying, "School has high expectations for people that are just kids. I feel like we're just too young to be having all this pressure and stress on us". In contrast, a Mexican student on the West Coast spoke about the purpose of a college preparatory by saying:

> Oh, I guess going to a college prep gives you like more credentials, you know, since you know there's high, higher expectations, push you further. It gives you a more solid chance of, you know, getting into the college that you want rather than just a college that accepts you.

In this group, all the students agreed that this was the fundamental reason they believe they are being prepared and will subsequently attain a four-year degree.

At the core of PODER's model, students engage in Advanced Placement for All, regardless of their academic abilities. All students identified that the Advanced Placement for All has supported their academic abilities to engage in highly rigorous content. Students in the Northeast and West Coast felt most supported in this aspect; however, in contrast, students in the South felt that even though Advanced Placement for All helps them academically, they do not believe the pacing of the classes is beneficial to overall learning.

While all students identified Advanced Placement for All as a support in their academic pursuits, some students in each region identified that they do not believe the academic model supports them in becoming well-rounded individuals due to the lack of real-world learning, not having the autonomy to learn what they want and limited opportunities

for group projects and collaborative work. A Puerto Rican student from the Northeast described his experience with the need for being well-rounded in the following way:

> There's a lack of teaching skills. I feel like we're at that point where we should already be learning about what reality's gonna be like, gonna walk into a job interview and they're gonna ask us a trigonometry question and then they'll be like, all right, cool, you're hired. It's not like that, you know, it's better to prepare us for like what the world's actually gonna be like. Because in reality most of what we learn, it's all gonna burn in the trash by the time we get out of college. It really just depends on what we major in. And then besides that, everything else is kind of meaningless. We need to be focusing more on what we're gonna have to do to like, you know, live an actual life. Cause it's really complicated, and we don't have any idea about it yet.

This comment was met with every student in the group non-verbally agreeing with head nods. Students in both the South and West Coast asserted that they would prefer more classes aligned with what they are interested in studying in college. A Mexican student from the South stated, "I feel like I'm not learning what I want or like to get into college. There are some things I want to major in. I feel like high school is a part where you're starting to actually take those".

Within the conversation around the academic model, students, once again, in each region brought in the community's assets. Students made connections to exploratory learning outside of their school building through field lessons or field trips. A Mexican student from the South described the importance of field trips by saying, "Field trips, I think are important for outside learning and stuff".

Overall, every student believed that the academic model put in place prepares them to attain a four-year degree. In all the comments made by students, all students affirmed their desire to attain a four-year degree. Students believed that the expectations were extremely

high, and, in some regions, they were not reasonable for adolescents. While students believe Advanced Placement for All is a significant component of academically preparing students, they would like to have some choice to expose them to their future interests and curiosities. Students in most regions believe that the academic model does not prepare students socially or operationally for life beyond high school. Further, students believe exposure to the community through field lessons or field trips would bolster the academic model and support more students.

Finding 3: Community Engagement

Harris & Kimaya (2015) describe true community engagement between a community served and an educational institution as the true reliance on one another to be a value added to each other. For an educational institution to truly serve a particular community and benefit from the community, an intentional effort from both needs to be made. While participants were not asked a direct question regarding community engagement, several questions from the other categories elicited responses from participants around this topic.

The only theme that emerged within this category was that intentional efforts were made. The following codes were identified within this theme: going, community, performance, trending, and parents. A Puerto Rican student from the Northeast began the conversation by connecting school connectedness directly with community engagement. He described how he felt connected before by saying:

> You see the whole community come together and do something great. We're just putting Black history on posters on the wall. Whereas we used to meet as a whole school and have the soul like community and different people.

As the student was describing the intentional ways the school used to engage the community and celebrate diversity, a Dominican student from the Northeast described his experience by

saying, "We would go to the South End community center and literally set up a whole event. Six or eight schools was there, and we would be playing Spanish music".

Many students from across the country described a similar experience suggesting that the school was performative and became charged with whatever social movement was relevant at the time. A Puerto Rican student from the Northeast described this by saying, "Just conforming to what society is mainly about and what's in politics".

While many students described their schools as losing touch with the communities they serve within and outside of the school building, Mexican students in both the South and West Coast described the change as stemming from the lack of parental involvement. Each of those groups described how families were heavily involved in the school and had connections to each other and the students. A Mexican student from Texas described this by saying, "It was a lot tighter knit. Parents knew each other and the kids. Even kids' parents knew each other, and they were like a family and would talk to each other a lot more".

Each student participating in these focus groups from across the country identified the importance of the school's involvement in the community and the community engagement aspect that the school provides. Students believed that their overall satisfaction and connection to the school relied heavily on the level of engagement that the school had within the community. Students described a more intentional effort needed to do three things. First, students stated the importance of creating community events that unite vast groups of people. Next, students described the performative nature of representation at their schools. This was found mainly in the Northeast and South; however, students believe that representation matters and should not follow social movements when they become famous. Finally, students expressed the need for further development in parental involvement. Students described wanting families to be more involved in the school.

Finding 4: Relationships with Peers/Staff

Conroy (2016) & Villavicencio (2013) agree and attest that students having faculty sharing affinities promotes connectedness, motivation, and the ability to denounce negative stereotypes. Both researchers agree that students are more likely to attain a four-year degree when there is an affinity with the individuals in their schools. PODER Public Charter Schools have 83% students of color (NCES, 2019) and over 80% teachers of color (PODER, 2021). During the focus group, the students were asked the following questions about relationships with peers and faculty: "What or who influenced you to aspire to obtain a four-year degree?; What or who did not influence you to aspire to obtain a four-year degree?; How did they influence you or not?; What support do you have to obtain a four-year degree? Specifically, who is supporting you, and how are they supporting you?; Were there barriers in the way when you were considering obtaining a four-year degree? If so, what were they?; How have these barriers influenced you and your plan?; Have you overcome these barriers? If so, how did you overcome these barriers? If not, why not?".

The theme and codes that emerged during this focus group section aligned heavily with the school connectedness category. Both sections had lack of empathy as the theme. The following codes emerged within this theme: lack, empathy, misunderstanding, acting, recognition, motivation, fear, number, robot, and fake.

In nearly all the regions, students made the connection between relationships with peers and faculty to school connectedness. The students often re-worded or reminded me of what they said. The conversation in the Northeast and the West Coast became very tense again. Students' shoulders were lifted, their voices were elevated, and their tone was directive. Overall, students in all regions expressed that their perception of relationships and school connectedness is summed up by the lack of empathy, lack of understanding, brisk behavior consequence structure, lack of recognition, lack of motivation, and feeling they are treated as a number or a robot.

As students were redirected to build upon their responses relating to relationships with peers and faculty, they noted that they believed the teachers feared being reprimanded, preventing them from building closer relationships. A Puerto Rican student in the Northeast stated:

> Yeah. It's like almost just in fear. Like there's no vulnerability. I'll just get in trouble, I'll get a detention, I'll get a referral. It's just like that. It shouldn't happen. I should be able to want to go to school.

A Dominican student in the Northeast agreed with the sentiment of the previous students and stated that he does not believe the teachers listen to them. The student stated:

> They need to care more about their students. If they want more people to like actually like the school, and self-advertised. They don't have to pay for advertising. If they want their students to advertise, they should listen to what they have to say. And how they feel.

This statement was representative of comments made in each region across different ethnic backgrounds. Most students agreed with these statements verbally by saying "yeah".

Another reason offered by students when prompted about their relationships was that they feel teachers "switch up" meaning they change their behavior. Further, students in the Northeast and West Coast felt that adults act this way because they are unhappy. A Mexican student on the West Coast expressed this reasoning by saying, "The teachers they have to switch up". This was reinforced by the student in the Northeast who shared his experience with how teachers behave when administrators observe their classes. He and the entire Northeast group stated that it "really noticeable". One Puerto Rican student in the Northeast described the gap in the relationship as detrimental. He said:

How are you gonna have a student that feels depressed go to school every day at like

ungodly hours in the morning to listen to people boss him around and stuff like that.

It's like they're not in that right mindset. So, it's like they need to like be welcoming.

Most of the students in the group agreed with verbal affirmations of "mmhm" or "Yeah".

When prompted about their motivations around the aspiration to attain a four-year

degree, every student indicated that a female caretaker was their motivation and support.

Most of the students stated their motivation and support were either their mom or aunt. A

Mexican student from the South stated:

All other family members do not have a college degree, and I want to try harder to be

like the first one to have a college degree. Mom will be bragging how she is proud.

A familiar connection was present in each focus group with similar motivations of being the

first in their family to make their female caretaker proud.

When prompted about motivation and support at the school, some of the students

indicated that teachers had motivated them. Particularly in the Northeast, students felt they

needed more support from a dedicated school staff person. A Dominican student from the

Northeast shared his experience of having zero support and fear of college costs without

scholarships. He stated, "Money is a factor. There isn't someone here at the school that helps

you with scholarships and stuff". It was evident that students do not believe college support

services were offered to assist them, but there is still the expectation of attaining a four-year

degree.

Qualitative Conclusion

Overwhelmingly most students felt disconnected from their schools. Furthermore,

many believed that their experiences resulted in senior Latino males not feeling supported,

which could attribute to wanting to aspire to attain a four-year degree. Students perceived a

lack of personal connection with adults in their buildings. They believe they are treated as

robots and do not have authentic relationships with adults. Further, many students felt that adults in their buildings do little to affirm or validate their achievements. Finally, each group of students indicated that their schools still needed to prepare them for life beyond high school due to the lack of socialization efforts in the form of clubs or sports. They also believe that the strict discipline systems do not allow them to socialize with their peers or other adults in the school. They expressed that if they do socialize, they will likely face disciplinary consequences.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Chapter Four analyzed influences that led Latino male students at PODER Public Charter Schools to aspire to a four-year college degree. In Chapter Five, the findings will be converged along with comparing the findings to the literature. The problems will be identified and discussed further in Chapter Five of this study, along with recommendations. Due to the sample size, there is generalizability found within this study. Further, the findings in this study, through both the survey data and focus group interview data, could be used to inform secondary educational institutions that serve senior Latino males to design educational programming to support the pursuit of a four-year degree.

Chapter 5: Recommendations

The National Center for Educational Statistics (2019) defines a post-secondary educational institution as providing education after graduation from secondary schooling. Further, it is noted that while 36% of Latino students enroll in some form of post-secondary education, only 21% graduate from these institutions. Research has shown that although there has been a significant increase in Latino students enrolling in secondary schools across the United States, these institutions are not prepared to support their aspiration to attain a four-

year degree (Bliss et al., 2018; Desai & Abeita, 2017; Dukakis et al.,2015; Farmer, 2010; Harper, 2015; Huerta et al., 2018; Villavicencio et al., 2018). This study analyzes specific design characteristics within PODER Public Charter Schools and the impact they have or do not have on senior Latino males aspiring to attain a four-year degree. This convergent, mixed-methods study explored these design characteristics through a survey and focus group interviews to better understand what elements lead senior Latino males to aspire to a four-year degree. The results were analyzed to answer the two research questions proposed by this study.

This chapter presents recommendations from the findings. The information found in this study fills the gap of focusing solely on senior Latino males and their aspiration to attain a four-year degree without the support of a university intervention. This research adds to the existing literature on college preparatory programming for students of color living in poverty. The recommendations in this chapter stem from the literature provided throughout this dissertation that shows a tremendous need for secondary schools to support senior Latino males throughout the secondary educational experience and the data collected in this study.

Recommendation 1: Embed school connectedness by developing systems that encourage, receive, and respond to student voices and feedback to actualize student leadership and guidance of school programs.

School connectedness is an interconnection between the institution's systems, structures, and people (Gloria et al., 2017). Research shows that the direct result of feeling a sense of belonging at school results in higher attendance rates, which for senior Latino males, could result in greater academic achievement (Villavicencio, 2013).

Often school connectedness is necessary for senior Latino males due to the potential lack of communal support resulting in the school taking a more significant role in students' lives (Davis & Heller, 2019). Perez (2017) suggests that the most beneficial way for senior

Latino males to feel connected in their schools is by having strong adult mentors with the same identity markers. Conroy (2016) suggests that teacher mentorship is the most powerful tool to increase school connectedness for senior Latino males. PODER Public Charter Schools has worked to increase their males of color teaching force to support school connectedness; however, students identified a need for more connection to their school communities beyond setting expectations and feeling like they could be themselves.

Converging the Methods

Senior Latino males indicated a slightly positive result in feeling connected to their schools. Students suggested that their voices were heard when expectations were set and identified that there was a process to express feedback on expectations that did not make sense. Further, senior Latino males expressed a slightly positive reaction towards being welcomed at school and being who they authentically are at school and with their peers.

During the focus groups, senior Latino males strongly felt that they were treated like "robots." Students expressed concerns about school connectedness and their innate feeling of being dehumanized. Across all regions, students expressed that there was little personal connection, and often, faculty did not know the students' names, nor did they try to get to know them. Students stated that their feelings of being disconnected from school have resulted in their lack of excitement in coming to school each day, discouraging them from aspiring to pursue post-secondary education.

While students overall responded slightly positively to survey prompts in this area, there needed to be more school connectedness during the focus groups. Although students felt their voices were heard when expectations were being made and when they wanted expectations changed, students identified as if they were treated as a robot or a number. Students did not feel that their schools differed from traditional brick-and-mortar public schools due to the lack of personal connection with the school staff and peers.

Recommended Strategies

College preparatory charter schools that serve Latino males should consider systems of gauging student voices consistently and constantly. Students having a voice in their school results in greater ownership and motivation and offer a true partnership. It also helps students to learn the valuable life skill of self-advocacy within institutions. PODER could improve by embedding student voice, respect for students' wants, and eliciting students' perspectives. Student voice could be gauged through student leadership clubs, regular surveys, or small focus groups with students when school-wide decisions are being made that impact them. In this study, student responses were somewhat positive on the survey but quite negative, distraught, and angered in the focus group interviews. This leads to the question of whether surveys capture student voices. Further, having in-person contact led by a trusted adult, such as a teacher or administrator, could result in a more genuine relationship between the faculty and the students in which students have a platform to express their ideas and concerns. Furthermore, this trusted adult can assist with implementing processes for student voice to impact their education.

Recommendation 2: Improve academic preparedness by increasing the offering of Advanced Placement and college in high school courses, increasing student advisement opportunities, offering early college exposure, and providing opportunities for dual enrollment.

Moore et al. (2010) suggest that while Latino males attain a lower college-readiness rate than their white counterparts, there are no easily discernable reasons for this outcome. Calhoun et al. (2019) suggest that the most impactful way for schools to increase four-year degree completion for Latino males is to provide academic rigor and stress-coping skills simultaneously. When considering academic rigor, advanced placement courses provide

access to college-level material in secondary school. Flennaugh (2017) noted that disproportionately low numbers of Latino students participate in these courses.

Along with providing rigorous coursework to Latino males, Villavicencio (2014) and Rodriguez et al. (2018) suggest that early college access in dual enrollment and college exposure support Latino males aspiring to complete a four-year degree. Further, Hines (2019) suggests that schools could increase four-year degree aspirations by supporting Latino males through college applications. Additionally, Rodriguez et al. (2018) suggest that opportunities for financial aid seminars, college fairs, and family college tours could also increase the aspiration of Latino males to complete a four-year degree. PODER Public Charter Schools require that every student take at least one Advanced Placement for all courses. In doing this, access to rigorous course content is available to all students regardless of academic standing. Further, PODER requires all students to visit at least ten colleges within their four years and requires all students to apply to at least nine colleges.

Converging the Methods

PODER Public Charter Schools have branded themselves as a college preparatory system focusing exclusively on students aspiring to, attending, and persisting through a four-year degree program. When surveyed about their experience with Advanced Placement, senior Latino males indicated that they have taken at least one Advanced Placement course and believed their courses were rigorous and supported them in preparing for college. Further, students indicated that they are assigned a college counselor to begin working with them on their post-secondary planning starting their junior year of high school. According to the survey, students widely indicated that they understand their post-secondary options and are highly prepared for applying for a job, getting a job, obtaining financial aid, and overall having academic success in classes at a four-year institution. Although students felt prepared for academic rigor, they also indicated that their learning needs still needed to be met.

Additionally, they indicated needing to be supported to apply for college. Senior Latino males felt teachers did not require higher-order thinking, which resulted in them needing to prepare themselves for highly rigorous courses.

During the focus groups, students reflected on the high academic expectations, rigorous coursework, and the support needed to better prepare for a four-year degree. Students expressed their desire to attend PODER because it is a college-going culture. Students expressly indicated that a college preparatory high school supports students in having options for college after graduating from secondary schooling. Further, students expressed that while the Advanced Placement courses helped prepare them for college-level coursework, they needed more choices. Limited elective course choices resulted in them needing to feel like a more well-rounded person. Students wanted to take enrichment courses such as technology or other career-driven electives. Further, students in at least half of the regions indicated the need for having a college counselor with a smaller caseload of students. Students often felt they needed to receive individualized support from their college counselor.

Recommended Strategies

In alignment with the research, quantitative and qualitative elements of this study, there is strong support to continue with the Advanced Placement for All academic model, in which students must take at least one advanced placement course before graduating regardless of academic ability. Further, allowing students to choose electives, enrichment courses, or building in student-choice-based clubs within the school day could support students in feeling more well-rounded and heard. While students in the surveys and the focus groups spoke somewhat about their experiences in dual enrollment, the literature is clear that early access to college credit-baring courses likely bolsters a Latino male's aspiration to a four-year degree. Furthermore, college-in-high school courses allow students to experience

academic rigor while simultaneously earning college credit. This, in and of itself, is a possible incentive for students to attend a four-year college.

In contrast, earning college credit for Advanced Placement courses typically only occurs if students receive a specific score on that exam. Various universities have different score requirements. So, it is possible that a student could perform well in an AP course, even earning an "A," but receive absolutely no college credit if they do not have a specific score or the university does not accept AP scores. For this reason, high schools should consider a college-in-high-school model. In doing this, students would be afforded the opportunity to access college-level rigorous work, earn college credit through passing the course and have exposure to college course workloads.

The research and focus groups also aligned that a smaller caseload (preferably 50 students or less) per college counselor could allow for more individualized planning and support. This support would include planning college visits and the required number of college applications. Due to the barrier of financial aid, the research, survey, and focus groups all suggest that having a dedicated college counselor to increase support in attaining financial aid and scholarships could result in senior Latino males aspirating for a four-year degree.

Finally, students would benefit from having alumni support. The suggestions made by the literature and focus groups on this study assert that senior Latino males would more likely aspire to a four-year degree if robust Alumni support was provided. This support could be through a person at the organization or school level. Further, a need for parental education in the form of workshops could ensure students are equipped with a more complete and robust support team at home.

Recommendation 3: Invest in community engagement to enrich the learning experiences and the communal support for the school's programming.

Community engagement is the interconnectedness between the school and the community (Harris & Kimaya, 2015). Community engagement efforts include enriching the academic lessons through community assets, opportunities for community-based organizations to support student's social and emotional well-being, and the school's efforts to invest and be involved in the greater community. Further, Conroy (2016) agrees that the impact of community-based organizations, particularly with mentorship, could truly support senior Latino males and their aspiration to attain a four-year degree. PODER Public Charter Schools has not made community engagement or communal support a part of their model.

Converging the Methods

While only addressed directly by one survey prompt, students indicated the highest standard deviation and the most response frequencies in the 'agree' and 'strongly agree' selections when asked about the impact of community engagement at their school. While brief, students affirmed that community-based organizations supported academic and social-emotional learning at their schools.

During the focus group interviews, senior Latino males connected community engagement to the other categories within this study. Students identified an unauthentic feel to community engagement in its forms for many regions. Students identified that the gap in enrichment could be filled by going into the community and learning from the already embedded assets. Further, students identified that the performative feeling stems from their schools only being involved in the community or community events when the event has been politically polarized. Students felt a lack of authentic culturally affirming events at their schools and believed the community could close this identified need.

Finally, students expressed the feeling of being all interconnected to each other. They reminisced about specific field trips, community events, and parental involvement. They

identified that parents were heavily involved in their schools and often knew the names of most students. Students identified that this communal feeling had been lost at PODER.

Recommended Strategies

The research, survey, and focus groups attest that building partnerships with community-based organizations could be an asset to the educational, socio-emotional, and communal aspects of supporting Latino males to aspire to attain a four-year degree. Based on the extensive literature of many years and findings from this study, schools should make concerted efforts to build community partnerships to eliminate gaps in the school's model. Further, allowing the community to be an asset in which students learn could bolster the academic program. This experiential learning could occur through field lessons, field trips, or excursions.

Next, the research and the focus groups indicated the need to be involved within the community. Allowing the school and students to participate in community events could allow for more significant support within the school and community. Additionally, finding community-based and school-wide opportunities to affirm students' identities could increase students' engagement and connectedness to the school.

Finally, providing intentional opportunities for family members to be involved could create a more communal feel. The research and focus groups agree that parental involvement could support engagement and connectedness. The research shows that schools often provide generic opportunities like parent-teacher conferences, but finding ways to engage families being involved truly could support these efforts.

Recommendation 4: Invest in relationships between student peers and faculty by revising disciplinary policies, consistently holding grade-specific advisories, and ensuring consistent implementation of celebratory whole-school convenings.

Perez (2017) suggests that adult and peer mentorship with similar identity markers are the leading factor in post-secondary success. Knaggs et al. (2015) confirm this by stating that Latino males benefit from a school-based staff identifying as Latino males. Vega et al. (2015) and Gloria et al. (2017) express that these relationships are critical, as some familiar absence could result in less aspiration to attain a four-year degree amongst Latino males. Morales affirms that the relationship between school staff and Latino males that share identity markers could be achieved when intentional time is made to demonstrate empathy, support, and trustworthiness. PODER Public Charter Schools hold students and teachers to strict disciplinary techniques rooted in demerits and exclusionary discipline practices. Further, advisories and whole school convenings only happen sometimes.

Converging the Methods

Discipline, relationships, and peer collaboration arose significantly in the survey and focus groups. However, on the survey, students only slightly indicated a positive response, whereas, in the focus groups, the responses were overwhelmingly negative.

The survey indicated that students have opportunities for peer-to-peer collaboration. Further, senior Latino males indicated they feel students respect one another and they were able to be themselves while at school. When surveyed regarding adult relationships, students indicated that they felt celebrated by their teachers and that teachers supported them in being available whenever needed. However, senior Latino males indicated that they did not feel the same level of support when concerns regarding schoolwork or social interactions were the topics of conversation.

The opposite experience was expressed during the focus groups. The responses on the survey were vastly different from the focus group responses. Students were very vocal about why they felt strongly about the topics discussed. Moreover, PODER Public Charter Schools does not engage students in focus group protocols.

Students expressed a lack of empathy and the lack of empathy expressed by teachers. They recognized a need for high expectations but felt they hindered their social ability. Further, students felt their teachers did not seek to understand but were quick to issue a consequence. Some students felt their teachers operated this way of their own volition, while others believed it was an 'act' to satisfy their employer.

This behavior by school personnel resulted in students lacking recognition and motivation. Students identified that they were never publicly celebrated but constantly publicly reprimanded. Students expressed that their academics were important but felt the strategies employed by the schools made them feel as if they were a robot or a number.

Recommended Strategies

Student responses in this area were disheartening for me to hear both as an administrator and researcher. Students were rightfully upset that their school did not readily acknowledge them in terms of their basic humanity and material accomplishments. However, the school is quick and willing to punish students who violate strict boundaries. This, in and of itself, creates ill feelings in students and discourages creative thought and actions.

The research and focus groups indicated a need for students to feel affirmed in various categories. Therefore, PODER should consider a disciplinary system that affirms students, restores the harm, and allows for reflection on student behaviors. This program could be in the form of restorative practices or restorative justice.

Additionally, the research and focus group suggest that a dedicated, trusted adult could increase the aspiration of Latino males to attain a four-year degree. PODER could benefit from having a daily grade-specific advisory program with one staff member that concurrently follows their students throughout their secondary-school experience. In doing this, the number of trusted adults and mentorship could increase. Moreover, it would allow students to build peer-to-peer connections and support long-term relationship building.

Answering the Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: What influences Latino males to aspire to pursue a four-year college degree?

RQ2: How do these factors influence Latino male students to aspire to pursue a four-year degree?

Many influences support senior Latino males to aspire to a four-year college degree. While subjects in this study come from one charter school system, it is essential to note that PODER is a national system, and over 1,500 students across the United States participated. Therefore, the data collected was both profound and extensive. While findings and recommendations may not be generalizable to all settings, they could be transferable to similar settings.

First, schools like PODER Public Charter School should consider opportunities for students' voices and feedback to be involved in the school's planning. In doing this, students will feel more connected to the school, supporting their investment and motivation in aligning with the college-going culture model.

Next, schools like PODER should consider continuing the Advancement Placement and dual enrollment/college in high school courses for all models, increasing student advising opportunities, and access to early exposure to colleges and universities. Doing this will make students more academically prepared to engage in college-level material. In eliminating these barriers, senior Latino males will likely be able to focus more on the social integration of post-secondary institutions and advocate for themselves academically when support is needed. Additionally, the academic model could be enriched by the investment in community engagement to support the academic, socio-emotional, and communal opportunities within and outside the schools. By embedding this, students will feel more connected, the academic

model will be supplemented by real-world learning, and students will feel more connected to the community.

Finally, schools like PODER Public Charter should invest in the relationship between peers and faculty by investing in restorative justice discipline systems, celebrating student achievement, and embedding grade-specific advisories with a trusted adult with similar identity markers. By doing this, students will be more motivated through recognition to achieve academically, resulting in better post-secondary academic outcomes and an increase in aspiration to attain a four-year degree.

Implications for Further Research

The specific findings of this research are most directly applicable to similar charter schools that are college preparatory with a particular interest in serving students of color. It is hoped that future research may replicate this study's qualitative and quantitative methods in traditional public schools or other school settings. This future research would support the increase in Latino students entering our public school system by understanding the needs of the students we serve and the specific motivations around post-secondary access, retention, and completion. Further, these same methods could be used with other subgroups of students for the abovementioned purposes. These groups could include Black students, Asian students, female students, students with individualized education plans, multilingual learners, or any other subgroup demographic within a particular school system that is of interest. These findings could be compared or contrasted to the findings in this study to create more generalizability.

If future research were to replicate this study, the researcher suggests asking more questions about community engagement and consistent questioning between the survey and the focus group questions. While the survey questions were robust, the focus groups provided

much-needed context and more significant findings. This researcher would recommend consistency in the number of questions and the focus of the questions.

In future research in the abovementioned areas, public, private, parochial, or charter school systems could develop student-designed schools. The impact of doing this is to allow student voices to guide the decision-making around school goals, targets, and programmatic planning. Additionally, there was little focus on the school or district leaders' identity or role in developing these types of schools. Future research could be duplicated with school and district leaders in these schools to gauge their understanding of student perceptions about their schools' academic and non-academic programming.

Additionally, there was a significant emphasis, particularly in the focus groups, surrounding schools being welcoming places, prioritizing student voice, and community cross-collaboration. Future research would benefit from piloting the recommendations found in this research that support student voices and community organizations to enrich the learning experience.

Researcher Reflection

As a practitioner and systems leader in this school system, it was challenging to hear how students felt during the focus groups. I often wrote in my reflection journal the why behind some of the school-wide system students mentioned. In doing this, I had to reflect on the structures and systems we put in place that made students feel so strongly regardless of intent.

The focus group portion of this dissertation allowed me to challenge my convictions, opinions, and viewpoints on how our schools are run. Further, I had to own that some of my decisions negatively impacted the students I cared about most. As someone who develops many of these systems and structures, I now know how it negatively impacts Latino males. I am affirmed by this dissertation in the things our schools are doing well and will immediately

make it my personal and professional mission to rethink and redesign systems that deny

students' identities and make them feel as if they do not have a voice.

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Appendix A

Survey Questions

1. How much do you disagree or agree with the following? (Scaled Lowest to Highest 1-5)

    a. I am proud of what other students have accomplished.

    b. I am proud of how my school contributes to the community.

    c. I contribute positively to my school.

    d. I have been recognized for something positive at my school.

    e. I take on leadership roles in my school.

    f. I am encouraged to be a strong learner at my school.

    g. School staff, teachers, and students make the expectations together.

    h. The expectations make sense.

    i. There is a process in my school for students to change the expectations.

    j. I have learned how to collaborate with other students.

    k. Students in groups share responsibility for the work.

    l. Learning is designed to meet my needs.

    m. My teachers give helpful feedback on my work.

    n. Other students give me feedback on my work.

    o. I provide feedback to other students on their work.

    p. The speed of learning new things in my courses is about right for me.

    q. Schoolwork is challenging.

    r. I give maximum effort in my courses.

    s. I work on tasks that require deeper thinking.

    t. My teachers ask questions that make me think.

    u. My teachers ask more questions than they give answers.

v. My teachers let me struggle to find solutions rather than just giving me the answers.

w. Other students treat me with respect.

x. I feel welcome at this school.

y. Students at my school respect each other.

z. Most students at my school get along.

aa. Students can be themselves at my school.

bb. Teachers are available to talk about problems I have with schoolwork.

cc. Teachers are available to talk about issues I have with other students at school.

dd. Teachers are happy for me when good things happen in my life.

ee. Teachers care when I am having a hard time.

ff. I feel like I can be myself around the teachers in my school.

gg. Teachers listen to what I have to say.

hh. I have taken at least 1 AP Course.

ii. The courses I take are challenging.

jj. The courses I take helped to prepare me to go to college.

kk. I am required to investigate real problems.

ll. I get to work on a problem or question for an extended period.

mm. I work collaboratively with other students on our projects.

nn. I work on issues that require knowledge from different subjects (for example, English and Math).

oo. The work I complete for school is relevant to my life, now or in the future.

pp. I understand our learning objectives.

qq. I understand instructions on class activities or assignments.

rr. I regularly collaborate with other students.

ss. Collaboration time with other students makes my classes better.

tt. Learning is active.

uu. The processes we use in classes are clear to me.

vv. I know what to expect during my lessons.

ww.   I have enough time to apply my learning.

xx. My classes feel productive.

yy. My individual learning needs are met.

zz. It is easy to seek support if I need it.

aaa.   Overall, I have had a good experience at PODER High School

2. How Prepared Do You Feel (Scaled 1-5)

   a. Applying for a job?

   b. Getting a job?

   c. Applying for college

   d. Obtaining financial aid for college?

   e. Taking classes at a community college?

   f. Taking courses at a 4-year college?

   g. Success in college?

   h. Success in a career?

   i. My school talks with students about options after high school.

   j. My school teaches job-hunting skills.

   k. My school helps with college applications.

   l. My school provides information about what is required to be accepted at the college of my choice.

3. My Plan After High School (Select 1)

   a. Vocational/Trade School.

  b. Community College (2-Year College).

  c. University (4-Year College).

  d. Workforce.

  e. Military.

  f. Other.

4. Demographics

  a. Male/Female/Non-Binary.

  b. Latino/Hispanic, Black, Asian, Pacific Islander, Native American, Mixed, Other.

Appendix B

Focus Group Questions

1. Why are you choosing to attend a four-year college?

2. What or who influenced you to attend a four-year college?

3. How did they influence you?

4. What support do you have to attend a four-year college? Specifically, who is supporting you, and how are they supporting you?

5. Were there barriers in the way when you were considering attending a four-year college? If so, what were they?

6. How have these barriers influenced you and your plan?

7. Have you overcome these barriers? If so, how did you overcome these barriers? If not, why not?

8. How, if at all, have stereotypes influenced your thinking or plans to attend a four-year college?

9. Considering student behavior expectations, how do you anticipate that PODER has influenced you to apply for a four-year university?

10. Academically, how do you anticipate that PODER has prepared you to attend a four-year university?

11. How do you anticipate PODER is preparing you to attend a four-year university?

12. Do you feel your connection or lack of connection at PODER has influenced your aspiration to attend a four-year college? Why?

13. Overall, do you believe that PODER's model effectively supports your decision to attend a four-year college? Why or why not?

14. What else could be done to inspire more Latino males to attend a four-year college?