The Role of *La Familia* on Mexican American Men’s College Persistence Intentions

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Mexican American men lag behind academically. To that end, this study examined the mediating role of parental encouragement in the relation between *familismo* and college persistence intentions among 186 Mexican American college men. The mediation analysis suggested that parental encouragement fully, positively, and significantly mediated the relation between *familismo* and college persistence intentions for this sample of Mexican American college men. Furthermore, parental encouragement explained 53% of the variance in the indirect relation between *familismo* and college persistence intentions. We also asked two open-ended questions about participants’ college persistence and potential barriers to college persistence. Three dimensions of academic supports (i.e., attitudinal, instrumental, and social support factors) and four dimensions of potential barriers (i.e., struggles, unexpected events, family, and nothing) emerged. Research and practice implications of the study’s findings are delineated.

*Keywords:* Mexican American men, college persistence, family, parental encouragement

Only 37% of Mexican American men are enrolled in 4-year institutions compared to 44% of White men and 63% of Mexican American women (Hurtado, Saenz, Santos, & Cabrera, 2008). Not only are the college enrollment rates of Mexican American men low, so are their college graduation rates. In fact, only 8.4% of Mexican American men 25 years or older actually have earned a college degree as compared to 33.8% of White men, 18.7% of Black men, and 55.8% of Asian men in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). Furthermore, it also is important to note that Mexican American men have the lowest college enrollment and graduate rates among men who identify with other Latino ethnic groups (e.g., Puerto Rican 14.4%, Cuban 25.6%, Central American 11.1%, South American 34.3%, and other 21.3%; U.S. Census Bureau, 2008b). Given the apparent gap between the college enrollment and graduate of Mexican American men, it is critical to address the phenomenon of the “vanishing Latino male in higher education” (Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009), particularly Mexican American men.

The leakage in the educational pipeline among Mexican American men has critical implications on society and the Mexican American community in particular as Latino men in general are more overrepresented in labor-intensive jobs and underrepresented in college than men of other racial/ethnic groups (Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009). Indeed, many Latino men are deterred from college graduation because of high school dropout, military recruitment, and joining the labor force instead of enrolling in college (Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009). In addition, most Latino college students are also employed (Longbeam, Sédlacek, & Alatorre, 2004) perhaps to help out the family financially. Such factors...
and responsibilities can lead to lower academic persistence among Mexican American men. Thus, in response to a call on research with Latino men in higher education (Hernandez & Lopez, 2004; Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009), the main purpose of this study was to examine the role of la familia, specifically, parental encouragement and familismo on the college persistence intentions of Mexican American college men.

Before delving into the relations among parental encouragement, familismo, and college persistence intentions, it is important to understand who Mexican Americans are culturally. They are a group of people living in the U.S. who are of Mexican descent (McNeill et al., 2001) and represent 64% of all Latinos (i.e., people of Latin American descent; U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). While Latinos have many commonalities such as language (i.e., Spanish) and cultural values, Latino subgroups vary in a variety of ways such as by race, immigration history, and social class (McNeill et al., 2001). Therefore, it is important to not assume that the experiences of all Latino subgroups are similar. For instance, among Latinos, McNeill and his colleagues (2001) noted that Mexican Americans have the lowest educational attainment rates, the largest unemployment rates, the lowest median earnings, and are most likely to work laborious jobs. These issues are particularly pertinent to the Mexican American male population.

For Mexican American men, the intersection of gender and Mexican culture creates a unique male identity. Traditional Mexican culture is characterized as being family oriented, being spiritual, valuing respect, and having traditional gender roles (Knight et al., 2009). In a scale development study, scholars found that gender role socialization for Mexican American men includes negative and positive dimensions of masculinity known as machismo (i.e., hyper-masculinity) and caballerismo (i.e., chivalry), respectively (Arciniega, Anderson, Tovar-Blank, & Tracey, 2008). Furthermore, Mirandé’s (1997) research identified negative traits of Latino masculinity consisting of exaggerated masculinity, male dominance/authoritarianism, aggressiveness, and self-centeredness. On the other hand, Mirandé’s study concluded that positive traits of Latino masculinity included courage, honor, and integrity.

It is important to note that Mexican American male identity is created within a collectivistic culture (Santiago-Rivera, Arredondo, & Galardo-Cooper, 2002) where the family system is at its core. Many Mexican immigrants, who are predominantly men (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008a), immigrate to the United States in hopes of obtaining a better life for their family. The sacrifices made and the hardships experienced by Mexican immigrants may be felt by their children. In response, these children may feel the need to further realize their parents dreams of a better life by going to college. In other words, research suggests that Mexican American men do not go to college just for themselves but for their family as well (Schwartz, Donovan, & Guido-DiBrito, 2009). Thus, it is important to understand the influence that the family has on the educational experiences of Mexican American men.

The Mexican cultural value of loyalty, commitment, and dedication to la familia is known as familismo (familism; Marín & Marín, 1991). For Latinos, they are one with family and have an interdependent mindset in which a sense of togetherness and collective responsibility to one another is emphasized (Falicov, 1998). For instance, Mirandé (1997) concluded in his Latino men’s study that not valuing one’s family and not fulfilling family obligations were viewed as unmanly. Given the importance of la familia in Mexican culture, educational research has found a strong relationship between familial factors and education among Latino students. While family is often mentioned as a source of support and comfort in times of hardships for Latino college students (Gloria et al., 2005; Hernandez, 2002), the family system can also be experienced as a stressor. For instance, because the family is central to Mexican culture, Mexican American college students may perceive pressure, whether internal or familial, to perform well academically because of having a sense of obligation and duty to advance their family, as often times these college students are the first in their family to pursue higher education (Hernandez, 2000). In addition, Latinos in general report a desire to help their family as a reason for going to college more so than White students (Phinney, Dennis, & Osorio, 2006), further supporting the unique importance of family to Latinos’ college trajectory. As Latino men who value dignidad (dignity) for their fami-
ily (de la Cancela, 1986), they may experience pressure to demonstrate honor to their family by getting a college education.

Indeed, it is important to address factors that contribute to Mexican American men’s college retention. Guided by Tinto’s (1993) model of persistence, retention is understood as the actual behavior of persisting in college until degree completion, whereas college persistence intentions are the intent, or goal, to persist in college until degree completion. In other words, just because a student decides to persist in college does not necessarily indicate a follow through. The current study seeks to understand the college persistence intentions of Mexican American men rather than their actual retention because we wanted to understand the cognitive processes that they undergo in deciding to persist academically.

Although researchers have studied the college nonpersistence intentions among Latinos (Gloria et al., 2005), less is understood about their college persistence intentions. While it is important to identify factors that contribute to dropout rates, it is even more important to determine what retains Mexican American men in college. Gloria and her colleagues (2005) demonstrated the importance of family support on the college persistence intentions of a predominantly Latina college student sample. Therefore, it is likely that family plays a significant role in the education of Mexican American men. However, research has yet to focus on the role of la familia exclusively on Mexican American men’s educational attainment. Nonetheless, Latino college students who received support from family and peers, and parental encouragement were less likely to make decisions that conflict with college persistence (Gloria et al., 2005). Furthermore, a study on Latino adolescents found that parental academic encouragement decreased the likelihood of dropping out of school (Martinez, DeGarmo, and Eddy, 2004). However, previous research suggests that academic motivation, a related construct to academic persistence, was not significantly influenced by mother’s support, father’s support, and parents’ education level, but was significantly influenced by teachers’ academic support was a significant predictor for Latino boys (Alfaro, Umaña-Taylor, & Bamaca, 2006). In addition, research on parental expectations of Latino college students found no relation to GPA (Yazedjian, Toews, & Navarro, 2009), whereas another study found that parental support was related to academic achievement (Ong, Phinney, & Dennis, 2006). Given these discrepancies on the role of family on Latinos’ education, more research is warranted to understand their relation. Furthermore, no study to date has investigated the potential influence of familismo on college persistence intentions, nor has any study examined the role of multiple family related factors and their relations on such intentions.

The current study contributes to the limited research on Mexican American men’s experiences in college. Specifically we examined the mediating role of parental encouragement, that is, perceived perceptions of receiving encouragement to pursue a college education, on the relation between familismo and college persistence intentions for Mexican American college men. It was hypothesized that parental encouragement would influence the relation between familismo and college persistence intentions because we believed that while familismo is important to education, receiving educational encouragement from parents may influence college persistence intentions above and beyond Mexican American men’s dedication to the family. In addition, we asked participants two open-ended questions to tap into factors that influence their college persistence and potential barriers to college graduation.

Method

Participants

Study participants included 186 Mexican American men attending a public Hispanic-Serving Institution in the southwest in which more than 86% of students are Latino. Most of the participants were sophomores (40%), followed by juniors (29%), freshmen (24%), and seniors (7%). Self-reported GPA ranged from 1.5 to 4.0 on a 4.0 scale ($M = 2.98, \text{SD} = 0.51$). Students ranged in age from 17 to 54 years ($M = 20.84, \text{SD} = 4.36$). Most were 1st generation Mexican Americans (U.S. born; 44%), followed 1st generation (México born; 20%), 4th generation (grandparents U.S. born; 16%), 3rd generation (parents U.S. born; 11%), and 5th generation (great-grandparents U.S. born; 9%).
Instruments

Parental encouragement. The Parental Encouragement Scale (Gloria, 1993) evaluates participants’ beliefs about receiving encouragement from their parents to pursue their education. This scale consists of 12 items, with 6 items pertaining to one’s mother and the other 6 items to one’s father. A sample item includes “My mother/father supports my efforts in getting a college education.” Items are measured on a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (4). Responses are averaged across the 12 items with higher scores indicating more perceived parental encouragement. A previous study has resulted in a Cronbach’s α coefficient of .89 with Latino college students (Gloria et al., 2005). The Cronbach’s α for the current study was .86.

Familismo. The Pan-Hispanic Familism Scale (Villarreal, Blozis, & Widaman, 2005) evaluates participants’ attitudes about the importance of family. This scale consists of 5 items (e.g., “My family is always there for me in times of need.”) measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Participant’s responses were averaged across the 5 items with higher scores indicating more endorsement of familismo. A one-factor confirmatory factor analysis demonstrated scale validity (Villarreal et al., 2005). A previous study resulted in a Cronbach’s α coefficient of .82 with Latino adults (Villarreal et al., 2005). The Cronbach’s α for the current study was .95.

College persistence intentions. The 30-item Persistence/Voluntary Dropout Decision Scale (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980) evaluates participants’ academic nonpersistence decisions, or intentions. However, because we wanted to examine students’ academic persistence we reversed the 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (5). Thus, responses were rated from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Responses were averaged across the 30 items with higher scores indicating more college persistence intentions. The scale consists of 5 subscales: (a) peer group interactions, (b) interactions with faculty, (c) institutional and goal commitment, (d) concern for student development, and (e) academic and intellectual development. However, for the purposes of the current study, we used the total scale score to measure college persistence intentions. Criterion-related validity was demonstrated by scale differentiation between students who persisted and students who did not (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980). In a previous study, Gloria and her colleagues (2005) reported a Cronbach’s α coefficient of .86 with Latino college students. The Cronbach’s α for the current study was .72.

Demographics. A demographic survey was included to gather information about participants’ ethnicity, age, grade level, and generation level.

Open-ended questions about college persistence and potential barriers. Participants were asked two opened-ended questions in the survey. The questions were: What has helped you stay in college? and What would keep you from graduating from college? They were given 5 lines to respond to each of the questions.

Procedures

Participants were recruited from undergraduate social sciences courses during the spring semester of the academic year. Questionnaires were administered during class time and were completed within 30 min. Participants consented to participate and received snacks as a reward for participation. Women in the classrooms were completing surveys for a separate study.

Results

Quantitative Analyses

Preliminary analyses. Screening for missing data and adherence to multivariate statistical analyses was conducted before testing our quantitative hypothesis. Two cases contained missing data and 1 case represented a Mexican American male who had already graduated from college and was attending classes to earn continuing education credits. These 3 cases were deleted and not reported as part of the description of the participants. Second, we used Mahalanobis Distance scores to detect multivariate outliers of which 4 cases met the criteria. This left 182 of the 186 original participants that were included in the subsequent quantitative data analyses. Next, we determined that familismo (i.e., the predictor variable), parental encouragement (i.e., the me-
diator), and college persistence intentions (i.e., the outcome) met the assumptions for normality (i.e., skewness less than 3.0 and kurtosis less than 8.0; Kline, 2005). Finally, we evaluated data for the presence of multicollinearity (i.e., VIF and Tolerance) and suppression, neither of which was found. After all these steps, the data appeared to meet the statistical assumptions for multivariate analyses. See Table 1 for the intercorrelations and descriptive statistics for the variables of interest in the present study. When compared to the possible mean of each measured variable, this sample of Mexican American college men tended to endorse high levels of parental encouragement, familismo, and college persistence intentions.

Because of the heterogeneity of the sample, the possibility of clustering effects by generation and educational statuses on the variables of interest (i.e., familismo, parental encouragement, and college persistence intentions) existed (see Table 2 for means and standard deviations by generation and educational statuses). Thus, a series of 1-way multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVA) was conducted. The first MANOVA revealed no significant generational differences [Wilks $\Lambda = .91 F(12, 460) = 1.43 p > .05$, $\eta_m = .03$, where $\eta_m$ represents the multivariate effect size], in either familismo [$F(4, 176) = .64, p > .05$, $\eta = .01$, where $\eta$ represents the univariate effect size], parental encouragement [$F(4, 176) = .41, p > .05$, $\eta = .04$], or college persistence intentions [$F(4, 176) = .18, p > .05$, $\eta = .04$]. In addition, no significant differences by educational status [Wilks $\Lambda = .92, F(9, 429) = 1.73, p > .05$, $\eta_m = .03$] in either familismo [$F(3, 178) = .95, p > .05$, $\eta = .02$], parental encouragement [$F(3, 178) = 1.50, p > .05$, $\eta = .03$], or college persistence intentions [$F(3, 178) = 2.37, p > .05$, $\eta = .04$] were found. Given no significant differences in familismo, parental encouragement, and college persistence intentions by generational and educational statuses arose, data were aggregated and we did not use these grouping variables in any further analyses.

**Primary analyses.** We conducted regression analyses to test whether parental encouragement mediated the relationship between familismo and college persistence intentions by following the recommendations of Frazier, Tix, and Barron (2004) for mediational analyses (see Table 3). First, we regressed college persistence intentions (the outcome) on familismo (the predictor). The unstandardized regression coefficient ($B_c = .06, s_c = .03$) associated with the effect of familismo on college persistence intentions (Path c) was significant ($p < .05$) suggesting that familismo positively and significantly predicted college persistence intentions. Next, we regressed parental encouragement (the mediator) on familismo (the predictor) testing Path a. Again, we found that the unstandardized regression coefficient ($B_a = .26, s_a = .04$) was significant suggesting that familismo positively and significantly predicted parental encouragement ($p < .001$). Then, we regressed college persistence intentions (the outcome) on parental encouragement (the mediator) when controlling for familismo (the predictor). The unstandardized regression coefficient for Path b ($B_b = .12, s_b = .06$) was significant ($p < .01$) suggesting that parental encouragement positively and significantly predicted college persistence intentions when the effect of familismo was held constant. The unstandardized regression coefficient ($B_c' = .03, s_c' = .03$) associated with familismo (the predictor) and college persistence intentions (the outcome), or Path c,’ was not significant ($p > .05$) suggesting parental encouragement fully mediated the relation between familismo and college persistence intentions. Together, familismo and parental encouragement explained 4% of the variance in college persistence intentions ($R^2 = .05; R^2_{adj} = .04$).

To make sure the mediation effect of parental encouragement in the relation between familismo and college persistence intentions was indeed significant, we used a method developed by Kenny, Kashy, and Bolger’s (1998). Kenny and colleagues developed an equation that takes into account standard error, thus dividing the mediated effect by a standard error.

### Table 1
**Correlations, Descriptive Statistics, and Reliabilities for the Variables of Interest**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. College persistence intentions</td>
<td>—</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Familismo</td>
<td>.16$^*$</td>
<td>—</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Parental encouragement</td>
<td>.21$^{**}$</td>
<td>.50$^{***}$</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>3.44</td>
<td>4.38</td>
<td>3.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$SD$</td>
<td>.33</td>
<td>.90</td>
<td>.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cronbach’s $\alpha$</td>
<td>.95</td>
<td>.86</td>
<td>.72</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$^*$ $p < .05$. $^{**}$ $p < .01$. $^{***}$ $p < .001$. 
Following their equation, we multiplied the unstandardized regression weights for the relation familismo and parental encouragement ($B_a = .26$) and the relation between parental encouragement and college persistence intentions when controlling for familismo ($B_b = .12$) and divided this product by the square root of $B_b^2s_a^2 + B_a^2s_b^2 + s_a^2s_b^2$. This equation yielded a significant z-score of 2.01 ($p < .05$) suggesting that parental encouragement fully mediated the relationship between familismo and college persistence intentions significantly. That is, familismo had a positive, indirect relationship on college persistence intentions via its relationship with parental encouragement. By dividing the products of $B_a$ and $B_b$ by $B_c$ (the unstandardized regression coefficients), we determined that 53% of the total effect of familismo on college persistence intentions is mediated by parental encouragement.

**Analysis of Open-Ended Questions**

This quantitative study used a questionnaire with different measures and two open-ended questions. The first question asked, *what has helped you stay in college?* and the second question asked, *what would keep you from graduating from college?* These questions were included to allow students to list factors that contribute to their success in college as well as factors that may potentially interfere with their graduation. Thus, we recognize that conducting in depth interviews would have allowed to hearing the students’ voices more thoroughly and

### Table 2

*Means and SDs by Generation and Educational Statuses*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Familismo $M$</th>
<th>Familismo $SD$</th>
<th>Parental encouragement $M$</th>
<th>Parental encouragement $SD$</th>
<th>College persistence $M$</th>
<th>College persistence $SD$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Generation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First</td>
<td>4.46</td>
<td>.86</td>
<td>3.47</td>
<td>.38</td>
<td>3.49</td>
<td>.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second</td>
<td>4.30</td>
<td>.97</td>
<td>3.26</td>
<td>.51</td>
<td>3.48</td>
<td>.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third</td>
<td>4.41</td>
<td>.99</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>.39</td>
<td>3.35</td>
<td>.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fourth</td>
<td>4.21</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>3.36</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>3.32</td>
<td>.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fifth</td>
<td>4.67</td>
<td>.61</td>
<td>3.42</td>
<td>.57</td>
<td>3.47</td>
<td>.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>4.36</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>3.44</td>
<td>.51</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>.26</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>4.38</td>
<td>.87</td>
<td>3.30</td>
<td>.46</td>
<td>3.48</td>
<td>.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>4.42</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>.47</td>
<td>3.48</td>
<td>.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>3.98</td>
<td>1.21</td>
<td>3.19</td>
<td>.55</td>
<td>3.49</td>
<td>.30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 3

*Testing the Mediator Effects of Parental Encouragement in the Relationship Between Familismo and College Persistence Intentions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>$B$</th>
<th>$SE$</th>
<th>$95%$ CI</th>
<th>$t$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Testing Step 1 (Path c)</td>
<td>Outcome: Persistence</td>
<td>$B$</td>
<td>$SE$</td>
<td>$95%$ CI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Predictor: Familismo</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.006, .111</td>
<td>.16*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Testing Step 2 (Path a)</td>
<td>Outcome: Encouragement</td>
<td>$B$</td>
<td>$SE$</td>
<td>$95%$ CI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Predictor: Familismo</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.194, .330</td>
<td>.50**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Testing Step 3 (Paths b and c’)</td>
<td>Outcome: Persistence</td>
<td>$B$</td>
<td>$SE$</td>
<td>$95%$ CI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mediator: Encouragement (b)</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.007, .087</td>
<td>.18*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Predictor: Familismo (c’)</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>-.032, .232</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. CI = confidence interval; persistence = college persistence intentions; encouragement = parental encouragement.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .001$. 

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such data could have been used for a mixed-methods study. Furthermore, the analysis of the open-ended questions did not follow a particular qualitative worldview or paradigm as the data was not gathered through in-depth interviews, rather, the questions were part of a questionnaire.

There were 184 responses for the first question and 186 responses for the second question. The responses from both questions were analyzed through content analysis by one of the authors. Content analysis is a technique that looks at summarizing different forms of text and is often used by various social and behavioral scientists (Neuendorf, 2002). The questions were analyzed separately and each response was coded for content. This technique is often used in qualitative research designs and is known as open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Creswell, 2007). After all responses were coded, categories were formed based on the codes. Thus, codes that appeared to be grouped together formed a category. The name for each category was developed after examining the group of codes and giving it a name that will represent each group of codes. Qualitative researchers typically use this type of procedure as part of their data analysis (e.g., Creswell, 2007). To assure validity and reliability, the codes and themes were shared with the other two authors. Consensus was achieved for both questions by all of the study’s authors. This process is known as peer review and qualitative researchers use it to validate their findings (Creswell & Miller, 2000). It is important to note that a given participant may have had multiple responses to an open-ended question that resulted in different codes and thus were grouped into different categories, or themes. Thus, the overarching categories for each open-ended question do not compare one set of participants versus another set of participants. Instead, these overarching categories represent the responses of the participants in general.

**College persistence.** For the question, *what has helped you stay in college?* 14 codes emerged from the data, which were grouped into three major categories, or themes. The categories were: (a) attitudinal factors, (b) instrumental factors, and (c) sources of support. First, the participants spoke of different factors related to their internal attitudes that have helped them to stay in college. Some of these attitudinal factors included hope, determination, and desire. For example, a participant said, “One thing that has helped me stay in college is the hope for a better standing in life and learning about new things.” Another spoke of the desire and/or motivation to be someone in life, he stated, “motivation of wanting a better life for myself.” Some participants also stated that being the first in their family who has attended college keeps them focused on staying in college and successfully completing their degrees (i.e., determination).

Instrumental factors highlighted in the participants’ responses were associated with the use of transportation, engagement in sports, and professional and personal opportunities. Some participants spoke about how having a vehicle helps them get to classes on time that is an essential part of staying in college. At the same time, others spoke about how having a college education will open career and life opportunities. For example, one student stated, “I know that education is the key to success in life.”

Sources of support also represented a salient theme in the participants’ responses regarding what keeps them in college. They spoke of receiving support from family, the university, financial aid, and others (e.g., professors). Indeed, participants highlighted their family members and financial aid as what has helped them stay in college. A participant stated, “my parents have been really supportive, and federal funds, and loans.” A similar response from another participant was, “my family, they are proud of me and have always supported me.” Participants also mentioned the university as a source of support. For example, a participant stated, “the university and what it has to offer such as all the right organizations and people.”

**Perceived barriers to graduation.** Nine codes were identified in the question, *what would keep you from graduating from college?* These codes led to four major categories: (a) struggles, (b) unexpected events, (c) family, and (d) nothing. Participants spoke of the different struggles that could keep them from graduating. These included finances, academics, and themselves. Some participants spoke about how financial aid is important, as they do not have the same resources as other students. For example, one participant stated, “what will keep me away from not graduating from college is I don’t have the help that financial aid provides to most of
the students.” Others just stated that “lack of money,” “economic problems,” and “not being able to pay for college” were reasons they may not stay in college. Participants also spoke of academic struggles as barriers that could prevent them from staying in college, including “grades,” “not passing,” and “failing classes” among others. Participants also stated that sometimes they could get in their own way of graduating from college.

Similarly, unexpected events emerged as a theme. In this theme, participants spoke of death and dying, health-related problems, bad luck, and pregnancy of a significant other. Some participants indicated that the unexpected death of a loved one or themselves might result in their academic nonpersistence. They also cited that unexpected health complications might be a barrier to graduating from college. For example, one participant self-identified as a diabetic and cited complications related to his diseases as potentially problematic in completing course requirements. Some participants said that unexpectedly failing a course or a set of courses, whereas some cited finding a good job unrelated to their current academic majors might result in their dropping out of college. Finally, some participants reported that an unexpected pregnancy of a significant other and the parenting responsibilities (e.g., financial and child rearing) associated with this would result in their academic nonpersistence.

Interestingly enough, family was considered a reason for keeping participants from graduating from college. Some participants simply indicated that their “family” or “parents” were barriers to completing their postsecondary education. However, one participant explained how he had not let his family influence him. He said, “I have separated myself from family influence. If I would have stayed close to family, it would have distracted my studies.”

Finally, an interesting theme that emerged consistently was “nothing” will prevent participants from graduating with a college degree. In fact, one student commented, “I am graduating from college no matter what happens in my life.”

Discussion

Given the underrepresentation of Mexican American men in higher education, it is important to understand the factors that influence their college persistence intentions. Thus, in the present study, we used both quantitative data and open-ended questions to explore the factors influencing Mexican American men’s college persistence intentions, or intentions to stay in college.

In our quantitative analysis, as expected, we found that parental encouragement significantly and fully mediated the relationship between familismo and college persistence intentions. That is, familismo positively predicted parental encouragement for pursuing education which in turn positively predicted college persistence intentions. This finding suggests that for familismo to have a positive indirect effect on college persistence intentions that the presence of parental encouragement to attend and complete college is necessary for this sample of Mexican American college men. Thus, it is not the Mexican cultural value of familismo in and of itself that promotes Mexican American men’s positive college persistence intentions, but the combination of familismo and parental encouragement.

Given that the family is at the core of the Mexican American male gender identity (Arciniega et al., 2008; Knight et al., 2009) and familismo encompasses the loyalty, commitment, and dedication to la familia, it seems logical that if Mexican American college men adhere to the cultural value of familismo that parental encouragement would have a significant impact on college persistence intentions, intentions, and behaviors. This was particularly true for this sample of Mexican American college men who highly endorsed familismo, parental encouragement, and college persistence intentions.

Via open-ended questions about factors that help or hinder intentions to stay in college and earn a college degree, we were allowed to hear the voices of our Mexican American college male participants. Their voices gave us a fuller picture of the role of la familia in their educational pursuits. For example, they spoke about their families as a source of support that makes it easier for them to stay in college. These men also spoke about how their families’ pride in their academic pursuits positively influences their college persistence intentions. Thus, the theme of family as a support for staying in school is congruent with our quantitative findings. While the relations among familismo, pa-
rental encouragement, and college persistence intentions have not been previously examined simultaneously, both our quantitative findings and the theme of family support influencing college persistence intentions are in line with previous research. For instance, parental encouragement was negatively related to Latino adolescents’ school dropout behaviors (Martinez et al., 2004) as well as Latino college students’ intentions of leaving college (Gloria et al., 2005) and academic achievement (Ong et al., 2006).

Interestingly, while our Mexican American college male participants pointed to their families as a source of support in terms of staying in school, they also viewed their family and familial obligations as potential distractions to their success in college. This finding coincides with the work of Fuligni, Tseng, and Lam (1999) suggesting that at times it is difficult to balance academic and family demands for ethnic minority students, particularly Latinos who may adhere to familismo. Given that these authors studied this influence with adolescents, further research is needed on the potential influence of familial obligations on Mexican American college men’s academic success (e.g., academic achievement and persistence). It also is possible that the Mexican American male gender identity is interacting with the idea that family is a distraction to their education. As suggested by Mirandé (1997), some Latino males can often be self-centered despite the cultural value of familismo. Hence, future research could focus on how the Mexican American male gender identity influences their feelings toward family and their academic persistence.

While this study’s quantitative findings provide useful information in understanding the role of la familia in education and parental encouragement by explaining 53% of the indirect effect of familismo on college persistence intentions, together familismo and parental encouragement only explained 4% of variance in Mexican American men’s college persistence intentions. Thus, other factors not quantitatively measured in the present study appear to be influencing these Mexican American college men’s college persistence intentions. Indeed, family was not the only theme illuminated by the open-end questions about factors helping these participants to stay in college and potential barriers that could keep them from graduating with their college degrees. Hence, it is important to examine the other themes voiced by our Mexican American college male participants to have a fuller understanding of factors that may be significantly influencing their college persistence.

The responses from the Mexican American college men highlight the influence of attitudinal, instrumental, and support factors on their likelihood of staying in college. First, the students’ own hope, determination, and desire (i.e., attitudinal) to complete their college education were sources of motivation for staying in college. For example, some students spoke about their desire and hope to learn new things, whereas some students spoke about the determination to be the first one in their family to graduate from college. These findings coincide with previous research suggesting that Latino college students are motivated to attend college by the hope of gaining personal-intellectual growth (Phinney et al., 2006). Although our participants did not elaborate on their motivations as first generation college students, previous research suggests that first generation college students’ determination to finish college is linked to their desire to help their families financially (Van T. Bui, 2002). Future research should investigate this link for Mexican American men who are the first to pursue a college degree, particularly in the light of the determination to finish college that some of our Mexican American college male participants attributed to their first generation college student status.

The instrumental factors related to staying in college denoted by participants included access to reliable transportation, the chance to practice sports, and the opportunities related to having a college education. Obviously, the ability to be on time to class is key to successfully completing a college degree and was acknowledged by the Mexican American men in this study. Additionally, one of the pathways to college for ethnic minority students is intercollegiate athletics (Braddock, 1981). Thus, practicing sports was cited as one reason for staying in college in the present study. The final instrumental factor was the opportunities related to having a college education. Participants indicated that opportunities leading to life and career success clearly maintained their enrollment in college. These findings lend support to previous theory sug-
gesting that for ethnic minority students, the results expected from finishing their college degree (i.e., outcome expectations) are a greater predictor of the likelihood of earning their degree when compared to their confidence in their ability to successfully complete their degree (i.e., self-confidence).

Above and beyond family or parental support, other sources of social and financial support were denoted as factors related to staying in college for this sample of Mexican American men. For example, other sources of social support included professors and campus organizations. In terms of financial support, participants denoted financial aid was key to staying. Together, these findings support previous research that points to the influence of teacher support (Alfaro et al., 2006), financial support (i.e., loans, scholarships; Capello, 1994), and involvement in campus organizations (Davalos, Chavez, & Guardiola, 1999) on Latinos’ academic outcomes (e.g., grades, achievement, graduation). In general, given the paucity of research on positive factors influencing college graduation, more research is needed on the influence of social and financial support simultaneously on Mexican American men’s rates of college graduation.

When asked about potential barriers to graduating from college, four major themes emerged, including: (a) struggles, (b) unexpected events, (c) family, and (d) nothing. Given we have addressed family as a potential barrier to graduating from college, we will focus on the other three themes here. In terms of struggles, Mexican American college men noted that difficulties with academics, finances, and their own motivation may stand in their way of graduating from college. Given that these students also noted that their own hope, determination, and desires along with social and financial support would help them to stay in school, it is no surprise that the lack of these attitudinal and instrumental factors would relate to their attrition from college before graduating (Fischer, 2005; Sanchez, 1992).

Furthermore, the men discussed how unexpected life events, such as death, illness, and pregnancy of a significant other, might keep them from completing college. While it is clear why their own deaths and illnesses may stand in the way of them graduating from college, our participants’ other responses in this theme may be related to their Mexican American male gender identities. As men in the Mexican American culture, our participants may adhere to the cultural value of caballerismo (e.g., chivalry; Arciniega et al., 2008). Thus, they may see it as their responsibility to be help the family deal with the death and illness of its members. Additionally, caballerismo and familismo in the Mexican culture call for the men to take responsibility for their families (Arciniega et al., 2008; Knight et al., 2009; Miranda, 1997). Thus, it is no surprise that an unexpected pregnancy of a significant other would be a barrier to completing a college degree for this sample of Mexican American college men given the financial and time commitments associated with raising a child. Again, future research is needed to illuminate the relationships between the Mexican American male gender identity and factors that may prevent them from persisting in college.

It also is important to note that a large portion of the Mexican American college men in the present study indicated that nothing would stand in their way of getting a college education. One can only speculate that students felt self-confident and focused in their college education that they truly believe that there is “nothing” that can stop them from staying in college. In addition, it is possible that the students who responded in this manner are not aware of the challenges that Latino students confront in college. It also is possible that the Mexican American male gender identity is interacting with our participants’ responses of “nothing” to the question of what will keep them graduating from college. For example, it may not look “manly” and their dignidad (dignity) may be challenged to say anything will get in their way of graduating and thus, they are protecting their hyper-masculinity associated with machismo. At the same time, these Mexican American college men may understand that the importance of a college degree for their families’ futures. However, future research is needed to address these aforementioned possibilities related to the Mexican American male gender identity as well as the awareness of educational barriers.

Implications for Practice

The findings of the current study have implications for academic and counseling professionals working with Mexican American college
men. Our quantitative results demonstrated that parental encouragement mediated the relation between familismo and college persistence intentions. In addition, one of the themes of the responses to the open-ended questions was the role of la familia as a support and barrier to staying in college. Given the significance of family on the college persistence intentions of Mexican American college men, academic and counseling personnel (referred to as personnel from here on) should assess the role that family plays on their education. For instance, exploring ways in which students can gain support from family can help bolster their academic experiences (Ong et al., 2006). Because family obligations were listed as barriers to college persistence, personnel could help explore with these men ways that such obligations can be reframed into positive experiences such as pride in helping ones family.

Aside from family playing a major role on the college persistence intentions of Mexican American college men, participants indicated hope and determination as facilitators. Hope (i.e., the belief that one can achieve one’s goals; Snyder, 2000) is an important resource among Mexican Americans (Edwards, Ong, & Lopez, 2007). Thus, personnel can help instill hope in students by helping them identify paths to achieving their goals and fostering agency (Snyder, 2000).

Because participants also indicated that the university was a source of support to their college persistence intentions and given the cultural value of personalismo (close personal relationships; Paniagua, 1994), personnel may help Mexican American college men find connections within the university community (e.g., Latino organizations, fraternities). Furthermore, Gloria (1999) emphasized the importance of college support groups for Mexican American women because it helps build a college familia and fosters the Mexican cultural value of personalismo. Such support groups may also be effective for Mexican American college men.

Mexican American men indicated that financial constraints could hinder them academically. Because many Latinos are the first in their family to attend college (Hernandez, 2000), their parents may not have sufficient college knowledge to help them find financial resources (Fann, McClafferty Jarsky, & McDonough, 2009). Thus, personnel can step in by helping students navigate and identify financial aid opportunities. Some students also indicated that doing poorly academically would serve as a barrier. In this case personnel can help connect Mexican American college men with tutoring resources.

**Limitations and Future Directions**

Despite the contributions of this study in expanding our understanding of Mexican American men’s college persistence intentions, there also are some clear limitations that should be noted. First, several factors limit our ability to generalize this study’s findings to other populations of Mexican American male undergraduates. The participants attended a Hispanic-serving 4-year university in a predominately Mexican American midsize southern Texas town located near the U.S.–México border. While the majority of U.S. Latinos live in the Southwest region, Latinos are represented in communities across the U.S. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008c). Additionally, the study’s generalizability is limited by the use of nonrandom sampling methods (e.g., self-selection bias) and its cross-sectional approach (Heppner, Wampold, & Kivlighan, 2007). Taken together, these limitations to generalizability point to the need for future studies that incorporate random samples of Mexican American men who live in multiple geographic regions and attend various undergraduate universities. Hopefully, such data collection procedures would lead to a more diverse sample of Mexican American men across different levels of culture orientation and from both Hispanic-serving and predominately White institutions. Then, future studies could examine the influence of cultural orientation (e.g., acculturation and enculturation) on adherence to cultural values (e.g., familismo) and the subsequent influence on Mexican American men’s college persistence intentions. Finally, such studies would help researchers, educators, and psychologists understand the academic experiences of Mexican American men at different types of universities.

While a strength of this study was its singular focus on Mexican American men’s college persistence intentions, it did not include masculinity constructs that may be relevant in the lives of Mexican American men. Thus, future studies should include culturally specific gender role
attitudes and behaviors (e.g., machismo and caballeroismo) as well as male-specific gender role phenomena (e.g., gender role conflict and male gender role norms). The inclusion of such gender-related constructs along with cultural orientation variables (e.g., acculturation and enculturation) may more fully explain Mexican American college men’s college persistence intentions as well as the role of familismo and parental encouragement.

Another strength of the present study is its use of both quantitative data and responses to open-ended questions. At the same time, limitations exist with both types of data. While we used valid and reliable instruments to quantitatively measure the constructs in this study, there is still concern about self-report bias and socially desirable responding. In terms of the open-ended questions, it is possible that another person or group of people would not interpret the data in the same way. Furthermore, the brief nature of the open-ended responses at times made it difficult to fully understand the context of the responses or the influences on the responses. It would behoove researchers to conduct future studies that fully implement a mixed-method research design wherein a subset of the original sample is selected for more in-depth interviews.

Finally, investigating the influence of familismo and parental encouragement on college persistence over time also is important in bolstering our understanding of Mexican American men’s educational experiences. Unlike the present study, such longitudinal studies would provide a more holistic picture of Mexican American men’s educational trajectory, not just a picture of their college persistence intentions at one point in time. Additionally, such longitudinal studies would allow an examination of actual persistence behaviors of Mexican American college men, not just their intentions.

References


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