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**YO PERTENEZCO AQUÍ: UNCOVERING THE EXPERIENCES AND SENSE  
OF BELONGING OF LATINX/A/O STUDENTS AT A PREDOMINANTLY  
WHITE INSTITUTION**

by

Brittany C. Passano

A Thesis

Submitted to the  
Department of Educational Services and Leadership  
College of Education  
In partial fulfillment of the requirement  
For the degree of  
Master of Arts in Higher Education  
at  
Rowan University  
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Thesis Chair: Raquel Wright-Mair, Ph.D

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## Dedication

To my parents: Zuleyma and Juan Passano, my sisters, Gigi and Brizzette Passano, and my little Lu. **You are the reason I am here today.** I dedicate this thesis to you. To my God: **Thank you.**

## Acknowledgments

I want to give thanks to all my people who have helped me through this thesis journey. I experience belonging, motivation and love through you. Thank you.

To my family: Even from afar you continued to push me to reach my dream. Thank you for your endless love and support. You are always the reason. I love you.

To my best friends: Kay and Vee, thank you for the motivation to push through. To think that we are completing our master's together, where did time go? I will never forget how much you supported me through this process. I love you.

To my RAs and ARD: Mimo, thank you for always asking how my thesis was going and showing me grace when my energy was low. I did this work to help students like you love their college experience and feel wholeheartedly supported. Thank you for your support in return.

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To my participants: Thank you for your vulnerability and time. Each and every one of you have helped make a difference in the lives of future Latinx/a/o students. You matter, and you belong here. Gracias.

## Abstract

Brittany C. Passano

YO PERTENEZCO AQUÍ: UNCOVERING THE EXPERIENCES AND SENSE OF BELONGING OF LATINX/A/O STUDENTS AT A PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTION

2020-2021

Raquel Wright-Mair, Ph.D

Master of Arts in Higher Education

As human beings, it is essential that we feel included in and connected to the communities in which we function. These feelings of inclusion and connection are referred to as feeling a sense of belonging. As a minoritized student population, Latinx/a/o students experience the difficulty of transitioning into an educational culture that is not prepared to welcome and serve them. The purpose of the following phenomenological qualitative study was to gain an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of Latinx/a/o students and the ways in which their perceptions shaped their sense of belonging at a predominantly white institution (PWI). The study features 12 undergraduate students who identify as Latinx/a/o, and explores the following themes: Representation matters, navigating marginalization, strong support system and intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. In addition to highlighting factors that impacted students' sense of belonging, recommendations for critical action were outlined. The findings of this research will not only add to the body of literature on Latinx/a/o students and their sense of belonging at PWIs, but also call for urgent and transformative action among education stakeholders.

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## Chapter I

### Introduction

When entering new spaces, people desire to feel a sense of belonging. Maslow (1943) researched the concept of sense of belonging and concluded that belonging is a basic human need. Sense of belonging is defined as the need to feel included, appreciated and valued in a community (Strayhorn, 2018). An important topic illustrated in higher education research is students' sense of belonging to their campus community. A student's college experience begins by entering a new space, culture, and lifestyle. Incoming students begin the college experience in search for a sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2018). Higher education institutions aim to foster a sense of belonging because it increases positive student outcomes, like student persistence, academic achievement, and student equity (Carales & Hooker, 2019; DiMenna, 2019). It is essential to highlight that not all students achieve a sense of belonging within their institutions in the same way.

A student population that disproportionately experiences a lack of sense of belonging is the Latinx/a/o<sup>1</sup> student population (Gonzalez, 2002, Johnson et al, 2005). Presently, the Latinx/a/o student population is increasing (Field, 2018). Latinx/a/o student representation in higher education is different depending on the classification of the college or university. The Latinx/a/o student community is the majority population in “open-access and community colleges and underrepresented in four-year institutions” (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2020, para. 1). Predominantly white institutions (PWIs) are among four-year institutions where Latinx/a/o students are underrepresented.

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<sup>1</sup> “Latinx/a/o” is used to be inclusive of all identities within the Hispanic/Latino community (Salinas, 2020).

Harper and Hurtado (2007) highlighted that students of color (which includes Latinx/a/o students) at PWIs tend to experience racial and ethnic prejudice and stereotypes, leaving them feeling “isolated and alienated” (p. 12) from their campus community. Research also indicates that Latinx/a/o students feel a sense of belonging through peer groups, faculty connection, residence life, campus leadership and academic programming. However, their strong familial ties, culture, and values, coupled with harmful racial and ethnic discrimination, makes it difficult for them to gain a pure sense of belonging (Martinez, 2020; Maestras et al, 2007; Nuñez, 2009; Dueñas & Gloria, 2020; Strayhorn, 2008; Johnson et al, 2005; Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Gonzalez, 2002). Since research has illustrated both positive and negative influences on Latinx/a/o student sense of belonging, this qualitative study will add to the growing and diverse body of literature by unearthing the nuanced experiences, perceptions, knowledges, concerns and needs of the Latinx/a/o students participating in this study. In doing this, the findings of the study will aid education stakeholders in developing a deeper, more sophisticated understanding of the factors that either feed or inhibit a sense of belonging among Latinx/a/o students.

### **Significance of the Problem**

Research illustrates that Latinx/a/o students are often plunged into inequitable institutional spaces that are not adequately prepared to serve and support them. As a result, they are subjected to marginalization on campus, based on their racial and ethnic identities, which negatively shapes their collegiate experience. Research on Latinx/a/o student’s sense of belonging presents a gap in knowledge. Research is limited in the in-depth reasoning on how Latinx/a/o students experience a sense of belonging. Most

studies employ a quantitative approach when researching the experiences of Latinx/a/o students, and this design does not allow for thick descriptions of students' lifeworlds (Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005; Maestras, Vaquera & Zehr, 2007; Museus, Yi & Saelua, 2016; Davis et al, 2019). Thus, this study was architected to uncover students' realities via asking them relevant questions, listening keenly to their stories and following up when necessary, and ensuring that participants' natural and authentic voices would remain the priority of this research project.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Latinx/a/o students deserve to feel validated, valued and supported within their campus community. One way to ensure this is by learning more about these students and their diverse needs through critical research. To this point, the purpose of this study is to gain an in-depth understanding of the personal experiences of and feelings of sense of belonging that exist among Latinx/a/o students at a PWI in the Northeastern United States. The findings of this study will help to inform practice and praxis within PWIs, enabling education stakeholders in this realm to cultivate inclusive, equitable and supportive spaces of learning for Latinx/a/o students. To intentionally study the perceptions of the Latinx/a/o student experience, in relation to sense of belonging, the following research questions were developed:

- RQ1: How do Latinx/a/o students feel about and describe their sense of belonging on campus?
- RQ2: What kind of support or challenges have Latinx/a/o students encountered during their college experience thus far, and how have these factors impacted their sense of belonging on campus?

## **Assumptions and Limitations**

It must be noted that the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted in-person class, forcing students to engage in virtual/online learning. As a result, the first-year students who participated in this study would not have had an opportunity to experience campus life in person. Therefore, their experience, although valid, were severely impacted and in many ways restricted by the strict safety measures (i.e., social distancing) that were implemented by the institution, and this fact had to be taken into account.

## **Operational Definitions of Important Terms**

1. ***Sense of belonging***: The feeling and perception that one can be their authentic self within a new environment and feel included by those around them (Strayhorn, 2018).
2. ***Latinx/a/o***: Term used to refer to those who identify with the Hispanic/Latino community. These individuals are of Latin American descent. The usage of the -x, -a, and -o serves a purpose to include all identities that encompass the Hispanic/Latino community (Salinas, 2020).
3. ***Predominantly White Institution (PWI)***: A college or university whose student population is primarily of white/Caucasian descent. The difference between the white student population compared to students of color is high.
4. ***Campus Involvement***: Participation in Rowan's campus extracurricular activities including holding campus leadership positions, membership in student organizations, attending campus events.
5. ***Consejo de familia***: This phrase is in the Spanish language and translates to family advice.

6. *Amistad*: This phrase is in the Spanish language and translates to Friendship.
7. *Flying First Living Learning Community*: A residential community that groups first-generation students in the same residence hall.
8. *Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF)*: A pathway program for students of low-income backgrounds to gain an equitable chance to have a successful transition into Rowan University.
9. *Resident Assistants*: Undergraduate student leaders who mentor residential students who live in campus residence halls and apartments. Each floor in the residence halls and apartments has a designed resident assistant to support students through educational programming and one-on-one intentional conversations.

## **Organization**

Chapter I has illustrated the official introduction of the research. Chapter II will review the literature in relation to sense of belonging and the Latinx/a/o student experience. Chapter III will thoroughly explain the methodology of the study, including the context of the study, participant recruitment, research methods, and data collection. Chapter IV will articulate the findings of the study, based on the interviews conducted with participants. Chapter V will include the discussion of the study's results in relation to the review of the literature discussed in Chapter II. Finally, conclusions will then be made, followed by recommendations for future research and the ways in which this research can be translated from theory to practice to assist education stakeholders in creating institutional environments that support students in the Latinx/a/o student community.

## Chapter II

### Review of the Literature

As social beings that desire human connection, it is essential that we, Latinx/a/o students, experience the feelings of being included in, being a part of, and feeling connected to peer groups and the wider campus community. This feeling is defined as experiencing a sense of belonging. Strayhorn (2018) defines the feeling of belonging as a basic human need. Student sense of belonging is defined as “a sense of connectedness, the feeling that one matters, that is essential to college student success” (Samura, 2018). Additionally, Strayhorn (2018) posits five points that can help to explain the importance of student sense of belonging:

1. Sense of belonging is important to us and is the reason we act and behave in the way we do.
2. Sense of belonging is needed so we can function. Students look for reassurance that they belong in a space.
3. Sense of belonging requires that we prove to others that they are valued as a part of the community. Students need to feel that they are appreciated.
4. Searching for a sense of belonging in a new community may cause doubts within one’s identity, therefore, students “thrive and flourish where they feel like they belong” (para. 16).
5. Sense of belonging is about being yourself and not looking to assimilate to a community but becoming a part of it as you are.

That said, it is imperative that researchers investigate the ways in which college students reach a sense of belonging throughout their collegiate experience, as well as in what ways their educational experiences support or hinder feelings of belonging among them.

### **Sense of Belonging in Higher Education**

Scholars have illustrated the importance of belonging through prominent research in the higher education field. Sense of belonging is particularly highlighted in postsecondary education because “student connection to campus fosters positive outcomes” (Carales & Hooker, 2019, p. 42). First year college students begin their collegiate experience entering a new environment which ignites a natural interest in community involvement. Zeller and Mosier (1993) indicated that students, in their transition, experience a culture shock where they struggle to get acclimated to the college campus. To buffer the initial shock of a new culture and community, colleges and universities try to help students become part of the campus community by hosting campus-wide programs and events.

Furthermore, research indicates that cultivating a sense of belonging among students requires the engagement of the institution’s faculty, staff and administrators (Martinez, 2020). When faculty demonstrate interest in their students’ personal experiences, students, in turn, begin to feel like they belong (Maestras et al, 2007). Sense of belonging is also essential to student persistence and success for Latino students (Nuñez, 2009). In addition, all racial and ethnic groups perceive the campus environment based on their culture, traditions, and values (Museus, Yi & Saelua, 2016).

## **The Latinx/a/o Student Population**

The Hispanic/Latino population has grown at an increased rate in the United States. Specifically, Latinos make up 18.5 percent of the U.S. population, averaging up to approximately 59.8 million people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019; CNN, 2020). Similarly, the Latino student population increased from 8.8 million to 17.9 million, two times more than seen in the last decade (Bauman, 2017). With a rising number of students attending school, records of U.S. higher education institutions show a similar increase in Latino college students (Fry & Lopez, 2012). To make the following research inclusive to all identities within the Latino population, the following section provides detailing on the reason for the use of the term Latinx/a/o for the purpose and significance of this research.

### **Understanding the Use of “Latinx/a/o”**

The term Hispanic or Latino is commonly used to describe the Latino population in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Currently, U.S. higher education institutions have begun to use the term “Latinx” instead of the commonly used Hispanic or Latino (Salinas, 2020). Although the literature for defining the term Latinx falls short, college students began to use the term Latinx to “escape the gender binaries encoded in the Spanish language” (Logue, 2015, para. 5; Salinas, 2020) Higher education institutions have recognized this as a need to be more inclusive and have begun to use the term more frequently (Logue, 2015).

Research by Salinas (2020) highlights that the use of the term Latinx does not necessarily translate into most Latino countries. The -x is considered ambiguous because its pronunciation is not clearly defined and its roots are not clearly researched (Salinas, 2020). The essence of the term appears to have begun in higher education through student

organizations and/or by activist groups in the mid-2000s (Armus, 2015; Gonzalez, 2020). Based on research of its origin and term use, higher education institutions should reconsider using the term “Latinx” as it can be considered a privileged term used by those with access to postsecondary education and does not encompass all identities within the Latino community (Salinas, 2020). To discuss this further, Salinas (2020) coined the idea of “*voces perdidas*” and “*voces de poder*” which provide metaphorical imagery of how the use of the term Latinx can be perceived (p. 155). *Voces perdidas* (translated to voices lost) refers to individuals who are marginalized by *voces de poder* (translated to voices of power), meaning people of power (Salinas, 2020, p.156). The term Latinx can be viewed as both *voces perdidas* and *voces de poder* as it helps to eliminate the binary implied by the Latino/a term (an argument for *voces perdidas*) but was also created in the ivory tower of higher education and does not directly translate to all Latino subcommunities (an argument for *voces de poder*) (Salinas, 2020, p.156).

In conclusion, this research has indicated that higher education institutions should reevaluate their use of the term “Latinx” and consider using a term that is inclusive and can encompass all individual identities within the Latino community. In other words, as institutions and advocates seek to use more inclusive language, they must also not lose sight of the Latino culture and history in the process. In keeping with this inclusive but culturally sustaining approach, the term “Latinx/a/o” will be used in the following sections and chapters as they encompass the experiences and identities of all individuals in the Latinx/a/o community holistically.

## **Latinx/a/o Student Sense of Belonging**

Students of minoritized groups have a difficult time transitioning into college (Arevalo, So, & McNaughton-Cassill, 2016). A value held by the United States and therefore in U.S. higher education institutions is individualism (Arevalo, So, & McNaughton-Cassill, 2016). Individualism is defined as valuing autonomy and independence (Zielinska, 2020). In turn, Latinx/a/o culture values collectivism (Schwartz, 2009). Collectivism means individuals within the community are nurtured to value strong family ties and this translates to their need for interpersonal (or extrafamilial) relationships (Schwartz, 2009). As the Latinx/a/o student population continues to grow, this distinction between Latinx/a/o culture and American culture should be noted. Research highlights that second-generation Latinx/a/o students have a difficult time transitioning to the college environment because they are trying to understand American culture, despite being nurtured with Latinx/a/o family traditions and values (Nuñez, 2009). Hurtado and Ponjuan (2005) even assert that those who value familial culture and traditions are “less likely to see their university as a welcoming campus environment” (p. 244). Given the conflicting values between American and Latinx/a/o culture, institutions must take on the responsibility of ensuring that Latinx/a/o students are connected to both their culture and the institution, thus fostering a sense of belonging among them (Carales & Hooker, 2019).

## **The Challenges Latinx/a/o Students Face at PWIs**

Underrepresentation of students of color is evident at PWIs where white students and faculty make up for more than 50 percent of the overall population. In turn, students of color at PWIs have conflicting experiences on campus and do not feel included in the

campus environment (Harwood et al, 2012). This argument is strengthened by Gonzales (2020) who found that low Latinx/a/o student presence at PWIs lead to feelings of isolation among these students and prevented them from feeling a sense of belonging at their institutions. Research has also indicated that Latinx/a/o students feel like they are “guests in someone else’s house” (Sotello Viernes Turner, 1994, p. 366). Furthermore, Latinx/a/o students experience cultural starvation because they are “deprived of culture that has given them a sense of purpose and meaning for most of their lives” (Robertson et al, 2016, p. 214). In response to these experiences and feelings, Latinx/a/o students create “counter-spaces” that help them feel more comfortable within PWI campus environments (Robertson et al, 2016, p. 720). Along with creating “counter-spaces,” this student population also believes that cultural assimilation would help them fit in and feel like they belong at their PWI (Robertson et al, 2016, p. 720). That said, it is imperative that research on Latinx/a/o students’ sense of belonging at PWIs be conducted as such scholarship would help to bring awareness to the exclusion and inequities that persist at such institutions, resulting in harmful experiences for Latinx/a/o students, as well as the sacrifices they are willing to make to fit in.

### **Support for the Latinx/a/o Student**

Although Latinx/a/o students generally find it harder to adjust to PWIs than their white counterparts, research shows there are havens and activities within the wider campus community that support these students and aid them in achieving the feeling of belonging and connectedness on campus. These includes: Extracurricular activities (Maestras et al, 2007; Dueñas & Gloria, 2020), participating in Greek life and taking on other leadership positions (Maestras et al, 2007), and getting involved in both

multicultural organizations and organizations with no emphasis on racial and ethnic identities (e.g., student government and Greek life) (Dueñas & Gloria, 2020). Another move towards supporting Latinx/a/o students takes the shape of Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs). These institutions are provided grants to assist in initiatives that support Latinx/a/o students (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). In addition, the state of New Jersey created an Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) program where students of low-income backgrounds (which often includes Latinx/a/o students) are eligible to receive financial assistance (State of New Jersey: Office of Secretary of Higher Education, 2020). Through these initiatives, Latinx/a/o students are given an opportunity to experience a welcoming college experience.

In a similar way, research indicates that on-campus living has both helped and hindered the search for Latinx/a/o sense of belonging (Johnson et al, 2005; Strayhorn, 2008). Experiences within campus residence halls is in part due to peer groups but is also heavily influenced by how much emphasis the residential staff places on advocating for “appreciation of cultural differences” (Johnson et al, 2005, p. 537). On the contrary, Strayhorn (2008) found that residence halls do not have a significant impact on Latinx/a/o student sense of belonging.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Critical Race theory, commonly known as CRT, is a theoretical paradigm that recognizes the need to discuss race and racism to understand the oppressive ideologies within the U.S. education system (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). CRT attempts to disrupt the “structural and cultural aspects of society that maintain the subordination and marginalization of People of Color” (Solórzano, 1997, p. 6). Ladson-Billings and Tate

(1995) define CRT by discussing three themes that illustrate social inequalities. The three themes are as follows: a) Race matters and should be the central focus in understanding inequality, b) poverty rights are considered more valuable than human rights because European colonizers created American culture with the intent to take land from those who inhabited the land originally, and c) combining the history of race and property rights helps us understand social disparities among race (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). In relation to education, CRT helps us understand the systems of oppression and racism within the U.S. school system and how they translate to the educational experiences of minoritized student populations (Huber, 2010). This is especially important since the U.S. education system was not created with racially-minoritized students in mind (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Examining the Latinx/a/o student experience as it relates to sense of belonging, CRT will be used to help provide an in-depth analysis of the Latinx/a/o student experience. The CRT framework was employed to guide the design and analysis of this phenomenological study because the focus of the study is on Latinx/a/o students who are entering an educational space that was not created with their values, culture, and traditions in mind. Since CRT's goal is to criticize and remove oppressive barriers within our Eurocentric society and Westernized institutions, the framework was found to be appropriate and effective in identifying, naming, and critiquing the various types of discrimination and oppression faced by participants. It also proved to be effective in helping to formulate pathways towards cultivating inclusive and equitable spaces for Latinx/a/o students.

## **Chapter III**

### **Methodology**

To learn more about the Latinx/a/o students' perception of sense of belonging at a PWI, a phenomenological qualitative research approach was employed. Upon completion of the interviews, participant transcripts were analyzed in search for a deeper understanding of the Latinx/a/o student experience. The following research questions were observed.

#### **Research Questions**

1. How do Latinx/a/o students feel about and describe their sense of belonging on campus?
2. What kind of support or challenges have Latinx/a/o students encountered during their college experience thus far, and how have these factors impacted their sense of belonging on campus?

#### **Context of the Study**

To engage in careful and critical research, the personal accounts of Latinx/a/o students' sense of belonging at a predominantly white institution were investigated through the lens of critical race theory. The study was conducted with the help of Latinx/a/o students of all undergraduate grade levels and gender identities.

#### **Rowan University**

Rowan University, located in Glassboro, New Jersey, is a public research institution classified as a R2: Doctoral University with high research activity (Carnegie Classification, n.d.). Founded in 1923, Rowan University is home to 16,011 undergraduate students (U.S News, 2020). College factual (2020) highlights the

enrollment statistics based on racial and ethnic groups. Rowan University undergraduate students are 65.5 percent White, 10.7 percent Hispanic/Latino, 9.9 percent Black, 4.9 percent Asian, 0.1 percent American Indian or Alaska Native, 0.1 percent Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, and 7.9 percent of an ethnicity that has not been confirmed (College Factual, 2020). Rowan University's enrollment population classifies the university as a PWI because the enrollment of white students is over 50% of the total student population (Brown & Dancy, 2010). Faculty racial and ethnic group statistics also rank similarly at 72.3 percent of faculty who self-identify as white compared to faculty members to belong to minoritized racial and ethnic groups who hold a percentage below 10 percent (College Factual, 2020).

### ***Relevant Campus Involvement***

Rowan University provides students the opportunity to participate in campus culture and community to foster personal and professional growth (Rowan University, 2020a). The Office of Social Justice, Inclusion and Conflict Resolution (SJICR) is home to the Multicultural Resource Center which serves to assist students of diverse cultures and identities (Rowan University, 2020b). The office works to create workshop presentations and events to bring awareness to the marginalization faced by minoritized race and ethnic groups (Rowan University, 2020b). The center also supports cultural student organizations including The Asian Cultural Association, The Black Cultural League, Rowan Rangeela, Student Organization for Caribbean Awareness, and the United Latino Association (Rowan University, 2020c). Additionally, Rowan University's Office of Greek Affairs is home to ten national Greek multicultural organizations (Rowan

University, 2020d). Although accepting students of all racial and ethnic backgrounds, a large majority member of these organizations are students of color.

Furthermore, Rowan University's ASCEND (Achieving Success through Collaboration, Engagement, And Determination) encompasses the university's Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) and RISE program. Rowan's EOF program provides "financial assistance and academic support services for low-income, first-generation" students (Rowan University, 2020e, para. 1). RISE is a university scholarship program created to support first-generation students. Upon acceptance, these students participate in an on-campus six-week program in correlation with EOF to prepare them for their upcoming collegiate experience (Rowan University, 2020e).

### **Research Design**

In the present study, a qualitative phenomenological research methodology was used to gain insight into the Latinx/a/o student experience, as it pertains to their sense of belonging (McMillan, 2016). Phenomenology seeks to examine the essence of qualitative research, asking 'how' and 'why' of the participants, in relation to the concept that is being studied (McLeod, 2019). Moreover, a phenomenological study is deployed to gain a deep and rich understanding of participants' lived experiences, revealing the essence of the experience among a group of people with specific commonalities (McMillan, 2016). In this case, the use of phenomenology is appropriate because this study was designed to collect thick and rich data about the essence of the experiences and perceptions of the sense of belonging among Latinx/a/o students who belong to the same racial/ethnic community and are functioning within the same college environment. That said, this study centered the "consciousness, perception, self-awareness, communication, social

interactions and culture” of participants (Smith, 2013, para. 9). This focus, in turn, allows the researcher to gain a sophisticated understanding of the collective lived experiences of the participants (Smith, 2013).

### **Procedure**

After receiving IRB approval, the recruitment process was the next step. Participants were recruited via email. Once students expressed interest in the study, they were provided with an informed consent form that reiterated the voluntary nature and confidentiality of the study, as well as the overall purpose and significance of the study. Interviews took place in February and early March of 2021. The data collection process was completed by March 2021.

### **Population and Sampling**

The population being examined for this study was Latinx/a/o undergraduate students attending a PWI in the Northeastern United States. As of 2019, the total population of Latinx/a/o students at the institution from which participants yielded was approximately 2,156 (Data USA, 2019). The researcher sought to garner data from a representative sample of the total Latinx/a/o student population. To achieve this, purposeful sampling was employed to recruit participants who meet the criteria outlined for the study. It is essential that, for the purpose of the study, the participants’ responses be “information-rich” (McMillan, 2016, p. 125). Since participants were being purposely selected, it must be noted that the participant criteria was developed by the researcher and subjective to the needs of the study (McMillan, 2016). Explicitly, in this case, the participant criteria laid out for this study included: (a) Participants’ self-identifying with the Latinx/a/o community and (b) students’ currently being enrolled as an undergraduate

student within the specific context of the study. The researcher also made room for students of all ages and gender identities. Following this criteria, the researcher was able to recruit and interview twelve Latinx/a/o undergraduate students. To be more specific, the sample included eight women and three men; four seniors, one junior, three sophomores, and two freshmen. The remaining two participants did not disclose their grade level. Pseudonyms were used at the conclusion of the interviews to keep data confidential in respect to the participants who shared vulnerable information about their belonging to the campus.

### **Profile of the Sample Participants**

A list of sample participants has been provided to describe each participant in depth. Pseudonyms were used to keep their stories and experiences confidential.

- Anthony is a junior, majoring in accounting. Anthony is Dominican. He is the President of RU Casa, a student run organization at Rowan's Camden campus.
- Danielle is a senior chemical engineering major with a Spanish minor. She was born in Brazil and moved to the United States when she was 12 years old. She is the treasurer of the Woman in Engineering club and is the class representative of the American Institute for Chemical Engineers.
- Isabel is a sophomore, double majoring in modern languages and linguistics and international studies. She is Mexican and a first-generation student.
- Jessica is a senior journalism major. She is Puerto Rican and a first-generation student.
- Mel is a senior human services major and has a minor in sociology and Spanish. Mel is a first-generation student.

- Natasha is studying civil and environmental engineering and serves as a Resident Assistant in her residence hall. Her parents are Colombian. Natasha is also a transfer student.
- Nathalie is a sophomore civil engineering major. She is 20 years old. Her father is from Ecuador and her mother is from Spain. Nathalie's hometown is Linden, New Jersey.
- Pacho is a freshman psychology major. He is a first-generation student.
- Rafa is a sophomore biological science major. Rafa is a general body member in the Minority Association of Pre-medical Students. Rafa is also a student athlete.
- Samantha is a freshman psychology major. She is 18 years old and is of Cuban descent. Samantha's hometown is Elizabeth, New Jersey.
- Sonia is a senior biological science major; she minors in environmental science and Geographical Information Science (GIS). She is Puerto Rican and is on the e-board of the Student Organization for Caribbean Awareness (SOCA).
- Vanessa is a first-generation student. Both of her parents are immigrants from Colombia. She is currently an art education student with a focus on illustration.

### **Data Collection**

Data was collected by conducting 60-minute, semi structured interviews with each participant. All interviews were conducted online to observe the safety measures implemented in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the start of the interview, I stated a detailed explanation of the purpose of the study and reiterated the voluntary nature of participants' involvement in the study (McMillan, 2016). I also made sure to thank participants for their participation. An interview protocol was created prior to the

interviews. The questions developed were meant to prompt the participant as they engage in an open conversation with the researcher about their past and current experiences (McMillan, 2016). The interview was designed as a semi-structured interview with nine open-ended questions that allowed for discussion and follow-up questions (Doyle, 2019; McMillan, 2016). Additionally, the interview questions were carefully evaluated to maximize the output of data collection (McMillan, 2016). With IRB approval, participants were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy when transcribing the data. During the interview, I tried to gain knowledge relevant to their sense of belonging by asking appropriate follow up questions for clarification (Qu & Dumay, 2011). In a similar way, to confirm the accuracy of the information shared by the interviewee, member checking was done (Birt et al, 2016). This meant that key statements and themes that emerged from participants' interviews were identified and brought to participants' attention, in an effort to ensure that the researcher's understanding of their points was accurate. This process also ensured that participant's voices remained potent and authentic during the data analysis portion of the study.

### **Data Analysis**

Once the data collection process had been concluded, the data analysis process began. This included de-identifying all data and replacing participants' real names with pseudonyms for security purposes. To carefully analyze the data transcribed from the interviews, patterns that emerged throughout participants' interviews were noted and coded (McMillan, 2016). These codes were then summarized and categorized. These categories were then placed into bigger thematic categories. Once placed into categories, the researcher engaged in a recursive process of reviewing the categories and connecting

them with codes found to ensure proper explanation of each theme (Given, 2008; McMillan, 2016). In addition to becoming intimate with and organizing the data, both the extant literature on Latinx/a/o students' sense of belonging and the theoretical framework (i.e., CRT) meant to guide the study were referenced and used to inform the overall analysis of the study.

## Chapter IV

### Findings

The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of Latinx/a/o students' sense of belonging at Rowan University. The rich data collected was analyzed and themed to aid in the articulation of the findings. Below, the various subsections will account for each emerging theme while honoring the natural voices of the participants.

#### Representation Matters

It is crucial that Latinx/a/o students believe that their race/ethnic identity is represented within the campus population in order for them to feel a sense of belonging. Therefore, representation throughout the institutions matters for Latinx/a/o students. They need to see people that look like them holding various positions within the campus population; they need their culture to be celebrated and embedded within the campus environment; they need to build relationships with others with whom they share similar life experiences. With this representation, they will feel validated. They will feel like they belong. Rowan University's student population demographics is measured at 65.5 percent White and 25.7 percent students of color. Latinx/a/o students (who fall within the bracket of students of color) constitute 10.7% of the undergraduate student population (College Factual, 2020). These statistics underscore the disproportionality that persists at Rowan University, securing Rowan University as a PWI, painting a grim picture of underrepresentation of Latinx/a/o students, faculty and administrators (and other people of color), and reifying feelings of disconnection, exclusion and isolation that reign among the Latinx/a/o student population (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Brown & Dancy, 2010; College Factual, 2020; Gonzales, 2020).

### ***Culture Shock***

Culture shock is defined as the experience of entering a space where the established community has different values and beliefs than that of the individual's cultural identity (Belford, 2017). At a PWI, Latinx/a/o students are being plunged into an unfamiliar environment that is not adequately prepared to meet the unique needs of these minoritized students. Therefore, the institutional culture creates a sense of discomfort and uncertainty among Latinx/a/o students as it reinforces their minoritized status. As a result, some Latinx/a/o students feel the need to assimilate, assuming the values, beliefs and behaviors of the wider campus community and culture to feel a sense of belonging. During the interview, Pacho, a first-generation student in their first year at Rowan spoke about his experience transitioning to college. Pacho stated: "When I came here [when I first started at Rowan, there was] like a whole culture shock for me, away from home. [I] had really no friends here on campus...but then I started to like assimilate." This assimilation process ultimately helped Pacho to fit in more easily at the university, but it also forced him to leave pieces of himself behind.

Essentially, Latinx/a/o representation at a predominantly white institution is crucial as it can help to ease culture shock. In terms of assimilation, the need to assimilate to the campus community only serves to erase the cultural values and beliefs of the Latinx/a/o student as they bury parts of their beautifully complex identity so they can be accepted. In a similar way, it should be acknowledged that the Latinx/a/o community strongly values familialism (or familism) which is the belief in strong kinship between family members, and the prioritization of family's needs above all else (Arevalo, So, & McNaughton-Cassill, 2016). Since higher education culture attempts to do the opposite,

Latinx/a/o students are pressured into altering their collectivist values to that of individualism so they can survive and thrive (Arevalo, So, & McNaughton-Cassill, 2016). This causes a violent culture shock for the student, which creates a disconnect between them and the institutional community (Blackmon, 2018).

### ***Code-Switching***

Latinx/a/o students experience code switching as a result of entering an environment much different than that of their home. Code-switching is defined as the changing of who you are to fit into your surroundings (Thompson, 2013). Code-switching for the Latinx/a/o population requires adjusting, assimilating and actively and intentionally alternating between one's true self and the self that would please the institution and its members, in an effort to fit into a pre-established institutional culture that is rooted in racism and xenophobia (i.e., the fear or hatred of people from other countries) (Bell, 1992; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 1998; Solórzano, 1998; Solórzano and Yosso, 2002; French & Chavez, 2010; Ojeda et al, 2012; Haywood, 2017). During the interview, Danielle stated that she had come to accept her code-switching experience. Specifically, Danielle stated:

It feels different, it's like you do have two layers to you, you have two sides, you know...for me, it's not just one. I have the side that's very American and very acclimated to the culture and...I really belong...and then there's the side of me that's just totally Brazilian and like I listen to Brazilian music and I...look at memes, I do all these things, but I don't do that at Rowan, you know. I do it on my own time by myself, because there's no one else who understands that.

In this excerpt, Danielle highlights her recognizing that she practically lives two different lives—one that speaks to her acclimation to the campus community and the other that is proud of her Brazilian roots. Although Danielle feels a sense of belonging at Rowan, her having to code-switch to achieve this feeling emphasizes the lack of diversity and inclusion on the campus, as well as the importance of education stakeholders’ cultivating institutional spaces in which Latinx/a/o students are being adequately supported, affirmed, and represented.

Essentially, it is evident that Latinx/a/o students have learned to separate their authentic Latinx/a/o identity from their pseudo-identity in order to function effectively within various spaces. It is also clear that representation is what they need. If Latinx/a/o students saw other Latinx/a/o people (especially in positions of power) being celebrated for being their authentic selves, then these students would have more of a reason to maintain and preserve their roots; not hide and distort them to be deemed worthy of acceptance, support and love.

### ***Encountering Peers with Similar Experiences***

Latinx/a/o students encountering other Latinx/a/o peers would help these students to feel like they belong on campus. Anthony noted, “I [felt] so comfortable at Rowan [as it pertains to a sense of] belonging because I had other people like me [who are] Hispanic. I didn't feel like I was the only one in the room.” This reiterates the argument that meeting other diverse peers helps Latinx/a/o students feel connected and comfortable because it creates the “feeling of inclusiveness” and understanding (Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005, p. 245). This point was also strengthened by Natasha during her interview as she stated, “So sense of belonging is for me like seeing people that are like me, or that we

have...similar backgrounds or similar experiences.” She noted that this would eventually lead to friendship and peer-to-peer mentorship throughout the collegiate experience, allowing for a positive overall campus experience. Speaking to Rafa’s experience within his student organization, he expressed his thoughts of belonging when interacting with peers:

It's hard to connect with people sometimes...if they haven't gone through some stuff you know...that's why...the minority groups that I'm in... it's nice because some of the people there have gone through the same things I've gone through or my parents have gone through so...it's nice to have someone that understands [you].

Furthermore, as students with minoritized life experiences, the need to explain oneself to an individual outside of their community is exhausting. Similar to that of a sounding board, Latinx/a/o peers already understand the adversity experienced by those in the Latino community. This understanding creates support similar to that of the relationships that Latinx/a/o students have with their family members at home. It also provides the comfort they are seeking away from home. Additionally, encountering peers with similar experiences means Latinx/a/o students will not feel the need to assimilate to the campus environment. If they saw other Latinxs/as/os who are thriving, holding leadership positions and making a positive impact on campus, they would be empowered to recognize their own ability to do the same. Isabel noted this feeling when she stated:

[Mariana, a student leader,] was really helpful...I didn't talk to her personally but I think just seeing her...role was really motivating and...building more upon [that]...I do belong here [and] I'm doing great...just because I don't see much of it

[Latinxs/as/os] represented...there's people like Mariana and Denisa [Isabel's RA] who are doing...these amazing things and I mean [if] they can do it, I don't see why I couldn't.

To conclude, these aforementioned points illustrate the cruciality of representation on campus. Culture shock and code switching highlight the suddenness of change experienced by Latinx/a/o students and the tactics of self-preservation that exist among them, respectively, as they navigate college life. While, encountering peers with similar experiences sheds light on the importance of peer support, especially when the source of that support yields from the same culture.

### **Navigating Marginalization**

Entering a predominantly white space, Latinx/a/o students are forced to the fringes as marginalized peoples within the institutional environment. For this reason, they encounter experiences with those who perceive them as less than, and degrade their identity. Participants in this study spoke about how they have navigated marginalization within the campus community in aims of feeling a sense of belonging. Feeling like an outcast was noted specifically by Vanessa who stated, "I'm like the red person in the black and white room." Several participants spoke to their experiences with marginalization and how it prolonged their acclimation process to the campus community. Marginalization was illustrated by the participants with examples of racism and stereotyping, imposter syndrome, and recognizing their privilege as *white-passing*. These points are further explored below:

### ***Racism and Stereotypes***

The Latinx/a/o community has been subjected to acts of racism and stereotypes as a minoritized community within the United States. Transitioning into the college experience, participants noted having negative experiences within their first semester. Within the institutional community, two participants highlighted their experience with microaggressions and blatant acts of racism. Jessica spoke to the first time she interacted with her roommate. In her example, her roommate was confused about who she was.

Jessica stated:

I told them, no I'm your roommate and [they were] like, 'Oh, we just got scared because it looked like you were in a gang with the guys'...I was like huh?...how did you get that impression they [said] 'I don't know you just came in [all] strong had all these guys like you're [all] a part of a Latin gang.

Jessica also mentioned that her roommates called her a "spic" (i.e., a derogatory word used against Latinxs/as/os deprived from the word Hispanic) on various occasions. This experience had a negative effect on Jessica's initial transition and caused her to lean on her Latinx/a/o peers as she removed herself from the situation. In a similar way, Vanessa spoke to an experience with her roommates in her first year as a transfer student to Rowan. Referring to a Latino tradition, Vanessa noted that she was taught that Saturday is the day to clean the house. Following this tradition, she did the same at her campus apartment. Specifically, Vanessa stated:

I think...it made me come off uptight, but it wasn't necessarily uptight...so I think that definitely made people weary of my personality and they made me think that I was a bit more stuck-up then I actually was. I think that was...probably the

biggest challenge that people take what I consider [my] culture as...being stuck up.

This direct quote shows that her simply doing a typical chore placed her in a position where she was judged unfairly.

In a bid to protect their family members from experiencing the horrors of racism and stereotyping on campus, the following examples will highlight the thoughts of, and advice shared by participants' family. First, Jessica noted her father stating:

'You need to lower your voice when you talk, because you have a strong voice. Don't curse so much, don't try and [say] so many words in Spanish...act like a white girl' [is] what he told me so I would fit in easier.

Jessica's father gave her advice that encouraged her to change who she is to belong on campus. In other words, Jessica's father suggested that she sacrifice herself and her natural ways of being for the sake of acceptance. In a similar way, Nathalie spoke about her cousin's advice. Nathalie stated:

I remember me and him had a talk...he sat me down...he got to give me like a warning...[stating] 'you're gonna be like a woman in engineering' so he kind of just gave me...a heads up like [saying] 'hey people can be judgemental.'

Both experiences shared above highlight the family's fear of racism playing a destructive role in students' lives. In one case, the family member encouraged the student to behave in a way that would please the white community, and, in the other, the family member advised the student to remain hypervigilant of their surroundings so they would not be targeted or recognized when it was actually happening. The issues of racial discrimination and concerns about safety were recurring themes throughout the data

analysis process. One participant even explicitly said that she did not feel safe on campus. She mentioned feeling that there would be a 50 percent chance of someone either defending or rejecting the use of racist rhetoric. More specifically, Vanessa said:

If someone were to speak out about [speaking Spanish] or to say something derogatory about [speaking Spanish], would there even be...people to necessarily defend us...at least I feel like in terms of the population, there is a 50/50 chance that people will be like ‘hey...they can speak however they want to speak’ and [there is the] other percent of the chance that other people are just going to be like ‘yeah, like speak English this is America’.

This quote reiterates the feelings of fear that Latinx/a/o students may experience on college campuses because of their marginalized race/ethnic identity that is often dismissed and not protected. Having to worry and fear for racism and stereotypes weakens their sense of belonging and makes them question their place within the campus space.

### ***Imposter Syndrome***

Most participants discussed the feelings associated with *Imposter syndrome*. Imposter syndrome is defined as the “deep-seated insecurity” which results in feeling fraudulent and doubtful in one’s abilities (McAllum, 2016, p. 364; McCullough, 2020). This self-doubt does not help foster a sense of belonging. Self-doubt is the thinking that you do not have the right, capability or purpose to be within a given space. Within the campus community, Latinx/a/o students experience self-doubt as a result of marginalization. Nathalie speaking to her experience with her fellow classmates stated:

And so [they, the male classmates] really made me feel bad about myself, because...they made me feel like I didn't belong and like I was an outcast and like I wasn't on their level like they [were] so much better than me.

In addition, it should be noted that Latinx/a/o students can also be first-generation students. These students are the first in their family to attend college, therefore, the college experience is foreign to them. During the interview, Isabel added that she was nervous being the first in her family to start college:

I was very nervous about being the first because...no one in my family could give me advice on like 'Oh you know you'll feel like you do not belong and the imposter syndrome is real' but there's so many people here that, like just walking around I'm just like I can be here...I can find I guess [a] sense of belonging here without having to really doubt it too much.

Similar to Isabel's response, although difficulty to reach a sense of belonging was prominent because of lingering self-doubt, the doubt eventually faded as students started building connections with peers, faculty and staff. Imposter syndrome can be experienced at the start of their transition to college because of the social exclusion they experience as part of a marginalized group.

### ***White-Passing***

The Latino community includes individuals of all race and skin tones. When discussing sense of belonging with participants, three participants noted they were mistaken for a white person—what the researcher refers to as “white-passing” throughout the paper. This implicitly and explicitly, but wrongly, categorizes these students as white rather than Latinx/a/o. It is also important to acknowledge the issue of colorism when

speaking on this topic. Colorism is defined as the advantage and disadvantage an individual holds based on the lightness or darkness of their skin tone and means favoring lighter skin over a darker skin complexion (Burton et al, 2010). Participants noted that having a lighter skin tone contributed to others not seeing them as part of their race/ethnic community. Rather, assuming that they identify with the majority race. According to participants, their being white-passing allowed them to experience less racial stereotyping; it spared them from the brunt of the racism that so often fell upon their more melanated peers.

**Acknowledging Privilege.** In addition to mentioning being considered white-passing, these participants spoke to the general privilege of having a lighter skin tone. Mel said “I guess it’s not really like I felt like I belong, but I feel like I also have the privilege of...being white passing” Sonia also reiterated:

I know Rowan is a safe place for me but there probably are people who think it's not safe...I'm privileged to look like the way I do...I could pass as like a white person for some others so... I know I don't have the ultimate struggle as others [in the Latino community].

Both Mel and Sonia felt a prolonged sense of belonging and both recognized the privileges of having lighter skin. Although perceived as being white, neither of the participants attributed their strong sense of belonging to their being white-passing or stated that they felt a sense of belonging more quickly or more easily than their darker counterparts. They did, however, recognize that, despite being part of the Latinx/a/o/ community, they are privileged to have significantly less non-marginalizing experiences because they have a lighter skin tone.

**Intersectionality.** When looking at the intersections of participants' identities, some participants who believe they pass as white shared that the only minoritized identity they hold on campus is within their STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) major. They specifically noted being a female/woman (i.e., sex/gender) as their marginalized identity as their race/ethnic identity did not present an issue. Danielle stated "when I am at Rowan...my minority is being a woman in STEM, being a woman in engineering and...that's what it is. That's all it is because I'm very white-passing." Put differently, these participants' white-passing features allowed them to experience a sense of belonging outside of their Latinx/a/o identity as there was no apparent fear of looking different or being treated differently. Therefore, some of the white-passing experienced marginalization, but more so because of their gender identity due to the sexism and patriarchy that exists within institutional and societal culture.

To conclude, institutions of higher education value whiteness and operate under Eurocentric ideologies that facilitate oppressive contexts for Latinx/a/o students. Consequently, the sense of belonging among Latinx/a/o students is weakened, causing them to have negative and harmful college experiences. Although some white-passing members of the Latinx/a/o community may not experience the blows of racism (either at all or as much as their more melanated peers), the voices of those who do experience racism still stands and should be taken seriously.

### **Strong Support System**

As human beings, having a strong support system is vital in the course of our lifetime. It is common in Latinx/a/o culture to have strong ties with family and friends. For this reason, Latinx/a/o students value interpersonal relationships. A strong and

healthy support system gives them the motivation to push through challenging circumstances. The support system for the participants within this study included family, friends, and campus administrators. These three groups contribute to their development of a sense of belonging.

### ***Consejo de Familia***

*Consejo de familia* translates to family advice. Family is often a pillar of strength for the Latinx/a/o community. As young adults become college students, it is difficult for some to transition because of the collectivist approach that they are used to in Latin culture versus the individualistic nature of the system of higher education. Despite this personal challenge, parents believe that a college degree will give their children an opportunity to experience upward social mobility within American society (Stepler, 2016). Therefore, the push to attend college is important, even if this means the family will be apart. Furthermore, because of the strong kinship that exists among Latinx/a/o families, students enter the institution remembering and honoring familial advice, and longing for connections similar to those they have at home. Family also gave participants the motivation to pursue their degree and overcome adversity as it arises throughout their college journey. Rafa stated:

The family support is what drives me a lot...my family doesn't know much about...what it takes to get here and... what it means to be a college student but...them being there and like offering support for what you may need outside of like studies and academics...it's nice to have someone...talk to you.

Likewise, Samantha spoke about her family when she stated, “I remember my mom used to help...calm me down. I remember just calling her and just being like ‘I'm so stressed

out.” These quotes underline the point that strong familial ties are an asset to Latinx/a/o students and play an integral role in students’ pursuit of a college degree.

### ***Amistad***

*Amistad* translates to friendship. Friendship within the collegiate experience is the closest Latinx/a/o students are able to get to a familial relationship which, as established, is vital in these students’ college journeys. Building friendships was one of the main ways through which participants felt connected to the campus community. It must be pointed out that most of the friendships noted by participants were with other students who also identify as Latinx/a/o. Sonia noted, “A lot of [the] close friends that I made here at Rowan, even though it's like a predominantly white campus, they’re...people of different backgrounds so we are all going through the journey together.” Adding to this line of argument, Anthony also noted, “When I started as an EOF student, I started already with...a group, a team-based friendship I built in [the EOF]...program, and that really helped me grow through my years; just having that group” This notion that friendships helps to extend connections to the broader campus community was also corroborated by Natasha’s statement:

She [Natasha’s friend] was the one that really got me [on] my toes into meeting other women like [my friends] Liliana and Jay and then that just branched off to like meeting...the [Residence] Life community and everything like that so [I am] really grateful for like meeting her and crossing paths with her.

Similar to the experiences mentioned above, Rafa also noted that “one of my best friend's is in there [the student organization] and he is currently...on the board and that's how I got interested.” Thus, participants, through sharing their own personal experiences, clearly

illustrate that friendships are lifelines within educational environments. These friendships then help Latinx/a/o students to feel a sense of belonging on campus.

### ***Campus Programs and Professionals***

In addition to the support of family and friends, Latinx/a/o students feel supported by programs that give them an opportunity to use their voice and support their growth and development throughout their undergraduate careers. Helpful programs and professionals mentioned during interviews include: the Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF), Residential Learning and University Housing, and academic administrators who have a vested interest in students beyond the classroom.

**EOF.** Rowan’s Educational Opportunity Fund (or EOF) program provides students of low-income backgrounds the resources and tools needed to navigate the curves of the higher education experience, prior to starting their college journeys. Thus, students enrolled in the program begin their transition to Rowan during the Pre-College Institution Summer Program which, as the name of the program suggests, occurs during the summer. Anthony spoke about his experience with the EOF program when he stated.

“They are a...diverse organization on campus, EOF has diverse students...[EOF] made me feel belonging because of everything they do...[they] try to incorporate every single person's perspective or nationality”

The advisors of the EOF program were also lauded as they served as a pillar of support and source of encouragement for students during the first-year transition. During the interview, Nathalie said:

“My EOF advisor on the first semester that [I] was here...had a talk with me...he told me that he had like a couple of female and like people of color...in

engineering and wanting to drop out or change their major because of [stereotyping and ignorance] and...he was like ‘I want you to...make sure that you're comfortable and you feel motivated to do it [be a part of the major]’”

From these quotes, it is evident that a well-designed program can only be as effective as its supervisors. Thankfully, the students who participated in the EOF program were met with both a carefully architected program and caring and competent EOF advisors, allowing for positive and beneficial engagements among students and between students and advisors.

**Residence Life.** The Office of Residential Learning and University Housing (RLUH) ensures a healthy, safe and educational on-campus living experience. Resident Assistants (RAs) serve as live-in student leaders that help residential students with first-year transitions, roommate conflicts, and campus acclimation, among other things. During the interview, Jessica noted how supportive her building staff was when she had encountered heightened conflicts with her roommates. Jessica said, “Nabil helped me, Lily helped me...Brandon helped me...I remember all the RAs from Mimosa that year... [they kept] pushing me to meet...other people.” Furthermore, RLUH and The Flying First-Generation Task Force have also created a Flying First living learning community where first-generation students are able to live among other first-generation students, and the RAs within the community have a particular interest in supporting first-generation students. Isabel noted a positive experience with her RA when she stated:

My RA Denisa, she was very helpful my freshman year [with] transitioning because I think everyone knew...that we were first gen you know, we were the

first person to go to college and she was very helpful especially when I had issues financially because it was a big problem freshman year.

Isabel also added:

The flying first living community...I think being offered that when I was choosing housing was very helpful because I feel like...if I ended up anywhere else...I feel like I would not have had as great a first semester as I had being an evergreen.

From these accounts, both the RAs and the living learning program itself made Isabel and Jessica feel safe and supported throughout their first-year college experience.

**Administrators and Faculty.** Campus administrators and faculty were also named as professionals who helped to support Latinx/a/o students and ensure diversity and inclusion in classroom settings. During her interview, Natasha noted:

The department head...wanted [their students] to feel...comfortable and the professors...[are] all [of] different backgrounds and so they also try to include projects that...[are] diverse...because there's always a question asking if...[the] professor [brought] culture into the classroom.

According to this account, department heads and faculty play a vital role in ensuring that students feel challenged but comfortable. If done correctly and with love, Latinx/a/o students will have an opportunity to work with teachers who engage in critical and culturally-relevant/sustaining pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995; McLaren, 2002; Paris, 2012) and value the multiplicity of truth in the classroom. They will also be able to see themselves reflected in the curriculum, class content, class assignments and class activities. If such measures are taken, Latinx/a/o students would feel included and

validated in the classroom, leading to strong feelings of belonging in the wider campus community.

### **Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivations**

Motivation is having the energy to complete a given task or responsibility.

Motivation can be affected by our surroundings. Since Latinx/a/o students are underrepresented at PWIs, their academic pursuits tend to be dependent mostly on their level of intrinsic motivation. Previous sections noted a sense of belonging occurs through representation and a strong support system. This section will discuss the push towards excellence that comes from within Latinx/a/o students.

### ***Grit, Stamina, and High Self-Efficacy***

Latinx/a/o students experience both positive and negative experiences as they journey towards attaining their college degree. That said, as they progress, their grit and self-efficacy increase as they become more passionate about their own growth and development and either begin to recognize or become more secure and confident in their own abilities to be successful within and beyond the institution. During the interview, Nathalie spoke of her struggles with her feeling a sense of belonging on campus and the stance she took to regain control of the narrative. She said, “But then there's other days where I'm just like you know what, no... I'm not going to let people bother me; I'm putting my foot down; I'm not going to let them win.” In this instance, Nathalie was responding to the marginalization she experienced within the classroom as a woman in STEM. Through her experience, she developed the perseverance to keep pushing through any and every impediment, using her own passion, as well as her family and pride in her culture (extrinsic motivations), as reasons to press forward.

Below, I will mention two other times where participants spoke to the grit, stamina, and self-efficacy they tapped into (within themselves) to continue on in their pursuit of completing their college degree. First, Pacho highlighted his thoughts on the campus culture and how his sense of belonging developed. He said, “So like the majority [of the campus community] ...it’s not my culture...but...[you] got to make the best out of it.” Rafa also noted, “Remembering you've made it to college, so you were able to do that...there must be something that you have that you're able to give and that you’re worth something you know.” Second, Vanessa noted, “So I do feel isolated, and I don't feel isolated; that's just a personal thing because I play my own drum and I fit into wherever I need to fit in. I'm flexible.” These direct quotes highlight the exclusionary nature of the university as Latinx/a/o students find it difficult to fit in or feel like they belong. However, they also underscore students’ ability to encourage themselves in the face of discomfort and adversity, holding on to their achievements as a reminder of their excellence and capabilities, and dancing to the beat of their own song as a means of self-preservation as they persist through to graduation. The elements of grit, stamina and self-efficacy do not necessarily contribute to or weaken a sense of belonging among Latinx/a/o students. Rather, they fortify students’ character and serve as a testament to their inner strength.

### ***Taking Initiative***

Given the grit, stamina, and high self-efficacy that Latinx/a/o students possess, they often take initiative by getting involved on campus. Their campus involvement then increases feelings of belonging among them as they take advantage of opportunities to

network with other peers, faculty and administrators and, ultimately, find their niche on campus. Rafa spoke to his experience within a student organization, stating:

I'm a part of the Minority Association of Pre-Medical students here which is where I've met some of...my friends that I have now and some of the people that I communicate the most with because...it's easier to connect that way because you need people either that have certain interest as you or that are looking to do the same thing you're looking to do in the future”

Similarly, Pacho noted, “Chi Alpha...I joined it like my third week in school...after that [I started] going to every event...I feel like I belong with them”. On this same note, Danielle added:

At the end of the semester, they [campus organization] had elections...we [Danielle and a friend] both ran for activities chairs and we got elected...now I [was] a part of the e-board with a bunch of juniors and seniors... I am now a Treasurer in my junior year.

These accounts of students putting themselves out there, risking being dismissed or ignored—very likely outcomes, given the exclusionary culture (of whiteness) that exists on campus—are powerful and emphasize the inner strength that these students possess and tap into during their college journeys. Fortunately for these participants, putting themselves out there paid off. These students were able to secure leadership positions and become involved in various organizations on campus that would aid them in their personal and professional growth and development. These opportunities for networking and edification, in turn, helped students to feel a sense of belonging on campus.

Therefore, Latinx/a/o students’ intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, grit, stamina, high

self-efficacy, and willingness to take initiative play an integral role in their persistence towards degree completion, and work together to increase feelings of belonging among them.

## Chapter V

### Discussion, Recommendations and Conclusion

In the final chapter of the study, Chapter V, the findings of the research will be discussed through the lens of critical race theory (CRT), answering the research questions while foregrounding the experiences of the participants and making an argument for the prioritization of Latinx/a/o students' sense of belonging at Rowan University. Next, recommendations will be offered to aid education stakeholders in developing and implementing practices and praxes that honor Latinx/a/o students and their culture. The conclusion section will then wrap up the main arguments and takeaways of the study.

#### Discussion

Sense of belonging is associated with feelings of comfort and the perception that individuals can be themselves authentically within a space or community (Strayhorn, 2018a). For people to experience a sense of belonging, they must feel valued, affirmed, celebrated, and supported by others in that community (Strayhorn, 2018b). Based on the findings shared in the prior section, a sense of belonging is vital among Latinx/a/o students who want to feel like school is a home away from home. When attending a PWI, however, the question arises whether it is possible for Latinx/a/o students to feel like they belong in a space where the majority of the people who occupy that space (i.e., students, faculty and administrators) do not look like them or share in their cultural value, beliefs and behaviors, reinforcing their position as underrepresented, minoritized and underserved students. Based on the responses from participants, the answer to this question is yes, it is possible; it just requires institutions to intentionally create classroom

spaces and campus environments that overtly recognize, honor, and protect Latinx/a/o students and culture.

### ***Research Question 1***

*How do Latinx/a/o students feel about and describe their sense of belonging on campus?*

All participants in this study confirmed that they feel a sense of belonging within Rowan's campus community. However, the degree of belonging perceived by students varied among participants. Four participants were content with their experience thus far. During the interview, they expressed, on multiple occasions, their joy and strong sense of belonging to the institutional community. Six participants, on the other hand, illustrated discomfort at the start of their college experience at Rowan University, but eventually found ways to increase their feelings of belonging. In a more intense showcasing of discomfort, two participants expressed how much they struggled to feel a sense of belonging on campus. They then explained that their resilience enabled them to keep working hard and keep seeking out opportunities and experiences that would help them to feel more part of the school community. The resilience portrayed by these students illustrates the vital role that inner strength plays in Latinx/a/o students' lives as they persist through to graduation. On the flip side, it brings our attention to the constant and exhausting emotional labor that students have to take on to simply feel like somebody of worth on campus. CRT as a theoretical framework challenges scholar-practitioners to identify and trouble oppressive constructs, and, in this case, Rowan's campus environment is indeed an oppressive context as its marginalized students are forced to push through discrimination and push through (harmful) discomfort as they push through

to graduation. This disproportionate burden that Latinx/a/o students have to carry is the epitome of unfair and unjust, and Rowan needs to step up and transform its campus environment from one that preserves whiteness to one that is inclusive and protective of Latinx/a/o students.

Another interesting point that emerged is that three (of 12) participants noted that they were able to connect with students from different racial/ethnic backgrounds and, therefore, experienced a sense of belonging on campus due to having friendships both within and outside of the racial/ethnic community with which they identify. These connections occurred through either their academic major or leadership positions. However, when these participants were in spaces that connected them with their Latin roots, they felt as though they were brought back to reality and reminded that they had to hide parts of themselves (assimilate) and constantly code-switch to build and maintain those interracial/ethnic relationships. That said, overall, Latinx/a/o students at Rowan are at various levels of belonging but can all agree that the campus environment would be more welcoming and affirming if they could see where education stakeholders are making intentional strides towards embracing Latinx/a/o culture across all facets of the institution, thus increasing (and for some, jumpstarting) their sense of belonging at the university (Strayhorn, 2018, Samura, 2018).

In addition to uncovering participants' sense of belonging at Rowan, the researcher found that all participants experienced culture shock upon starting their journey at the university, and each of them attempted to find ways to make themselves feel like part of the community. Data also revealed that participants value representation but believed that it was lacking in every aspect of the institution. If Latinx/a/o

representation should increase at Rowan, Latinx/a/o students would certainly feel more comfortable being themselves and would feel like they have a place at the university. It is also important to note that two participants who experienced campus life before the COVID-19 pandemic stated that there is visible separation between the white student population and students of color. One participant, Mel, described this as “parallels” within the student body because the student groups are standing side by side but do not blend. Consequently, Latinx/a/o students are experiencing cultural starvation, and this missing causes them to create “counter-spaces” where they are able to take off their masks and fully be themselves with their fellow Latinx/a/o peers (Robertson et al, 2016). That said, four participants explicitly stated that they feel like they belong when they are among other Latinx/a/o students who share in their experiences, culture and language, corroborating Hurtado and Ponjuan’s (2005) stance that students feel a stronger sense of belonging when they connect with students of similar background and social realities.

### ***Research Question 2***

*What kind of support or challenges have Latinx/a/o students encountered during their college experience thus far, and how have these factors impacted their sense of belonging on campus?*

After carefully analyzing the data, it is evident that Latinx/a/o students are having conflicting experiences that impact their sense of belonging on campus (Harwood et al., 2012). Data dictates that Latinx/a/o students received support from either family members, friends and campus administrators, or a combination of two or all three of these sources. These interactions, in turn, positively shaped their college experiences. All participants mentioned having at least one group of individuals who contributed to their

feelings of belonging on campus; most listed more than one systems of support, though. In addition to serving as a source of encouragement, these pillars of support also became a source of extrinsic motivation for participants.

Speaking to the challenges that students encountered, sense of belonging was weakened when participants were faced with cultural ignorance, as well as either blatant or subtle racism, sexism and xenophobia. A few participants also spoke to the lack of safety and security they felt when attempting to live their truths (e.g., speaking Spanish in public) as Latinx/a/o people on the college campus. Bridging this discussion to theory, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs highlights an ascending pyramid that requires the needs lower down in the hierarchy to be satisfied before individuals can tend to the needs higher up in the strata. According to Maslow (1943), physiological (or basic) needs and safety must be met before individuals can feel a sense of love and belonging. As it relates to the study, Latinx/a/o students' sense of belonging cannot be satisfied until their safety needs are met. Therefore, if students do not feel safe on campus, they will not feel like they belong on campus. Unfortunately, this was the case for some of the participants. To create campus environments that tend to the safety needs of Latinx/a/o students, education stakeholders must be willing to foreground their experiences and voices (Solorzano, 1998) so that policies, practices and praxes will reflect the unique safety needs of these students. In turn, when these safety needs are met, students will be more likely to feel a sense of love and belonging on campus.

Furthermore, growing in a culture that values a strong kinship among family members, it is difficult for Latinx/a/o students to enter a campus culture that wants them to be independent. That said, although the start of their experience tends to be difficult,

Latinx/a/o students find the strength and motivation to push through the culture shift with the help of their support system(s). Furthermore, the participants of this study fought to preserve themselves and their culture by fighting against (in)visible oppression and domination to somehow find their people and their niche on campus. These limited but necessary places of safety and rejuvenation enabled Latinx/a/o students to survive the endemic nature of whiteness that persists on campus and in the wider society (Bell, 1992; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 1998; Solórzano, 1998; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; French & Chavez, 2010; Ojeda et al, 2012; Haywood, 2017), and effectively function (and for some, thrive) in classroom settings and other campus spaces.

Since CRT, the framework guiding the study, underscores the oppression faced by marginalized students (and other peoples) in predominantly white spaces and demands action to disrupt the Eurocentric ideologies that reign within institutions, it must be said that Rowan University needs to go back to the drawing board and transform its policies, practices and praxes. As it currently stands, most of the Latinx/a/o students who participated in this study do not think that Rowan University cares about them or their culture. This means that these students are left to fend for themselves in an unwelcoming and oppressive environment that does not honor their presence and ways of being and living. In keeping with the tenets of CRT, Rowan stakeholders must examine its biases and traditions (which are often rooted in racism) and abandon strategies and approaches that exclude Latinx/a/o students and preserve white (and male) structures and paradigms. They must also deploy policies, pedagogies, programs, practices and praxes that celebrate Latinx/a/o students and their culture. In taking such critical action, Latinx/a/o students

would feel like being themselves is actually a viable option. The freedom of staying true to themselves and their culture would then yield a strong sense of belonging among them.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

Based on the results of this study, education stakeholders at Rowan University should consider the following recommendations as they strive to cultivate more diverse, inclusive, welcoming and equitable campus environments that enable Latinx/a/o students to not only survive college but thrive within and beyond its doors. These recommendations could also be applied within the context of any PWI and should therefore be noted by education stakeholders outside of Rowan University as well.

#### ***Increase Representation***

Representation matters to Latinx/a/o students. Therefore, measures must be put in place to illustrate representation of Latinx/a/o people and Latinx/a/o culture, values and traditions on campus. This can be achieved through education authorities' hiring more Latinx/a/o faculty, administrators and staff. Likewise, administrators can demonstrate their commitment towards diversifying the student population and including Latinx/a/o, specifically, by: a) Developing a more equitable admission process, thus increasing the number of Latinx/a/o students on campus, and b) creating more scholarships and preparatory programs geared towards Latinx/a/o students, ensuring Latinx/a/o students have access to education at Rowan University (e.g., EOF). If institutions do this, however, they also have to ensure that the campus environment is equipped to serve and support these students. This means that education stakeholders have to show their dedication to embracing Latinx/a/o culture not only through campus initiatives (not just Hispanic heritage month), but also on a daily basis through curriculum and everyday

practices and praxes on campus (e.g., support groups for first-generation students). By engaging in these critical actions, Rowan could transform its campus from one that is unwelcoming to Latinx/a/o students to one that works intentionally to tend to the needs of Latinx/a/o students. These needs include honoring their culture in every realm, relieving their unique stresses and strains, and ensuring that students are given a platform to speak their truths and hold the institution accountable when it does not live up to its word. In turn, students would feel like they belong on this campus and would have more positive college experiences.

### ***Expand and Develop Campus Programs to Honor Latinx/a/o Students***

Since encountering peers with similar experiences helps Latinx/a/o students feel a sense of belonging, Rowan stakeholders should consider expanding current programs that are beneficial to Latinx/a/o students and developing more programs designed, specifically, to support Latinx/a/o students as they transition to and navigate college. One of the current programs that support Latinx/a/o students is the Flying First Living Learning Community program. As mentioned in the findings, the Flying First program does not exclusively serve Latinx/a/o students; it serves and supports any first-generation student who is living on campus. That said, this program was noted as helpful by a participant as it created a brave space where she could not only learn but be herself. Similarly, the Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) program at Rowan was lauded by participants for being nothing short of effective and beneficial as it provided them with funding and a pre-college experience that eased them into their college journeys. Given these rave reviews, Rowan University should allocate more funds for these programs and

others like them so that more first-generation and low-income students are able to access higher education and benefit from community living and learning.

### ***Promote Familial Relationships and Involvement***

Since family is valued strongly by Latinx/a/o students, Rowan University stakeholders should create ways for parents/guardians (and other family members) to get more involved in their children's collegiate experience. It is understood that higher education institutions aim to help students become mature, independent professionals that are able to succeed post-graduation. However, education stakeholders must also acknowledge and respect the fact that family members play a major role in Latinx/a/o student success. Given this reality, Rowan should host events where family members are invited, hire administrators and professors that speak the Spanish language, and ensure that information that family members are privy to is accessible. Being committed to involving family members in Latinx/a/o students' campus life means being inclusive to their cultural values. Being inclusive of their cultural values means creating an environment in which they feel welcomed. Creating an environment in which they feel welcomed means fostering a strong sense of belonging among Latinx/a/o students.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

Attending a PWI has an effect on the Latinx/a/o student search for a sense of belonging. The following points will discuss how this research should continue and how other student populations should be considered in similar research.

1. Further research on sense of belonging needs to be conducted based on the various identities that people/students can hold, including race/ethnicity/nationality, sex/gender, sexual orientation, social class, religion and

spiritually, and physical and mental (dis)ability. In particular, this research should focus on minoritized populations with the identities listed. More voices need to be heard.

2. Further studies should be conducted on the family/student relationship of Latinx/a/o students and how this influences and impacts their collegiate experience.
3. Further research should be facilitated on what colleges and universities are doing to make the campus more inclusive and whether these measures are working.

### **Conclusion**

Sense of belonging is important within the collegiate experience and Latinx/a/o students deserve a fair chance at finding it. This phenomenological study added to the body of literature on Latinx/a/o students' sense of belonging at predominantly white institutions (PWIs). From the interviews emerged four core themes, namely: a) Representation matters, b) navigating marginalization, c) strong support system, and d) intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. These themes highlight and explore the ways in which sense of belonging ties to Latinx/a/o students' need for representation, the oppressive context within which Latinx/a/o students have to function, the different people and groups that guide and support Latinx/a/o students, and the various motivations behind Latinx/a/o students' persistence towards degree completion. Lastly, recommendations for critical action were offered. These include: a) Increase representation, b) expand and develop campus programs to honor Latinx/a/o students, and c) promote familial relationships and involvement. The findings and recommendations of this study are

expected to inform practice and praxes at Rowan University, thus creating a loving and affirming campus environment where Latinx/a/o students can not only survive but thrive.

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